

# “Laffite 101”

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## Introduction

- Because our seminars attract attendees with differing levels of knowledge of Jean and Pierre Laffite, we distribute a “Lafitte 101” hand-out as a primer, to get us all largely “on the same page” – to frame, at the outset of the day’s talks, the historical era and events during and amidst which our protagonists were active.
- Jean and Pierre Laffite were smugglers; they were privateers/pirates (the distinction between which is addressed farther below in this document); and they were also patriots, if only opportunistically so. They flourished in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. They lived in New Orleans for perhaps some twelve or fourteen years, and later in Galveston for three. They were products of their times, as are we all to some degree, and they were catapulted into historical superstardom because their lives coincided with: 1) an important epoch of world history, and 2) the decisive battle of an international military conflict. The important epoch of world history was the fight for independence of the American colonies of Spain; the decisive battle of an international military conflict was the Battle of New Orleans of January 8, 1815, the culmination of the War of 1812.

## Origins

- We know that Jean Laffite was born about 1780 or 1781, but we know this not from a birth or baptismal certificate, nor from notations in a family Bible of unquestioned provenance. We know it, instead, from later notarial documents executed by Laffite for routine mercantile transactions. Such a document of that time might not list the birth dates of the parties involved, but it might state their current ages, allowing us to perform the mathematical calculation to approximate the former. Jean had a brother, Pierre, who was older - according to various estimates, by from three to nine years.
- We do not know for certain where the brothers Laffite were born, although the surname obviously indicates a paternal French genealogy.
- On at least one official document, the Laffites indicated origins on the southwestern coast of France, in the region of Bordeaux, but the veracity of this datum is suspect, as there were apparently other and conflicting statements of place of origin made by them at other times.
- Some researchers believe instead that the Laffite brothers were born in the French Caribbean colony of St. Domingue - present-day Haiti. If the St. Domingue theory is true, the slave uprisings during which Toussaint l’Ouverture wrote his page in history in the 1790s would provide a reason for the Laffites’ exodus from that island, while the Francophile culture of New Orleans and its proximity to St. Domingue provide a reason for their relocation to that specific locale.
- Conflicting statements about their place of origin might have been made, for example, if there were instances in which having been born in the mother country, rather than in one of its colonies, might have produced a more favorable position or status for social or business purposes.
- Adding to the difficulty of tracing the ancestry of Jean and Pierre Laffite is the fact that both their surname – with the four possible combinations of one or two “f”s and “t”s - and their given names (“Jean” and “Pierre” in French are “John” and “Peter” in English) are not uncommon, both in the Old World and the New. For example, a line of Laffites elsewhere in Louisiana, referred to as the “Bayou Pierre Laffites,” has been confused by some researchers as closely related to, or descended from, our Jean and Pierre, but objective research has proved this belief erroneous.

