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Bernadotte, Bonaparte, and Louisiana: The Last Dream of a French Empire in North America

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The role of General Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte in the Bonapartist project for the remaking of New France remains so poorly known today that the recent synthesis by Gilles Havard and Cécile Vidal does not even mention his name.¹ And yet between 1798 and 1803, the ambition for taking part in a great American adventure was quite real for this remarkable leader of men, who accumulated numerous documents on Louisiana at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The unusual destiny of Bernadotte, who became hereditary prince of Sweden in 1810 and then its king (1818-1844) may perhaps explain this oversight. Indeed, the holdings of the royal archives at the Castle of Kungliga in Stockholm include his documents on the Mississippi basin; these describe the state of the former French possession in America at the end of the eighteenth century.² Some, like a pseudonymous memoir by “Tastanéguy” composed in year V of the Republic, are well-known, while others remain unpublished. These archives and our knowledge of the complex relations between Bonaparte and Bernadotte have shaped this study.³ It seems appropriate, nevertheless, to review briefly the context in which the reestablishment of French authority in Louisiana was contemplated in 1803, forty years after his departure.

The French defeat in Canada was sealed by the fall of Montreal in 1760. Choiseul, Louis XV's minister, managed nevertheless to get Spain involved in the conflict as of 1761 by reactivating the Bourbon family pact. This alliance did not have the desired result; the British were able to occupy Havana. So that Spain might recover Cuba, Choiseul imagined a complicated exchange at the expense of an immense French Louisiana that he deemed without interest. Thus, he ceded the part of the territory east of

¹ Gilles Havard et Cécile Vidal, *Histoire de l'Amérique française*, 2nd ed. (Paris : Flammarion, 2006).

² Kungliga Slottet, Stockholm (hereafter, KSS),: “*Bernadotteska Familjearkivet (BFA) - Karl XIV Johans arkiv - Nr 1*”, or “Archives of the Bernadotte family, archives of Karl XIV Johan, no. 1”.

³ Jean-Marc Olivier, “Bernadotte revisited, or the Complexity of a Long Reign (1810-1844),” *Revue d'histoire nordique/Nordic Historical Review* 2 (2006): 127-137.

the Mississippi to England and offered the western part to Spain on condition that it accept ceding Florida to England in exchange for Cuba.⁴ This exchange was confirmed by the Treaty of Paris of 1763 which also put an end to the Seven Years' War. The installation of a Spanish administration and laws in Louisiana was a slow process, and yet nonetheless provoked an unsuccessful rebellion in 1768-1769.⁵ The reasons for the rebellion were largely commercial, involving the rejection of Spanish trade monopoly; French patriotism played only a minor part. Still, thanks to the arrival of the Acadians and various refugees, especially those of Santo Domingo, Louisiana remains more francophone than hispanophone.⁶ The 1783 Treaty of Paris did not foresee the return of Louisiana; it simply redistributed territory. Spain recovered Florida, and the United States gained eastern Louisiana, which England ceded to them. Not until the fervent revolutionary turmoil of 1800 was a true reconquest envisaged. As of September 30, 1800 the Mortefontaine convention restored friendly relations and free commerce with the United States. More important, on the first of October 1800, the secret treaty of San Ildefonso between Spain and France anticipated the restitution of western Louisiana in exchange for Tuscany, which was promised to the Duke of Parma, the King of Spain's brother-in-law.⁷

It's was at the time of the San Ildefonso treaty that the Bernadotte episode occurred. It represents the most ambitious project elaborated in the wake of the short-lived retaking of the island of Saint-Domingue in 1802-1803.⁸ Serious hesitation seems to characterize the moment, and the importance of the stakes involved can only be measured if one fully understands the relations between First Consul Bonaparte and the Governor he appointed for Louisiana, General Bernadotte. This reading constitutes the main element of the first part of this article. The second part's analysis of the important documentation Bernadotte compiled offers a precise presentation of Louisiana around the years 1797-1803. In the final part we consider the plan to retake the former French colony and then its abandonment.

