

A Napoleonic Exile in New Albany

Edward D. Seeber*

It was bitterly ironical that exile from France and a premature death on the Ohio River should have been the fate of Jacques Garnier, for it was he who proposed, in 1792, the law which perpetually banished the Royalist refugees and condemned them to death in the event of their return to France.

With the fall of Napoleon, this prominent Revolutionary sought peace and freedom in the United States, the haven of so many French expatriates. He reached this new Canaan in October, 1816, and within a few months was established in New Albany. It is here that we discover him, in the present narrative, keeping a modest store, selling land for the "Vine and Olive Company" to settlers bound for the new development on the Tombigbee River, and completing his latest book of which there remains no trace.

Jacques Garnier (usually know as Garnier de Saintes) was born in 1755¹ in the town of Saintes, some forty miles southeast of La Rochelle. At the outbreak of the French Revolution, he became president of his provincial (Saintonge) committee in charge of the procurement, conservation, and distribution of grain, then attorney general of the newly-created *département* of Charente-Inférieure. Elected to the National Convention, Garnier allied himself with the most violent faction, the *Montagnards*; at the trial of Louis XVI, in 1792, he voted for the monarch's death without appeal or delay, with the remark: "The people, when betrayed, do not judge their kings; they hurl a Lightning bolt and exterminate them."

In 1793, he summoned before the Revolutionary Tribunal General Blanchelande, governor of Santo Domingo, charged with opposing the enforcement of the decree which freed the island's slaves, and with the illegal execution of the mulatto

* Dr. Edward D. Seeber is professor of French and Italian at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

¹ According to *La Grande Encyclopédie* (31 vols., Paris, n.d.), XVIII, 542-543. Pierre Larousse, *Grand Dictionnaire universel* (17 vols., Paris, n.d.), VIII, 1043, gives 1754 while the older *Nouvelle Biographie générale*, edited by J. C. F. Hoefer (44 vols., Paris, 1855-1866), XIX (1857), 518-519, gives 1752. Garnier is called Jacques in *La Grande Encyclopédie* and in the catalogue of the *Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris 1897-), LVII (1914), 507, and Jean in the other two works cited and in the *British Museum Catalogue of Printed Books* (79 vols., London, 1881-1889), XXVIII (1888), 175.

leader Vincent Ogé. The same year, he helped organize the Committee of Public Safety, and in 1794 was elected president of the Jacobins. Further honor came to him in 1798, when he was named by the Directory as vice-consul to the United States (an appointment which he refused), and again in 1800, when Napoleon made him president of the criminal court of Saintes and a chevalier of the Legion of Honor.

With the second Restoration, Garnier de Saintes fell under the exile laws of July, 1815, was arrested in Paris, and banished to Belgium. There for five months he attacked the Bourbons in his periodical *Le Surveillant* until his expulsion early in 1816, which occasioned his *Farewell to the Inhabitants of Bruxelles*, with the epigraph "Today is inflicted upon me exile from exile." Meanwhile, he had published *The Return of Truth to France* and *An Exile's Debt; or, A New Plan of National Education, Based on the Principles of Socrates, and Selected from the Work of Crito, one of his Disciples*.² Garnier came directly to America; but his sojourn in the Ohio Valley was cut short in 1820 by a boating accident, which took his life and, supposedly, that of his son.

In the summer of 1817, a French Traveler, Edouard de Montulé, arrived in Louisville after a trip by steamboat from New Orleans. There he met a French family to whom he was presented by a compatriot named Meslier, "one of the commissioner-explorers of the French society of the Tumbicbée." Through this family, Montulé met Garnier de Saintes under the circumstances related in the following passage, dated July 2, 1817:

Monsieur L. C——, junior, suggested to me one day that we go and see M. Garnier (of Saintes), who was living three or four miles from there, and across the Ohio, in the town of New-Albany. After crossing the Ohio in a ferry boat, which took at least half an hour, we arrived in New-Albany. The location is delightful; but it would be much more so if the great floods of the river had not prevented the building of houses on the bank. The fact is, they are on higher ground, and rather distant. The space separating them from the river is always filled with débris brought by the water. A log house, in fairly poor repair, was the dwelling place of the former representative of the people. We knocked at the door of a sort of shop, for he sells whiskey,

² The original titles of these works are: *Adieux à messieurs les habitants de Bruxelles* (Bruxelles, 1816); *Le Retour de la vérité en France* (Paris, 1815); *La Dette d'un exilé, ou Plan nouveau d'éducation nationale, basé sur les principes de Socrate . . . et extraits de l'ouvrage de Criton, l'un de ses disciples . . .* (Bruxelles, 1816).

rum, and cigars for a living. A small boy opened the door and led us into the kitchen; it is the bedroom, the living-room—in short, the only room of M. Garnier, who came forward to greet us with a spoon in one hand and a notebook in the other.

He does his own cooking, and is writing a book. I being a French soldier, he received me most graciously. Without inviting us to stay for dinner, he killed two chickens, dressed them, put them on to fricassee, doubled the amount of his beans, already cooking, prepared a salad, and then asked us if we should like to join him. When the meal was over, I asked M. Garnier if I might read a few pages of his work. The title is *Emérides, ou Soirées de Socrate* [*Socratic Evenings*]. In it he supposes that the genius of that philosopher reveals the future to him, providing an infinity of examples in the lessons he unfolds to his disciples, who often raise objections which are as specious as the answers are worthy of his wisdom. The work is entirely philosophical. It can be seen that its very plan has permitted the author to treat of events which have taken place in Europe before our eyes. It appeared to me that this book is well thought out and admirably written; perhaps it can be criticized for some prolixity, but one will note with pleasure that M. Garnier, although elderly, is not too fixed in his ideas: he treats Henry the Fourth as fairly as he does Bonaparte.

The little fellow who opened the shop for us is M. Garnier's factotum; he is only fourteen, and very small for his age, but full of good sense. His mother, Madame Audibert, lives opposite M. Garnier. She is a native of Vendée, but in her thinking she is prodigiously opposed to that of her compatriots. I know not what she did, or what was done to her to poison so deeply a heart which seems otherwise full of feeling and tenderness. Her children are well brought up; one of them is a tall, pretty girl recently arrived from Philadelphia. She is not yet used to the life of farming, which, however, her mother seems to understand well enough. This family, and M. Garnier, are future inhabitants of the colony which I must tell you about.

[There follows a brief description of the allotments on the Tombigbee River granted by Congress to French refugees.]

M. Meslier had strongly urged me to buy a share [in this land]. He had gone away, leaving his authority as manager in the hands of M. Garnier, with whom I signed for a quarter of a share, or 125 acres of land, and, in the city which they are going to build, a lot 25 feet wide and 200 feet deep. For that I gave him the sum of 75 francs that each shareholder advances to take care of the growing society's initial expenses. I am delighted with the idea of being a landowner in this country of America, a true haven for the unfortunate.³

³ Translated from Letter XVII of Edouard de Montulé's *Voyage en Amérique, en Italie en Sicile et en Egypte, pendant les années 1816, 1817, 1818 et 1819* (2 vols., Paris, 1821).