## The Laffites in New Orleans and in the War of 1812

- One or both brothers may have already been living in New Orleans when that city became part of the United States in December 1803 through the Louisiana Purchase. They opened a blacksmith shop in the French Quarter (although its location was probably not that of the current “Laffite’s Blacksmith Shop” tavern on Bourbon Street). However, blacksmithing may have always been, and in later years definitely was, a front, because their true source of revenue came from goods captured at sea, smuggled into Louisiana, and sold at auction.
- For the Laffites established a base at Baratavia, on Grande Terre Island on the Gulf of Mexico, some fifty miles as the crow flies due south of New Orleans, in the latter part of the first decade of the nineteenth century, perhaps about 1806 or 1808. There they maintained a fleet of vessels and warehouse space. They would capture ships on the seas and bring them and/or their cargoes to Baratavia, where they temporarily stored the goods. This merchandise they later sold at auction in the environs of New Orleans, especially at a place called “The Temple,” thought to have been in the vicinity of Lake Salvador, southwest of the city.
- At this juncture, it may occur to one to ask this question: How, at this point in relatively modern history, and in the civilized western world, could people forge such a career plundering ships on the high seas as to make themselves, literally, legends in their own time? After all, the golden age of piracy in the Atlantic and Caribbean lasted approximately from 1560–1730; notorious pirates such as Henry Morgan, Calico Jack, Captain Kidd, and Blackbeard all “met their maker” between 1690 and 1720, while the Laffites were not active until more than three-quarters of a century later.
- The answer: via the use of a credential known as a “patent” or “letter of marque,” issued by a rebelling territory to raise a mercenary navy to fight for its independence. These credentials authorized seamen to prey only upon the vessels of the nations with which they were engaged in hostilities, in return for prizes and booty. (For example, the Province of Cartagena de Indias began to issue letters of marque in late 1811 after it formally declared its independence from Spain.) Possession of a letter of marque distinguished the privateer from the pirate – and a legal maritime activity from an illegal one. The Laffites admitted to being privateers, but bristled at, and denied, accusations of piracy.
- After several years, the United States government grew weary of the Laffites’ enterprise, for three main reasons:
  - 1) the need for the customs revenues lost to their smuggling, particularly as the generation of funds to finance the War of 1812 grew in importance;
  - 2) the diplomatic harm caused by the Laffites’ assaults on ships of nations with which the United States enjoyed amicable relations; and
  - 3) outrage at predations not authorized by letters of marque, such as assaults on vessels of neutral countries - or even of the United States itself - and other atrocities.United States authorities tried to stifle the Laffites’ operations by staging raids both at Baratavia and, on at least one occasion, during an auction at “The Temple.”
- In September 1814, the British called at Baratavia to ask Laffite to join their side in the War of 1812, in return for money and a high military rank. Instead, Jean asked for time in which to reach a decision, then forwarded the news of the British offer to authorities in New Orleans, and extended his own offer to instead ally his band with the American forces.
- As we now approach the moment at which the Laffites make their lasting contribution to the course of our nation’s history, it is worth a brief digression to briefly discuss the conflict that set the stage for that action. Knowledge of the causes and importance of the War of 1812 has faded over the two centuries since it was fought, but it was a crucial event at the time. The motives were several:
  - 1) lingering resentment from the American Revolutionary War of three and one-half decades earlier;

- 2) the British incitement of Native Americans to harass settlers pushing our nation's frontier westward; and
- 3) the British practice of detaining American ships while at sea to impress sailors whom the British claimed to be deserters from their Navy.

Today we typically remember, if anything, just one or two vignettes related to the War of 1812: the stories of First Lady Dolly Madison rescuing household goods from the White House as the British attacked Washington, and of Francis Scott Key penning "The Star-Spangled Banner" while witnessing the British bombardment of Fort McHenry in Baltimore. But Americans of that time were fearful of the very real possibility that a loss in the conflict would result in the British subjugating America anew, for if the British captured New Orleans, they captured control of the Mississippi River, the importance of which, for the transport of both humans and cargo, cannot be overstated.

- General Andrew Jackson arrived in New Orleans in December 1814 to establish martial law, and although he had previously considered the Laffitians "hellish banditti," he soon realized he desperately needed their manpower, their knowledge of the labyrinthine bayous surrounding the city, and their stores of munitions, such as musket flints. And so, the United States accepted Jean Laffite's offer of assistance against the British.
- The Laffitians provided significant support in the American victory in the Battle of New Orleans on 8 January 1815, and President James Madison subsequently rewarded them by issuing them a presidential proclamation of pardon for any past crimes committed. All criminal records having thus been expunged, some of the band remained in New Orleans or in Barataria to pursue legal occupations, but the Laffites and some others eventually found their way to Galveston about mid-1817 and continued their seafaring ways. Jean and Pierre even became, for a time, spies and double-agents for the Spanish crown, operating under the code name "No. 13."

