

# The Laffite Society Chronicles

VOLUME X NUMBER 1  
FEBRUARY, 2004

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## THE EDITOR'S PAGE

DON C. MARLER

With this issue of the *Laffite Society Chronicles* we introduce the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Laffite Society. This event provides a good opportunity to pause and review what our purpose and goals were in the beginning and how far we have come in meeting them. We will be doing that review during the coming year and hopefully we can mark this milestone with at least one event. We know we have made progress and have had fun doing it.

Since the last issue of the *Chronicles* we have posted on our website a "Timeline" of Laffite related activities and a "Question and Answer" (Q & A) section for those who have general questions about the Society and the brothers Laffites. See these items at the website and use them freely.

The Christmas party was held in December and it was again a successful

and pleasant affair, affording opportunity for socialization and celebration of the activities of the past year. Thanks to Diane and Dale Olson for providing a wonderful facility for the society's activities. This facility even provides that most essential feature--a professional bar. With Mike Eubank, Clifford Johnson and Lady Elizabeth Galloway tending bar, and Jean Laffite, aka Jim Nonus drinking, the party is off to a good start. The dinner was wonderful. President, Jeff Modzelewski, presented a brief piece on Lyle Saxon that is presented herein.

A late word has reached us that member, Robert "Bob" Looper, passed away on November 23, 2003. He lived at Golden Meadow, La. Bob knew the old Laffite stomping grounds and it was always surprising how much he knew about Laffite history. A tribute to him will be included in the next issue of the *Chronicles*.

## THE LAFFITES—THE EARLY LOUISIANA YEARS

WILLIAM C. DAVIS

For all their later notoriety, Jean and Pierre Laffite lived most of their lives in the shadows. As a result, nothing like a conventional biography is possible for them. Rather, their careers are a blank canvas with only intermittent outbursts of color to illuminate certain episodes and periods. We know nothing with certainty of the years leading up to their early manhood. Neither their places nor dates of birth are known with any certainty. Rather, they simply appear in the Louisiana record, Pierre in 1803 and Jean six years later in 1809. Even then, their early Louisiana years are known only in skeletal outline, and it is not until 1810 that we begin to see fuller pictures of their lives. Then, after just a decade, they recede back into the documentary mist again, their lives and careers after 1820 almost as cloudy as their origins.

Setting aside the later legends and questionable recollections, what we have to interpret their first years in Louisiana are just a couple of dozen contemporary documents, sources that help to build a skeleton and stimulate much speculation and logical inference. The picture that emerges even from this, however, runs counter in several places to the long assumed conventional Laffite story, yet it is a picture that is essential to establish and inform the succeeding decade of their lives that is so much more extensively recorded.

Traditionally the earliest contemporary reference to the Laffites was assumed to be the advertisement in the New Orleans *Le Moniteur de la Louisiane*, September 18, 1802, announcing the new firm of "Hearico and Lafitte," ironworkers and tool makers, newly arrived in the city, and specializing in equipment for lumber and sugar mills. Their establishment was located near the St. Louis Cathedral at the corner of the Place d'Armes. Unfortunately, it cannot be confirmed just what the first name of this Lafitte may have been, and

no Lafittes are listed in the city directory at that time. Nor can Hearico be easily identified, though he might have been a Charles Herrico or Henriad who appears in records in 1805.<sup>1</sup> Even in the 1850s some people were already skeptical of the identification of Jean and Pierre Laffite as blacksmiths, though others, among them their associate and sometime counsel John R. Grymes attested to their having practiced that trade, though that recollection came more than forty years after the fact and Grymes himself may not have been in New Orleans at the time of the supposed smithy's operation.<sup>2</sup>

However, there quite certainly was a Lafitte with a bona fide connection to blacksmithing. The WPA Index to Colonial Court Records, at the Louisiana State Museum, reveals that at the time the index was prepared in the 1930's, Box 83, Book 4087 of the collection contained an 1803 document whereby "Pierre Lafitte," an innkeeper in New Orleans, bought a slave at auction from an unidentified seller. There follows a two-word sentence: "Master blacksmith." It could mean either that Lafitte was the blacksmith, or--more likely--that it was the slave. Unfortunately, the original document itself disappeared from the collection sometime prior to its microfilming in the 1980s, a common problem with this collection. Thus no signature or other potential information is available further to identify this Pierre Lafitte. Is he the partner of Hearico? Perhaps. Is he one and the same as Pierre Laffite, brother of Jean? Probably not. Nevertheless, this document does show that in 1803, the same year that Pierre Laffite first appears in the official records in New Orleans, there was an innkeeper of the same name—though a different spelling—who had at least a smithering connection, and this could be the origin of the ironworking tradition, of which more later.

Pierre Laffite first appears unequivocally on June 6, 1803, when he stood before notary Pierre Pedesclaux to register his purchase of a property at what is today 902 Royal Street, at the corner of Dumaine, from Marguerite Landreaux, the widow of Julien Vienne. The documents refer to him as being already a resident of New Orleans, and suggest that he lived on Royal Street.<sup>3</sup> His full and unmistakable signature appears on the document, just as he would sign it for the next decade until he started abbreviating his given name. It is perhaps significant that Vienne, a native of Normandy in France, had been a merchant and ship-owner in San Domingue.<sup>4</sup> Probably more significant in light of later recollections that the Laffites had a warehouse on Royal Street, is the fact that Vienne had been a merchant and importer in New Orleans, too, and immediately adjacent to the lot purchased by Pierre was another on which Vienne had a substantial warehouse.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly on this very same day, June 6, 1803, Pierre sold the same property, thus limiting the only verifiable instance of land ownership in Louisiana by either of the Laffites to only an hour or so.<sup>6</sup> The reason for the quick turnaround is not given, though it was not at all uncommon. What is most important is the association of Pierre with a merchant's property and a widow who owned a warehouse next door. Since leases were not necessarily recorded by the notaries, it is probable that any warehouse or other property used by the Laffites was leased. Still, they will appear in time in connection with another property in the Veaux Carré, an association that is itself a part of Laffite legend. Pierre went back to notary Pedesclaux on July 29, 1803, to register a debt owed to Pedro Alarcón, but then he disappeared from the New Orleans record for almost two years.<sup>7</sup>

Dumaine in that period was known as the "Street of the Stores," and would have been the place to be if Laffite was a merchant. And certainly Pierre Laffite was a merchant, though his next documentary appearance is rather surprising. In the manuscript archives

of the Spanish government of West Florida, now in the vault of the clerk of court's office in the East Baton Rouge Parish Court House in Baton Rouge, are found three important documents that have been overlooked and ignored ever since they were first identified by Stanley Arthur during his WPA survey work in the 1930s. Indeed, in the typewritten transcripts and translations of these archives prepared under Arthur's direction, he made note—mistakenly—that they were the first archival appearance of Pierre Laffite in Louisiana, but then—and typically—failed either to see or appreciate the significance of their content, and even misdated them to 1806 in his one passing reference to them in his book *Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover*.<sup>8</sup>

On October 16, 1804, Josephine Patin, a widow of Pointe Coupée, a small community on the west side of the Mississippi opposite Baton Rouge, and then a part of the Louisiana Territory recently purchased by the United States, appeared in court in Baton Rouge and gave her power of attorney to Pierre Laffite, "a resident merchant of this post." The importance of those words needs to be emphasized. In October 1804 Pierre Laffite was either living in, or at least had a residence in, Baton Rouge in Spanish West Florida. Equally to the point, he was known as a merchant doing business in Baton Rouge, and when Julian Poydras, civil judge for the United States in Point Coupée witnessed the document, he attested that he knew both Patin and Laffite and witnessed their signatures as being "the same which they usually make," meaning that Pierre was in court enough prior to this date that Poydras knew his signature. And it is the very recognizable Pierre Laffite signature, the same that had already appeared on the notarial documents in New Orleans the year before.<sup>9</sup>

Mrs. Patin gave Pierre her power of attorney specifically to appear before courts in New Orleans, Spanish Havana and Vera Cruz, or any other jurisdiction to sell two slaves belonging to her, one named Jacob and the other Pierrot, who were sent to the penitentiary in

