

# The Laffite Study Group Newsletter

Volume IV No. 4 Winter 1984

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The Laffite Study Group was formed in 1975 to unite persons with an interest in Jean Laffite's role in history, folklore, and literature. A non-profit educational organization, the study group publishes this **Newsletter** and a series of occasional papers entitled **The Life and Times of Jean Laffite**. Membership in the LSG is open to all. Annual dues are \$10 for individuals and libraries (\$15 outside the U.S.), \$200 for life memberships. Queries concerning membership dues, subscriptions, etc., should be addressed to the Secretary-Treasurer, 2570 Kevin Lane, Houston, Texas 77043.

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## THE BEST LAFFITE LORE

by Robert C. Vogel

More has been written about Jean Laffite than about any other character in Gulf Coast history, with the possible exception of Andrew Jackson and Herando de Soto. A selective bibliography of historical works pertaining to the career of Jean Laffite, published several years ago in the first number of the **Life and Times of Jean Laffite**, included more than eighty titles published in English. A master's thesis written at Southern Methodist University in 1951 explored Laffite as a major character in American fiction, verse, and film, citing more than a hundred works.

I have been asked to sort through the vast collection of Laffite lore, picking out the very best books and articles, the works most helpful in assessing Jean Laffite's place in American history. Jean Laffite's historical significance can be debated, his role as one of the great American folk characters cannot -- therefore I have included works of fiction in my list. For the sake of convenience, I have limited my review to the ten "best" published works, including biographies, narrative histories, and journal articles, and novels.

Here are my ten candidates for the best examples of Laffite lore:

1. Harris Gaylord Warren, "Jean Laffite" article in the **Handbook of Texas II** (Austin, 1952)
2. Stanley Faye, "The Great Stroke of Pierre Laffite," in the **Louisiana Historical Quarterly XXIII** (1940)
3. Charles E. Gyarre, "Historical Sketch of Pierre and Jean Lafitte, the Famous Smugglers of Louisiana," in the **Magazine of American History X** (1883)

4. J. Ignacio Rubio Mane, **Los Piratas Lafitte** (Mexico City, 1938)
5. Mitchell V. Charnley, **Jean Lafitte, Gentleman Smug-  
gler** (New York, 1934)
6. Stanley Clisby Arthur, **Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover**  
(New Orleans, 1952)
7. Harris Gaylord Warren, **The Sword Was Their Passport:  
A History of American Filibustering in the Mexican  
Revolution** (Baton Rouge, 1941)
8. Lyle Saxon, **Lafitte the Pirate** (New Orleans, 1930)
9. Joseph Holt Ingraham, **Lafitte: The Pirate of the  
Gulf** (New York, 1836)
10. Jane Lucas DeGrummond, **The Baratarians and the Battle  
of New Orleans** (Baton Rouge, 1961)

Word for word, Harris Gaylord Warren's biographical essay in the **Handbook of Texas** is the best assessment I have encountered of Jean Laffite's place in American history. Only those facts of Laffite's career which can be documented are included -- this is the bare bones of the historical character Jean Laffite, with all of the legend pared away. Warren drew heavily on the work of Stanley Faye, a truly splendid avocational scholar who made the most extensive use of primary documents from the Archivo General de Indias and other Spanish sources. Faye's article, "The Great Stroke of Pierre Laffite," is concerned primarily with the Laffite brothers' activities after 1814 and is especially noteworthy for its portrayal of Pierre Laffite as the principal Baratarian operative. There is a wealth of biographical information in Faye's work, including some tantalizing glimpses of the Laffite brothers' possible Hispanic origins.

Louisiana's pre-eminent nineteenth century historian, Charles Gayarre published two papers on the subject of the Laffites: the **Magazine of American History** article (since reprinted by the Pemberton Press in 1964), focusing on the brothers' activities in Barataria, and a follow-up article on their Texas scheme published in the **Southern Bivouac** II in 1886. Gayarre offers several key documents and a carefully developed resume of the Laffite brothers' movements through several critical episodes in the history of the Gulf Coast.