### The Laffites in Galveston

- Galveston Island was an interesting place during the three years the Laffites occupied it, from mid-1817 until mid-1820, approximately two decades before the formal founding of the City of Galveston.
  - There were filibusters – freebooters, or mercenary soldiers – such as the Frenchman Louis Michel Aury, the Spaniard Francisco Javier Mina, and the American James Long, all intent on fomenting rebellion against Spanish rule;
  - There were Frenchmen, led by Charles Lallemand, who founded the short-lived colony of Champ d'Asile – "Asylum Field" - across the bay and up the Trinity River, near the present-day city of Liberty;
  - There were conflicts with the native Karankawas "down the Island"; and
  - There was a brutal hurricane in 1818, which devastated the Laffite commune.
- The Laffites set up housekeeping at their "Maison Rouge" ("Red House"). The site of that structure is believed to be that at which the state historical marker now stands at 1417 Water Street/Harborside Drive, although the ruins there visible are not of the Laffites' structure but rather of one dating from the mid-1880s.
- The settlement continued to engage in privateering/piracy, and the United States government again wearied of their activity, as reports once more surfaced of predations on American vessels and of other affronts. After a sailor named George Brown attacked a Louisiana coastal plantation and terrorized its inhabitants, the United States Navy came to call. In an attempt at appeasement, Laffite hanged Brown on the east end of the Island and turned other guilty parties over to the Navy for transport to New Orleans and eventual adjudication and hanging. But when the lawlessness still did not abate, the Navy returned and forced the Laffites to abandon Galveston Island in mid-1820 (sometimes erroneously reported as mid-1821).

### Sailing Off into the Sunset

- The Laffites left Galveston to frequent the waters off Central America and of the Caribbean. They are known to have been active around Cuba – it is documented that, for a brief time, Jean was jailed there, but he escaped.
- Just a year and a half after leaving Galveston, Pierre died, in the autumn of 1821, off the coast of the island of Isla Mujeres in the Yucatan, in a battle with authorities. He was buried nearby on the northern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula at the town of Dzilam de Bravo. A misunderstanding that *his* death was instead that of Jean has caused intermittent confusion for researchers down through the years.
- Jean survived Pierre by just a year and one half. According to an article published by the *Cartagena Gazette*, he was fatally wounded in early February 1823 while trying to capture two Spanish prizes off the coast of Honduras and was buried at sea.

### Apocrypha

A man named John A. Laflin arrived in New Orleans in the 1940s peddling an old journal written in French which he claimed had been penned by his direct ancestor, the famous Jean Laffite. The document - now commonly referred to as *The Journal of Jean Laffite* – claims that Jean did not perish while pursuing his maritime activities, but instead gave up the sea and moved to Alton, Illinois, to become a gentleman farmer, living until about 1850. His “descendant” peddling the manuscript had it translated by French nuns in a convent, and he published it through a vanity press in the late 1950s. The original manuscript eventually came into the hands of former Texas governor Price Daniel, who later donated it to the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center in Liberty, Texas. Most serious researchers believe it to be spurious for a variety of reasons, but tests to date the paper and ferrous ink do indicate for those an origin in the mid-nineteenth century. The *Journal* has now become a healthy-sized satellite story to the greater Laffite legend. Even if it is indeed a hoax, who would have been motivated to take the time and effort to create it - someone of the pre-Civil War era who could write French fluently but who suffered from dementia?

### Some Thoughts on Two Commonly Asked Questions about the Laffites

- Regarding the possibility that the Laffites left buried treasure behind when they departed Galveston Island – This is thought to be very unlikely. Even had they thought to do so with the plan to return at a later time and recover it, Galveston is a barrier island that at that time was virtually devoid of significant vegetation and other naturally occurring features (hence the denotation of a location “down the Island” as “Three Trees,” so rare was such a topographical feature in that era). There would have been little by which to remember a location, and both natural and man-made markings would have been erased by the effects of periodic hurricanes.
- Regarding whether Jean Laffite left any descendants – We are aware of none, although older brother Pierre fathered at least one illegitimate child (with his mistress Marie Louise Villars). However, as explained at the beginning of this document, since both Jean’s given and surnames are encountered not infrequently in historical records in Louisiana, many people believe themselves to be descendants (and not a few have approached the Laffite Society with such claims over the twenty years of the group’s current incarnation).