

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JEAN LAFFITE

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WILL THE REAL JEAN LAFFITE PLEASE STAND AND BE RECOGNIZED?

by John L. Howells

A Houston, Texas, couple, Roger and Karin Kwiatkowski, have written a 847-page novel they style as "conjectural history," entitled The Eleventh Commandment, giving a new history of Jean Laffite. They hope to sway historians to their interpretation, but so far even their New York agent has been unable to find a publisher for their research. But they continue to spread their conclusions through television appearances, library presentations, and newspaper articles.

They contend that there never was just one Jean Laffite, but several. That the Galveston Laffite was definately not the New Orleans Laffite and did not know the intimate details of the latter's activities. That the real Jean Laffite was a very old man by the time of the War of 1812. That the original Jean Laffite was a benefactor of New Orleans' Ursuline nuns.

Evidently, their research combines the lives of many individuals in New Orleans from 1730 to 1820 with the name Laffite. The Jean Laffite who was supposedly the benefactor of the Ursulines was the well-known New Orleans merchant Jean (Juan) Lafite, who died around 1780. This fellow was a prominent local figure, of unquestioned character, and an officer in the provincial militia. One of his plantations was on the site of what is now Audubon Park. This plantation was purchased from Lafite by Etienne Bore for a sugar plantation, and produced the first American sugar in 1799. The property was acquired from Bore's heirs by the city for the International Cotton Exposition in 1882 (of which John Baptiste Lafitte was treasurer). Jean or Juan Lafite's son, also named Jean, was a common seaman who died off Guadeloupe in a hurricane in 1818. The rather uneventful lives of these Jean Lafites are well documented.

As one historian said, "History is as interpreted by the historian," but it would help if the historians would at least keep their characters separate and distinct.

JEAN LAFFITE AND SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA
PART I: THE LAKE CHARLES AREA
by Robert C. Vogel

The Calcasieu River, which flows from northern Vernon Parish into the Gulf of Mexico, was a well-known water route used by Indians, explorers, early settlers -- and, according to local tradition, the Calcasieu provided the pirate Jean Laffite and his men with a convenient means of transporting contraband into Louisiana from their base at Galveston. No one has ever found any pirate treasure anywhere in southwest Louisiana, yet legends persist to the effect that a significant portion of the pirate booty was dumped or buried when Laffite was being pursued by the navy or revenue service, and there are many who believe that some of the loot may still be found in the vicinity of Lake Charles. Indeed, Contraband Bayou, which flows through the City of Lake Charles, was named in allusion to the strongly held local belief that Laffite's treasure lies buried somewhere along its banks.

The first European families to settle at Lake Charles, the LeBleus and the Salliers (the city was named for Charles Sallier), are credited with having coexisted with Laffite's pirates. Legend has it that the earthen embankment at the old Barbe House on Shell Beach Drive (on the site of the original Sallier home) was built by Jean Laffite to protect a two-room cabin he had built there for his use. According to one of the old stories collected by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930's, there used to be an old barn on the old LeBleu plantation near Iowa, Louisiana, which had served as a rendezvous for Laffite and his crew. Half a century later, fishermen and trappers still talk of various Laffite pirate schooners scuttled in one or another of the isolated bayous, the outlines of which are no longer visible, although their timbers could be seen just below the surface during living memory.

While there is little documentary confirmation for any of these stories, it is certain that gangs of smugglers and filibusters were active in the Calcasieu district while it was part of the disputed "neutral ground" strip from 1806 until 1819. The region was very sparsely settled, and the myriad of bayous, islands, chenieres, bays, inlets, and marshes facilitated intercoastal smuggling, though it is doubtful that pirate schooners ever put into either the Calcasieu River or Lake Charles. Naval operations directed at interdicting the Galvestoneers was focused on the direct sea approaches to New Orleans (Barataria Bay, the mouths of the Mississippi, the Rigolettes, Bayou St. Jean) and on the larger navigable streams such as the Bayou Teche and Bayou Lafourche. Navy records do not show any cutting-out expeditions against pirates on Lake Charles or the Calcasieu, although the New Orleans squadron did occasionally make prizes of unlucky pirates found loitering around the mouth of the Sabine River. It seems most likely that the bulk of the contraband between Texas and Louisiana -- particularly the traffic in African slaves -- was moved overland, via the Old Spanish Trail.

