

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JEAN LAFFITE

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TREASURES OF JEAN LAFFITE

by John L. Howells

Treasure books and old newspaper articles have many stories of Laffite's treasures supposedly secreted in secure hiding places in southern Louisiana and near Galveston. Few have reported finding treasure, possibly because the finders didn't wish to advertise their good fortune.

That there were treasures buried on and around areas occupied by Laffite's men is born out by statements made by Captain Lambert, one of Laffite's lieutenants. He claimed that although Laffite was in constant communication with New Orleans, and made many deposits there, he hedged losing it all by secreting a considerable amount.

On page 130 of the Journal of Jean Laffite (New York, 1958), Laffite mentions that his officers buried large amounts of gold "seven leagues west and two leagues north of the town of Saint Augustine," as well as "some Spanish silver and gold coins . . . on the Island of Pecan," and that some objects of value were "secreted in estuaries around Bayou Teche near New Orleans." In the original manuscript, now preserved in the Sam Houston Research Center in Liberty, Texas, two pages have been neatly removed from the journal where Laffite described his hidden treasures. These two pages were evidently removed before the journal was given to the nuns who translated it for the 1958 publication.

Charles Hayes' 1879 History of Galveston (Austin, 1975) relates the story of the author's unsuccessful attempt to secure the papers from an individual (unfortunately unidentified) who had been Laffite's private secretary, "which would give a very accurate account of the character and extent of Laffite's operation" -- and which might have given clues about treasure.

Another person who knew Laffite and his associates, and who would have had knowledge of pirate finances and activities, was Colonel Warren D. C. Hall, who resided for over ten years at the fabled Three Trees ("Laffite's Grove") on Galveston Island, where he died in 1867. Hall had been an attorney, was active in the Aury, Perry, and Long filibusters attempting to overthrow Spanish

rule in Mexico, and later became Secretary of War in the Republic of Texas. Hall was interviewed for the 1857 Galveston City Directory and provided a description of Laffite, but no in-depth interview was ever recorded from this responsible source about Laffite's Galveston establishment.

Early newspaper articles reciting stories by old salts, who were supposed to have served under Laffite, mention possible treasure sites like Pecan Island in Vermillion Parish, at Thompson's Bluff on the Calcasieu River, and at various places along Contraband Bayou near Lake Charles. One old document cites a cache of 70,000 doubloons buried on Kelso's Island, which appears on old maps of Cameron Parish near the Calcasieu-Cameron parish line. (A doubloon contains one ounce of gold, worth \$15 in Laffite's time, now valued at over \$350.) Most of these revelations were supposedly death bed bequeaths to relatives who were unable to locate the exact site and mentioned the facts to "trusted friends" who leaked the details to reporters.

In the Galveston Weekly News of May 25, 1874, there is a long article about a Houston physician who was attending a dying old fellow who described a vast amount of gold, silver, and precious stones concealed in a well near Tampico, Mexico. At first he doubted the statement, but when the man died declaring it to be the truth, he began to seriously contemplate "going for" the treasure. The doctor and two friends secured the necessary equipment and spent three weeks following the dead man's directions, but returned empty handed.

In his book, Wave of the Gulf (San Antonio, 1938), Jesse Ziegler mentions that as a boy he had pointed out to him members of "Lafitte's Gang." Ziegler's grandparents, who came to Galveston in 1845, described them as a "rum-soaked, motley crew" who wore the scars of a hard and violent life. Among them was "Crazy Ben," who wore earrings and looked like a typical pirate. These fellows never seemed to work, yet paid for their necessities and booze with old Spanish coins.

