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CONTENTS

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| "Filibusters on the Lower Trinity, 1816-1820" By John V. Clay | 1 |
| Notes, Documents and Correspondence | 7 |
| Book Review. Reilly, <u>The British at the Gates</u> By Pamela Grunewald Keyes | 10 |

The Laffite Study Group was established in 1975 to encourage and assist research concerning Jean Laffite's role in American history, folklore and literature. Members and associates receive the Life and Times of Jean Laffite, a bulletin containing short articles, research notes, documents, commentaries and news of current research. LTJL is published at irregular intervals, at least once each calendar year, as manuscripts become available and are approved by the publications committee.

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Filibusters on the Lower Trinity, 1816-1820

by John V. Clay

After Hidalgo opened the revolutionary times in Mexico, great numbers of adventurers from the United States, Europe and South America began to gather in Louisiana and Mississippi. From these territories, safe within the boundaries of the United States, they were able to organize filibustering expeditions into Texas and Mexico. Spain was approaching its last days in North America and was militarily weaker than it had ever been before in the New World. This weakness and the great distance from Mexico to the borders of the Louisiana territory were factors that encouraged the unscrupulous and idealistic to gather on the edge of Texas.

Despite the neutrality laws that existed, the American government usually aided the filibuster by neglecting to take action that would prevent the formation of an expedition against the Spanish Dominions. The records of the time strongly indicate that many officials of the United States actually encouraged this activity because of political and commercial considerations that would have been a product of success. Enormously wealthy merchants in New Orleans, Philadelphia and other cities were the backers of these schemes. (1)

Few among the men who were leaders and members of the various filibustering expeditions to Texas from 1812-1821 were men of integrity devoted to the ideals of the freedom of the oppressed. In flamboyant and resounding terms all professed their desire to aid the people of New Spain to throw off colonial rule. The great majority of the leaders were capable men with experience in military action. Almost all were involved because of the advantages of financial reward, profit from land speculation, and the lure of adventure. Betrayal, plot and counterplot were common in the years when filibustering activity was at its peak.

During the years 1812-1816 some semblance of peace was maintained in Texas even though the land hungry continued to pour into the province. In 1816 a contingent of Spanish troops came to Atascosito and El Orcoquisac and made an extensive search for illegal settlers and other aliens, mostly drifters in the territory between the Trinity and the Sabine.(2)

Three filibustering expeditions came to the Trinity River-Galveston Island area. The first was led by Francisco Xavier Mina who truly sought to help the revolutionary movement in Mexico. Historian Harris Gaylord Warren says of him, ". . . Mina was the greatest of the filibusters, the most resourceful, the most courageous, and a superb guerrilla fighter: but his expedition demonstrated the utter

futility of filibustering . . ." (3) During the French invasion of Spain, Mina, although young, became famous because of his actions against the French. When peace came to Spain and Ferdinand VII was restored to the throne, Mina expected the liberal gains outlined in the Spanish Constitution of 1812 to be implemented, but this did not occur. Mina attempted to create a revolution but failed; shortly thereafter he came to the United States.

While Mina was one of the few idealists of the filibustering period, his companion-in-arms Louis Aury was an outright pirate at the time of their joint expedition against the Spanish in Texas. Aury became a hero during the revolt against the Spanish in New Granada. In May, 1815, he entered the insurgent forces and became in August the commander of a privateer squadron at Cartagena. At that time the Spanish royalist fleet blockaded the port. Aury broke the blockade and escaped, along with Simon Bolivar, the liberator of South America. Almost immediately after his escape Aury began forming a pirate squadron and under his leadership the fleet met instant success. Prizes were brought to Galveston where Aury made his headquarters in 1816, preceding the famous brothers Laffite. He was a capable naval leader, talented in acquiring followers and ships to pursue his piratical schemes. (4) Felipe Fatio, Spanish consul at New Orleans, regarded the pirate as a definite threat to Texas and Mexico and wanted him out of Galveston. In order to displace Aury, Pierre Laffite, then an agent in the Spanish secret service, journeyed to Galveston in June, 1817, and was so successful in his dealings with the pirate's followers that many deserted their captain and joined the Laffites. (5)

In July, 1817, Aury and Mina sailed from Galveston to invade Mexico. (6) Mina landed with his army at the mouth of the Rio Santander, on the east coast of the Gulf of Mexico about midway between the Rio Grande and Tampico. He intended to swell his ranks from among the people who were a part of the revolutionary turmoil that existed in Mexico. His success was minor, and he was defeated in military action. Mina was executed on November 11, 1817. Only a few of his followers returned to Galveston, among them Juan Davis Bradborn. (7)