Pensacola for five and ten years respectively, as a result of the 1796 revolt of the slaves at Pointe Coupée.<sup>10</sup> This may have been "boilerplate" language, or it may mean that the merchant Pierre sometimes had business in Havana and Vera Cruz, and Mrs. Patin anticipated that he might be visiting those places in the near future, which she could only assume if he had told her so. Two weeks later on October 30, 1804, Pierre Laffite appeared in Baton Rouge again with Patin's power of attorney and sold one of the slaves to Esteban Folche, appearing before Don Carlos de Grand-Pré, colonel of the Royal Army and civil governor of the post of Baton Rouge. Significantly, the governor testified that he knew Laffite by sight, suggesting that Pierre was not a stranger in Baton Rouge, either.<sup>11</sup> A few days later, when Julian Guedri of Baton Rouge sold three slaves to Clement Lacour, a resident of Pointe Coupée, Pierre appeared again in Baton Rouge and witnessed the document.<sup>12</sup>

Just when Pierre Laffite began his trading and at least intermittent residence in Point Coupée and Baton Rouge is undetermined at the moment, but certainly it calls for a thorough examination of the early records of both East Baton Rouge and Point Coupée Parishes. Just what sort of business he engaged in is also unknown as of this moment, though at that time Point Coupée enjoyed a thriving trade. A visitor the year before remarked that "stores . . . are springing up daily," making it unnecessary for planters to go all the way to New Orleans for merchandise. Moreover, "boatmen peddlers" or *caboteurs*, most of them French sailors, plied the river in pirogues selling staple goods from landing to landing.<sup>13</sup> Laffite's connection with Point Coupée seems to have lasted at least until November 1805, when he sold a slave to a man from the village, though recording the sale with a notary in New Orleans. In fact, he may have been active there as late as 1810, as will be seen.

It is worth noting that from July 29, 1803, until this November 1805 sale, Pierre disappeared entirely from the

documentary record in New Orleans, at least allowing the speculation that he had been spending that time upriver. By early 1806 he was back in New Orleans, however, or at least making frequent visits. Between January 10 and April 14 he made a series of slave sales in the city.<sup>14</sup> Then on April 21, 1806, he appeared in person before Pedesclaux on an entirely different sort of business.

The hundreds of French nationals killed in the late uprisings on San Domingue created a considerable legal problem in the settling of their estates back home. The absence of bodies, death certificates, or any other form of certain proof of death, required heirs to secure sworn testimony from people who had witnessed the death of the deceased before they could be declared legally dead and their estates settled. On this date Pierre Laffite provided testimony that he had witnessed the death of a Mr. Gabauriau of Gornac Sur Garone, killed on the Place St. Pierre in the slave revolt at Cap Français. Pierre did not sign the document, but it states that he appeared before the notary in person.

Of far more significance is what the document says and implies. Laffite identified himself as a "native of Pauillac, France." Of course many birthplaces have been offered for the Laffites, but it may be significant that one of the only other ones directly contemporary and provided on a document directly related to the Laffites, is the statement on the 1813 crew list of the *Superbe* at the Historic New Orleans Collection, which identified Jean Laffite as a native of Bordeaux.<sup>15</sup> Bordeaux is a city, to be sure, but it is and was a general name for a region as well, and Pauillac is in the Bordeaux. Research is now underway in and around Pauillac to see if any record of the Laffites is to be found there.

The other salient fact, of course, is that in order to witness the killing of the unfortunate Mr. Gabauriau, Pierre—and presumably Jean—had to be in San Domingue and Cap Français during one of the revolts.<sup>16</sup> In the 1780s there was a family named

Gabriau living in Sainte-Rose, very close to Cap Français.<sup>17</sup> Certainly there were also Lafittes and Laffites, and it has been a common assumption that Pierre and Jean Laffite probably came to Louisiana along with the rest of the exodus of white refugees from San Domingue. Marc Lafitte of Léogane lived in Port au Prince and was proprietor of a hospital, but more interestingly, he was also a notary, and naturally the speculation arises that he may have been the same notary Marc Lafitte of New Orleans with whom the Laffites did considerable business beginning in 1812.<sup>18</sup> There was also a Pierre Lafitte living in Port-au-Prince in the 1790s, a merchant from St. Marc noted as having fled to Savannah, Georgia, in 1794.<sup>19</sup> This does not make a connection between these Lafittes specifically and the New Orleans Laffites, but Pierre's affidavit does finally and definitely establish his presence at least on San Domingue during the revolts.

That would be Pierre's last personal appearance in New Orleans for three years. The inference that he spent those years trading in Spanish West Florida gains added weight from a power of attorney registered before notary Pedesclaux, on May 21, 1806. In it "Pedro Larralde" granted his power of attorney to "Pedro Laffite." That the paper was written in Spanish itself suggests a possible West Florida connection, but then the document actually refers to Laffite as "a resident of Pensacola" who was in Pensacola at that time.<sup>20</sup> Ten days later Pierre sent a representative to sell a slave for him in New Orleans, and that transaction also refers to him then being in Pensacola.<sup>21</sup>

What was Pierre doing in Pensacola? When did he go there and how long did he remain? These questions and more will probably never be answered. Unfortunately, virtually all of the Spanish city and governmental archives at Pensacola were loaded aboard a ship for transfer to Havana when Pensacola passed into United States hands in 1819. Tragically, the vessel got within sight of the Cuban coast and then sank—a victim, ironically, of freebooters—taking a treasure trove of history to the bottom. We only know at

the moment that Pierre does not appear again until April 7, 1809, when he sells a slave and the document lists him as a resident of New Orleans.<sup>22</sup> Thereafter he is once again frequently in the city recording slave sales and other transactions throughout 1809 and 1810. It is significant that several of the slaves he sells are natives of Africa, suggesting recent illegal import, while at least one came from San Domingue.<sup>23</sup>

And now, and only now, does Jean Laffite appear for the first time in the contemporary documentary record. Up until this period the records are completely silent about Pierre's younger brother, and we can only speculate as to why. Was he simply overshadowed in their business by his older brother? Was he even in Louisiana? Did he stay in West Florida during these years, or was he perhaps as some have speculated involved in privateering out of Guadeloupe and Martinique. As yet, we simply do not know (at least from sources available in the United States). However, in December 1809 one of the most significant of all Laffite documents was written, providing the first mention of Jean and the earliest and still most detailed descriptions of both brothers, as well as some telling hints about their personal and professional lives at the time.

The document was a letter written from 18-year-old Esau Glasscock of Concordia Parish, Louisiana, to his brother Edward. Unfortunately it may no longer survive. At least its whereabouts are currently unknown. In the 1920's it belonged to Mrs. Elizabeth Dix Perrault of Natchez, great-granddaughter of Thomas Glasscock, and thus a great-niece of Thomas's son Esau. She made the letter and other family papers available to Lyle Saxon when he was researching his book *Lafitte the Pirate*, published in 1930. Mrs. Perrault, however, died in 1929, leaving two children who are believed to have divided all of the family memorabilia in her hands. Her daughter married Robert Calhoun of Vidalia, and their daughter, Anna Calhoun is still living and inherited what her mother had of Elizabeth Perrault's papers. Elizabeth's son

Francis D. Perrault inherited the other half of her family effects. He had only one child, Francis D. Perrault, Jr., and when that gentleman died childless in 2000, the other half of Elizabeth Perrault's family papers passed to that same Anna Calhoun, who thus has virtually all of what Elizabeth Perrault left at her death in 1929. She confirms that the Esau Glasscock letter is not among the things she has, and that she does not now recall the document.<sup>24</sup>

We are left to wonder what might have become of the letter. Perhaps Elizabeth Perrault loaned the actual document to Saxon during his research and he either lost or inadvertently destroyed it. Since she died in 1929, a year before the publication of *Lafitte the Pirate*, perhaps Saxon simply never got around to returning it to the family if it had been loaned to him. It does not appear to be in his surviving papers, some of which are in the Special Collections at Northwestern Louisiana State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana, but his papers are scattered, and what survives seems to be chiefly what he wrote to others rather than his own personal files. Maybe the letter was simply lost in the transfer of Mrs. Perrault's effects, or just fell apart over the years. Saxon did note that it was already torn and fragile when he examined it in the 1920s. And perhaps it still survives, but is in the hands of some collateral member of the family. After all, it had been written to Edward Glasscock, and we can only speculate on how it found its way into the hands of Elizabeth Perrault, who was a grand niece and not a direct descendant. Perhaps Edward's descendants loaned it to her as she collected materials for Saxon, and it is now back in the hands of some distant Glasscock cousin.