⁴ Havard et Vidal, *Histoire de l'Amérique française*, 663-682.

⁵ Daniel H. Usner, Jr., *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 116-119.

⁶ Carl A. Brasseaux, *The Founding of New Acadia: The beginning of Acadian Life in Louisiana, 1765-1803* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988).

⁷ Havard et Vidal, *Histoire de l'Amérique française*, 705-706.

⁸ Claude B. et Marcel B. Auguste, *L'expédition Leclerc* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Deschamps, 1985).

The complex Relations Between Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte and Napoleon Bonaparte

Napoleon Bonaparte and Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte knew one another personally since early 1797, when the Army of the Rhine under Bernadotte reinforced the Army of Italy that had just been covered in glory under Bonaparte's command. Everything tended to separate the two men: Bernadotte found "the Corsican" cold and cynical in politics, while Bonaparte could not stand the big Gascon, with his proud demeanor and his "southerner's chatter."⁹ During a dinner in October 1797, Bonaparte humiliated Bernadotte by making a number of literary and historical references inaccessible to a man who had joined the French army in 1780 upon the death of his father, as a 17-year-old simple soldier.¹⁰ After that stormy beginning, Bernadotte dove into many kinds of reading and managed thereafter to cut a good figure and hold his own at official dinners. His curiosity for far away places grew increasingly keen. By the end of 1797, in displeasure following the dissolution of his army, he requested an overseas command in India, Mauritius, or the Ionian islands. The Directory proposed putting him in charge of the Army of Italy because of Bonaparte's departure for Egypt. An uneasy Bonaparte did everything he could to prevent this promotion and ultimately managed to obtain Bernadotte's appointment as Ambassador to Vienna.¹¹

The two men appeared then as serious rivals but their destinies became intertwined because of family connections in addition to the political and military events in which both were simultaneously involved. Indeed, in 1798 Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte married Désirée Clary, who was Bonaparte's fiancée for several months.¹² Better still, Napoleon's brother Joseph married Désirée's sister, Julie Clary. The two siblings had lived together in Paris for a time and were very close, so Bernadotte became a familiar of

⁹ Sir Dunbar Plunket Barton, *Bernadotte* (Paris: Payot, 1983) (original English edition, 3 volumes, 1914 - 1925; first French edition, 1931).

¹⁰ Barton, *Bernadotte*, 77.

¹¹ Torvald T. Höjer, *Bernadotte. Maréchal de France* (Paris : Plon, 1943) (original Swedish edition, 1939), 103-105.

¹² Françoise Kermina, *Bernadotte et Désirée Clary* (Paris: Perrin, 1991).

the Bonaparte family and established a friendship with his brother-in-law, Joseph Bonaparte.

Bonaparte's return from Egypt and the coup d'état of 18 Brumaire year VIII (9 November 1799) put Bernadotte in a delicate situation. He refuses to throw his support to the new Consul despite having been solicited on several occasions. More seriously still, as a fervent Republican he let his rival understand that he would act against him if the Directory ordered him to; such an order was never officially transmitted. Once Bonaparte prevailed, he decided to keep Bernadotte far from the Jacobin coterie and plots in which his name had appeared from time to time.¹³ He could not imprison him because the family demurred; nor however could the disgraced Bernadotte bear to be sidelined. So when Bernadotte referred in Bonaparte's presence to his intention to cross the Atlantic and settle in the United States, Bonaparte took him at his word, and proposed in the fall of 1802 that Bernadotte govern Louisiana.¹⁴ The peace of Amiens had been signed with England on 25 March that year, making possible, among other things, the reconquest of the western part of Saint-Domingue, which France achieved with the capture of Toussaint Louverture on 7 June 1802. Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte at this time believed that his destiny lay in America, and began accumulating information about Louisiana.

