THE FINAL RESTING PLACE OF JEAN LAFFITE

PAUL GARDINER

[Editor's note: The Laffite Society expresses its appreciation to Society members and cousins Paul Gardiner and Dr. Reginald Wilson for their work on the Culp/Fosterburg Cemetery, an important factor in the attempt to authenticate The Journal of Jean Laffite: The Privateer-Patriot's Own Story.

Mr. Gardiner has volunteered much time on site in Fosterburg, Illinois, researching the aforementioned cemetery, which is believed by some credible Laffite researchers to hold the remains of the privateer. Mr. Gardiner has perused the tombstones' inscriptions, photographed the area, and interviewed long-time residents about the locale's past.

Dr. Wilson has integrated the data resulting from Mr. Gardiner's physical research into the context of other information known about Laffite and/or contained in the Journal, in an attempt to prove whether this document is indeed the diary of Monsieur Laffite, or merely a clever and laborious forgery.


The following is a summary of the search to determine, at this late date, if any of Mr. Laflin's statements has any basis in fact.

Mr. Laflin stated, "We left St. Louis on the train for Alton, Illinois .... Reaching Alton, we walked six miles to the farm." He also stated that the grave site was "... on the 180-acre farm of Frank Culp, six miles north of Alton and 4 miles southeast of Bethalto, Illinois," and that "The cemetery was ... about half a mile east of the Culp farm[house]."

First, it should be noted that Mr. Laflin's sense of direction was not always correct. Bethalto, Illinois, is east of Alton, and therefore a farm six miles north of Alton could only be northwest of Bethalto.

A study of the Culp family history reveals that a Frank Culp (1869-1955) owned a farm at Fosterburg, Illinois, on Fosterburg Road. The Alton train station is located in north Alton off of Illinois State Highway 140, about three-quarters
of a mile west of Fosterburg Road. The distance from the train station to Fosterburg is approximately six miles, in a northerly direction.

The Culp home still stands today and is known as “the Ashlock home.” Early maps show that the Ashlock farm comprised 200 acres, which included a cemetery in the southwest corner of the property. The two-story brick home was built in 1865 by Richard Ashlock (1816-1900). It was restored in the early 1980's. Frank Culp's wife, Mae, was the granddaughter of Richard Ashlock.

Mr. Laflin stated, “The cemetery was an old one, about one hundred yards long and eighty yards wide, about half a mile east of the Culp Farm.” The cemetery on this farm is located about one-half mile west of the home. It was originally a private burial ground but today is known as “Fosterburg Cemetery.”

The burials in the cemetery date from at least as far back as the early 1840's, according to the inscriptions on several tombstones. The earliest graves are located in the southeast corner of the cemetery on a small hill. The size of the cemetery in 1922 would approximate that stated by Mr. Laflin, who also noted that Laffite's burial took place in the northwest corner of the cemetery, an ornamental railing encircling the grave.

Given Mr. Laflin's error with regard to the relative locations of Alton and Bethalto, might we infer that the location of Laffite's grave was in the southeast (rather than the northwest) corner of the cemetery?

No iron railing is now visible at any of the gravesites, nor could a local resident, who can remember the cemetery as far back as the 1930's, recall seeing an iron railing around any of them.

Mr. Laflin noted that Mr. Culp and his wife invited them for lunch and that they met the Culp's twenty-one-year-old daughter, Edith. That Frank Culp had a daughter named Edith is confirmed on page 675 of the 1912 edition of The Centennial History of Madison County, where it states that Frank Culp had one child, a daughter named Edith Florence Culp, who was born in 1899.

During the visit, Mr. Culp spoke of a barn built in the spring of 1852. Mr. Eugene Grillo of Fosterburg remembers an old barn which was situated about one hundred feet north of the Ashlock home and which he said could have dated from that period. That barn is no longer standing.

The final item to be checked in Mr. Laflin's statement concerns the gravestone of a soldier killed in the Spanish-American War in 1898. A search of the gravestone inscriptions did not reveal any evidence of such a soldier's grave, nor was any record of such a burial found in the Madison County Genealogical Society's published records for Fosterburg Cemetery.

In conclusion, while there appears to be some credibility to Mr. Laflin's account of his 1922 visit to the purported gravesite of Jean Laffite, several of his statements could not be verified. Perhaps Mr. Laflin himself, at the time of his 1966 meeting with Audrey Lloyd, was no longer certain of all the facts of that cemetery sojourn which had taken place some forty-four years earlier.