Of one thing we may be certain. Saxon did not invent the letter or those portions of its contents that he *actually quoted*. Saxon is often derided as a mere fictionalist. Certainly he was not an historian in our accepted definition of the word. Rather, he romanticized using genuine sources for the framework of a story that he then liberally embellished with context drawn from his imagination, though

still based on general sources. However, when Saxon dealt with historical documents, his only real vice was correcting spelling and adding punctuation, and when he put such material in quotations it is clear that he was dealing with an actual document before him. Consequently, when Saxon quotes from the Glasscock letter about young Esau's impressions of Pierre and Jean Laffite, he is clearly using a genuine source. On the other hand, when he has Esau walking down to the corner of Bourbon and St. Philip to meet Pierre at the brothers' blacksmith shop, none of the description is in quotation marks, and we may safely assume that Saxon is inventing a scene based on the common acceptance in 1930 that the Laffites did actually operate and live in a smithy.

The Glasscock letter cannot be reconstructed in its entirety, though we know that it covered several subjects, including an eventful trip from Concordia to New Orleans, and young Esau's impressions gained walking about the streets of the city. Most of this Saxon merely paraphrased, and may well have enhanced, but since his primary interest was the Laffites, it is reasonable to assume that he substantively quoted all portions of the letter that dealt with Jean and Pierre. Those quotations as they appear in *Lafitte the Pirate* can be reassembled to produce the following abstract relating to the Laffites:

Concordia Parish, Louisiana

December 1809

Dear Brother Ned,

I have seen the notorious Captain Lafitte, and our father has bought six likely negroes from the barracoon at Grand Terre. . . .

He [Pierre Laffite] is a strapping man of middle size with light hair growing low on his forehead. His eyes are dark and his teeth very white. He speaks English with a strong accent of French. He assured me of our father's safety, saying that the trip was arduous and



difficult, and that unfavorable winds and tides sometimes delayed the boats, etc. . . .

He [a little boy with Pierre] is the son of this Mr. Lafitte by a previous marriage. . .

He [Jean Laffite] is tall, with pale skin, and he has large dark eyes. He is clean-shaven except for a beard extending part-way down his cheeks. He greeted our father as an old friend, as they had spent some days together in the boats. . . .

[Later Esau saw Jean again] this time in company with a quadroon woman, hardly more than a child, with liquid black eyes, such as many of them possess, but somewhat too thin for my taste. . . .<sup>25</sup>

Though this abstract is brief, it contains much of substance. First there are the directly contemporary descriptions of the two men, the fullest that we have, and it should be added that they comport well with all of the other contemporary descriptions of the Laffites by those who knew them. Second there is the confirmation that the Laffites are already involved in the illegal importation of slaves, with Jean managing the operation on Grand Terre while Pierre lived in New Orleans and handled affairs there. Thus all of those slave sales conducted by Pierre in the months immediately before and after the Glasscock's visit are probably documentary proofs of the illicit family business. Then there is the mention of Pierre Laffite having a son with him, though not by the woman in whose company Esau found Pierre. Saxon describes this scene. Since it is not in quotations, it is not included in the above abstract, but if Saxon was not inventing in this instance, then the woman with Pierre was a current wife or mistress, "swarthy and dark," and recently arrived from San Domingue. This would seem to confirm the statement of Felipe Fatio in March 1818, to the effect that Pierre had a son named Eugène aged about 16, meaning he would have been born in 1801 or 1802, and thus would have been 7 or 8 and definably "a little boy" when Glasscock saw him.<sup>26</sup> It also hints at a

relationship of Pierre's confirmed by material that will follow shortly. The letter also links Jean with a quadroon girl, though there is nothing by which to attempt to identify her.

Most interesting of all, however, is Glasscock's opening statement that he has met "the notorious Captain Lafitte." While Saxon assumes that Glasscock is talking about Jean, in fact there is nothing in the statement or in the material quoted to indicate just which of the brothers young Esau meant. Immediately questions arise, and ones not easily answered at the moment. Which Laffite did he mean, and on what basis would he have referred to either as "captain" in late 1809? The earliest firm evidence we have of one of them actually exercising command of a vessel comes in 1813, when Jean is listed as captain of the brig *Diligente* owned by his brother.<sup>27</sup> Does Glasscock's using that title indicate that one or the other of the Laffites was commonly known as "captain," and does that therefore mean that one of them was actually commanding merchant or privateering craft prior to the War of 1812? Or, since the Glasscock letter definitely puts Jean on Grand Terre at least occasionally as of late 1809, was he already essentially acting as overlord or "bos" of the smugglers operating there, and being acknowledged as such by being called "captain"? Neither should it be forgotten that a man in charge of a number of slaves was sometimes addressed as "captain," though this seems the least likely explanation.

We can only guess at the significance of Glasscock's use of the title, but it should be remembered that he actually employed two adjectives to define that unspecified Laffite. The other word was "notorious," and again questions arise. What had either Laffite done as of the end of 1809 to be regarded as "notorious"? Moreover, considering that the Glasscocks came from Concordia Parish, across the Mississippi from Natchez, Mississippi, some 200 river miles upstream from New Orleans, we have to ask what the Laffites had done by this time to earn an unsavory reputation so far from the

presumed center of their operations. One portion of the Glasscock letter that is paraphrased, but not quoted, by Saxon, is a conversation between Thomas Glasscock and John R. Grymes, in which Grymes suggests the Laffites as a source of slaves, and Glasscock protests that he has heard that they were outlaws.<sup>28</sup> Perhaps this is the origin of their notoriety, though it is interesting that Glasscock might think they were outlaws, when neither Laffite will actually run afoul of the law until 1812.

Indeed, as will be seen shortly, one of them will actually be an officer of the law within a few months. And if one or both of them are so notorious, we have to wonder why the New Orleans press and the public legal record are completely silent about them up to this time. Is it possible that the notoriety applied to Pierre and that it derived from his dealings in and around Baton Rouge and West Florida a few years earlier? The Glasscock letter thus generates more questions than it answers, yet it remains the earliest really "human" document to get us to grips with the Laffites in the years before they genuinely became notorious.

Less than a year after the Glasscock visit, Pierre shifted scene again to Ascension Parish, which it should be noted is immediately adjacent to Point Coupée and Baton Rouge and some distance upriver from New Orleans. This suggests that as late as 1810 Pierre is still involved in affairs in that vicinity. It is also worth noting that on the west bank of the river in the heart of Ascension Parish sat the village of La Fourche des Chitimachas, formerly known as Donaldsonville, and which would become Donaldsonville in a few years. This is where by 1813 or 1814 at the latest the Laffites had a base to which they smuggled slaves from Grand Terre.

On July 5, 1810, the Spanish schooner *El Bolador*, belonging to Vicente Dordoigaite and laden with a cargo of seventy slaves from Africa, was taken off the Tortugas by a privateer flying French colors. The captors took the vessel to Round Bay on the Louisiana

coast, unloaded the slaves, and burned her to the water. Shortly thereafter the slaves were introduced into Louisiana and sold in violation of the 1808 prohibition of the African slave trade. Dordoigaite immediately recovered some of them, keeping them in the parish jail, only to have several taken out by force by unknown hands, and in July 1810 the *El Bolador's* Captain Peter Paillet learned the whereabouts of five of them.<sup>29</sup> He reported them to the sheriff of Ascension Parrish, who in time summoned Pierre Laffite, who was either already a "deputy marshal" or whom the sheriff thereupon deputized. Laffite also knew where the slaves were, and that they had probably been taken from jail by a planter named Louis Bourdier.

In company with Paillet, Laffite went to the Bourdier plantation, near Donaldsonville, in September and found a slave boy hidden in an outhouse, and immediately seized him.<sup>30</sup> A few days later he and Paillet went back and found four more slaves hidden in a garret in an outhouse and concluded that they were hidden there by Bourdier, who knew they were illegally imported when he purchased them. These, too, Pierre seized and turned over to the court on September 18, 1810.<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, Paillet then filed a claim under the existing law that when a fine of \$1,000 per slave was levied against Bourdier for violating the law, half should go to himself for finding the slaves and turning them in. Pierre himself appeared in the Ascension Parish court to file signed depositions attesting to his role in the apprehension of the five slaves.<sup>32</sup> Then on October 11, Pierre arrested Bourdier himself and delivered him to the jail in Donaldsonville.<sup>33</sup>

In all of the depositions and statements presented to the court in these matters, Pierre Laffite signed his name in full in the same unmistakable signature used in his other documents discussed here, and he was also identified in them all as a deputy marshal. The juxtaposition of time, place, and subject, can hardly be coincidental. Tradition and some early recollections identify Donaldsonville, and more specifically the Viala

plantation, as the location of the Laffite outlet for illegal slave sales, and in the case of the *El Bolador* Pierre was in the vicinity and had knowledge of who had purchased illegal slaves. The speculation is inevitable that Pierre himself had something to do with the importation or sale of those slaves, via Jean or other smugglers at Round Bay. Moreover, the gambit of importing slaves into Louisiana, then reporting them to the officials for seizure would be used by a number of later Laffite associates as a means of "laundering" slaves. That is, once the slaves were seized, law required their sale at auction, and half the proceeds went to the individual first reporting or locating them. In this instance, it was Pierre who found them. Secondly, as with Paillet, there was also a 50% finder's fee for reporting illicit slaves, to be taken from the Federal fines imposed on buyers of the banned blacks. Pierre's involvement in this incident as a deputy marshal may well be one such case, by which he had helped import and sell the slaves in the first place. Then he informed the authorities of their likely whereabouts, accepted a deputy marshal's appointment for the interim in order to seize the slaves when he found them, and then in some degree profited from their subsequent sale and/or fines.

