

Lafitte's Map

By Ian Bruce and John Turner

St Helena has had many visitors in its history. Some were famous – including the King of Great Britain. Some were exiles such as Napoleon and the 6,000 Boer PoWs. Some were simply tourists and ship passengers. And one was Louis-Francois- Grégoire Lafitte de Brassier (whom we will shorten to “Lafitte”). He wasn't a famous person, an exile, or even a tourist. He was a spy.

Most of what is known about Lafitte comes from military records.¹ The son of a soldier, he was born on 19 August 1740 in Provence. Aged 15, Lafitte volunteered for the Regiment of Lorraine and served in its ranks for the next 19 years. A year after enlisting, he and his regiment were posted to the Indies. Britain and France were continually at war in this period and Lafitte's arrival in India in 1756 coincided with the start of the Seven Year's War (1756-1763). In India, this included a push by Robert Clive against French forces, its allies and territories. Lafitte survived twelve different battles and sieges between 1757 and 1760 and was serving in India at the Pondicherry headquarters of the French East India Company when, at the point of near starvation, their soldiers surrendered in January 1761. He was held as a prisoner-of-war for five years at Bombay before finally being returned to France. In 1774, after 19 years of service, Lafitte was finally appointed an officer in the Corps of Engineers. The French government regarded topography an important military subject and a special unit of military engineers were trained by army staffs.² Lafitte's superior topographic drawing skills must have been recognised because in 1776 he was ordered to sail east and create maps of the Seychelles archipelago and Canton. Returning to Pondicherry two years later, Lafitte was awarded a commission as a lieutenant.³

Yet another global Anglo-French war broke out in 1777 following France's covert support of rebels in the American Revolution. In India, the British once again laid siege to Pondicherry in August 1778 and the French finally surrendered the following October. Surviving French forces, including Lafitte, were taken as prisoners of war to Madras. Some men, particularly the senior ranks, were released soon after but others such as Lafitte remained a prisoner for several years. He spent his time profitably, not only marrying⁴ but also creating detailed plans of Madras and its defences under the noses of his British captors.⁵

Lafitte and his family were finally shipped from India on 18 January 1780, most probably from Madras on a convoy of five East India Company ships.⁶

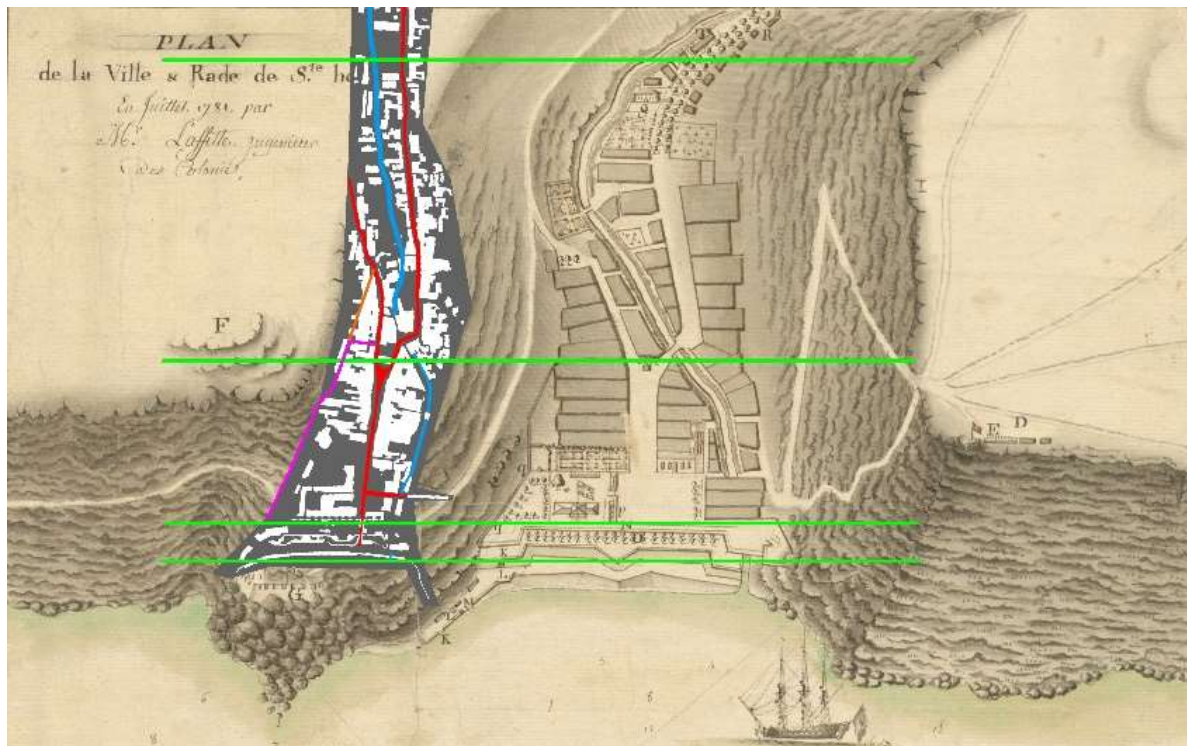
The French passengers were still prisoners of war. Presumably, all they wanted was to be transported back to France or one of its territories so for them the EIC convoy went off in the entirely wrong direction toward China. Thus, it was only on 19 May 1781, a full 16 months after leaving Madras, that the ships eventually arrived at St Helena on their home voyage.⁷

