

# The Laffite Study Group Newsletter

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PAM KEYES  
Editor

## Hellish Bandit Or Gentleman Smuggler ?

If Jean Laffite had been as cruel as some writers have depicted him, the infamous Blackbeard would look like a Sunday School teacher by comparison.

Since the time the Creole privateer first took up the trade of smuggling in 1805, his name has been linked with crime and tales of rape and pillage with little respect to whether or not the stories are true.

As recently as an article in the August, 1981, issue of Friends magazine, Laffite has been promoted as a man who took what he wanted with little regard for others. The article's author, Dale Williams, describes Laffite as "one of the most murderous freebooters of all time" and "one of the most daring, resourceful and evil men who ever lived." Such sensationalistic writing is deplorable. Although not a saint, Laffite was not a devil.

Modern writers need to limit their pennings to facts uncovered by proper research rather than venerating the false images concocted by dime novelists in the 1800s.

According to Alexander Walker, who wrote "Jackson & New Orleans" in 1854,

"It is not improbable that there were not a few (Baratarians) who would 'scuttle a ship' or cut a throat. But such deed cannot be associated with Jean Laffite save in the idle fictions by which the taste of the youth of the country is vitiated and history outraged and perverted. He was more of a patriot than a pirate, he rendered services of immense benefit to his adopted country, and should be held in respect and honor rather than defamed and calumniated."

Let's look at the various descriptions of Laffite in turn and compare them to facts.

Was the "Terror of the Gulf" a killer?

Yes, but only in self-defense and in the interest of justice. In Laffite's time, duels were a popular method for ending quarrels quickly, and the Creole corsair was no stranger to them.

One of the dime novelists' favorite Laffite scenes to embroider is the time the privateer was faced with an uprising led by one of Captain Gambi's men at Grande Terre. Faced by an unruly mob, Laffite shot the leader through the heart with no hesitation. Though the act could be viewed as murder, consider what would have happened had Laffite not acted quickly. The Baratarians chose him as their "bos" for his ability to manage them. If Laffite had not killed the upstart, the others could have taken the reaction as cowardice or weakness on his part.

Despite tales of the "den of inequity" at Galveston Island, a sense of moral justice prevailed. Laffite made certain that everyone knew he would hang any man found molesting a married woman.

When George Brown and a group of his men went on a slave-stealing trip to the home of John Lyons, he was summarily tried by Laffite, found guilty and hung.

There were other hangings, too, at Galveston, and though it may seem like it was a kangaroo court method, it was frontier justice then.

Was Laffite a pirate?

He claimed not, as seen in No. 1612 of the Lamar Papers:

"During this meeting, Laffite conf. on Page 3

# Join The LSG!

Persons interested in old New Orleans, privateering, smuggling and intrigue in addition to the historical wealth of the Battle of New Orleans are encouraged to join the Laffite Study Group.

Founded in 1975 by Robert C. Vogel, the group is devoted to the study of Jean Laffite's role in American history, folklore and literature.

As a member, you will receive the quarterly LSG Newsletter and the irregularly published Life and Times of Jean Laffite, a journal of notes and longer papers.

Dues for the LSG are: \$6 for individuals and institutions; \$20 for sustaining, and \$100 for life memberships. Dues should be sent to John Howells, LSG treasurer, 2570

Kevin Lane, Houston, Texas 77043.

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LSG officers for 1982-83 are:

President: Sir Jack D.L. Holmes,  
Ph.D., O.I.C.

Vice President: Dr. Jane L. de  
Grunmond

Secretary-Treasurer: John Howells

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Articles for the LSG Newsletter are welcomed. Due to space limitations, articles should be no longer than 700 words and should be sent to Pam Keyes, Editor, LSG NEWSLETTER, 320 "I" N.W., Miami, OK 74354.

Longer items, such as papers, etc., may be used in the Life and Times of Jean Laffite. Such items should be sent to Robert C. Vogel, 6971 Homestead Ave. So., Cottage Grove, MN 55016.

## NEWS BRIEFS

According to Robert Vogel, the title of the Laffite session at the Louisiana Historical Association meeting will probably be "Jean Laffite and Contraband Days: Southwestern Louisiana Folklore." Papers will be presented at the Lake Charles meeting at 9:30 a.m. March 6, 1982. Gerard Sellers will be commentator and Bob Coleman will preside.

U.S. Naval History Sources in the United States, a publication of the U.S. Govt. Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402, is available for \$5.50 from the Superintendent of Documents at the aforementioned address.

Mike Jones of the Lake Charles American Press wrote an article concerning the Laffite Journal's authenticity for the paper's August 30, 1981 edition.

An objective presentation of both the pro and con side of the Journal's authenticity was provided by Jones, who quoted, among others, the LSG's Robert Vogel and John Howells.

Also noted in the Lake Charles American Press were two short stories on Laffite treasure which were part of a longer article on buried treasure in Cameron Parish. Geneva Griffith wrote the article.

"Treasure of Golden Ship" concerned the tale of three members of the Trahan family, who claim they each found the ruins of a ship with ribs of gold but were unable to relocate the ruins to retrieve them.

The ship is still supposed to be somewhere in the southwest end of the Sabine Wildlife Reserve.

In the "Treasure of the Grand Chenier" two men discovered a brick construction bearing the form of an "L" while digging post holes for a cemetery fence in 1928. The remains of a skeleton were found nearby but there was no sign of treasure. The citizenry of Grand Chenier were quick to believe that Laffite had buried treasure there and had placed a dead man behind to guard it.

versed freely with Sam Williams and vindicated himself against the charge of piracy, stating that he had only warred against Spain, and that under rightful authority; and that his only offence against law was that of introducing his goods into the country contrary to the custom laws."

