

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JEAN LAFFITE

NEWSLETTER OF THE LAFFITE STUDY GROUP • P. O. BOX 44 • COTTAGE GROVE, MINNESOTA 55016

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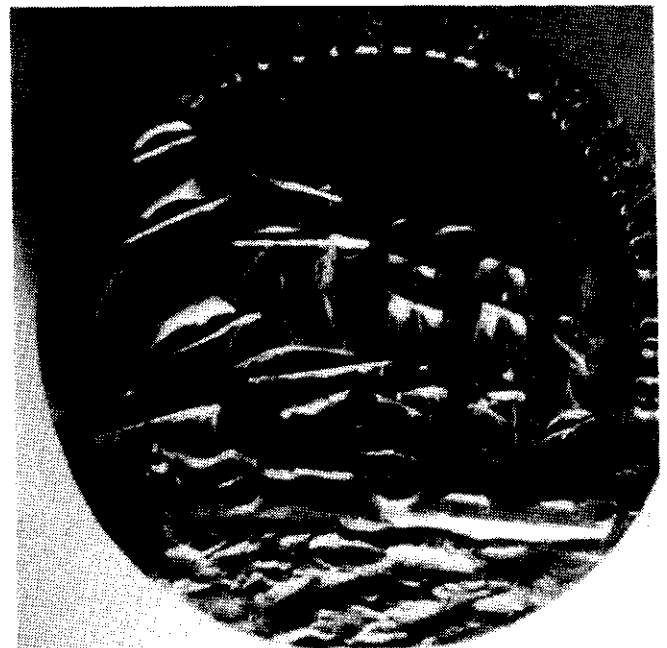
Summer 1989

MEDALLION

The 2-5/8" diameter high relief bronze medallion of "Jean Lafitte Corsaire" shown below can be ordered from the Paris Mint for 160 French francs (about \$27.00 U.S.), post paid. The medallion is catalogue item # 9333 and can be ordered from:

Administration des Monnaies et medailles
11, quai de Conti
Paris 06, France.

Allow thirty days for delivery.



NEWS & NOTES

We came across the following item in Vol. 55 of The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politics, and Literature for the Year 1814 (London, 1815), regarding Lt. Col. Nicholls' intrigues with the Baratarians on the eve of the British invasion of Louisiana:

He also addressed a letter to Mons. La Fete, or Fitte, a Frenchman, the chief of a band of outlaws or pirates, as they are termed in an American paper, who had posted themselves in an island called Barataria, in an arm of the sea running up towards the Mississippi below New Orleans; in which he acquainted La Fete with his arrival, and made him large offers for his assistance. We have no further direct information of the proceedings of Lieutenant-Colonel Nicholls . . .

The same number of The Annual Review printed an excerpt from Lord Byron's epic poem The Corsair -- but not the well-known "He left a corsair's name to other times,/Linked with one virtue and a thousand crimes" couplet traditionally linked to Laffite.

LSG member Pam Keyes has had a letter to the editor published in the May 1989 issue of Texas Monthly regarding an article on Texas forgeries by Gregory Curtis (March 1989). In her letter, Ms. Keyes takes issue with Curtis' opinion that John Laflin, a.k.a. John Andrechyne Lafitte, forged the Journal of Jean Laffite.

John C. Fredriksen has announced a publication agreement with Edwin Mellen Press regarding his forthcoming book, The War of 1812: An Illustrated Encyclopedia. This is intended as a comprehensive book encompassing all aspects of the war -- military, political, diplomatic, Native American, social and economic. Contributors are solicited, but as the editor wishes to promote an international perspective, Canadian and British scholars are especially encouraged to participate. Contact John Fredriksen, 69 Flamingo Dr., Warwick, RI 02886.

The Blue Heron Press of Thibodaux, Louisiana, has released a pre-publication notice for In Search of Evangeline, Birth and Evolution of the Evangeline Myth, a monograph with historical documentation and photos by Carl A. Brasseaux, assistant director of the Center for Louisiana Studies at USL. Copies may be reserved by sending \$10.95 to: Blue Heron Press, 100 W. Fifth Street, Thibodaux, Louisiana 70301.

