THE ADVENTURES OF LAFITTE AND THE PIRATES OF BARATARIA
FRANCISCO MOTA
TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY JEFF MODZELEWSKI

[Editor's note: the following article is the translation of Chapter XXVII of the book Pirates in the Caribbean by the Cuban author Francisco Mota (House of the Americas, 1984; "Our Countries" Collection, "Directions" Series). The book title and publishing credits are presented in the original Spanish at the end of the article. The Lafitte Society expresses its gratitude to member Robert C. Vogel for submitting this piece.]

1. The name which attains the greatest resonance among the corsairs and pirates of the nineteenth century is that of Lafitte. The brothers Jean and Pierre Lafitte - corsairs some of the time, pirates the rest; slavers when it was convenient, traffickers always, and, if it were worth the trouble, spies in the pay of he who paid them the best - constitute two of the most adventurous and colorful men of the beginning of the past century.

A great part of the activity of these French adventurers had to do with Cuba and its waters. It is possible that among the numerous Cuban "Lafittes" and "Laftitas" are perhaps found the only living branches of their genealogical tree ... All this, and many other reasons which will be presented in the following, intimately join the history and legend of the Lafittes with Cuban maritime adventure.

2. Jean and Pierre Lafitte, descendants of Spanish Basques who emigrated to France, were born in Gaul's Vascony in the first years of the ninth decade of the eighteenth century. Sons of a sailor, upon the sea they served a precocious apprenticeship. Of Jean, the elder, we have news that already in 1794 - when he was thirteen or fourteen years of age - he was sailing as a cabin-boy on French boats that sailed to Africa - that is to say, on slaver boats, to dispense with euphemisms. It is not known when he made his debut in the Caribbean, but surely this event would have occurred during his first time at sea, since we know that every slaver adventure concluded in the slave markets of the Antilles and of the United States. In those years, his brother Pierre, also involved in maritime adventure, attacked - sometimes as a pirate and other times as a corsair - in the twists and bends of the Antilles. Their center of operations and refuge was the island of Guadaloupe. In order to increase "business," Jean fortified and manned in Saint-Malo a brigantine carrying nearly one hundred men and a half-dozen cannon, and sailed with it to the Antilles.

The avatars of the Napoleonic Wars caused the island of Guadaloupe to fall into the hands of the English, and the situation became uncomfortable for the brothers Lafitte. This event coincided with the need of the emerging nations, rebelling against Hispanic power, for sea-borne corsairs to insert themselves as buffers between their ports and the reinforcements which the empire would send against them. The Lafittes were welcomed in Cartagena of the Indies, and their ships were among the first to hoist the corsair flag of that new nation. The adventurersome blood of the Lafittes was not tamed in the service of this flag, and only for the profits from depredation (which they always undertook for their own account) did they fly it. Since Cartagena of the Indies was not an ideal, but rather a difficult, market for the product of their adventures, they quickly discover young New Orleans.

Here the Lafittes do not find any fools, and although the majority of their neighbors know that they are pirates, in the new city they are found registered as blacksmiths. They have a very famous blacksmith shop in one of the most central places of the populated area, and to it flock all those who wish to enter into dealings with the Lafittes. These dealings come down to the purchase of objects obtained as booty in their attacks, above all the acquisition of "pieces of ebony" - that is to say, black slaves - which the Lafittes introduce clandestinely, whether after their direct capture in Africa, or (more frequently) through attacks on other slavers which had previously done the capturing.

They are the most competitive merchants of African slaves of the hour, and instead of selling by the piece - that is, per man - the Lafittes had the idea, peculiar to neo-capitalist competition, to offer slaves at one dollar per pound. They weigh them, and if they weigh one hundred fifty pounds, then they receive one hundred fifty dollars ...

