

# 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. Life memberships are available for \$200.00. Applications for membership should be addressed to: Secretary-Treasurer, Laffite Study Group, 2570 Kevin Lane, Houston, TX 77043.

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### THE LAFFITE NETWORK

Research and publications are an integral part of the Laffite Study Group's mission. Members of the LSG receive the quarterly **Newsletter**, which is oriented toward general interest. The LSG also maintains a series of occasional papers, **The Life and Times of Jean Laffite**, with articles based on substantive research and primary documents, and reprints of published sources that are out of print or otherwise difficult to obtain. Copies of articles which appeared in the first six installments of the **LTJL** (1975-1982) may be obtained by writing Robert C. Vogel, 6971 Homestead Avenue South, Cottage Grove, MN 55016. Copies will be billed at 15 cents per page, post paid.

The annual meeting of the Louisiana Historical Association will take place at the Best Western Motel, New Iberia, on 10-12 March.

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### JOHN A. LAFFLIN AND THE JOURNAL OF JEAN LAFFITE

by Ray and Sue Thompson  
edited by Robert C. Vogel

The article which appears below (the first of two parts) was assembled from several letters written by the late Ray Thompson and his wife Sue to Robert C. Vogel in the mid-1970's. John

Andrechyne Lafflin, a.k.a., John A. Lafitte, was the owner of a collection of journals and other documents purportedly written by Jean Laffite. Part of this collection was published as the **Journal of Jean Laffite: The Privateer Patriot's Own Story** (New York, 1958). Ray Thompson was a New Orleans journalist and the author of **The Land of Lafitte the Pirate** (New Orleans, 1943).

We would like to tell you what we know about the alleged Journal of Jean Laffite, as we are very familiar with the story of Laffite's supposed burial in Alton, Illinois, and the alleged diary he left. In fact, we know well the man who claimed to be a descendant of Jean Laffite.

We first met him in 1942, while we were researching Laffite, as John Andrechyne Lafflin, a burly retired railroader who said his real name was Jean Laffite. We kept in contact with him for well over twenty years, always hoping that he would present some real proof of his ancestry.

Our first meeting with him was exciting, for if his story was true it would prove once and for all who Laffite was and where he died. We invited him to stay in our home in New Orleans for several weeks. During that time, we introduced him to a number of historian friends. They interrogated him at length but concluded he was a fraud. He claimed to have a "family journal" with him written by Jean Laffite, but would not show it to anyone, saying it "would do you no good, it is written in French." We pointed out that there were many competent translators in New Orleans. The owner of the Lafitte Blacksmith Shop offered to pay for translating any journals or letters he might have. Lafflin refused the offer. During his first stay with us, he appeared to know very little about Jean Laffite. In fact, he seemed more interested in examining records that we had, and was curious about Laffite's "buried treasure."

The one item he presented as evidence at this time was a small bible with an inscription on the flyleaf signed "Jean Lafite." We photostated the bible and inscription -- then compared the signature with known signatures of Jean Laffite. They were quite dissimilar -- worse yet, the inscription appeared to be written with a ballpoint pen! But, being writers, we were hoping Lafflin's story was true, so we suggested he visit the Rosenberg Library and Duke University to see if he could find anything that would corroborate his story. We gave him a list of all Laffite collections we knew about, and invited him to return to for a longer stay the following summer.

The following year, he spent several months with us, during which time we again tried to get him to show us his "original journal," but again without success. This time he was much more glib about Jean Laffite, but his information was data that could be found in any book already written. We intro-

duced him to Lyle Saxon, the author of *Lafitte the Pirate*, and Lyle's opinion was also that the man was a fraud. We took him to Grand Isle to meet the descendants of Laffite's smugglers -- the Landrys, Rigauds, Chignizolas, and Judge Mercedes Adams. They questioned him about things he should have known, if indeed his great-grandfather was Jean Laffite, but elicited nothing new. Their consensus was the same -- he was not the great grandson of Laffite. During this visit he spent much time at the Howard-Tilton Library at Tulane University, and at the Cabildo, where he was finally taken in tow by Stanley Clisby Arthur.

On a third trip to New Orleans, he suggested we collaborate with him on a book based on the "journal and all the documents he had now collected," working from a "rough draft" of his version of Jean Laffite's life. We told him we could not consider it unless we saw the original journal and had it translated. He then went to see Mr. Arthur and before he left told us he was working out an arrangement with Arthur to do a book based on his "diary and documents."

[To be Continued.]

