

The Laffite Society Chronicles

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THE EDITOR'S PAGE

Don C. Marler

In the past year the Laffite Society has lost three members to the foul clutches of the Grim Reaper. Robert B. Looper, Joel B. Kirkpatrick, Jr. and John Howells are remembered in this issue by fellow society members. They will be missed but their contributions and our memory of them will live on.

This issue of *The Laffite Society*

Chronicles contains, in addition to its usual serious articles, a couple that are on the lighter side. The series of biographical sketches of members is continued in this issue. These sketches are published at the pleasure of the member. If you wish to share a sketch of yourself send it along with a photograph to Jean Epperson or to the editor.

AN OPPORTUNITY MISSED

David S. Pettus

The 2003 Laffite Society Christmas Banquet was highlighted by President Jeffery Modzelewski's address on the Life of Lyle Saxon, biographer of Jean Laffite. After sazeracs and conversation in the Maceo Bakery the assembled Laffite Society members and guests repaired to the Buccaneer Room for a wonderful dinner catered by Restaurant LeCoy. President Modzelewski's address followed the meal.

I knew nothing of Lyle Saxon before the address except that he had written a book entitled *Lafitte the Pirate*, that I had not read--an oversight now corrected.

During the address I realized that Saxon and I had something in common--we had both been at the St. Charles Hotel in New Orleans at the same time-- Saxon as a resident and I as a transient. In 1944 and again in 1945 I stayed at the St. Charles for a few days. I was there for repairs on an injured right hand. My mother and I left Houston on a train from Union Station on Crawford Avenue, now Minute Maid Park. Soldiers were hanging out of windows waving and yelling, I now realize, at

girls on the station platform. After an adventurous and wonderful trip, to me at least, we arrived at the Mississippi River. The train was divided into sections and conveyed to the eastside of the river by ferry and then reassembled. Our room at the St. Charles was darkened--now I realize it was likely equipped with blackout curtain; remember there was a war on. My most vivid memory of my stay there is that it was Easter and my mother gave me a chocolate chicken. It was the only chocolate chicken I ever had and I loved every bite of it.

Even though I now know that Lyle Saxon was living at the hotel, at the time, I had no idea he was there. At the tender age of four I had never heard of Saxon or Laffite. The only person I remember meeting there was the room service waiter. Being served dinner in a hotel room on a metal cart was a new experience for me. It is possible that Saxon and I passed in the hotel lobby and didn't notice each other. If he saw me he made no effort to introduce himself; thus, an opportunity for our meeting was missed.

JEAN LAFFITE: CATALYST TO JACKSON'S VICTORY AT NEW ORLEANS

Pam Keyes

With the notable exception of the late Dr. Jane de Grummond's *The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans*, none of the modern histories of the Battle of New Orleans adequately credit the valuable, even crucial, role privateer-smuggler Jean Laffite played in that campaign's American victory.¹

Most scholars think the only significant thing Laffite did for the Americans was supplying them with 7,500 quartz flints needed to fire their guns. But the flints were only part of the assistance given by Jean and Pierre Laffite. As Andrew Jackson's ebullient biographer Alexander Walker said in the introduction to his 1856 work *Jackson and New Orleans*. The splendor of the closing victory of the Battle of New Orleans has obscured many features of that campaign which contributed largely to the final success.²

The glory of that miraculous American victory at Chalmette is so vividly limned with General Andrew Jackson's dynamic leadership and crushing defeat of the battle-seasoned men who fought Napoleon, that the little thread that began this whole singular picture is almost lost to the eye. A closer inspection and careful study of old documents, letters and actions unravels the initiator of the deeds which developed into Jackson's stellar success at New Orleans. That catalyst was provided by none other than Jean Laffite, leader and "bos" of Barataria's smuggler and privateer base on the Gulf.

Imagine, if you will, a British New Orleans, an English province stretching from Louisiana to the northwest territories, British control of trade traffic on the Mississippi River since 1814. Imagine United States history so radically altered as to be unrecognizable, like a bizarre parallel reality. All of that would have happened if Jean Laffite had not forwarded to New Orleans legislator, Jean Blanque, the British letters he had received a few days before from the hands of Capt. Nicholas Lockyer of

the British ship *Sophie* on September 3, 1814.

Twentieth century military historian, Robin Reilly, observed that "it is curious to reflect that to a significant extent Andrew Jackson owed his election as President of the United States to the aid of the Laffites and their band of Baratarian pirates."³

The British approached Barataria in the early fall of 1814 thinking to easily acquire without bloodshed the light sloops of the privateers, plus the Baratarians' knowledge of the best approaches to New Orleans. They presented Laffite documents proving their intent, and tried to bribe him with a captaincy. After allowing his men to hold the British officers overnight in a brig, Laffite released them the next morning, telling them he needed some time to think the offer over. The same day, Laffite wrote a letter to Blanque and to Gov. William C.C. Claiborne to accompany the packet of official letters he had received from Capt. Lockyer, and sent the lot to New Orleans posthaste by his fastest courier, who arrived in the city on Sept. 6.⁴

By forwarding the British letters to Blanque, Laffite served as the spark for a series of actions, starting with the governor's council called the evening of the 6th when Blanque presented Laffite's packet to Gov. Claiborne. Although the council was unsuccessful in drawing General Andrew Jackson away from Mobile, it did lead to brewing public unrest and dissension in the city and surrounding area which was ameliorated only by Jackson's arrival.⁵

Almost all historians agree that without Jackson's presence and commanding leadership, New Orleans would have been a fast, nearly bloodless conquest when the British invaded later that month. If Laffite and the Baratarian had sided with the enemy, British troops could have moved easily and rapidly to a point above New Orleans, using the privateer's small sloops

that had a more shallow draft than the large British warships.⁶

Along with their expeditionary forces that gathered at Jamaica, the British had brought all the supplies and materials needed to set up a provisional government. Some wives and daughters also were on the warships, a sign the British feared no resistance on the seas.⁷ Even though by the time of the Battle of New Orleans peace had been presumably settled through the Treaty of Ghent, if they had successfully invaded New Orleans, the British would most likely have ignored the treaty and remained as an occupation force, controlling trade traffic up the Mississippi from the Gulf Coast, changing history dramatically. Even Jackson, years later as he was leaving the presidency, agreed to that viewpoint⁸. Simply put, if Laffite had not forwarded the letters to Blaquie and the authorities at New Orleans, Gen. Jackson in all probability would not have been at Chalmette when the British forces arrived off Lake Borgne. He would have been waiting for them to attack at Mobile. The implications for alternative history in that event are vast.

Some may question this train of revisionist thought by stating that Jackson was under direct orders from President James Madison to defend New Orleans, and that's why he marched there. But, as biographer Marquis James pointed out in footnotes to *The Life of Andrew Jackson*, it was "not until after Jackson had departed for New Orleans in November (1814) did (Secretary of War) Monroe begin his oft-cited requests for the General to hasten to the defense of the city."⁹ Secretary of War Monroe's first letter regarding an imminent attack on New Orleans by the British was not written until Dec. 7, after Jackson had already arrived in that city.¹⁰

Because the skeptical governor's council members mostly believed the British letters were fraudulent, Commodore Daniel Patterson asked for and got permission to execute earlier plans and attack Barataria to eliminate any threat from that direction. He and Ross proceeded with their gunships down to Grande Terre by the slow route (the only route they knew), allowing Laffite and his men plenty of time to get most of their valuable goods to other places. The night of the council meeting, Jean's elder

brother Pierre, held prisoner in the Cabildo for almost four months, mysteriously and fortuitously broke out of jail and was soon with Jean at Grande Terre.¹¹ On Sept. 10, Jean Laffite wrote another letter to Claiborne, once again offering his services to the Americans, before leaving with Pierre to a nearby friendly plantation, most likely on the German coast of Louisiana.

When Patterson and Ross arrived at Barataria on Sept. 16, they met with no resistance, and took Dominique You, Renato Beluche, and several other Baratarians prisoner. They also confiscated all the ships and cargo present.¹² Interestingly, Gov. Claiborne inadvertently had approved the arrest of his own wife's relative, as Beluche was Susana Bosque Claiborne's first cousin once removed.¹³

Gov. Claiborne had not concurred with his skeptical council about the validity of the British letters. Their contents worried him, and he forwarded them on to Jackson at Mobile, deciding to err on the side of caution if need be.