Workers employed by the Federal Writers Project collected numerous local stories of Laffite's treasure. According to Houston: A History and Guide (1942):

Jean Lafitte's occupation of Galveston Island and his journeys up the nearby streams gave rise to much treasure lore. As late as 1912 a chest containing old Spanish coins, believed to have been cached by pirates, was unearthed by fishermen after W. D. Warren had found a crested silver cruet at the mouth of the San Bernard River. Legends have persisted of gold buried by Spaniards and Mexicans, and so diligent have been the searchers that Dead Man's Lake has twice been drained and excavated: first by Dr. W. F. Dearen, and in 1930 by the Sullivan brothers of Houston. A story that the gold of General Santa Anna lies buried somewhere in the salt marches of the San Bernard has inspired many a

futile search; yet in 1929 a pot of gold estimated to contain \$2,000 was dug up at the corner of Houston and Washington Avenues where a filling station was being erected. That discovery brought forth many almost forgotten tales. Great holes yawning along the shores of San Jacinto Bay, where pirate ships once anchored, and others along the routes followed by Spanish and Mexican caravans, indicate the perennial labors of treasure hunters.

In Treasures of Galveston Bay (Waco, 1979), Carroll Lewis reports that:

in 1961, Douglas Zwiler, a Houston attorney, purchased the site of Laffite's home 'Maison Rouge,' located at Avenue A and 15th Street in Galveston. He hired two unemployed laborers to clean up the site which was overgrown with weeds and littered with trash. Soon after the job was completed he happened to find out that one of the laborers had just purchased a new home that cost about \$12,000 and the other helper had bought a new \$14,000 house. This was quite an achievement for two men who had recently been in the ranks of the unemployed. Was it possible that these two workers discovered some of Laffite's buried treasure while clearing out the debris?

Although Treasures of Galveston Bay has been out of print for nine years, it is the most complete recording of legends of hidden, lost, or buried treasure in that area.

When metal detectors first became available after World War Two, I remembered tales told by an old time Houston resident: every spring in the early 1900's, his father would take him fishing on Clear Lake (near the present site of the Houston NASA Space Center). His father told him that before the great 1900 hurricane, Clear Lake had been a deep freshwater lake that emptied into Galveston Bay, and that Laffite's captains would bring their ships into the lake to soak their hulls in the fresh water for several weeks to kill barnacles. Since that area was still unpopulated in the early 1900's, evidence of the pirates' campsites were still evident, and occasionally he found broken pieces of muskets and cutlasses.

In the early 1950's, with my newly acquired metal detector, I worked the Clear Lake area, hoping to find an abandoned cannon or something large enough to survive over a hundred years. I did uncover caches of iron cooking pots, utensils, and numerous hand-blown wine bottles, but attached no significance to these finds and left them there. Years later at a bottle collectors' show I learned that collectors would pay fifty to a hundred dollars apiece for such bottles!

Legend has it that Laffite's treasury had \$800,000 when the great hurricane of September 1818 hit Galveston and wiped out his settlement. The Maison Rouge, although badly damaged, was the

only building left standing. According to diaries of refugees of General Lallemand's expedition, who were at Galveston at the time, five of Laffite's ships anchored in the bay were sunk. Laffite went to New Orleans to get financing from his agent, Joseph Sauvinet, and the New Orleans Associates. This implies that the \$800,000 was also swept into Galveston Bay.

The following story is from Ray Miller's Galveston (Austin, 1983):

Confederate soldiers discovered some old coins in the sand while they were building breastworks on the beach at Galveston during the last year of the war. The account in the "Tri-Weekly" described the coins as Spanish doubloons. The paper said there were several thousand of them. Everybody supposed they were part of Lafitte's loot.

The Official Records of the War of the Rebellion contains the report of a Confederate cavalry troop on patrol near Matagorda in 1864 who bivouaced on the beach in a heavy rain storm. Next morning, when the wind and rain had subsided, the troopers discovered a pile of nearly a thousand doubloons just fifty yards from their camp, which had been uncovered by the wind. The coins had apparently been in a chest, which had rotted away. The officer in charge mentioned the find in his report of the reconnaissance, noting that the coins were divided among the troopers.

THE HOUMA INDIANS AND JEAN LAFFITE'S TREASURE

by Janel Curry

The Houma Indians have inhabited the coastal marshes of the Mississippi River Delta since about 1800. Their occupation of this area, which ranges from Bayou Dularge in Terrebonne Parish to as far east as St. Bernard Parish, accounts for a great deal of the tribe's oral history and folklore about Jean Laffite. In fact, the Barataria region is at the center of Houma territory and until recently was a major hunting, fishing, and trapping ground for the tribe.

