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UNCLE SAM BONAPARTES

An updated account of the Bonapartes in America, written on the 150th anniversary of the death of Napoleon on St. Helena.

Through traffic is dense in centretown Tallahassee, Florida, largely because U.S. highways 27 and 319 merge and briefly coincide with Monroe, the north-south main street of that pleasant city of snow-white buildings and lanky palms. Only the smallest fraction of the out-of-towners taking that route is, we can be sure, aware, or would be given pause by the fact that, two blocks west of Monroe, in an old graveyard, a plaque and twin obelisks identify the tomb of Achille and Catherine Murat. *Prince* and *princess*, they are cited as, although, oddly, only Catherine, who was a native-born American, could lay transparent claim to the title in her later years. Achille was a mere ex-prince, but his links with celebrity are firm. It is a little stirring to be near the remains, in so unexpected a setting, of a man whose uncle was Napoleon and whose father was Napoleon's swashbuckling cavalry leader, Joachim Murat, Marshal of the Empire, High Admiral of France, and King of Naples. This year, the 150th anniversary of the death of Napoleon himself, is perhaps a good time to recall the American Bonapartes. Equipped with such genes and such notability, all of them made distinct marks in the New World.

Although Achille was not the first of the clan to cross the Atlantic, he deserves early mention as the one to become most thoroughly Americanized. This may not be unconnected with his being a family oddity, for he had very little showiness and, more strangely, was impromiscuous. The background to his leaving Europe was this: When, after Waterloo, the Empire crumpled, the King and Queen of Naples, alias Joachim Murat, and his wife Caroline (Napoleon's selfish and unscrupulous sister), found themselves in dutch with the Italians. Murat quickly and stupidly involved himself in a military escapade that cost him his life in front of a firing squad at Pizzo. Caroline, now calling herself the Contessa di Lipona (anagram of Napoli),

retired north with her children and her newest lover, the French Marshal Macdonald. Achille, aged 14 and the eldest child, remained with his mother for another eight years, after which he was given permission by Metternich (in his capacity as Allied custodian of Bonapartes, and not as Caroline's lover, as he had been once) to emigrate to the United States. He arrived in New York in the May of 1823. On the recommendation of Richard Keith Call, the Florida territorial representative, he soon moved to that brand-new state, staying first at St. Augustine. Shortly after the founding of Tallahassee in 1824 he crossed the peninsula and settled there, acquiring various preferments, including the Postmastership. He bought plantations, and slaves to run them. He prospered. For a while he was Mayor of a local community named, in his honor, Lipona.

As a southern gentleman, Achille needed a lady, and so in 1826 came to marry Catherine Gray, a lovely young widow who was a descendant of (who else?) George Washington. The marriage was stable and good, although childless. When Achille, commissioned as a colonel, went off as A.D.C. to Call in his prosecution of the Seminole War, Kate dutifully went along too.

The young Frenchman's local interests spread. He was called to the Florida Bar, and the setting up of the state Institute of Agriculture was partly his work. He also took to writing encomiums to his adopted country, describing himself as "ci-devant Prince Royal of the Two Sicilies, and Citizen of the United States". He defended slavery, using the familiar paternalistic arguments, and attributed its bad press to English agents, bent on discrediting the Union and discouraging emigration to it. The low cost of American government was one of his favorite themes—as well it might be, considering what he must have known about the extravagances of his uncle's court.

In general, and despite some eccentricities, Achille seems to have been liked and respected. Emerson, who developed a friendship, pronounced his soul "noble", found his mind "surpassing mine in the variety of its researches", and expressed "love and honor" for this "consistent Atheist". For his part Achille the Atheist tried, unsuccessfully, to enlist Emerson's support for what he deemed a worthwhile project: ridding Florida of Methodism.

When Achille died, in 1847, his wife stayed on in the property known as Econchattie in Jefferson County, managing the estate and the 200 slaves left to her. Early in the days of the Second Empire she visited Paris, and Napoleon III, imbued with the traditional Bonaparte family solidarity, granted "cousin Kate" an annuity plus the title of Princess of the Empire. She lived into the

Civil War and is said to have fired the cannon that signaled Florida's secession. In 1867, at the age of 64, she died, much mourned.

Now let's shift north in geography and backward in time—to the fast-growing city of Baltimore in the late summer of 1803. All society—well, the female half, anyway—is swooning over the gorgeous young French naval officer who has just entered town with panache and seemingly unlimited funds. (It turns out later that the money is being blithely, not to say shamelessly, extracted from the coffers of the uneasy French diplomatic officials in the area.) On top of everything, he is the young brother of Europe's most powerful man, the First Consul of France.

