

Chapter Title: Seeds of Change: Marseille, 1999–2000

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Marseille, France

Until the early twentieth century, it was common practice to dump ballast overboard into the open sea before entering a port to avoid deballasting fees. But in Marseille, France, ships came into the port fully ballasted. Otherwise, the mistral wind rushing down the Alps could easily push lightened ships right back into the turbulent sea and onto the rocky coastline. Another common but illegal practice was to dispose of ballast surreptitiously, usually under cover of darkness, directly into the port's waters. But this was not always possible in Marseille, as the port was shallow and therefore easily silted up. Therefore, ballast could typically only be unloaded onto land, usually into the legally designated depot on the quay. And along with the ballast came seeds.

For hundreds of years, seeds coming from the regions trading with Marseille, including Norway, South Africa, Mexico, and Vietnam, have likely been accumulating along the corners of the port of Marseille without being noticed. When I embarked on my *Seeds of Change* journey, I wanted to find them.

Marseille is France's oldest port city. As early as the Middle Ages, it served as the major military port for soldiers leaving for the Crusades. Soldiers and colonists sailed to the Americas from Marseille. During the French Empire, colonists and soldiers left its port for Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, among other places. These acts of religious wars and colonization transformed Marseille into a rich city. At the time, it was the world's fourth-largest port, making it key to the administration of the colonies. Sometime later, defeated colonists from North Africa returned and settled there, bringing on their ships even more ballast. (I learned in later iterations of *Seeds of Change* that much ballast is needed when humans are transported.)

Before contacting Dr. Heli Jutila, an expert in ballast flora who consulted on the botanical investigation, I met with Dr. Frédéric Médail of the Institut Méditerranéen d'Ecologie et de Paléontologie at the Faculté des Sciences de St. Jérôme of the Université d'Aix-Marseille, as it was then called. I hoped he could help me ascertain whether ballast studies already existed. None did. In Marseille, I was able to contribute original research and botanical studies on ballast flora without duplicating existing scientific work.

Each iteration of *Seeds of Change* would lead me to different

paths of investigations on ballast and ballast flora. I began to research in the local libraries and archives, as well as the city's history museum and chamber of commerce, for clues on the location of ballast sites.

The earliest letter I found mentioning a ballast site was from a concerned citizen in Marseille to the ruling Marquis in 1816. "Before the revolution," he reminds the authorities, "there was an enclosure on Rive Neuve known as Pierre de Marbre where ballast was received and provided for ships. This enclosure was destroyed during the unfortunate moments. [...]" Due to this lack of a ballast depot, as noted in another letter of complaint from 1824, ballast was abandoned at estates in the countryside. Finally, a ballast depot was built later that year at what seems to be the site of the earlier depot, on the Quai de la Pierre de Marbre of the Rive Neuve.

A likely spot for the ballast depot seems to be a parking lot surrounded by ancient, high walls, an area large enough to build a ship in. I remove two forty-centimeter samples of earth. In my research, I used only the deepest layers, which are the oldest and therefore less disturbed by current human activity. I placed these in pots numbered three, four, five, and six.

In February of 1851, four ships were ballasted in the port. Research reveals both legal and illegal ballast practices were common. In some cases, frequently used illegal ballast sites soon became legal. The depot at the Bassin du Carénage, known as "Depot X" near Fort Saint-Nicolas,



Map from the Archives of Marseille with probable ballast site locations by Alves in the Port of Marseille. (Archives de Marseille.)



Probable ballast depot of 1824. (Photo by MTA, 1999.)

and the depot at the Bassin de la Gare Maritime, were eventually listed as official ballast sites in the *Cahiers des Charges* of 1855.

Investigations led to the discovery of the following ballast sites in the Port of Marseille: the Pierre de Marbre depot, the Depot X at the foot of Fort Saint-Nicolas, the depot at the Bassin du Carénage, the depot at the Bassin de la Gare Maritime (now Bassin National), and the depot at Major.

The Bassin du Carénage, built in the 1830s, entirely disappears



from maps at times. Sometimes it is a no-man's-land—a historical storage area for boating material and later for the clutter that gathered at the terminal of a railroad line, built in 1878. Now it is a much smaller basin. Public authorization would be necessary to take samples.