The Calcasieu district shares with Barataria Bay, Galveston Island, and other well-known Gulf Coast pirate hangouts several important environmental characteristics. These are: its remote location in a (pre-1840) borderland region, its relatively limited habitable land area, vegetation dominated by sea marsh, and barrier islands. Although crowded with shipping today, in their natural state (i.e., pre-Army Corps of Engineers), these were not really seaports at all -- indeed, Barataria Bay, Galveston Bay, and the Calcasieu were barely navigable under optimal conditions in the early 1800's, even by shallow-draught sailing ships.

EXCERPT FROM AN 1816 REVIEW OF LATOUR'S
HISTORICAL MEMOIR OF THE WAR IN WEST FLORIDA AND LOUISIANA

Early in 1816, the Philadelphia publisher John Conrad & Company published A. Lacarriere Latour's Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana in 1814-15--with an Atlas, translated from the French by H. P. Nugent. The following is the concluding paragraph of a lengthy (34 pages) review which appeared in the July 1816 issue of The North American Review (vol. III, no. 8), a Boston literary journal. --

We are pleased with this work of Major Latour: the narrative of the military events is minute and interesting, and the appendix contains an invaluable collection of state papers. Besides the general interest which the work possesses for citizens of the United States at large, it is so peculiarly interesting to the inhabitants of the Southern section, that we presume a second edition will be wanted, and under this impression, we offer a few suggestions to the author. If the translation be carefully revised, some French idioms may be corrected. We should recommend too, the striking out several epithets that occur in the work, in speaking of the enemy, such as "atrocious, ferocious, savage, &c., &c.," [and] the calling rockets a "diabolical invention." This is railing, [and] as a matter of taste, they should be expunged. They are probably not more ferocious and plundering than other nations: it will be better therefore to narrate the facts without qualifying epithets: these will be supplied when necessary by the feelings of the reader. Besides, it is one of the great evils of war, that morality must give way before it: the end must often justify the means: and one side is frequently obliged to resort to the very conduct which had been execrated in the other. For instance, when the British made a disgraceful overture to the Baratarians, General Jackson, in a proclamation, spoke of these latter, considering them to be pirates, as a "hellish banditti;" yet the policy of self-preservation obliged him to employ them when their services were offered, and having rendered very essential ones, he recommended them for that pardon, which was afterwards granted by the President [emphasis added]. In another case, he has given an account of a Tennessee

rifleman, p. 128, who killed in ambush, three sentinels of the enemy: we do not much admire this exertion of Indian dexterity, the exercise of which, in cases like the present, is, we believe, proscribed by the usages of civilized warfare; but we refer to the candour of Major Latour, whether it does not lead to the justification of the action related, in the letter from John Miller, among the very curious intercepted letters, given in the appendix, and which he has stigmatized by printing the passage in Italicks? -- A few corrections of this kind, and the work will be still more honourable to the author, and be a valuable addition to the library of the historian.

Latour's Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana did not go into a second edition. However, it was reprinted in facsimile, with an introduction by Jane Lucas DeGrummond, by the University of Florida Press in 1964.

AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT OF PRIVATEERS IN ACTION
OFF NAUTLA, MEXICO, IN 1814
by Ellis P. Bean

(The following excerpt from the Memoir of Ellis P. Bean was originally published by Henderson Yoakum in his History of Texas (1856), vol. I, pp. 447-448.)