Just weeks after this episode, Pierre appeared in the documentary record for the last time during that first Laffite decade in Louisiana, and in an entirely different context. On October 27, 1810, a daughter named Marie Josephe was born to Pierre and his mistress Adelaide Maselari. In entering the birth and subsequent baptism in the baptismal register of St. Louis Cathedral, it was noted that the parents lived in New Orleans, and that Pierre came from Bayonne, France, while the mother came from St. Louis Parish of Jeremy, San Domingue.<sup>34</sup> The attribution of Bayonne as the place of Pierre's birth conflicts with his own statement four years before that he was born in Pauillac, but it is significant that this register confirms the Glasscock description of Pierre living with a woman from San Domingue. His relationship with Adelaide Maselari—or

Masclary—is further cemented on October 26, 1811, when Pierre sold to her a slave woman named Charlotte. Whereas the baptismal register made no mention of the child or the mother being of mixed race, suggesting that Adelaide Maselari was probably white, it is specifically noted in the 1811 slave sale that Adelaide is a free woman of color, confirming Glasscock's comment about her complexion.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, Saxon, in his embellishing narrative with the Glasscock letter, suggests that Pierre and Adelaide were living at the smithy on Bourbon and St. Philip. Title searches done by the Veaux Carré Commission in the 1930s, and now housed at the Historic New Orleans Collection archives, confirm that at no time did any property at that intersection ever belong to either of the Laffites. Independent research by the author confirms that there is no record of the Laffites ever owning any property anywhere in New Orleans other than the parcel at Royal and Dumaine that briefly belonged in part to Pierre in 1803. Archaeological work at the traditional site of the Laffite smithy, a site for some decades now occupied by a tavern called the "Lafitte Blacksmith Shop," also revealed none of the telltale debris that would ordinarily be associated with a smithy; suggesting that no such enterprise was ever pursued on that site under any ownership.<sup>36</sup>

Yet there is that tradition of the Laffites and blacksmithing and that site, a tradition that was current as early as the 1850s, and in a roundabout way its origins can now be confirmed. The site of today's tavern never had anything to do with the Laffites. However, across St. Philip, where today stands the Lafitte Guest House at 1003 Bourbon Street, it is a different story. On August 16, 1816, this property was purchased by a free woman of color named Marie Villard. She subsequently sold it, then purchased it again in 1819, though she appears to have lived in it uninterrupted. On the latter occasion, she purchased it for 9000 piastres in promissory notes, 7500 piastres of which was subscribed by Jean Laffite over his signature.<sup>37</sup> Prior

to that time, Marie Louise or Marguerite Villard was engaged in a number of property and slave transactions to which Pierre Laffite was a party either as witness or as surety for promissory notes. Of course this is the Marie Villard who replaced Adelaide Maselari as Pierre's mistress sometime prior to September 1815.

The logical conclusion is that in the established New Orleans tradition of *placage*, whereby white men bought their mulatto or quadroon mistresses houses and maintained them in some comfort, Pierre Laffite had set up his mistress Marie Villard in the house at 1003 Bourbon. Thus, off and on from the time she first acquired it in 1816, this is where Pierre and Jean Laffite would have stayed when they were in New Orleans, especially since legend and some documentation also support a relationship between Jean and Marie's sister Catherine, making Jean's backing of the repurchase in 1819 the more logical. Thus the Laffites had a very definite connection with the intersection of Bourbon and St. Philip for at least three years. Tradition was right in that. It just identified them with the wrong corner on St. Philip. Add to that the early association of the Laffites with blacksmithing thanks to that 1802 Hearico and Lafitte advertisement and the 1803 innkeeper named Pierre Lafitte who either was a blacksmith or else employed one, and the dynamics of memory did the rest. No one was lying or inventing. There had been a Lafitte--maybe two--who was an ironworker in early New Orleans, and people with long memories could remember that Jean and Pierre Laffite intermittently lived on the corner of Bourbon and St. Philip. It was easy for the peculiar workings of the oral tradition to conflate the two, producing a new and utterly erroneous legend out of very definable sets of facts.

And that is what we know of the Laffites in the first decade of the nineteenth century, or at least what we can establish certainly from directly contemporary documents. More certainly remains to be found, and each new discovery will add more flashes of

color to the canvas, though it is safe to say that it will never be as filled as we would like. But then, perhaps that is best, for one of the lures of the Laffites is the very mystery that has always surrounded them, and which in all likelihood always will frame their portrait.<sup>38</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Charles Herrico Quittance, September 1805, Notary Pierre Pedesclaux, Vol. 51, p. 766, New Orleans Notarial Archives.

<sup>2</sup> "Editorial and Literary Department--Life and Times of Lafitte," *DeBow's Southern and Western Review*, XII (January 1852), p. 112.

<sup>3</sup> June 6, 1803, Notary Pierre Pedesclaux, Vol. 43, pp. 222-23, Notarial Archives.

<sup>4</sup> July 6, 1775, Note Notary Juan B. Garic, Vol. 6, p. 173, Notarial Archives.

<sup>5</sup> Testate succession of Julian Vienne, February 12, 1777, "Index to Spanish Judicial Records of Louisiana," *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, XII (April 1929), pp. 349-50, 353.

<sup>6</sup> June 6, 1803, Pierre Pedesclaux, Vol. 44 pp. 476-77, Notarial Archives.

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Laffite to Pedro Alarcon, July 29, 1803, Notary Pierre Pedesclaux, Vol. 45, p. 646, Notarial Archives.

<sup>8</sup> Stanley Clisby Arthur, *Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover* (New Orleans, 1952), pp. 14-15.

<sup>9</sup> Power of Attorney, October 16, 1804, Archives of the Spanish Government of West Florida, Clerk of Court's Office, East Baton Rouge Parish Courthouse, Baton Rouge, LA.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Sale of slave, October 30, 1804, Archives of the Spanish Government of West Florida.

<sup>12</sup> Record of sale, November 3, 1804, Archives of the Spanish Government of West Florida.

<sup>13</sup> C. C. Robin, *Voyage to Louisiana* (Gretna, LA, 2000), pp. 118-19.

<sup>14</sup> Pierre Pedesclaux, Vol. 52 January, 1806, p. 15; Vol. 52, p. 33, January 10, 1806; Vol. 52, p. 90, February 8, 1806; Vol. 52, p. 120, February 14, 1806, Notarial Archives.

<sup>15</sup> Certificate of Inspection, 1813 [maybe March 2], Pirate Papers, Historic New Orleans Collection.

<sup>16</sup> April 21, 1806, Pierre Pedesclaux, Vol. 52, p. 335, Notarial Archives.

<sup>17</sup> M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry, *Description Topographique, Physique, Civile, Politique et Historique de La Partie Française de L'Isle Saint-Domingue* (Paris: Société de L'Histoire des Colonies Françaises and Librairie Larose, 1958; originally published in 1797), I, p. 406.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 1022; Vol III, p. 1506.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, III, p. 1506.

<sup>20</sup> Pedro Laffite May 21, 1806, Pierre Pedesclaux Vol. 52 p. 429, Notarial Archives.

<sup>21</sup> Pierre Pedesclaux, Vol. 52, p. 454, Notarial Archives.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Laffite sale to P. T. DuBourg, April 7, 1806, Narcissus Broutin, Vol. 12, p. 164, Notarial Archives.

