12-1-1990

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ODET PHILIPPE: FROM CHARLESTON TO TAMPA BAY
by J. Allison DeFoor, II

Odet Philippe was the earliest permanent, non-native settler on the Pinellas peninsula and a key figure in the early development of Tampa Bay. Stories of his life and times have reached mythical proportions, with Philippe attributed to be member of French royalty, a boyhood schoolmate of Napoleon Bonaparte and surgeon paroled to the New World after the Battle of Trafalgar. A previous article explored part of Philippe’s background and revealed his extensive involvement in South Florida and Key West during a period from 1829 through 1856. The article cast doubt upon connections to Napoleon and the Napoleonic Wars, but established Philippe as a leading figure in the development of South Florida before the Civil War, with extensive commercial and familial ties throughout the state.¹

This article traces Philippe’s background to South Carolina, his residence prior to his relocation in Florida. The records of that state show a variety of commercial efforts and failures, which compelled his removal to the frontier of territorial Florida. Finally, a tantalizing hint is also found to suggest a point of origin quite different from the France of legend.

The mythical Philippe was perhaps entirely too good to be entirely true. The story of how the self-proclaimed French surgeon and count supposedly arrived at Tampa Bay has been often repeated.² According to legend, Philippe and his family were intercepted on their vessel, Néy, by the pirate Gomez and taken prisoner while on a voyage in Florida waters. Gomez learned that Philippe was a surgeon and enlisted his services in the treatment of the pirate and his crew. The grateful pirate allegedly gave Philippe a chest of treasure, a letter of protection directed to other pirates and a map indicating Old Tampa Bay. Gomez described Tampa Bay to the doctor in glowing terms, calling it “the most beautiful body of water in the world, with the possible exception of the Bay of Naples.”³

Unlike the legend for which no historical documents exist, records show that Philippe established his homestead of Saint Helena at the head of Old Tampa Bay. The site of Saint Helena today is Philippe Park in Safety Harbor, Florida. The exact date of Philippe’s arrival in the Tampa Bay region has always been shrouded in mystery. Some histories give a date as early as 1823 based upon old family records.⁴ The plaque in Philippe Park credits the year 1842, presumably because he received title to his plantation under the Armed Occupation Act of 1842.⁵ However, the census of 1840 already listed him as a resident of Hillsborough County, which then included Pinellas.⁶

In addition to cultivating citrus fruits and raising cattle on his Hillsborough County plantation, Philippe engaged in commercial activity in the recently established village at Tampa. Early records reflect a variety of activities, dating from the late 1830s.⁷ By 1842, he owned two billiard parlors in Tampa, a ten-pin alley and oyster house, his residence at Saint Helena, two other residences, two slaves (John and Anthony), four horses, one colt, four mules, five cows, six calves and an assortment of hogs, hunting dogs and wagons. On December 6, 1842, he placed all of this property into trust for the benefit of his second wife, Marie Charlotte Florence Fontaine.⁸
After spending the Civil War inland in what is now Pasco County, Philippe returned to Saint Helena with his family and lived there until his death in 1869.  

The traditional story of Philippe’s activities prior to his arrival in Tampa Bay was as sweeping as the story of his capture by the pirate Gomez. It was said that he was raised as a nobleman in Lyons, France, and studied with Napoleon Bonaparte. He supposedly completed medical school and became a surgeon who was subsequently appointed by his friend Napoleon to a position of rank in the French navy. He was said to have been captured in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and sent to England as a prisoner of war. He then allegedly made arrangements to leave England for the New World, paroled on the promise never to return to France. Released in the Bahamas, he made his way to Charleston, South Carolina, a city of great culture and influence with a French population of significance.

By 1830, Philippe had moved to South Florida. The reasons for his leaving the sophistication of Charleston for the frontier of peninsular Florida were reportedly due to business reverses. One
story charitably related that he had signed for the debt of another and when the obligation came due, it bankrupted him, causing his departure. The records of Monroe County, Florida, reveal that Philippe had an extensive involvement in South Florida at both New River (today’s Ft. Lauderdale) and Key West, before he relocated in the Tampa Bay area.