Turn-of-the-Nineteenth Century Louisiana In the Bernadotte Archives

The documents Bernadotte assembled have diverse sources including letters from different ministry employees familiar with Louisiana or who had administered it; excerpts from published documents like the Puchet dictionary; or memoirs about the situation in Louisiana and its economic, commercial and strategic interests. A "commercial plan" and a project for a commercial company, both dated Year X (1802), round out this most pragmatic dossier.¹⁵

But to it we must also add Tastanégý's celebrated memoir entitled "Grand chef de guerre de la nation Creek," or "Great War Chief of the Creek Nation" dated Year V (1797), a volume of memories of the man known as "the white Indian." Antoine Louis

¹³ Höjer, *Bernadotte*, 210-218.

¹⁴ Barton, *Bernadotte*, 159-163.

¹⁵ KSS, BFA, Karl XIV Johans arkiv, No. 1,

Leclerc Milfort, an adventurer, lived for twenty years with the Creeks among whom he became a reputed war chief known as “Tastanégý”. When he returned from America in 1796, he defended the idea of an alliance between the Creeks and France for the purpose of reconquering Louisiana.¹⁶ In his memoir, Milfort emphasized his intimate knowledge of the territory and Indians. Bernadotte owned a manuscript copy of the original Year V memoir,¹⁷ not the book based on it published in 1802.¹⁸ In this memoir addressed to France’s governing Directory (1795-1799), the author calling himself “François Tastanégý” proposed once more to depart anonymously for America on a British ship in order to rouse the Creeks by reminding them of the excellent relations they had had with the French, in contrast to the threat they faced from the Anglo-Saxons and the Spanish who did not respect their customs.¹⁹ Tastanégý dreamt of a Louisiana “common to two peoples united by ancient bonds, and whose identical interests should bring even closer together.”²⁰

Still, the great majority of documents dealt with things that were much more down to earth. Every existing or potential resource was reviewed, including the climate was considered temperate and far less dangerous than the Antilles for Europeans, and which opened up the possibility of agricultural colonization. Demographic evaluations were also established. The total white population is estimated at about 80,000 inhabitants in Year X (1801-1802) for all of western Louisiana as far north as the Great Lakes, but indications are that the greatest part of this population is concentrated in the Lower Mississippi Valley.²¹ The city of New Orleans alone was thought to number some 6,000 souls.²² The Indians, often referred to as *indigènes*, were estimated at between 30,000 and 40,000 on the right bank, but the Year X report specified that “these peoples are often

¹⁶ Havard et Vidal, *Histoire de l’Amérique française*, 708-709.

¹⁷ KSS, B Karl XIV Johans arkiv, No. 1, “Mémoire présenté par François Castanegy Grand Chef de guerre de la nation Crik (sic) au Directoire exécutif de la République française en l’An 5”.

¹⁸ Louis Leclerc Milfort, *Mémoire au coup-d’œil rapide sur mes différens voyages et mon séjour dans la nation Créck [electronic resource] / par la gal. Milfort, Tastanégý ou grand chef de guerre de la nation Créck, et général de brigade au service de la République française* (Paris:Imprimerie de Giguet et Michand, an XI (1802)), available at the U.S. Library of Congress, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbfr.0059>.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ KSS, BFA, Karl XIV Johans arkiv, No. 1, “Paris, 11 Nivose an 10. Au général Bernadotte Conseiller d’État”.

²² KSS, BFA, Karl XIV Johans arkiv, No. 1, 5.

at war with one another and each day are fewer in number.”²³ To these figures were added 30,000 black slaves and 6,000 free colored people. The report also specified that: “ordinarily they [the slaves] are purchased in Saint-Domingue upon the arrival of the slave ships; 100,000 more of them would have been purchased in the last ten years had it not been for the opposition of a Spanish government fearful of having to repress excesses like those that took place in our Islands.”²⁴ The report’s author added: “I shall observe that the European prejudice with regard to alliances with blacks remains, but it does not affect the *indigenes*.” Finally, there is the affirmation that all “inhabitants are Roman Catholics.”