In a discussion of Louisiana novels, the 1917 edition of the Cambridge History of American Literature includes a short paragraph devoted to a lost novel by Alexandre Barde, Michel Peyroux au l'Histoire des Pirates en Amerique (1848). Part of this story about Laffite's pirates was published in serial form in La Revue Louisianaise but was never completed because the printer lost the manuscript.

LSG couch potatoes will rejoice at the news that the 1958 remake of Cecil B. DeMille's 1938 swashbuckler "The Buccaneer" is now available on videotape from Kartes Video. Long a staple of late-night television, the movie stars Yul Brynner (complete with dark wig) as Jean Laffite and Charles Boyer as Dominique You; slightly more convincing is Charlton Heston in the role of Andrew Jackson; Inger Stevens plays Gov. Claiborne's daughter.

THE EVILS OF PIRACY. 1814

A federal grand jury met in New Orleans during the summer of 1814 to consider a number of cases involving acts of piracy and smuggling committed by the Baratarians. The jury issued the following presentment on 27 July 1814:

The Grand Jury feels it to be a duty they owe to society and to themselves to state that piracy and smuggling so long established and so systematically practiced by many of the inhabitants of this state, particularly in this city and its vicinity; that the Grand Jury finds it difficult legally to establish facts even where the strongest presumptions are offered. The Grand Jury, impressed with a belief that the evils complained of have impaired public and individual credit, impaired the honest fair trader and contributed to drain our country of its (illegible) corrupted the morals of many of our citizens and especially stamps disgrace on our state, deem it a duty incumbent on them by this public presentment again to direct the attention of the public to this serious subject, calling upon all good citizens for their most active exertions to suppress the evil, and by their disapprobation of every individual who may be concerned directly or indirectly in such practices in some measure to remove the stain that has fallen on all classes of society in the minds of the good people of our sister states.

They are compelled also to notice with pain the feeble efforts that have been made by those whose immediate duty it was to correct the evil. The Grand Jury will not arraign the motives of the executives of the state and of the United States, but cannot help expressing their opinion that had the means within the power of said officers been properly used, the whole of the iniquitous plans of piracy and smuggling might long ere this have been suppressed. The Grand Jury highly approbates the conduct of the court and the officers of the court believing that everything has been done by them in the premises consistent with their duty, as far as the state of society would permit.

The above document was taken from the minute books of the United States District Court at New Orleans, which are preserved in the Federal Archives and Records Center, Fort Worth, Texas.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BARATARIANS AT GALVESTON IN 1817

by Beverly Chew

Edited by Robert C. Vogel

[Ed. Note: Beverly Chew (1773-1851) was a Virginian who migrated to Louisiana before the Louisiana Purchase, where he became a partner in the New Orleans mercantile firm of Chew & Relf. After the War of 1812, Chew was appointed collector of customs for the port of New Orleans. According to the Dictionary of Louisiana Biography (vol. I, p. 175), "Chew's hostility to the Lafitte brothers of Barataria became legendary while he was in that post." After leaving government service, Chew remained in New Orleans, where he had a long career in banking. The following pages are excerpted from Chew's report to Secretary of the Treasury William Crawford, dated New Orleans, 1 August 1817, printed in The American State Papers, Foreign Relations, (vol. IV, pp. 134-135). I have reorganized the original text into paragraphs and modernized spellings.]

I deem it my duty to state that the most shameful violations of the slave act, as well as our revenue laws, continue to be practised with impunity by a motly mixture of freebooters and smugglers at Galveston under the Mexican flag, and being, in reality, little else than the re-establishment of the Barataria band, removed somewhat more out of the reach of justice; and, unless the officers of the customs are provided with more effectual means for the enforcement of the laws, the treasury must suffer incalculably.