In no time at all Jerome Bonaparte has captivated, proposed to, and been accepted by, one of Baltimore's most stunning and wealthy young women, Elizabeth (Betsey) Patterson. The French diplomats, thoroughly alarmed by this, urge the youth to consult Big Brother before going further, a suggestion that is gaily poohpoohed. Nothing must be held up.

The marriage (it was mixed, Betsey's family being Protestant) was solemnized by Baltimore's Roman Catholic Bishop Carroll on Christmas Eve, 1803, in the Patterson mansion. A civil contract was also signed. The ceremony and the celebration formed the highlight of the Season. The perfection of the radiant couple affected everyone. The nineteen-year-old groom was in purple and gold, and the eighteen-year-old bride wore a wispy see-through gown that was simply sensational.

News of the marriage flashed across the Atlantic at 10 miles an hour and was first reported by *The Times* of London on 4 February, 1804. A Paris paper snapped up the item, and in this way it came to the attention of the First Consul. Napoleon was, let us say, displeased. In fact he pronounced instant anathema. Jerome was to return home at once minus the "young person" he had been "connected" with. He, Napoleon, would then organize Jerome's future, matrimonially and every otherwise. Neither the testimony of President Jefferson that the Pattersons were of "great worth and respectability" nor the deferential advice from Pope Leo XII that the marriage was unannullable had any effect. However, Betsey, confident that she could charm Napoleon into acquiescence, sailed with Jerome in the steamship *Erin*. Arrived in Lisbon, they found that the French authorities had orders not to allow her to land there or, indeed, anyplace else in continental Europe.

About this time Napoleon wrote a letter outlining his orders and decisions. Few things can quite match this remarkable document as evidence of its author's phenomenal dictatorial character. And, in reading it, please bear

in mind that it was addressed to his, and of course Jerome's *mother*. Napoleon apprised Madame Mere that

. . . M. Jerome Bonaparte has arrived in Lisbon with the woman he lives with. I have ordered this prodigal son to go to Milan, via Perpignan, Toulouse, Grenoble, and Turin. I have informed him that if he diverges from that route he will be arrested. Miss Patterson, who lives with him and who is accompanied by her brother, is to be sent back to America on my orders. If she were to evade these orders and get to Bordeaux or Paris, she would be taken to Amsterdam and put aboard the first American vessel. If, during the only interview I shall grant him, the young man shows himself unworthy of the name he bears, I shall treat him severely, and if he persists in his liaison, if he is disinclined to wash away the dishonor he has stained my name with by forsaking his country's flag on land and sea for the sake of a wretched woman, I shall cast him off forever. I may make an example of him, to teach young soldiers the sacredness of duty and the enormity of the crime of forsaking their flag for a woman.

Write to him on the supposition that he will go to Milan. Point out that I have been a father to him, that his duty to me is sacred, and that his only remaining hope of salvation is to obey my instructions. Tell his sisters to write him, too. Remember, once I have pronounced sentence upon him, I shall be inflexible, and his life will be blasted forever.

And that of course was the finale of the happy young marriage. Jerome, protesting, on the one hand, his undying love for Betsey, and proclaiming, on the other, his unqualified loyalty to Napoleon, forsook his Baltimore belle. The Archbishop of Paris dutifully untied the marriage knot; Jerome was wedded to a German princess and made king of Westphalia, a nation-state that Napoleon had just finished creating. Only once did he and Betsey ever set eyes on each other again: this was by chance, in the galleries of the Pitti Palace in Florence—and they never exchanged a word!

Jerome's monarchy was distinguished by squandermania and profligacy, but kingship is a strange thing, and there is evidence that he managed to endear himself to many of his subjects. He was active in Napoleon's Russian campaign (until he went back home in a huff over the Emperor's censure) and at Waterloo. He spent his last years, in the 1850s, in Paris, sleeping with his latest mistress by night, and girl-watching along the boulevards by day.