I have always preferred **Los Piratas Lafitte** by the Mexican historian J. Ignacio Rubio Mane over its English counterparts. This is in every way a well crafted little book, a very good read even if your Spanish (like mine) is something less than fluent. Similarly, **Jean Lafitte, Gentleman Smuggler** by my fellow Minnesotan Mitchell V. Charnley is an excellent piece of work and deserves a prominent place in any Laffite aficionado's library. Charnley makes good use of what are essentially secondary source materials and does not have to resort to fabrication or documents of questionable authenticity (a la Mssrs. Saxon and Arthur) to tell his version of the Laffite story.

Stanley Clisby Arthur was an historian of limited abilities and his **Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover** makes my list only with a number of qualifications. While making use of some hitherto untapped resources (i.e., the United States District Court records), Arthur really does not plow over much new ground. Perhaps the greatest flaw in **Gentleman Rover** is a result of the author's uncritical use of the "family papers" held by John Andrechyne Lafitte. Arthur seems to have used only photo-copies of some Laffite MSS and much of his revisionist biography was apparently based on the second-hand testimony of a half-literate Kansas City railroad engineer. Even with these flaws, the book would have been more useful had it incorporated footnotes or a more comprehensive bibliography.

Harris Gaylord Warren makes my list twice, and the only reason **The Sword Was Their Passport** isn't ranked higher is due to its scope: Pierre and Jean Laffite play a supporting role in this history of plotters and spies and do not really stand out from Jose Alvarez de Toledo, Jean Humbert, Louis Aury, Juan Mariano Picornell, et al. Warren has unraveled an extremely complicated web of intrigues involving the active participation of Americans (and other foreigners) in the Mexican revolution, making extensive use of primary source materials in U.S., Mexican, and European archives, especially the Papeles de Cuba. The book may be faulted for its inadequate index and maps, perhaps also for its rather pedestrian writing style; nevertheless, **The Sword Was Their Passport**, along with Faye's **Louisiana Historical Quarterly** articles, stands as the most comprehensive analyses of Jean Laffite's role in the history of American expansionism and Hispanic American independence.

Lyle Saxon's **Lafitte the Pirate** may well be the most popular and widely read biography of Jean Laffite -- it is certainly the source most often cited by historians writing about Laffite. These facts notwithstanding, **Lafitte the Pirate** is an historical novel. Saxon was a gifted writer -- **Children of Strangers** is one

of my favorite Louisiana novels -- and a fair hand at historical research. Yet, **Lafitte the Pirate** incorporates essentially the same secondary source material used by Charnley in **Jean Lafitte, Gentleman Smuggler**, the only real difference being that Saxon fleshed out his anti-hero's biography with events which never took place and people who never existed. For example, the tale of Jean Laffite's quadroon mistress is entirely a fabrication based on nonexistent documents.

If there had been a fiction best-seller list in 1836, Joseph Holt Ingraham's **Lafitte: The Pirate of the Gulf**, first published by Harper & Brothers and subsequently reprinted, would have been on it. While it is not the earliest fictional characterization of the life of Jean Laffite, Ingraham's Victorian blockbuster was the catalyst for the first wave of Laffite mania which swept the country in the 1840's. According to the review which appeared in Edgar Allen Poe's **Southern Literary Messenger** in April, 1836, Ingraham based his historical novel on information contained in Timothy Flint's two-volume **History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley** (1833). The novel is a difficult read these days -- sample dialogue: "'Lafitte,' says he [the Count D'Oley], 'thou seared and branded outlaw! -- cursed of God and loathed of men! -- fit keeper of hell's dark springs! -- blaster of human happiness! -- destroyer of innocents!'" There are also a lot of strange words, e.g., "rhodomentive," "praxitiles," "frizziour."