Laffite's importance in the American success becomes clearer when one examines the correspondence and subsequent actions of Gov. Claiborne, Edward Livingston and Jackson. Starting with Claiborne's forwarded packet, Jackson over the next couple of months received increasingly more pleas from both Claiborne and Livingston to come to New Orleans, especially during the latter part of October and early November, but these failed to budge Old Hickory from his post until it was almost too late.¹⁴ In retrospect it is interesting to note the British explanation for their failure to invade a city which even the tactical genius Napoleon had said was not defendable--New Orleans.¹⁵

Articles in the *Royal Gazette* of Kingston, Jamaica said that Jackson had been well informed "by private letters from Carthagera" and that "the enemy received such particular information respecting the Expedition, they were fully prepared to receive us." There was no truth to any part of this British whitewash.¹⁶

Jackson's information about the British intentions for Louisiana that fall came straight from Laffite's packet which Gov. Claiborne had forwarded to him at Mobile

in mid September 1814 , along with a letter in which he evidenced support for Laffite: "There is in this city a much greater Spirit of Disaffection than I had anticipated, and among the faithful Louisianians There is a Despondency which palsies all my preparations...Laffite and his associates might probably be made useful to us."¹⁷ However, Old Hickory scoffed at the packet's authenticity, not to mention sending to Claiborne on Sept. 21 an address that chastised those who would place any confidence in men who have courted an alliance with the "pirates of Barrataria (sic)" further implying that Louisianians had been insulted by Nicholls' proclamation asking for allegiance against the Americans as it had called on them to "associate...with...this hellish Banditti?"¹⁸

Obviously, Jackson did not know Claiborne was related by marriage to one of the "pirates of Barrataria." As James points out, General Jackson made a major blunder in initially rebuffing the help of Laffite, but his mind was changed largely by friend (and fellow Mason) Livingston, the New Orleans lawyer who had created a power base there as the chairman of the Citizens for Defense created after news of the British letters alarmed the city. Livingston also happened to be the leader of the secretive New Orleans Association, not to mention the Laffite brothers' attorney.¹⁹

At a meeting of the Citizens for Defense at Tremoulet's Coffeehouse on Sept. 15, 1814, the brilliant orator Livingston eloquently summed up the situation: "Fellow citizens! the navigation of the Mississippi is as necessary to two millions of our western brethren, as the blood is to the pulsation of the heart--those brave men, closely attached to the union, will never suffer, whatever seducing offers may be made to them--they will never suffer the state of Louisiana to be subject to a foreign power, and should the events of war enable the enemy to occupy it, they will make every sacrifice to recover a country, so necessary to their existence. A war ruinous to you would be the consequence--the enemy to whom you would have had the weakness to yield, would subject you to a military despotism of all others the most dreadful; your estates, your slaves, your persons would be put in requisition, and you would be forced at the point of the bayonet to fight against those very men whom you have

voluntarily chosen for fellow citizens and brethren."²⁰

The effect of Livingston's speech was a growing worry and indecision among the populace of New Orleans. Meanwhile, General Jackson dug in his heels at Mobile and waited throughout the month of October for reinforcement troops from Tennessee to arrive and bolster his defenses around Fort Bowyer. During October, 2,500 militia from the area were organized and equipped at Fort Hawkins, Georgia, before joining Jackson at Mobile. At the time, Fort Hawkins was the principal depository for army supplies and rations for troops involved in both Indian fighting and the War of 1812.²¹ Jackson waited until virtually the last day to head toward New Orleans because he was adamant that the British would invade through "the Mobile."²²

Through spy reports, Old Hickory closely followed the British movements around Pensacola and the east. Late that summer, noting the forces were making preparations for some action (in Jackson's mind, the most advantageous military target being Mobile), Jackson wrote on August 22 to Gov. Claiborne to prepare a Louisiana militia which might be "called to face an invading enemy beyond the boundary of the state, to stop his entry into their territory (Louisiana)." In response to Jackson's letter, Claiborne published on Sept. 5 militia orders directing the militia of the two divisions of the state to hold themselves in readiness to march, and to be reviewed at Baton Rouge on Oct. 1.²³ Claiborne would meet the next day, Sept. 6, with council members to discuss the packet received that day from Laffite.

Anxious to do something about the British threat, Jackson determined he would surprise the British at Pensacola with a forced march attack of 3,000 men which arrived on Nov. 6. The British blew up Fort Barrancas in advance of Jackson's arrival, and withdrew from the area, leaving Jackson with no victory, and worse, he had deliberately violated the neutrality of Spain and had acted on his own initiative without orders from the US government. He doubled back in haste to unprotected Mobile, returning to his post on Nov. 11 and finding letters from New Orleans waiting for him. Jackson's unauthorized

feint at Pensacola had left both Mobile and Louisiana wide open.²⁴ Incredibly, Jackson did not leave for New Orleans until Nov. 21, taking a circuitous route presumably to reconnoiter weak points the enemy could attack. It seems obvious his real purpose in taking the slow route was to be able to quickly double back to Mobile if the British lion pounced as expected. When Jackson finally did arrive with a few of his staff officers at New Orleans on Dec. 2, 1814, the city was woefully unprepared for any sort of British attack.²⁵ The Patterson and Ross expedition against Barataria had made sure there were no fast privateers available to defend the coast, and there were no less than six possible approaches to New Orleans that the British could choose (Lake Borgne, Lake Pontchartrain, River Aux Chenes, the Mississippi mouth, Barataria Bay and Bayou Lafourche).²⁶

"It is hardly possible to form an idea of the change which his (Jackson's) arrival produced in the minds of the people. Hitherto partial attempts had been made to adopt measures of defence; (sic) the legislature had appointed a joint committee of both houses, to concert with the governor, Commodore Patterson, and the military commandant, such measures as they should deem most expedient; but nothing had been done. There was wanting that concentration of power, so necessary for the success of military operations," wrote Latour in his account of the campaign.²⁷

Benson J. Lossing wrote, "He (Jackson) found the city utterly defenseless, and the councils of the people distracted by petty factions. The patriotic Governor Claiborne had called the Legislature together as early as the 5th of October (to discuss defense strategies.) The members were divided into several factions, and there was neither union, nor harmony, nor confidence to be found. The people, alarmed and distrustful, complained of the Legislature; that body, in turn, complained of the governor; and Claiborne complained of both the Legislature and the people. Money and credit were equally wanting, and arms and ammunition were very scarce. There was no effective naval force in the adjacent waters; and only two small militia regiments, and a weak battalion of uniformed volunteers, commanded by

Major Plauche....constituted the military force of the city."²⁸

In *The Life of Edward Livingston* author, Hunt, agreed that Lafitte (sic) "immediately divulged the (British) overture to Governor Claiborne and the legislature, and calling himself a stray sheep.....offered to devote himself and his followers to the defence of the country, if their services should be accepted, with an assurance of amnesty for their past conduct. The Governor and legislature hesitated; but the communication of Lafitte becoming known at once awoke many citizens, including Mr. Livingston, to the peril impending over the city; and the public meeting, with the appointment of a committee of safety, on the 15th of September, was the immediate consequence."²⁹

According to Jack Ramsay in his *Jean Laffite, Prince of Pirates*, "Although Laffite's warnings of an attack had been taken with little seriousness, as the certainty of an invasion became apparent, his credibility was enhanced. The fact he had offered his services to Jackson was widely known. This was an element that helped galvanize local willingness to resist." Ramsay goes on to say that the Laffites' aid to the American cause was used to "rally members of the French-speaking community around the American standard."³⁰

Major Villere pointed out to Jackson that Patterson didn't have enough sailors to man the ships *Louisiana* and the *Carolina*, and that Jackson had few artillerymen. Bernard Marigny and the defense committee said the same thing, pointing out how useful the Baratarians could be to the cause.³¹ Judge Dominick Hall said the legislature had to pass a resolution demanding procedures be suspended against the Baratarians for four months in order to free the men from jail. The resolution was presented the next day and Judge Hall immediately released Dominique You and the rest of the jailed Baratarians.

When Jackson learned on Dec. 13 that all five of his gunboats on Lake Borgne had been captured by the British, "it caused him to feel great anxiety for the safety of Mobile. He had relied principally upon the gunboats for the protection of the channels by which the rear of Fort Bowyer at Mobile might be gained."³²

Hunt gave further information about when Laffite's offer of help was accepted: "The offer of Lafitte met with no official response until martial law was declared (Dec. 16, 1814), and Jackson was, practically, dictator. Then the leader of the "hellish banditti" presented his proposal to the new power. He was supported in the application by the favorable representations of many official persons and private citizens. The Commander-in-Chief was not easily convinced. But the calm and confident opinion of Livingston prevailed in favor of the Baratarians."³³ After Jackson declared martial law, no one could leave the City of New Orleans without written permission from the Jackson headquarters.³⁴

With the gunboats gone from Lake Borgne, Jackson was blind to British advances in that quarter, and the invasion was inevitable. Latour notes the "expediency of inviting the Barratarians (sic) to our standard was generally admitted." The governor conferred on the subject with major-general Jackson; and with his approbation issued (on Dec. 17) general orders in which he invited the Baratarians to enroll themselves and march against the enemy, adding that if their conduct in the field was approved by Jackson, that that officer would unite with the governor in a request for a "free and full pardon" from the president of the United States.³⁵

