



# The Laffite Society Chronicles

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## The Editor's Page

Don C. Marler

Every decent human being is appalled at the destruction and suffering wrought on New Orleans and its environs by hurricane Katrina. All who have followed the New Orleans antics of the Laffites have no doubt had thoughts about the storm's impact on the land, waterways and other historic sites that served as haunts of the corsairs. Had Katrina hit the Gulf coast from New Orleans to Mobile while the British were preparing to invade, their job would have been a cakewalk.

Grand Isle was hit hard by the storm; yet, it will rebuild and survive as will other nearby small communities, wetlands and bayous. New Orleans is another matter. Despite its illustrious and romantic history one can seriously hope that we can, while retaining a sentimental memory of a beloved city, make a rational decision to not restore it as a residential city. The cost and risk in rebuilding would be enormous. In its early 1700 beginnings perhaps the precarious nature of the site was not known. We can no longer plead ignorance. We know it is below sea level and surrounded by a levee system that makes it a large bowl into which flood waters pour upon occasion. This flooding has happened before, but never to the extent that Katrina afforded.

How can we in good conscience rebuild in an area we know will put the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in jeopardy? Children, the elderly, poor and handicapped and many others will be at risk from the moment they begin living in this huge manmade earthen bowl. The memory of Katrina will keep an underlying fear alive and lurking in the shadows of their minds.

Would it not be prudent to, in the name of objective reality, forego such a build-back? Instead of building homes, schools and playgrounds on the

contaminated soil of this historic city why not capitalize on its other strengths--refineries and the port. The enormous amount of concrete and other debris could be used to build a high ground base for the so-called dirty or smokestack industries. Secure port facilities could also be created by raising them to a safe level. And a high and dry road could be constructed to get material, merchandise and workers in and out of this industrial complex. The cost of all this and the cost of relocation of residents would be less than rebuilding and it would be a permanent solution. Rebuilding New Orleans into a residential city is as permanent as the next category IV hurricane.

The laws of "group think" will likely take over and alternative ideas will not find lodging on fertile soil. We will, in the end, likely build back the homes and businesses that have been lost. It is already happening and will continue unless the government calls a halt to it and devises an alternative. One fears there is no appetite for a dialogue on this unpopular subject.

More relevant to the Society is the prevalence of writers among us. In addition to those who have made my job easy by writing numerous articles for *The Chronicles* are those members who have written books published this year. Here are the ones we know about:

Don Peak, *Fire Mission*. A fine book about the exploits of the American Cannoneers in WWII. Don was there.

William C. Davis, *The Pirates Laffite*. Perhaps the best book ever written on the Laffites.

Cheryl Higley (Sawyer), *Siren*. An enchanting Laffite novel.

Don C. Marler, *Reflections on Life in the Swamp*.

*Around thee foes to forge the ready lie,  
And blot life's latest scene with calumny*

## The Journal of Jean Laffite

William C. Davis

[Editor's note: This piece was to have been the last chapter of Davis' book *The Pirates Laffite* but the publisher insisted on cutting it. This omitted chapter may be the one of most interest to those who have struggled with the authenticity of the Journal]

In 1943 a man calling himself John A. Laffite appeared in New Orleans claiming to be the direct great-grandson of Jean Laffite. For several years he contacted Laffite researchers attempting to learn more information about his presumed ancestor. In 1947-1948 "Laffite" revealed the existence of a journal and many other papers supposedly kept by his ancestor, but still apparently he showed them to no one until he allowed Stanley Clisby Arthur access to some of the papers in 1950-1951. He also gave Arthur a little of the content of the Journal, though Arthur stated that he did not have access to the Journal itself, and thus presumably did not actually see it. The descendant did describe the Journal to Arthur, however. He told Arthur that it was written in early 1851 and gave him a physical description that is significant:

They are contained in a series of small books, five by six inches in size, some 380 pages of penned words, all in the French language, beginning: "When I was three years old . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Still no one was allowed to examine the original Journal. Then Mr. Laffite suffered two fires that supposedly destroyed most of his family collection, but by 1966 he seemed to have a lot of it again and was trying to sell it piece by piece, and did dispose of several items that are today in public and private

collections. Even in the 1960s a number of the items that Mr. Laffite brought out were determined to be crude forgeries. In 1969 he found a buyer for the rest of the material, including the Journal. Finally in 1973 outside authorities were allowed to examine the Journal itself. Mr. Laffite, meanwhile, had died in 1970, and even before his death his lifetime of small-time con artistry, mail fraud, a string of aliases, and bizarre behavior were being uncovered. Eventually it was revealed that his actual name was John Matejka, though before changing his name to Laffite he went for years as John Nafsinger, and that he bore no familial or blood relation to the Laffites whatsoever.<sup>2</sup>

From 1973 onward the debate has grown on whether or not the Journal is genuine or a forgery, and on who created it if it is not authentic. Nafsinger himself had one laboratory test performed in the 1950s on an isolated bit of document that may or may not actually have come from the surviving Journal. All this showed was that the paper appeared to be mid-nineteenth century in origin, and possibly as early as 1830, and that the ink looked old as well, though no chemical analyses are known to have been performed, and again we do not know if what Nafsinger sent actually came from the Journal itself. The collection then changed hands again,

and in 1978 was donated to the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center at Liberty, Texas, where it remains today.

The debate on the authenticity of the Journal continues to the present day. One investigator styling himself an "examiner of questioned documents" in 1974 concluded that the handwriting in the Journal bore some characteristics that were "identical" to those in authentic Jean Laffite signatures, however this is far from saying that the Journal itself is authentic.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the stylized nature of signatures makes them of limited value in analyzing other texts. This examiner did not have the authentic examples of Jean Laffite's handwriting that we have now, and which reveal almost no similarity with that in the Journal.

The first task in assessing the nature of the Journal is to address the physical document itself, and most immediately apparent is that the document that we now have bears no resemblance to what Nafsinger described to Stanley Arthur around 1951.<sup>4</sup> Then Nafsinger said it was in several small books that measured five by six inches each. In the surviving Journal, however, those several small volumes have somehow become a single bound volume measuring 7.5 inches in width and 12.5 inches in height. The content is on common laid paper, originally bound in 13-14 32-page gathered and stitched signatures. Inside the boards are marbled end sheets, the front holding a book plate from the R. Dedilver Blank Book Manufactory of 110 Walnut St., Philadelphia. The end boards are worn and show signs of scorching, and the remnant of some original leather covering. The first actual page contains a sticker with a handwritten inscription of presentation to "John Laffite" of Charleston, dated August 23, 1835. It should be noted that this page and the two following do not match the paper in the rest of the volume, nor does it show scorching, glue stains, or other age markings that match with those on the facing page. In short, these pages with the inscription are not original to the book, but have been inserted at a later date.

The actual contents number 260 pages, far fewer than the 380 Nafsinger described to Arthur, and fewer than there should be for that many signatures, thanks to a considerable number of pages being cut out. A singular, and suspect, feature of these missing pages is that they come in clumps, and invariably appear at the conclusion of each of the dated and signed passages of narrative. That presents several possibilities. One is that the narrative was written one passage at a time, and then some time passed during which the author cut out immediately following pages for other purposes before taking up his pen again to continue. Another is that there was already some material in the book, and that it was being converted for another purpose when the Journal writing commenced. Several newspaper clippings dating from the late 1700s to the mid-1800s are still in the book, and it may be that the missing pages had clippings and were taken out. Still that would make it very curious that every Journal entry just happened coincidentally to end before a group of removed pages. It is also possible that the creator took out those pages to use for creating other Laffite documents, though it has not been possible to compare this paper with that of other documents in other depositories that are clearly from the same pen.

Throughout the bulk of the journal the calligraphy appears to be consistent, and the ink to match, suggesting most of it was written over a short period, with the same pen, and the same ink. After 55 pages the density of the ink suddenly becomes darker, and then on page 202 it suddenly shifts to red ink for a few lines, and then back to dark brown. Then it goes back to a reddish color and remains that for the balance of the volume. From time to time newspaper clippings are interspersed throughout, most of them from 1790-1820, and including a few that relate to Amelia Island and Galveston and Aury and Macgregor. Nafsinger also glued onto one page a September 5, 1956, letter from David C. Mearns of the Library of Congress, which states that a sample of paper supposedly taken from

the Journal appeared to be compatible with paper from 1830. Another letter of June 2, 1955, from the Harris Laboratories, states that from an unidentified sample sent to them for analysis, the ink appeared to be more than 75 years old but they had not applied chemical techniques for proof.

One clipping deals with the capture of a pirate named Dubois, its origin unknown. On page 212 appears what looks like a seal, about 3.25 inches in diameter, showing an eagle grasping a snake in its beak, while in its claws it holds lightning bolts and arrows. Around the perimeter appear the letters "No" and "YDS." It has been cut from a larger document, and is incomplete. On page 258 is a very crude pencil sketch labeled "Mathew Laflin Born 1803." On the following page is an advertisement in stencil for Mathew Laflin "makers of gunpowder, flints, fuses for blasting . . ." On the final page, 260, are clippings, including one advertising "Laflins and Smith," gunpowder and fuse makers of St. Louis."

Every entry is signed "Jn Laffite," and in an imitation of Jean Laffite's signature that is not at all convincing. About two dozen unquestionably authentic signatures of Jean Laffite exist on letters and legal documents in public archives, and they are remarkably consistent. He, like his brother Pierre, invariably lifted the pen from the paper after the second "f" in the surname, and then wrote the "ite" in a separate motion inclining upward from the base signature. There are twenty-two "Jn Laffite" signatures in the Journal, including one that is contained in the body of the text, and not one of them shows this distinctive feature. Jean Laffite also dotted the "i" in his name with something like a vertical dash, whereas in the Journal it is a large round dot. Authentic signatures also show a horizontal stroke through the "t" beginning at the left of the double "f's," whereas in the Journal signatures the "t" is crossed by a rubric commencing from the "e." There are other significant features in the letter formation of genuine signatures that do not appear in the Journal signatures. The same erroneous features appear on

documents in other collections that appear to have originated from the same source as the Journal.