One of the French officers, Captain Mahée on the ship *Halsewell*, immediately wrote a letter to the Governor and Council begging as an officer and gentleman to be allowed a short period on the island. However, a state of war still existed with France⁸ so Mahée was told none of the French could be landed unless the ship's surgeon considered there were good health reasons for doing so. Lafitte was indeed allowed to land, presumably because either he or his family had health issues. A more dangerous man to let loose on the island is hard to imagine. Described as having dark hair, blue eyes, a big nose and smallpox scars, he set about doing what he did best – compiling a map of Jamestown, its defences and gunnery fortresses along the coast. His motive is clear – he intended to convey his map back to the French authorities in support of a future invasion of the island. Given the grave disadvantage the loss of St Helena

would have on the East India Company, during the Seven Years War (1756–63) at least two French East Indies naval commanders had already proposed an invasion of the island.⁹

As had also been the case at Madras, his status as a prisoner-of-war does not seem to have inhibited Laffitte. In creating the map, he must have surreptitiously estimated angles by eye and silently counted footsteps as he paced the streets. To do this in a small place like Jamestown where little goes unobserved cannot have been easy, but he succeeded.

The accuracy of these measurements can be seen in the next image where a plot of the modern road system has been overlaid on top of Laffitte's map.

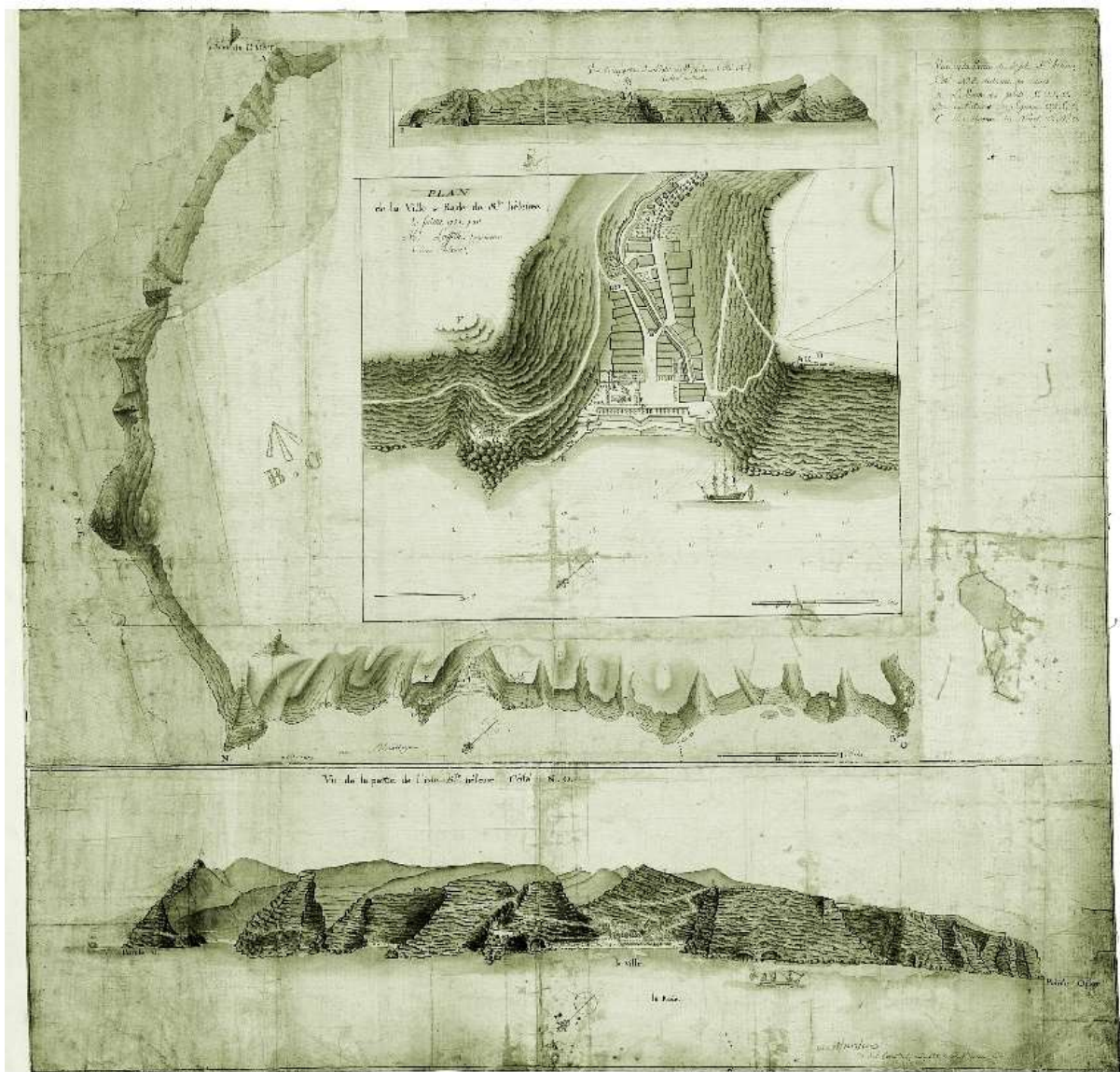


Certainly, the map has flaws – the buildings shown are figurative rather than literal, but then the exact delineation of the houses would have been of little consequence to an invading army. The road layouts are largely accurate, even though he would clearly not have been in possession of formal map-making tools.

The absence of buildings in upper Napoleon Street (then Cock Hill) and south of the Middle Cemetery in Market Street is probably because Laffitte's permitted wanderings could not take him that far. He shows a hospital as part of the barracks (now Pilling School) but actually the hospital would have been up at Maldivia, roughly where it is today.