John Coffee and his 800 men arrived on Dec. 20 from Baton Rouge, and a flotilla on the Mississippi soon brought Carroll and his 3,000 Tennesseans. Carroll also had 1,100 muskets from the War Department.³⁶ On Dec. 22, Jackson sent Jean Laffite to the Temple auction site near Barataria to help Major Reynolds fortify it. "Mr. Jean Lafite (sic) has offered his services to go down and give you every information...Dismiss him as soon as possible as I shall want him here."³⁷ Beluche and Dominique You and their gun crews erected batteries at Fort St. John on Dec. 23. That afternoon, Jackson was at Fort St. Charles (near the present-day Jackson Barracks) gathering his troops for a defensive strike below the city. Although in Dr. Grummond's account, Jean and Pierre Laffite were said to have been in Jackson's escort that afternoon, only Pierre could have been, as Jean was still at the Temple assisting Reynolds with blocking the bayous

and possibly gathering the flints and powder Jean later brought to Jackson. This was the only time following the declaration of martial law that Jean had written permission to leave the immediate vicinity of New Orleans and the battlefield.³⁸

By the night of Dec. 23, 4,500 British troops landed. Pierre Laffite and Col. De La Ronde guided Coffee to the swamp side of the De La Ronde plantation where the British were encamped. Meanwhile, Patterson's *Carolina* crept on the Mississippi beside the British camp. Her crew of 90 men were mostly Baratarians. The notable absence of Jean Laffite from this battle underscores that he must have still been at the Temple area, probably not returning until sometime on December 24 or 25 (the date he next shows up in the records).³⁹ During the Dec. 23 battle, Latour's historical memoir lists 2,131 men for Jackson and 4,980 for the British. On Jan. 8, Latour says there were 4,000 American defenders with 800 detached. Even after Jackson set up his defense lines along the Rodriguez Canal, he left an opening in the woods the British could have routed around to strike from the flank, but Jean Laffite noticed that and advised Jackson in time to close the gap by extending the line to the impassable swamps, on Christmas Day.⁴⁰

Sometime on Dec. 27, Jean Laffite supervised the installation of two 24-pounder cannons which became Batteries No. 3 and 4. Dominique You, Beluche, and Baratarians including Vincent Gambie were brought in from Fort St. John to man Battery No. 3, the single most effective artillery battery in the Jan. 8 victory.⁴¹

Although it is unknown exactly when the 7,500 flints arrived from Laffite, Jackson later credited him with donating those flints to the American cause, adding that they "were solely the supply of flints for all of my militia."⁴²

Nothing is known of the exact actions of Jean or Pierre Laffite between Dec. 28 and Jan. 8, but a pass and letter from General Jackson exist to document Jean's position during the critical morning of Jan. 8. Jackson sent Jean Laffite and General Humbert across the river to aid Brigadier-

General Morgan, who was in command there. Jackson's letter describes Laffite as "a man acquainted with the geography of the country on your side of the river, and will be able to afford you any information you may want with respect to the canals and passes by which the enemy may attempt to penetrate."⁴³

Summing up, Laffite may not have realized at the time he forwarded the British letters just how important his action would be, but its results were unforgettable, especially coupled with his later assistance to the American cause. His true motives for joining the Americans may have been more to do with business than patriotism as some have written, but the manner in which he and Pierre Laffite acted throughout the campaign testifies to their patriotism.

Jean Laffite wrote the following to Jean Blaque at the start of his letter to accompany the British packet: "Though proscribed by my adoptive country, I will never let slip any occasion of serving her, or of proving that she has never ceased to be dear to me." Was he sincere when he wrote those words on Sept. 4, 1814, at Grande Terre? Maybe.⁴⁴

As Frost writes, "in the most remote and exposed points of a united Nation, we often find the most brilliant proofs of patriotism, courage and devotion."⁴⁵

ENDNOTES

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Pam Keyes with her Laffite Collection. She is holding her rarest book--the 1816 First Edition of Arsene Lacarriere Latour's book, *Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana*.

PRIVATEER OR PIRATE: THE DIFFERENCE

Wil Zapalac

Ah, yes...the difference.

In days of old, the "difference" between privateer and pirate could have meant either death or a prosperous but dangerous existence. It could have been a gray area, neither black nor white, but yet filled with skulls and crossbones. A Letter of Reprisal, a Letter of Marque, a privateering commission--this was the difference.

Yet, it is perhaps almost too well known just what made the specified where, when and how in the Letters of Marque--the difference. However, in the whishy-washy sense of fake privateering commissions or the altogether absence of the genuine article, this was sometimes not so well known.

American piracy was more entrenched long before the American Revolution than patriotic historians would care to admit. And the English government knew all too well the lack of authenticity in numerous "privateering commissions".

According to some sources, King Henry the Third granted the first Letter of Reprisal in 1243. The precursor of the Letter of Marque, these letters licensed a ship to attack enemy ships without fear of punishment. In exchange, King Henry received a share of all plunder and increased the size of his navy without having to pay to maintain, supply or crew those ships. Originally, ships that were granted such licenses were called "private-men-of-war" but this was shortened to privateer. In time,

the term privateer came to represent the ship, the captain and the crew.

As greedy and lazy as those in power were, they were not totally stupid. Privateering commissions held clauses specifying how long the holder could maraud ships of a certain nation. The dove of peace could flutter unpredictably through an open window and thus allow for considerable international embarrassment.

There is reportedly ongoing research being conducted to establish whether Captain Kidd was an actual privateer, not a pirate, and that he was denied admission of certain "French Passes", as proof of his innocence, at his trial in England.

And, yet, it would have been possible for a ship's captain to have been both a privateer and a pirate. Using Letters of Marque for its original purpose was easy enough, just as it was easy to stray from the letter's directives and blow the daylights out of some richly stocked merchantman vessel of a friendly nation.

Crooked customs collectors would rake in any specie, regardless of origin of capture. Holders of fake Letters of Marque could cause substantial headaches for legitimate privateers, and judicial heads could care less which was which.

The point of all the above is the exasperating question--Was Jean Laffite privateer, pirate or both?

Book Review

Cassandra, LOST
Author, Joanna Catherine Scott
Reviewer, Cindy Vallar

Just before her eighteenth birthday in 1793, Cassandra Owings of Maryland elopes with a Frenchman of whom her father disapproves. Benedict van Pradelles takes his new bride to France to help his parents flee Paris. When Cassandra and Benedict arrive, his mother is too ill to travel and Benedict must reclaim their wealth and property in the country. After escaping the revolutionists who imprisoned him, a wounded Benedict returns to Cassandra, who must now nurse him and his mother while she herself is pregnant. Confined to the two rooms where they live, she feels like a prisoner within the walls of the townhouse, for the streets are unsafe and the servants seem ready to harm them if given any excuse.

During this time Cassandra meets and befriends Jean La Fitte, a young lad who helps his father and Benedict in their secret affairs. Eventually she joins Jean in his work, which allows her to escape from her prison and experience adventure. Jean's father's arrest and the deaths of Benedict's parents force them all to realize they must leave France or face the guillotine. When Jean decides to search for his brother Pierre rather than accompany Cassandra and Benedict to America, she gives him a locket with her picture in it and they promise that someday they will meet again.

This well-researched novel about Cassandra and her life in Paris and New Orleans is based on fact. Not enough is known of her real life, for she had no contact with her family after she eloped. Whether she had

an affair with Jean Laffite can't be proven with any certainty, although he apparently knew her. Laffite was a master at illusion and misinformation, and the author does a commendable job showing this penchant for secrecy. She portrays him as a complex character, charismatic yet iron willed, traits necessary to his trade as privateer and smuggler. She deftly weaves the facts and legends about Laffite, providing plausible

explanations for the stories we know of him.

If Jean Laffite was not a character in this book, would I have read it? Probably not, for I had several major problems with the story. First, much is told rather than shown to the reader. This technique keeps the reader at arm's length from the action rather than allowing the reader to "participate" in the story. Perhaps a greater flaw, though, is that Cassandra is not a likeable heroine. She's childish and self-centered, and has a skewed definition of love. She never becomes more than a one-dimensional character, whereas Benedict and Laffite do. Even William Claiborne, the governor of Louisiana, is better drawn, although the reader may think the familial relationship between Claiborne and Cassandra contrived, and the author doesn't confirm in her author's note whether they were cousins or not.

There are several factual errors in the story, although they are minor ones. Bluebeard is twice portrayed as a real pirate when he's actually a fictional one. The reader is left to wonder why the author didn't just use Blackbeard as the pirate in question, as he really lived and residents of Maryland would have known of him, for he was a legend in his own time. The author's claim that polite society didn't accept Laffite is half right--most Americans didn't, but Creoles did. Also, she doesn't have him deny that he's a pirate when Cassandra asks this of him. In fact, Laffite's contemporaries say he vehemently denied ever being a pirate.

Lastly, the author spells his name as "Lafitte," whereas he always signed his name "Laffite," as evidenced in several extant documents.

Cassandra, LOST
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REVIEW OF LAFITTE¹
OR THE BARATARIAN CHIEF,
A TALE
FOUNDED ON FACTS
NEW YORK 1828

D. McDonald Karilanovic

This small work of romance and adventure termed a Novella, was originally taken from a publication called the *Free Press* in Auburn, New York. Its author is unknown, and it is a story told from the standpoint of an unidentified world traveler with apparent experience in the use of arms who meets and becomes friendly with the privateer Jean Laffite and, who, through influential friends of his own, eventually helps Laffite to obtain a pardon from the American Government in return for the latter's allegiance in fighting the British. In this review, I will refer to the teller of this tale as the "Narrator".

