

The Laffite Study Group

Newsletter

Volume VI No. 2 Summer 1986

The Laffite Study Group is a non-profit educational organization which aims to promote research in, and the dissemination of knowledge concerning Jean Laffite's role in American history, literature, and folklore. The focus of interest includes the Gulf Coast region and Western Caribbean in the early nineteenth century, with emphasis on Louisiana and Texas. The study group publishes this quarterly newsletter and a series of occasional papers entitled the **Life and Times of Jean Laffite**.

The Laffite Study Group invites the participation and support of all who share its interest in Jean Laffite and the lore of Gulf Coast piracy, privateering, and filibustering. Membership is open to all. Annual dues are ten dollars (\$10.00) for individuals and institutions, fifteen dollars (\$15.00) outside of the United States. Applications for membership should be sent to: John L. Howells, Secretary-Treasurer, Laffite Study Group, 2570 Kevin Lane, Houston, Texas 77043.

THE LAFFITE NETWORK

We were saddened to learn of the passing of fellow LSG member Albert Tate, Jr., who died 27 March 1986, aged 65. A native of Opelousas, Judge Tate served on the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans. A noted researcher and genealogist, he had been a member of the LSG since 1984.

The 1987 annual meeting of the Louisiana Historical Association will be held jointly with the Mississippi Historical Society in New Orleans in March. Members of the LSG may wish to hold another of our informal rendezvous at the meeting. If you would be interested in getting together with other Laffite aficionados next spring, please write to: Sir Jack D. L. Holmes, President, LSG, 520 South 22nd Avenue, Birmingham, Alabama 35205.

The Managing Editor regrets to announce that his stock of back issues of the **Life and Times of Jean Laffite**, nos. 1-5, have been exhausted. A limited number of LTJL no. 6 (June 1982) are still available at \$5.00 per copy (post paid), from Robert C. Vogel, P.O. Box 44, Cottage Grove, Minnesota 55016.

GRANDE TERRE IN 1844

[The following article, "Visit to Lafitte's Island," appeared without by-line in the New Orleans **Daily Picayune** on 27 August 1844.]

A friend of ours, who has often enlivened the columns of the **Picayune** with his contributions, has lately paid a visit to Lafitte's Island, and given a description of it to the public through the columns of the **Planters Gazette**. We avail ourselves of so much of it as we can find room for in our paper to-day. The party set forth on their trip from the plantation of Mr. Wilkinson, a wealthy and hospitable gentleman, who resides about sixty-five miles below the city: --

Embarking on board a neat two-masted sailboat, manned by four strong negroes, we found ourselves at sunrise cordelling our way through the high grass of the prairie, and a few moments after our boat was ploughing at a rapid rate through the waters of Wilkinson's bayou. Two miles took us into Lake Hermitage, on the western side of which runs a strip of land higher than the rest of the country, and extending many miles to the north and south of that point. This strip of land is thickly with handsome live oak, resembling in its isolated position the "cross timbers" of the great south western prairies. It is the only woodland to be found on that route, between the Mississippi and the Gulf of Mexico . . .

Wind and tide were against us, which rendered our progress very slow and tedious until we entered the head of Barataria Bay, when the sails were hoisted and we managed to make a little better headway. The bay is nearly eighteen miles in length, and from six to ten in width, and is studded with numerous small low islands, formed, like all the islands in these regions, of the deposits of the Mississippi, filled in with sand and shells, and covered with marsh weeds and stunted shrubbery. The distance from Wilkinson's to Grande Terre (Lafitte's Island) is said by some to be thirty miles; to us it seemed to be at least 75 miles! At half-past one, P.M., however, we reached Fort Livingston, situated on the southwestern point of Grande Terre, and about a quarter of a mile from where Lafitte had his fort on the same island.

This island lies directly upon the Gulf of Mexico, there being no land beyond it from the south-east to the southwestern points of the compass. Ingraham, in his novel called "Lafitte, the Pirate," describes Grande Terre as being high with cliffs overhanging the sea, and all that sort of thing, which certainly sounds very pretty, but we are under the painful necessity of pulling down Ingraham's beautiful island to the level of reality, which brings it down pretty nearly to the level of the sea. Grande Terre is about six miles in

length by about one to three in width, lying east and west. It is low, most of it being nothing but marsh. The greatest natural elevation on the island does not probably exceed five feet--counting from the high water mark. Besides the fort now being erected there by the U. S. Government, the island contains a sugar plantation, which belongs to the Forstalls, of New Orleans, and produces from three to four hundred hogsheads of sugar a year. Fuel for the place is procured from the immense quantity of driftwood that has been heaped upon the southern shore of the island. This wood all comes from the Mississippi, and is blown in by the southerly winds which prevail there almost without intermission.

Fort Livingston is a second or third class work, made of brick and concrete of shells, sand and lime. It is about half completed.--There are some thirty hands employed on the work. When finished it will be handsome, and, in a position so peculiar, it will be impregnable.

Lying as Grande Terre does, in the open Gulf, it is never without a breeze, and during the summer months there is always a brisk southern wind sweeping over it. So constant and strong is the wind, that the small trees on the island (there are no large ones) lean with their branches pointed towards the north, looking, even during a calm, as if the wind was still operating against them. Going, as we did, from a quiet, sultry region, we at first found the sea breeze too harsh and boisterous for comfort; but we soon became accustomed to it, and would most willingly have remained there till November. We found no gnats or sand-flies to annoy us; and even the mosquitoes, which are supposed to infest every place in the South, were not very numerous; but for industry, and the length and sharpness of their bills, we will put the Barataria mosquitoes against those of any other portion of the world.

Barataria Bay abounds with fish of every variety to be found in a southern latitude, from the "big scale" down to the minnow. Redfish and spotted trout can be caught in great numbers; and then, there are oysters, crabs, terrapins, and shrimps without end. Shrimps are caught and dried by the fishermen, and sent in barrels to market, where they sell at five and six dollars a barrel. The islands will produce almost every kind of garden vegetable, &c., in abundance; but in no place did we ever taste melons of so delicious a flavor as at Grande Terre. The earliest and by far the best melons to be found in the New Orleans market are received from Barataria.

Few traces of Lafitte's "fort" and quarters are to be found on Grande Terre. A detachment of U.S. troops have occupied the spot where Lafitte lived, since he left the island; and it is difficult to say whether the breastwork (the remains of which are still visible) was the work of the pirate or of

Uncle Sam. Several romantic travellers have, it is true, gathered up fragments of cemenet and small brickbats from the place, which they firmly believe were once pressed by the foot of Lafitte; but we are inclined to believe with Mr. R. [Rigaud], the shrewd and intelligent master-mason and overseer at Fort Livingston, that older and better brickbats than these can be found in other parts of the island, where they have been placed since Lafitte's day.

The splendid surf, rolling in upon the shoals of pure sand, which extend a long distance out from the south side of Grande Terre, affords the finest bathing in the world.

(Submitted by William deMarigny Hyland, New Orleans. Mr. Hyland is an historian and genealogist employed by the St. Bernard Parish Police Jury.)

The **LSG Newsletter** is published quarterly by the Laffite Study Group, P. O. Box 44, Cottage Grove, Minnesota 55016. Robert C. Vogel, editor.