The handwriting in the body text of the Journal is clear and legible and in a consistent hand similar to the "secretarial" French used by clerks and other trained professional scribes. As such, it resembles that in many court documents, and has been confused with being by the same hand that wrote some of the *Le Brave* documents, when most probably both were simply written by trained scribes taught the then-standard letter formation. This was a common phenomenon in France, England, Spain, and other countries at the time, though the concept never quite took hold in America. It should be noted that contrary to common misconception, Jean Laffite did not write the *Le Brave* documents. He merely signed one. Indeed, on that document where his name appears in the body text, written by the hand that wrote the rest of the document, the writing of his name differs markedly from the actual signature below. Any comparison of his handwriting in actual letters he did write, such as his October 1814 letter to Livingston, his 1818 and 1819 letters to Graham and Long, or the 1820 letter to Malus in New Orleans, will show radical differences with the *Le Brave* documents and with the Journal and accompanying materials.

On the basis of the calligraphy and the signatures in the Journal, one ought to conclude that they are not the work of Jean Laffite unless his writing underwent dramatic changes and improvement between 1820 and 1845 when the author supposedly commenced the work. Even that unlikely scenario does not explain the presentation of the content. Gene Marshall, translator of the best edition of the work, *The Memoirs of Jean Laffite from Le Journal de Jean Laffite* (N.p., 1999), has concluded from his work with the translation that "high level French proficiency is pervasive" in the Journal and that "the manuscript contains . . . much educated, sophisticated French." That contrasts dramatically with the conclusions of Dr.

Christina Vella of Tulane University and Dr. Harry Redmond, Jr., of New Orleans, who translated the Laffite letters to Livingston and Malus. They found the writer just barely literate, ignorant of much basic grammar, and overchallenged by simple usages like homonyms, a conclusion that applied to Pierre's writing as well.<sup>5</sup> Is it logical to assume that a man who was only rudimentarily proficient in writing his native language in 1820, would two decades later be writing at a "high level" of proficiency, especially when he was living in an English speaking nation, and when after he left Louisiana for good in 1820 the need or even opportunity for writing or speaking French was at best limited? If he later went to college or a tutor to learn French composition, he does not mention it in the *Journal*. Interestingly, he does speak of other education in the *Journal*, saying he received some form of higher education at St. Croix where he studied "psychology," a subject that was not taught anywhere in the 1790s, and which in any case could not have been taught at St. Croix since there were no colleges or universities on the island at that time (p. 46).

There are other measurements that need to be applied to the content of the *Journal*, however, before a definitive conclusion as to its authenticity is reached. Perhaps surprisingly, factual errors should carry the least weight of all. Giving the *Journal* the benefit of the doubt, if it is genuine then it must be evaluated as would any other honest memoir written up to forty years or more after the fact. Memory is enormously capricious, and the aging process, especially if dementia has set in, can lead to the most absurdly false recollections, yet given in all sincerity and with no intent to deceive. Thus by the 1920s veterans of the American Civil War of the 1860s often gave extended and detailed recollections of battles in which they never participated. Even short term memory is subject to error from inattention or personal motives, as courtrooms witness every day. Thus, mere mistakes, even glaring ones, cannot of themselves condemn the *Journal*. Moreover, it is important to bear in mind that

translation from one language to another can introduce errors despite the best efforts and intentions. Some words in French simply have no accurate counterparts in English.

The mistakes in the *Journal* do give added cause for caution, however, because they are so many, and so many are so glaring, seriously compromising the overall reliability of the work even if it were genuine (the citations for the examples that follow are all to Marshall's edition of the *Journal*). For a start, the first dated entry in the *Journal* is August 8, 1845, not "early 1851" as Nafsinger told Arthur. The author has Pierre Laffite sailing the Caribbean in 1801-1805, when documentary evidence places him in France until at least May 1802, and in New Orleans and Baton Rouge 1803-1805 (p. 73). A list of vessels given as containing all those owned and operated by the Laffites includes many with no connection whatever to the brothers, and is in fact simply a list of every privateer mentioned in the books of Lyle Saxon and Harris Gaylord Warren, and the Stanley Faye articles, which appear to be the principal sources for the *Journal*. It even includes a couple of ships like the *Almirante* that were Spanish (p. 80). The list of vessels taken from him at Baratavia includes many that not only were not there in September 1814, but also some that never belonged to the Laffites at all (p. 88). Speaking of Laffite ships, the *Journal* states that Jean got a commission from Cartagena for *Dorada* in 1809 (p. 76). In fact, in 1809 *Dorada* was still securely in the hands of her Spanish owner Francisco Ajuria, and the Laffites would not have her until the fall of 1813. There are similar inaccuracies with *Journal* accounts of other vessels, some of which the Laffites never owned. Then there is the problem of his ship *Jupiter*, which Jean Laffite never had. The *Journal* author claims that she was a steamboat built for him in Charleston about 1817, and that she was "the largest and fastest of my steamships on the sea" and had the "best and most modern machinery" (pp. 122, 124). In fact, there were no ocean-going steamboats until 1819 and the *Savannah*, and there is not a shred

of evidence in all of the District Court case files to indicate that any vessels involved in privateering were steamboats.

In discussing the British offer of 1814, the Journal author continues the myth that Jean was offered 30,000 pounds by the British, its origin being Latour's claim of a \$30,000 reward, a myth repeated in Saxon (p. 82). The Journal author also gets the names of many of the Laffites' genuine associates wrong, as in referring to Guy Champlin as "Jn Champlain" and Julius Amigoni as "Jn Amigone" (p. 78), though he later gets Champlin right. He also claims as subordinates or employees, men who never worked for the Laffites. Again Champlin is an example, and so is Samuel May Williams, who is referred to as being an advisor, when his only connection with the brothers is that he encountered Pierre on the streets of New Orleans on one or two occasions, and was in the East during Jean's 1815-1816 visit (pp. 78, 110). The Williams references come straight from his own recollections as furnished to Mirabeau Lamar and later published in the collected Lamar papers. The author presents lists of his "captains" that include virtually everyone ever connected with filibustering, all of them people whose names appear in the lists of characters in Saxon and in the published district court records as of the 1930s, plus the works of Faye and Warren. Many are preposterous, such as Aury, a man who never admitted himself to be subordinate to anyone, and Manuel García, who replaced Fatio as Spain's agent in New Orleans, was never a sea captain, and dismissed the Laffites as untrustworthy rabble (pp. 78-79).

Chronology is seriously misshapen, as when the author says Pierre Laffite was captured at Barataria in September 1814 with the others there taken, when in fact he was arrested the previous July (p. 88).<sup>6</sup> The Journal completely mistakes the time of the abandonment of Galveston, placing it in March 1821, rather than May 1820, a mistake that also appears in Saxon (pp. 145, 150, 152). Many of the claims made are simply outrageous, as when the author

says that he gave General Jackson 362 cannon and 300,000 flints at New Orleans (pp. 89, 93, 103). In fact, there were not 360 cannon on the continent at that time, and Jackson's own testimony is that he got 7,500 flints from the Laffites. In dealing with the campaign itself, the author asserts that Latour knew nothing of the geography of lowland Louisiana in late 1814, and that as a result General Humbert helped with its mapping (p. 110). Humbert had been in Louisiana less than a year, and as of the fall of 1814 had only passed through the bayou country once at most. As for that battle, the author consistently confuses Jean with what Pierre was doing for Jackson during the campaign. The claim that the author saw a cannon ball fired by Dominique carry away the legs of British General Pakenham and mortally wound him is pure fabrication. Pakenham died from two grapeshot wounds, and lost no limbs (p. 95).

Recollections of affairs after the battle are just as flawed. According to the author, Laffite challenged General Jackson to a duel and almost slapped his face, but Old Hickory refused to accept the challenge (p. 92). No one with even a passing familiarity with the life of Andrew Jackson could believe that he would back down from a challenge or insult such as this. Whatever else one might think of Jackson, the very idea is simply ridiculous. The author claims that immediately after the battle "I had a vast and powerful fleet," this in spite of his own—exaggerated—list a few pages earlier of all the vessels he lost to Patterson's raid. In fact, in early 1815 the Laffites had no known ships, and no base for them to operate from (p. 102). The loss of his ships was part of why Jean Laffite went East that summer, but the Journal author says he departed October 25, 1815. In an example of often remarkably precise recall of inconsequential details amid catastrophic forgetfulness of major events, the author even remembered precisely that it was a Wednesday that he left (p. 105). In another such instance, he gives the precise navigational coordinates down to degrees and minutes for a prize he took forty years earlier, disingenuously



adding that the coordinates are given "as best I remember" (p. 59).

In fact, Jean left New Orleans July 15, 1815. The Journal author's subsequent recollection of reaching Washington November 7 and staying until March 3, 1816, is also accompanied by precise recollection of the days of the week, but gets both dates wrong by months (p. 107). At another sitting, the writer suddenly recalled that Pierre was with him on the trip, in spite of the numerous legal transactions of Pierre's and correspondence of Sedella, Morphy, and Pierre himself, that unquestionably place him in New Orleans (p. 124). The author also recalls that the case for restitution of the property taken from him at Baratania languished from inaction by the Supreme Court in Washington, when in fact no appeal was ever filed from the district court in New Orleans (p. 111).

The Journal author's lack of real familiarity with the era, its individuals, and the issues with which they dealt, often led him to make egregious errors, few examples more glaring than a brief account of a meeting held in 1818-1819—dates are rarely specific except where they don't matter—at which the Laffites and their Spanish employers decide to dismiss from their confidence several people including Francisco Mina—who had already been executed by a Spanish firing squad, Henry Perry—who had been dead for more than a year, Aury—already gone for good to Old Providence—and most intriguing of all, a "General Soto De Marina." There was no such person. Rather, Soto la Marina was one of the Mexican Gulf ports sometimes used by the filibusters (p. 129).

Toward the end, the author has Pierre accompanying Jean to Mugerres, and then living on to March 9, 1844, unaware of the considerable dossier of documents establishing Pierre's death in November 1821 (pp. 152, 154, 160).

There are other examples that reveal the author's glaring ignorance of how privateers worked, nothing more so than his assertions that Laffite's corsairs "won in every battle on the coasts of

Louisiana," and that "my vessels were engaged in several battles on the high seas against English and Spanish war vessels" (pp. 80, 81). Privateers did not fight battles. They had nothing to gain from risking a fight with a warship. They assiduously avoided them, taking on only unarmed merchant vessels. If they ever fired a shot, it was a single one across the bow of a prospective prize, and that ended the matter. One looks in vain in the records for any examples of privateers intentionally engaging warships, or even of armed boarding of a prize against resistance. Yet the Journal author has Laffite attacking and defeating an entire British war fleet in August 1813 (p. 85). Equally outlandish is his statement that at age 18 Jean shared command of a 300-ton privateer with Pierre (p. 57). Captains did not share joint command of ships. Moreover, most privateers were 30- or 40-ton displacement vessels. Even *La Diligente*, possibly the largest vessel the Laffites ever owned, only ran 136 tons. A 300-ton vessel simply drew too much water and was too slow to operate in the seas plied by the corsairs.