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#### TREASURE TALES

In 1924, the folklorist J. W. Morris collected this treasure tale from John Smith and W. C. Callihan, a couple of old-timers from Liverpool in Brazoria County, Texas. According to Smith and Callihan, Jim Campbell and an "odd character" named Captain Snyder had buried Jean Laffite's treasure near the mouth of Chocolate Bayou. Sometime in the 1850's, a strange ship appeared off the mouth of the bayou, where it hovered about for several days, frequently shifting its anchorage. This aroused the curiosity of young Smith and Callihan, who waited for the stranger to depart, then headed down to the bayou where they discovered signs of recent digging--and a deep hole with the imprint of a chest still visible at the bottom . . .

The Texas historian Walter Prescott Webb recalled the story of the "iron box" in an article published in the *Journal of American Folklore* (1915). One night, a sleeping Steve Pipkins was visited by a "spirit" who instructed him to dig up Laffite's treasure, which was in an iron box buried three feet underground along the bank of the San Antonio River. Trouble was, Pipkins didn't believe in spirits, so he decided not to go looking for the treasure. Finally, his wife nagged him into following the spirit's directions--whereupon, Pipkins found nothing but a freshly dug hole in the ground . . .

RCV

AN AUTHENTIC JEAN LAFFITE LETTER

In the summer of 1918, U.S. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams dispatched secret agent George Graham to interview Jean Laffite at Galveston. Laffite's letter to Graham dated 26 August 1818, reproduced here in facsimile, is one of several preserved in the records of Special Agents, Department of State MSS in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Translation: "Dear Sir: I shall hasten to reply to the letter that you have done me the honor to write me, as soon as you shall have the goodness to inform me concerning the powers [delegated authorities] that you have and who authorizes you to put questions of such nature to me. I have the honor to be, Sir, your very obedient servant. (Signed) Jn Laffite."

*Galveston le 26. aout 1818.*

*Monsieur*

*Je m'empresse de répondre à la  
lettre que vous m'avez fait l'honneur  
de m'écrire, et de vous avoir eu  
la complaisance de me donner connaissance  
des pouvoirs que vous avez, de qui vous  
autorisez à me faire des questions de  
cette nature.*

*J'ai l'honneur d'être*

*Monsieur*

*Votre très obéissant  
serviteur.  
Jn Laffite*

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PIERRE LAFFITE, R.I.P. IN YUCATAN

The following documents are from the Archivo de las Notarias Publicas, Merida, Yucatan, Mexico.

Dzilam, 10 November 1821

Before me, alcalde constitucional of this town, appeared George Schum [sic] with the corpse of Pedro Lafite, who was buried on this day. I beg the alcaldes constitucional to help him reach the capital at the orders of the Captain General.

(Signed) Cristobal Carrillo

I, the priest Jose Gregorio Cervera, curate of this parish of Santa Clara Dzidzantun, province and bishopric of Yucatan, certify that I give faithful and true testimony in every way that on the 10th day of the month of November [there] appeared before me in the town of Dzilam, coming from its port, the dead body of Don Pedro Lafite, carried by an American [un ingles americano], to whom I gave holy burial after having informed the illustrious cabildo of this town of said cadaver, and at the petition of the American conductor and for the ends that may be necessary. I give this today the date of today.

(Signed) Jose Gregorio Cervera

Dzemul, 16 November 1821

I, Don Jose Trinidad Lizama, alcalde constitucional of this town, had presented to me the person of George Donll Borhd Schumph, with an American woman [una inglesa americana], who have let me know that they are going to place themselves at the order of the Captain General, and only the referred to George will go to the capital, the sick American woman remaining in this town. I beg the mayors along his route to give the necessary help to the above mentioned George.

(Signed) Jose Trinidad Lizama

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GENEALOGICAL NOTE: HERMAN E. LAFFITTE (1847-1913)

Herman Eteinne Laffitte was born at Castries on the island of St. Lucia, B.W.I., in 1847, the son of Oscar Laffitte and Estelle de Brettes. While in his teens, Herman left St. Lucia and went to sea, eventually coming ashore at Quebec, where in 1868 he married Demoiselle Georgiana Olscamps, a native of that city. After attending dental school, Laffitte moved his family to the head of Lake Superior, establishing a practice in the port town of Superior, Wisconsin, c. 1870. Superior's first dentist, Laffitte was also a prominent land attorney and a leading figure in society. He and Georgiana were the parents of seven children. Dr. Laffitte died in 1913 and was buried in the little St. Francois Xavier cemetery on the shore of Lake Superior. While

Dr. Laffitte was apparently disinclined to recount many of the details of his early life and family history, tradition has it that he was the grandson of Jean Laffite the pirate -- but of course there are no documents to support this claim.

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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 members to submit articles, reviews and information for publication in the newsletter.