It is clear that Philippe left Charleston for Key West early in 1829. This date is established by a citizenship declaration which was acted upon in the District Court of South Carolina at Charleston in January 1829, following a six-year waiting period from the time of his original notice of intention to become an American citizen. A minimum five-year waiting period was required by law. Philippe filed the declaration upon arrival in Key West with the district court there, presumably to make clear his status as an American citizen.

This document casts doubt upon any ties to Napoleon or the Napoleonic Wars, because it established Philippe’s date of birth as 1788 in Lyons, France. This date would have made it impossible for him to have studied with Bonaparte who had gone to France from Corsica in 1778 to attend military school and was commissioned into the artillery at the age of sixteen in 1785. The birthdate of 1788 also would make it highly unlikely that Philippe was a surgeon at the age of seventeen in 1805, when he was supposedly captured in the Battle of Trafalgar.

Whatever his origins, Odet Philippe did reside in Charleston, South Carolina, prior to living in Florida. The records of that city show a variety of transactions which indicate that he was an active businessman in his day. He apparently arrived in Charleston between 1810 and 1820. He was listed as a resident of the city in the census of 1820 under the name “Audet,” but his name did not appear in the census of 1810. A researcher twenty years ago showed that Philippe did not practice medicine in Charleston which had an organized and active medical society. Rather, he was listed in the city directories of 1819 and 1822 as a “Segar maker on East Bay Street.”

Philippe engaged in several transactions regarding slaves in Charleston, the earliest in 1818. At least one historian has suggested that Philippe may have engaged in the international slave trade, even though it had been banned in 1807. Whether or not he engaged in the illicit trading of African slaves, he legally bought and sold at least nine slaves during the period of 1818 through 1833. As was the custom, these commercial transactions were recorded using commonly printed forms, onto which one inserted the names of the purchaser and the seller, together with details such as the name and age of the slave to be sold. However, frequent errors of spelling occurred.

The first of these transactions by Philippe involved the purchase of a slave from John Aberigg on September 24, 1818, which was recorded October 17, 1818. The purchase indicated that Aberigg was a Charleston watchmaker who sold a slave to “Odet Philippe of said City, Segar maker.” The price was $850 for “A Negro man Boy named Sanno about Sixteen years of Age.” On September 25, 1818, the day after this purchase, Philippe transferred ownership of Sanno to “Duthe de Desmottes of said City.” The transfer makes no reference to Dorothee de Desmottes being Philippe’s wife. The price of $850 was the same as Philippe’s purchase price. In 1831, Philippe transferred Sanno to Alexis Galliot for the sum of $500. The price suggests that this was a bargain or perhaps a forced sale. The transaction was actually executed not by Philippe but rather “by his attorney-in-fact, C. Fontain.” This reference to Philippe’s second wife implies that she executed the document in Philippe’s absence, perhaps while he was in South Florida.
There is no recorded transfer of the slave Sanno from Desmottes back to Philippe, though presumably upon her death the slave had passed through her estate to Philippe.

Also in the year 1818, Philippe had transferred to Louis Cabeuil Reynaud “one Negro wench named Jenny and her two Mulatto boys named Daniel aged three years and (no name given) aged one month with her future issue.” This reportedly occurred on December 19, but the date may be in error because it was recorded in January 1818. The source of the slaves was not recorded.

In 1821, Philippe made several additional purchases of slaves. He first bought “a young man named Charles about Eighteen years of age who is sober, honest and no runaway said now delivered in good health/and sound.” This young man was purchased from Henry Gleise “of the City of Charleston (physician).” The price was $220. Philippe also bought “a Negro Boy named Peter about Twelve years of age” from the firm of John Austin and Samuel Woolfols of Augusta, Georgia. The price was $400, and the deed referred to the purchaser as “Odet Philip of the City of Charleston, tobacconist.” Six years later, Philippe transferred ownership of Peter to
Charlotte Fontaine for the sum of $350. Again, this transfer omitted any reference to whether or not Fontaine was, at the time, his spouse.\(^{25}\)