It is worthy of note that the Journal author attempted to lend verisimilitude to the work by references linking it to established primary documents, as when he stated that Pierre was for a time "an American official" around 1806 (pp. 74, 75). The reference is derived from a misinterpretation of Pierre's one-time deputation as a marshal's assistant in 1810 in the matter of the slave cargo of the *El Bolador*. These documents, as cited in the notes herein, were widely published in the newspapers in the 1930s, and the clippings were—and are—available in the vertical clipping files on Laffite at several Louisiana libraries. The statement that Jean Laffite once stated that he was born in Bordeaux in 1780 comes from the papers of *La Diligente* at the Historic New Orleans Collection, papers detailed in Saxon (p. 75). Following the abandonment of Galveston, the Journal author says that Pierre took the alias Ricardo de León, a derivation of the newspaper article republished in Saxon dealing with a privateer—Gaspar—who wrote a

humorous letter signing himself Richard Coeur de Lion (p. 153). The author also links Pierre to land claims filed in Louisiana in the 1830s and later (p. 159). They are genuine, but relate to an entirely different Lafitte family of Natchitoches and western Louisiana who have no connection to the corsair brothers. In its later pages the Journal continues the confusion of Pierre Laffite with the family of Pierre Bouet Laffite of Natchitoches and the Sabine, including identifying that man's son Cezar Laffite as an offspring of the corsair Laffite (p. 124).

In fact, in trying to link the Journal to genuine documents, the author sometimes mistook fiction for fact, as in the repeated mention of the *Confiant* or *Confiance* as a Laffite vessel. There was such a vessel, but it belonged to Nicholas Jolly, who never had any connection to the Laffites.<sup>7</sup> However, in a fictional article by George Pierce in *DeBow's Review* for October 1851, the story has Jean Laffite commanding a vessel named *Confiance* in the days before he came to Louisiana. It can hardly be a coincidence, then, that a document that was once part of the collection built around the Journal, in the same handwriting as much of the rest of it, would turn up connecting Laffite with a ship of that name. In the 1970s it was in the TORCH Collection at Houston. It purported to be a set of articles commissioning the Laffite privateer *Confiant*, dated at Galveston, May 9, 1817, and signed by Jean Laffite. It is a crude forgery, proven so by its own internal evidence, as where it states that the vessel is authorized to "capture the fighting ships flying the colors of England or Spain." As previously stated, one thing privateers did not do, and were not to risk doing, was taking on armed enemy vessels, virtually all of which would have them outgunned and outmanned. Moreover, on May 9, 1817, Jean Laffite was not in Galveston, but had arrived back in New Orleans on April 22, and would not be at Galveston again until the fall. As for the body of the document, it is chiefly just a copy of the *Le Brave* articles of 1818, which as it happens were published at least as early as 1943 in Ray M. Thompson's *Land of Lafitte the*

*Pirate*. The *Confiant* document is no longer listed in the inventory of the TORCH Collection, and has apparently disappeared.

All of this—and there is much more—ought to be serious enough to compromise the whole content of the Journal as being at best unreliable even if it is authentic. If genuine, it is clearly the creation of a person suffering serious memory lapse and hallucination to the point of dementia. Even that is not sufficient to explain the Journal's inextricable connection to the forged *Confiant* document or the confusion of a Mexican port with a non-existent general, but in sum, the document is so unreliable that nothing from it can or should be accepted on face value unless corroborated completely and independently from direct contemporary sources. Significantly, the only portions of the Journal that can be so corroborated detail information that was already widely available in print as of 1943 or even 1940, including being available to any would-be creator willing to walk into the public library in New Orleans or any of several other cities. What can be substantiated in the Journal is not new; what is new in the Journal cannot be substantiated, and much of that is demonstrably false.

More serious than this, however, are the things that ought to be in the Journal that do not appear. The Journal's author is unaware of Pierre's established residence and property ownership in New Orleans in 1803. He leaves out Pierre's residence in or near Baton Rouge in 1804, and more seriously, overlooks the three years 1806-1809 that Pierre spent in Pensacola, placing him elsewhere. Significantly, all three of these omissions were not known or in the published Laffite literature as of 1940, and the Pensacola connection was only discovered in the course of research for this volume in 2000. In short, someone setting out in the 1940s to create a Jean Laffite journal would have had no convenient way to find out about these things by simply going to Saxon, Faye, and perhaps Warren. Moreover, nothing whatever of the Laffite

brothers' extensive legal dealings revealed in the court archives at the New Orleans Public Library appears in the *Journal*, including Pierre's bankruptcy or the details of their financing of the Galveston enterprise. Nothing from almost 100 Laffite transactions in the Notarial Archives dealing with slave purchases, ship purchases, and the undeniable links to Marie Villard—who is not mentioned in the memoir—is to be found in the *Journal*. And from the mountain of case files of the District Court detailing the business affairs of the Laffites, virtually nothing appears in the *Journal* except references to material that was published from those case files in the New Orleans newspapers in the 1930s. Certainly that must raise an eyebrow. Would Jean Laffite reasonably have forgotten all of these things that did not happen to be available in print as of 1940?

Not likely, but it stretches credulity too far to accept that he would have forgotten his eight-month exploration of the Arkansas with Latour in 1816. This is all the more surprising given that the *Journal* makes clear the close association of Jean and Latour, yet all the *Journal* author says of that period is that "in the month of April 1816, I decided to pursue my privateering on the high seas" (p. 109). When the *Journal* has Jean going to sea, in fact he and Latour had already gone upriver to the Arkansas. It was Jean Laffite's first clandestine assignment as a Spanish agent. More than that, it was the longest journey of his life, a genuine adventure into little-explored territory. It defies logic to assume that even a man suffering dementia would include in his *Journal* inconsequential details like days of the week or the stores he saw during a carriage ride in St. Louis, but would omit what had been for him an epic journey.

The logical reason for its omission is readily apparent. As of 1940, no writer on Laffite had yet discovered the story and put it in readily accessible print. Saxon did not know of it at all, but gave a version that had Laffite going to San Domingue and elsewhere privateering in that period, misinformation the

*Journal* repeats. Warren referred to it only obliquely in one sentence in his dissertation, but omitted that from his published book in 1943.<sup>8</sup> Faye gave it a paragraph in his major article on the Laffites in 1940, but provided no detail whatever. Otherwise hints were only available in a couple of obscure Arkansas memoirs, and in a county courthouse in Arkansas itself. Thus nothing was readily at hand to give even an outline of the story when the *Journal* was written, and thus it was omitted entirely. Only in 1948, after the *Journal* was already complete and on the market seeking a buyer, did the Hodges' article on the Arkansas journey for the first time put the broad picture of the trip in print, and by then it was too late to include it in the *Journal*.

Almost parenthetically, it is worth mentioning that amid all the lists of ships and adventures, the *Journal* author has also forgotten his service in the Colombian navy and his command of the *General Santander*, which again was unknown in the 1940s, and not discovered until recent years. Yet there is a standard of measurement that causes even greater problems for the *Journal* than what it gets wrong, or what it omits, and that is what is in it that could not possibly be there if it is genuine.

For a start, unless one grants that it is possible to predict the future and that the *Journal* author enjoyed powers of precognition, certain comments in the work raise serious flags. No one writing in 1846, as one entry is dated, could anticipate World War I, but the *Journal* author predicts that the empires of Europe would fall in 1919 (p. 134). Even harder to swallow is his 1850 prediction that "machines will be invented to write words more quickly on paper than could be written by 20 human hands with a quill" (p. 172). That, of course, is a prescient reference to the typewriter, which came along a few decades later. Here, however, is one of several instances in which the writer steps into a pitfall unawares, thanks to making a common but erroneous assumption. In this case it is one still made even today, that in "olden times" everything was written with

quill pens. By 1850 and the alleged date of this entry, quills had been out of use for more than half a century, and virtually everyone used steel nib pens. If the author of the Journal was himself actually writing in 1850, he would have been using a steel nib pen, as the Journal pages themselves—whenever written—make clearly evident, and that would have been his frame of reference, not a quill.<sup>9</sup>

And it seems fair to assume that all reasonable people will agree that time travel is not possible, today or in 1850. Nevertheless, under date of June 4, 1850, the Journal author states that his wife has told him that day that “a new invention exists allowing the making of ‘Daguerre’ photographs with a small box, which are reproduced on sheets of thin black metal” (p. 182; p. 247 of the manuscript Journal). The “Daguerre” process he mentions is, of course, the daguerreotype, invented in France in 1839 by Louis Daguerre, whom the Journal author elsewhere lists as one of his friends, and even possibly one of his employees in the privateering business! The photograph involved making an image on a sheet of metal covered with silver and polished to a mirror sheen. For more than a decade it was the only photographic process commercially available, and was still dominant well after the date of the Journal entry. Thus it was not a “new invention” in 1850, and in any event his description makes it evident that he was not referring to the daguerreotype.

The “sheets of thin black metal” that the entry describes, of course, are the successor to the daguerreotype, the melainotype, ferrotype, or more commonly styled “tintype.” It is a thin sheet of iron painted black, or “japanned,” and then coated with a light sensitive emulsion. Thanks to the millions of them made—and still made even today—and perhaps the attraction of the alliterative name, the tintype is what Americans most often associate with old photographs, just as they associate the quill with old writing. That presented another seemingly safe assumption-turned-pitfall into which this time the Journal author sank out of sight. The inventor of the tintype,

Hamilton L. Smith of Ohio, did not develop and announce his process to the world until the fall of 1855. It is first mentioned in the scientific literature in November of that year, and in February 1856 he took out a patent. Only after Peter Neff commenced manufacture of the plates later that year did photographers in the United States begin to practice the process, and its spread was slow.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, there were only two photographers operating in St. Louis in 1850, Thomas M. Easterly and John Fitzgibbons, and both exclusively practiced the daguerreotype method, which in fact was the only one available until 1854 and the beginning of the albumen paper process.<sup>11</sup>

The collection of which the Journal is a part actually has several alleged photographs of Jean Laffite and his wife. In box 4, file 8, there is a photo identified as a daguerreotype of Jean Laffite and second wife Emma Hortense Mortimore, and beneath the image on the inside of the case is an inscription stating that it was taken April 7, 1844 in Cincinnati. It is not a daguerreotype, however, but an ambrotype on glass, a technique that sometimes gave the superficial appearance of a daguerreotype. Wholly aside from the fact that the man in the image is probably no more than 35, whereas by the evidence of the Journal itself Jean Laffite would have been 73, the ambrotype process did not come to America until 1854, ten years after the bogus inscription. And accompanying the inscription is yet another forged Jean Laffite signature matching those that appear in the Journal itself.