In the blacksmith shop in New Orleans the Lafittes stored neither the pirated booty nor, much less, slaves for sale. To warehouse both, and to provide a place for their men to rest and repair their boats, the capable Basque pirates had
engineered for themselves a series of hidden enclaves in the Mississippi delta. The place which became most famous was that designated with the Quixotic name of Barataria. This was a coastal island baptized who-knows-when with the name that Cervantes had given to the comical government of Sancho Panza.

It is said that Lafitte waited on his clientele as a king would wait on foreign ambassadors. He served them delicate dishes and exquisite drinks, seating at his table the most beautiful women of New Orleans (famous at all times for its beautiful women). Lafitte came to be an antecedent of those gangsters of our time who, from a well-appointed, air-conditioned office, direct an entire efficient corporation in the service of crime. Actually, Barataria was one of the bays that opened up toward the southwest of the delta island of Grande Terre, at the mouth of the Mississippi, between Fourchon Pass and Southwest Pass.

For a decade, pirates and adventurers brought to Barataria prize vessels and their cargoes. There, auctions were frequent. Many boats had their former structures disguised with fixtures or repairs, so the booty did not turn out to be difficult to place with the numerous businessmen of the North and the South who, under the protection of piracy and corsairs, managed to enrich themselves.

Of the business spirit of the Lafittes speaks the fact that Pierre, the younger brother, came to open a "boutique" of luxury articles on the Rue Royale in New Orleans, where things which came to be exquisites for the businessmen of Barataria were the pleasure and awe of the beautiful women and fops of the hedonistic city.

3. The piratical activities of Jean and Pierre Lafitte have a duration of approximately one and one-half decades, counting just the Caribbean phase. During these fifteen years the majority of the minor attacks, occurring between the Gulf of Mexico and Terra Firma, have something to do with the Lafittes: either one of the boats of their - on occasion - numerous little squadrons commits the act, or it is carried out by some independent pirate or corsair who, eventually, will end up negotiating the fruit of his crimes with the famous brothers of New Orleans.

On more than one occasion the Cuban coast saw itself invaded by adventurers who, without a flag, sacked here and there, generally attacking places of slave labor, not with the motive of liberating the Africans, but rather with that of speculating anew with their skin and bones.

The United States, and above all the most southerly states of that Union, needed more and more slave labor. Starting from the beginnings of the nineteenth century, a series of legal obstacles began to oppose their free trade and, although it might seem a paradox or joke, the man who created the black market for the black man in the South of the United States was Lafitte. He came to have at his disposal about one thousand delinquents of every art and style, eventually even having legal representation in New Orleans in case things were not shaping up as favorably as he would have liked. The best lawyers in the South, of course, were entirely at his service.

To the valiant nature of Jean Lafitte the following anecdote speaks clearly: When the government of New Orleans passed into the hands of the United States, the governor, William Claiborne, annoyed with the importance which Lafitte had acquired in the city, put a price on his head and hung posters with this or a similar inscription: "500 dollars reward will be paid to whomever hands over the said Jean Laffite, wanted by justice. Given in my hand, in New Orleans, on the 24th day of the month of November of 1813." It is probable that more than one neighbor recognized the handsome pirate contemplating with a smile the poster advertising a price for his delivery. A few days later, next to each one of the "Wanted" posters, there appeared others on which was offered one thousand five hundred dollars for the capture and delivery in Barataria "of the said William Claiborne, governor of the city."

4. There is one ugly facet in the life of Jean Lafitte: his excessive inclination to sell and betray those who became close friends of his. We have portrayed him as an antecedent of those of Murder, Inc., but he was not even faithful to his friends as at least the latter were. As soon as he stood to gain something from a betrayal, that was that.

