The Ships' Officers
(Part III)
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Delving further into the research of Lafitte's officers, one notes mention of a "Captain Morin." Possibly sailing for a short time with Aury (through introduction by Herrera), Morin may have also run afloat of the "Commandante" after jumping over to his side. In J.O. Dyer's papers, he is described as a nervous, small, dark Frenchman, dishonest and miserly.

Yet another seaman to run afoul of Lafitte was one "Captain Juana," who arrived in Galveston from New Orleans, possibly in 1817. Lafitte at first would not give to Juana a commission or letter of marque (which, coming from either Venezuela, La Planta, or Grenada, went for as little as fifty dollars in that period). However, James Campbell and others talked the "bos" into it. Yet, Lafitte advised Juana that he (Laffite) "had little confidence in him and that if he ever committed predatory [acts] upon any other than Spanish vessels, he would most assuredly hang him, if ever caught." Such Lafitte did at Campeche Point.

If this account is true; and if the Marotte incident were true; and if the Brown/Ratti incident were true, one would gather that if things ever became too boring in the Lafitte commune, one could always scamper over to the gallows and see which violator of the privateer's codes was having his neck stretched that week.

With such treachery forever boiling about him, Lafitte surely must have missed the presence of some of the former Baratarians, such as Youx and Beluche, that had stayed behind in the old haunts of Louisiana.

Yet, leadership is an attractive force for a vessel, and as such it brought out the likes of Campbell, Churchill, Roach, Beguin, Cochrane, LaPorte, and Hill.

Laffite's offshore ventures probably peaked just before the destructive 1818 storm. The Dyer papers estimate that total prizes taken had amounted to twenty-three vessels. One would assume that it was at this period of time that the following statement was overheard and eventually published "back in the East": "Doubloons were as plentiful as biscuits in Galvez Town!" This must have been the case. Trustworthy officers such as Campbell, Churchill, etc., surely recognized that if they did nothing else but follow through on Lafitte's designs, plans, and orders, there would be no need to quibble over small pouches of coin or jewel.

And yet, to capture a prize, Lafitte's captains had to put to sea. And, prizes or not, the Gulf of Mexico's waters could be treacherously demanding.

Studies show that the "boys" would succumb to the other pastimes of the island. In addition to gambling and varied debaucheries, many officers also found the hunting on the island far too good to ignore. Wildlife was plentiful, and some of the more reflective officers, such as James Campbell, used the hunting as a pause from the duties and duels. So it was that, at times, it was necessary to send 'hunting' parties out just to man certain vessels.

There may also be some substance to the opinion that even the "bos" was not overly fond of life at sea. For one, the threat of capture was forever present. Second, the running of the isle's business meant more than rising each morn to check and see if the ladle were in the water-bucket. The base was nowhere near self-sufficient, so those supplies not furnished by captured vessels had to be bought and brought from elsewhere.

Also, having sailed since God only knows when, and being close to middle-aged at the time of his doing business from Galveston, Lafitte more than likely had long since found the sea to not be the romantic escape over which poets have always warbled. Any person who has had to work at sea can attest to such, for man is not an albatross.

Pity the wretched offshore rig workers, not just stuck in desolate conditions but also stuck in one spot, day after day. While I was splashing around various back decks of various vessels, I occasionally rode the crew-charge boat with construction-barge workers who did six-month stints on the things. Six months in the same spot or field in the Gulf of Mexico is a long time.

These offshore workers tended to either be rather quiet, or very much the opposite. And they acted the same as airline passengers, until the first hour of, say, ten-foot waves passed. Then - well, at that time, there were no seasick bags aboard crew boats.
The U.S. Coast Guard has a saying - possibly original - that touts, "Life at sea is ninety percent boredom and ten percent sheer $@#$%^& terror." And this refers just to the weather. One can readily conjure up a scene where an officer in the "Commandante's" elite array of vessel commanders is just about to come up with the ninety-ninth version of mumblety-peg for the crew when a sail finally catches the squinting scowl of a half-mad lookout. 

Whereas James Campbell at times seemed to be Laffite's ready aide at either port or starboard, one can only speculate as to which way the accolades went among the other trustworthy officers. And what led some of them to remain behind in the Galveston Isle area after the beefsteak had long since vanished? Was the "bos" (many times dead, either by "doctored" or "third-hand" means) slipping back and forth with the same devil-may-care, devil-may-rot appearances, flung 'bout in the swamps of Louisiana? All the time? Or as his schedule permitted? 

In the line of such thought, the name of "Stephen Churchill" springs up on Laffite's office chalkboard of staid officers. Who was Churchill? And is the name correct? Nowadays (the pronunciation being 'now-w-w ah-h daze'), utmost care is given to modern-day, heavy-duty watercraft which zip into, around, and back out of the oil business in the Gulf of Mexico. And such care is given especially to vessel logs, those red (or perhaps green), tightly-bound barmaids of the chart table. 

Bad, if the logs show to not be in your favor; good, if they do. A vessel's log is the modern-day captain's on-board sea lawyer. Almost as reliable as Moses's tablets but not quite as heavy, these books contain not only the vessel's activities but the names and positions of crew members - and whatever else bit of fact the vessel's master deems pertinent or interesting. 

Laffite was business-minded enough to form a real assembly, once set up on Galveston Isle. This led to an able and actual "stock company," a Mr. "ituribarri" being one of five directors. Yet, these board "officers" and other listings of such things neither included nor noted any person named Churchill. 

Modern-day boat companies compile all vessel logs for the year when December 31st rolls around - or try to. Whether because Laffite was either extremely adept at attracting serendipitous women for secretaries, or because he became bored with the upkeep of the ships' logs, he leaves little mention of Mr. Churchill. 

And thus begins, once again, the paradoxical mystery of the "Commandante" and his "movers." Churchill may have been on the papers of the "bos," meaning that he was included in a letter of marque's authorized endeavors, but not as a seaman, or a cook, or a cannoneer, but as a "lieutenant." Was "lieutenant" meant to be a francovian jest at the ranking systems of landlubber militias of the times?

The Laffitian humor is noted for such, assuredly, and at numerous times. Study shows that if someone named Churchill sailed for brimstone and doubloons, it was a short and sweet sailing. He was not lost on the Carmelita, nor on the evasive Devorador. Yet, Churchill was one of the officers to eventually end up staying in the Galveston area. Apparently capable of living with the notoriety of being one of Laffite's "boys," Churchill was in charge of running the ferry for the west end of the island. This led to the first mail route between the island and what was then known as the port and town of Velasco, now known as Freeport. There is also mention of the same Churchill and son apprehending a desperado wanted for murders in Mississippi, and turning the same over to the Sheriff of Galveston, one "W.J. Wilson." The desperado was eventually hanged back in Mississippi. 

So it was said that Churchill was a man of good reputation but also "was a man who would not stand imposition and one whom it was not advisable to needlessly affront."