



**Barry Lawrence Ruderman
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Carte générale du Bassin de la Plata, dressée d'après les documents recueillis sur les lieux, et les meilleurs plans partiels de cette contrée par M.Coffinières, Lt. Cnel. du Génie Montevideo 1850 -- Gravee au Depot de la Guerre publiee en 1853 (with 3 page manuscript Description of the "Peninsule de l'Aguaquey").

Stock#: 60429
Map Maker: Coffinières
Date: 1853
Place: Paris
Color: Hand Colored
Condition: VG
Size: 29.5 x 40 inches
Price: \$3,500.00



Description:

First Map of the Rio de la Plata Basin—Rare Map with Manuscript Additions & 3 Page Manuscript Suggesting A French Colonization Effort In The Region

Nice example of Grégoire Gaspard Félix Coffinières rare map of the Rio de la Plata Basin, the second largest fluvial system in the world. It was compiled by Coffinières during his time in Argentina in 1849 and 1850 and includes manuscript additions outlining an intriguing colonial project.

Coffiniere's map is accompanied by a 3 page hand written report extolling the virtues of Misiones, where the colonial project was located. The manuscript was apparently intended as part of a prospective French



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Colony in the region, which was under consideration in about 1855.

The map shows the entirety of the massive Rio de la Plata Basin, an area which includes part of what is today Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Brazil. It shows the principal tributaries of the basin, the Paraná, the Uruguay, and the Paraguay, and many other waterways are also shown. Great forests, particularly in Entre Rios, so-called because it is sandwiched between the Paraná and the Uruguay Rivers, cover large parts of the territory. A road network is traced as well.

There are several crossed swords on the map, accompanied by years in circles. These mark battles that took place as nations of South America fought for their independence, first from Spain and then from each other. Indeed, Argentina was still enduring civil war when this map was made. It would only become the nation state that we know as modern Argentina in 1861.

As the title in the lower right corner explains, the map was made by Grégoire Gaspard Félix Coffinières. He was a graduate of the prestigious École Polytechnique, then a military academy focused on engineering and the sciences. Coffinières was, therefore, a highly trained military engineer whose work was gathered from the latest documents he found while in the Rio de la Plata region, as well as other plans he gathered in Europe. The importance of this area is underlined by the fact that the map was engraved and published by the French *Dépôt de la Guerre*, or the War Department.

This is the first known map to focus exclusively on the Rio de la Plata Basin. River mapping was centuries old at the time this map was printed, but the focus on river basins was relatively new. In the eighteenth century, Philippe Buache created several maps of the world's watersheds as a way to illustrate his theories of underwater mountain chains which in turn influenced the world's river systems. This map is the earliest known example to focus so narrowly on the Rio de la Plata Basin.

The Aguapey Peninsula and Blaise Despouy

In addition to being extremely rare—OCLC lists six known copies—this particular example of the map contains manuscript additions and hand-coloring. The manuscript additions focus on one particular area, in the province of Misiones. Misiones, as it now known with the Spanish spelling, is today the northeastern most-province of Argentina. Before European invasion, it was long settled by indigenous peoples, including the Kaingang, the Xokleng, and the Guaraní.

In the seventeenth century, the Jesuits established many of their missions in a band that stretched from



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Paraguay to Misiones to Uruguay and Rio Grande do Sul in Brazil. These missions were largely abandoned by the 1770s, when the Jesuit order was suppressed. Despite Guaraní resistance, the economy shifted to a plantation economy and many Guaraní people were forced into slave conditions.

Throughout the early- and mid-nineteenth century, Paraguay, Uruguay, Brazil, and the United Provinces of Rio de la Plata (a forerunner to Argentina) fought over Misiones, a fertile agricultural area best known today for its magnificent waterfalls. Only in 1876 would Argentina officially gain control over the province.

When this map was made, then, Misiones was a contested territory, a status that offered opportunities to ambitious men caught up in war. This explains the yellow-colored section of the map, labeled "*Péninsule de L'Aguapey appartenant à Bze Despouy*," or the Aguapey Peninsula, which appertains to Bze. Despouy. It seems that somehow Monsieur Despouy obtained a sizeable chunk of the Misiones region, specifically the triangle of land formed by the Uruguay and Aguapey Rivers.

Bze Despouy refers to Blaise (or Blas) Despouy, whose life remains somewhat of a mystery. He was a Frenchman, one of nearly 5,000 in the area during this time. He became embroiled in the wars of independence and civil wars that wracked the region throughout this period and surviving correspondence in South American archives show that he was in touch with high-ranking military commanders of the Banda Oriental area. In the mid-1820s, Despouy traded a quantity of cotton, ponchos, handkerchiefs, hoes, axes, and horses to Félix Aguirre for the large portion of land here shown in yellow.

If little is known of Despouy, more is known of the person on the other side of the transactions, Félix Aguirre. Aguirre (1790-1834) was a Rio de la Plata soldier and politician. After fighting on behalf of Buenos Aires and its allies, in 1821 Aguirre became the governor of Misiones. The political situation was still fluid, and at times his position was only nominal, but Aguirre exercised power over Misiones for much of the 1820s. However, he was seldom in the province for long, as he was constantly on the move as a commander in the larger wars of independence and civil conflicts. The sale to Despouy was compensation for Despouy's goods and supplies, which Aguirre needed to continue to fight.

Why, then, would this land deal struck in the thick of war matter thirty years later, when this map was made? It seems the Despouy never relinquished his claim on the land. In 1856, just after this detailed map of the region was published, it seems Despouy attempted to sell the land to a maritime company in France, perhaps in his native La Rochelle.



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A French Colony in the Misiones?

This map may have been a planning document for the French businessmen and officials interested in a South American foothold. The present example is accompanied by a three-page explanation that suggests that colonization of the area by European immigrants was the goal. The unsigned description tells of how fertile the land is for animal husbandry and agriculture. The climate is considered safe for Europeans and the author even says that Misiones is known as the Italy of South America. Interestingly, a note in another hand has added that most of the villages in the region are in ruins, perhaps a reference to abandonment by the now long-gone Jesuits.

These grand plans came to naught, however. The news that the French intended to exercise a claim over Misiones understandably alarmed the Rio de la Plata officials, who used diplomatic channels to halt the attempt. The French ambassador surrendered the French claim to the holding in 1856.

In fact, this prospective colony was at the leading edge of the French wave of immigration in Argentina. From the second half of the nineteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century, Argentina received the second largest group of French immigrants worldwide; that largest group went to the United States. Argentina received 1,484 French immigrants in 1856. The number of French immigrants present in the province of Buenos Aires reached 25,000 by 1859.

In 1857, an immigrant from Béarn, Alejo Peyret, founded the first farming colony very near to Misiones. The French colony was in San José, Entre Ríos. In 1864, out of 380 families living in two town, 125 were from Savoy. Eventually, French settlers would also build their lives in Misiones and would profoundly impact its culture and development.

Conclusion & Rarity

This map illustrates a little known and intriguing colonial episode from the most tumultuous period in the history of the Rio de la Plata. It is also extremely rare, with only six known copies: three in the USA, two in France, and one (damaged) in Australia as listed in OCLC. This first known map solely focused on the Rio de la Plata Basin tells many stories and would make a worthy addition to any collection of South America maps.

Detailed Condition:



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Two sheets joined. Dissected and laid on linen, with original slipcase. Includes a 3 page manuscript Description of the "Peninsule de l'Aguaqey." Minor dampstaining.