

The Laffite Study Group Newsletter

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NEW LAFFITE BIOGRAPHY NEEDED

by Pam Keyes

Since Jean Laffite was such a colorful historic character, it may well seem odd that no one has written a new biography of him in more than thirty years.

The best Laffite biographies are both flawed in their own ways: Lyle Saxon's **Lafitte the Pirate** (New Orleans: Robert L. Crager & Co., 1930) and Stanley Clisby Arthur's **Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover** (New Orleans: Harmanson, 1952). The former gives only cursory notice of the Laffite brothers' Galveston days and the latter, though excellent for its use of U.S. District Court documentation, is hampered by a lack of thorough research on the John A. Laffite papers. Other than Jane Lucas DeGrummond's excellent account of the Laffites' part in the Battle of New Orleans in **The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans** (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1961) and of their association with the subject of **Renato Beluche: Smuggler, Privateer, and Patriot** (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1983), there has been no definitive Laffite biography containing new information since 1952. What is the reason for this void? On reflection, there may be several reasons.

First, primary source material on Jean Laffite is scattered in libraries and archives across the United States and in Latin America, the Caribbean, and Spain.

Second, there is uncertainty among historians as to whether or not any part of the John A. Laffite collection, including the "Journal of Jean Laffite," is genuine.

Third, the blending of folklore into historical accounts has so muddled and exaggerated the record it is difficult to sift the "wheat from the chaff." There are also gaps in the Laffite history which no researcher has been able to fill, such as the date and place of the Laffite brothers' birth.

Finally, the Laffite biographer is faced with problems surrounding access to material protected under copyright and use of certain unpublished documents and manuscripts.

It would take a dedicated researcher to compile and synthesize all of the available material on Jean Laffite. It is hoped that there is someone "out there" who has started on the task so that we may be able to someday have a complete and

reliable biography of Jean Laffite in one volume, rather than having to rely on hundreds of books and articles.

THE LAFFITE NETWORK
Compiled by Robert C. Vogel

Not long ago, I was researching the Laffite brothers' activities in and around the Yucatan peninsula during the early 1820's and in the course of my reading came across several references to a mysterious American woman identified as Lucille or Lucy Allen. She is reported to have been Jean Laffite's wife or concubine. John Lloyd Stephens, the American explorer who visited Yucatan in the 1840's, encountered the "senora del Norte from Mobile" at Silan; a century later, journalists interviewed alleged descendants of Laffite's at Dzilam who told them the story about Lucy Allen and Jean Laffite. Even the suspect "Journal of Jean Laffite" contains an off-hand reference to Lucy Allen of Mobile as a chum of Denise Laffite. I would be interested in knowing more about the Allens of Mobile and primary sources relating to the Laffites' Yucatan days.

A request for archaeological information:

Gerard Sellers of Abbeville, La., is seeking assistance in developing a research strategy for a study of the archaeological sites of coastal Vermilion Parish. Gerard, the prime mover behind the acclaimed **Islands of the Marsh** exhibition on Chenier culture history, recently completed a series of mini-documentaries on Southwestern Louisiana for public television. He has compiled local histories for Pecan Island, Chenier au Tigre, and other locales associated with the privateersmen and filibusters of the Laffite era. If you have any information, specifically field reports, site maps, descriptions of coastal mounds and artifacts, drop Gerard a line at 505 George Street, Abbeville, La. 70510.

For your library:

Grand Isle on the Gulf: An Early History (Metairie, La.:

Jefferson Parish Historical Commission, 1979), by Sally Kittredge Evans, Frederick Stielow, and Betsy Swanson. This is a well researched and nicely illustrated little book, a fine contribution to the literature of the Barataria Bay region. Some of you will no doubt recall photojournalist Swanson's splendid **Historic Jefferson Parish** (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co., 1975) and her recent work for the Jean Lafitte National Historic Park. Readers of **LTJL** know Stielow from his contributions to the Laffite Study Group publication.

"TREASURE TROVE"
CLASSIC LAFFITE LORE

[Editor's note. The article reprinted here originally appeared on page five of **Flake's Daily Bulletin**, published at Galveston on Sunday, 5 November, 1871. The correspondent's name is lost to history.]

In this broad land we question if there is a single man who would openly endorse piracy, yet since the disappearance of the pirate Lafitte from the Gulf, there have been more or less men eagerly engaged in the search for his ill-gotten gains supposed to be hidden somewhere on this Gulf coast. Periodically for the last thirty years the public mind has been excited by statements that a clue has been found to this buried wealth, and from time to time persons have been found credulous enough to expend thousands of dollars in the prosecution of a search based upon these statements. During the last week we have been placed in possession of facts which seems [sic] to be so plain and positive as to leave no doubt that the secret hiding place for the spoils of this noted pirate of the Gulf has at last been discovered.

Some time ago a gentleman of this city purchased an old house at the west end of the island. About the 1st of last September his children while playing 'hide and go seek' in the garret found an old rusty tin box, which, with childish curiosity, they tried to look into. Being unable to open it they carried it to their father, who in breaking the lock found a number of old musty papers.

Among these papers was a letter written in Spanish, dated at New Orleans on the 28th of March, 1820, enclosing two other letters, the ink with which they were written had become so faint, however, as to make both the signature and the place from which they were written illegible. The letter of the 28th was signed Pedro de Quinla, and addressed to Lieutenant Pierre,

proposing for him to get the surviving members of Lafitte's command together and refit for another expedition; an appointment was made to meet at the mouth of the bayou DeLarge [sic], and if it was found impractical to re-organize, they would then proceed to the place where the treasures of the former expeditions had been buried, and divide the spoils.

The gentleman paid no attention to the matter until about the 15th of last month, when, in course of conversation with one of the oldest citizens on the island, he mentioned the circumstance, and from him learned that some years ago there was a man on this island whose name was Pierre, and who claimed to be a brother and Lieutenant of Lafftte. He once more got out the old tin box, and with a trusted friend they went over the papers together. They found not only the letters alluded to, but a complete chart of the Gulf coast, and an accurate description of a small island. From the particularity with which the approaches to it were described, and the locality of certain trees upon it accurately designated, and from other papers referring to it, which we were not permitted to see, they at once concluded that the treasures of Lafitte were buried there.

Keeping the matter as secret as possible, they fitted out a boat and on the night of the 26th last month left here to prosecute the search. Day before yesterday one of the gentlemen returned for more tools and provisions. He is wild with excitement, and confident that the wealth of Lafitte will fall into their hands. He brings with him several doubloons and a small old fashioned diamond cross set in silver. These he reports having found in the remains of an old chest which they dug up. The chest had rotted and its contents were scattered about in the sand. They also found a ship's compass and a lot of old tools. This, he tells us, exactly agrees with one of the papers in their possession, and that they have not yet touched the spot where the bulk of the treasure is described as hid, but as soon as he returns with the proper tools they will at once proceed to dig it up. He left here last night and expects to return in three or four days; until then we are not at liberty to make public anything more than we have already given. We are also promised a big diamond ring if for the present we do not reveal the names of the parties concerned.

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