THE ACQUISITION OF THE LAFITTE JOURNAL
EDITED BY DON C. MARLER

[Editor’s note: On Tuesday evening, August 12, 1997, members and guests of The Laffite Society met at The Simpson Gallery in Houston, Texas, to hear Mr. William Simpson discuss his purchase of The Journal of Jean Laffite and other Laffite-related memorabilia from Mr. John Laflin.

Mr. John Howells, who did much of the early work of trying to authenticate the Journal, attended the meeting, and, after Mr. Simpson spoke, Mr. Howells presented an account of these authentication efforts.

Laffite Society member and avid researcher Dr. Reginald Wilson recorded on audio tape the remarks of Messrs. Simpson and Howells on that evening, and it is upon that recording that this article is based.

Considerable thought was given to how to present this material. Mr. Simpson’s remarks made up the bulk of the evening’s presentation and, though charming and entertaining, contained numerous digressions and parenthetical statements as well as historical data. Since the objective in requesting that Mr. Simpson address The Society was to obtain a factual account of the acquisition of the Journal, a word-for-word transcription of his talk would thus have contained extraneous text not suitable for this publication. It was thus decided to edit his remarks so as to distill the factual matter from the sum of fact, opinion, and commentary.

What follows is largely a close paraphrasing of the spoken remarks of Mr. Simpson and Mr. Howells. Editorial notes have been inserted in brackets.

To avoid possible confusion when reading the account that follows, it should be noted that the aforementioned John Laflin used the alias John Laffite and believed himself to be the great-grandson of the privateer Jean Laffite.]

William Simpson’s Remarks

About 1969, Mr. Richard Santos, from the Bexar Archives in San Antonio, called to say that an old man [John Laflin, alias John Laffite] had come to him with some papers. Santos had had time to go through some of them and said, “It is the most astonishing thing I have ever seen, because some of the things in these papers could only be proven by things in my archives, and I can assure you nothing has been salted here.” The term “salted” refers to something being put in rather than taken out.

I left Houston and went to Santos’s office immediately. Santos confirmed the things he had relayed on the phone, and he warned me that Laflin was somewhat strange. Santos said he had also called Mr. John Jenkins in Austin and that the old man [Laflin] was headed there.

I left and met with Jenkins in Austin and later met with Laflin. The latter was a very curious and highly paranoid man.

I had no feeling at the time that Santos was acting as a paid agent, but I did feel that he hoped to put people together to purchase the documents and possibly get one or two pieces for his archive. I am not sure that was ever articulated.

I took Jenkins aside, and we agreed to “go halves” on buying the documents.

I made some judgments about Laflin. He kept referring to people who had attempted to steal his collection. He did not want to show us the original collection, but he had numerous photocopies of it which he was willing to display to us.

I refused, saying I could not sell from a photocopy and would not buy from one. I told him, if he were serious about selling, to produce his collection. He could stand and watch [our review] or hire armed guards to watch.

Laflin referred to some people named Thompson – I believe they lived in New Orleans. He had a low opinion of these Thompsons. He said that they had put him up for a time, and Laflin believed that they did so in a scheme to attempt to steal his collection.

Laflin also said that at a radio station (later I learned it was a television station, but he said radio station) part of his collection had been burned. He did not mention that there had been a fire at his home earlier that had burned some of it; I learned about this from Dr. Reginald Wilson. Laflin did not mention it.

Laflin also told us that Charles Hamilton, the autograph dealer, had seen the collection and had attempted to steal it. I do not remember if Laflin said that Hamilton [was actually successful in stealing] some of the documents or only attempted to steal them.

Laflin finally agreed to bring in the collection. It was in the same box in which it was delivered to Mr. Howells a few years later.

The John Laflin that I met had been a
railroad man. His hands were quite coarse, heavy and gnarled. He was not a bookish man. He would have been incapable of faking the collection. He was not, by any stretch of the imagination, what we would call a "literate" man. The Thompsons said he used to go down the streets of New Orleans trying to buy old paper so he could fake these documents. Nonsense! the man would have been incapable - totally, totally incapable - of it.

