

Memorial column, known as 'Napoleon's Column' Val-de-la-Haye



View of the column, postcard, n.d. private collection

Napoleon was exiled to Saint Helena in 1815 and died there in 1821. It wasn't until 1840 that King Louis-Philippe finally decided to repatriate Napoleon's remains and have them reburied at Invalides. The vessels chartered for the voyage arrived in Cherbourg on 30th November 1840. To avoid crowds on the road to Rouen, the journey continued by sea and river, rather than overland. A sailing steamship, *La Normandie*, was used for the first leg, and after sailing along the coast of Calvados to Le Havre, the ship headed up the River Seine.

For the voyage upriver from Rouen, the remains needed transferring to another vessel. A barge was required, one capable of navigating the numerous sandbanks in the river and the low bridges in the towns between Rouen and Courbevoie, where the coffin was eventually unloaded on 15th December. The transfer took place at Val de la Haye, which was ideal because it was sheltered by an island and close to Rouen.



Prefectorial decree authorising the transfer of the remains at Val de la Haye, ADSM 1 M 369 © Département de la Seine-Maritime

The ceremonial transfer took place between the 8th & 9th December. The King's son, le Prince de Joinville, had been entrusted with organising the expedition and had himself

accompanied the Emperor's remains aboard *La Normandie*. Local dignitaries including the *prefet*, Dupont-Delporte, the colonel of the National Guard and the mayor of Val de la Haye met the ship and many locals also lined the river bank to watch the proceedings.

The following day, the town council announced its intention to commemorate the event. To finance this, they organised two successive fund-raising drives. Unfortunately, both were met with little enthusiasm, not least by the Grand Marshals, who had been close advisers to the Emperor.

6,200 francs were eventually collected and invested. Once some interest had accrued, they managed to lay the foundation stone of the monument in 1844 on a plot of land beside the river donated by a Mme Fizeaux, nee Lézurier de la Martel.



Plan view of the column, ADSM 1M 369 © Département de la Seine-Maritime

The column was inaugurated on 15th August 1846, with an official ceremony that included festivities, traditional dances, fireworks and the bronze eagle being placed on the column's summit. The plaques adorning the base were not added until several years later due to the lack of funds. Iron railings later enclosed the site in 1851.

The monument is a fluted Doric column, 75cm in diameter and adorned with bronze rings featuring the names in relief of Napoleon's most famous battles, including Arcole (Italian campaign, 1796), Pyramids (Egyptian campaign, 1798), Austerlitz (German and Trafalgar campaigns, 1805), Jena (Prussian campaign, 1806) and Moscow (Russian campaign, 1812). A bronze eagle with wings folded surmounts the column. It weighs approximately 545 kg and was commissioned from the Maison Marguery workshops in Rouen.

A box was also buried in the foundations. It contained a lock of the Emperor's hair, a piece of mahogany from his coffin, a fragment of stone from his grave on St. Helena, a twig from the willow tree sheltering his grave, a parchment listing the donors, a copper plaque bearing the date of the laying of the foundation stone and the minutes of the ceremony signed by the Prefect and the dignitaries present.

The municipality is responsible for the column's upkeep and promotion of it as a cultural legacy, and therefore initiated an extensive restoration programme in 2018. They took the opportunity to remove the eagle for cleaning and to landscape the site delimited by bollards and chains installed thanks to a grant from the *département* in 1933.



Reinstallation of the eagle statue after restoration in 2018 © private collection

In June 2018, two days of festivities were jointly organised by the municipality, local historians and associations including *l'Association Colonne Napoléon*¹, *le souvenir napoléonien*² and *les Amis du patrimoine napoléonien*³.



Napoleonic Festivities, June 2018 © private collection

¹ <https://www.colonne-napoleon.fr/>

² <https://www.souvenirnapeoleonien.org/>

³ <http://lesapn.org/>