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ODET PHILIPPE:
Peninsular Pioneer

Amy F. David

Pirate, doctor, entrepreneur, nobleman: all terms that have been used to describe Pinellas County's first non-native settler, Odet Philippe, but none which tell the full story of the man. A new book, *Odet Philippe: Peninsular Pioneer*, written by descendant J. Allison DeFoor, II, addressees the myth and mystery of Philippe as he reveals the indisputable contributions of the early pioneer.

A visit to Safety Harbor, Florida's Philippe Park, originally Philippe's plantation St. Helena, offers telling clues to the legend that remain today, perhaps originated by Philippe himself. Even his gravestone, DeFoor notes, contains misinformation, including an incorrect birth date and the misspelling of his name.

Local legend maintains that Odet Philippe, who was born to royalty, earning him the title "Count", served with Napoleon as chief surgeon at the Battle of Trafalgar. After his capture and eventual release in the Bahamas, he is said to have made his way to Charleston, South Carolina. It is indeed in Charleston where historical records first identify Odet Philippe as early as 1818. Listed in the city directory as a "Cigar maker on East Bay Street", Philippe also was involved in the slave trade, purchasing at least nine African slaves from 1818 - 1833. In 1822, Philippe and his wife Dorothee de Desmottes had their three daughters, Louise Poleanne, Elizabeth Octavia, and Septima Marie, baptized at St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church. A fourth daughter, Melanie, was born in 1825. The death and burial place of Dorothee is yet to be discovered, but Philippe's second wife was Marie Charlotte Florance Fontaine, Septima's godmother. She and Odet adopted another daughter, Henrietta Florance, born in 1841.

Aside from Philippe's declaration of birth on citizenship papers, DeFoor pursues another interesting scenario. Several contemporaneous accounts, including this one, refer to Philippe as being a "Trenchman and native of St. Domingo [now Haiti] about the color of Alfred. . . ." Alfred was a house slave in Alabama. A subsequent search of family records in Lyon, France, have failed to uncover any information. While conclusive evidence is yet to be discovered, it is a tantalizingly possibility that Philippe could have been born of the afftanchi, or mulatto, class in San Dorningue. Civil unrest and slave uprisings at the end of the 18th century sent many out of the country and to U.S. locations, including Charleston.

Business reverses in Charleston led Philippe to explore opportunities elsewhere and by 1830, he was actively involved in business in South Florida, living in both New River (now Ft. Lauderdale) and Key West. In both locations, Philippe pursued his vision of combining his mercantile interests with a working plantation. At New River he developed a coontie plantation and salt flat, but the outbreak of the Second Seminole War forced him to abandon the area. With concurrent business interests in Key West, records show Philippe firmly established in the area by the mid-1830s, involved in cigar-making and owning several businesses, including a pool hall. It is in Key

West where his second wife Marie Charlotte Florance Fontaine Philippe is buried, having died in 1846. Her grave may still be viewed on the grounds of the "Old Stone" Methodist Church on Eaton Street.

There is evidence that by the late 1830s, Odet Philippe had discovered Tampa Bay and in 1839 purchased a lot "in the town of Tampa", bordered by Tampa Street, for $100.00 and resumed many of the mercantile businesses he had pursued in Key West. On November 1, 1842, Philippe received title for 160 acres on the northwest side of Tampa Bay under the Armed Occupation Act. It was here he established his citrus plantation of St. Helena (now Philippe Park in Safety Harbor) and realized his agricultural- mere antile dream. St. Helena soon became known as the Cypress Gardens of its day, attracting visitors to its lush and productive citrus groves.

It is at Tampa Bay that Philippe's documentable contributions to the state of Florida outshone the mystery and myth of his life. As the first pioneering settler in Pinellas County, Philippe continued to make cigars and thus was the first in the area to do so. Eventually, Tampa was to become known as "Cigar City" from the product. In an even wider-reaching contribution, Philippe's crop cultivation and development of citrus, including the development of the "Duncan" grapefruit, among other varieties, helped create the Florida citrus industry. His great success at Tampa Bay attracted other pioneers to the area, who also tried their hands at citrus cultivation.

But perhaps the most important contribution Philippe made was that of family. His daughters and descendants married, several into other area pioneer families including the Booths, MeMullens, Stephens and Youngbloods, and have continued to make their own contributions to Florida. In the words of author J. Allison DeFoor, II, " . . . 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."