

# THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JEAN LAFFITE

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## JEAN LAFFITE, BUCCANEER, HAD MOST COLORFUL CAREER by J. O. Dyer, M.D.

(Editor's Note - Dr. Dyer practiced medicine in Galveston during the mid to late 1800's and during his lifetime collected much data and many documents on the life of the buccaneer. He treated former Laffite followers without charge in exchange for information about Laffite. After his death his Laffite collection was given to the Rosenberg Library in Galveston, but much was destroyed during the 1900 hurricane. It was from these sources he wrote the following which survived the 1900 storm and was printed in the Galveston Daily News, September 19, 1926.)

Jean Laffite, gentleman buccaneer, cultured, severe and respected, swept Spanish commerce from the Gulf of Mexico, not only because piracy was profitable, but rather because revenge was sweet. Thrown into a prison, his marriage voided and his wife given to a Spanish grandee, then her suicide - it was just these that caused Jean Laffite's cruisers to sail the blue waters of the gulf in successful search of Spanish treasure. His blue pennant flung to the breeze at topmast served well to stay the progress of laden vessels from across the ocean from Mexico.

The buccaneer was born during 1783 in the province of Hautes Pyrenees, France, to noble parents. His father and mother were guillotined during the French Revolution. When Jean was 17 years old he emigrated with Pierre to the island of Martinique, a West Indian possession. For a year or more he lived on a sugar plantation. Jean and Pierre then emigrated to New Orleans about 1803 where they found smuggling very profitable.

Pierre Laffite was as ruffianly as Jean was gentle; the former was a gambler, drunkard, cross-eyed and brutal looking, while the latter showed his noble birth and education in face and figure.

Assuming with Pierre, the firm name of Laffite Freres (Laffite Brothers), the younger man's executive ability blossomed forth. His first step was to make slaves more

profitable. Those of fine physique bought at public auction were housed in a large building in the French Quarter in New Orleans. The blacks were taught to become blacksmiths and thus equipped brought double the price of field workers. Business was profitable, but trading in human flesh was revolting to Jean's fiber so he gradually sought other outlets for his energies and found that of thousands of other persons were none too appreciative of Spanish domain. Spanish colonies in South America had rebelled and letters of marque to privateer cruisers were issued. Spanish commerce was the prey and Jean's opportunity was at hand. Privateering was legitimate, being not amenable to maritime laws.

Serving as a fence for the privateersmen, Jean made money and established influence. In two years he purchased twelve cruisers, commanded 2,000 men and fortified a camp known as Barataria on Grand Terre Island, seventy-five miles from New Orleans. In three years he virtually swept Spanish commerce from the Gulf of Mexico, had captured seventy-three vessels and inflicted property losses of several million dollars.

"I fought with General Jackson against the British at New Orleans," said Laffite, "in January 1815 and supplied his army with powder and flints which they would not have been able to secure in time otherwise." "I never permitted unnecessary bloodshed by my men, and all their captures were made under the conditions of maritime laws. Do you suppose the government would have tolerated my headquarters at Barataria for four years if my vessels had committed piracy? On this island (Saint Louis) I signed orders of our admiralty court which brought the execution of four officers who disobeyed orders and committed acts of violence." Such were the utterances to Colonel Graham. In his letters, some of which still exist, Laffite declared that no nation other than Spain suffered at his hands.

There can be but little doubt that Laffite in 1814 asked Commodore Patterson to take over the Baratarian camp which had become somewhat unmanageable owing to the presence of several hundred half-blood or mulatto desperadoes, who came along with the French-Haitian refugees. And Laffite saw to it that this capture was a bloodless affair.

Morin de la Porta of New Orleans conceived the idea of forming a buccaneer camp at Galveston in imitation of Barataria. In 1815 Morin interested Commodore Aury, a Carthaginian of French birth, to join his enterprise, and he secured a flotilla of small craft. They reached Saint Louis Island on November 1, 1816, and established a camp with an admiralty court. Prize vessels were captured in the Gulf and business assumed a silvery lining.