<sup>23</sup> Pierre Laffite slave sale to Fernando Alzar, May 29, 1809, Notary Pierre Pedesclaux, Vol. 59, p. 354; Pierre Laffite slave sale to Miguel Da Pena, September 28, 1809, Notary Narcissus Broutin, Vol. 20-A, p. 510; Pierre Laffite to Jean del Puerto, 1810, Pierre Pedesclaux Vol. 60 p. 78; Pierre Laffite and A. Robin sale of slave, March 3,

1810, Narcissus Broutin, Vol. 22, p. 126; Pierre Laffite slave sale to Arnaud Beauvais, March 16, 1810, Narcissus Broutin, Vol. 22, pp. 157-58; Pierre Laffite and A. Robin slave sale to J. N. B. D'Abnour, June 12, 1810, Narcissus Broutin, Vol. 23, p. 352; Andre Robin and Laffite slave sale to George Mayer, Narcissus Broutin, Vol. 23, p. 361; Pierre Laffite and A. Robin slave sale to Etienne LaFebre, June 27, 1810, Narcissus Broutin, Vol. 23, p. 377; Pierre Laffite slave sale to Paul Martin and Paul Savoie, August 24, 1810, Narcissus Broutin, Vol. 23, p. 475, Notarial Archives.

<sup>24</sup> Anna Calhoun to the author, August 19, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Laffite the Pirate* (New York, 1930), pp. 3-11.

<sup>26</sup> Fatio to captain general, March 1818, Legajo 1900, Archivo General des Indies, Seville, Spain.

<sup>27</sup> Certificate of Inspection, 1813 [possibly March 2], Pirate Papers, Historic New Orleans Collection.

<sup>28</sup> P. 6.

<sup>29</sup> Libel of Vicente Dordoigaite, n.d., Vicente Dordoigaite vs. *El Bolador*, Case File #0419, Records of the United States District Court for Eastern Louisiana, National Archives Southwest Region, Ft. Worth, Texas.

<sup>30</sup> Deposition, September 23, 1810, Case File #0574, United States v Pierre Laffite, National Archives Southwest Region.

<sup>31</sup> Pierre Laffite deposition, September 23, 1810, Case File #0399, P. N. Paillet v. L. Bourdier, National Archives Southwest Region.

<sup>32</sup> Paillet deposition, July 16, 1810, *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Arrest order, October 11, 1810, Deposition of Paillet, n.d., Deposition of Pierre Laffite, September 28, 1810, Case File #0399, National Archives Southwest Region.

<sup>34</sup> Baptismal Book 1, p 117, act 486, St. Louis Cathedral Archives, New Orleans, Louisiana.

<sup>35</sup> Pierre Laffite slave sale to Adelaide Masclary [Maselari], October 26, 1811, Notary Narcissus Broutin, Vol. 26, p. 451, Notarial archives.

<sup>36</sup> Veaux Carré Survey, Square 76, Lot 18806, Historic New Orleans Collection.

<sup>37</sup> April 30, 1819, Notary Philippe Pedesclaux, Vol. 7, pp. 339-40, Notarial Archives.

<sup>38</sup> It will be observed that the alleged journal of Jean Laffite, most recently translated and published as *The Memoirs of Jean Laffite* (Philadelphia, 1999), has not been used as a source document in this article. In the first place, the purpose of the present account has been to deal only with directly contemporaneous documentation, whereas the *Memoir* alleges in its content that it was written between 1845 and 1850. More to the point, this document is so fatally compromised by inaccuracies, anachronisms, mistakes obviously borrowed from other

twentieth century sources, and examples of impossible foreknowledge, that it cannot be regarded either as written by Laffite himself, or by anyone prior to the 1940s. Interestingly, in its very brief account of the period 1803-1810 covered in this article, the *Memoirs* is almost wholly silent, there having been no substantial published sources for its author to use, whereas if really written by Laffite, there should have been plenty of memory to rely on. It is entirely unaware of established facts of the Laffite's early lives in Louisiana that were not in print as of the 1940s. For instance, it is ignorant of Pierre's 1803 purchase of property in New Orleans. It knows nothing of his activities as a merchant at Point Coupée and his Baton Rouge connections, or of his involvement and sometime residence in Pensacola. It says that he was briefly "an American official in New Orleans," whereas he was actually a deputized marshal in Donaldsonville. The *Memoir* also repeats the now discredited tradition that the Laffite brothers established a blacksmith shop in New Orleans, in 1805, which we can be virtually certain they did not. More could be said to discredit the document, but this is neither the time nor the venue for that discussion.

## LYLE CHAMBERS SAXON, 1891 - 1946

Jeff Modzelewski

[Editor's note: This piece was presented at the annual Christmas meeting of the Laffite Society in Galveston, Texas, December 14, 2003.]

Various facets of Laffite lore, the veracity of which is questionable or the connection of which to Laffite seems peripheral, have nonetheless come to form part of the Laffite saga.

The purported *Journal of Jean Laffite* is a prime example. Even if this old manuscript, written in French and housed at the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center in Liberty, Texas, is a hoax, as most researchers now believe, and not the memoirs of the privateer which he completed a quarter of a century after retiring from the sea to become a gentleman farmer in Alton, Illinois, the *Journal* and the effort that went into its creation are noteworthy in themselves and have become inseparable from any in-depth study of Laffite.

Another example of an item with a seemingly superficial connection to Laffite becoming indissolubly entwined with the privateer's story is the writer and *bon vivant* Lyle Chambers Saxon. To be sure, Saxon in 1930 published a book titled *Lafitte the Pirate*, and on the surface this would appear to imbed him into Laffite lore for good and direct reason. However, it is perhaps an understatement to say that this work incorporated much novelistic license and the errors of past researchers, and serious Laffite students today almost perceptibly scoff at citations in other works which reference Saxon's *Lafitte the Pirate*.

Nevertheless, *Lafitte the Pirate* has come to be used, for better or worse, as a reference by successive generations of authors, and thus forms part of the recommended "must-read" list for those embarking upon their studies of Laffite. This fact, joined with the common bond which Laffite and Saxon share of strong identification with their adopted city of New Orleans, and aided by the undeniable charisma of the author which shines even through second

and third-hand accounts over more than half a century, have caused Lyle Saxon to become inextricably cemented into the Laffite story.

In short, since Laffite researchers can scarcely avoid coming upon mention of Lyle Saxon, it is fitting that we learn something more of him.

The man who, by mid-twentieth century, had come to be called "Mr. New Orleans,"<sup>1</sup> was in fact born in Bellingham, Washington, on September 4, 1891, but throughout his life he apparently enjoyed the common misconception that he had been born in the Pelican State and he did nothing to correct it.

Although some questioned his legitimacy, Saxon's parents were married at his birth, but their conjugal union lasted only briefly. Lyle's mother, Katherine "Kittie" Chambers Saxon, while pregnant, had followed his father, Hugh Saxon, west to California and thence to the Pacific Northwest, but within a short time of Lyle's birth mother and baby found themselves back in her hometown of Baton Rouge. Lyle's father Hugh remained for most of his life in the Golden State and died in 1945, about a year before his by-then famous son. Hugh Saxon attained some success in Hollywood as an actor, appearing in a number of films throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Lyle was to bear a lifelong animosity toward his father for having abandoned his mother, and he refused contact with the elder Saxon despite the latter's several attempts over the years to establish such.

Saxon was raised in his maternal grandfather's home in Baton Rouge by his mother and her two maiden sisters, Maude and Elizabeth Chambers. He attended Louisiana State University for several years in the early nineteen-teens. Just as he always allowed others to suppose he was a

native Louisianan, he likewise allowed them to believe that he had received a degree from L.S.U., but this was not fact.

In 1914 Saxon first took up residence in New Orleans, at the age of twenty-two or twenty-three. By the end of his life thirty-two years later, he had become so identified with the Crescent City that tours of the Vieux Carré included his rooms at the St. Charles Hotel. He once commented wryly, "I started out as a writer, and I end as a souvenir."<sup>2</sup>

His professional life lasted little more than thirty years. For approximately half of this time Saxon was employed full-time by either a newspaper or the federal government while also writing on the side. For the other half of these years he enjoyed the independence, but suffered as well the economic uncertainties, of working solely as a free-lance writer.

For nine years, from 1917 until 1926, Saxon worked as a journalist in New Orleans, beginning as a cub reporter for the *New Orleans Item* and finishing nine years later with the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, having been for it reporter, literary critic, and Sunday editor, and having obtained some small fame in his adopted city.

From 1926 until 1930, Saxon worked as a free-lance writer in New York City, producing there four book-length works, including *Lafitte the Pirate*, and publishing shorter pieces in various periodicals and literary anthologies.

Back in New Orleans, he continued writing independently, but financial strain forced him to accept steady employment once again in the early autumn of 1935, when he became the State Director of the Louisiana Writers' Project for the Works Progress Administration. He retained this position until the project ended in December, 1942, and then once again wrote independently until his death three and one-half years later.

