

The Laffite Study Group

Newsletter

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The Laffite Study Group is a non-profit educational organization which aims to promote research in, and the dissemination of knowledge concerning Jean Laffite's role in American history, literature, and folklore. The focus of interest includes the Gulf Coast region and the Western Caribbean in the early 19th century, with emphasis on Louisiana and Texas. The study group publishes this quarterly newsletter and a series of occasional papers entitled the **Life and Times of Jean Laffite**.

The Laffite Study Group invites the participation and support of all who share its interest in Jean Laffite and the lore of Gulf Coast piracy, privateering, and filibustering. Membership is open to all. Annual dues are ten dollars (\$10.00) for individuals and libraries, fifteen dollars (\$15.00) outside of the United States. Applications for membership should be sent to: John L. Howells, Secretary-Treasurer, Laffite Study Group, 2570 Kevin Lane, Houston, Texas 77043.

JEAN LAFITTE NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

The Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve was established by Congress in 1978 to preserve the natural and cultural resources of the Mississippi Delta Region. The Barataria Unit of the JLNHP consists of fresh water bayous, swamps and marshlands, providing a home for majestic live oaks cloaked in Spanish moss, bald cypress trees, muskrat, otter, nutria, song and water birds, snakes, and alligators. Present also are prehistoric shell middens providing evidence of human occupation for the past 2,000 years.

There are hiking and canoe trails throughout the park and fishing is allowed with a state fishing license. Trails can be enjoyed year-round but visitors should be prepared for wet areas and insects, especially in the summer months. Park Rangers are on duty to provide assistance and answer questions.

There are plans to enlarge and improve the park. A facility to present the full sweep of the history and contemporary culture of

the Acadiens (Cajuns) is planned for Eunice, near Lafayette. A planned facility at Thibodaux will have a small boat exhibition, featuring indigenous small craft such as the "Lafitte skiff" and the pirogue.

To reach the park from New Orleans, take the Greater New Orleans Bridge to the West Bank Expressway (Rt. 90). Follow the expressway to Barataria Blvd. (LA 45) and turn left. After 2.8 miles turn left onto LA 3134. Continue for 5.3 miles, turn right at LA 45, and you are in the park. For more information call (504) 689-2002.

THE LAFITTE NETWORK

Dues for the calendar year 1986 are now due. Membership renewals and new member applications received after 1 September 1986 will be applied to 1987. Your continued support of the study group is appreciated by the Board of Directors.

If you paid your dues but did not receive your **Newsletter** please accept our apologies and let us know so we can correct our records. If you have not paid your dues, we would appreciate it if you would do so as soon as possible so we can continue sending you the study group's publications.

Sir Jack D. L. Holmes has accepted the position of scholar-in-residence at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, translating documents relating to the Spanish presence in Mississippi. The project has been funded by the Mississippi Committee for the Humanities.

Vergie Crompton, 9915 Gandy Road, Louisville KY 40272, is seeking information on Robert P. Dockery (Docrey), a native of North Carolina who may have been an associate of Laffite between 1804 and 1822 and captain of the ship **Night Hawk**. According to a diary supposed to have been kept by Dockery (Crompton's great-great-great grandfather), the Laffite brothers ran afoul of the government as early as 1807, and were established at Corpus Christi in 1822-26.

Fred Stielow's article, "Francophones and Americanization on a Gulf Coast Island," appeared in the Spring 1986 number of **Louisiana History**. Stielow has been a contributor to the **Life and Times of Jean Laffite** and is presently on the faculty of the University of Maryland.

Russell M. Magnaghi, who teaches American history at Northern Michigan University in Marquette, devotes three paragraphs to the Baratarians Vincent Gambi and "Nez Coupe" Chighizola in his excellent essay, "Louisiana's Italian Immigrants Prior to 1870," published in **Louisiana History** 27 (Winter 1986).

THOMAS JEFFERSON BEALE AND HIS TREASURE

For more than 130 years, treasure hunters have been probing the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Roanoke, Virginia, seeking the fortune in gold, silver, and jewels supposedly hidden there in 1819 by Thomas Jefferson Beale.

Thomas Jefferson Beale was a Virginia adventurer who came west about the year 1817, fleeing the consequences of his having killed a fellow Virginian in a duel, said to have been fought over a woman. By all accounts, this Beale had a lot in common with Jean Laffite. His origins and the circumstances surrounding his eventual demise are the subject of heated debate among Beale Treasure buffs. He was described as tall, dark and handsome, a "model of manly beauty, favored by ladies and envied by men." Sources differ in their assessment of his moral character: like Jean Laffite, he was either a gentleman rover or a brigand. The leader of a band of adventurers, Beale "discovered" a gold mine somewhere in the Spanish Dominions north of Santa Fe. The treasure was secretly transported back to Virginia (some say by way of New Orleans) and buried in a stone vault somewhere in Bedford County.

Beale described the gold mine and the hiding of the treasure trove in documents which he placed in a strongbox and left in the safekeeping of the innkeeper at the Washington Hotel in Lynchburg, Virginia. Several months later, Beale wrote to the innkeeper from Saint Louis and declared that the letters were in code and "unintelligible without the aid of a key." The key was held by another friend of Beale's, who had been instructed not to deliver it to the man in Lynchburg until ten years had passed.

In 1845, 23 years after received Beale's strongbox, the innkeeper broke the lock and extracted three ciphers. Cipher Number 1 described the exact location of the treasure trove. Cipher Number 2 was an inventory of the vault's contents. Cipher Number 3 listed the names of Beale's 1817-1819 expedition. Unable to decipher the documents, the innkeeper waited 17 years and then turned them over to one James Ward, who eventually managed to break Cipher Number 2 (the key was based on the text of the Declaration of Independence). Ward published the Beale Papers in 1885 and touched off a century-long scramble by code-breakers and gold-seekers.

In the mid-1960's the Beale Cypher Association was formed to unite avocational treasure hunters with cryptanalysts in a serious effort to solve the Beale riddle. Twenty years later, they have still found found the key to the critical Cipher Number 1.

Does the Beale Treasure really exist? Computers have proved the Beale Ciphers authentic, but have been unable to crack the code. Many believe it is a hoax -- and some have pointed fingers in the direction of Edgar Allen Poe, who attended the University of Virginia briefly in the 1820's and had something of a special

talent for cryptography. As might be expected, no one has yet found any conclusive evidence to prove that Thomas Jefferson Beale was anywhere near Santa Fe in 1817, or that he had any connection with Pierre or Jean Laffite.

(Sources: **Gold in the Blue Ridge**, by P. B. and Walter Dean Innis (Washington-New York, 1973); Ruth Daniloff's article in **The Smithsonian** (April 1981); additional information provided by members of the Beale Cipher Association.)

The LSG Newsletter is published quarterly by the Laffite Study Group, P. O. Box 44, Cottage Grove, Minnesota 55016. Robert C. Vogel, editor.