Commodore Perry joined the camp with some of his men, as did an adventurer, General Xavier Mina from Spain, who arrived in

a brig of war. The three chiefs were not satisfied with their captures of rich prizes, so determined to invade Mexico, but Morin refused the use of his vessels for the enterprize. They were seized by Auxy and early in 1817 the expedition sailed for the Santander River. Morin returned to Louisiana and the Saint Louis camp was left in charge of Pierre Rousselin, treasure and a supercargo.

Several months after the expedition had left for the Santander River other persons, also interested in privateering were looking for a camp on an island off Texas. Pierre Derrieux and Jean Laffite, with brigs of war, and H. Gramalton met in Matagorda Bay, lying south of Saint Louis Island. The three spent several weeks exploring the long chain of islands which stretched parallel with the Texas coast. They had not heard of the departure of the expedition from Saint Louis Island, but the officers there had been told by Karankawa tribesmen of the presence in Matagorda waters of newcomers. A visit made by de la Porta to Laffite resulted in an agreement by which de la Porta, Rousselin, and Morin benefited. The camp at Saint Louis was sold to Laffite and partners for shares in the new buccaneer establishment. Thus Laffite came to what is now Galveston on May 3, 1817 and remained there until May 10, 1820. Spanish ships again saw Laffite's blue pennant at the top mast of vessels in the Gulf. They were seized and cargoes taken.

Colonel Graham (associated in business with the writer's father in New Orleans) visited Laffite in 1818 and told how Laffite with pain and indignation featuring his countenance, spoke of sensational journals, then as now, describing his youth as a career of piracy. In 1814 Laffite refused a large sum of money tendered by officers of the British navy, then stationed off the Louisiana coast, provided he would accept a commission in the British navy, then preparing to attack New Orleans, and assist their invasion of Louisiana with small boats and men.

Laffite was tall and handsome, of dark complexion and a firm mouth. When angered his eyes enlarged and the face terror inspiring; when pleased his left eye closed partly, giving his face a whimsical appearance. He was highly educated, and this writer has a record in which Laffite entertained some visitors with stories of the habits of whales, sharks, and of the rays, all of which were numerous in the waters adjacent to the island.

The Spaniards attacked by buccaneers as a rule surrendered without a fight, such was the terror inspired by the Laffite pennants, thanks to the adverse advertising that Laffite had secured, though not earned. As a rule the cruisers that rendezvoused at Saint Louis Island took away specie and some articles of merchandise from captured prize vessels, allowing the crew to retain their boats and sail to their destination.

There are no records that any of the men of the Laffite cruisers maltreated the crews of captured vessels or even robbed them of their kits. What happened in Matagorda Bay, when mutineers from the St. Louis camp in 1820, attacked and plundered an American schooner is a different story, for Laffite's influence had ceased. Such also was the case when the crew of the Brave, on the way to New Orleans to ship sailors for the flagship Pride, mutinied and committed outrages on the Louisiana coast. These were captured by the revenue cutter Alabama and several of them were executed.

These statements have been verified by contemporary historians relative to the Baratarian Camp, and by this writer from records obtained from members of the Laffite commune, and others who were contemporary with the Saint Louis Island camp. Saint Louis Island was beyond the line of civilization, a camp on a sand key and not a rock girt tale, as stated by Byron, who in his "Corsair" credited Laffite with a single virtue and a thousand sins. His more predominant fault, and he had human frailties, was revenge. His smuggling and contrabanding against the United States, at Barataria were pardoned by President Madison in 1815.

The one woman to whom Laffite was especially considerate, was a beautiful girl, the daughter of Pierre Laffite. While Jean was in Washington trying to obtain a legal hearing to recover his goods seized at Barataria by Commodore Patterson's forces in 1814, the girl was sent to Quebec, Canada to be educated so that she might be spared the humiliation of her descent. Early in 1818 she went to Saint Louis Island and became housekeeper for her benefactor at Maison Rouge, the combined fort, warehouse and residence of executives of Laffite's commune. American naval officers from the brig Enterprise visited the commune and later told of the lavish entertainment afforded, also of the beautiful girl who served the wines. One day one of the visitors made free with the girl. Laffite became enraged and let his visitors know that the girl was not a chattel. She died at the commune, having developed tuberculosis through exposure during the hurricane of 1818.