If indeed the “camera never lies,” then someone else is lying, for here we have a photograph identified as being taken a decade before its process was invented. And getting back to the Journal itself we have a supposed 1850 description of a photographic process that was not patented or available until 1856. That alone defies reality, of course, but it is compounded by the family Bible in the collection, which attempts to establish Jean Laffite’s death on May 5, 1854. Thus the Journal author actually died two years before the invention of the

process he described six years before its debut.

Yet another category of things that the real Jean Laffite would not have put into any memoir are items from his career that the published literature as of 1940 had gotten wrong, but which have since been corrected. The Journal contains the old canard that the Laffite brothers operated a blacksmith shop in New Orleans in 1805 (p. 74). Saxon, Faye, and Warren all repeated the old myth. Interestingly, in 1952 Stanley Arthur, whose book *Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover* is otherwise so useless, was the first to question the smithy legend, another evidence that, as he said, the Journal itself was not available to him. There was no such blacksmith shop. The Journal also details Laffite's involvement with a plan to rescue Napoleon from exile at St. Helena (pp. 105, 120, 125). It is a fiction derived from articles by Meigs O. Frost published in the *New Orleans States*, August 26, September 2, 9, 1928, based on clearly faked documents attributed to Dr. Louis Genella of New Orleans. They maintain that Laffite actually got Napoleon out, and that he lived on incognito in Louisiana. They are also the source of the story that the Laffites had a connection with John Paul Jones, which the Journal incorporates, calling him "Jn Puilijon" (p. 48). The Journal author left out, however, Genella's contention that Jean Laffite actually served with Jones on the *Bonhomme Richard* in its epic 1778 battle with the British *Serapis*, which was wise given that the fight took place three years before Laffite's birth. The Genella documents also have Laffite, Jones, and Napoleon, all buried together at the Temple.

The Journal repeats the old story of Laffite meeting Humbert at a dinner given for his birthday in New Orleans in 1813 (p. 114). The story originated in print in Castellanos, *New Orleans as it Was*. The event may never have taken place, but what is significant is that Castellanos recounted it in 1895 as a celebration of a French *holiday*. When Saxon took it from Castellanos, however, he carelessly got it wrong, and changed the occasion into

Humbert's *birthday*. The Journal author repeated Saxon's 1930 error, meaning he was writing his account with Saxon in front of him. Moreover, Humbert's birthday was August 22, and on that date in 1813 he had not yet come to New Orleans, being still in the East.

In several places the Journal author mentions his sister Yvonne, who lived in Philadelphia. There is no evidence for such a person ever existing. However, in a large copy book that is part of the collection, there is more on this Yvonne, including her marriage to the Laffites' associate Laurent Maire, making him their brother-in-law. As already stated, in fact Maire married Adeline Godon, a white woman from an old Louisiana family that predated the arrival of the Laffites, and they remained married through his life until his death in 1827. His widow survived him by more than seventy years, as is clearly established by probate records and her obituary.<sup>12</sup> Maire cannot possibly have been the Laffites' brother-in-law. Neither of the brothers was married, nor by law could they marry the mulatto Villard women. In any event, Maire was an Italian, white, and therefore could not have been a Villard brother. And there is no way to make Adeline Godon into a Laffite sister. However, Stanley Faye, in his major article published in July 1940, apparently misread a Spanish source and concluded that Maire was the Laffites' brother-in-law.<sup>13</sup> It is the only place anywhere in print that this mistake is made, and it is a mistake, yet it also appears in the collection associated with the Journal.

The Journal author also consistently, and mistakenly, says that he made the trip to the East in 1818-1819 that was actually made by his brother Pierre, though on one occasion he says they both went, which is clearly impossible since his own documentary trail ties Jean to Galveston in that period (pp. 125-26, 136). It was a mistake made by Saxon, though not by Faye or Warren. Since the trip lasted about seven months, it is again reasonable to assume that the real Jean Laffite would not have forgotten that he had not made

it. The Journal author also clearly had access to the 1923 edition of the papers of Mirabeau B. Lamar, containing several statements by Samuel May Williams that are almost the only sources we have for the two brothers' eastern visits. In using it, the Journal author was careless and misread Williams' 1855 statement that he met a Laffite in the Capital at the Washington Hotel operated by a Mr. Butler. In the Journal he has gotten it turned around so that Laffite was at the Hotel Butler in Washington (p. 138).

The Journal does not give any account of the fictitious fight between the Galveston commune under Laffite and the Karankawa Indians, but it does mention the episode, placing it in 1818 (p. 151). No such engagement ever took place with Laffite, and the fight was actually with Long on July 30, 1820, two months after Laffite had abandoned Galveston. But Saxon had it in his book, and the Journal author included it in his, a recollection he cannot have had of an event that did not take place.

Fatally telling in regard to mistakes the Journal should not incorporate are two instances dated November 8, 1845, and December 1, 1846, in which the Journal author refers to one of his lieutenants at Galveston as "Theodore Rawlins" (pp. 78, 137). He is speaking of James Rollins, one of the mutineers who took the *General Victoria* back to New Orleans in August 1820. Rollins's name is very clearly stated as given by himself in September 1820 on two documents in the District Court case file. However, when John McHenry's 1853 recollection of the event was published in *DeBow's Review*, the only printed source to mention the episode, James Rollins was mistakenly referred to as "Theodore Rawlins," and was so presented in the piece. Once again, it was a mistake that is only corrected in print for the first time now, and one that the Journal author can only reasonably have made by having the McHenry article in front of him. More significant even than that, however, is the fact that McHenry did not himself write the 1853 article.<sup>14</sup> It was written by John Henry Brown, based on his

recollections of conversations with McHenry in that year. Thus when McHenry told Brown about Rollins, either McHenry or Brown mistook his first name James for Theodore, and then Brown himself probably made the error of hearing "Rollins" but printing it as "Rawlins." For the Journal to be genuine, we have to be willing to accept that Jean Laffite would by coincidence make exactly the same combination of two mistakes made by two men, and that he would make those mistakes eight years before they appeared in print in *DeBow's*.

Other anachronisms are almost amusing, as in the reference to Trujillo, San Domingue, in 1822, when the city was actually not named Trujillo until 1936 (p. 154). Better yet is the assertion that Jean Desfarges was a "master cannoneer and navigator" in 1805 (p. 74). Given that Desfarges was born in 1795, that means he must have been unusually precocious to be an accomplished artilleryman at the age of 9-10. Particularly interesting are places in which the Journal contradicts itself on impossible events. The author says that Pierre visited New Orleans in March-April 1831 and stayed with his fictitious older brother Alexandre whom the Journal identifies as none other than Dominique Youx. If he did so, then Pierre must have slept in the St. Louis Cemetery, for the Journal itself earlier says, quite accurately, that Dominique died in November 1830, at least four months before Pierre's fictitious visit (p. 125). Similar problems appear throughout the large copy book that is in the collection, portions of which are written as if by Jean Laffite, and others as if by Pierre. It would be pointless to cite all of them, though one of interest is the assertion that one Louis Ferrière was responsible for Pierre's arrest in 1814, and that in revenge, Gambi murdered Ferrière on September 12, 1814, on his doorstep at 620 Ursulines Street. In 1814 most street numbers in New Orleans did not yet exist, and would not until beginning in 1851. Thus, Ferrière's home was not at 620 or any other number in 1814. However it was so related in Stanley Arthur's *In Old New Orleans* (New

Orleans, 1936), p. 145, and that is where the Journal author got it.

Wholly aside from the particulars of the content, there are other peculiarities about the Journal that do not fit. Throughout, the author is boastful, even egotistical, proclaiming his contributions to America and the world, including taking credit for saving Andrew Jackson at New Orleans, and thus saving the United States from being forced to return to colonial rule by Britain. Yet throughout the text there is also the recurring theme of resentment and wounded pride that the world has failed to recognize his benisons to mankind. Does it stand to reason that a man so wounded at being denied the credit he felt he deserved, would spend the last thirty years of his life in self-imposed obscurity by living under an assumed name, thus himself virtually guaranteeing that he could not get the recognition he so craved? Moreover, nowhere does the author give an adequate explanation of why he chose to live under an alias.

Then there is the matter of the singularly peculiar balance in the Journal. The entire work runs to just over 54,500 words. The portion detailing the first 40 years of the subject's life comprises 41,500 words, or seventy-six percent—roughly 1,000 words per year. The portion covering the final thirty-three alleged years of his life runs to 13,000 words, or just twenty-four percent—less than 400 words per year, even though one might reasonably be expected to have greater recall of more recent events. The dividing line between the two is 1820-1821, which just happens to be the point at which authentic records and narratives of the lives of the Laffites, known and in print as of 1940-1943, come to an end. In short, someone inventing the Journal could write in considerable detail about events prior to 1820 because substantial sources were easily at hand to provide bones and flesh for the narrative. However, for anything after 1820-1821, such an author would find no more sources, and be forced to write purely from imagination. It is worth noting that there is a considerable lack of detail in

the post-1821 narrative, other than quite inconsequential names of store owners and doctors, public transactions in St. Louis, and so forth, the sort of things to be found in an issue or two of a contemporary newspaper and thrown in for verisimilitude. Virtually nothing of the author's personal activities as detailed can be verified. Once again, everything in the Journal that can be independently corroborated occurs in the pre-1821 narrative, and was all available in print in a handful of easily accessible sources as of 1940-1943, precisely the time when Nafsinger began calling attention to himself and his family papers. One might reasonably expect that even out of sheer coincidence, a few things invented by the author might actually receive apparent corroboration through subsequent research, but to date not a single instance has been found.

So what is the Journal? Its proponents, and it has a coterie of intelligent, sincere, and industrious, defenders, maintain that its flaws can be explained away by poor memory, inadequate or incomplete contemporary records, problems of translation, and misinterpretation by those who regard it as a forgery. No doubt, many individual instances of apparent problems in the Journal can, in fact, reasonably be dismissed thanks to these excuses. However, the logician would find that the volume of the problems is too large, and their magnitude too great. The necessity for the creation of hypotheses upon hypotheses on an exponential scale to explain them all strays so far from the ordinary bases of judgment, that no explanation other than forgery is adequate to define the document. Nothing can explain the Journal's wonderful ability to know in advance of events that did not occur until after the date of its entries, and even after the author's presumed death. Neither is there a rational explanation for how the Journal can incorporate as *genuine recollection* incorrect statements that were not made in the Laffite literature *until the 1930s and 1940s*, shortly before the Journal's revelation to the public, and which are only now shown to be in error.