Despite these shortcomings to this day it remains the best contemporary map of lower Jamestown and is interesting to see the level of development at the time.

As a prisoner-of-war, he was clearly allowed some liberty to walk around in lower Jamestown, but that would have been the limit of his range. So, if we examine his full map, we see many mistakes and misrepresentations. For example, Upper James Valley is immensely foreshortened, and the roads at the top of Ladder Hill are vague and could not have represented actual routes at the time.



The full map shows the entire coastline and defences from Sugar Loaf point on the northeast to South West Point on the northwest. Having sailed from the Cape, Lafitte's convoy would have met the island in the region of Prosperous Bay. Whether powered by wind, coal or oil, it has always been the practice of ships coming from the Cape to approach Jamestown by passing north of the island in an anticlockwise direction.¹⁰ This largely takes them into the lee of the island, thereby passing Sugar Loaf Point before arriving off Jamestown.

We believe Lafitte sketched this section of the coast as his ship passed by. Apart from adding one extra valley that does not exist, this is very accurately drawn. However, the coastline beyond his anchorage is vague with little of interest, which we think shows he could only observe this from his ship's anchorage. For example, he did not sketch the strong defences at Lemon Valley, which would have been beyond his view at that location. He also located High Knoll Fort much too close to Ladder Hill Fort, an easy mistake if he had only seen High Knoll from a ship in James Bay.

He also added some notes on the islands' forts, including numbers of cannon and the strength of the garrison but his assessments seem rather strange. He described the defences from Mundens to Banks' as being of "no defensive value, just like the port's defences" which shows he seriously underestimated their strength. We think it unlikely that he would have been able to inspect these defences for himself so would have relied on what he saw from his ship

and vague descriptions given to him by people in town. His cannon-counts and garrison strength data are probably also sourced from anecdotal data rather than accurate personal measurement, though we have not been able to find any contemporary military records with which to compare them.