When Laffite dissolved the Saint Louis Camp, complying with demand of the U.S., he made an equitable division of the remaining ships and merchandise among the men, for after the storm of 1818 the executive was practically dictator of the camp, owning most of the assets. The ships he left behind after departing for Yucatan with a single vessel, probably were the cause of clouding his name, for they were put into commission under selected captains; still flew the Laffite blue pennant and undoubtedly some of them committed piratical acts. But they were not of his making.

### LSC MEMBER RETRACES THE COURSES OF LAFFITE'S CRUISERS

Windle Dyer of New Orleans enjoys sailing and has visited ports frequented by Laffite's buccaneers. He notes that Yucatan is directly south of Barataria and could be reached in five days sailing time. Laffite's cruisers could easily monitor shipping traffic in the Gulf by leaving Barataria and their base in Yucatan on an appointed date, meet mid-way and compare observations of possible prizes. So Laffite's ships possibly routinely patrolled the Gulf.

### CONTEMPORARY DESCRIPTION OF JEAN LAFFITE FOUND IN GALVESTON'S ROSENBERG LIBRARY

In the Galveston City Directory of 1857, Early History of Galveston, page 61, Co 1, W. D. C. Hall who had been an associate of early Texas filibusters Col. Henry Perry and General James Long was interviewed. Col. Hall was still a resident of Galveston in 1857 and related his meetings with Laffite at Laffite's Maison Rouge on Galveston Island in January 1820. "Col. Hall found him one of the most prepossessing men he ever met with, both in personal appearance and address. Laffite was six feet and two inches high, and his figure one of remarkable symmetry. In his deportment he was remarkably bland, dignified and social towards equals, though reserved and silent towards inferiors, or those under his command. He received visitors with an easy air of welcome and profuse hospitality. He wore no uniform, but dressed fashionably, and was remarkably neat in his personal appearance. On board his vessel he usually wore a loose coat with nothing to distinguish him from his subordinates. He spoke English correctly, but with a marked French accent that at once indicated his nativity, though it perhaps imparted additional interest to his conversation. He possessed superior conversational powers, and entertained his guests with the rehearsal of many original and amusing anecdotes. He had a remarkable habit of closing one eye while in conversation, and keeping it closed so much, that many who had but slight acquaintance with him were firmly impressed with the belief that he had the use of but one eye."

At the time Col. Hall first became acquainted with him, Laffite was preparing to leave the Island in accordance with an order brought by the commander of the U. S. Brig Enterprise, Lt. Kearney, to abandon the Island and destroy the town.

### LAFFITE STUDY GROUP MEMBER PURCHASES GALVESTON SITE OF MAISON ROUGE

R. Dale and wife Diane Olson recently purchased the property located at 1417 Water (Avenue A), on Galveston Island, the

site marked by the State of Texas as the location of Laffite's Maison Rouge. They are interested in collecting information about the site. They also own a home in the East End Historic District of Galveston and spend several months a year there. He offers access to any LSG members by prior appointment. Their permanent address is 1500 Sunny Crest Drive, Fullerton, CA 92635.

#### QUESTIONS YOU MAY HAVE PONDERED ABOUT JEAN LAFFITE

How was Laffite able to supply Gen. Andrew Jackson with enough powder to obtain the release of his 80 pirates from the Cabildo jail and a promise of a full pardon for prior crimes?

The contribution Jean Laffite made by furnishing powder and flints, of which Jackson did not have enough to withstand the first British assault, is well known. How he happened to have such a large supply - enough for 30,000 men, as Laffite is quoted as saying, is not generally known.

After a meeting in February 1814 with Col. Ellis P. Bean, Mexican revolutionary representative who was sent to the U. S. to find a gun powder source, Laffite agreed to secure from eastern powder manufacturers, supplemented with his own powder production from facilities hidden in the swamps near Barataria, four thousand dollars worth per month, including flints, and deliver them to rebel ports in Mexico. So he had a large amount of flints and powder on hand awaiting shipment to Mexican revolutionaries.

