On Tuesday evening, September 16, 1997, members and guests of the Laffite Society ventured out en masse for a most interesting tour of the harbor of Galveston Island, Texas, Jean Laffite's privateering base from 1817 to circa 1820. What made the tour all the more interesting was the fact that it was conducted by boat aboard the MV Seagull.

The Seagull is a single-deck pontoon boat fifty-five feet in length. It is equipped with twin, 200-horsepower Evinrude engines, modern-day navigation equipment, head (that's "bathroom" for landlubbers), ample seating, wet bar, and various other conveniences.

The original harbor tour was to have taken place on the preceding Tuesday, September 9, 1997, but the spirit of Laffite must have been restless, for the weather on that day produced a raging set of thunderstorms that swept across the bay and island of Galveston, spawned by a blustery norther. The Laffite group, ever prudent, retreated to its usual gathering place at The Eiband's Gallery, 2201 Postoffice Street, to re-group, re-plan, dry out, and enjoy some of the refreshments that had been originally packed into coolers and cartons for enjoyment "at sea."

One week later, the elements were more favorable and the tour was undertaken. With an autumn full moon edging up from the eastern end of the isle, the Seagull slipped out of its dock at the Galveston Yacht Club basin.

The first event, albeit unplanned, was the sighting of a school of dolphin. In teams of mothers and calves, the creatures, which are said to carry the souls of demised mariners, romped to and fro as Laffite Society members and guests "oohed" and "aahed" appreciatively.

The tour then headed for the remains of the historic concrete ship Selma. This vessel, built in 1918, is indeed constructed of concrete, actually sailed, and now rests near shore at the eastern end of Pelican Island, just north of Galveston's harbor. A World War I steel shortage seems to have been the main reason for the choice of the ship's building material.

Having suffered irreparable damage from a grounding and a subsequent dry-dock accident, the vessel was scuttled in 1923 but remains viewable since it sits in water just a few feet deep. In the years after its scuttling, the Selma is reputed to have been the hideout for hermits, World War II spies, and "others." The Seagull was able to get close enough to the Selma that many of those on board reached out and touched its ancient, barnacled starboard side.

Under way again, the Seagull headed for yet another unusual site, the University of Texas Medical Branch's "Face on the Wall." The story behind this "attraction" is the following.

Several years ago, a mysterious image was seen on the exterior wall of a modern UTMB building sitting on the waterfront that was visible from both land and water. The image was more than a few feet in size and so became quite noticeable. Most viewers described the image as resembling a man's face. When press concerning the novelty apparently did not sit well with university officials, they hired someone to use strong acid-cleaning methods to scrub the image off the building.

However, just a few weeks later, the same image reappeared on a lower story of the same building, directly below the place the original image had occupied. Stain, phenomenon, or whatever, the "face" still remains to this day. It seems, to this writer, to resemble a man's visage with a strong chin and a slight smile.

There are other side stories that go with the matter - some funny, some not so funny. One of the latter group involves a woman who died while trying to view the image from her automobile. She drove around the building after dark and, in the poor light cast by the night sky and the few lights burning in the surrounding warehouses, the woman apparently became disoriented, drove off into the water, and drowned.

Departing the site of the spectral image, our group sailed gamely on, the orange glow of a huge, ominous, full moon heightened by the quickly-disappearing September setting sun. Once back into the harbor's shipping channel, the Seagull made a turn to port. Across the channel from this point, on Pelican Island, might have lay the hunting fields set up by Laffite - perhaps his answer to lawsuit abuse and finger-pointing!

The next stop was the berth and dock area for Galveston's "Mosquito Fleet." The "Mosquito Fleet" is a small fleet of even smaller shrimp boats, nestled in a tiny inset of the harbor,
only a few blocks from the actual location of Laffite's famous "Maison Rouge" (although Laffite might have actually docked his fleet of ships more to the east of this current-day mooring). Various unscrupulous business heads have tried over the years to force the "Mosquito Fleet" to move, but without success.

While the Seagull did a lazy turnabout in this 'hidey hole' for shrimpers, our tour guide, Victor Lang, pointed out several birds indigenous to the area, as they roosted in the riggings of shrimp boats. It is unknown how many slumbering shrimpers were awakened by the chatter of The Laffite Society and guests, but this writer noted no objects hurled at our departing wake.

It should be noted that the aforementioned Mr. Lang is a most efficient and humorous guide. Outfitted with a wireless microphone headset which enabled him to bound about from gunnel to bow to stern to gunnel, Victor kept the participants forever informed and entertained.

From the shrimper haven the Seagull headed west, past the famous Galveston Isle sailing vessel Elissa and along the shipping docks.

To add to a night of "unusualities," two American-flagged deep-sea vessels arrived in port during the tour, each making ready to dock with the assistance of harbor tugs. As mentioned by our tour guide, due to the small size of the American merchant marine fleet, any appearance of its vessels is a welcome sight.

The Seagull then made its way to the odiferous sulfur dock and the bridge that connects Galveston Island to Pelican Isle, and, making another slow turn of one hundred eighty degrees across from the Texas A&M maritime training ship and campus, headed back for smooth docking at its berth.

The courteous and able captain of the Seagull is one Ron Mozara, assisted by competent and cordial deckhand Cecil Robles. Captain Mozara informed this writer that an additional vessel, Seagull II, has been built and will soon be pressed into service. This particular vessel will be of a two-tiered, catamaran style, able to roam forty-five miles offshore, with a capacity of eighty passengers.

The Seagull's tour coordinator, Amy Phillips, made the trip as well. Ms. Phillips ably demonstrated her substantial administrative abilities in arranging for the original sailing date, canceling that date due to the inclement weather, and then re-book the tour for the subsequent week. She also attracted attention with her attractive necklace composed of "pieces of eight." This writer was, unfortunately, unable to gain any samples of said pieces of eight with which to start his own collection!

The hardy Laffite Society members and guests who were eventually successful in sailing on the cruise on the make-up date (and we extend our sympathies to those who were unable to be part of the re-scheduled fun and entertainment) included the following: Don Birkholtz, Bobby Boyd, Jim and Margaret Earthman, Bill and Bernadette Foley, Jeanette Haydel, John Hunger, Dorothy McD. Karlanovic, Nelson Leissner, Bill Leopold, Don and Sybil Marler, Louise Martin, Jeff and Kathy Modzelewski, Jim Nonus, Susan Baker Olsen, Don and Joy Peak, Ms. Potter, Dick and Marjorie Rasche, Dave and Ginny Roberts, Christa Sykes, and Judy Waggoner. The success of this tour gave the group hope that another would be planned for some time in the future. For tour information for the general public, those interested may telephone (409) 765-1700.