A final handwritten transfer of slaves was recorded in Charleston but executed by Philippe in Monroe County, Florida, during 1833. The document was witnessed by Thomas Easton and George P. Washington. The latter had married Philippe’s daughter, Mary Elizabeth Octavia, earlier that year.\(^{26}\) The handwritten document transferred ownership of a slave, Nelly, together with her infant and two other children, Julia and Madelaine, to Edward Chandler. However, Chandler was to hold this property “in trust... and to the sole and only use, benefit and behalf of Marie Charlotte Florence Philippe, the present Wife of the Said Odet Philippe.” The document was executed on September 6, 1833, in Monroe County and was recorded in Key West, on December 7, 1833, and subsequently recorded in Charleston. The document referred to the physical location of the slaves as being “now in Charleston.”\(^{27}\) Thus, although Philippe had moved to Florida, he still had business ties to Charleston, and the document implies that his wife may have still been there.

One further reference to slave holdings of Philippe is found in Charleston. This is his tax return for property in the parish of Christ Church in the district of Charleston for the year of 1824, filed in 1825. The document declares that Philippe owned “6 Negros” who were taxed at the rate of 75 cents each, producing a tax of $4.50. It also shows his ownership of sixty-seven acres of land in the parish.\(^{28}\) If the frequent buying and selling of slaves reflects a modicum of prosperity, the land and litigation involving it proved his undoing in Charleston.

Real property transactions by Philippe are found first in records of 1822. In that year Lewis Cabeuil Reynaud, who had earlier purchased a slave and her two children from Philippe, sold to Philippe a “tract of land situate lying and being in the Parish of Christ Church. . .containing Sixty Seven acres more or less.” The purchase price was $2,000.\(^{29}\) Also executed and recorded at the same time were subsidiary documents which show that a note and mortgage accompanied the purchase of the property. These documents were prepared by the law firm of D’ailey and Legare. The first document was a note from Philippe to Lewis C. Reynaud. The note bears the face amount of $1,800, but payable only upon default of payment of $900, together with interest at the rate of seven percent per year, which was due and payable on March 4, 1824.\(^{30}\) Thus, it appears that of the $2,000 purchase price for his plantation, $900 was financed by a note from the seller.

A confession of judgment, a legal device designed to hasten foreclosure, accompanied the note. Indeed, the transaction was structured in part as a suit with judgment deferred until 1824 and payment.\(^{31}\) A mortgage from Philippe to Reynaud was also executed by Philippe’s wife, Dorothee Desmottes, and separately recorded.\(^{32}\) Further, a deed from Philippe to Reynaud was recorded in December 1822, conveying back to Reynaud a life estate on a piece of the property originally sold by Reynaud to Philippe. The parcel consisted of the land “lying and being in Christ Church Parish bounded on One Side by Land of William Mathews and on other Sides by Land of the Said Odet Philippe Measuring in front One Hundred and Twenty-five feet wide and in One Hundred and Fifteen Feet.”\(^{33}\)
A separate rogue (or mavarick) deed exists to the Christ Church tract. The deed purports to transfer the property from Philippe to John Moisson as trustee for his wife, Dorothee Desmottes Philippe, and their children. This was a device which he used on other occasions to transfer property and was doubtlessly an attempt to elude his creditors. The transfer of the Christ Church land was not mentioned in any subsequent litigation or transfers, and it appears to have been a nullity.

The next reference to this property is found in the records of South Carolina when Philippe filed suit in the month before the note was due. On February 7, 1824, Philippe applied to the South Carolina Court, Southern Circuit in Equity, for an injunction seeking to prevent Reynaud “his agents and counsellors, the Sheriff of Charleston District and all others thereon in concurrence” from proceeding against Philippe and his property, based upon the belief that Reynaud was about to execute the previously recorded confession of judgment, as well as call in the mortgage and note. In his petition which was verified under oath, Philippe contended that he had been defrauded. Philippe’s claim was that an encumbrance existed upon “his plantation” in the form of a reservation of a family cemetery for the family of Joseph LeSerne in the center of the plantation together with rights of passage. Philippe claimed to have had no knowledge of the reservation when he had originally purchased the property. Thus, he argued, the title had “no value,” and the value of the land was greatly deteriorated by the proximity of the burial yard to the house located on the property. He dubbed the action of Reynaud “a fraudulent inducement to his execution of note, mortgage, confession and the like.”