And Betsey? To begin with, having moved to England, she there bore

a son to Jerome. This was in 1805. The child was baptized Jerome Patterson Bonaparte, the first Bonaparte with American blood. The handsome Betsey never remarried, although she eventually secured a Maryland divorce from Jerome (mainly to reacquire property rights in the United States). After Waterloo she visited with various European Bonapartes, and began hankering to have her son Bo, as everyone called him, marry back into the clan. But Bo, proudly American, showed no interest whatever. In time, and to his mother's disgust ("he has ruined himself"), he married a nice rich American girl named Susan Williams, and the couple was even able to frustrate Betsey's "ardent hope" that they'd have no children.

Betsey, clearly, was not exactly the warmest of women. And she was always ambivalent about her ties with the famous family. "Had I waited", she once sighed, "had I waited, with my wit and beauty, I could have married an English duke instead of a Corsican brigand". In her old age, rich, shabby, and miserly, she took to a diet of brandy and milk. At the age of 94 she died—in a Baltimore rooming house.

Bo's life in Maryland was unhectic. But his son reverted to type by soldiering. His name—and I feel the need to apologize for introducing such confusion—was Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte. (The French have always been monotonously conservative in regard to forenames, and the Bonapartes took name repetition to exasperating extremes.) Well, *this* Jerome served in the U.S. cavalry, in Texas particularly, and later joined Napoleon III's Imperial Dragoons, being with them in the Crimean War, and at the siege of Paris. After the collapse of the Second Empire he returned to the U.S. and married a granddaughter of Daniel Webster. A notable son of this marriage was Charles Joseph, otherwise "Soup-house Charlie", peppery corporation lawyer and anti-vice crusader. Charles's friendship with Teddy Roosevelt brought him cabinet rank; at one time he was Secretary of the Navy, and it is interesting to find that the President made a courtesy check with the French Government before making a Bonaparte boss of the Navy. Later, as Attorney General, Charles created the legal framework upon which, thirty years later, the F.B.I. was built—so J. Edgar Hoover averred once.

Another of Bo's sons was (pardon me) Jerome Napoleon Charles Bonaparte, a socialite who is said to have achieved his greatest fame by posing as a Calvert Man of Distinction. His death in New York City in 1945 extinguished the male line of the Maryland Bonapartes.

Three other immigrant Bonapartes deserve notice, although two of these, Lucien and Charles (another, earlier Charles), stayed only briefly in the

1820s, and are not of compelling interest. Lucien was Achille Murat's younger brother, but of a quite different stripe, being dissolute, vacuous, and gross. In the United States he lived off his relatives until his marriage to a moneyed girl, Caroline Fraser. The couple later moved to France. They raised four children. Charles, the eldest son of Napoleon's brother Lucien's second marriage, came here as a young man, in 1822, to begin a notable career as a zoologist, with a specialty in taxonomy. Most of this career, however, was followed after his return to Europe.

The third "other immigrant" was a man of considerable general interest—and in point of time an earlier arrival. In fact he was the main victim of Lucien's incorrigible sponging. This man was Joseph, Napoleon's elder brother, nominal head of the family, one-time King of Naples, and one-time King of Spain. An easy-going type, Joseph, as king-material, was roughly the equal of Mr. Pickwick. Napoleon's naive fraternal optimism kept him going in the business long enough—far too long in regard to the Peninsular debacle. During Napoleon's lackadaisical final hours in France, at Malmaison, Joseph thoughtfully offered to serve as a decoy in a plan to sneak the ex-Emperor past the British naval patrols and away to America to ask asylum. As everyone knows, Napoleon decided instead to surrender to what he rather unctuously described as his "most powerful, most trustworthy, and most generous" enemy, personified by the Prince Regent. Presumably President Madison was glad to see a looming problem neatly vanish in this way.

Joseph himself sailed across the ocean (leaving his wife Julie Clary behind), and landed in New York with a big grin, a hefty fortune, and a fresh title: the Comte de Survilliers. The welcome committee was headed by the Mayor. Initially Joseph lived in westside Manhattan, but he soon bought a sizable property in Bordentown, New Jersey. (Some years earlier—in fact just after the Retreat from Russia—Napoleon and Joseph had agreed that if they had to move out of Europe the Bordentown area looked on the map to be a nice place to settle.) The house, Point Breeze, became a minor court under Joseph (it burnt down in 1820 and was rebuilt on a more lavish scale). Here the ex-King lived until the climate of French politics was favorable to his repatriation, and he left these shores for good in 1832.