It has been suggested that perhaps the Journal was intended as a novel. Certainly most of it is fiction. But it bears few if any elements of something intended as an entertainment for a reader. There is no story or plot, it defines no characters, establishes no dramatic tension. If it was to be a novel, in short, it was written by someone lacking any grasp of how to tell a story. Moreover, the inclusion of all those attempted Jean Laffite signatures, and the writing in a genuine circa 1830s-1860s blank book, argues against the novel idea. This was intended to be taken as an authentic period document written by Jean Laffite. Of course it may have been a hobby or innocent amusement for its creator, and then somehow fell into the hands of its unscrupulous promoter. This seems unlikely, however. It has also been suggested that it was actually written in the nineteenth century as an innocent essay in romantic fiction, but that falls down in the face of the content in the Journal relating some specific details of the Laffites' work as spies for Spain that simply was not known in the nineteenth century, and would not be known until the appearance of Stanley Faye's article in 1940. The work can only have been written after the publication of Saxon, Faye, and Warren's works 1930-1943, and perhaps Warren was not absolutely necessary, and the real cutoff date should be 1940.

Those who have studied John Nafsinger/Matejka are mainly agreed that he did not have the education or intellectual wherewithal to create the Journal, even though he was known to visit antique shops and book stores buying old paper and books, one of which certainly could have been the original ledger or scrapbook that was then turned into the Journal by removing unusable pages. His surviving letters also hint that he may have had accomplices in creating the documents. Certainly descriptions of the man's mental state match well with the scattered and disorganized nature of the narrative in the Journal. The fact that the Journal comes in association with a host of other clear forgeries does not help its case, though it is possible

that Nafsinger or someone else acquired the Journal and then "sweetened the pot" by surrounding it with other reinforcing forgeries, most of them clumsy, such as purported correspondence of Dominique, who was in fact illiterate and had to sign documents by a mark.<sup>15</sup> It should be noted, though, that whoever created all the other material—the documents, copy books, family Bible, mislabeled and altered photographs, and more—must have had sufficient command of French to be able to read the Journal and thus know how to create documents that would compliment it. In short, the greatest likelihood would seem to be that most or all of the collection emanates from a single source, and the years of effort that Nafsinger himself spent trying to capitalize on the collection suggests that if he was not the creator, then he had a hand in the creation of all of it even if that hand did not hold the pen that wrote the Journal.

It remains a complex document in a complex and puzzling collection of materials. Certainly someone invested some time and effort in its creation, though not much careful attention to detail, and not much effort at imagination as evidenced by the dramatic reduction in post 1821 coverage. To date, no one has gone to the expense of commissioning the kind of forensic tests that can date with some reliability the composition of the ink used, and it should be noted that, like old paper, old ink is not that hard to acquire. More vital is determining how long that ink has been on what is admittedly mid-nineteenth century paper. If at a future date such tests are performed and confirm dates in the twentieth century, the question will be settled. If the tests return equivocal results, as can happen, then the debate will continue. Logically, just as information in the pre-1821 narrative can easily lead a researcher to contemporary corroboration of its statements directly relating to or involving Jean Laffite, then the post-1821 narrative should do the same. To date, after half a century of scrutiny, it has failed to do so even once. If in future a few instances can be found of



the Journal leading us to corroboration that Laffite financed Karl Marx or married Emma Mortimore or exchanged correspondence with Abraham Lincoln, and if there are a sufficient number of these instances to take us beyond the laws of probability in regard to mere coincidence, then those who dismiss the Journal as a clumsy forgery may have to soften their conclusions, though it will always have to face the apparently insurmountable problem of the anachronisms and instances of future knowledge.

For the moment, if we cannot say precisely what the Journal is, at least we can say on the available evidence what it is not, and that is an authentic memoir written by Jean Laffite, or anyone else prior to circa 1940. The idea for it may have been sparked by those early newspaper accounts suggesting that when Laffite disappeared, it was not in the Caribbean, but somewhere else like Orange, New York. "The absence of all intelligence is a proof that he was ashamed of his past career," a New Orleans writer speculated in 1871, "and changed his name and profession, as he had intended, and led a new life."<sup>i</sup> For the moment, the rational conclusion is that he did not, but in the Journal someone chose to create a new life for him after his death.

#### Endnotes

1. Stanley Clisby Arthur, *Jean Laffite: Gentleman Rover*, pp. 277, 286. In his introduction to the published Journal cited below, Robert L. Schaadt states on p. 191, note 47, that Laffite scholars have erred when they said Arthur did not have access to the whole collection or the Journal. Arthur himself contradicts this with his specific statement on p. 277 of Laffite that this autobiographical diary or journal . . . has not been turned over to me along with other family papers, and also Arthur's statement on p. 286 that the materials Nafsinger let him use were letters, portraits, and other records which had to do with his career. Arthur's earlier reference to journals on this same page, which Schaadt cites, clearly did not include the Journal.
2. For an able discussion of the history of the Journal and Nafsinger/Matejka, see Dr. Robert L. Schaadt's introduction to Gene Marshall, ed., *The Memoirs of Jean Laffite from Le Journal de Jean Laffite* (N.p., 1999), pp. 11-35. See also Jean L. Epperson, "Who was John Andrechyne Laffite?" *Laffite Society Chronicles*, IV (September 2000), p. 2.
3. Ralph O. Queen to John L. Howells, September 27, 1974, Howells Research Notes, Laffite Collection, Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center, Liberty, TX.
4. Dr. Robert L. Schaadt was most generous in allowing a thorough examination of the original journal and accompanying materials in the Jean Laffite Collection.
5. Gene Marshall, "The Languages of the Author of Laffite's Journal", essay in Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center, Liberty, TX. An example of the kind of grammatical construction that Jean Laffite could not cope with in his own composition would be writing flour pot for flower pot, though this is not an example taken from one of his letters.
6. The 1958 translation of the Journal makes this read that my older brother Dominique was captured by Patterson, but Dominique's name does not, in fact, appear here in the original Journal, but was added by the 1958 translators, for whom this is a typical example of their fast and loose approach to translation. They had active participation by Matejka as an

inducement, or he may even have edited their translation after the fact to suit his needs.

7. New Orleans, *Louisiana Gazette and New-Orleans Mercantile Advertiser*, June 21, 1817.
8. Harris Gaylord Warren, *New Spain and the Filibusters*, 1812-1821, PhDdissertation (Evanston, IL, 1937), p. 286.
9. It needs to be noted that in the 1958 edition of the Journal, which all parties agree is an inferior translation, the word quill is not used, but rather the more generic pen.
10. Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography from 1839 to the Present* (Boston, 1982), p. 103; Robert Taft, *Photography and the American Scene, A Social History, 1839-1889* (New York, 1938), pp. 153-56.
11. See the website Early St. Louis Photographers, compiled by David A. Lossos, based on city directories, at <http://genealogyinstlouis.accessgenealogy.com/tracylewis.htm>.
12. Laurent Maire Estate Inventory, September 15, 1827, Orleans Parish Court of Probates, Louisiana Division, New Orleans Public Library.
13. Faye, Great Stroke, p. 742.
14. Brown, Texas, I, pp. 77-78n.
15. For examples of Dominique signing by mark see Dominique You to Nathaniel Jenkins, March 3, 1823, Notary Philippe Pedesclaux, Vol. 26, Act 151, Jenkins to You, April 2, 1824, Act 263, NONA. In the You Papers at HNOC there are documents relating to Dominique's vessel *Pandoure* that carry a signature, but they are most likely written on his behalf. It seems unlikely that a man who could sign his name in 1812 would forget how to do it by 1823.
16. New Orleans, *Times-Picayune*, August 20, 1871.

# John Andrechyne Laffite and the Laffite Collection

Reginald Wilson

In 1942, John Andrechyne Laffite, who claimed to be the great grandson of Jean Laffite, traveled from the Kansas City area to New Orleans where he visited with Sue and Ray Thompson, newspaper writers. In the following years, John A. came in contact with a number of historians and Laffite aficionados, some of whom questioned whether John A. might be a fraud. In 1949, he married Lacie Surratt. At times she wondered about his claim but really never questioned it. John A. continued to perpetrate his claim until his death in 1970. Through research, Jean Epperson, a member of The Laffite Society, exposed John A.'s true identity. John had been employed by the Missouri Pacific R R from 1914 until he retired. Epperson was successful in obtaining his R R Retirement records. John Howells, a member of the earlier Laffite Study Group, had requested these records but his request was rejected. Epperson found that the first time John worked for the railroad his name on the payroll was John Matejka. After that his name was Nafsinger, then finally John Laffite. In the 1900 and 1910 census, Epperson found John's father was John Matejka, his mother was Mary (Pavlik) Matejka, and he had a younger sister, Mary. The 1920 census showed John A. was in the Douglas County Jail.

How did John A. obtain the Laffite Collection? This collection began when Jean Laffite stated in the Journal: "Most of my personal valuables and documents had been forwarded to Charleston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia."<sup>1</sup> This piece offers one possible explanation, based on facts, speculation, and opinion, for how John obtained this collection.

John A. was not an honorable man. He was a forger and he was not truthful. He was not truthful about who he was<sup>2</sup>, he was not truthful about who his father was<sup>3</sup>, his Mother was not Mary

Pauline Fontenelle<sup>4</sup>, and the death of his sister was a fabrication<sup>5</sup>. John and his family went their separate ways after John was in jail in 1920. It was about this time that he came into possession of the Laffite collection. Could it be that in his devious mind, John wondered that maybe some time in the future he might be able to claim to be descended from Jean Laffite? To do so, he would need to hide his true identity. John's parents were Bohemian immigrants; therefore, he did not have any cousins, aunts, uncles, or grandparents here in the United States that could blow the whistle on him. He would have to wait long enough so that any of Jean Laffite's true descendants could not interfere. He decided to take the very rare name of Nafsinger claiming that his mother had married John Nafsinger as her second husband<sup>6</sup>. He eventually took the name Laffite claiming his father was Leon Laffite, son of Jules Laffite, grandson of Jean Laffite.