In the economic domain, agriculture is predominant, and Bernadotte’s sources of information signal that New Orleans’ commercial activity is run by the major owners of farms whose annual outputs by weight are estimated as follows:

- one million pounds of tobacco
- 600,000 pounds of cotton
- 200,000 pounds of indigo
- 20,000 barrels of rice
- very fine sugar
- wood and planking for construction
- and the Indians from the upper river bring in over 100,000 pounds of pelts.²⁵

Smaller facilities enable local processing: 23 sugar factories and 80 saw mills are listed. Finally the reports indicate that “several inhabitants of New-Orleans possess their own vessels and use them to conduct commercial business with the United States, the Antilles, Cartagena [Colombia], Veracruz [Mexico] and in particular Havana [Cuba].” The greater part of imported merchandise is provided by England and indirectly by the United States. The total of these figures is quite modest when considering that there were as many as 500,000 slaves in the western part of Saint-Domingue.²⁶ This is why Bernadotte had great plans for development.

Major Projects to Compete with the Advance of the American Colonists

²³ KSS, BFA, Karl XIV Johans arkiv, No. 1, 7.

²⁴ KSS, BFA, Karl XIV Johans arkiv, No. 1, 6-7.

²⁵ KSS, BFA, Karl XIV Johans arkiv, No. 1, 9, “Plan de commerce” of the Year X, and “Coup d’œil général sur les productions de la Louisiane,” also drawn up in Year X for a business company project.

²⁶ Yves Benot, *La révolution française et la fin des colonies* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1988).

Among his documents, Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte carefully preserved two from the Year X that seem to come from the same adviser, someone perhaps named Guien, who proposed the establishment of a company to which a twenty year concession for the exclusive commercial exploitation of Louisiana was to be granted.²⁷ In order to justify this request, the proposal's author provided a memoir entitled "A Look at Louisiana's Products." which he opens with a discussion of the underutilization of its potential natural resources. The "Look" emphasized Louisiana's rich forests, the possibility of planting fruit bearing tree for oranges and lemons and also claimed that the New Orleans area there were vines whos grapes made wine that was "not at all bad One variety of vine has even been known to give two yields in a single year." The author also took note of the abundance of animals and of paradoxical absence of tanneries in the following passage, which reveals his clear familiarity with the great plains:

The prairies of Louisiana are one of the world's great wonders. Everywhere prairies stretching for 20 to 30 leagues can be seen, all of them dense with wild animals of every species. At the time of year when the grass grows to full maturity it can reach heights of nine or ten feet. In the fall, the Indians set fire to the grasses to smoke out wild animals that they then hunt down in defiles wait for in ranks and thenwhere they kill them by the thousands. But in many places they are satisfied with simply removing the tongues of the cattle, the skins of the dear, and the cords of the roebucks, which they dry in the sun and then beat into a thread as white and as fine as, but far stronger than, the most renowned thread of Flanders. It is a shame that they have not been encouraged to tan the hides of these animals, to salt their meat and extract their suet. They could supply enough for all the isles and even all of Europe with these three articles. Assuredly, their huge forests furnish them with enough bark, and their deposits enough salt, for tanning and curing (...).²⁸

Bernadotte's other advisors emphasize the strategic position of Louisiana and particularly of New Orleans which locks up the output of the great American rivers (the Mississippi, the Missouri and the Ohio). In the event of a major resettlement by the French, a good part of the United States would depend permanently on French commerce to market their bark and salted products. Americans in the western territories, whose

²⁷ KSS, BFA, Karl XIV Johans arkiv, No. 1, Letter of 7 Floréal year X (28 April 1802), and "Business Plan for Louisiana attempting the facilitation of the means of its establishment in this colony and its agricultural exploitation".

