A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE LAFFITE STUDY GROUP, 1975 - 1990

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The Laffite Study Group ("LSG") was founded in 1975 "to bring together those people interested in Jean Laffite's role in American history, folklore, and literature" and "to encourage original research and facilitate greater communication among researchers."1

The founding members of the LSG were John L. Howells, Jane Lucas DeGrummond, Harris Gaylord Warren, Sue Thompson, and Robert C. Vogel.2 The present writer, as befitting the junior partner in the enterprise, was assigned the task of compiling a bibliography, while all of the members exchanged letters, drafts of research papers, and research sources by mail.

By the end of 1975 several others had joined the group, and it was soon apparent that networking through the mails was becoming too cumbersome. After conferring with Howells and DeGrummond, I volunteered to assemble and edit a collection of LSG research papers for publication. The first Life and Times of Jean Laffite 3 ("LTJL") appeared in January, 1976, and, thanks to a generous gift from Professor DeGrummond, fifty copies were printed for distribution at the Louisiana Historical Association's annual meeting, which was held that March in Lafayette.

The first number of LTJL was well received and sparked considerable interest in the LSG, particularly among Louisiana historians. When LTJL No. 2 came out in July, 1976, we mailed out more than sixty copies. Meanwhile, the group had started to ask for donations from its members to help defray printing and postage costs. Most pitched in five or ten dollars (some considerably more), and in this way we financed publication of three more volumes of occasional papers, as well as a volume of reprints.4

Although it had been conceived as a colloquium and network for researchers, the study group soon started to evolve into something much more like a historical society. In October, 1980, the LSG elected its first board of officers. Jack D.L. Holmes5 became the organization's first and only president, Jane L. DeGrummond vice-president, and John Howells secretary and treasurer. I remained managing editor of the group's publications and served on its Executive Board, along with Pam Keyes.6

As part of its new organizational structure, the LSG committed itself to publishing a quarterly newsletter, the first number of which appeared in the fall of 1980. From 1980 until 1986, the LSG Newsletter was edited by Ms. Keyes.

The sixth and final installment of LTJL appeared in June, 1982, but because of rising production costs it was decided to abandon the occasional-papers format and focus the group's resources on publication of the quarterly newsletter. Five years later, responding to a nostalgic impulse, the editorial committee changed the name of the newsletter to The Life and Times of Jean Laffite, but publication under this title was suspended after Volume X, the final number, in 1989.7

Like the old soldier, the LSG did not die -- it simply faded away. The group's founders had never envisioned a permanent organization; therefore, we never devoted much attention to administrative structure, strategic planning, public relations, or finance. The result was a rather amorphous, almost anarchistic, agglomeration of individuals with diverse interests.

Investment in enlisting new members was never a priority, and, despite the fact that the group found itself chronically short of cash, there was little fundraising activity beyond intermittent letters begging members to remit their dues. Paid membership peaked in the late 1980's at between fifty and sixty individuals and institutions, but there were as many lapsed dues-paying members as there were active, paid-up ones.

We usually printed and mailed between 100 and 125 newsletters, and 75 to 100 copies were distributed gratis at historical conferences. LSG members included professional and avocational historians, academics, journalists, treasure hunters, archivists, librarians, lawyers, teachers, students, folklorists, artists, and collectors spread across twelve of the United States and four foreign countries.8 Despite the fascinating membership profile, there were no meetings of the LSG, although there were several memorable ad hoc gatherings over the years, mostly in conjunction with the annual spring meetings of the Louisiana Historical Association.

Much of the momentum behind the original LSG was gone by 1990. Within a few years, Jack Holmes, Jane DeGrummond, Ray and Sue Thompson, Harris Warren, Fowell Casey, and Judge Albert Tate, all good friends and core
members of the original LSG, had passed away. Meanwhile, other stalwarts had moved on to different interests.

In 1990, an abrupt change in my personal life and career path forced me to reconsider my commitment to the LSG, and I relinquished the editorship of the LJS. Nevertheless, I am pleased to report that along with my good friend John Howells and other old Laffitians, the study group network lives on through the exchange of letters and e-mails.

Notes
1. The mission of the LSG, as formally stated in the by-laws adopted in 1980, was developed out of the correspondence between Robert Vogel, John Howells, and Jane DeGrummond in 1974-1975; the concept of an informal Laffite colloquy originated with Professor DeGrummond.
2. Howells, of Houston, Texas, now retired, was an accountant employed by the Internal Revenue Service. An amateur historian with a keen interest in antique firearms and the Civil War, John was married to the former Miss Jean Laffite of New Orleans (now deceased). Dr. DeGrummond was a professor of Latin American history at Louisiana State University and author of The Barbarians and the Battle of New Orleans. Dr. Warren, then residing in New Mexico, was a retired professor of history and author of The Sword Was Their Passport and many articles relating to Laffite. Sue Thompson and her husband Ray, then living in Gulfport, Mississippi, had earlier written The Land of Laffite the Pirate while residing in New Orleans. In 1975, I was a 22-year-old college student living in St. Paul, Minnesota.
3. The title of the series was borrowed from George A. Pierce’s controversial essay published in 1851 in DeBow’s Review.
4. In 1977, the LSG instituted a $6 annual subscription fee. This was later raised to $10.
5. “Sir” Jack Holmes joined the LSG in the bar of the Holiday Inn in Lafayette, Louisiana, in 1976. A specialist in the history of the Spanish Borderlands frontier (for work upon which he received a knighthood from the King of Spain), Jack was the study group’s self-appointed ambassador-at-large; if he had not been elected president, there would probably have been a coup d'etat. See “Dr. Strangebreed, Or How I Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Laffite” (LSG Newsletter, Vol. 1, No. 1 [Winter, 1981], p. 2).
6. Pamela Grunewald of Miami, Oklahoma, joined the LSG in 1975 when she was a student in junior college. When she left the board, her place was taken by Dr. Thomas D. Watson, professor of history at McNeese State University and a past president of the Louisiana Historical Association.
7. In all, the LSG published six volumes of the occasional-papers series between 1975 and 1982, with a volume of selected reprints from the first five numbers released in 1979. Nine volumes (thirty issues) of the newsletter were published between 1980 and 1990.
8. As an example of the diversity of the LSG, at one time it counted as dues-paying members two judges (one from Louisiana, one from Texas), two convicts (both doing hard time at the Louisiana State Penitentiary in Angola), three attorneys, and two police officers.