

# **The Laffite Study Group**

## **Newsletter**

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The Laffite Study Group is a non-profit membership organization for persons interested in Jean Laffite's role in American history, literature and folklore. Membership in the LSG is open to all. Annual dues are \$10.00 for individuals and institutions. Applications for membership should be addressed to: John L. Howells, Secretary-Treasurer, Laffite Study Group, 2570 Kevin Lane, Houston, TX 77043.

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In this issue:

The Laffite Network  
Cassandra Van Pradelles  
Corsairs of Guadeloupe in 1806  
The Case of the 'Dos Hermanos'  
Publications of Interest

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### **THE LAFFITE NETWORK**

LSG members Jack Holmes and Robert Vogel will be participants in a session on "Piracy in Colonial Times" at the Gulf Coast History and Humanities Conference in Mobile, Alabama, on 10 March, 1989. Holmes' paper is entitled, "Point and Counter Point: Piracy, Privateers, and the Spanish Coast Guard in 1821." Vogel's paper is on "Jean Laffite, the Baratarians, and the Historical Geography of Piracy in the Gulf of Mexico." The Gulf Coast Conference is sponsored by the University of South Alabama, the University of West Florida, and Pensacola Junior College, and will run 9-11 March.

An excellent library of historical and genealogical sources is maintained at the Wallisville Heritage Park, Wallisville, Texas. In addition to the library collection, the park has some very interesting archival holdings, scrapbooks, photographs, etc., including many documents translated from the Spanish by the late avocational historian John Clay (1912-1986) and some interesting local items regarding Jean Laffite. The park was established in 1979 for the restoration and preservation of the historic Wallisville townsite and the nearby El Orcoquisac Archaeological District on the Trinity River.

Reminder: 1990 membership renewals are due. Your continued support will be greatly appreciated.

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### LOST AT SEA: CASSANDRA VAN PRADELLES

The following interesting tidbit of Laffite lore was gleaned from the collections of the Wallisville Heritage Park, Wallisville, Texas 77597:

There is a tombstone marking an empty grave in the Sherwood Cemetery in Baltimore, Maryland, bearing the simple inscription: "Cassandra D. Van Pradelles. Lost at sea in 1815. Aged 40 years." Cassandra Deye Owings was born in Baltimore ca. 1775. At the age of 15 she fell in love with a young French army officer, Benedict Francois Van Pradelles, with whom she eloped to Philadelphia, where the couple were married on 29 August 1790. After living in France for several years, the Van Pradelles emigrated to New Orleans, where Capt. Van Pradelles died in 1808. Cassandra's own health was not good, so on her doctor's advice she decided to return to Maryland.

Cassandra booked passage on the ship Corinthian, bound for Baltimore. While awaiting passage, she is said to have told her friends about a dream she had in which the ship she was traveling was captured by the pirate Laffite; in this dream, Cassandra and other other passengers were tied, blindfolded and forced to walk the plank. Many years later, one of Madame Van Pradelles' trunks and some of her valuables were recovered among pirate booty seized by the navy when they captured one of Laffite's pirate strongholds. Successive generations of the family (which resettled in Texas in the 1830's) have insisted that Cassandra and the other passengers on the Corinthian were made to walk the plank by Jean Laffite.

Where do we draw the line between history and legend? The essential elements of the Cassandra story -- beautiful lady captured by pirates and made to walk the plank, the tell-tale jewelry found among the pirates' booty -- are conventional story lines in the rich lore of piracy. And is it merely a coincidence that the earliest published versions of the Cassandra story appeared shortly after publication of Lyle Saxon's bestselling *Lafitte the Pirate*?

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### THE CASE OF THE SCHOONER 'DOS HERMANOS'

by Robert C. Vogel

During its February term in 1817, the United States Supreme Court heard arguments in the matter of the *Dos Hermanos*, a case being appealed from the United States District Court for Louisiana. This case involved the schooner *Dos Hermanos*, which was seized by the United States Navy on 18 October 1814 and brought to New Orleans as a prize. The schooner, which had been ostensibly

bound from Jamaica to Pensacola with a cargo of dry goods, was in fact en route to New Orleans when captured by an armed boat under the command of Purser Thomas Shields. When prize proceedings were instituted, a proprietary interest in the cargo of the libelled schooner was claimed by John F. Miller on behalf of Basil Green, a merchant of Cartagena.

In testimony before the district court, it was learned that Green was a native of Maryland who had resided in Baltimore before going abroad in 1809. In 1811, he located at Cartagena (in what is now Colombia). After fitting out a schooner with a Cartagena letter-of-marque, Green journeyed to New Orleans in the spring of 1813 in an attempt to sell shares in the privateer, which ended up as the American letter-of-marque Hornet. Soon afterwards, there was a mutiny aboard the Hornet and the unlucky Mr. Green ended up back in Cartagena, where he sold the Hornet for \$11,636. The other owners wanted their money back; one of them, John F. Miller of New Orleans, traveled to Cartagena to collect the proportions owed the Hornet stockholders. According to Miller, Green consigned his own share to Miller to invest in a cargo to be shipped to West Florida. Miller then went to Jamaica, where he chartered the schooner Dos Hermanos, Captain Delgado master and owner, for a round-trip voyage from Kingston to Pensacola. To preserve the schooner's cargo against seizure, Miller drew up papers consigning the goods to a certain Don Juan Lesado in Pensacola.

The Dos Hermanos sailed from Kingston on or about 13 September 1814, with Miller on board. In his affidavit, Miller claimed that currents drove the schooner off course (all the way to Galveston Bay, he said), and the destination had to be changed from Pensacola to the Bayou St. John, near New Orleans. Miller also asserted that while the schooner was laying at the Petit Cocquilles, he removed all of the papers respecting the cargo, so that when the navy boarded the Dos Hermanos her cargo was undocumented.

In their ruling affirming the lower court decision, the justices were struck by the "total absence of all documentary proof to establish the claim of Mr. Green," and questioned whether the "colourable documents" produced by Mr. Miller were not in fact part of a disguise to elude American, as well as British or Spanish capture. The testimony of the schooner's crew also failed to support Green's claim: Delgado and his mate said they believed Miller to have been the real owner of the cargo. Miller's explanations about the disposition of the proceeds of the Hornet sale were also unsupported by corroborative documents or facts asserted upon independent testimony. Finally, the court noted that the voyage of the Dos Hermanos was illegal, and it appeared to them that Miller had lied about the value of the cargo as well as its ownership. "Mr. Miller himself certainly stands in a predicament which does not lend additional credit to his assertions."

The foregoing is based upon Reports of Cases Argued and Adjudged in the Supreme Court of the United States, Volume II, by Henry Wheaton (New York, 1817), pages 76-99.

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### PUBLICATIONS OF INTEREST

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750, by Marcus Rediker. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Cartographic Sources in the Rosenberg Library, ed. by Henry G. Talliaferro and Jane A. Kenamore. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1988.

Manuscript Sources in the Rosenberg Library: A Selective Guide, ed. by Jane A. Kenamore and Michael E. Wilson. College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1983.

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The Laffite Study Group Newsletter is published quarterly by the Laffite Study Group, P.O. Box 44, Cottage Grove, MN 55016, as a service to its membership. Opinions expressed in signed articles are those of the writers and not necessarily those of the LSG or its board of directors. We encourage readers to submit articles, reviews and information for publication in the newsletter.

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