Persons who knew John A. had few kind words about him. William Simpson said he was a dodgy individual, totally uneducated and unimaginative.<sup>7</sup> Sue Thompson said John was a very devious man, uneducated but shrewd and wily.<sup>8</sup> Audrey Lloyd, who authored a book with John, stated he was gruff, intolerant, bullying, melancholy wistfulness, inconsistent in behavior, and had confused emotions.<sup>9</sup> Don C. Marler, a psychotherapist, never met John A., but based on information from others that did felt that John A. was psychologically and emotionally disturbed.<sup>10</sup> John did not hesitate to try to impress Audrey Lloyd early in their association. He told her that he had trained for 4 years to be a brain surgeon. He also told her that one time he traveled to Houston to see Rebecca Tumlinson who once had started to write a book with John A. She was not available so he flew to Mexico City, then to Honolulu, then to Vancouver,

then to Halifax, Nova Scotia, then back to South Carolina.

We know that any material passing through John's hands must be questioned: is it authentic or is it a forgery? Any statement made by John must be questioned: is it truthful or is it a fabrication?

The Laffite collection began when Jean Laffite shipped most of his personal valuables and documents to Charleston, probably to the Mortimore family; a second shipment to Baltimore, probably to Eli Ramsay, a business associate; and a third shipment to Philadelphia, probably to some friend or family member.<sup>11</sup> Lt. Kearney arrived at Galveston in January, 1820, and told Jean that the American government had ordered him to leave; therefore, he began the process of preserving his valuable documents.

Jean did not want to make the same mistake he did on Grand Terre when he and Pierre left in a hurry leaving behind all office records that included documents of business with several merchants, papers, ledgers, Bill of sales, ships and their cargo, etc. Commodore Patterson collected these papers and turned them over to District Attorney Grymes. Within a few weeks he issued indictments on eleven of the captured Baratarians and several merchants.<sup>12</sup>

According to Laffite's Journal and records found in the small copy book, (see Exhibit A ) Jean Laffite married Christina Lawein (Lavine) February 10, 1800, on the Isle of Saint Croix. This couple had Lucien, (1801), Antoine, (1802) and Denise Jeanette, (1804). Denise was born aboard Jean's brother's boat on August 2nd off Grand Terre. Christina died following delivery on the same day probably due to hemorrhage that was not uncommon at that time. Denise married Francis Little and had five children: Sylvester, Jesse, Francis, Eunice, and Lois Ann.

The three shipments were made in three trunks. At some point in time these three trunks were collected by Antoine and/or Lucien. Eventually, these trunks were passed on to Denise's children and

finally ended with the youngest child, Lois Ann. Lois Ann was born deaf in 1840, therefore a mute. In a letter to Audrey Lloyd John A. stated:

"The first time I met or seen (sic) her was 1900 when I was 9 years old, and many more time after. She died at the age 74 in 1914. She used her fingers to talk with and as usual all mutes make poker faces, or look poker faced when talking with thier (sic) fingers as fast as other mutes. Her face features were very beautiful and soft. Never showed her age. Was an old maid and never married."<sup>13</sup>

Another time he wrote:

"I have seen her many times, she was very beautiful, and of high intellect and I have heard it said ... that she was a person with a sixth sense. Some said she was a 'Cairvoyant' (sic)<sup>14</sup>

Twice in the above passages John states that he saw her many times. In all his other letters and material he never spoke about any other member of the Laffite family except he did say that he met 3 of Denise's children when he was about 8 years old.<sup>14</sup> In some way the Laffite collection passed from the Laffite family, probably by Lois Ann, to John A. No other connecting link is found, therefore, it must have gone from Lois Ann to John. There is a link for one item: " I handed them (Madeline Kent and Husband) a small diary book in trust for 6 months, the diary book was the property of Frank Perheil of Omaha wrote (sic) by his ancestor Lucien Laffite about his father Jean Laffite."<sup>16</sup> A computer search did not find a single person in the United States with the last name Perheil. Did John make this name up in order to not reveal the true name of the Laffite descendant for some unknown reason?

Now at the age of 21 John A. had the Laffite collection in 3 trunks.<sup>17</sup> Everything was in French which he did not understand. The only thing he could do for the present was to sit on them and bide his time. The first crisis came

in 1937 when he had to apply for a Social Security number. The application asked for the name of his father and mother. John A. certainly was not going to give his father's true name. At this early date, John had not decided how he was going to become a Laffite descendant. He left that space blank and

filled in Mary Perlieu Fontonello (sic) for his mother in doing so John had made another mistake. The Fontenelle family was an early, well known, documented family whose family history could easily be found.

In the 1940s, John spoke to a number of historians and Laffite aficionados but never showed any of the items in the collection other than photocopies to anyone. It is said that two college professors saw the Journal but they did not give a written report. John and his wife, Lacie, moved from the Kansas City area to Pacolet, South Carolina, the last of 1958. December 10, 1959, about 10 AM, they noticed their house was on fire. The fire department was called immediately but the whole attic was ablaze when first noticed.

Nothing was saved other than one trunk that John threw out a window that contained a small part of the Laffite collection. Lacie confirmed that they lost everything, clothes, furniture, etc.<sup>18</sup> Lacie's nephew, John Surratt, in a telephone conversation with this writer, also confirmed that the only article saved was one trunk thrown from a window.

In May, 1960, Mr. Herman Liveright, Program Director of W D S U -TV, New Orleans, did see the Journal and the 3 copy books. These were damaged in the fire at the WSPA Radio-TV Monday, May 16, 1960 in New Orleans. Lightning does strike twice in the same place.

On June 20, 1974, Audrey Lloyd wrote a 7 page letter to Mr. Jay Chernis in New York. In this letter she listed the items that John brought with him to Midland, Texas, November, 1966. This was after the house fire in 1959 when only one trunk was saved. The letter stated:

He brought with him a mountain of Laffite papers, documents, Bibles, the original journals (several of them) hand written in French, translated copies of two of them, pictures of the Laffites, Jean's log books, and many scraps of paper with Jean's notes on them. There were also Jean's instructions to his ship's captains and the ship's laws, all hand written in French and signed by Jean Laffite. In addition, along with many other valuable papers, were hand written documents by Eugene Laffite (son of Pierre) revealing hitherto unknown and most fascinating information".

In July 1969, Johnny Jenkins and William Simpson purchased the collection from John A. for the reported amount of \$15,000.00. Eventually William Simpson became the sole owner. At a later date, Gov. Price Daniel purchased the collection and donated it to the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center at Liberty, Texas. At that time the collection consisted mainly of the *Journal of Jean Laffite*, 3 copy books, several Bibles, and photographs.

In 1958, John A. had the Journal translated by unknown persons. There were only 400 (?) copies printed. In 1999, Dr. Gene Marshall did another more complete translation correcting errors and omissions. Audrey Lloyd stated that when John A. visited her, she had several Journals, two of which had been translated. Where is the other translated Journal? Where is the one or two Journals that had not been translated? There is a 4 page "Instructions to the Ship's Captain" on display in the museum at Sam Houston Library that may or may not have been part of the Laffite Collection. It is only known to have been sold to Gov. Price Daniel by William Simpson and donated to the library. This "Article of

Piracy" is not authentic. It is dated 18 December, 1806, Grand Terre, and signed by Jean Laffite. Jean Laffite and his commune did not start on Grand Terre until 1809. Another Article of Piracy is found on page 85 of *The Treasures of Galveston Bay* by Carroll Lewis, 1977. This is dated Galveston, 9 May, 1817 and signed by Jean Laffite. Likewise, this article is not authentic. On 8 May, 1817, both Jean and Pierre were in New Orleans and in conference with Fatio and de Sedella that night. Jean did not return to Galveston until September, 4 months later.<sup>19</sup>

The handwriting of both of these "Articles of Piracy" are very similar to the handwriting of the Journal. The person who committed this fraud had to have the original Journal, a photocopy of several pages, or a facsimile of the LeBrave document in order to copy the handwriting. Remember that some person or persons had the Laffite collection for possibly 75 years before John A. came into possession of it, so don't be too quick to point a finger at John. Actually, that person committed a double fraud by copying the handwriting of the *Journal that Jean Laffite* he did not write and then signing Jean Laffite's name to it. The authentic handwriting of Jean Laffite is completely different from that of the Journal.

It is hard to understand why John A. had this collection all those years and no one saw the contents of the two trunks that burned. What was his game plan? John was a very unusual person--devious, shrewd, confused. Did he come to believe that he actually was the great grandson of Jean Laffite? Was he delusional or simply dishonest? We will never know.

If it is true that John did know Lois Ann and saw her many times as he said he did, then this is proof that Jean Laffite did marry Christina Lawein and this couple had three children; Antoine, Lucien, and Denise. It would be most likely that John, in some way, obtained Jean Laffite's collection from her.

## Endnotes

1. *The Journal of Jean Laffite* Vantage Press 1958 page 119
2. Jean Epperson, "Who was John Andrechyne Laffite". *Laffite Society Chronicles* Vol. VI, No. 2. Sept. 2000. Missouri Pacific R R retirement records revealed that John was the son of Mary and John Matejka, Bohemian immigrants.
3. There is no proof that there ever was a Leon Laffite. This was the product of John A's imagination.
4. Reginald Wilson "Jean Laffite and the French Fur Traders", *Laffite Society Chronicles*, Vol.V11, No.1, Feb., 2001.
5. John claimed that his little sister, Mary, aka Rosemary, became a Nun and was assigned to teach at the parochial school at St. Anne's Church in Le Suer, Mn. where she died on March 6, 1922. A Ms. Griep, Church Secretary, was contacted by phone on August 31, 2000. Research by Ms. Griep could not find a teacher who had died any time during the 1920s. She also checked the Church records of deaths. A letter dated Oct. 16, 2000 from Delore Griep stated she again checked all records and nothing could be found regarding the death of one of their teachers.
6. A Computer search for the name Nafsinger found only 19 in the United States. John thought the name so rare that no one would be able to check on it. Endnote no. 2 gives his real name. The 1900 and the 1910 census gives John living with his parents and little sister, Mary. An email dated 20 June, 2000, from John Richard Nafsinger states that all the Nafsingers were his relatives and there was never a John Nafsinger that married a widow with 2 small children. Ms.