In addition to tens of articles published in the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* and various periodicals of the day, Saxon's book-length works include:

- *Father Mississippi* (1927)
- *Fabulous New Orleans* (1928)
- *Old Louisiana* (1929)
- *Lafitte the Pirate* (1930)
- *A Walk through the Vieux Carré and a Short History of the St. Charles* (1935)
- *Children of Strangers* (1937)
- *New Orleans City Guide* (1938)
- *Louisiana: A Guide to the State* (1941)
- *Gumbo Ya-Ya* (1945) (co-authored with Edward Dreyer and Robert Tallant)
- *The Friends of Joe Gilmore* (published posthumously in 1948)

Lyle Chambers Saxon passed away in 1946 at the age of fifty-four.

These are the facts; now something about the man.

By all accounts, Saxon was a charming and captivating personality, to men as well as to women. As Dale Olson remarked to me over lunch one day in late November, 2003, Saxon was a vestige of the Old South, his persona that of the consummate southern gentleman.

Saxon was one of the first to recognize the historic value and potential of the French Quarter in New Orleans and to dare to take up residence there in years when its environment might have been kindly labeled "seedy" but realistically described as "dangerous."

He was generous to a fault, often living in precarious financial circumstances while aiding other aspiring writers to pay their room and board. He helped to support his maiden maternal aunts in Baton Rouge for his entire working life.

Saxon was an integral member of the literary salons of his day, both in New Orleans and during his four-year sojourn in New York City. His circle of acquaintances and friends included the literary likes of Sherwood Anderson, Heywood Broun, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, Edna Ferber, Ford Madox Ford, Sinclair Lewis, and John Steinbeck.



Yet Lyle Saxon's life, while outwardly one of ease, was not without its troubles.

He wanted, above else, to be a novelist, yet he produced only one true novel - only one plotted, book-length piece of fiction - in his life: *Children of Strangers*, begun in 1923 but not published until 1937. This disappointment plagued him throughout his life.

From his young adult years on, Saxon suffered a number of sometimes-serious incidents of bad health. In his late 20s he was found to be tubercular and spent six months recuperating. In 1939 he suffered a ruptured appendix and related complications, from which he nearly died and which affected his health for the remaining seven years that he lived.

Some negative health issues he brought upon himself. In his later years he lapsed into sexual promiscuity, sometimes literally prostituting himself, and at least once, in 1932, he contracted syphilis. He talks of being "painfully sick" and of receiving "treatments from a doctor which reduce me to such depths of humiliation that I blush to think of them."<sup>3</sup>

Just as his treatments for syphilis were ending in late 1932, two thugs broke into his rooms one day and forced him to write a check and then phone the hotel desk to authorize one of the thugs to cash it. While he was doing so, the other thug amused himself by torturing Saxon, burning the soles of his feet with matches. The psychological trauma never left Saxon.

Then there was his alcoholism. By the time he was in his late 30s he had begun to routinely drink alone. A friend visited him in 1937 and found Saxon in such an alcoholic daze that Saxon did not recognize him. A few years later the same friend came upon him in Royal St. Saxon had a girl on his arm and was so inebriated that he could not speak. All that he could do was to lean against the side of the Monteleone Hotel and raise his hand.<sup>4</sup> And by 1944 Saxon confessed that he had become a "fifth-a-day" man.

According to a number of people who knew him well, Lyle Saxon, throughout his life, and despite his outward appearance as a *bon vivant*, was a profoundly lonely man.

Despite his charm, he never married. Ever in the midst of vibrant society and gaiety, Saxon at heart lived in isolation.

Yet there was in his life, too, much fun. He was a major proponent of masking at Mardi Gras. He describes his 1940 costume thusly: "I was a white rabbit that year—six feet, two inches tall with a skin tight costume of white imitation rabbit fur, a simpering rabbit face, ears two feet long, standing straight up and lined with pink satin, a large bow of pink ribbon tied around my neck, and a small bushy tail." When the time came to enter the streets, Saxon climbed into a baby carriage, and [his manservant] Joe [Gilmore] wheeled the infant bunny through the crowd as Saxon drank from a nursing bottle of whiskey."<sup>5</sup>

On another occasion the building next door caught fire late at night. He and some friends sat on their French-Quarter balcony, calmly sipping cocktails and watching the efforts of the firefighters. Then, when the excitement was done, they sauntered over to the Café du Monde for beignets and café au lait.

Despite failing health, during 1946's Mardi Gras, Saxon felt sufficiently well to broadcast the Rex parade from the balcony of the St. Charles Hotel. Shortly thereafter he left to visit his friend Miss Cammie Henry at Melrose Plantation, fifteen miles south of Natchitoches, a place of refuge for him for nearly a quarter of a century at which he could write and rest. But when he reached Baton Rouge he began to hemorrhage and returned to New Orleans. He was admitted to Baptist Hospital, and this time the diagnosis was cancer. With characteristic stiff upper lip he quipped, "There's no answer to cancer."<sup>6</sup> He also told friends, "Don't grieve for me. I've had a wonderful time."<sup>7</sup> An unsuccessful operation was performed, pneumonia set in, and Lyle Chambers Saxon died on April 9, 1946. He is buried in Magnolia Cemetery in Baton Rouge, in a family plot containing the tombs of his mother and her two maiden sisters.

In June, 2003, en route to a Laffite Society field trip to New Orleans, Dale and Diane Olson and my wife Kathy and I stopped at Baton Rouge's Magnolia Cemetery to find Lyle Saxon's tomb. Once located, we toasted him with Sazerac cocktails which

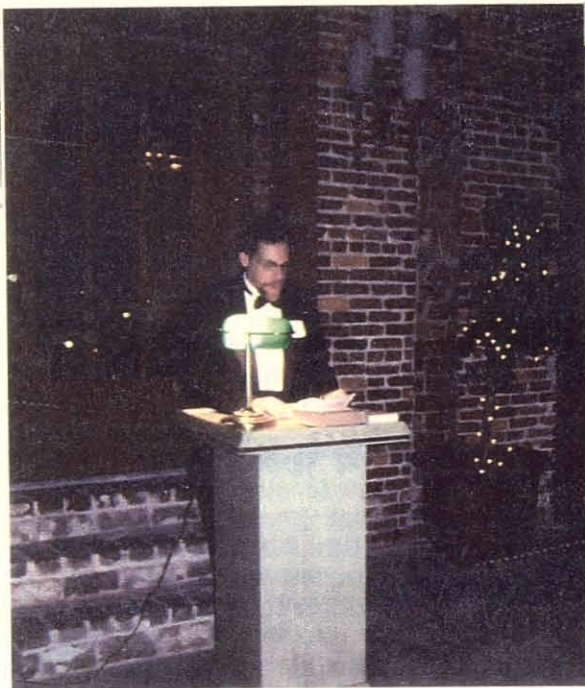
we had pre-mixed in Galveston, and left one for Saxon on his grave. His tombstone reads, "For this honorable man we pay not our last respects, but offer instead the everlasting homage for his noble spirit which so enriched all our lives. Author – Writer –Philosopher."<sup>8</sup> It was an overcast, end-of-spring day, and as we offered our toast, storm clouds threatened and rain began to fall. We sympathized with the sentiments of George Sessions Perry, who proclaimed, in an article on New Orleans from a series titled "The Cities of America," published in the June 1, 1946 issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*, that, with the passing of Lyle Saxon, "the heart of old New Orleans had stopped beating."<sup>9</sup>

Many of Saxon's works, including *Lafitte the Pirate*, have been reissued in recent years in inexpensive paperback editions by Pelican Publishing Company in Gretna, Louisiana. For good biographies, and well

worth reading, look to *The Life and Selected Letters of Lyle Saxon* by Chance Harvey, published by Pelican in 2003, and James W. Thomas's *Lyle Saxon: A Critical Biography*, volume 3 of the Southern Literary Series, published by Summa Publications in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1991.

#### Endnotes

1. Chance Harvey, *The Life and Selected Letters of Lyle Saxon*, Pelican Publishing Company, Gretna, LA, 2003, p. 81.
2. *Ibid*, p. 213.
3. *Ibid*, pp. 164-165.
4. *Ibid*, p. 194.
5. *Ibid*, p. 198.
6. *Ibid*, p. 213.
7. *Ibid*, p. 188.
8. *Ibid*, p. 218.
9. *Ibid*, p. 213.