Jenkins and I agreed to buy the collection for $15,000. Jenkins was going to pay $7,500 and I $7,500. Laflin refused my check, saying, "Mr. Santos sent me to this man, but I don't know you." Jenkins paid him the full amount and I paid Jenkins for half.

Jenkins and I agreed that we would not sell individual documents, but would sell the collection as a whole. Jenkins agreed to market the collection. I later became aware of an agreement between Jenkins and Mr. Santos that Santos would act as agent for Jenkins. At the time, I knew nothing of this, nor did Santos mention it to me, nor did Jenkins mention this.

The collection was not in my hands. It was in Mr. Jenkins's hands. I did not bother to inventory the collection. I assume what I ended up with was the entire collection. I didn't go through the entire collection.

About a year later, Mr. Jenkins had difficulty with cash flow, and he called wanting to sell his half of the collection. I bought it, and the day it arrived my wife and I left for the Cabildo in New Orleans, where we were told we would find so much Laffite material we would be bowled over. They were able to produce one photostat with a signature. The handwriting matched that in my collection.

We were then sent to the university at Baton Rouge, which "was swimming in Laffite material." They had none.

Then John Howells came along and took the collection and did all the work. In the Federal Archives in Fort Worth he found records of a court case in a sealed packet which contained a signature of Jean Laffite. We hired an FBI handwriting expert. This man determined that the handwriting in the collection and that found in the sealed packet in Fort Worth were by one and the same hand.

Governor Daniels and Mrs. Daniels came and expressed interest in the collection in 1975. I had the collection for about six years. Later, Governor Daniels came to this room. We sat at a table which had been in the Parliament; I had it shipped here from England. Governor Daniels, Mr. Howells, my son, myself, and maybe one other person who came with Governor Daniels, sat at that table. I set a price of $20,000. I was not trying to make money off it, but wanted something for my friend who had worked so hard on it. Governor Daniels bought the collection. He later told me he believed in the collection. In 1978 he donated it to the Sam Houston Regional Library at Liberty.

Charles Hamilton wrote some very derogatory things about me and about the collection in one of his books. Hamilton, according to John Laflin, wanted the collection on consignment; he would have sold it on consignment. John Laflin would have none of that.

John Howells's Remarks

In 1973 I borrowed the Laffite Journal from Mr. Simpson, who had purchased it together with John Jenkins from John Laflin, alias John Laffite, the great-grandson of the pirate Jean Laffite. I began to attempt to locate a known signature of Jean Laffite.

At the Federal Archives in Fort Worth I found case #1440, "U.S. vs. John Desfarges." Desfarges was captain of the privateer ship Le Brave which was owned by Jean Laffite. The document contained the "division of spoils" in Laffite's own handwriting and signature. Desfarges and his crew had been captured at the mouth of the Mississippi River attacking a Spanish ship. They were taken to New Orleans where they were tried, convicted and hanged. These documents had been in the Federal Archives since 1819, so I knew they were genuine.

Later I went to the Texas State Archives and examined the Lamar papers. These papers were in the hands of the Lamar family from
around 1840 to 1890 when they were sold to the state of Texas, where they have been since. I examined documents #19 and #24, which were letters from Jean Laffite to General Long. They were given to Lamar by Jane Long.

Mr. Ralph Queen, a nationally known handwriting expert, was hired to examine the signatures and the handwriting of these documents. Queen had 40 years' experience with the Houston Police Department, the State of Texas, and the Federal Government, and was a member of the International Association of Identification.

Mr. Queen examined the journal several times between June and September of 1974. Two pages of the journal containing dates and signatures of Laffite were removed for intense examination. One was found to have been written with iron oxide ink and the other with _____ [word unintelligible] ink. These signatures were compared to the known authentic signatures. The handwriting in the journal when compared to the known signatures of Laffite was declared authentic.

[Mr. Howells then proceeded to give details of the evidence leading to this conclusion. These details have been recorded in writing in another work and are not repeated in this article.]