But Joseph's American properties were not sold off until some years later, and the bill of sale of the Bordentown estate carried a clause that has been under discussion in the New Jersey courts quite recently—in 1970. It appears that an 11-acre strip was deeded to the newly formed Camden and Amboy Railroad, with the provision that it would revert to the estate if the company

ever ceased to use it. A few years ago Ocean Spray Cranberries Inc. acquired a subsection of this land parcel, and, to feel more legally secure, applied for a quashing of the reverter clause. In this application Joseph and his family were actually named as defendants.

I began this account with reference to the tangible evidence of the Bonaparte Americanization in the far south, including estates in Jefferson County, Florida, and it can appropriately be closed with reference to an estate in the far north—in Jefferson County, New York. Pulling off Interstate Highway 81 at Watertown, not far from the Canadian border, and proceeding northeast on N.Y. 3, you soon come to a small intersection whose north branch is only about a mile long. It terminates in the modest resort community of Bonaparte, on Lake Bonaparte. You are now in the heart of what was once the Black River estate of Joseph Bonaparte—a property of considerable size, bought for country living and, maybe, development. Actually, several eminent French exiles lived for a while in that then remote area, one being Marshal Grouchy, Napoleon's scapegoat at Waterloo.

The big tract had a curious older background of French ownership, as a matter of fact. In 1792 a group of refugee aristocrats, headed by Jacques Donatien Le Ray, Comte de Chaumont, formed "La Compagnie de New York" and acquired title to well over half a million acres of the Black River valley. The thickly wooded territory, to be named Castorland, was marked for development on the grandest scale, and everything points to the company's enthusiastically making plans for a place they really knew very little about. Nothing of course came of these plans, and the only trace of the scheme today is the name of a village and a bay on the Lake Ontario periphery of Castorland: it is Chaumont.

Dreams about this region were to be resuscitated from time to time, and during Joseph's tenure Lucien Murat boldly talked of creating a fashionable resort city thereabouts, to be called Joachim (after Marshal Murat).

Joseph himself was probably the least affected by delusions concerning the future of the estate, and, anyway, his immediate thoughts were centering on the establishment of his newest mistress there. The lady was Annette Savage, a young Quaker woman, allegedly having kinship with Pocahontas. Joseph built her a graceful house, and there eventually she gave birth to his daughter, christened Caroline. After a while, though, in his Bonapartistic way, he grew tired of Annette and married her off to a fellow exile named Delafoie. The wedding, in Watertown, was very stylish. The couple went to live in Teresa, nearby. The baby girl, now named Caroline Bonaparte Delafoie, grew

up to marry a man by the name of Benton. Years later Mrs. Benton visited Napoleon III in Paris, and the Emperor in *his* Bonapartistic way, awarded her a pension. She came home, taught piano for many years around Watertown and Utica, and died, this grandniece of the great Napoleon, at Richfield Springs, upstate New York, in 1891.

Yes, the schemes and dreams of the exiles. One of the most fondly cherished was that Napoleon could be rescued from St. Helena and brought in triumph to America. So preparations were made, and not far from the New York village of Chaumont a house was built and furnished for the released prisoner. The site was Cape Vincent, on the waterfront where the St. Lawrence flows out of Lake Ontario. The builder was Pierre Riel, a friend and devotee of Napoleon. Long known, because of its bizarre shape, as the Cup and Saucer house, it was destroyed by fire in the 1860s. (The house was not unique in its purpose. The Girod plotters built another such in New Orleans—Nicolas Girod was the Mayor at the time.)

But of course Napoleon was not rescued, and indeed he himself had scant faith or even interest in the plots, being immersed in his cult-engendering memoirs. And what leisure he had was directed to local matters. One outcome of this leisure was a son, his last child. The mother seems to have been a housekeeper. She took the infant back to her native Scotland, and there she married an Edinburgh watchmaker, an understanding fellow who helped raise the boy and who taught him his trade. Having completed his apprenticeship, young John Bonaparte Gordon emigrated to the United States and achieved a fine reputation as a watchmaker in New London, Connecticut. In 1874 he moved to San Francisco, and there he died in 1886. It is true that the documentary evidence for his paternity is not absolutely unassailable, but I believe it—because of one telling item: in his manhood Gordon was the spitting image of Napoleon I.

John Gordon's body lies in Laural Hill Cemetery, San Francisco. Hereditarily, though, the remains have as much right to be exhumed and placed next those of his father in Paris as were the remains of the King of Rome, Napoleon's sole legitimate son, originally buried in Vienna. *That* transfer was made in the miserable winter of 1940, one hundred years to the day after the Emperor's own enshrinement, by courtesy of Adolf Hitler.