As soon as I could, I went to Huatusco, where there were stationed fifty patriots. Thence I continued my journey to the king's bridge, or Puente del Rey, where I found General Victoria and a man by the name of Ansures. I stayed with them one night, and proceeded to the town of Nautla, on the coast. This place was, at that time, commanded by a negro named Philipia. I found here a large open boat, and thought, by putting a deck on it, I could pass the gulf. After working at it five days, there came in sight a fine schooner, belonging to a company of privateers commanded by Lafitte, and well known by the citizens of the United States. They lived on an island called Barrataria (sic), below New Orleans. This schooner, called "The Tiger," was commanded by Captain Dominic, a Frenchman. I had under me in that place about seventy-five men. We made every signal, but could not get them to send their boat, although they lay to, and showed their colors. At that time they had Carthaginian colors, with which I was not acquainted. Toward evening they sailed southwest, toward Vera Cruz.

The second day after, we saw two sails coming up the coast, very close to the shore. With a good glass, I quickly found that the foremost vessel was the one that had left two days before. When she came opposite to us, she let fly the same colors as before. I had no other craft than large piraguas, and could not think of venturing out, not knowing but she was a royalist.

In this time the other vessel, which I found to be a large brig, came close alongside the schooner, and hoisting English colors, the fight began between them. The schooner spread her sails, and played around the brig, until she had shot away her mainmast. The brig was then ungovernable. The schooner made off out of gunshot, and then lay to again. The brig sent out two large boats to board the schooner. As they came near, she sunk one of them, and the other was badly shattered. The brig having picked up her men from the wreck, the schooner made off toward New Orleans, and the brig returned to a southwest course.

The next morning, the guard on shore reported that there was a small schooner at the mouth of the river, a half-mile from the town. Filling three piraguas with men, I went down to the schooner, and found her drifting toward the shore, but, as there was a calm, making no headway. I went out with two of my boats, and boarded and brought her in. This is the first vessel the Mexican nation ever owned. She had on board some flour and dried beef, which was of great service to us. I had a thought of fitting up this vessel for my voyage, but I found she was only a coaster, and had no compass or quadrant; and if she had, they would have been of no service to me, for I knew nothing of navigation, and had never been twenty miles from shore in my life.

The next morning, a woman came down the coast to sell us some towels and eggs, and informed me that, six miles up, there was a schooner run close to shore; that her deck was covered with men, and she had no masts. Supposing it might be the enemy who had come out from Tampico, and was aiming to land and give me battle, I then set out with my small force to stop them from landing -- knowing that on that open coast they would land with difficulty. When I approached near them, I concealed my men behind the sandbanks, and sent five men unarmed to the shore, that they might not be alarmed. The five men hailed them, and they sent out their boat for them. I then learned that this was "The Tiger;" that she had been so fortunate as to cripple the English brig, and get away from her; that afterward the crew of the schooner had got to drinking, and ran her on the shoal which extends out a great distance from shore. I learned that the Spaniards at Vera Cruz had promised the English captain two thousand dollars if he would capture the schooner; but he got well shattered, and did not take her as he expected. I was happy to find some of my countrymen on board, and learned from them, for the first time, that the United States and England were at war.

I then sent for my small schooner I had found at the mouth of the river, and transported the crew of the Tiger and all on board of her to Nautia. We then prepared my little schooner, and took on as many of the crew of the Tiger as we could carry, and in ten days set sail for New Orleans. In thirteen days more I landed safely on Barrataria (sic) island. I left my small schooner in care of Laritte, and got an old Frenchman to pilot me through

some lakes, and land me on the Mississippi, about nine miles above New Orleans. I got a skiff from a gentleman by the name of Hearn, and a negro to row me down to the city. This was in 1814.

NEWS & NOTES

The annual meeting of the Louisiana Historical Association will be 15-17 March 1990, in Alexandria. As usual, Laffite Study Group members are expected to congregate.

