King Joseph Bonaparte in Bordentown

By Rev. Edward M. Jawidzik

In the wake of the earth-shaking cataclysm of the Great Revolution in France, there emerged the juggernaut personality of Napoleon Bonaparte, who conquered most of Christendom and codified as law much of the Enlightenment ideas which led to the upheaval. He crowned himself Emperor of the French in 1804. It has been said that except for the Life of Christ, more biographies about Napoleon had been published than about any other person, although this has since been superseded by Lincoln.

His Imperial Majesty believed it was his prerogative to assign positions of power in Europe to his relatives and friends, one of whom was his older brother Joseph, who had been born on January 7, 1768, in French Corsica. Napoleon made him King of Naples, Spain, and the Indies in 1806. His reception in Madrid to empty streets and shuttered windows was disappointing, and he went through the actions of an ineffectual reign. In anticipation of trouble, Joseph began to buy up tracts of land in the by then more peaceful and prosperous New World.

With the fall of his illustrious brother at Waterloo in 1815, Joseph became a persona non grata in Madrid and fled for America. He arrived in New York on August 20, 1815, calling himself the Count of Survilliers. He brought with him a large cache of diamonds and the income it generated enabled him to live in the royal lifestyle to which he had become accustomed. He rented a house on Ninth Street and Market in Philadelphia, and in 1816 he purchased a 142-acre estate in Bordentown, New Jersey, which now happens to be located in the Catholic Diocese of Trenton. He bought it from Stephen Sayre, but in the name of James Carret, since Joseph was not a US citizen and could not own property. Point Breeze became his primary base of operations.

During his 17-year continuous stay in the fledgling nation, Joseph exhibited his magnificent art collection at Point Breeze and he entertained Mrs. John Quincy Adams, the Marquis de Lafayette, and Henry Clay. He rented a summer home in Watertown, New York, now Fort Drum Army Base; a mansion in today’s Hamilton Township, New Jersey, called Bow Hill; and the Dunlop House in Philadelphia from Stephen Girard, and he acquired vast expanses of real estate throughout America’s Northeast. The original mansion overlooking the Delaware River burned down in 1820, so Joseph built a new one along what is now Park Street.

Joseph hired many locals to work his estate, which included orchards, crops and floral gardens befitting a king, and he was “the best thing that ever happened to Bordentown,” according to local historian and Divine Word Missionaries archivist Andy Cosentino.

During his stay in the region, Joseph attended Mass on Sundays at Saint Joseph’s Church, Willing’s Alley, Philadelphia. He reportedly was allowed to bring his pet Saint Bernard to Mass with him. It is good to be King! The animal slept through the Eucharistic Liturgy.

As the political situation became more stable and safe across the pond, Joseph, now in his late sixties, Joseph felt his age and missed his family and his home continent. He made the first of his return trips to Europe in 1832, and bid his final farewell to America in 1838.
He suffered a serious stroke near London in 1840, and he passed away on July 28, 1844, at Villa Serristori in Florence, Italy, at the age of 76. His mortal remains were eventually entombed at Les Invalides in Paris, or “Napoleon’s Tomb,” in 1862 near his brother.

In 1847, Point Breeze was sold by Joseph’s grandson Joseph, who had inherited it, to Thomas Richards, who conveyed it to Henry Beckett, son of Sir Henry Beckett, the British consul at Philadelphia. He razed the mansion in 1850 because, it is said, of his distaste for anything French, and replaced it with an Italianate villa.

The Vincentian Fathers of Philadelphia bought the property in 1874 to use as a summer home until 1911 when Harris Hammond (not of the Hammond Organ Company family) bought Point Breeze. The mansion became commonly known as their “Hammond Mansion.” After spending a great deal on improvements, he lost everything in the Stock Market Crash of 1929. After being derelict for many years, Point Breeze was bought by the Society of the Divine Word in 1941 and in 1947 they opened a seminary for men of junior college age or older interested in a missionary vocation, in those days called “belated vocations.” In 1958, the seminary began to welcome high school age students. Because the number of candidates increased (!), a new building was constructed in 1961 with classrooms, a dormitory, and a dining room. In 1968, a gymnasium and auditorium were added.

When a disastrous fire on February 2, 1983 burned the Hammond Mansion to the ground, the Society decided to not rebuild the mansion and to close the seminary.

Here is a list of rectors and principals during the Society of the Divine Word years:

- Fr. Peter Weyland, SVD, first local superior, July 1941-November 1941
- Fr. Emil Lesage, SVD, first rector, November 1941-June 1946
- Fr. Robert Hunter, SVD, second rector, July 1946-June 1948
- Fr. Casimir Murawski, SVD, third rector, June 1948-June 1952
- Fr. Nicholas Bisheimer, SVD, fourth rector, June 1952-June 1958
- Fr. Walter Hafner, SVD, fifth rector, July 1858-June 1961
- Fr. Raymond Sanders, SVD, sixth rector, June 1961-June 1967
- Fr. Edward McGinn, SVD, seventh rector, April 1967-March 1968
- Fr. Stephen Szmutko, SVD, eighth rector, April 1968-June 1970
- Fr. Paul Connors, SVD, ninth rector, June 1970-June 1976
- Fr. Donald Ehr, SVD, tenth rector, June 1976-June, 1982
- Fr. William Shea, SVD, eleventh rector, June 1982-June 1985
- Fr. Norman St. John, SVD, twelfth rector, June 1985-June 1993
- Fr. Martin Padovani, SVD, thirteenth rector, June 1993-June 2002
- Fr. Raymond T. Lennon, SVD, fourteenth rector, June 2002-June 2008
- Fr. Walter E. Miller, SVD, fifteenth rector, June 2008-August 2009
- Bro. Patrick J. Hogan, SVD, sixteenth rector, August 2009-2014
- Fr. Raymond T. Lennon, SVD, seventeenth rector, June 2014-present

The school for belated vocations of the Divine Word Missionaries began in 1947. There was no separation of the Rector and Principal at that time. The Rector was the head of the school which was directed by the prefect/dean of students. In 1958, the Seminary High School established at Duxbury, Massachusetts, or Mirimar, was transferred to Bordentown. The first Principal, appointed in the late 1960s, was Fr. Donald Sobieski, SVD. In 1970, Fr. Paul Connors, SVD, became the second principal until

The Bordentown Divine Word Community was made a residence for retired members and those involved in various apostolates. As of this writing, there are twelve priests and three brothers living at the religious house.

Though now just a memory, and a faint one at that, the Joseph Bonaparte years at Point Breeze provide a notable illustration of a time when Philadelphia and the Delaware Valley were a dynamic center of intellectual and cultural life, exposing European taste to Philadelphia’s and New York’s guests and patrons.