The most bizarre and colorful of all the schemes of conquest had for its base a site on the Trinity River not far from El Orcoquisac and Atascosito. After the downfall of Napoleon many of his officers began to arrive in America. With the arrival of Joseph Bonaparte in 1815 rumors concerning a plan to put Napoleon's brother on a throne in Mexico became prevalent. When generals Charles and Henry Lallemand appeared in the United States, it was generally assumed that the refugees were attempting to find an asylum for Napoleon. The elder Lallemand had attempted to go into exile with the Emperor and was thought to have been involved in a plot to rescue the Corsican from St. Helena. Luis de Onis, Spain's minister to the United States, did not believe that men of Lallemand's sort would be involved in any peaceful pursuits and feared America had designs against Spain. As part of an effort to win the French over, Onis implied that Spain might allow them to come to Texas if they were willing to live there peacefully. (8)

Apparently General Lallemand accepted this as an invitation and began organizing an expedition. Its destination was a place on the Trinity River and was to be known as Champ d'Asile. Early in 1818 the expedition arrived at Galveston and brought there large stores of munitions.(9) Jean Laffite, the island's commander, even though deeply involved with the Spanish, could do nothing about the landing of the French--they were "too formidable," and more were expected. Pierre, the elder Laffite, instructed his brother to help the Lallemands, whose forces could have destroyed the pirates with ease. The French were given boats to transport their men and supplies up the Trinity. Galveston was thereby freed of possible destruction and loss of men by desertion to the filibusters.(10)

The French began construction of a fort, which was described as, ". . . an irregular five-sided figure, with its ditch above the bank of the river, whose small fort was connected by an entrenchment with a redoubt of a square figure . . . a covered way leaving from the last mentioned in the direction of the quarters which consisted of 28 wooden houses strong enough with their loopholes that they were like small forts. It had 8 pieces of artillery . . . its taking would have cost much blood . . ." Construction was never finished. The entire operational procedure of the colony was organized along military lines, and peace treaties were made with the neighboring Indians.(11)

It has long been thought that the principal object of the Lallemands' efforts was to gain control of the mines of northern Mexico in order to obtain funds for freeing Napoleon. The almost defenseless condition of New Spain must have been considered by the Napoleonic refugees. Troubled and in turmoil, Mexico would have had little chance against Napoleon's veterans. Joseph Bonaparte knew of the precautions being taken to keep his brother imprisoned and could not have failed to inform the adventurers' leaders about these precautions prior to their departure for Texas. Other than for conquest and loot, whatever the filibusters intended by an invasion of Mexico is not really known.(12)

Governor Martinez of Texas received orders to oust the French and Viceroy Apodaca orders the frontier commanders "to put to the sword without quarter whoever dared to violate the dominions of His Majesty."(13)

The combination of Lallemand and Laffite was too important for the United States to ignore, so Secretary of State John Quincy Adams sent Major George Graham as an envoy to the filibuster and the pirate. His mission was to inform all parties at Galveston that the United States disliked their presence in Texas. Graham met the two and informed them of the determination of the United States in this matter. Lallemand took the hint and abandoned the project; Laffite also recognized that the end of his activities was at hand.(14)

A short time before Graham's arrival at Galveston, the French had withdrawn from Champ d'Asile to Laffite's establishment. Lalle-

mand stated that President Monroe's message to Congress of December 2, 1817, hinting at a possible United States military intervention in Texas, had caused some of his financial supporters to withdraw from the project. This withdrawal, the advance of the Spanish from San Antonio, and the belief that supplies could not be obtained from the Indians caused the French to abandon Texas. The retreat to Galveston was made in good order.(15)

Meanwhile, the Laffites had been informing the Spanish authorities of the progress of the French and had formulated a plan for the destruction of the Champ d'Asile project.(16) In September, 1818, Captain Juan Castaneda departed from San Antonio with a force of 240 men under orders to drive the French out of Texas. On October 9, he arrived at the banks of the Trinity and proceeded to search out Champ d'Asile. Three Americans were found living in a hut on the Bayou Punto de Busto (Turtle Bayou). One of them led Castaneda's emissaries to Galveston to demand the surrender of Lallemand and Laffite. General Rigaud, who was then in command of the Frenchmen at Galveston, presented apologies for the intrusion of the refugees. Laffite, knowing of the exhausted condition of the Spanish, ignored the demand for surrender. Rightly concluding that the invaders were incapable of further harm, Castaneda returned to the mainland and proceeded to destroy Champ d'Asile, an act which required two days. On November 1 the Spanish contingent crossed the Trinity to return to San Antonio.(17)