According to the Houma oral history, two of Laffite's men married into the tribe in the early 1800's. The first of these, named Solet, accounts for the present-day Houma family of the same name. The other, Jean Naquin, was said to have arrived at Isle de Jean Charles (the most isolated Houma settlement), "from the south, up through the swamp," implying a connection with Laffite's Baratarians.

The Houma folklore about Laffite that has survived to the present day includes treasure stories. These treasure stories are very typical and are of a genre that is by no means peculiar to coastal Louisiana. They contain two almost universally repeated elements. The first is that the person who volunteers to guard a

treasure is killed and buried with it. The second is that while a treasure is being dug up, silence cannot be broken or the treasure will sink back into the ground. Whitney Billiot related the following story concerning the first practice to me in a 1978 interview:

They buried money like that. When they came to bury money, they asked who wanted to take care of the money. Whoever said they wanted to take care of the money, they'd kill him and bury him with it. They would bury him there. That's why they say "a spirit has money" -- I don't know. That person knew that he was going to be killed, I guess. Laffite and his gang: it was them who buried the money. They stole and buried, is what I heard.

Many of the Houma claim to have participated in treasure hunts, almost all of which ended with the silence broken and the treasure returning to the earth. In one such instance, several people used a divining rod to locate a treasure. As they started to dig, they heard and felt a spirit move toward them through the tall grass as the wind fell silent. Soon their shovels struck something hard -- but fear overtook one of the party, who broke the silence, whereupon the treasure sank back into the ground and the spirit dissipated. They continued to dig several feet deeper, but found nothing.

These are but a sampling of the many kinds of Laffite treasure stories that are preserved in the folklore of the Houma, some of which are typical of the Gulf region and others with a unique Houma flavor.

COMMENT ON LAFFITE IN SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA AND A RESPONSE TO JOHN HOWELLS

by Karin and Roger Kwiatkowski

On November 27th, the same day we received the Fall issue of the LSG newsletter, we talked with Mike LeBleu of Houston. Mike is a direct descendant of Arsene LeBleu of Lake Charles, one of the subjects of Robert Vogel's article about Laffite and Southwest Louisiana published in the Fall issue.

He said that he had been researching his family's oral history, but in the last year or so had stumbled over two seemingly illogical aspects of his family's tradition. These two stubborn traditions had frustrated him to the point of ignoring them altogether when he could not make sense out of them.

First, he could not explain why, if Arsene LeBleu had been so closely associated with Jean Laffite, there was no record of any LeBleus in New Orleans or among the Baratarians. Secondly, and most bizarre of all, he said, he could not comprehend his family's 170-year tradition that there had been two Laffites.

Mr. LeBleu said that he had been shocked to hear about our research in a television interview because suddenly these two points made perfect sense. If the man in Galveston had been a privateer using the name of Laffite as an alias, then, of course, Arsene LeBleu would not have been among the Baratarians. And Arsenne LeBleu, as a close confidant of the Galveston Laffite, would most certainly have known that the privateer was using an alias, thus the family tradition of "two Laffites." Mr. LeBleu said we were the first he had ever heard, outside of his family, who referred to two separate Laffites.

In January, Mike is returning home to the LeBleu plantation, where he will tape record his family's oral history. He further reported that because his family still owns some of Arsene LeBleu's original furniture, he is hopeful he can find clear and definitive documentation among the family records of the "two Laffites." He is convinced that the Galveston privateer was using an alias, that Arsene LeBleu knew it very well and may have left some written record, not only of that fact, but perhaps of the privateer's real identity and origin as well. He has some hunches of his own which he is going to research through his family's records at the LeBleu plantation.