The documents, however, proved otherwise. Contained in the file is an extract from the original 1822 contract which refers to a previous deed from Joseph LeSerne and Ann LeSerne to Reynaud. This extract reserved to the LeSernes “the right of the burial ground which is now enclosed and used for that purpose.” Therefore, the chancellor and equity judge declared Phillipe’s claim unfounded: “The injunction prayed for in this case cannot be granted. The... preceding deed is too distinct to have left any doubt. If the party was really uninformed, it was his own fault and if he is entitled to [relief], he can have it elsewhere.”

With the failure of his bid to have the equity courts forestall the imminent mortgage foreclosure, Philippe was left with no choice but payment or default. Philippe satisfied the debt, as shown in a document dated June 4, 1824, and prepared by Reynaud’s attorneys, D’ajley and Legare. The source of the funds for that payment led to further litigation.

Philippe had turned to William Mathews, his neighbor, for the source of money to liquidate his debt to Reynaud. On May 28, 1824, Philippe borrowed $1,100 from Mathews and secured it with a mortgage on his plantation in Christ Church Parish. The sixty-seven acres was described with greater specificity than in previous documents as being bounded to the north by land belonging to Mathews, to the east by land belonging to Theophilus Elsworth, to the south by marshlands, and to the west by land belonging to “Prince,” with no first name indicated. The mortgage referred to Philippe “of Christ Church Parish,” so it is clear that he was at that time resident at that place. The note was for sixty days.

Astonishingly, court records of Charleston reveal that no interest was paid upon the note, and yet foreclosure was not sought until 1831. The report of James W. Grey, Commissioner in Equity
in the Fourth Circuit Court in Equity, dated May 11, 1831, found Philippe to be delinquent in interest payments for six years. The amount due was $522.74 in interest, making a total obligation of $1,622.74. A later report by Commissioner Grey indicated that public notice was given by newspaper of a foreclosure auction which occurred on August 5, 1831. At the auction, the high bidder was William Mathews for $200, from which $63.87 was deducted as costs of the sale. Thus, Mathews acquired the property in question, foreclosed Philippe’s interests and expanded the size of his own domain. The foreclosure report itself was not filed until 1832.

In the foreclosure suit Philippe had to be notified publicly by newspaper presumably because he had already left for Florida. Indeed, an order contained in the South Carolina records noted the court's finding that “Odet Philippe, the defendant, . . . is without the limits of the State.” The publication was ordered to be printed in the Charleston Courier, “once a fort-night for three months.”

In addition to the foregoing transactions in slaves and land, Philippe had miscellaneous transactions which were recorded in documents in Charleston. In 1827, Philippe transferred to Charlotte Fontaine, without reference to her being his spouse, a number of items of personal property for an alleged total of $210. The items included sixteen dozen red pans and eight sheet iron red pans ($51), a young shed horse ($30), head wagon ($12), four coins ($60), four dozen glasses ($20), a quantity of tobacco ($24) and a Marin colt ($50).

In a final lawsuit over a debt, Philippe was sued in 1831 by Louise Moisson, executrix of the last will and testament of John Moisson. This is the same John Moisson who had held the property at Christ Church in trust for Philippe’s wife and children in 1823. The suit alleged that on July 20, 1831, Moisson had loaned Philippe the sum of $565. Refering to Philippe as “absent from and without the limits of this state,” the suit claimed that he had made many promises to Moisson concerning payment of the debt, but that Philippe was “contriving and fraudulently intending, craftily and subtly to deceive.” As a result of this suit, a writ was issued to attach all of the property of Philippe which could be found in the state of South Carolina. In December 1831, the writ was served attaching “all of the money, goods, chattel, debts, books of account, also Lands, leasehold estates and chattels real of the within named Odet Phillippe in the hand, custody and possession of Benj. F. Hunt.”