Dr. James Long, the last of the filibusters, appeared for the final effort. Apparently caught up in the restless nature of the times, Dr. Long, who had been a participant in the Battle of New Orleans, organized and headed the last filibustering expedition aimed at driving the royalists out of Texas. Long and his backers contended that Texas rightfully belonged to the United States as a part of the Louisiana Purchase and that an invasion would free the citizens of Texas from what they referred to as the tyranny of Spanish rule.

Long's primary purpose in invading Texas was to acquire land for speculation for his financial backers, military leaders and participating soldiers. Unlike previous filibusters, the United States regarded Long as a menace to its territorial ambitions. Previous to his invasion, the United States had aided the filibusters by a policy of nonintervention. This abruptly changed with the Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819, which had not been ratified by Spain. Long's followers were arrested, his arms and supplies seized by American authorities.

Upon his arrival in Texas, General Long organized a provisional government. In its first proclamation the council of government promised religious liberty, a free press, a system of public education, and free trade. Most importantly, the council also promised good land to all comers at a small price. This offer, accompanied by a great deal of publicity, had a tremendous influence on the increase of American migration to the area west of the Sabine River. It had the effect of building a force that became overwhelming.

Because of United States interference Long was forced to scatter his men about the territory to "live off the land" until a supply base could be established. For this the general needed the aid of Jean Laffite, to whom he offered a commission and letters of marque. Galveston was to be a legal port of entry into the Republic of Texas with its own admiralty court. Laffite sent token supplies but soon betrayed Long to the royalists. Meantime the ranks of Long's little army were dwindling because of desertion. Laffite's information caused the Spanish to prepare to meet this new challenge to their sovereignty. Colonel Perez left San Antonio in September, 1819, with 500 men and marched toward Nacogdoches. His purpose was to put a quick and thorough end to this last filibustering expedition. Some of Long's men were captured; most retreated with their general across the Sabine into Louisiana. One contingent of Perez' force drove out the American settlers at Atascosito while another fought a lively skirmish with some horse thieves at Cayo Gallardo. Warren says of Perez' force: "[it was] little more than a straggling mob . . . in such a deplorable condition that he feared for its dissolution before the return could be accomplished . . . with his troops on the edge of starvation, his horses worn out and useless, Perez returned to San Antonio in February, 1820 . . ."

The Perez expedition had not put an end to Long's ambitions. He returned to Galveston and again attempted to secure aid from the forces of Pierre and Jean Laffite, who could not help, having had troubles enough of their own. After the Laffites abandoned Galveston, Long was unable to secure financial backing and was compelled to take military action before his army dissolved. While waiting for support, Long built a fort at Point Bolivar across the channel from Galveston Island. In September, 1820, he departed with his ships and men to La Bahia, which he captured without a fight. A short while later he surrendered to Colonel Perez, who had marched to La Bahia to put down the invasion. Long was taken to Mexico City where he was assassinated.

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(1) Harris Gaylord Warren, "New Spain and the Filibusters," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1937. Chap. I.

(2) Sergeant del Toro, Archivo General de Mexico, Provincias Internas, vol. 239.

(3) Warren, "New Spain and the Filibusters," p. 285.

(4) Ibid., p. 309.

(5) Ibid., p. 311.

(6) Ibid., p. 257.

(7) Ibid., pp. 283-284.

(8) Onis to the Viceroy, December 28, 1817, Archivo General de Indias, Audencia de Mexico Papeles de Estado, Leg. 13, no. 9; Harris Gaylord Warren, The Sword Was Their Passport (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1943), p. 190.

(9) Juan Ruiz Apodaca to Felipe Fatio, July 16, 1818, Archivo General de Indias, Audencia de Mexico, Papeles de Estado, Leg. 13.

(10) Warren, "New Spain," pp. 321, 338-339.

(11) Report of Captain Juan Castaneda, A. G. I. Audencia de Mexico, Papeles de Estado, Leg. 14.

(12) Onis to the Viceroy, December 28, 1817; Warren, "New Spain," p. 325.