Jeff Modzelewski  
Giving the address



l-r Norman Sachnik, Jean Epperson  
and Sheldon Kindall socializing

## A Visit To The Bay Islands

Reginald Wilson

*[Editor's note: Laffite Society members Reginald and Betty Wilson have a long standing interest in treasure and pirate history. In pursuit of their interest they have had many exciting and interesting adventures. This an account of one of their adventures.]*

In the Spring of 1969, Betty and I began to plan a month long vacation. We would fly to the Bay Islands, then return through Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico. On Utila, the Methodist minister, Rev. Bryant, was an amateur radio operator and I had contacted him a number of times. He invited us to spend a few days with him. The next island was Roatan. There were several Mayan village sites I wanted to visit and Carroll Lewis, who wrote Treasures of Galveston Bay said that I should meet Howard Jennings, if at all possible. Jennings was originally from Texarkana and was a suave, debonair individual that knew his way around Central America and was a "wheeler dealer." In Honduras, I wanted to see the Mayan ruins of Copan. San Salvador was the home of Laura Catani, an exchange student who had lived with the Seabergs and Jo Ann Wolfe. We knew her quite well. In Guatemala there were several places I wanted to visit including Tikal. In San Cristobal de las Casas, the home of MAF pilot, Jack Walker and family, was our destination.

The night before Betty, Larry, and I left, our children gave us a Bon Voyage party. The next day they and the Wolfe's drove us to the Houston Airport. Jo Ann was going with us as far as San Salvador to visit Laura Catani. We noticed a teenager seated near us listening to our conversation. While boarding the plane, she struck up a conversation with Larry and Jo Ann. She also was going to the Bay Islands! We welcomed her. Larry, Jo Ann, and new friend, Lynn, sat together. All three would be Senior students next year in school.

There was a stopover in Mexico City. All of us got off the plane and proceeded to the terminal for a cold drink. We asked Lynn who she was going to visit on the Bay Islands. She said her father, who was a

contractor and lived on Roatan. We asked his name? She replied, "Howard Jennings." Betty and I looked at each other in a rather odd manner. Lynn noted this and asked us if there was a problem. We said, "No, a friend told us that we should meet him and we hope we will be able to do so."

The plane made a brief stop in El Salvador. Jo Ann met her friend and we flew on to San Pedro Sula where we spent the night before going the next afternoon to La Ceiba, Honduras. We made a point in San Pedro Sula to stay at the same hotel where Lynn had reservations. The following morning an amateur radio friend picked us and Lynn up to give us a sightseeing tour of the city. We paid for all of Lynn's meals and went out of our way to make her feel like she was one of us. Once she said that her father was sure going to appreciate us looking after her! This was just what we wanted. When I had a chance, I asked my ham radio friend what he knew about Howard Jennings. He said that he was well known over that whole area and was thought to be involved in contraband. When we arrived at La Ceiba, Howard Jennings had arrived from Roatan, in his boat, to pick up his daughter. Naturally, we met him, and visited for a while. He found that on Roatan, we had reservations at Bill Kepler's Reef House. He said that he had to pick up his mail there and that he and his "wife" would like to have us over for lunch one day.

We flew the 30 miles to the island of Utila in a single motor three passenger plane. Rev. Bryant met us and drove us to his home. This island had just one long main street with almost all of the houses facing this street. I judged the population to be 200 - 250 people. His wife and son, Eric, welcomed us and showed us to our room. I found out later that this couple had another son that drowned a short time after they arrived on



the island. We had hardly settled in when we began to notice large cockroaches everywhere. If you opened the refrigerator, several would run out. Some ran in. The wife commented that they had a problem controlling the cockroaches! She cooked a chicken on Saturday, and left it out on the counter for us to eat on Sunday. Fortunately, there was a little store next door that we were able to sneak a few things to eat to tide us over until we could get to the next island.

Rev. Bryant was the only Ordained Minister for the 2 islands. He had 13 Churches and several Lay Ministers under his supervision. The Sunday we were there, we went to Church where the Reverend brought the message. You never heard such singing. The male pianist played with a boogie beat, and the choir and congregation sang "loud and clear" to the top of their voices. You then realized that many of these were descendants of pirates. That night, the pianist brought the message--which was unusually good. There was a small disturbance when two dogs wandered in and started a fight in the middle of the sermon!

While there, a guide took us to an area known to archaeologists as the "80 acre site". Here we found loads of broken Mayan pottery, Mayan clay whistles, and even an Iguana nest full of eggs. One day, a guide took us through a canal across the island to the ocean side where there was an old Mayan burial site. With just a little exploration, we found a burial of just the skull and long bones of the body. This style of burial was typical of the Mayans. Don't ask me why. There were several small mountains on the island. One had a fairly large cave that pirate guns, powder, and silverware had been found years ago. I asked our guide if there were any old bottles around that we might find. He took us to an abandoned garden that had been outlined years ago by sticking these old black, hand blown bottles neck down. We recovered several. The next day, 6-8 people were there recovering these old bottles when they heard we would pay 25 cents for them. We had to stay an extra day because the small plane already had passengers the day we wanted to go to Roatan. That extra day was used to hike about the island to inspect several caves for Mayan artifacts. When we returned, our guide said we had walked 7 miles. It was a beautiful walk among the trees including palms along the beach. The mountains on

the mainland of Honduras could easily be seen though they were 30 miles away.

The next day, we flew the 5 miles to Coxen's Hole, Roatan, where we were met by a guide to take us to Bill Kepler's Reef House. The only transportation for this island was by boat except a short road between two villages. There were 3 cars on the island until 2 had a head-on-collision, so now there was only one. We took the mail boat from Coxen's Hole to Oak Ridge where Kepler's place was located. On the way we passed French Harbor and Jonesville. A pirate by the name of Jones started this community and for years everyone there had the last name of Jones. The Reef House was really nice. Kepler once had a fishing camp and three nice fishing boats in Cuba, but when Castro took over Bill got out of there with nothing. He lost everything. He then moved to Roatan and now ran another fishing camp, noted for Bone fishing. We had our own private cottage. The first night, he said the cook would fix anything we wanted. First we had a huge bowl of boiled shrimp, then we had a salad, steaks, baked potatoes, vegetables and Key lime pie. What a difference a day makes!!

Bill turned a boat and his guide over to us to go and do whatever we pleased. There were no other guests at the camp while we were there. We went to several locations on which I had archaeological reports. One, on top of a hill, had more sherds, broken bowls, and artifacts than anyplace I had ever seen. One did not even have to dig for them. We found two whole jars that we brought back to the States. We found a stone ax and a smooth stone hatchet, but unfortunately neither arrived in the barrel of artifacts that Bill shipped back to the States for us.

The Reef House is described as:

*"...located on Roatan Island, largest in a group of sun drenched isles off the coast of Spanish Honduras, opens an exciting new frontier to sport fishermen, adventurous skin divers, and relaxation-seeking beach combers. They are beautiful islands. Rolling green hills contrast with the cobalt blue of the Caribbean. Palm-fringed beaches surround crystal-clear bays and lagoons. A tropical climate, cooled by pleasant trade winds, completes this scenic paradise."*

We found this to be a true statement.

The first night after our delicious meal, Bill Kepler joined us for a round table bull session. Howard Jennings was brought up. In preparation for our trip, I had ordered a back issue of *True Magazine* and a back issue of *Argosy Magazine*. Both had an article about Jennings and his escapades. Carroll Lewis had told me that Jennings had in some way been involved in a scandal in Peru but he was not sure about the details. I began speaking about treasures Jennings had found, etc., and off hand mentioned the problem he had in Peru. After the discussion progressed a while longer, Bill said, "Doc, you know things about Jennings that even his closest friends don't know." I answered, "I always do an in depth study of places, archaeological sites, and individuals that I might meet before I leave on a vacation. After that Bill really opened up and began to tell the whole story about Jennings and his Peru adventure. A few little comments by me, such as, "I know, he really had it," was enough to keep Bill talking. Here is the story:

Jennings was a happy-go-lucky treasure hunter at heart, much the same as Carroll Lewis. A few years earlier, Jennings had gone to Peru with a metal detector that would test down to 25-30 feet. He was more or less wandering around, lost for any specific place to use his detector when he was contacted by two brothers who had inherited a huge tract of land that was used for cattle grazing and some farming. They told Jennings that on their property there was an old Inca burial ground. They had experienced little success finding the burials because they were so deep and their method was just a hit and miss situation. An agreement was made regarding the distribution of any treasure found. Jennings accompanied them to their property and started their men digging where he got good soundings with his detector. Immediately, they began finding graves at 20 plus feet that had all kinds of silver and gold artifacts. This continued on into the third week or so.