The ballast site known as Depot X was established on the quay of the former Bassin du Carénage near Fort Saint-Nicolas. But at the foot of the fort, there is a possible ballast site, and a sample was taken from a depth of thirty centimeters. This sample was planted in pots number seven, eight, and nine.



The Palais du Pharo guards the entrance to the Vieux Port, on the other side of Fort Saint Jean. Site sampled and placed in pots one, two, and ten. It would turn out to be an unlikely ballast site due to earlier major construction work.

The ballast site known as the depot at the Bassin de la Gare Maritime was established at a southeast angle to the basin, which is named today the Bassin National. Now passenger ships from the Mediterranean dock there. Access to this area is restricted.

Top: Bassin du Carénage: Probable ballast site. The highway is part of a centuries old no-man's-land and a likely ballast site. (MTA, 1999.) Bottom: Bassin du Carénage area before the reconstruction for the highway and tunnel. (Archives de Marseille.)

The Depot Major is now listed along with three other depots in the *Cahier des Charges* of 1870. In total, they hold seven thousand tons of ballast. This area was later excavated for the construction of the new and massive Cathedral of the Major and later again for a highway. By 1902, perhaps due to a new method of ballasting by use of water, only two ballast depots are in use: Vieux Port and

Gare Maritime (Bassin National). A few years later, solid ballasting operations cease.

The neighborhood that meets the Mediterranean Sea in this area of the port is known as the *panier* or “basket.” Residents here are usually immigrants, and their descendants are from the different regions of the world that traded with Marseille, many through colonial ties. The final artwork in the Marseille iteration of *Seeds of Change* was intended to take the form of a ballast garden built on a site near this immigrant *quartier* where local residents, along with the scientific community, could cooperate in identifying the sprouting seeds. Since some immigrants come from rural regions, they could provide expert information on the plants’ origins. However, a change in local government with an anti-immigrant agenda meant that the project could not be completed.

Meanwhile, six of the ten pots planted with pilot samples from this first research quietly germinated for one hundred days at the Institute for Ecology of the Technical University in Berlin. Most plants would turn out to be local Mediterranean flora; I needed to have taken deeper samples to go past the emergent flora and its seeds but had not been able to do so sufficiently due to the asphalt and rocky soil. Dr. Jutila had forewarned me that, at times, I would have to ascertain whether previously soil had been moved or added to a site in order to ensure the viability of removing an earth sample.

I spent many months self-learning to read handwritten French from the early nineteenth century and nautical terms of the period. It was my first time doing such research and I was seduced by every mention of ballast and would write an entire chronology based on that documentation. Eventually I would disregard most of that early research as I came to understand that I was interested in how that could make sense of not only our past but of the present that becomes active in making a future.

I would like to thank Dr. Herbert Sukopp for his encouragement and support of this work.



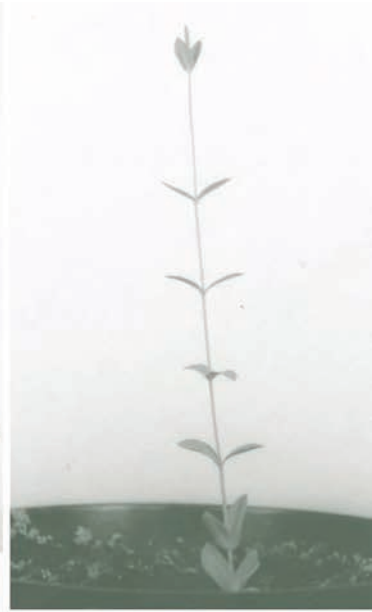
Top: Fort Saint-Nicolas, a probable ballast site. (MTA, 1999). Bottom: Palais du Pharo, probable ballast site. (MTA, 1999.)



The Major Cathedral on the grounds of the former La Major ballast site in the Panier. (MTA, 1999.)



Germinating seeds from samples of probable ballast sites. (MTA, 1999.)



Some weeks later, some plants grew.
(MTA, 2000.)