WHEN DID JEAN LAFFITE LEAVE GALVESTON?

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[WITH A RELATED CITATION PROVIDED BY DR. REGINALD WILSON]

[Editor's note: two different years, 1820 and 1821, are both frequently quoted as that in which Jean Laffite abandoned his Maison Rouge and Galveston Island. Both years cannot be correct, of course, but the incorrect year (whichever it be, since the issue might never be resolved to the satisfaction of all) was at some point in the distant past noted in error, and that error has since been perpetuated through citation by subsequent writers of the work in which the original inaccuracy occurred.

The year of Laffite's departure from Galveston was the topic of the February 1997 meeting of The Laffite Society, and an abstract of that month's presentation was included in the July 1997 The Laffite Society Chronicles.

In this article, Ms. Epperson documents additional research into the issue. At the end of her article is appended a related citation from an issue of the Louisiana Historical Quarterly provided by Dr. Reginald Wilson.]

There has been much written, many discussions, and some creative conjecture about the date Jean Laffite finally abandoned Galveston Island. Did he leave in 1820 or 1821? Let's examine primary sources and statements nearest in time to the event to see if we can determine with some accuracy the correct date.

Laffite was told to leave Galveston several times by representatives of the United States government; the final time, in February, 1820, by Lieutenant Lawrence Kearny of the United States brig-of-war Enterprise. Lieutenant Kearny, aboard the Enterprise off Tortuga, wrote to Commodore Daniel Patterson on March 7, 1820, saying that he had witnessed the destruction of the commune on Galveston Island and that Laffite’s house was burned. Kearny does not say he saw Laffite leave the Island but that he believes that Laffite will comply with the orders1.

Colonel Warren D.C. Hall, a veteran of the Magee-Gutierrez expedition into Texas in 1812-1813, came back to Texas in December 1815 under the command of Colonel Henry Perry at Point Bolivar. Perry and Commodore Luis Aury joined forces with Xavier Mina. Their expedition against the Spanish Royalists failed and Hall returned to Louisiana.

Hall once more arrived on Bolivar with Colonel James Long in 1820. He was left in charge of the camp when Long was absent in New Orleans on business. Hall became acquainted with Jean Laffite when Hall was preparing to vacate Galveston Island. Hall states that he and Laffite became quite friendly, visiting back and forth between Galveston and Bolivar. Hall was endeavoring to get Laffite to leave some of his possessions for the Long group.

Hall reported that Laffite left his town in ashes and departed Galveston the twelfth of May, 1820. Hall’s memoirs were reported some thirty-seven years later in the 1857 Galveston City Directory2. Thus we have a witness to the departure of Laffite but one who was reporting the event many years later.

The date of departure of Jean Laffite from Galveston was reported by Nicolas Jose de Villavaso, the Spanish Consul, as May 6, 1820, and he stated that Pierre Laffite later confirmed this date. The Orleans Gazette of July 13, 1820, and the New York Advertiser of August 18, 1820, also carried announcements of Laffite’s departure from Galveston3.

Stanley Faye said that Laffite apparently did not leave Galveston until the middle of May, 1820, but New Orleans port data lists Pierre as having arrived there on March 7 on board the schooner Pegasus4. Captain William Mitchell of the Pegasus was put on trial for piracy on March 18, 1820. A letter written by Jean Laffite to M. Malus listing the articles he needed to “set sail on the seas” was among the trial documents5.

It is true that some of Laffite’s men revisited the Island after Laffite’s departure and that some captains came to the Island not knowing that Laffite had gone.

Henderson Yoakum’s History of Texas, published in 1855, gives the date of March 21, 1821, as that of Laffite’s final departure from Galveston aboard his ship Pride. Yoakum’s data was based on William Bollaert’s Life of Jean Laffite6. William Bollaert was an English journalist who visited Texas between February 1842 and July 1844. He gathered all his facts from secondhand sources and he was not above embellishing these facts to make them more interesting for the popular tabloids of the day.

Not only is Yoakum’s date of March 21,
1821, as that of Laffite's departure from Galveston incorrect, there is no proof of the existence of a ship named Pride. Historians down to the present day have perpetuated both of these falsehoods. Warren D.C. Hall said in 1857 that Yoakum's history was full of errors too numerous to state in detail.

Thus, primary sources agree that Laffite left his Galveston base some time in the spring of 1820 never to return.

Notes

Related Citation of Dr. Reginald Wilson
Speaking of the vessel Guerriere, captained by Dominique You, in the company of another privateering ship, sailing south from the Gulf for the Caribbean, we read:

"...the Guerriere abandoned Aury as she had abandoned Galveston and sailed for the Yucatan Channel. On May 21 [1820], off Cape Catoche, the two vessels captured a Spanish schooner from Campeche, ordered her to Galveston and then sailed along the coast to examine the shipping of Vera Cruz. The prize captain reached Galveston two or three weeks after the brothers Lafitte had evacuated the place. Therefore he had to sail away for the only prize court remaining open to him, that of Margarita Island in Venezuela!"