One afternoon, Jennings best helper whispered to him, "you had better not go to sleep tonight." Jennings gave him \$50.00 and thanked him. That evening all the local helpers left to go to a nearby village for a fiesta, leaving only Jennings and the two brothers in camp for the night. After dark, Jennings pulled his pistol, and got the drop on the two brothers. At this point, it was

unclear if Jennings just injured one or might have killed one of the brothers. He tied them (or him) up, removed the distributor of the cars except one that he used to get the hell out of there. It is unclear whether he took just his share of the treasure or whether he took all of it. Anyway, he, in some way, made his way back to the states with the gold and silver artifacts. Jennings settled in Birmingham, Alabama. It was not too long until our Federal Government came knocking on his door and slapped a \$300,000 lean on him for importing gold and silver into this country without a permit. Obviously, the brothers had the Peruvian Government trace down Jennings and complain to our Government. Jennings was able to clear himself by selling these artifacts to the Birmingham museum and to a private museum for ten cents on the dollar valuation. Jennings ended up with \$36,000. This was used to build his Tudor style home on Roatan on Old Port Royal inlet.

The day following our arrival, Jennings came by boat from his home on Old Port Royal to the Reef House to pick up his mail. He invited us for lunch the next day. The following day, our guide took us over into Old Port Royal inlet where the pirates had lived in the 1600s and up until the 1800s. They were said to have been part of Morgan's men at one time, but had acted on their own at other times. This inlet only had a small opening. In 1670, the pirates built on one side of the inlet, a fort of stone blocks with about 6 openings for canon emplacements. Opposite this were two small islands, the Cow and the Calf. The larger, the Cow, had a small fort that was said to have had two canons. Jennings home was built up the side of a hill on the mainland that had previously been the location of another fort with five gun emplacements. About 500 people were said to have lived in this pirate settlement. It was abandoned in the late 1800s (?) leaving trash dumps of broken plates, rum bottles, pieces of iron, etc. and even a "man trap" that Jennings had found.

Our guide showed us the various places where the pirates lived, a cave where they stored their powder, and we found several pirate rum bottles. Lynn saw us and joined us before we went to have lunch with Ann and Howard. Their home had just been completed and we were the first to sign their guest book. After lunch, Howard brought out some of the Mayan and pirate artifacts that

he had found. He also showed us pictures of gold artifacts that he had smuggled out of Costa Rica for a high government official to New York to Sotheby's auction house. These artifacts had been broken into six groups. The first group had been auctioned off and this was a financial success. That afternoon Lynn took us to a location where a pirate house had been located. She was clearing it off and using a small metal detector to see if she could find anything. We learned that Lynn and her Mother, who taught school, lived in Austin, Texas. Her Mother and her Father, Howard, had been separated many years. Lynn said she thought her Mother had sent her to her Father and Ann's to teach her some etiquette!

We returned that afternoon to the Reef House. The following morning we flew to the mainland of Honduras to continue our journey. We never saw Lynn again but it was not the last we heard of Jennings.

### Epilogue

A few weeks after we visited Howard and Ann, there was a knock on their door. It was a Honduranian Army Sergeant and three Privates. They told Howard that he had 30 minutes to pack his bags and come with them to the La Ceiba airport to be shipped out of the country. He was persona-non-gratis. Apparently the Peruvian government had caught up with him again. Ann was left to close up the house and return to England, her home.

A few years later, I accidentally caught Howard Jennings on a Houston TV station,

talking about a book he and his friend, Robin Moore, had just written and published. The name of the book was *The Treasure Hunter*. Robin Moore wrote *The Green Berets*, *The French Connection*, and about 7-8 other books. I purchased the book immediately. *The Treasure Hunter* does tell about Jennings' escapade in Peru, but not the whole story. It tells as well as a number of other treasure hunts, most of which were successful. Incidentally, he did find a small trunk, using a metal detector, in one corner of the fort on the Cow. The bottom was lined with silver bars. Robin Moore was along on some of these hunts.

The last I heard of Jennings, he was in Florida until my daughter, Patty, overheard his name mentioned at a party in Washington, DC. She listened carefully until it was mentioned again. She then stepped in and asked if Howard Jennings was the person that had lived on Roatan at one time. At this, stone silence prevailed. One finally asked what she knew about Howard Jennings? She said that 5 - 6 years ago her parents had visited him on Roatan. They clamed up and would say no more about Jennings. Patty left but a few minutes later asked some one who those men were. The answer was "CIA"!

Another individual, Mitchell-Hedges, from England, was another visitor to the Bay Islands who had success in finding treasure. His find brought him \$600,000.00. He returned to England and lived happily ever after. His story will have to be another article.

Reginald and Betty Wilson





## BIOS PROJECT

*[Editor's note: We continue the project of publishing biographical sketches (bios) of those Laffite Society members who wish to have one published. Send a write-up of 500 words or less along with a photo to Jean Epperson. We offer three bios in this issue.]*

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### WIL ZAPÁLAC

The fellow in the above photograph grew up on Galveston Isle, roughly some one hundred yards or so, southwest of the Maison Rouge area.

Interest in Jean Laffite was always simmering, especially during various voyages off the coast of Louisiana...and several blunders up various bayous. One should really work on the water to truly understand it is not the romantic dribble many authors warble over.

A halt in the duties of that of a maritime officer, I believe that was somewhere in 1989, was what brought the interest in the "Bos" to

a boil. An ad somewhere lead to Dale Olson's newsletter and on and on. And on.

One will find that research on Jean Laffite and "the boys" may often reflect or simulate his "offshore endeavors" .... Mercurial, as in the fickle sense, to say the least. Sometimes results can be very hot, sometimes... very cold. Deception and trickery abounds. Treasure maps...everywhere.

Present employment, for the fellow in the photo above, is with the F.E.M.A. people and attendance at the Laffite Society meetings is...demanded.



## JEAN L. EPPERSON

Laffite Society member, Jean L. Epperson, is a retired public school-teacher, researcher and writer, specializing in early Texas and Louisiana history. Her special interest at the moment is the brothers Laffite. She has a Bachelor of Science and Master of Education Degree from the University of Houston at Houston, Texas.

Jean has written and published *Historical Vignettes of Galveston Bay* and *Lost Spanish Towns: Atascosito and Trinidad de Salcedo*. She has had many historical articles published, of which the following are of special interest, "The 1834 Census of Anahuac" in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* in

January, 1989; "The Laffitte Family of Bayou Pierre, La.", *The Laffite Chronicles*, July, 1996; and "Charles Salier of Lake Charles and his Texas Connection", *Lost Spanish Towns*, Dogwood Press, 1996. Jean has made several research contributions to the accumulation of Laffite literature, the most notable of which is the clear identification of the perpetrator of the *Journal of Jean Laffite*. She unmasked John Matejka, aka John Nafsinger, John A. Laflin and John Andrechyne Laffite. See "Who Was John Andrechyne Laffite" in *The Laffite Society Chronicles*, VI, No. 2 Summer, 2000.

Jean lives at Dayton, Texas.



Jean L. Epperson



## William C. Davis

*[Editor's note: Laffite Society member, William C. Davis, has recently published Three Roads to the Alamo as well as the works referenced below.]*

William C. Davis, a native of Independence, Missouri, was educated in northern California, then spent twenty years in editorial management in the magazine and book publishing industry, before leaving in 1990 to spend the next ten years working as a writer and consultant. He is the author or editor of more than forty books in the fields of Civil War and Southern history, as well as numerous documentary screenplays. He was the on-camera senior consultant for 52 episodes of the Arts & Entertainment Network/History Channel series "Civil War Journal," as well as a number of other productions on commercial and Public Television and film productions, including "The Blue and Gray," "George Washington," and "The Perfect Tribute."

He has twice been nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in History, and is the only three-time winner of the Jefferson Davis Award given for book-length

works in Confederate History. His most recent book, *Lone Star Rising: The Revolutionary Birth of the Texas Republic*, was published by The Free Press in January 2004.

Davis has come to Virginia Tech as Director of Programs for the new Virginia Center for Civil War Studies, as well as serving as Professor of History. In coming to Virginia he is in a way returning to his roots, since his Davis ancestors settled in nearby Carroll and Grayson Counties some 200 years ago, and virtually all of his ancestry goes back in the Old Dominion, some as far as 1610.

### Education

B.A. Sonoma State University,  
1968

M.A. Sonoma State University,  
1969

Doc. Hum. Let. Lincoln  
Memorial University, 1976

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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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