- Mildred Nafsinger, Redwood Falls, Mn. confirmed this statement.
7. Personal email to this writer dated Oct. 2000 from William Simpson.
  8. Personal letter from Sue Thompson to Pamela Grunewald.
  9. Sam Houston Library and Research Center, Laffite Collection C, Box 4, File 5, Letter written Oct. 1967.
  10. Don Marler, "Psychological Profile of John A. Laffite". *Laffite Society Chronicles*, Vol. V11, No. 1, Feb. 2001.
  11. *The Journal of Jean Laffite* 1958, pp., 117 - 119.
  12. William C. Davis, *The Pirates Laffite*, pp., 200-2001.
  13. Sam Houston Library and Research Center, Laffite Collection, Box 1, File 53, Letter dated Oct. 14, 1966.
  14. Sam Houston Library and Research Center, Laffite Collection Box 1, file 53.
  15. Sam Houston Library and Research Center, Laffite Collection Box 1, file 53 letter dated Sept. 1966.
  16. Sam Houston Library and Research Center, Laffite Collection Box 1, file 54 letter dated Jan. 9, 1967.
  17. Sam Houston Library and Research Center, Laffite Collection Box 1, file 53 letter dated Oct. 7, 1966.
  18. Sam Houston Library and Research Center, Laffite Collection Box 1, file 42 letter dated June 20, 1974.
  19. *Their Sword Was Their Passport* by Warren states that they were in New Orleans on the 8th of May, 1817, in conference. This is confirmed in Stanley Faye's "The Great Stroke of Pierre Laffite".

~ Mon premier mariage ~

Laffite Mari à Christina Lawein  
 Né le 22 Avril 1782 Février 10. 1800 Né le 14 Janvier 1780  
 Port au Prince. L'île de Saint Croix Décédé le 2 Août 1800  
 Saint Domingo. Enfants :  
 Marie Païon Laffite, Né le 4 Janvier 1801 - Port au Prince Saint Domingo  
 Antoinette Laffite, Né le 7 Mai 1802 - Port au Prince Saint Domingo  
 Marie Jemette Laffite, née le 2 Août 1804. Sur la scissseaux de  
 l'île de Saint Croix

Exhibit A.

An enlarged page from the small copy book in the Laffite collection, Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center, Liberty, Texas. This gives the marriage of Jean Laffite to Christina Lawein, their dates of birth, place of birth, date of marriage and their three children. The handwriting is the same as the handwriting of the Journal of Jean Laffite. Both were written by Antoine Laffite.

Note the damage from the WSPA Radio-TV station fire.



## When Was Laffite's Journal Written ?

Reginald Wilson

In 1942 a man walked into a bar on Bourbon Street and announced in a loud voice, "I'm John Laffite, the great grandson of Jean Laffite". Can you imagine the excitement and the questions? "Well, what ever happened to ole Laffite after he left Galveston?", "I bet he was a pirate down in the Caribbean", "No, he lived a quiet life on some island", "Where did he die?". John was directed to the home of Ray and Sue Thompson, the local Laffite aficionados. Ray and Sue could not believe their good fortune that finally they were going to be the lucky ones to answer many unanswered questions about Laffite.

John told them that he had inherited from his grandfather, Jules Laffite, many ledgers, bill of sales, reports of ships coming in and going out, family photo albums, the family Bible, six journals, etc. and even the rocking chair and bed that Jean Laffite slept on. One Journal was written by Jean Laffite telling the story of his life. He did not have any of these items with him but he told them he would return next year for another visit. John returned but he failed to bring any of the items he had spoken about. After several months the Thompsons decided John was not who he claimed to be and sent him on his way.

The Journal, supposedly written by Jean Laffite telling his life's story, finally ended up in the hands of Gov. Price Daniel along with about seven or eight other items. These he donated to the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center in Liberty, Texas, where they are now on display.

John Andrechyne Laffite died February 20, 1970 in Columbia, S.C. Several years ago, Jean Epperson, a member of the Laffite Society, obtained John Laffite's retirement records from the Railroad Retirement Board. He was an impostor. His real name was John Matejka, son of John and Mary Matejka, Bohemian emigrants. How,

when, and where John came in possession of the Laffite family memorabilia, we may never know for certain.

When was Laffite's Journal written? Most assume that it was written about mid nineteenth century. A few others state that there is nothing in the Journal that could not be found in the New Orleans libraries with a few months of research. The Journal is a 13"x8"x1" slightly burned leather bound volume, written in French, 257 pages. Ralph O. Queen found that the ink used was iron oxide, its ferrous content permeating the paper, and another ink called Gallnut. The Journal's paper, a linen based type used before 1850, contained several types of water marks, one being a large Fleur-de-lis, none of which were on record with the Institute of Water Marks. Queen further reported that the ink " cannot be readily removed by washing the paper".<sup>1</sup> It was written in first person from 1845 to 1850, and at the end of each "chapter" there is Jean Laffite's signature. The above would make one think that perhaps it was written at those dates, but a blank Journal could have been purchased in 1940 and the iron ink could have been hand made.

There is strong evidence that the Journal was not written by Jean Laffite. Reports by Jean Epperson and Gary Fretz indicate that he was killed in a gun battle in 1823 off the shore of Honduras.<sup>2-3</sup> There are numerous local and family events written about in the Journal that happened after 1823. This would indicate that it was written by some one very close to Jean Laffite such as a secretary, associate, or family member that was familiar with the early life of Jean Laffite and also had family papers, Jean Laffite's ledgers, notes, letters, cargo and freight lading, order and purchase receipts, etc. The Journal definitely was NOT written by John Matejka nor anyone that he might have hired to do so.

There are a number of obstacles that one would have to overcome in order to write the Journal in the 20th century. First, we know that the Journal was written by 1942 when John Matejka (aka John Laffite) visited Ray and Sue Thompson. John probably had it many years before this as suggested by his application to Social Security in 1937 on which he did not used his true father's and mother's name. To have used his father's name would have made a permanent record of who he really was. He left the space blank for his father and wrote Mary Pauline Fontenelle for his mother. (he misspelled both Pauline and Fontenelle)

If the Journal was written in the Twentieth Century, it would have had to be written after July, 1940 for several reasons. In the Journal translation by Gene Marshall pages 117, 118 the Journal gives the secret numbers assigned to a number of different members of De Sedella's organization. These numbers were known only to a very few men. They had to be kept top secret in order for Pierre to carry out his secret mission, aka Pierre's Great Stroke. It was not until Stanley Faye wrote "The Great Stroke of Pierre Laffite" published in the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, July 1940, vol.23 #3, 93 pages and 7 Chapters, that the outside world learned about Pierre and Jean's work as spies for the Spanish and the numbers assigned to those men working with De Sedella. Stanley Faye was fluent in both Spanish and French. During his retirement, he spent many months in the Newberry Library, Chicago, deciphering the longhand French writing on microfilm from the archives of Havana to find this information. Another individual could have made this same discovery by deciphering the French microfilm at Newberry or some other library that had copies of these same microfilms or could have gone to Havana and studied the archives there.

Stanley Faye's article only names two individuals who were given a secret number: " Pierre Laffite was No.13, 13-A or 13-uno, his brother, No.13-bis, 13-B or 13-dos". The Journal lists 13 who were given a number, therefore,

the Journal could not have gotten the number list from Faye's article.<sup>4</sup> If Jean Laffite did not write the Journal, there were only one or two persons who knew this list who could have passed this information on to some one who did write the Journal, most likely a family member. This could have been given verbally or passed as written information.

On page 65, the Journal, (Marshall's translation), tells of Jean Laffite at the age of four being visited by his Uncle, Jean Laffite, and Uncle Jean's Uncle, Bernard Miramon. These two were on their way to Mexico where, after several years, they were exiled. A person writing the Journal in the 20th century would not have known about this until after Charles Ramsdell published his article in *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, April, 1940.<sup>5</sup> Ramsdell accidentally found this information while going through the archives in Mexico City. This folder (over 100 pages) tells the story of "Juan Lafita y Miramon". At that time Ramsdell was under the impression he was reading about Jean Laffite, the privateer patriot. Now, another individual could have found this folder in the Archivo General before 1940.

On page 134 (Marshall's translation) Laffite tells of sending four carpenters, five masons, and two blacksmiths to repair his fort on the mainland 45 kilometers from Galveston and 21 kilometers from the Trinity River. The presence of five masons would indicate the foundations were at least partially stone. This stone would have been available from the ballast of abandoned ships at Galveston. Local foundations would have been of wood as no stone was available in this area. About 30 years ago, I found two elderly individuals who were born and raised in Pelly. Pelly is the part of Baytown, Texas that is closest to Tabbs Bay, part of Galveston Bay. These two told me that when they were children, they occasionally went over to the bay front to play. (1900 - 1910). In the Evergreen area there were old foundations of a house that everyone said were where the pirates had lived. One playmate found the remains of an

old 1820 vintage pistol. The distance from Galveston to these foundations is almost exactly 45 kilometers. By water, the distance from the Trinity River, going South around Fisher's reef, is in the range of 21 kilometers. In 1850 there were accurate charts of Galveston Bay. I doubt anyone could find the location of this house or fort in any library and even now find it without the above information.

With the information presented above, it seems impossible that the Journal could have been written in a few short months between July, 1940 and 1942 with all the other information that it contains. Furthermore, the researcher would have had to be a person fluent in French and knowledgeable in Spanish, to write the Journal.<sup>6</sup> He would also have to find a blank Journal, linen based type, make or find the iron style ink, and use a steel pen and he would have to have been good at copying the handwriting of others.

If a person in 1940 - 41 were able to research old newspapers, books, autobiographies, maps, historical quarterlies, private unpublished papers, archives, etc., and find all the information that is in the Journal, there is NO WAY THAT THIS PERSON COULD HAVE WRITTEN THE GEN. LONG LETTER OR THE LE BRAVE DOCUMENTI These were written in 1819. Ralph O. Queen, a handwriting expert with 40 years experience, after examining the Journal, the Long letters, and the Le Brave document, stated that all three were in the same handwriting. Mr. Queen had experience in criminal investigation of handwriting identification for the Houston Police Department, the State of Texas and the Federal Government. He was a member of the International Association for Identification, whose membership is limited to persons with extensive legal experience in detection of forgeries. After my in-depth study of these same three documents, I came to the same conclusion, the handwriting is the same. Therefore, it must be concluded that these three documents were written by a person who was on Galveston in the Fall of 1819 to write the Long letters and the Le Brave

document and then lived long enough to have written the Journal in 1850.