The story opens with the Narrator describing his meeting and conversation with Anson, a "weather-beaten, rough, hardy looking seaman" of English origin as the two travelers sat beneath an awning on a steamboat bound from New Orleans for a location along the Mississippi known as English Turn. The garrulous old seaman talks excitedly and carelessly about an event he had witnessed the day before when out for a walk on the levee. He had taken cover "behind some orange grove trees" to observe a "boat's crew anchor a wagon" and approach the spot. A bloody fight ensued, ending in the death of one of the antagonists and the sinking of a hull.

While the Narrator listens intently to Anson's story, he notices a person whom he had before seen who seems to be aroused by the latter's tale of the bloody duel during which the sailor mentions that one of the duelists had been the pirate chief Laffite.² Before taking his leave, Anson tells the Narrator that he recognized the gentleman he had observed with interest earlier as the one who had been the survivor of the duel he had witnessed the day before, none other than Laffite himself.

That evening, the Narrator and Anson board the "stout brig *Cleopatra*" headed for New York, the farmer's home state.

The second day out at sea, the *Cleopatra* is attacked by a pirate vessel. Captain Bowden and crew fight off the murderous assault, although with considerable loss of men. Almost immediately following cessation of this first assault, a second pirate vessel approaches. During the furious struggle that ensues, Anson and the vessel's commander, Captain Bowden, are killed. The Narrator's life is threatened at the hands of a vengeful crew member, Laborde, but after a valiant struggle, he is saved from death by the pirate ship's captain who turns out to be the impressive man the Narrator had seen on the deck of the steamer a few days earlier, Laffite the pirate chief.

Along with the captured vessel and its cargo, the Narrator is taken to Laffite's island establishment in Barataria.³ Finding some resonance in demeanor and bearing, Laffite and the Narrator soon become friendly. During one of their many talks, the Narrator learns that Laffite has been engaged in a struggle to obtain a pardon from the American Government which had charged him with piracy and smuggling, and that his greatest concern and longing was to obtain a release from this charge, so that he could, as a gentleman, re-enter civilized society without fear of arrest. The Narrator offers to intercede in Laffite's petition for a pardon in return for the latter's agreement to ally his forces and arms with the Americans in their struggle against the British, which he then agrees to do. In return, for offering his assistance in obtaining a pardon, the Narrator then asks of Laffite a favor, to relate to him how he, a man of apparent education and a gentleman, had come to his present position in life as an outcast. Laffite then

tells his story.

His name, he says, is Mortimer Wilson, born in the county of Westchester, New York of honest, respectable parents, although "destitute of wealth". At the age of 10, he is adopted by an uncle living in New York City, a respectable merchant who raises him and educates him, instructing him over time in the methods of his business. At the age of 19, Mortimer is sent to Charleston, SC on business for his uncle where he meets a beautiful young woman, Mary Mornton, the daughter of his uncle's business partner, in whose home he lives as a guest. Some days having passed, and with his business concluded, Mortimer plans to return home to New York, but falls ill "of the fever of the country". Mary takes it upon herself to become Mortimer's nurse and dedicates herself to his recovery. During this time, as Mortimer convalesces, the two realize they have become strongly attached to one another.

Unknown to Mortimer during his illness, a previous admirer of Mary's, George Hanson, arrives on the scene, having returned from a recent trip to Europe. He announces his intention to take Mary as his fiancée, who is vehemently opposed, to the idea of a union with the haughty, self-important suitor.

Mortimer soon recovers under Mary's ardent ministrations and as a guest in their home spends many hours in her company and in that of her family, and also with George Hanson's lovely sister, Annette, who is Mary's best friend and who, together with George, lives in the home of a General Garnett. During one such social occasion when the jealous George is present, he confronts Mortimer with a gun, demanding that he withdraw his attentions from Mary. At this time, he also falsely accuses Mortimer of misleading his sister Annette's affections. On one occasion Annette had confessed to Mortimer her strong feelings for him in the hope that he might return her affection, and Mortimer had at that time gently revealed to her his deep love for Mary, an avowal of which she had accepted with understanding.

A duel ensues. In a fit of anger, George fires his pistol at Mortimer before the latter can gain

hold of his pistol. The ball misses Mortimer's head, but George, then enraged, throws his weapon at Mortimer, the butt of which strikes his shoulder, causing the pistol which he now has in hand to discharge. George falls dead, a bullet through the heart.

The family, hearing the discharge and the anxious cries, come to Mortimer's aid. Mary's father, Mr. Mornton, immediately sees the situation for what it is, and believing Mortimer to be innocent but concerned that George's powerful and wealthy friends and others might readily pronounce him guilty of murder, contrives a plan to get him out of the city as quickly as possible. Mary, professing her love for Mortimer, promises to wait patiently for his return.

That night, Mortimer finds himself making his escape on the *Speedwell*, a vessel bound for Havana. Mr. Mornton has assured him that once he arrives at Cuba he can easily take a vessel to New York without difficulty.

Just before arriving at Key West, the *Speedwell* is attacked by a pirate cruiser, and a desperate battle ensues. Mortimer is knocked unconscious and later taken aboard the pirate vessel. The *Speedwell*, along with the plunder, is taken among the Keys scattered along the Cuban coast.

Mortimer is consequently left with some of the crew in the pirate establishment. Days and months pass with no return of the pirate vessel that left him and remaining crew there.

After nearly half a year, and trying in vain to escape, one day a boat from a wrecked vessel drifts up in which Mortimer and the crew then coast up to Havana. Here, Mortimer learns that the pirate vessel that had left him on the key had been seized for attacking a British vessel, the crew sent to Jamaica for trial, where all were executed. He also learns that the crew of the *Speedwell*, the vessel on which he had escaped from Charleston, had been killed, and the ship scuttled and sunk.

Longing to return to civilization and to his beloved Mary, Mortimer soon leaves Havana bound for Charleston. Upon his arrival, he

rushes to the Mornton home only to learn with great sadness that Mary, his beloved, had taken ill and died, having waited in despair for news of him upon hearing of the fate of the *Speedwell* and its unfortunate crew.

After five days, shocked by the news of Mary's death, destitute of clothing and "emaciated almost to a skeleton," Mortimer takes a ship for Savannah where, there being some evidence apparent to the captain of his ability and experience, he is taken on board a South American privateer as second-in-command to a certain Captain Laffite. In the course of this agreement with the captain, Mortimer, "on his request," is enlisted in the crew as a "brother of the captain recently arrived from the north", with the name of Laffite, a name which he then assumes and by which he becomes known to all.

The South American privateer on which Mortimer is now second-in-command has a commission from the republican government of Buenos Ayres [sic]. Mortimer stays with the ship for several years and amasses a considerable fortune. He has serious thoughts of returning to New York but fate intervenes to direct his course elsewhere. One evening, while cruising off of St. Domingue, his ship encounters a British vessel.

Furious fighting takes place in which Captain Laffite is killed and Mortimer is severely wounded by a saber blow to the head. Mortimer eventually recovers, then succeeds to Captain Laffite's command, appoints the once vengeful crew member Laborde as second-in-command, adds two vessels to his establishment, and takes possession of the island, on the "northwest part of the Gulf," where he and his men successfully maintain themselves against arrest.

Here, Mortimer's (Laffite's) tale of his life as a pirate ends. The Narrator thanks him for telling him his story and reaffirms his pledge to help Laffite obtain a pardon, which he eventually succeeds in doing just before the outbreak of war with the British. Mortimer (Laffite) and his forces subsequently win fame and favor in fighting the British troops along with General Andrew Jackson's men at Chalmette in 1815.

Following the cessation of fighting, much celebration takes place in and around New Orleans. A splendid ball is given in honor of General Jackson which the Narrator and Mortimer (Laffite) both attend. At the event, the Narrator is introduced to a beautiful young lady, a Miss Annette Hanson from Charleston. During this meeting, the conversation turns to the heroic acts of the defenders, and the Narrator soon learns to his dismay that the lovely Miss Hanson was the dear friend of Mary Mornton, Mortimer's deceased love. Here, Miss Hanson relates to the Narrator the sad story of her friend's longing for the lost Mortimer, acclaiming his many fine and gentle attributes, and not realizing that the Narrator is aware of her story.

The Narrator, seizing upon the unusual convergence of events that have brought together in the same room, so many years later, both Mortimer and Annette Hanson, contrive to maneuver Annette into the presence of the formidable Captain Laffite where she quickly recognizes him in disbelief as the long lost Mortimer Wilson. Not long after, the Narrator says, the two were wed.