In writing of Laffite's exploits for magazines and newspapers, the late Ray Thompson believed the Creole was "more of a soldier of fortune than a killer."

Was Laffite an ill-bred, vindictive man?

Not so, according to Thompson, as seen in his "Land of Lafitte the Pirate":

"Most of the smugglers could neither read nor write. Few of them could talk with ease or poise to Creole plantation owners who were their best customers. They needed a gentleman in their midst - a man who could talk Parisian French or the Baratarians patois with equal proficiency. Lafitte was such a man."

Noted for a somewhat irascible manner, Laffite yet kept himself collected most of the time.

"In his deportment, Laffite was remarkably bland, dignified and social toward equals, though reserved and silent toward inferiors or those under his command," wrote Col. J. S. Thrasher in "Early History of Galveston."

One of Laffite's contemporaries, First Lieutenant James M. McIntosh, wrote the following:

"Laffite was one who, if he had vices also had his virtues, and who possessed a courteous and gentlemanly deportment seldom equalled and not to be surpassed."

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Before he met the Baratarians buccaneer shortly before the Battle of New Orleans, General Andrew Jackson was led by false rumor to believe Laffite and his men were the worst of outlaws, an opinion cultivated by Louisiana Governor William C.C. Claiborne and his revenue agents. Following this lead, Jackson branded the Baratarians and their chieftains as "hellish banditti." However, it wasn't long before Old Hickory realized his mistake. It was upon his recommendation that President James Madison pardoned Laffite and his men for all acts of smuggling, an honor merited by their services against the British at New Orleans.

So you see how important it is for modern writers to refrain from using hackneyed and often incorrect stories about Laffite. Through the years, the French privateer has been much maligned but only occasionally championed.

-----By Pam Keyes, Ed.

### A WILD TIME IN THE OLD TOWN

(The following is an interesting news account taken from the Louisiana Gazette of Sept. 11, 1810. It is a colorful slice of life which happened in the New Orleans of Laffite's time.)

**PROTECTION!** Last night one of the city watch was using very insolent language to a gentleman's family, a Mr. Rochelle was passing, and on hearing such outrageous abuse, he ordered the fellow to be silent and to go away. In place of obeying Mr. R., he turned his abuse upon him. Mr. R., provoked at his insolence, gave him a gentle chastisement and sent him off; soon after Mr. R. having returned to his own house, the same fellow and another of the City Watch, both armed with dirks

and swords, knocked at his door and demanded admittance, threatening him with death - he fastened his doors and armed himself with a sword - they forced open the gate and attacked him - he defended himself against them both, until his neighbors flew to his assistance.

Such a daring, villainous attack, with intent to murder, has never before been made in this city, nor we presume in any other, by men who are employed and paid to guard and protect the citizens. No doubt but the civil magistrate and police officers will adopt proper measures to bring the culprits to exemplary justice.

Had Mr. R. been a weakly small man, in all probability he would have fell by the hands of these assassins.





# A News Flash From 1814



(Taken from Niles' Weekly Register, Oct. 22, 1814)

Copy of a letter from John K. Smith, esquire, to the secretary of the navy, dated New Orleans, Sept. 23, 1814.

Sir: Captain Patterson left this place on the 11th inst. with three barges, and was joined at the Balize by six gun boats and the schooner Carolina, from whence he proceeded against Barrataria. He has been completely successful in breaking up the nest of pirates at that place, and has taken nine vessels, some specie and a quantity of dry goods. The principal (Lafitte) escaped; but the second in command, Dominique, is taken. The number of prisoners taken is not known, nor are any of the particulars. A letter from that place states that Capt. Patterson would leave there on the 20th. He will therefore, no doubt, have the honor of giving you the result by the next mail.

The breaking up of this piratical establishment is of great importance to this country, it is ascertained that vessels clearing out from this port with passengers have been captured and every soul on board murdered; they took indiscriminately vessels of every nation, and the fact was perfectly known at Pensacola. The commanding British officer at that place recently made a

communication in writing to Lafitte, requesting his aid in an attack on New Orleans, which was refused. That correspondence, which is in the hands of Governor Claiborne no doubt has been communicated to the government.

In the gallant defense of Mobile Point the only two 24 pounders were injured and rendered useless-- General Jackson has since made a requisition upon Capt. Patterson for others to replace them, which have in his absence been furnished. I have the honor to be,

J.K. Smith, &c.

Hon. William Jones, secretary of the navy.

## GOOD NEWS

Extract of a letter from Col. Ross, at Grandterre, to Major Reynolds, dated Sept. 19, 1814.

I have just time to say that in addition to taking some of the ring-leaders, we are in possession of all the flotilla except a sch'r that was burnt to the water's edge, that were here, say seven fine sch'rs and felucas, armed and unarmed. We have this moment returned from taking a fine sch'r outside of the island, of 150 tons, armed complete. Captain Henley lay off the bar, and out-manoeuvred her; she ran for us, getting between two fires--signal, a gun from the commodore; another strange sail in sight.



LAFITTE, La. \_ According to an Associated Press report, shrimp fishermen of Lafitte, La., have a custom which is at least a century old. When bad weather threatens, they symbolically slash at it with their knives.

One fisherman claimed

he recently made a black waterspout disappear from Bagou Barataria by making an X with his knife on the spout.

Jules Nuez, owner of a local seafood company, says he has been cutting the weather all his life.

"I picked it up from

my mama who was afraid of them. When she would see a water spout coming, she would tell me to run and get a butcher knife."

The Spring LSG Newsletter  
DEADLINE is MARCH 30.