After the September 1818 storm, the Galveston commune began to diminish for a number of reasons; living on a sandbar was no picnic; capture of Spanish treasure ships was now almost nil; the United States, England, and France had joined to clear the Gulf of pirates, and there was not any future for the Island of Galveston. Of those few still on Galveston in the Fall of 1819, consider all possible individuals that had the knowledge to write French, then delete those that did not live to 1850. This leaves a list of three or four at the most. Take the handwriting of these three or four, and compare them to that of the Journal. It is a very simple matter to match one of these handwritings to that of the Journal. The result is you not only have when the Journal was written but also who wrote the Journal! Who did write the Journal?

Laffite's Journal was written in the 19th century.

#### Endnotes

1. John Howells, "Handwriting Analysis of the Journal of Jean Laffite" Unpublished paper included as part of this piece. On file with Jean Laffite papers, Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center, Liberty, Texas
2. Jean Epperson, "The Final Years of Jean Laffite" *The Laffite Society Chronicles* Vol VII, Number 2, October, 2001 pp.2-6.
3. Gary Fretz, "Laffite's Legacy" *The Laffite Society Chronicles*, Vol IX, Number 1, February, 2003 15-23.
4. The Journal of Jean Laffite, Vantage Press 1958, p. 84.

List of other persons given numbers:

John West F-28  
Abner Duncan F-5  
Manuel Morenos F-6  
John Desfarges F-7  
Robert Johnston F-9  
John Grymes F-11  
Ed. Livingston B-7-F  
F. Dupuis 17-J  
Jules Arceneaux F-13  
Gen. Wilkinson 13  
Arsene Latour 7-C  
Pierre Gaul D4  
David DeForest 17-D  
Alexander Laffite 13-D  
Gen Ariza 45-V

5

Charles Ramsdell, Jr "Why Jean Laffite Became a Pirate". *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, Vol. XLIII, Number 4 April 1940.

6.

Gene Marshall, Ph.D. "The Languages of the Author of Laffite's Journal" *The Laffite Society Chronicles*, Vol. VI, Number 1 February, 2000.

## A VISIT BY AUTHOR OF LAFFITE BOOK

Pam Keyes

Historian William C. "Jack" Davis ended a week-long book tour for his "The Pirates Laffite, the Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf" at the most fitting place possible, the elegantly appointed Laffite Room of the Trolley Station building at Galveston, monthly meeting place of the Laffite Society.

Co-hosts for the book-signing event, held May 29, were Laffite Society member Diane Olson and Midsummer Books of Galveston. Wine was served from an antique back bar in the room.

At 706 pages (including footnotes, bibliography, and index), *The Pirates Laffite* is, in my opinion, the best history ever written about Jean and Pierre Laffite, and the only complete study of Pierre Laffite, who has gotten short shrift from writers in the past, with the exception of historical journal writer Stanley Faye. It is written in a flowing narrative style, and even the 150+ pages of footnotes are entertaining to read, as Davis discusses in them some of his methods for arriving at his conclusions regarding the Laffites.

Accompanying Davis to the Galveston event and to all of his book tour stops was his wife, Sandra. Earlier that week, the Davises had promoted the new Laffite history at similar events at Williamsburg, Va.; New Orleans and Baton Rouge in Louisiana; Pass Christian and Jackson, Mississippi, and at Mobile, Ala.

At the request of Midsummer Books, I introduced Jack to an audience that included members of the Laffite Society and other interested parties, among them a descendant of John Dick, a district attorney who had prosecuted the Laffite brothers at New Orleans.

Although he had originally planned to give a brief presentation before proceeding to the book signing, Davis warmed to the receptive group and gave an entertaining talk about the Laffites for over an hour, with a

question and answer session following. Interestingly, he said he had found working on the Laffite book to be probably the most enjoyable research he had done for any of his numerous history books. Most of his histories have focused on the Civil War, and two were nominated for the Pulitzer.

He said he became interested in the Laffites while doing research on James Bowie for his "Three Roads to the Alamo" book. Another of his recent Texas history books is "Lone Star Rising," which includes some information about the Laffites.

Davis told the group about the various places he had done research for the "Pirates Laffite" book, and stressed the importance of the vast holdings of the Notarial Archives of New Orleans, the only archive of its type in the United States. He uncovered many Laffite related documents in the original notarial records there. These archives are in bound volumes by notary and year, with indexing by name in the front of the book. The documents are in English, French and Spanish, representing the polyglot nature of New Orleans.

New information about the Laffites and their associates continues to be found. Just a few days before the final editing of the book, and just in time to make it into the work, Davis learned of a very important 1802 passport for Pierre Laffite establishing Pierre's residence at Bordeaux at the time. The passport was discovered by Patrick Lafitte of France, and is the earliest authentic document connected to either brother.

An important part of the book was a study of the Laffites' family lives, centering on the placage arrangements they had with their mulatto mistresses, Marie and Catherine Villard. Davis said he may be doing another book studying the tragic effect of what this sort of relationship had on the participants' family, as Pierre Laffite and Marie

Villard's descendants were embroiled in a heated court battle in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to prove they were white and not part black, and they lost the case. All of the family members who testified in that case also lost their white status with the judge's ruling. There are several hundred pages of testimony, according to Davis.

At the New Orleans book signing, Davis said he met Diane Burkett, one of Pierre Laffite's direct descendants through Marie Villard. She is descended completely on the matrilineal line back to Marie Villard. Although Davis noted there are several direct descendants of Pierre Laffite and Marie Villard alive today, he has yet to find any living descendants of Jean Laffite. A son who was born to Jean and Catherine (or Catiche) Villard died as a teenager.

Following the talk, Davis answered questions from the audience. I asked him what he had found to be the most surprising aspect of his studies of the Laffites, and he responded it was their character. Unlike their thuggish cohorts like William Mitchell and Vincent Gambi, he said the Laffites were against violence, and had even made a point in their dealings with the Spanish to stress that they would not help if harm came to those upon whom they spied.

After Davis had signed books, the session concluded with a champagne toast in Jack's honor by the Laffite Society members toward the book's success. Jack and Sandra returned home the next day to Blacksburg, Va., where he is director of the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies, and a history professor at Virginia Tech.

LAFFITE SOCIETY MEMBERS SPEAK  
AT  
LOUISIANA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION  
ANNUAL CONFERENCE

R. Dale Olson

The Louisiana Historical Association held its forty-seventh annual meeting in Lafayette, Louisiana on March 17 through March 19, 2005. Society members Robert C. Vogel and R. Dale Olson took part in the conference, and other members attended.

Past President, R. Dale Olson, was Chairman of a Session, "Pirates of the Gulf", which was presented at 1:15 p.m. on Friday, 18 March in the Debutante Room of the Holiday Inn in Lafayette.

Advisory Board member, Robert C. Vogel, of Pathfinder, CRM, presented a paper, "Fantasy Archaeology: The Search for Laffite's Treasure", which included a recounting of the many legends of buried treasure associated with the Laffites. Vogel placed these stories within an historical context in which he identified several common elements typically associated with similar legends extending over many centuries. Vogel began his lecture by stating, "Be forewarned: This is an excursion into the wild side of history." He noted that "new attitudes about the role of treasure hunting have

developed. Adventure seems to have nudged past greed as the primary motive."

Benjamin D. Maygarden, of Earth Search in New Orleans, presented his exhaustive research into the descendants of Pierre Laffite in a paper, "The Silent Legacy of the Laffites' Private Lives". He meticulously traced the social environment within which the Laffites operated in early 19<sup>th</sup>. Century Louisiana and concluded by offering a voluminous genealogy of Laffite descendants.

Wilbur E. Meneray, Assistant Dean for Special Collections at Tulane University, provided comments following the two papers, and offered suggestions related to continued research.

R. Dale Olson provided an introduction to the session and to each of the papers, and concluding remarks.

Society members, Jean Epperson, Sheldon Kindall, Diane Olson, Kathy Vogel, Mike and Jerry Eubank, Don and B.J. Peak, Cynthia Nobels, and Wil Zapalac were in attendance.



From left: R. Dale Olson, Wilbur E. Meneray, Robert C. Vogel and Benjamin D. Mayarden



## CALENDAR

General meetings of The Laffite Society are held on the third Tuesday of each month at 6:00 p.m. at the Trolley stop Building (on the south side of the 2000 block of The Strand, Galveston, TX., 77550. Many of the meetings feature interesting and informative presentations by members or guest speakers. The exception is the December meeting, the annual "Holiday Social," which is an evening of food, drink, and entertaining conversation in a relaxed and festive setting.

Board of Directors meetings are scheduled for the first month of each calendar quarter (January, April, July, and October) on the same day as that month's general meeting and normally either precede or follow same. Additional Board of Directors meetings may be scheduled at the Board's discretion.

In addition to the general meetings, one or more special events are normally scheduled during the year. Examples of such special events that have taken place in the past include: an excursion to Grande Terre, Louisiana (Laffite's "Barataria"), the address of the Society's then-President, R. Dale Olson, to the Louisiana Historical Society at the New Orleans Country Club, and a summer archaeological excavation at the supposed site of Laffite's Maison Rouge.

Inquiries about upcoming special events may be directed to The Laffite Society, P.O. Box 1325, Galveston, Tx., 77553, or consult the webpage at: [thelaffitesociety.com](http://thelaffitesociety.com) and the newsgroup at, [laffite@yahoogroups.com](mailto:laffite@yahoogroups.com).

The Laffite Society attempts to mail information (snail mail or email) to members and interested parties on the Society's mailing list as special event details are determined.

*The Laffite Society Chronicles* are published two times per year—in the spring and fall.

## Bulletin Board

### News of interest--Katrina

Some of the storm related Gulf Coast places of interest to Laffite Society members are:

- \* Destrehan Plantation--minor damage,
- \* Historic New Orleans Collection --all buildings and collections are dry,
- \* Notarial Archives--Damage may be significant--some documents were soaked. Many wet documents are now frozen and on trucks going to a restoration center in Chicago. There are 50 million documents there. No recent report.
- \* For more info on damage to Museums by Katrina go to <http://www.aam-us.org/latest/news/HurricaneFirstReports> and <http://www.ssacares.org/repositoryinfo.php>

We have two positions open on the Board: Archivist and Historian.

### Membership

There are 87 members currently in the Society.

*New members--Welcome:*

John G. Germann, Houston, Tx.  
Gary S. Branfman, Victoria, Tx.  
Linda Corely, Houma, La.

THE LAFFITE SOCIETY  
BOARD OF DIRECTORS  
AUGUST 2005-JULY 2006

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The Laffite Society is a not-for-profit organization devoted to the study of the privateers Jean and Pierre Laffite and their contemporaries, and to the geographical locales and chronological era associated with them.

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