Of course, we were dismayed by the article about our research by John Howells ("Will the Real Jean Laffite Please Stand and Be Recognized?") in the Fall issue. Perhaps because he has never read our novel and apparently has read only parts of our bibliography, the article completely misconstrued our research. We, too, deplore historians who tripped over the different Laffites in the old French and Spanish colonial records of New Orleans. The father and son Lafite whom Howells refers to are recorded in the old Spanish colonial archives as "Juan Lafite, Sr. and Juan Lafite, Jr." Never at any time did we confuse these two "Lafites" with the Baratarian privateer. In fact, we wrote in our bibliography:

In the records at the Old Mint Building in New Orleans, we counted, from approximately 1750 to 1850, four different Jean Lafittes--none of whom were the pirate Jean Lafitte. [Juan, Sr. and Juan, Jr. are two of those four.] We also found a Pierre Lafitte who was a notary public and two Peter Lafittes from France. Likewise, none of these three was the pirate Pierre Lafitte. However, when checking the old city records, it is virtually impossible to tell which Pierre Lafitte bought a slave or which Jean Lafitte was married. Apparently, past historians tripped over these accounts and assumed that the brothers varied the spelling of their name. It would account for the wide variation of their ages in biographies as well. In the Old Mint records, one Peter "Laffite" was 50 in 1820 while a Peter "Lafitte" was 28 in that same year. We also found dozens of other Lafittes, Laffittes and Lafites for the same period. We stopped counting after three dozen. Obviously, the names Jean and Pierre and Lafitte were extremely common names. Perhaps

because of that, there has been a proliferation of families claiming to have descended from the notorious pirates and a confusion about the genuine activities of the brothers.

So we could not agree more when John Howells writes: "'History is as interpreted by the historian,' but it would help if the historians would at least keep their characters separate and distinct."

We were drawn to join the LSG because of its openness and by-laws which avowed that the study group's "principal function will be to encourage original research and facilitate greater communication among researchers."

Naturally, we are hopeful that Mike LeBleu can document that enormous amount of circumstantial evidence we have accumulated regarding the Laffites. However, such documentation would raise more questions than it would answer. Who was the Galveston privateer? Can the LeBleu family papers prove or disprove the authenticity of the Journal of Jean Laffite? The questions are endless.

Our belief that the Galveston privateer used an alias does not diminish his legendary status, but rather makes him all the more mysterious, enigmatic and elusive. It opens an entirely new avenue of Laffite research and will ultimately, we believe, yield the most exciting Laffite discoveries to be made.

NEWS & NOTES

Will you help us with an end-of-the-year gift? As 1989 draws to a close, the LSG is once again asking its friends for help. This year, we have expanded the new LTJL from four to eight pages and have also worked to increase our outreach activities so that others can become better acquainted with Jean Laffite's role in history, folklore, and literature. We have great plans for 1990, but are strapped for funds. The Laffite Study Group appreciates receiving your annual contributions, which are essential for meeting operating costs, and encourages special gifts, which will be of great help in 1990 and beyond. Send your contributions to John L. Howells, LSG Secretary-Treasurer, 2570 Kevin Lane, Houston, Texas 77043.

A gentle suggestion. Membership dues in the LSG are for the calendar year, and 1990 dues are now due. \$10 for individual and institutional memberships includes a subscription to the new expanded quarterly newsletter, The Life and Times of Jean Laffite. Members who haven't paid their dues (some of you are years in arrears) have continued to receive complimentary issues of the newsletter. This cannot continue. Writing out your check to the LSG might make a good New Year's resolution.

Patterson-Ross raid. Robert Vogel will be presenting a paper, "Patterson and Ross' Raid on Barataria, September, 1814," part of a program on military actions in early Southwestern Louisiana at the Louisiana Historical Association meeting in Alexandria on 16 March 1990. A paper Vogel read at last spring's Gulf Coast Conference, "Jean Laffite, the Baratarians, and the Historical Geography of Piracy in the Gulf of Mexico," has been accepted for publication in the Spring 1990 number of the Gulf Coast Historical Review.

The Life and Times of Jean Laffite is published quarterly by the Laffite Study Group. Membership in the LSG is open to all. Annual dues are \$10 for individuals and institutions. Address applications for membership to:

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