To give you a more correct idea of this establishment, it will be necessary to be a little prolix, which I beg you will excuse. Galvezton is a small island or sandbar, situate in the Bay of St. Bernard on the coast of Texas, about ninety miles west of the Sabine [River], within the jurisdictional limits claimed by the United States in virtue of the cession of Louisiana to them by France. The establishment was recently made there by a Commodore [Louis] Aury, with a few small schooners from Aux Cayes, manned in a great measure with refugees from Barataria and mulattoes. This establishment was reinforced by a few more men from different points of the coast of Louisiana, the most efficient part of them being principally mariners (Frenchmen or Italians) who have been hanging loose upon society in and about New Orleans, in greater or smaller numbers, ever since the breaking up of the establishment at Barataria. Colonel [Henry] Perry commanded one party of about eighty or ninety men of this community, who had been enlisted principally as soldiers within our jurisdiction; and Mr. [Jose Manuel de] Herarra, coming with a few followers from New Orleans, brought up the rear . . . [Herrera] then announced the establishment to the world by a proclamation, attested by a Frenchman by the name of Morin, very recently a bankrupt auctioneer in New Orleans, as Secretary of State.

From this new station, fed and drawing all its resources from New Orleans, and keeping up a regular intelligence through a variety of channels with their friends here, an active system of plunder was commenced on the high seas, chiefly of Spanish property, but often without much concern as to the national character, particularly when money was in question. The captures made by their numerous cruisers (many owned by citizens of the United States) were condemned by a pretended court of admiralty there as prizes, and the cargoes introduced into this State, principally in a clandestine manner. The vessels thus condemned have generally come here under new names and with the Mexican flag. Some of them have been detained by the United States naval force for hovering in our waters and others have been libelled for restitution by the Spanish consul, in behalf of the original owners. And though several trials have come on before the honorable United States District Court for the District of Louisiana, and [the] claimants have never been able to produce proof of the Government of Galveston having ever been authorized by the Mexican republic, restitution has been decreed in several instances.

There is no evidence of the establishment having been made or sanctioned by, or connected with, a Mexican republic, if one be now existing; and the presumption of such an actual establishment under such an authority is strongly repelled by the illegal and piratical character of thje establishment, and its ambulatory nature. It is not only of very recent origin, but is clothed with no character of permanency; for it was abandoned about the 5th of April, and transferred to Matagorda, leaving [at] Galveston only an advice boat to advertise such privateers and prizes which might arrive there of the spot on which they had fixed their new residence. Some days after the abandonment of Galveston [by Aury], several privateers arrived there, and among the rest the General Artigas, commanded by one G. Champlin, of New York, with two schooners, her prizes, the Patronila, with one hundred and seventy-four slaves, and the Enrequita, with one hundred and thirteen slaves; and also a Spanish and a Portuguese vessel, and the American schooner Evening Post, of New York, Calvin Williams, master, prizes to . . . Captain Maurice Nicholas Jolly.

Among the most conspicuous characters who happened to be then at Galveston were many of the notorious offenders against our laws who had so lately been indulged with a remission of the punishment, who, so far from gratefully availing themselves of the lenity of the Government to return to or commence an orderly and honest life, seem to have regarded its indulgence almost as an encouragement to a renewal of their offences. You will readily perceive I allude to the Baratarians, among whom the Laffites may be classed foremost and most actively engaged in the Galveston trade, and [who are] owners of several cruisers under the Mexican flag. Many of our citizens are equally guilty, and are universally known to be owners of the same kind of vessels. A number of these characters being at Galveston after the

abandonment, readily saw the advantages that would result in the re-establishment of a government at that place, its situation so immediately in the vicinity of our settlements being much preferable to Matagorda; their views being entirely confined to introducing their captures into this State.