The suit had a happy ending for Philippe because when it finally went to trial in January 1834, Louise Moisson failed to appear. The nature of the delay is unknown, but Benjamin F. Hunt, acting as counsel for Philippe, recovered from Louise Moisson the sum of $27 for the cost of his defense. It is unlikely that Philippe personally appeared in court since the record referred to his having been represented “by his said attorney.”

The records of South Carolina show that Odet Philippe had a colorful and tumultuous background while living in Charleston. It is clear that business reverses of a less honorable nature than previously recorded inspired him to leave the sophistication and civility of Charleston for the then rugged frontier of peninsular Florida.
More interesting to contemplate is where Philippe had lived before arriving in Charleston. His legendary origins are in France, but his alleged training as a French surgeon and a boyhood
acquaintance with Napoleon Bonaparte have been clearly disproven. Moreover, his noble origins are suspect.

A tantalizing alternative explanation appeared in correspondence from an Alabamian who toured Florida in 1851, seeking to regain his health. Clement Claiborne Clay (1816-1886) was the son of Governor Clement Comer Clay of Alabama. A lawyer by profession, he was serving in 1851 as a county judge. He subsequently was elected to the United States Senate and later served in the Confederate Senate. Suffering from a bronchial condition, he toured Florida in 1851 and kept an active correspondence concerning what he found. At one point, he referred to an attempt to cross Tampa Bay which was prevented by bad weather. Clay then wrote: “So, I was disappointed in not seeing the head bluffs of Olde Tampa and the orange groves of Mons. Philippi, a Frenchman and native of St. Domingo about the color of Alfred – who was anxious to extend to us his hospitality.” 45 “Alfred” was Clay’s house slave in Alabama.

The clear suggestion is that Philippe’s true origins may have been in Santo Domingo, or more properly St. Dominigue, the French half of the island of Hispaniola. Today’s Haiti, St. Dominique was an area of great sophistication at the end of the eighteenth century, and it produced enormous wealth for France. The colony consisted of a half million black African slaves governed by about 40,000 white colonists. Between these poles lay a large group of free mulattos, affranchis, who were almost equal in number to the whites. The free mulattos exercised largely the same rights as whites, and by 1789 they possessed one-third of the landed wealth and one-quarter of the slaves of the colony. The affranchis were a rich and powerful class, with many educated in Europe. Beginning in 1790 they began agitation for liberty, inspired by the French Revolution. The spirit of revolt spread to the slaves of St. Domingue, who rose up and succeeded in winning their independence with the proclamation of the Republic of Haiti in 1803. During the thirteen-year struggle, a large number of the governing class of whites, as well as those of mixed race, were killed or fled to safer environments in the face of a paroxysm of violence. 46

Whether Clay’s passing reference finally explains Philippe’s true origins has not yet been verified. Previous suggestions of ties to piracy and the slave trade have surrounded Philippe. 47 Whether the trail leads to St. Domingue or France, much research will be needed before this mystery can be resolved. In any event, Philippe represents the best of immigrants who have always been drawn to Florida. Severing his roots and bearing little beyond his wits, he helped carve out of a wilderness the foundations of the present state of Florida.

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2 The story has been told by numerous historians, but none better than by D. B. McKay, *Pioneer Florida* (Tampa: Southern Publishing Company, 1959), II, 299. This is the source of the narrative herein. Much of the romanticism surrounding Philippe can be traced to two seminal articles originally published in local newspapers: Maxwell Hunter, “Dr. Odet Philippe was Pinellas Peninsula’s First White Settler,” *St. Petersburg Times*, December 20, 1936, 29; Mrs. George W. Booth, “Romantic Story of Dr. Philippe Safety Harbor’s First Settler,” *Tampa Sunday Tribune*, May 1, 1921, 1.
4 Ibid., 301.
5 The act provided for a grant of 160 areas of land to any head of family or single man who would arm himself, defend the property, occupy it and cultivate at least five acres. James W. Covington, *The Story of Southwest Florida* (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1957), 106, and Appendix B, 422.