* * * * *

In 1879, following five years of effort, Charles Waldo Hayes, a Galveston journalist, finished his two-volume history of Galveston entitled, *History of the Island and the City of Galveston: From the Discovery of the Island in 1526, from the Founding of the City in 1837 Down to the Year 1879*. The work has been described as the most complete history of Galveston ever written. Included in the first volume are several pages describing the story of Mortimer Wilson and how he came to assume the role of Jean Laffite.⁴ As stated in the Preface by Larry J. Wygant, upon completion of the book in 1879, it was sent to Cincinnati and set in type. However, before the plates made could be printed, the printing plant burned down, destroying the plates. Copies made of the original proof passed through the hands of several dealers before coming to the attention of a Galveston book collector, Harry Bennett, who made a typescript of it and donated it to the Rosenberg Library in

Galveston in 1942. The book therefore, Wygant says, was never printed until 1974, when the typescript was made available.

What makes the history in this book important, as stated in the Preface, is that Hayes had access to records and accounts of events no longer available to historians. He had consulted with persons who had been involved in establishing the city and had access to newspapers, documents and records "destroyed long ago."

Although Hayes' history is supposedly based on facts he had gathered from various sources, he does not always cite references to anchor his statements, perhaps in some cases to protect the identities of his confidants. One curious incident described introduces a chain of events resulting in the narration of the Mortimer Wilson story.

According to Hayes⁵, two years prior to 1879, a "very able and shrewd attorney" of Galveston was consulted by a "gentleman, resident of the city" on the matter of recovery of title to "eighty leagues of land embracing Galveston Island, and a portion of the contiguous coast, granted by the Spanish crown, not to Laffite, but a Mortimer Wilson," said by the gentleman to have been the "much abused leader of the buccaneers." The claim to the title was made by the heirs of Wilson who resided in a "southern city on the Atlantic seaboard," and who were never aware that their father and Laffite were one and the same. According to Hayes' account, on investigating their father's papers, they had found the Spanish grant. Knowing that the Galveston gentleman (whose uncle it was that had adopted Mortimer as a child) had been a "devoted friend of their father and engaged with him in his operations," they, "through another party" had contacted him in a long letter to "request that he contact an able attorney to see if they could make claim to the title." However, due to the long passage of time, "all title to the property had elapsed," as the gentleman was informed. But during the consultation he gave the attorney a "lengthy history of the career of Mortimer Wilson, alias Laffite [sic]."

While the main events of both accounts, that of the Novella and Hayes' history, are essentially the same, there are some differences in details. For example, we have an individual living in

Galveston in Hayes' time, in 1877, who is supposed to have been a devoted friend and business partner of Mortimer Wilson (alias Laffite), who provides an attorney he has consulted on behalf of the heirs with the story of Mortimer's life.

In Hayes' account, supposedly obtained from the Galveston attorney, provided during his consultation with the gentleman resident of the city, Mortimer was born on "Long Island," not in "Westchester County," as stated in the Novella. In addition, the wealthy merchant who had adopted Mortimer was said to be the uncle of the gentleman in Galveston, a piece of information not mentioned in the Novella. Much attention is given in the Hayes' account to the personal qualities and physical attributes and accomplishments that Mortimer was said to have possessed, which were only lightly touched upon in the Novella since the story was presented in the first person tense in that work by Mortimer (Laffite) himself, and, accordingly, with some modesty as one might expect of a well bred gentleman of that era.⁶ In addition, the Hayes account says that Mortimer and Mary Mornton were engaged, whereas in the Novella, though vowing their love for one another, there was no mention of any formal commitment such as an engagement.

Moreover, the description of the fatal duel between Mortimer and George Hanson also differed. The Hayes story stated that Mortimer leaped upon George "with the ferocity of a tiger," thus preventing the latter from carrying out his intention of killing him, during which Mortimer's pistol discharges; while the Novella states that George hurled his pistol at Mortimer, striking his shoulder and causing the latter's pistol to discharge the fatal bullet that entered George's heart.

Upon escaping death at the hands of pirates who had attacked the *Speedwell*, the vessel that Mortimer had taken passage on in his escape from Charleston, the name, by the way, which does not appear in his account, Hayes says that after Mortimer and the crew had made their way to Havana, having been marooned on one of the keys for half a year, he "had met some of Laffite's men at a 'sailors' boarding house". Learning from them that Laffite had his

headquarters on one of the islands off the coast of South Carolina, he took passage with them. At this juncture, meeting Laffite at his rendezvous, he was taken aboard ship as Laffite's "nephew," rather than as a "brother" as described in the Novella, taking the name of Laffite as his own. (The Novella merely mentions that on reaching Havana after his escape from the key, Mortimer took passage on a ship directly to Charleston, hoping to be reunited with Mary.). The Novella also does not mention that Mortimer, after joining Laffite's crew, cruised with him for quite awhile, gaining experience in handling a vessel, before arriving in Charleston "in disguise," as Hayes' account says he did.

A more expanded and quite different narrative is given in Hayes' history of the fierce, running sea battle in which the "old Count de Lafitte" loses his life in Galveston harbor in a skirmish with a Spanish man-of-war, a battle that had begun while cruising off the coast of Vera Cruz. Following, is the story quoted from the history.⁷

Chase was instantly given by the fastest sailing and most formidably armed of the Spanish vessels, and one of the most terrific running fights ever fought on the Gulf of Mexico occurred. It was kept up with unceasing persistency and vigor until the entrance to the harbor of Galveston was sighted, where the plucky privateer, with her prize, made a bold shoot and successfully entered, hotly pursued by the Spanish man-of-war. The privateers, to successfully elude their antagonist, scuttled and sunk their prize, and triumphantly sailed up the bay into shallow water, beyond the Spanish guns, and where their vessel could not follow. Here they remained until the Spanish war vessel gave up the pursuit and drew off, when they sailed for their rendezvous. During this fight, the old Count de Lafitte entrusted the entire command to his gallant Lieutenant, and remained in the

cabin, ever and anon going up the companion-way to see how the fight was progressing, and if it would be necessary for him to assume command of the ship. On one of these tours of observation, as he was standing breast high above the deck in the companion-way, intently watching the progress of the fight, he was struck with a round shot, and fell dead at the foot of the stairway.

Mortimer, now known to all by the name of Laffite, was shortly after the latter's death, proclaimed commander of the crew. "Speaking French and Spanish like a native, this deception was successfully carried out." Not long after Laffite's death, Mortimer and his men took possession of the island of Grand Terre, establishing their headquarters there in 1810.

At this point, according to a footnote by Hayes, the account of Mortimer's or Laffite's career as told by his friend is dropped, to be taken up again by the historical record, it being "more full and complete and partially confirmatory, covering the period of the time of his establishment on Grand Terre until his abandonment of Galveston Island in 1821."⁸

CONCLUSION

What now to make of these two perspectives on the life of Mortimer Wilson and his allegedly assumed role of the pirate Laffite? Each of the accounts, the Novella by an unknown author, and Charles W. Hayes' *History of Galveston*, presents many details differently and in some cases enhances the story with seemingly significant information of a personal nature, given in one and not in the other. The Novella is said to have been "founded on facts," as stated in its title. But on which facts? For sure, the historical record, but not all can confirm certain events. While Hayes' work is presented as history, presumably as fact-based as he could make it, his testimony given here on Mortimer Wilson's life is offered second hand from the attorney as told to him by Mortimer's friend. The story as given by the gentleman is related with great attention to detail, especially, for instance,

with regard to that given of Mortimer's personal attributes, almost as if to deliberately portray him as a singularly heroic figure. Is this a rendering of fact or romantic fiction? Further, in the Novella, Mortimer is adopted "by an uncle" living in New York City, whereas in Haye's history it is the uncle of the Galveston resident providing the story who adopts him.⁹ An intriguing, seemingly unimportant detail also in the history is that the descendants of Mortimer contacted the Galveston gentleman "through a friend,"¹⁰ Which suggests a possible desire to protect the anonymity of one who had been closely associated with Mortimer's former business operations.

It is to be noted with critical interest that, in some instances, certain descriptive words in the history are also the exact ones used in the Novella.¹¹ (C~ p. 40, "... destitute of wealth and compelled by misfortune to use every exertion to support a helpless and dependent family..." and¹² Hayes' history, "... destitute of wealth, and compelled by misfortune... to support and educate a numerous and dependent family." Also, Hayes writes, "... having amassed a considerable fortune, he [Mortimer] entertained serious thoughts of returning to New York".¹³ Almost the same phrase is to be found in the Novella.¹⁴ "... I [Mortimer] had amassed a considerable fortune, and entertained serious thoughts of returning to New York..." Could it be that Hayes had had access to the Novella (or to the serialized publication as it appeared in the *Free Press* in Auburn, New York), before completing his history in 1879? Or might it have been that both the unknown writer of the Novella and Hayes had both consulted some other original source(s), perhaps personal records or diaries, before publishing their works. Going beyond, it is tempting to stretch credulity by attributing the authorship of the Novella to the Galveston gentleman himself. Although his age is never given in Haye's work, if he had been elderly at the time of his consultation with the lawyer in 1877, perhaps in his eighties, he would have been young enough to have been a contemporary of

Mortimer Wilson (Laffite) during his Galveston Island days.

Long-time Laffite researcher and author, Robert C. Vogel, says the Novella may have been merely a romantic work intended for a young reading audience, and that such works, often with unknown authors, were not uncommon in the literature of earlier generations.