(13) Apodaca to Fatio, July 16, 1818, A. G. I. Audencia de Mexico, Papeles de Estado, Leg. 14.

(14) Walter Prichard, "George Graham's Mission to Galveston in 1818," Louisiana Historical Quarterly 20 (1937), pp. 619-650.

(15) Warren, "New Spain," pp. 337-338.

(16) Ibid., chapters 11 and 12.

(17) Report of Captain Castaneda, A. G. I. Audencia de Mexico, Papeles de Estado, Leg. 14.

[Ed. note. Mr. Clay's article is adapted from Chapter IX of his monograph, Spain Mexico The Lower Trinity (Houston: published by the author, 1977).]

NOTES, DOCUMENTS AND CORRESPONDENCE

Laffite's Fort (Grand Terre)

"There has been a lot of talk about Laffite's "fort" on Grand Terre Island. About 1853 the U. S. Coastal Survey group put out a map of the area [southern Barataria Bay] which showed the site of the assumed ruins of that fort. The map was made at the time when so many of the romantic stories of Laffite had been published. [See "Selections from the Lafitte Book" in LTJL Number 3 (December, 1976), pp. 4-39, passim.] None of the accounts of the American officers who visited Grand Terre Island in the period 1812-1815 ever mention such a fort. Holmes doesn't and neither does Colonel George Ross of the 44th Infantry regiment, [nor] Commodore Patterson of the Navy at the time they put the place out of business in late 1814. Ross speaks of a number of huts only. [See "The Dispersal of Privateers and Smugglers at Barataria" in LTJL Number 1 (January, 1976), pp. 18-22.] Before Ross commanded the 44th Regiment of U. S. Volunteers he had been with the 1st Battalion of Louisiana Volunteers. Payrolls in the National Archives which I have checked show that that battalion had cantonments on Grand Terre Island and on Caminada Island in 1813.

"The microfilm of Andrew Jackson Papers at LSU from the Library of Congress in reel 18 has a copy of the orders of Brig. Gen. Edmund P. Gaines dated April 24, 1815 . . . ordering the 44th U. S. Infantry to go to Grand Terre Island and sending other regular units to other locations along the coast. Commanding officers were ordered to build at these outposts huts with floors, sheds, etc. Some time was to be devoted to the construction of batteries and other works of defense at each outpost. 'Fort Petite Coquilles, Fort St. Philip and a work at Grande Terre particularly are to be completed as soon as possible.' If any ruins of a fort on Grand Terre Island existed [in the middle nineteenth century] it was undoubtedly the ruins of a redoubt which the 44th was ordered to build there . . ."

An extract from a letter of Powell A. Casey to the managing editor, dated Baton Rouge, LA, May 24, 1978. Mr. Casey is well known as one of the South's foremost military historians and is the author of many books and articles on Louisiana military history. He is currently working on a comprehensive study of military forts and camps in the Pelican State.

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Laffite MSS in the Historic New Orleans Collection

A small quantity of interesting Laffite documents are included

among the holdings of the Williams Residence Museum of the Historic New Orleans Collection. The Lafitte (Pierre and Jean) Collection consists of three items (1813) concerning the brothers and their French privateer Diligente. The first is an unsigned request for a letter-of-marque from the French consul at New Orleans; the second is a Certificate of Inspection for the vessel; the last is the Roll of Crew, listing name, rank, age and place of birth for each crewman. All three documents are in French.

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From a "journal" by Jesse Hord, quoted in Macum Phelan's History of Methodism in Texas (1924), p. 111: "At the DeMoss Settlement (Caney) [Near Port Lavaca, TX] night services were held to a late hour, January 31, 1839. Many, if not every sinner of the assembled company, bowed and cried aloud for mercy. Several professed to have obtained a degree of comfort. There was, however, one poor soul who from the beginning seemed to be overwhelmed with a sense of guilt and burden of sin, whose conversion was clear pentecostal. The tongue of fire seemed to rest upon her, and she confessed her conversion in the language of praise and thanksgiving to God. This lady, Mrs. Tone, with other persons, joined the church at the close of our service for the night . . . Mrs. Tone, now living with her second husband, had been from early womanhood to middle age the wife of the notorious Lafitte, and with him had encountered all of his various fortunes by sea and by land."