It is not a prize-winning map, but it was still quite detailed for its time and would have been of considerable use to the French Military in their invasion planning. Which brings us to a final interesting feature of Lafitte's Map – there are two nearly-identical but distinctly separate versions. One is held by the British National Archives – a curious place to find a French spy-map.¹¹ The other was discovered two decades ago at a map sale in Augsburg, purchased by our own Edward Baldwin and stored at the St Helena Museum. Edward's map also came with a three-page handwritten report by Lafitte with a detailed description of the island defences and his assessment of its vulnerabilities. The two maps are almost identical, measuring roughly 70 x 70 cm. Each provides a bird's-eye view of Jamestown and its anchorage and shows the steepness of the hills surrounding the town and its defence works. Two aspects of the coastline are also shown, one being another bird's-eye view and the other a view from the sea.

There may be a simple explanation for this duplication of maps. Lafitte would have been severely circumscribed in drawing his map, presumably discretely pacing out the distances and estimating angles. At some point, either on the island or after he left it, his activities were realised, and his map was confiscated. Given he eventually returned to France with all his other maps, it seems more likely the map was found on the island, although a search of the records has so far revealed nothing on Lafitte. We suspect the confiscated version is the one today kept at the British National Archives. Determined to aid his government, Lafitte later drew a second map – the one now owned by Edward. Whether he did this purely from memory – in which case he must either have had an eidetic memory (which might have explained why the French made him a map-maker in the first place) or managed to keep detailed notes.

Back in France, the Bourbon authorities were obviously unaware of Lafitte's activities. They decided to take advantage of a proposal by Yves-Joseph de Kerguelen de Trémarec to embark on a voyage of exploration. He was a contemporary of Captain Cook and had already (in 1772) discovered the Kerguelen Islands in the southern Indian Ocean. Although his country was officially at war with Britain, in 1780 he successfully applied to the Admiralty in London for a letter of safe conduct. This was valid for four years and allowed him to travel through British territorial waters. The French authorities decided that the expedition should also include a survey of two British territories – St Helena and areas along the Ganges River – preparatory to French ships launching surprise attacks.

At precisely the same time that Lafitte was busy mapping Jamestown, on 16 July 1781, Yves de Kerguelen set sail from the port of Paimbœuf on the *Liber Navigator* bound for Mauritius. A day later his ship was stopped and boarded by *HMS Alfred*. A search of the ship revealed letters that argued the advantages of taking St Helena.¹²

“The capture of the island together with what merchandise would be found deposited there would produce 20 million of livres, the capture of 20 vessels at 3 million each would produce 60 million which would make the immense sum of 80 million. [...] Besides one should consider the great advantage of having an excellent retreat for our ships returning from the Isle of France [Mauritius] and Bourbon [Réunion], from the Indies and from China, and also that this island so useful to the English who have no other place to touch at between China and England would in peaceable times be an equilibrium or a restitution for Pondicherry and our establishment in Bengal and on the coast of Malabar”.

On the basis of these letters, the *Liber Navigator* was escorted to Kinsale [County Cork] where Yves de Kerguelen was briefly imprisoned. The ship and its contents were confiscated, an action that was duly ratified in 1782 by a British court.

By this time, Lafitte was back in France so the French authorities had full details of St Helena's defences in their hands. However, they made no use of this over the next few years. France and Britain enjoying a brief nine-year period of peace up to 1793 when hostilities broke out yet again, first with French Revolutionary forces and then with Napoleon.

Serious proposals for a French invasion of St Helena were not made until 1804 when Napoleon ordered the three main fleets to a range of destinations that included Ireland, the West Indies and St Helena. A section of Vice-Admiral Villeneuve's fleet with 1,200-1,500 men under the command of General de Brigade (later Marshal) Charles Michel Joseph Reille¹³ was given the task of capturing St Helena. Fearing that his orders had come to the notice of the British, Napoleon changed his orders on 8 October.¹⁴ In the event, Reille would have found formidable defences had been put in place in the quarter century since Lafitte's visit.