Accordingly, a meeting was called on the 15th of April, and it was resolved to re-establish the Government . . . And thus, without even the semblance of authority from the Mexican republic, they immediately proceeded to condemn vessels and cargoes as good prizes and to introduce them into this port; and, among the rest, the cargo of the Evening Post. It was some time before this was known here, great pains having been taken to keep it secret. Since it has been known, I have felt it my duty to report all vessels and cargoes which have arrived here from Galveston to the district attorney, who has had them arrested under the Spanish treaty. But, owing to the unfortunate absence of the judge, no decision can be had thereon. These steps of the officers of the port have irritated the Baratarian gentlemen and their connections to a high degree and representations filled with falsehoods will probably [be] made against them [i.e., the federal officers], particularly on the score of enmity to the patriotic cause. As well might a man be accused of being an enemy of personal liberty who arrests and confines a robber, as that the officers of the port of New Orleans should be accused of being unfriendly to the revolution in the Spanish provinces because they attempted to prevent a lawless establishment at Galveston from violating the laws.

The prizes made by the privateers under the Mexican flag . . . [contain] a very large amount of merchandise, such as jewelry, laces, silks, linens, britannias, muslins, seersuckers, calicoes, etc., all of which are repacked in small bales, of convenient size for transportation on mules, and the greatest part introduced clandestinely. Other articles, such as iron, nails, tallow, leather, glass ware, crockery, cordage, beef, etc., are brought here in their prizes. It is stated, and universally believed, that Captain Champlin sold the slaves captured in the Patronila and Enrequita to the Laffites, Sauvinet, and other speculators in this place, who have or will resell [them] to the planters. And the facility offered to smugglers by the innumerable inlets are too obvious, on a view of the map, to doubt; but they either are or will be all introduced into this State, without the possibility of the officers of the revenue being able to prevent or punish them; more especially as the great portion of the population are disposed to countenance them in violating our laws.

A few days ago, information having been given that one of our citizens had gone to [Galveston] with a very considerable sum in specie to purchase slaves for himself and two other planters, I determined to make an effort to arrest him on his return, and immediately purchased a fine boat on account of the Government (which had been lately captured by a party I had sent on Lake

Ponchartrain, and condemned for a violation of the slave act) which I have sent under the command of an active, enterprising inspector, with a military guard of twelve men . . . I cannot but hope the Government will see the necessity of giving instructions to the naval force on this station to prevent the re-establishment of Galveston; otherwise the bay [Gulf of Mexico?] will no longer be safe for any flag. Since they have been denied shelter in Port au Prince, they have no other asylum than Galveston.

On the part of these pirates we have to contend with, we behold an extended and organized system of enterprise, of ingenuity, of indefatigability, and of audacity, favored by a variety of local advantages and supported always by force of arms; and, unless they may be met by correspondent species of resistance, the results of the contest are of very simple calculation.

INDIAN TROUBLES

The following is taken from Albert S. Gatschet's "The Karankawa Indians," Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology Papers, I (Harvard University, 1888):

While Galveston island was occupied by the well-known pirate Lafitte, some of his men in 1818 abducted one of the Karankawa women. To revenge this injury, about three hundred of these Indians landed on the sand-bar, near the "Three Trees." When this became known, two hundred of the adventurers, armed with two pieces of artillery, immediately proceeded down the island to meet the Indians, who after a stubborn fight and the loss of about thirty men withdrew to the mainland. After Lafitte had evacuated his position upon that island, Dr. Parnell visited it in 1821 to hunt for treasures supposed to have been buried there by the freebooters. He found some Indians, attacked them and put them to flight. The historian Yoakum believes that it was through these attacks that the Karankawas subsequently became so hostile towards the colonists in the wake of Stephen Austin.

The Karankawa (also spelled Caranchua) Indians historically lived along the Texas coast between Galveston and Corpus Christi bays, where they followed a semi-nomadic, hunting and gathering lifestyle. Because of their fierce resistance to European encroachment on their territory, and because they practiced ritual cannibalism, the Karankawa struck fear into the hearts of successive generations of Texans. They were especially dreaded by shipwrecked sailors. Decimated by warfare and ravaged by European diseases, the surviving remnants of the Karankawa nation fled to Mexico in the 1840's.