J. L. H.

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The Nicolls Expedition to Baratania, 1814

John Sugden of Hull, England, has written an article on the Lockyer-Nicolls expedition to the Baratarian privateers, September, 1814, to be published at some future date in the Louisiana Historical Association's journal, Louisiana History. Relying primarily upon British archival sources and published material, Sugden has reconstructed the position of Nicolls' mission to Laffite. We quote from his letter of April 10, 1978, to the managing editor.

"1. The idea of approaching Lafitte is first mentioned by Pigot in his report of June, 1814, but I feel he must have got his information on the privateers from somewhere else, possibly . . . Governor Charles Cameron of the Bahamas.

"2. Cochrane's orders to Nicolls and Percy made no reference to the privateers, although there are plenty to the Indians and Negroes, but a copy of Pigot's report containing that suggestion was furnished Nicolls. The point is important since it indicates [that] the recruiting of the Baratarians was not a fundamental part of British thinking and would not have led them to make extraordinary concessions to obtain

Lafitte's services. Nicolls also conferred, later, with Cameron, after which Nicolls wrote Cochrane mentioning [that] he hoped to recruit the privateers.

"3. The attempt was then made, on the instructions of Percy and Nicolls, to recruit Lafitte. Lockyer failed and reported back to Percy. There is no indication that Percy ever reported the affair to his superiors.

"I think, therefore, on this evidence, it is fair to state that the mission was never really a product of the British high command, simply a local initiative made by Percy and Nicolls, prompted by Pigot's suggestions and possibly by private conversations with Cameron. As for the other aspects of the story:

"A. The Monetary Offer. I do not believe this was ever made to Lafitte. Cochrane allocated Nicolls \$1000, enjoining him to use it sparingly. We know the expedition was in perennial financial difficulties over purchasing supplies for the Indians and Negroes and that this put Nicolls in debt at the end of the war. There was, therefore, no official money available with which Lafitte could have been bribed as reported, and Nicolls himself was not so wealthy . . .

"B. The Captaincy. This could not possibly have been a naval captaincy. The only authority Nicolls possessed was with regard to the Colonial Marines, in which he hoped to incorporate the privateers. Cochrane obtained, however, permission to issue Nicolls 8 blank lieutenant commissions for the provincial force he was required to raise and he might allocate these as he saw fit. I feel Lafitte may have been offered one of these . . .

"C. Lands. Cochrane empowered Nicolls to offer lands in the British West Indies as inducements to Negroes to enlist in his Colonial Marines and Nicolls undoubtedly extended this offer to the privateers."

* * * * *

J. Ignacio Rubio Mañe, formerly director of the Archivo Nacional in Mexico City and author of several works dealing with the activities of the Laffites and other privateersmen in Mexican waters, reports that in the Gaceta de Cartagena de Colombia, Wednesday March 19, 1832, there is a notice of Jean Laffite's death in a naval battle with the English.

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BOOK REVIEW

The British at the Gates: The New Orleans Campaign in the War of 1812.
By Robin Reilly. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1974.)

The British at the Gates is one of a number of recent books about the Battle of New Orleans which use eye-witness accounts from British sources, integrated with material concerning political, social and economic conditions in lower Louisiana at the time of the British invasion. Mr. Reilly has skillfully interwoven the main characters' motivations, accurately accounting for how these motivations led to victory or defeat. Though the British Lt. Gen. Keane is generally chosen as the scapegoat for not attacking Jackson's forces early on in the battle, it was actually Maj. Gen. Packenham's mistake that lost the campaign for the British. The author claims that Packenham had an opportunity to strike Jackson's weak left flank, but refrained from attacking for three days while awaiting the arrival of heavy artillery. Jackson, in the meantime, completed strengthening his defenses.

Much of Reilly's information on the British army's situation at New Orleans comes from the journal of a young English soldier, George Robert Gleig, who was a keen observer.

The author of The British at the Gates researched the American side of the battle just as thoroughly as the British. Jean Laffite's role in the campaign receives very thorough treatment. Careful analysis is offered on just how the brothers Laffite developed their smuggling business. Relying on the published Journal of Jean Laffite for some information, Mr. Reilly is nonetheless skeptical of some anecdotes in the alleged memoir. He doubts that Jean Laffite immediately made up his mind to side with the United States; Reilly realizes that the Baratarians threw in their lot with the Americans simply because it was in their best interests to do so. Much of this book's conjecture concerning the independent attitude of Jean Laffite makes sense in the light of Laffite's precarious position on the eve of the British invasion.

Pamela Grunewald Keyes
Miami, Oklahoma