

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

Congratulations to LSG member Sylvie-Beatrice Robin on her marriage to M. Francois Feuillie in Paris on 12 March.

Reminder: 1988 membership renewals are due. If you have not paid your dues, we would appreciate it if you would do so as soon as possible.

M. Ann Belkov is the new superintendent of the Jean Lafitte National Historical Park, replacing William Isenogle, who has retired from the National Park Service.

On 15 April 1988 more than 300 friends and former students gathered in Minneapolis to roast Mitchell V. Charnley on the occasion of his 90th birthday. Charnley, author of *Jean Lafitte, Gentleman Rover*, published in 1934, taught journalism at the University of Minnesota for nearly 40 years; some of his better-known students include Harry Reasoner, Eric Sevareid, Garrison Kelllor, Gerl Joseph and Max Shulman.

John Howells of Houston writes that the letter from Jean Laffite to George Graham reproduced in the Spring 1988 issue of the LSG Newsletter was also printed in *General George Mason Graham* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co., 1947). The handwriting also matches that of the 1819 "Le Brave" document and other Jean Laffite MSS in the Lamar Papers.

JOHN A. LAFFLIN AND THE JOURNAL OF JEAN LAFFITE

by Ray and Sue Thompson
edited by Robert C. Vogel

(continued from Spring 1988)

In 1952, Stanley C. Arthur published *Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover* (Harmonson), based on "family records," and Madeline Kent wrote *The Corsair* (Doubleday), said to be based on the diary of Jean Laffite. We contacted Doubleday, who were said to have bought the diary. They reported they had not bought any such diary, had never seen any such diary and if such existed Madeline Kent must have it or at least have seen it. Madeline Kent, when we contacted her, refused to comment on the matter. We told Lafflin we questioned much of the supposition in Arthur's book and believed the Kent book to be entirely fictitious. His reply was "all will be answered in my book." And here is what he wrote us about Arthur's and Kent's books:

...the book by Stanley C. Arthur 'Jean Laffite Gentleman Rover' is a book of facts released by me with only a few letters [emphasis added] to Mr. Arthur. Stanley C. Arthur never had seen the journal book...the *Corsair* book is fiction. I had no control over Madeline Kent who insisted on a biographical novel...adding romantic spice about Laffite.

John Lafflin had told Arthur that Doubleday was having the journals translated by "a scholar." He wrote us that he personally had the journals translated and edited by six different translators in Kansas City and Omaha in 1957. Why six translators in two separate states -- unless he did not want one translator to see all six of those journals? Why wait 15 years to have them translated when many people had offered to have them translated for him in the period from 1942 on?

In 1958 he published *The Journal of Jean Laffite: The Privateer-Patriot's Own Story* (Vantage Press). In our opinion this book is a complete hoax, much of it a condensed version of *The Corsair*. Lafflin undoubtedly had family journals written by someone posing as Jean Laffite, and the Mortimore family records are traceable, but they do not prove the John Lafflin who married Emma Mortimer was Jean Laffite. We believe the great grandson, John Lafflin, excerpted from that family journal those portions he wanted to use -- but inserted throughout his own interpretation of events. Having known John Lafflin so well over the years it is possible to pick out, page by page, what might have come from a family journal and what was inserted by Lafflin.

In 1960, John Lafflin asked us to write a book based on the "diary" which he had published in 1958. We invited him to visit us, bring with him the material, and we would work out some arrangement. By now he was claiming to have visited the archives in Spain, Mexico and Cuba and had much new material to show us.

A neat trick since he neither spoke, wrote nor understood Spanish or French. Even neater considering that he had previously written us that he could not afford to travel about anymore because he no longer had access to "free railroad passes."

We were even more suspicious, knowing that on a second trip to Texas he had spent much time examining Stanley Faye's translations of Laffite letters from the Archivo General de Indias, Papeles de Cuba. But we were still intrigued enough to pursue the matter further. Again we got only verbal stories -- again he was evasive about showing the "original journals"; yet wanting us to write a book based on his 1958 book! We agreed to think it over since we were still hoping he did have a genuine Laffite diary.

In every meeting with him throughout the years, we and many others whom he met tried to impress upon him the importance and value of the genuine Laffite diary -- urged him to deposit it with the Library of Congress, a university or put it in a bank vault for safe keeping. Why, if he was so certain his Laffite diary and documents were genuine, did he continue to carelessly carry them around the country? Why, if they were genuine, was he so fearful of having anyone actually see them?

In January 1962, he again asked us to collaborate on a book. This time we insisted upon seeing the "original Laffite journal" if we were to consider writing a book about his material, especially in view of the fact that we did not think the bible inscription and letters [he had shown us during previous visits] were in Jean Laffite's handwriting. We told him we must see the originals, or at least photostats, so the handwriting could be authenticated.

On 4 February 1962 he answered us from Pacolet, South Carolina, telling us that the Rosenberg Library [Galveston, Texas] did not have one authentic word written by Laffite...that the [George Mason] Graham papers were so much fiction...that Tulane University had no authentic records. "They have nothing," he wrote, "that is authentic." Then he added, "all that is needed is for the journal to be dramatized by a good writer. If interested beg to you you advise." And he advised us that all of his papers including the journals had been burned when his home was destroyed by fire. Checking this out, we learned his home had indeed burned and that subsequently the family bible had been destroyed in another fire, at WSPA-TV in Columbia, where he had left it, together with "alleged photostatic copies" of his records. We do know, following his trail throughout the years, that he photostated many documents and material from various libraries in his continuous travels around the country -- and undoubtedly had collected a lot of photostats of library and university material.

DR. FORMENTO MAKES A HOUSE CALL TO MAISON ROUGE

[Ed. Note. The following article is taken from Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Louisiana, volume I, pages 410-411, published in 1892.]

Dr. Felix Formento Sr. comes from an old and distinguished family of Italy, having been born in Piedmont, in 1790. He graduated in medicine at the University of Turin in 1813, and took part as a surgeon in the last campaign in France, of the Emperor Napoleon I. At the downfall of the Napoleon dynasty he left Europe and came to the United States. Soon after he joined as physician the expedition commanded by General Lallemand, who, at the head of a heroic band of exiled French soldiers like himself, undertook to found the settlement known as "Champ d'Asile," in the then province of Texas, a dependency of Mexico. In 1818, after the dispersion of that unfortunate expedition, Dr. Formento sought a refuge in New Orleans under rather romantic circumstances. While serving in the "Champ d'Asile," at a time when complete demoralization existed among the remaining few disappointed members of that expedition, Dr. Formento was induced by the famous privateer, Lafitte, to visit his headquarters in some island or locality in the vicinity so as to give his professional services to his daughter, to whom he was greatly devoted. She had been affected for some time with some serious disease--typhoid fever it was thought. Dr. Formento remained for several weeks at Lafitte's house and was treated with the consideration of a king or, still better, as the savior of the celebrated privateer's only daughter. After her recovery Lafitte gave the young Doctor many tokens of gratitude, and also provided him with the means of reaching New Orleans, where he arrived during the year 1818. He then began the practice of his profession, in which he very soon acquired a wide-spread reputation, and attained great eminence as a practitioner... [Dr. Formento practiced in New Orleans for many years and died at Pigneral, Italy, on 6 January 1888.]

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