Charles Reille – St Helena's prospective governor

And what of Lafitte? From his letters it is known he finally returned to France at Calais on 13 November 1781. He began a five-year campaign for the French military authorities to recognise his value as a cartographer and to accede to an appeal that he and his family be allowed back to his old home at Pondicherry. In 1782 he published several dozen of his East Indian maps in an Atlas. These fully demonstrate his cartographic abilities.¹⁵ Eventually an agreement was reached to part-fund his family's return to Pondicherry on condition that he called at Cape Town and send back a detailed map of the town and its surroundings. Having sent this back to France, he presumably sailed on to Pondicherry where he fades from history. He had long served France as a common soldier and survived tropical diseases, numerous conflicts against the British and many long periods of imprisonment. This was unusual, but still, there were others in the French army who had suffered and endured something of the same. The quality that finally stood him apart from his fellow soldiers was his unique skill as a cartographer. He was only once discovered and that was at St Helena, which is too small for the actions of even the most surreptitious of spies to go unnoticed.

And he left us with the first detailed map of Lower Jamestown, for which we must offer him many thanks, despite its rather dubious genesis.

Acknowledgements: We are very grateful for help by Edward Baldwin who kindly allowed us to use images of his version of Lafitte's map. We also thank Adam Sizeland, Director of the Museum of St Helena, for photographing the map.

¹ Lafitte's biography is mainly sourced from a paper by Laura J. Mitchell, 'Illustrating Empire: A Soldier's Life and Trans-Imperial Encounters in the Eighteenth Century', *World History Connected* 14, no. 1 (February 2017), <https://tinyurl.com/yauubflm>. This spells his name as "Lafite". Several other name variations have been found, for example, Louis François Grégoire Lafitte du Brassier, Louis François Grégoire Laffitte de Brassier, Louis François Grégoire La Fite de Brassier and Louis François Grégoire Lafite Brasier.

² Brett D. Steele and Tamera Dorland, *The Heirs of Archimedes: Science and the Art of War Through the Age of Enlightenment* (London: The MIT Press, 2005), 336, <https://tinyurl.com/ya3m6xhh>, <https://tinyurl.com/ycyquzz2>.

³ Under the terms of the 1763 Treaty of Paris, Pondicherry returned to French control [Ian H. Magedera, 'Arrested Development, the Shape of "French India" after the Treaties of Paris of 1763 and 1814', *Interventions International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 12, no. 3 (1 November 2010): 331–43, <https://tinyurl.com/ycm4unb5>].

⁴ Mitchell, 'Illustrating Empire'. This paper suggests Lafitte possibly married an officer's daughter or a woman from the local Catholic community. It also suggests the couple had three children born in the East Indies but from the details [<https://tinyurl.com/ybx6nl8m>] of his last known voyage in 1786 to map the Cape, two of the three children were respectively aged only three and four and these must have been born in France.

⁵ Alexis Rinckenbach, 'Early French Colonial Cartography of the Indian Ocean: The Depot de Fortifications des Colonies Collection', *Proceedings 18th ICA/ACI International Cartographic Conference* 1 (June 1997): 134–41, <https://tinyurl.com/yauzyhq5>.

⁶ Lafitte and his family probably sailed from Madras on a convoy of five East India Company ships [East Indies Series 63, Lists of French Prisoners Embarked and Arrived in England on the Halswell, Granby, Earl of Sandwich, Earl of Oxford, and London? (1780-1781), IOR/H/155, British Library: Asian and African Studies, <https://tinyurl.com/y7zth7vu>].

⁷ The details of the Halsewell have probably been best preserved: 6 Mar 1779 left Portsmouth - 5 Apr Madeira - 8 May Goree - 30 Jul Cape - 18 Jan 1780 Madras - 19 Jul Malacca - 1 Sep Whampoa - 11 Dec Second Bar - 19 May 1781 St Helena - 20 Oct Downs. [Halsewell Logs, IOR/L/MAR/A-B', British Library: Asian and African Studies]. It is not known how long the East India Company ships remained at St Helena, but several crew members were buried at St James Church in the weeks that followed the convoy's arrival: Frederick Muller, *Halsewell*, 30 June 1781; William Kidson, *Granby*, 25 July 1781; William Murphy and Joseph Stephens, *Earl of Oxford*, 27 May and 16 June 1781 [Witwatersrand University, St James Burial Register 1767-1807 p.18]. The ship was famously sunk on the Dorset cliffs on 6 January 1786 [<https://tinyurl.com/ybyrql7>].

⁸ For example, in the year 1781, combined French and American forces had defeated Britain at the Battles of the Chesapeake and Yorktown.