Prior to presenting his account of the metamorphosis of Mortimer into the pirate Laffite, Hayes presents this conclusion.¹⁵

"That the original Laffite was a Frenchman, who had achieved some distinction as a cruiser and privateer, none will deny or gainsay. But whether the Lafitte of a later period, who gained such renown, and whose fate is wrapped in such profound obscurity, was of French origin or not, is a question of serious doubt in the minds of intelligent and inquiring men, who have given the subject investigation."

Endnotes

1. The name "Lafitte" as spelled in the Novella will be written as "Laffite" in this review.
2. Novella, pp. 7-9.
3. *Ibid.* pp.34-35.
4. Charles Waldo Hayes, *History of the Island and the City of Galveston: From the Discovery of the Island in 1526, from the Founding of the City in 1837 Down to the Year 1879*, pp. 86-90.
5. *Ibid.*, Vol. I, p. 86.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 87.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
8. Research has now confirmed that the actual date was 1820.
9. *Op.cit.* Hayes, p. 87.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.* p. 40.
12. *Ibid.* P. 87.
13. *Ibid.* p. 89.
14. Novella, pp. 91-92.
15. *Op. cit.* Hayes, p. 86.

BIOGRAPHY
DOROTHY MCDONALD KARILANOVIC
Recording/Corresponding Secretary
THE LAFFITE SOCIETY



Born February 14, 1936 in Galveston Island's ethnically diverse East End, known in the early 1900s as the "Chinese Residence Section", Dorothy first resided at 928 Winnie. She was the youngest in a Victorian/Edwardian household comprised of six adults representing four generations. She received her early education in Galveston, obtaining a high school diploma in 1954. After graduation, Dorothy attended Texas Women's University in Denton, Texas, the University of Houston, Houston, Texas, the Academia Hispano-American, San Miguel de Allende, Gto., Mexico, the Alliance Française, New York City, for a total of nearly eight years of study of the Spanish and French languages.

Following study at a Spanish language school in Mexico in 1962, Dorothy was hired by Pan American World Airlines, Latin American Division in New York City, where she worked as a Flight Attendant until 1964 primarily on routes between New York and the

Caribbean. After marriage in New York in 1965, she was employed for the next 15 years in the medical field, eventually becoming personal secretary for 9 years to the Chief of Pathology at the Cornell Medical Center-New York Hospital in New York City.

Following 18 years of residence in New York City, Dorothy returned with her husband to live in Galveston in 1980, and in 1981 resumed employment at The University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston. For the last 11 years of employment at the University, she prepared manuscripts for publication for various scholars in the Institute for Medical Humanities, retiring from the University in February, 1998.

A student of classical piano from age 8 to 15, Dorothy later took up chord study and improvisation at the Mannes College of Music in Manhattan, New York in 1978-79, and in private study. In the early 1980s, upon returning to Galveston, she became lab pianist for

several semesters with the College of the Mainland Big Band Jazz Ensemble and Combo in Texas City, Texas. Since the mid-1980s, she has performed locally in a variety of venues both as a soloist and in ensemble settings with a focus on popular music and light jazz. In 2003, she participated as an invited performer and lecturer in an Academy of Lifelong Learning class, "Fundamentals of Jazz History," sponsored by the Sealy Center on aging and the Institute for the Medical Humanities at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston.

As a charter member of the Laffite Society since its inception in July, 1994, Dorothy has served as Recording/Correspondence Secretary as well as a translator of Spanish and French books and documents. Since August, 1994, she has performed a total of 38 translations for members on request, for the Society's archive and for publication in the *Laffite Society Chronicles*. Her minutes of the Society's meetings are superb--a difficult task for which the Society is grateful.

CINDY VALLAR

Born and raised in Pennsylvania Dutch Country, Cindy Vallar spent her formative years reading books and writing poetry. While in college, she saw a movie based on the life of Jean Laffite. Intrigued by the mysterious, she set about writing a novel about Laffite. Graduation, career, and marriage put novel writing on hold until she worked as the school librarian for seriously emotionally challenged teenagers. She returned to writing to relieve the stress inherent in working in special education facilities.

During her senior year of college, Cindy met a young man who had attended the same high school she had seven years before she did. They married a year later and celebrated their twenty-fourth wedding anniversary with a move from Kansas to Texas. They currently reside in Keller.

After a twenty-year career as a librarian, Cindy Vallar retired to pursue her dream of writing a historical novel. NovelBooks, Inc. published *The Scottish Thistle*, her debut novel about Scotland's Rising of 1745, in 2002. Cindy also pens a monthly history column, *Pirates and Privateers*, at Suite101.com. She edits short stories for NovelBooks, Inc. and novels for Wings Press in addition to offering freelance

editing services. She reviews books for adults and children for *Historical Novel Reviews* and *Pirates and Privateers*. She teaches online classes and presents workshops about the Scottish Highlands and maritime piracy.

The oldest of four sisters, whom her mother fondly refers to as her "Little Women," Cindy graduated from Towson University and received a Master's Degree in Library Science from the University of Maryland. She is a member of EPIC, The Historical Novel Society, the Texas Coalition of Authors, the Clan Cameron Association, the Scottish Clans of North Texas, The Laffite

Society, and the Louisiana Historical Society. Her favorite authors include Rafael Sabatini, Stuart Woods, Clive Cussler, Leon Uris, Nigel Tranter, and LaVyrle Spencer. She's a fan of professional bull riding, Errol Flynn, Teddy bears, and the Scottish Highlands.

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CINDY VALLAR



Don C. Marler

Bios project continued.

Don was born in central Louisiana in 1933 and after serving in the U.S. Navy during the Korean War as a "Frogman," now known as "SEALS," he attended Louisiana College, LSU and Tulane University. He received the MSW degree and did advanced work toward a Ph. D. in Social Work. He worked as a Social Worker, therapist, administrator and management consultant until his retirement in 1995. Working with Rea & Associates, Inc., a private social service firm, he assisted in evaluating childcare institutions in several states. In his thirty-five years working, primarily in the field of mental health and mental retardation, he wrote numerous articles for professional journals.

In the early 1990s Don began writing and publishing local history--mostly of southwest Louisiana and southeast Texas history. To date he has written or edited seven books, the latest of which is *Redbones of Louisiana*.

After his first book Don formed the publishing company, Dogwood Press, and through this company has published books for local authors and also has reprinted several books that are in the public domain. He maintains a website where a description of these books can be seen at: <http://dogwoodpress.myriad.net/>

Don is one of the founders of The Laffite Society headquartered in Galveston, Texas. This group is dedicated to the study of the brothers, Jean and Pierre Laffite, who were privateers operating in the New Orleans and Galveston areas in the 1800s. He is the editor of *The Laffite Chronicles*, a journal that publishes the activities of the society and its scholarly research reports and writings.

He enjoys research and non-fiction writing and reads widely on the subjects on which he writes. Don lives on Toledo Bend Lake south of Hemphill, Texas with his wife, Sybil.



Don C. Marler

Biography of Jean Laffite Society Member Gary Fretz

Jean Epperson

Raised in New Orleans, Gary Fretz attended New Orleans Academy and graduated from Tulane in 1976 with a minor in history and a major in Economics (he still hasn't figured out what to do with this degree). His family was into cruising their 40' sailboat frequently around Lake Pontchartrain and the Gulf Coast. Gary learned to race sailboats at age seven and has won several District Titles as well as a National Championship (2.4 Meter Class, 2001). Like most New Orleans schoolboys, Gary read Lyle Saxon's *Laffite The Pirate* at an early age. Illusions of discovering Jean Laffite's lost treasure infected Gary's brain. This led him to the Laffite Study Group around 1973. He still has all of that correspondence and Pam Keyes very generously shared a lot of information. Fretz always wanted to know what happened to the Laffites (initially for treasure hunting reasons) and he has enjoyed his membership in the Laffite Society immensely even though he is unable to attend the meetings.

Fretz has cruised and explored the jungles of South America and almost every major island between Grenada and the Bahamas. Two cruises of the Eastern U.S. coast were completed with frequent stops at historical sites. At age 17, Gary's father allowed him and three high school buddies to take the family yacht for a two week cruise over the Christmas holidays. Captain Fretz had read somewhere that Smuggler's Cove on Cat Island (Mississippi) was one of Renato Beluche and Dominique Youx's favorite anchorages. This treasure-hunting voyage was planned over a period of four months with the precision of a commando raid. A primitive Garrett metal detector was obtained. An 1855 nautical chart was studied to determine where the drifting sands would have been in the Laffite era

(and where the treasure would be buried!). Fretz navigated the yacht to this snug harbor in record time and commenced the search. But all the adventurers found were 1,000,000 mosquitoes, 72 aluminum can pop tops, lovely sand dunes covered in sea oats, a lot of fun drinking beer at night, horseshoe crabs and hungry raccoons (the island was discovered by French explorers who had never seen a raccoon before; hence the name "Cat Island"). Nevertheless Fretz did not lose his interest in treasure hunting. He researched some shipwrecks off the Florida coast and dove the wreck of the 1715 Spanish treasure ship "Nuestra Senora de las Nieves" in 3" visibility waters. Some minor (worthless) objects were recovered and Fretz is probably lucky to be here as this area is near the recent shark attacks that have been in the news.