The most documented case of this treasonous attitude is found in his behavior with the Mexicans who trusted him. On the 12th of April of 1814, in New Orleans and under the presidency of Bernardo Gutierrez de Lara, a junta government of the Mexican Republic had been formed. The collaboration offered in terms of
men and boats by the Lafittes was of such importance that these future liberators of Mexico did not hesitate in offering the pirate a position with a voice in the aforementioned junta. A French émigré general, Humbert, would command the expedition, and the corsair boats would transfer almost two thousand men from Matagorda to Tampa to rekindle there a new impulse for freedom in the Mexican people. This plan, in writing and with a wealth of detail, was sold by Lafitte to the government of Havana through a clergyman intermediary - Father Sedella - who at that time was the nucleus of Spanish espionage in the Caribbean. Nevertheless, more heroic and less ruinous attitudes salvage his prestige in history ... Some months after this adventure, in September of that very year 1814, the captain of the British navy, Lockyer, visited him in Barataria to offer him 30,000 dollars and the rank of frigate captain in the English navy if he would join the British forces which, at war with the United States, were attempting to re-conquer Louisiana. Far from accepting the offer, Lafitte sent the British documents to Governor Claiborne and at the same time offered his services and those of his men to defend New Orleans from the anticipated attack of the English. The American governor did not understand the pirate's good will, and not only bombarded his dry dock and encampments, but also made prisoners of Pierre, the brother of Lafitte, and of his two most outstanding lieutenants, Rene Beluche and Dominique You.

Meanwhile, the English general Pakenham had laid siege to the city of New Orleans. Not even the fortunate assistance of General Jackson was sufficient for the defense of the square. When the surrender of the latter was imminent, Lafitte, forgetting recent quarrels, made his appearance on the battlefield with his boats and men, swaying the result of the contest toward the northern side.

Claiborne had no choice but to free Pierre Lafitte, as well as Beluche and You. It is told of this defense of New Orleans that on one occasion when the riflemen of Kentucky had been overwhelmed by the English infantry, Lafitte and his men, brandishing sabers and machetes, launched themselves, as if in the act of boarding a prize at sea, upon the well-disciplined British soldiers who, faced with this unexpected form of fighting, retreated full of fright. The square was held. Jackson, victorious chief, in his report to the President and speaking of the pirates of Barataria, put it in these terms: "I can do no less than praise warmly the manner in which the gentlemen carried themselves and the heroism with which they defended the fatherland ..." At the great ball with which the high society of New Orleans celebrated the victory, the Lafittes and their men found themselves elbow-to-elbow with the most aristocratic of the North American officials. And according to the testimony of the time, the dashing men of Barataria had more success among the ladies than the gallant soldiers of the North...

Moved by the attitude and heroism of the pirates, President Madison in March of 1815 decreed an amnesty which included within its terms all those who lived the adventure alongside the Lafitte brothers. And, for a few months, they enjoyed the tranquility and peace which this settlement of accounts with the law provided them. At the end of that time it began to dawn on them that such a lifestyle did not suit them. For some, this was so because they were wasteful and extravagant by nature, and had little to spend in those days, as unproductive as they were peaceful; for others, like Lafitte himself - more than wealthy - because they carried adventure in their blood. The early times were bad for the pirates, because a team of boats from the United States, Spain, and England attacked one morning the refuge of Barataria, destroyed many of their vessels, and burned the new shelters of the pirates. This attack, occurring almost by surprise, disbanded Lafitte's men for a time. But Lafitte, with quickness and foresight, had already searched out refuge on Galveston Island at a place called Campeche. This period was a bit confused. There was piracy, but there were also betrayals ... Another time in conjunction with the aforementioned clergyman, Sedella, Lafitte brought to the attention of the Viceroy of Mexico the revolutionary correspondence that Guadalupe Victoria had exchanged with other Mexican independence leaders. A harder case, however, is that which he carried out against the planned expedition being prepared in Philadelphia to liberate Cuba. The French engineer Lacarriere Latour had entered into a contract with a North American anti-slavery society ready to finance an expedition to liberate Cuba. This report, which he placed into the hands of the ambassador Luis de Onis so that he in turn would bring it to the attention of the Spanish authorities, was worth to him the pardon of all the crimes for which he was being pursued from Cuba and the remaining Hispanic colonies.
5. A new phase is begun for the Lafittes after this betrayal. For some months they live as corsairs, and more than once they act as such against the corsairs of New Granada and Buenos Aires. Thus, the former attackers convert themselves into defenders of the Cuban coast. What the knave Lafitte seeks is to obtain a patent, not as a corsair, but as a slave dealer, and he succeeds. The government of Cuba recognizes in his talents the potential to provide them with African flesh, and Lafitte and the few men who now follow him deliver for some time. Habit makes him fall into certain convenient traffic patterns: instead of searching for his merchandise on the coasts of Guinea, he prefers to wait for it near the Caribbean, when others less shrewd are controlling it. He returns, then, to his days of pirating. A notice from the New Orleans Customs office is clear in this sense: 'The violation of the slave law continues to be practiced with impunity, just as the fiscal policy of the Republic is being ignored, by a hodgepodge mixture of filibusters and contrabandists who, under the Mexican flag, have their seat in Galveston. In reality they turn out to be the same men who had seemed to have been eradicated from Barataria ...