⁹ For the claim that Jean Baptiste Charles Henri Hector (Comte d'Estaing) and Michel-Joseph Froger de l'Eguille separately urged an invasion of St Helena see H.W. Richmond, *The Navy In India 1763 - 1783*, 1931, 125, <https://tinyurl.com/y8vl5moc>; Georges Lacour-Gayet, *La Marine Militaire de La France Sous Le Règne de Louis XV*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1910), 410–11, <https://tinyurl.com/y8hb3bjm>. Unfortunately, neither reference quotes primary source details.

¹⁰ According to [William Herbert, William Nicholson, and Samuel Dunn, *A New Directory for the East-Indies* (London: Gilbert and Wright, 1791), 446–47, <https://tinyurl.com/yaptrkcx>.]: “A ship bound to this island must run down along the north side of it, and within ½ a cable's length of Sugar-Loaf Point, and afterward keep the shore close aboard, within a cable's length: there is no danger, the shore being bold and steep to”. The RMS took a similar route as do modern sailing boats, the windward side of the island being less variable and erratic than the leeward side.

¹¹ ‘National Archives, Plan de la Ville & Rade de-e Hélène en Juillet 1781 par Mr. Laffitte, Ingenieur des Colonies’ (1781), MPH 1/251, The National Archives, Kew, <https://tinyurl.com/y9uzlrfj>.

¹² John McAleer, *Britain's Maritime Empire: Southern Africa, the South Atlantic and the Indian Ocean, 1763–1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 114, <https://tinyurl.com/yb7vrqky>; ‘British Library: IOR/H/153: From Paul Benson at Cork and Intercepted Letters 11th Aug., 1st Aug., 3rd Aug. 1781; From Richard Lewin at the Cape 30th Jan. and 3rd March 1781, French Plans, Enterprises Proposed by Capt. Kerguelen and Others’ (81 1780), <https://tinyurl.com/yanlmrum>; ‘IOR/H/154, East Indies Series 62, 1779-1781, Paul Benson to Directors. Pp. 77-8, Cork, 17 Aug. 1781, Character of M. de Kerguelen, Commander of the Liber Navigator; Pp. 95-113, 25 and 29 Aug. 1781, with Proposals for French Attacks on St Helena, Dacca, Chittagong, &c.’ (1781).

¹³ Johannes Willms, *Napoleon & St Helena: On the Island of Exile*, trans. John Brownjohn (London: Armchair Traveller/Haus Publishing, 2008), 48–49; Geoffrey Bennett, *The Battle of Trafalgar*, 89. ‘Honoré Charles Reille’, *Wikipedia*, 3 June 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y92rr52j>; ‘Honoré Reille (1775-1860)’, <https://tinyurl.com/y77uh63r>.

¹⁴ Reille duly sailed with Villeneuve, whose fleet was chased all the way from the Mediterranean across the Atlantic to the West Indies and back again by Nelson. Ahead of the Battle of Trafalgar, Reille was landed at Cadiz and made his way across Europe to re-join Napoleon, taking part in the Battle of Austerlitz.

¹⁵ Atlas des cartes géographiques, principalement les plans des villes les plus considerables, appartenant aux différentes nations européennes ainsi qu'aux princes Indiens de l'Asie, avec quelques cartes marines. Fait et relevé par les ordres des gouverneurs des Isles de France et de Pondichéry, très exactement, par Mr Lafite de Brassier, ingénieur militaire, géographe des colonies, depuis l'année 1776 a 1782 [Charles Germain Marie Bourel de La Roncière, *Catalogue général des manuscrits des bibliothèques publiques de France : bibliothèques de la marine* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit et cie., 1907), 224–25, <https://tinyurl.com/yd8c63yx>; *Géographie et voyages*, vol. 3 (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1840), 175, <https://tinyurl.com/ydxj5but>.]

The following is an annotated English translation of a document that accompanied the map of St Helena by Louis-Francois- Grégoire Lafitte de Brassier when it was purchased at an auction in the 1990s by Edward Baldwin at Augsburg. We would like to thank Edward for giving us permission to publish this reports plus extracts of his map.

Situation of the Island of St Helena, July 1781

The Island of St Helena is, by its situation, capable of good defence, its coast is composed of very steep rocks, as you can see on the map I have provided, further there are in many places hills which fall to the edge of the water, where walls have been constructed running from one mountain to the next. The widest of the gorges between these hills is no wider than 250 *toises*, some have cannons, but no great number.