Trained as a stunt plane and bush pilot, Fretz flew his Citabria 7ECA to the Gulf Coast many times to survey the beautiful islands off Mississippi.

In 1993 Fretz founded what has become the U.S.'s largest sailing yacht brokerage. This is fortunate because he has been diagnosed (by his wife) with a serious mental affliction: an addiction to owning different boats and yachts and he has owned over 35 of them. At this time, the Fretz Fleet includes two motor vessels, 3 sailing boats and one Chapman pirogue (the "Roll-Royce" of pirogues that any Baratarians would guard with his life).

Fretz has read over 5,000 books (all non-fiction with history being the favorite subject) and he writes a monthly column for a local nautical publication (for three years) called "Titillating Trivia". This is a cross between "Ripley's Believe-It-Or-Not!"

and "News of the Weird" with a nautical-historical theme.

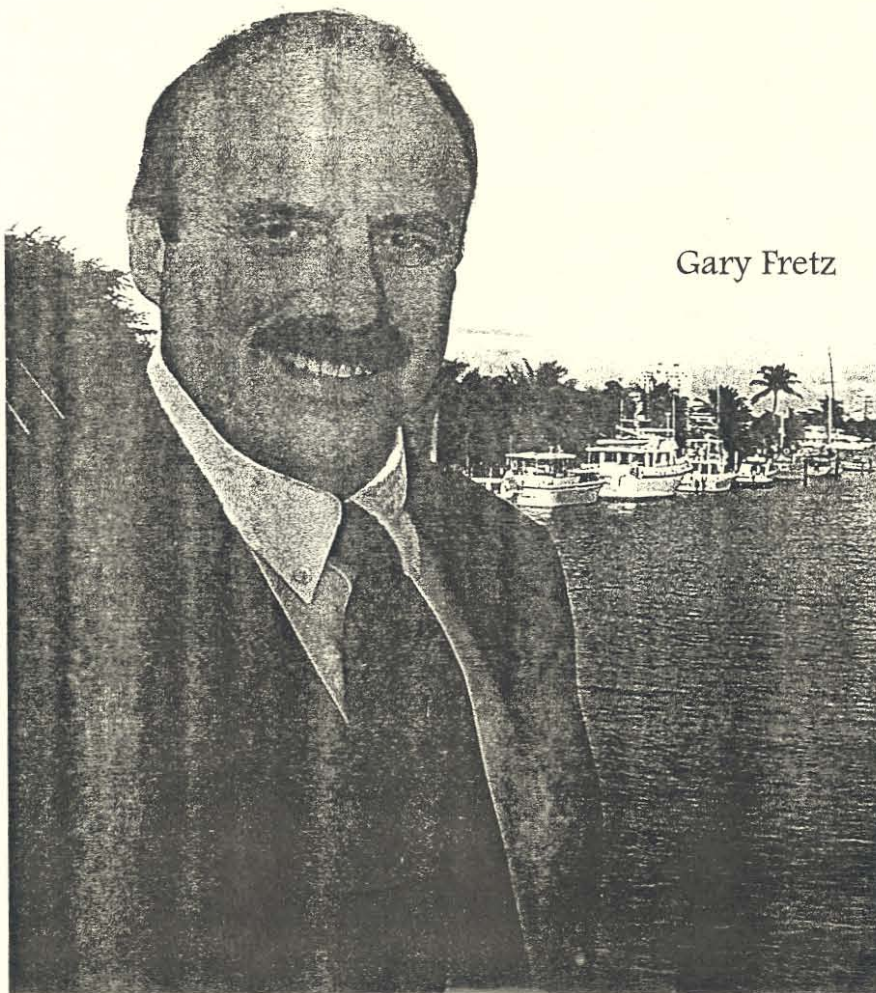
Fretz is married to the former Mary Elizabeth Blouin of New Orleans and Thibodaux (formerly Marketing Director for Oak Alley Plantation and Jax Brewery) who comes from a long line of sugar cane planters (Nottoway, Catherine Plantation, and Bush Grove Plantation). They reside on the water in Ft. Lauderdale and have a cat named Joey who is Supreme Exalted Ruler of the house.

Other interests/affiliations:

- Member of Southern Yacht Club (New Orleans since 1970), Lauderdale Yacht Club and the U.S. Naval Institute. Formerly a member of Houston Yacht Club, St. Katherine's Yacht Club (London, England), Chicago Sailing Club, Tulane Flying Club.
- U.S. Coast Guard 50 ton Captain's license (expired), licensed and bonded Yacht and

Ship Broker (Florida) and licensed real estate salesperson/business brokerage in Florida.

- Owns worldwide license for "Earl the Dead Cat" (www.earlthedeadcat.org) who has been on the Tonight Show twice. Fretz has produced video infomercials and donates 5% of the gross sales of this business to the Louisiana SPCA.
- Owns a plantation raising teak and rosewood in Costa Rica (the world needs more trees!).
- Student of Guy Findlay and Vernon Howard.
- Invented "Top Gun Sprayshield" in use on some racing sailboats.
- GF and his father founded Ruth's Chris Steak Houses of Florida.
- Taught Beginning and Intermediate Coastal Cruising at an American Sailing Association accredited school.
- Has lived and worked in New York City, London, Houston, Chicago and Florida.



Gary Fretz

ROBERT B. LOOPER DIES AT 81

Jeff Modzelewski

The Laffite Society was saddened to hear of the death of another long-time member in 2003. Robert Burdine Looper of Golden Meadow, Louisiana, passed away a few days before Thanksgiving, on Sunday, November 23. Earlier in the year we lost Richard Rasche (see *Laffite Society Chronicles*, summer 2003).

Although Bob was unable to regularly attend the Laffite Society's monthly meetings due to distance, he managed to be very much more of a presence than one would have expected from a man in his eighth decade of life who lived 350 miles from our base in Galveston, Texas. Many of us recall that he more than once drove to Galveston during the day to hear an evening Laffite Society presentation in which he was especially interested and then returned to Golden Meadow at meeting's end arriving home in the wee hours of the next morning.

We also fondly remember meeting with Bob on his "home turf" when we traveled on Laffite Society field trips to New Orleans, Grand Isle or Grande Terre.

The following obituary was downloaded from the Internet. It was written by Emilie Bahr and staff writers and published by the *Houma Daily Comet*, Tuesday, November 25, 2003.

Genealogist of Cajun Families, Robert Looper, Dies at 81

Members of the Lafourche Parish Library Board of Control Monday observed a moment of silence for one of their own. Robert "Bob" Looper, a community advocate who had served as a member of the library board for about four years, died on Sunday at the age of 81.

A native of Detroit, Mich., and a longtime resident of Golden Meadow, Looper had moved to the bayou to work in the oil industry, [Chevron] residing most of his adult life here. During that time, he helped to organize community events, to preserve the history of South Louisiana and to improve the parish's public library system. One of South Louisiana's foremost genealogists, Looper spent many years working to

catalogue local Cajun families and was an active member of La Societe des Cajuns, which is dedicated to the preservation of the culture of lower Lafourche Parish. He was also the editor of the Societe quarterly journal *Les Memoires de Bayou Lafourche*.

Those who knew and worked with Looper remembered him fondly Monday.

Paul Chiquet, director of the Lafourche public library system, said Looper was a firm believer in education and developed a genuine love for the parish and its library system. Serving as chairman of the library board's building committee, Looper was also an active member of the Friends of the Galliano Public Library. "He was dedicated to the parish library system," said Chiquet, noting that Looper's main wish was to see the library system's new building plans completed.

"He was a very good board member," said fellow board member Ethel Caillouet, who along with board member Marilyn Duet, served with Looper on the board's building committee.

Library Board President Eva Shanklin noted Monday that Looper's dedication to the public library system's buildings would be missed.

Looper's community involvement extended beyond his service on the board.

Windell Curole, chairman of the Cheniere Hurricane Centennial observance, met Looper in 1993 during the planning of the event to memorialize those lost during the 1893 hurricane that devastated the small fishing village of Cheniere Caminada. Curole recalled Looper as being a "really good guy," whose creativity, knowledge and hard work played an essential role in the Cheniere Committee and in the community. Curole last saw Looper at the Louisiana

Purchase Bicentennial celebration in September, which was sponsored by the Cheniere Hurricane Centennial committee and coincided with the annual Cut Off Youth Center fair. He characterized Looper as a man whose life was long dedicated to South Louisiana, its people and its history in spite of Looper's northern roots. *"It's a real loss for the community,"* said Curole.

Bob did the bulk of the work on three indices to cemeteries local to his area of south Louisiana: the Hebert and Cheramie Cemeteries in Galliano, and Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Church Cemetery in Larose.