6 Florida Census, 1840, Hillsborough County. Hillsborough County was created in 1834; statehood came to Florida in 1845. See generally Evelyn C. Bash, “Profiles of Early Pioneers on the Pinellas Peninsula,” *Tampa Bay History*, 5 (Spring/Summer 1983): 82-84.

7 Philippe purchased three lots on Tampa Street near Whiting Street on February 5, 1839, from Augustus Steele for $100. On April 25, 1839, Philippe purchased a lot from Cason E. Cooper for $50. The lot was located on the west side of the Hillsborough River at its mouth and was traversed by a small stream. On April 4, 1839, Philippe joined with Manuel Olivella on a bond in the amount of $500 covering Olivella’s service as a notary public. The bond was witnessed by John C. Casey, captain of Ft. Brooke. Three red cows branded “OP” were certified as Philippe’s on May 1, 1839, by Captain Casey. Official Records, Hillsborough County, Day Book, vol. 1, pp. 109, 124, 139, 179.

8 Ibid., vol. II, p. 352. This transfer of property was doubtlessly an attempt to dodge creditors, and the property later reverted to him as much of it was listed in his will upon his death in 1869. McKay, *Pioneer Florida*, II, 302.


12 DeFoor, “Odet Philippe,” 31-34.

13 According to records of the United States District Court in Charleston, South Carolina, “Odet Phillippe” declared his intention to become an American citizen on December 3, 1822, when he was thirty-four years old. The clerk of the court acted upon the request on January 7, 1829. Philippe’s 1829 declaration stated: “I Odet Phillippe [sic] a native of France born in Lyon now aged Forty one years Do Solemnly swear that I will support the Constitution of the United States and I do absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to every foheran [sic] Prince Potentate State or Sovereignty whatsoever and particularly Charles the tenth the King of France – so help me God (signed) Odet Philippe.” An orginal copy of this document was filed in the federal courts in Key West in 1829. Given the controversy over the years regarding the spelling of his name, it is interesting to note that the body of the declaration appears to be in different writing than the signature and, indeed, spells the name differently.

14 Act of March 22, 1816, Vol. 3, Statutes at Large 358. This provision has survived over the years and is now found at 8 U.S.C. 1427.

15 The document was surrendered, along with other such documents, by the courts to the Monroe County Library for safekeeping, and it remains there today. Packet 1829, Sheet #1, Document from United States Circuit Court (Charleston), Citizenship Oath of Odet Philippe.

16 South Carolina Census, 1820, p. 46.


20 Ibid., p. 317.
26 Official Records of Monroe County, Book B, 11-12.
28 Comptroller General, 1824 Tax Returns #216, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C.
29 Charleston District Deeds, vol. L-9, p. 115-17; South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C. (Microfilm Roll #54).
30 Lewis C. Reynaud v. Odet Philippe, Charleston District Court of Common Pleas Judgment Rolls, 1822, #360A, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C.
31 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
35 Charleston District Court of Equity, Bills 1824, #48, South Carolina Department of Archives and History, Columbia, S.C. (Microfilm Roll #L.H. 3786-3787).
36 Ibid.
37 Lewis C. Reynaud v. Odet Philippe, Charleston District Court of Common Pleas Judgment Rolls, 1822, #360A.
39 William Mathews v. Odet Philippe, Charleston District Court of Equity Reports, 1831, #76.
40 William Mathews v. Odet Philippe, Charleston District Court of Equity Reports, 1832, #87.
41 William Mathews v. Odet Philippe, Charleston District Court of Equity Reports, 1832, #50.
42 Misc. Records (Bills of Sale), vol. SE, pp. 70-71 (Microfilm Roll #W.K.2009-2010).
43 Louise Moisson, Executrix, v. Odet Philippe, Charleston District Court of Common Pleas Judgment Rolls, 1834, #218A.
44 Ibid.