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The Dictionary of Louisiana Biography, published jointly by the Center for Louisiana Studies and the Louisiana Historical Association, is a two-volume reference work featuring 2,500 biographical sketches of historically significant Louisianians. Written by over 350 Louisiana historians and genealogists, these sketches detail the ancestry, vital statistics, and accomplishments of famous Louisiana politicians, physicians, attorneys, military leaders, criminals, actors, and religious leaders. Copies of A Dictionary of Louisiana Biography can be purchased at \$70.00 per set from the Louisiana Historical Association, P. O. Box 40831, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, LA 70504.

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Kevin Ladd, director of the Wallisville Heritage Park, submits the following article, which he transcribed from the Galveston Weekly News of 11 October 1883:

The city editor of the Houston Age has unearthed one of the oldest inhabitants in the person of Mr. John Iiams, who came to Texas from Louisiana, in 1822, not quite early enough to join the colony of Mons. Lafitte on Galveston island, but Mr. I. says:

"I saw Lafitte in Louisiana before I came to Texas. I was a good big boy and remember him very well. He used to go up Bayou Lafourche, on his way to New Orleans for supplies. People think he must have been a desperate looking man; but he looked very pleasant, and was always in a good humor when I saw him. He was about six feet tall and was rather stout. He always had two barges of men with him. He stayed in our neighborhood four days once, fixing ammunition. They had come on their ships to Vermillion bayou. They used to stay two or three weeks on their trips to New Orleans. They would take their barges up the little bayous and hide them while they were gone to the city. They would bring up silks and Irish linens and other fine goods, and would sell them to the neighborhood people very cheap; and that made them popular."

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According to C. H. Chaucheprat (ed.), Routier des Iles Antilles (Paris, 1842), there was a coast guard watch tower at the mouth

of Barataria Bay while Louisiana was a Spanish province (vol. II, p. 81).

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The following interesting book titles were noted during a recent perusal of the on-line catalog of the research libraries of the New York Public Library (CATNYP): Vida de Luis Aury, corsario de Buennos Aires en las luchas por la independencia de Venezuela, Colombia y Centroamerica, by Carlos A. Ferro (Buenos Aires, 1976); Corsaires de la Republique et de l'Empire, by Rene Guillemin (Paris, 1982); Piracy today: robberies and violence at sea since 1980, by Roger Villar (London, 1985).

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The word "filibuster" has a curious etymology. In the early 17th century, French writers came across the English word "freebooter," referring to the pirates then active on the Spanish Main, and rendered it "flibustier." A century later, English writers describing American citizens engaged in fomenting insurrection in Latin America translated the French word back into English as "filibuster."

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Genealogist Mary Smith Fay, in her book War of 1812 Veterans in Texas (New Orleans, 1979), offers biographical data on a number of individuals connected with Jean Laffite, including: Peter Ellis Bean, Aylett V. Buckner, James Campbell, Warren D. C. Hall, and John McHenry. Bean, of course, was the Texas patriot who was transported from Mexico to Louisiana by Dominique You in 1814. Buckner is said to have served in one of the Baratarian companies at the Battle of New Orleans. The Irish-American Campbell was ex-U.S. Navy, commanded a privateer under Laffite, and later settled near Galveston. The adventurous attorney Hall accompanied the abortive Long filibusters and sojourned at Galveston in 1819. McHenry was a seaman on a Galveston corsair and a member of Long's expedition who returned to Texas as a colonist in 1829.

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In his book Last Island (Houma, 1980), James M. Southern states that as late as 1873 there were ex-Baratarian pirates living on Timbalier Island and at other points in southern Terrebonne Parish, including the legendary Vincent Gambi.

The Life and Times of Jean Laffite is published quarterly by the Laffite Study Group. Membership in the LSG is open to all. Annual dues are \$10 for individuals and institutions. Address applications for membership to:

John L. Howells, Secretary-Treasurer
Laffite Study Group
2570 Kevin Lane
Houston, Texas 77043.