In addition, Bob is credited with collecting, researching, and indexing the photographs in three volumes of work titled *Reflechir: Epervier du Memoires du Bayou - A Castnet of Bayou Memories*. These books, featuring the people and places of the South Lafourche area

from the 1840s to the 1970s, were published by the Cheniere Hurricane Centennial in the 1990s. When the library which he worked to build is completed the genealogy department will be named the Robert Looper Genealogy Department.

Bob is survived by a sister, Joyce Salyer Looper Watt, and two step daughters, Billie Joyce Piercy and Carolyn Sue Falgout. Carolyn has sent Bob's Laffite materials to be added to the Society's archives.

My wife Kathy and Bob shared a special closeness; when they saw each other they just "clicked." He always greeted her with, "hey, kid." For my part, I most remember Bob's intense, almost burning, gaze from those deep-set blue eyes. His passing re-teaches us the continuing lesson that our time is fleeting, and that we should therefore cherish each opportunity for fellowship, for more chances are guaranteed to no one.

The Laffite Society has lost another friend.



Robert "Bob" Looper

Joel B. Kirkpatrick, Jr.

Don C. Marler

Joel Bryant Kirkpatrick, Jr., 76, died March 16, 2004 at his home in Galveston, Texas. Joel was born in Galveston, Texas son of Vera and Jewell Kirkpatrick. He was a member of the Laffite Society. Joel was a veteran, of the Korean War where he served as a First Lieutenant. He graduated from the University of Texas--Austin. For many years, he was a newspaper reporter for the *Galveston Daily News*, and wrote a popular weekly column entitled "The Morning Cup." He published a collection

of some of these columns in a book entitled *They Ain't Wanted Here*. Joel enjoyed historical research, and worked on Laffite related subjects such as Charles Cronea and James Campbell.

Joel is survived by his wife, Barbara A. Kirkpatrick, his siblings, Nancy Jo Sanchez and Ollie "Mike" Kirkpatrick, his children, Bryant David and Anne; 5 grandchildren and other relatives. His presence will be deeply missed by the Laffite Society.



John Howells

1929-2004

In Memoriam

Pam Keyes

With the passing of Houston resident, John Howells, on July 7, 2004, the Laffite Society lost one of its most valuable members, a tireless history enthusiast whose generosity with his time and archives has benefited nearly all of the people studying Laffite today.

Ill health in recent years precluded John from being active within the Laffite Society, but he remained vibrantly interested in current Laffite research. A 34-year employee of the Internal Revenue Service, Howells became interested in studying Jean Laffite as a youth in 1938, when he saw the first version of *The Buccaneer*, a movie with Fredric March in the starring role. Growing up in Houston, he made several trips to Galveston and outlying areas, soaking up all the stories and information he could find about Laffite. Interestingly, Howells married Miss Jean Hugué Lafitte in 1958. She died in 1989.

Through the years, John in his travels in Texas and Louisiana amassed a vast collection of copies of documents, newspaper articles, court papers and the like from libraries, universities and archives throughout the United States.

When I began writing to him in 1976 shortly after the formation of the Laffite Study Group which he co-founded (along with Robert Vogel, Sue Thompson, Dr. Jane de Grummond and Harris Gaylord Warren), John sent me hundreds of copies of Laffite materials from the eight file cabinets he had filled with his research. Although he wrote me once that he disliked writing letters, he more than made up for his concise handwritten letters since every couple of weeks for several years he sent me thick manila envelopes stuffed with copies of Laffite materials. He sent me a complete copy of the papers connected with the *Le Brave* trial of 1819, in

which several of Laffite's men from Galveston were found guilty of piracy and hanged. This generosity with historical materials was greatly appreciated, and I have continued to spread his goodwill and historical enthusiasm by making copies to send to others interested in Laffite.

As Howells had studied the *Laffite Journal* for its authenticity at the request of William Simpson in the early 1970s, he was the first proponent for the authenticity of the journal, a manuscript that remains mired in a quagmire of controversy.

During his study of the *Laffite Journal*, Howells had the original in his possession for almost two years, during which time, he told me later, it had "sat under the coffee table in the living room" so he could examine it frequently. To attempt authentication, John located the *Le Brave* ship's document in the Federal Regional Archives in Fort Worth, and then the Laffite documents in the Texas State Archives' Lamar Papers, as these materials were considered to have known examples of handwriting by Jean Laffite. He gave copies of these documents to Ralph O. Queen, an expert examiner of questioned documents, to use for a handwriting comparison to the *Laffite Journal*. Queen told Howells and Simpson that he believed the journal to be authentic and that the writing in it matched that of the other documents.

Howells was largely instrumental in getting former Texas Gov. Price Daniel to purchase the Laffite Journal collection, which was subsequently donated to the Sam Houston Regional Library at Liberty, Texas. The *Laffite Journal* now is among the featured exhibits at Sam Houston.

Despite the controversy over the journal throughout the intervening years, with some historians dismissing it as a fraud and forgery, John remained steadfast in his belief in its authenticity. It was a mark of his congeniality that he could visit and be amiable with those who held polar opposite viewpoints on the *Laffite Journal*, like fellow Laffite Study Group co-founders Robert Vogel and Sue Thompson. I was one of the few Laffite researchers in the old Laffite Study Group who had the same belief as John, and although now I think some of the collection may be fraudulent, I yet maintain a belief in the authenticity of the *Laffite Journal* itself, chiefly based on the handwriting, signatures, and some other information which has only recently come to light.

Curiously, although I had written to Howells for over 25 years, I only met him in person once, but it was a perfect meeting, at the site of Laffite's Maison Rouge in Galveston in October of 1996. Some other members of the newly formed Laffite Society had gathered at the site too, and it was also the first time they had met John. We took photographs and toured the grounds after Dale and Diane Olson, the owners of the site, unlocked the gate to let us in. The photograph I took of John Howells that accompanies this article was taken on that day.

In 1997, following a presentation by

William Simpson for the Laffite Society at the Simpson Gallery in Houston, Howells presented an account of his authentication efforts in regard to the *Laffite Journal* Collection.

John had a keen interest in Civil War history in addition to his Laffite studies, and was a past president and treasurer of the Houston Civil War Roundtable. Additionally, he was an antique gun collector and was past treasurer of the Houston Gun Collectors Association.

An avid pilot who flew prop planes and made the transition to jets, Howells was a member of the World War I Flying Club. He retired from the Texas Air National Guard in 1989.

Born in 1929 at Pittsburgh, Penn., Howells was a graduate of Lamar High School in Houston and joined the Army Air Corps in 1947. He attended Texas A&M College until he was called into service in 1950 during the Korean War and served at the TXANG Weather Service at Ellington Air Force Base. He later graduated from the University of Texas at Austin. John was a member of St. Catherine's Catholic Church.

John Howells is survived by a brother, Richard Howells; three children, Jean Marie Howells, Sylvia Richmacher and Robert Howells, and one granddaughter. He will be missed.



John Howells

CALENDAR

General meetings of The Laffite Society are held on the third Tuesday of each month at 6:00 p.m. at the Trolley stop Building (on the south side of the 2000 block of The Strand, Galveston, TX., 77550. Many of the meetings feature interesting and informative presentations by members or guest speakers. The exception is the December meeting, the annual "Holiday Social," which is an evening of food, drink, and entertaining conversation in a relaxed and festive setting.

Board of Directors meetings are scheduled for the first month of each calendar quarter (January, April, July, and October) on the same day as that month's general meeting and normally either precede or follow same. Additional Board of Directors meetings may be scheduled at the Board's discretion.

In addition to the general meetings, one or more special events are normally scheduled during the year. Examples of such special events that have taken place in the past include: an excursion to Grande Terre, Louisiana (Laffite's "Barataria"), the address of the Society's then-President, R. Dale Olson, to the Louisiana Historical Society at the New Orleans Country Club, and a summer archaeological excavation at the supposed site of Laffite's Maison Rouge.

Inquiries about upcoming special events may be directed to The Laffite Society, P.O. Box 1325, Galveston, Tx., 77553, or consult the webpage at: thelaffitesociety.com and the newsgroup at, laffite@yahoogroups.com.

The Laffite Society attempts to mail information (snail mail or email) to members and interested parties on the Society's mailing list as special event details are determined.

The Laffite Society Chronicles are published two times per year—in the spring and fall.

Bulletin Board

Anyone willing to assist in preparation of the December festive meeting please contact the president.

Membership

There are 73 members currently in the Society.

New members--Welcome:

Maria and Carlos Puente
6052 Wrigley Way
Fort Worth, Texas 76122-3534

THE LAFFITE SOCIETY
BOARD OF DIRECTORS
AUGUST 2004-JULY 2005

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MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

The Laffite Society is a not-for-profit organization devoted to the study of the privateers Jean and Pierre Laffite and their contemporaries, and to the geographical locales and chronological era associated with them.

Annual dues are as follows:

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|-------------------------------------|----------|
| Student..... | \$ 15.00 |
| Senior (Over 65)..... | 15.00 |
| Institution..... | 15.00 |
| Individual..... | 30.00 |
| Family..... | 35.00 |
| Sustaining Member..... | 100.00 |
| Life Membership (One Payment) | 350.00 |