In Galveston, Jean Lafitte proudly wore the title of “governor,” which he said had been bestowed upon him by a not-yet-existent Republic of Texas.

Pierre, meanwhile, found himself no less than in Havana, where he was hoping to collect part of the pay for their espionage, payment that had been authorized by a Spanish Royal Order of the 2nd of March of 1820. The Lafittes planned to spend their final years in our capital.

Here, in Havana, they had purchased a ranch situated in what is today the crossroads of Correa and Calzada de Jesus del Monte, a place that for many years has maintained the legend that under its ground is hidden part of the treasure of these pirates ... But this home was only to be enjoyed by their descendants. Pierre died in the Yucatan in November, 1821, and Jean continued smuggling slaves, more than pirating, around the Cuban coast, until in January of 1822 the small fleet that still belonged to him from his yesteryear’s powerful squadron was destroyed by cannon fire by a brigantine of the English navy off the southern coast of Cuba.

Surviving the catastrophe, he swam with some of his companions to the Cuban shore, where he ended up taken prisoner by the guards near Santa Cruz del Sur. He was in the jail at Puerto Principe for some weeks, and because he was sick he managed to be transferred to the Hospital of San Juan de Dios, from which he escaped the 13th of February of 1822, to flee toward some inlet of the Camagueyan coast.

The report of the governor of Puerto Principe, dated the 19th of March, said that Jean Lafitte “... is established in a pirate guairo [a small, two-masted vessel with leg-of-mutton sails] and several boats crewed by people of every nation and color, up to the number of thirty men, in the anchorage of Rincon Grande, one league distant from Viaro, on the north coast of this jurisdiction and adjacent to Boca Carabela.”

But Lafitte still sailed for some years around the Camagueyan coast, especially, and it seems to be that due to a matter of interest he ended his days assassinated by one of his Cuban associates in slaver traffic. Because it must be said that this Lafitte had more than one Cuban associate, especially around 1820, when slaves were still important in the Mississippi delta. For some months, the pirates of the Gulf and some Cuban contrabandists and corsairs were planning an attack that would make them famous worldwide. It had to do with nothing less than organizing an expedition, at whose head would be placed Lafitte, to take by raid the island of St. Helena, in the middle of the Atlantic, liberating the most famous prisoner of that time: Napoleon Bonaparte. For this the Lafitales had already prepared accommodations in New Orleans, where they would lodge the illustrious freedman until such time as circumstances would indicate future activities. But the plan crumbled to earth with the unexpected death of the exiled emperor in 1821.

Still to the end of the nineteenth century, in the most picturesque part of New Orleans, there was being pointed out to the tourist the house where, if the adventure had turned out well, he who would be Emperor of France would have ended his days ...

Mota, Francisco, Piratas en el Caribe (Casa de las Américas, 1984: Colección "Nuestros Países," Serie "Rumbos").