²⁸ Ibid.

numbers were rapidly growing (a letter of 8 Prairial in Year VI (1798) referred to the doubling of the population of the United States every 25 years), were also presented as consumers of spirits, cloth and covers transported up the major rivers out of New Orleans.²⁹

But the Year X report also registered concern over the progress made by the "Anglo-Americans" during the almost two decades of peace between 1783 and 1801.³⁰ It spelled out the threat that emerged directly from United States annexation of the right bank of the Mississippi after the Treaty of Paris of 1783:

The Americans quickly bridged the gap that separated them from the Mississippi and constructed a small fort for the Natchez on the banks of the river some 24 leagues above New Orleans. In this way an entire portion of Louisiana to the east of the river as well as both Floridas are now reduced to a narrow strip of land no more than six leagues wide in some areas (...) There can be no doubt that since the Georgians have taken up residency on the banks of the Mississippi, the *settlers* [colonists] in the United States will come to the vast territory that this posting left behind, and also that inhabitants of Louisiana and Florida will promptly find a huge population of laborious, troublesome people on their shoulders, whose well known nature it is to never know when to stop and to recognize no limits.³¹

Bernadotte was aware of the danger and of the sparse population of French Louisiana and set as a "condition of his departure that in addition to three thousand soldiers he would take with him a similar number of planters and be provided with everything needed for a more or less lengthy absence that would prevent him from communicating with the metropolis."³² The First Consul refused to consider these conditions, declaring that he would not do so even for one of his brothers. So Bernadotte, regretfully, refused the appointment, and subsequently accepted that of plenipotentiary

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ KSS, BFA, Karl XIV Johans arkiv, No. 1, "Paris, 11 Nivose an 10. Au général Bernadotte Conseiller d'État", 17.

³¹ KSS, BFA, Karl XIV Johans arkiv, No. 1, 18-19; 21.

³² François de Barbé-Marbois, *Histoire de la Louisiane et de la cession de cette colonie par la France aux États-Unis de l'Amérique septentrionale ; précédée d'un discours sur la constitution et le gouvernement des États-Unis* (Paris : Imprimerie de Firmin Didot, 1829), 222-223. Barbé-Marbois (1745-1837) is a highly placed Ancien Régime bureaucrat, who was intendant in Santo-Domingo in 1789. Expelled by the planters after an attempt at poorly understood reformspar he pursued his career back in Europe and became Bonaparte's Treasury minister, a post he occupied when he actively participated in the sale of Louisiana. He was made a Count and then a Marquis by Louis XVIII and maintained an interest in the development of the United States until the end of his life.

ambassador to the United States; his departure was cancelled upon the Louisiana Purchase. Napoleon hoped for fifty million gold francs from the sale, but he actually obtained eighty million, minus twenty million as an indemnity for ships seized.³³ Concluded on 3 May 1803, this surprising sale occurred in a period of rising tensions with England, which resumed hostilities with France on 10 May.

In the end, external factors like the deterioration of the situation in Santo Domingo and the threat of renewed warfare in Europe caused the collapse of such vast projects. They were not totally utopian at this date, since the French could count on their alliances with the Spanish and Americans when they reestablished slavery. As of Year III (1795) in fact, the Thermidorian Convention authorized forced labor and the requisition of manpower in the colonies for the sugar harvests. This legislation was later confirmed by the Directory. Bonaparte's law of 20 Floréal Year X (10 May 1802) went still further by restoring the status of persons held prior to 1789, which amounted to a return to slavery and the inequality of rights of mulattos compared with those of other citizens.³⁴ This legislation appeased the neighboring slave holding powers and was reinforced by the still vigorous presence of French culture in Louisiana. Language and Catholic religion, specifically, were spread well after 1803 by active congregations like the Ursuline convents in New Orleans that Emily Clark has studied.³⁵ Finally, French woodsmen maintained privileged relationships with the Indian peoples, as the significant assistance they provided the Lewis and Clark expedition between 1804 and 1806 demonstrated.³⁶

³³ The final sum of sixty million gold francs is roughly equivalent to a billion of today's Euros.

³⁴ Yves Benot, *La démente coloniale sous Napoléon* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 1992).

³⁵ Emily Clark, *Masterless Mistresses. The New Orleans Ursulines and the Development of a New World Society, 1727-1834* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

³⁶ Pierre Lagayette, editor, *Thomas Jefferson et l'Ouest: l'expédition de Lewis et Clark* (Paris: Ellipses, 2005).

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