

# The Laffite Study Group

## Newsletter

Volume VII No. 4 Winter 1987

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The Laffite Study Group was organized in 1975 for the purpose of uniting persons interested in Jean Laffite's role in American history, literature and folklore. Membership in the LSG is open to all. Annual dues are \$10.00 for individuals and institutions. Life memberships are available for \$200.00. Applications for membership should be addressed to: Secretary-Treasurer, Laffite Study Group, 2570 Kevin Lane, Houston, Texas 77043.

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### THE LAFFITE NETWORK

To: Friends of the Laffite Study Group  
From: Robert C. Vogel

This spring marks the beginning of the Laffite Study Group's 13th year in existence. Once again, we are challenged by an impending financial crisis. As most of you are aware, the LSG is wholly dependent upon membership dues and gifts for operating funds. We have worked hard to publish the quarterly newsletter on time and within budget. Unfortunately, we have been unable to publish The Life and Times of Jean Laffite collection of occasional papers. The last installment of the LTJL, number 6, appeared in 1982. Part of the problem is that not enough LSG members pay their annual dues on time. We have also received no major gifts in several years. The LSG board of directors has resisted the temptation to increase membership and subscription fees. In 1988, a major effort will be made to increase the membership to its early 1980's level of 200+.

On behalf of the members of our unique organization, I would like to challenge all of our friends to bring their LSG membership up-to-date. If you are not a member of the LSG, a new member application form is included with this issue of the Newsletter. We need your help!

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From the Jack D. L. Holmes "If you don't mind, I'd rather eat something else" file comes this clipping from the New Orleans Daily Picayune of 19 April 1879 -- "Almost everybody in Lowndes County, Ga., knew Downing. He was a fisherman, and for years has supplied the Valdosta market with fish from the Ocean pond. He fished for several days, or until he had a load, and then went to market. His protracted absense during the first part of last week attracted the attention of his friends, who at length went to his abode. Arriving at the landing where he kept his boat, they found his fish box and canoes, but the fisherman was missing. Soon afterward they reached the bank of the pond, and saw two alligators emerge from the grass near by and come toward the shore, apparently seeking a fight. A gun was procured and both alligators killed and dragged ashore. Their stomachs contained human flesh, bones, particles of clothing and other things that showed plainly the fate of poor Downing."

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We read in the Los Angeles Times that the wreck of the ship that inspired Billy Budd has been discovered. A privately funded underwater archaeological expedition off the coast of Mexico has located the wreck of the U.S. brig Somers, which sank in a gale on 8 December 1846. In 1842 Somers was on a training cruise when the skipper sensed mutiny afoot. Three seamen, including the 18-year-old son of the secretary of war, were hanged at the yardarm. Upon returning to port, the captain was court-martialed on charges which included murder, but was acquitted. The story inspired Herman Melville's novella Billy Budd, one of the most famous works in American maritime literature, and became a lasting part of the lore of the sea. Sailors shunned Somers after the mutiny, saying the ship was haunted. According to the Times article, one of the divers "claimed to have heard screams resonating through the water" while working on the wreck this summer.

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#### A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF JACQUES LAFFITTE, BANKER

by John L. Howells

Jacques Laffitte (1767-1844) was a French financier and political figure. The son of a laborer, he went to Paris to seek his fortune and at the age of twenty got a position as a bookkeeper at Perregaux's bank, who appreciated Laffitte's exceptional aptitude and made him an associate in 1800. When Perregaux died in 1804 he left the bank to Laffitte.

In a few years Laffitte acquired an enormous fortune that he always used in the most noble manner, becoming president of the Chamber of Commerce of Paris, and judge at the Court of Commerce of the Department of the Seine in 1813. Laffitte brought the bank through the most difficult financial circumstances during the "Hundred Days" in 1814. He was a representative at the Chamber of Representatives and after Waterloo gave considerable loans to France and the City of Paris. As a member of the Deputy Chamber beginning in 1816-1818, he contributed by his advice and

speeches to the re-establishment of French finances. The warmth with which he defended the liberty of the press and electoral law in 1817 caused him to lose his post as President of the Bank of France in 1819. He opposed the law of double vote in 1820 and in 1823 opposed the Spanish expedition, but was in favor of the project of the conversion of rents of the Ministry of Villele in 1824 which compromised his popularity. Soon he regained it entirely by his open opposition to the Interior politics of Charles X, and also by his philanthropic generosity and inexhaustable dedication to the Liberal Party.

In 1824 he was not re-elected, but became deputy of Bayonne. He was at Palais-Bourbon in March 1827, proposed the indictment of the Cabinet after the dissolution the Garde Nationale, obtained a double mandate at the general elections of November 1827, and pronounced himself in favor of the Duke of Orleans, who, according to Laffitte, would realize on the throne the fusion of the monarchy and personal universal liberty.

One of the leaders of the French colonization attempt in Mississippi Territory in 1817 was General Desnouette, a brother-in-law of Jacques Laffitte, who also bankrolled Lallemant's abortive Champ D'Asile filibuster to Texas in 1818 and Henri Castro's colonization of Medina County, Texas, in 1840.

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#### SHIPS HISTORY: PRIVATEER BELLONA

**Bellona** was registered at the Port of New Orleans as a two-masted schooner of 70 tons, measuring 63 feet 4 inches in length and 18 feet 4 inches beam and drawing 7 feet. The date and place of her construction is not known. **Bellona** was one of a small squadron of privateers that cruised in the Gulf of Mexico under the command of Louis Aury. Off Galveston Island on 7 September 1816, some of Aury's followers mutinied, led by a mulatto sailor from the **Bellona**. Aury was shot and seriously wounded, but managed to retake his ships, including **Bellona**, which was "fired" but not seriously damaged. Aury subsequently sailed in **Bellona** whilst convoying Xavier Mina's revolutionary army to Soto de la Marina on the Mexican coast; the schooner carried a battery of field artillery and a contingent of cavalry. Leaving Mina to his fate, Aury returned to Galveston, where he discovered that in his absence a group of New Orleans adventurers led by the Laffite brothers had staged a successful coup. Aury retired from the Texas coast and participated in a filibustering expedition in East Florida. **Bellona** appears to have remained active in the Gulf of Mexico, but her eventual fate is unknown.

(Sources: Harris Gaylord Warren, The Sword Was Their Passport (Baton Rouge, 1941); New Orleans port records.)

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The Laffite Study Group Newsletter is published four times a year in Spring, Summer, Fall and Winter. Correspondence, articles, books for review and all editorial queries should be addressed to Robert C. Vogel, LSG Newsletter Editor, P.O. Box 44, Cottage Grove, Minnesota 55016.

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LAFFITE STUDY GROUP MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL

1988

INDIVIDUAL MEMBERSHIP ..... \$10.00  
INSTITUTIONAL MEMBERSHIP ..... \$10.00  
LIFE MEMBERSHIP ..... \$200.00  
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