There are better books about the British invasion of Louisiana in 1814-1815 than Jane Lucas DeGrummond's **The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans**; a better Louisiana perspective on the Laffite brothers can probably be found in the works of Charles Gayarre, or even Stanley Arthur; and Stanley Faye and Harris Warren certainly offer a more comprehensive view of the Baratarians' role in shaping the history of the Spanish Borderlands and Latin America. Nevertheless, **The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans** belongs in the library of any serious student of Laffite. Dr. DeGrummond, now retired from teaching Latin American history at Louisiana State University, has made a substantial contribution to our knowledge of the important part played by the Louisiana based smugglers and privateersmen in Jackson's Louisiana campaign, synthesizing a vast array of primary and secondary source materials. **The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans** combines both careful scholarship and literary excellence, a mix of craftsmanship and style that has eluded most other historians who have tried to follow up on Latour and Gayarre.

SHIPS' HISTORIES: USS ALLIGATOR

For the historian whose studies are focused on an individual, such as Jean Laffite, or a small group, such as the privateersmen of the Gulf of Mexico in 1810-1825, the need to compile and constantly update a dramatis personae of the obscure personages encountered in one's research often results in numerous tangential investigations. The careful historian knows that the play of history does not all go on at center stage: we must learn what the bit players and even the stage hands are doing if we are to accurately reconstruct an particular episode in the recorded past. A close inspection of the background scenery is also sometimes helpful.

With this issue of the **LSG Newsletter**, the editors will begin a series of brief sketches on specific ships whose courses took them across the path of Jean Laffite. These ships' histories will enable students of Laffite to better reconstruct the environment of the Gulf of Mexico in the early nineteenth century.

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The United States schooner **Alligator**, the third vessel of that name in the naval service (the tender **Alligator** was captured by the British on Lake Borgne on 14 December, 1814), was launched on 2 November, 1820, from the Boston Navy Yard. The schooner was armed with a dozen six-pounders and measured 86 feet in length, with a beam of 24 feet 7 inches, displacing 198 tons. The vessel was commissioned early in 1821 and made two short cruises to the West Coast of Africa in that year, skippered by Master Commandant R. F. Stockton. In the spring of 1822 **Alligator** took up station with the West Indies squadron, hunting pirates. On 9 November, 1822, off Matanzas, Cuba, **Alligator** fought and captured an armed schooner; a year later the schooner ran aground on Crayfort Reef, Fla., and was lost.

**Alligator's** link to Laffite was noted by Lyle Saxon, on page 259 of **Lafitte the Pirate**. Quoting an item which appeared in the New Orleans **Courier** under the date of 22 May, 1821, we are presented with second-hand evidence that Jean Laffite was among the "pirates" chased by **Alligator** and other naval vessels off Sugar Key, Cuba, earlier that month. Official records neither confirm nor deny this report, originally printed as an excerpt from a merchantman's log book. Specific information about the

schooner **Alligator** was made available by the Naval History Center and the National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D.C.

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REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION

Responses to "Requests for Information" should be sent to: The Laffite Study Group, P.O. Box 44, Cottage Grove, Minnesota 55016.

Needed: Biography of Bartholeme Lafon, New Orleans engineer and cartographer, also reportedly a privateersman and associate of the Laffite brothers.

Jean Laffite treasure in Delaware Bay. Looking for newspaper stories, local histories, etc.

Location of Juan Lafit [sic] plantation, vicinity of New Orleans, ca. 1770. Don Juan Lafitte was a merchant and militia lieutenant, died ca. 1790, sired Jean Lafitte the sailor who died in a hurricane off Guadeloupe in 1817.

Contemporary Latin American writings on Jean Laffite. Scholarly literature, popular works, newspaper and magazine features, film, etc.

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The **LSG Newsletter** is published by the Laffite Study Group, a non-profit educational organization.

Contributions to the **Newsletter** and orders for back issues should be directed to: Laffite Study Group, c/o Robert C. Vogel, P.O. Box 44, Cottage Grove, Minnesota 55016.