I have examined with great care, in as much as I could, being a prisoner, all the sea coast of the island from point **A** as far as point **B**, and going to the northern part of the Island, where I saw new works in the area **C**. These are works to improve the defences, in dry stone, which are of no great strength.

Being master of the peaks, these works have no defensive value, just like the forts of port.

Inland there are many small earth defences (redoubts) some with guns but no walls, there is also at five miles from the port, heading to the middle of the Island, a small town of sixty or so dwelling houses with a magazine for military munitions, a body of soldiers, consisting at this time of 200 soldiers and 50 gunners, the other troops being distributed around the Island.

This little town is fortified by earthwork line around, no water in the ditches, unfenced, defended in various places by guns of seven to 27 pounds calibre.

On the summit of the mountain **D**, at the edge of the sea, there is a signal repeating house, communicating with other mountain tops and the ships, also a battery **E** of ten large calibre guns and four mortars, trained on the roadstead; but this battery is too high to bother the ships whose anchorage is no more than half a mile away, by 14, 12 and 9 ???

On mountain **F**, to the right of the harbour, a third of the way up, on the edge of the sea, is a masonry battery **G**, with embrasures mounting 14 cannons of 24 French pounds, and four large mortars, and a garrison. This battery defends the roadstead and the approaches from the North, the route absolutely necessary on account of the constant wind direction.

Detail of the Town

In the Town of St Helena, where all ships come to drop anchor, live a Governor, the Administrative Council and the States Major.

It is built between two high mountains which are very close to each other and has only one street. It is fortified at the seaward end by two curtain walls **H** which run from one mountain to the other, **I**, terminated by a bastion at each end, the inner curtain commands the outer. They are separated by three rows of trees. The first, outer curtain has a ditch five *toises* wide, with a covered road of three *toises*. The sea bathes the foot of the glacis.

The town is entered to the left, **K**, of this wall, by crossing two drawbridges. At **L** ships get their water, close to the first bridge, at a fountain with taps **M**. The inner ramparts, **N**, have an entrance gate **O** with two doors. This line of fortifications carries 120 guns ranging in calibre from 12 to 42 pounders.

One notices within this rampart a semi-revetted battery with six guns, no ditch. The Government House is surrounded by a wall eight feet high **Q**, at the foot of the town. At the country end of the town is an earthen redoubt sporting eight cannons **R**, within it a building for lodging the officers **S**, a barracks for the troops **T** and to the side a hospital **V**.

The recognition signals for ships which come from India, from Bengal and from China, under a Dutch flag on the main mast, a white pennant atop the (Artimon?) mast, two cannon shots, flag in the poop.

The Island supplies nothing for the subsistence of the inhabitants or the garrison. Normally every year two ships of 600 tons are sent from England laden with provisions. The rendezvous for the ships from China and India is at a distance of six to 15 leagues to the East of the Island, they being obliged to make this manoeuvre by the prevailing direction of the wind which always blows hereabouts.

Strength of the Garrison in June and July 1781

Soldiers	638
Gunners	130
Civilian Militia	120
Armed black slaves	286

Total men	1174
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By M Lafitte, Colonial Judge [?] [probably Ingénieur des Colonies]

Comparative details of the second Lafitte map held at National Archives, Kew:

<http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C4562058>

Reference: MPH 1/251

Description: Map of the north and north-west coast of St Helena: bird's eye view of the cliffs from 'Isles de l'Est' to West Point. With reference table. Inset 'Plan de la Ville & Rade de St e Hélène en Juillet 1781 par Mr. Laffitte, Ingenieur des Colonies': bird's-eye view of Jamestown and its anchorage, showing the steepness of the hills surrounding the town and the dominant position of two defence works, one at Munden's Point; a ship at anchor lies off the town. Scale: about 2.5 cm to 64 toises. Compass indicator. With two views of the coast: 'Vue de la partie de... St. Helene Coté N.E.' and 'Vue de la partie de l'isle Ste. hélène Côté N.O.'. The latter view shows the appearance of Jamestown from the sea, and the roads leading to the cliffs surrounding the town.

Date: 1781.

Language: French

Dimensions: 68 cm x 70 cm

Publication note: Maps and Plans in the Public Record Office: 3. Africa, ed P A Penfold (London, 1982), entries 3574 and 3594