The interesting events which led to the meeting between Laffite and Col. Bean are covered in the book entitled The Lives of Ellis P. Bean, by Bennet Lay, 1960, University of Texas Printing Division, 227 pages. Col. Bean was nearly as notorious as Laffite. As the book's dust jacket summarizes, "The incredible Colonel Bean was....A Filibuster with Philip Nolan, Prisoner of Spain in Mexico, Chief Powder supplier to General Morelos in the Mexican War of Independence, Envoy of the Mexican patriots to the United States, Associate of Jean Laffite the pirate, Soldier at New Orleans under Andrew Jackson, planter in Stephen F. Austin's Texas, Indian Agent for the Texas Republic, Successful bigamist and Pan American patriot."

#### HOW MANY SHIPS DID LAFFITE CAPTURE?

In the Laffite Journal Collection located at the Sam Houston Research Center and Library, Liberty, Texas, there are other books, bibles, and journals that have not been published. In a journal nearly the same size as the Journal that was

translated and published in 1958, is a list of ships captured, listed by name and nationality, the 73 ships captured by corsairs owned by Jean Laffite, 24 by Captain Dominique You and 13 ships captured by Captain Renato Beluche.

These records are summarized as follows:

Jean Laffite's corsairs - 73 total ships  
37 Spanish, 24 English and 12 other  
Dominique You - 24 total ships  
9 Spanish, 8 English and 7 other  
Renato Beluche - 13 total ships  
6 Spanish, 5 English and 2 other

A sample of these entries is shown below.

Sonisa Antonio. built in Spain. 1811, captured  
by Jean Laffite 1812.

República built in Spain 1810, captured  
by Jean Laffite 1812.

Franklin - built by British 1812, captured  
by Jean Laffite 1816.

El Tigre. built in Portugal 1812, captured  
by Frederic Youx 1812.

La Rosalia. built in Spain 1810, captured  
by Frederic Youx 1813.

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JEAN LAFFITE WAS THE LAST OF THE GREAT BUCCANNERS

"A corsair's name linked to other times  
With one virtue and a thousand crimes."

WHEN DID JEAN LAFFITE ACTUALLY LEAVE GALVESTON?

Most books and encyclopedias give March 21, 1821 as the date of his final departure from Galveston. This erroneous date was probably carried forward by historians from the otherwise excellent Yoakum's History of Texas published in 1855. But in the U. S. Federal Archives, Record Group 45, #108, Office of Naval Records, Captains Letters, Vol. I, #108, for 1820 is Lt. Lawrence Kearney's report of Laffite's departure to Commodore Patterson, dated March 7, 1820, and Patterson's cover letter passing along Kearney's report to the Secretary of the Navy, Smith Thompson, Washington, dated March 17, 1820, reproduced as follows:

U. S. Brig Enterprize  
Off Tortuga, March 7, 1820

Sir:

I was at Galveston on the 27th ult. and found the force there to consist of one Brig, two Small Schooners, and one Felucca and but few men attached to them.

Laffite has burned his house and embarked on board the Brig. There is no doubt of his intention to abandon the place immediately, his works of defense razed to the ground, his vessels are preparing for sea and only wait a favorable time to cross the Bar for which purpose the Brig is lightened, her draft of water being too great.

He assures me he will fully comply with the stipulations of the agreement to abandon the place and will cruise no more in the Bay of Mexico. A few houses are yet standing for their present conveniences which are to be burned as soon as they can get over the Bar. The Felucca, now used as a lighter for the Brig, he will not carry with him, but also burn, together with all useless vessels or boats.

The preparation already made induce a belief that full compliance on his part may be depended upon.

I am very Respectfully Your Obent. Servt.,  
(signed) Lawrence Kearny

Comg. the U. S. Brig Enterprize

Com. Dan. T. Patterson  
Commddg. New Orleans Station

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