THE SAGA OF THE SEAL
PAM KEYES AND DR. REGINALD WILSON

[Editor's note: Pam Keyes and Dr. Reginald Wilson are both very active members of The Laffite Society. Ms. Keyes was also an integral part of the antecedent Laffite Study Group, having served as its Editor of Publications for a number of years. Dr. Wilson is a foremost researcher in the attempt to authenticate The Journal of Jean Laffite.]

Deep within The Journal of Jean Laffite at the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center in Liberty, Texas, is a mysterious eagle-and-serpent seal which has proven to be as enigmatic as Laffite himself.

Perhaps the strangest thing about this silver-colored, very ornate seal is the fact that several historians and manuscript dealers have looked at it over the years without ever suspecting how important it could be. Indeed, this seal could provide the means to authenticate the controversial Laffite journal and collection at Sam Houston.

The seal's importance as a key puzzle piece was not brought to light until Pam Keyes happened to chance upon a picture of it in a book loaned to her by Dr. Reginald Wilson, Treasures of Galveston Bay by Carroll Lewis. The picture shows the Journal open to the page featuring the seal. Keyes was immediately quite intrigued, because she recalled seeing something similar to the seal in the file collection of the late historian Dr. Jane de Grummond back in the early 1980's. These files, which covered one whole wall in de Grummond's home, contained voluminous materials relating to Renato Beluche, Simon Bolivar, and the Laffite brothers and their fellow Baratarians.

At first, Keyes was positive that the seal was one issued by Cartagena, New Granada (Colombia) - as were those issued to Beluche - since it must have been in one of Beluche's letters of marque in Dr. de Grummond's collection that Keyes had espied the similar seal.

The first step was to search for Dr. de Grummond's files, which since her death in 1989 had been dispersed. Most of this vast collection is not catalogued but resides at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where de Grummond was a professor of history. Some of the files were given to researchers. Among those which remain there, the LSU librarian was unable to locate a similar seal, so the mystery continued.

But there is an important clue in the seal itself: its design is strikingly similar, although not identical, to the present-day Mexican national emblem. A study of early nineteenth century Mexican documents turned up no identical seal, however, and in fact, the early Mexican seals bore much cruder images of the eagle than that depicted on the seal in the Laffite journal. But there must be a connection, thought Keyes, and more detective work turned up some interesting possibilities.

The Laffite brothers' financial backers for their Galveston operation were, initially at least, the equally mysterious New Orleans Association, a group of investors which included Edward Livingston. The NOA also provided backing to some Mexican insurgents.

The search for information continued. Dr. Wilson proceeded to contact persons still living who had in the past examined the Journal, to obtain their impressions of the seal. William Simpson and John Howells both recalled noticing the seal, but neither had attached any significance to it.

John A. Laffite at one time had loaned the Journal to two Tulane professors for examination, but they apparently left nothing in writing regarding their impressions. Betsy Swanson recalled that several people in New Orleans did see the Journal, but neither Ray and Sue Thompson nor Stanley Arthur were among them.

Since Dr. Wilson believed the two people most likely to have knowledge of such stamps and seals would be Sally K. Reeves, in charge of the Notarial Archives in New Orleans, and her husband, William Reeves, president of the Louisiana Historical Society, a picture and description of the seal were forwarded to them for their comments and possible identification.

William Reeves responded, "How exciting, yet still mysterious. I am jumping out of my skin!" Neither of the Reeves had seen any seal or stamp similar to the one in the Journal. And one of the most knowledgeable Latinists whom the Reeves knew, Dr. Guillermo Nanez-Falcon, curator of the Latin American Library at Tulane, said he had never seen a similar seal but felt that it was of Mexican origin.

A major break in the case came when Dr. Wilson found several references to a seal in
Stanley Faye’s article, “The Great Stroke of Pierre Laffite.” In a translation of a letter dated February 17, 1818, which Pierre Laffite wrote from New Orleans, he stated he was sending to Jean Laffite on Galveston Island a box marked “J.L.” that would contain printed privateer commissions and other ships’ papers in blank, as well as the engraved seal and hand-stamp of a revolutionary establishment. This establishment was identified as Mexico. The letter, the box, Pierre’s son Eugene, General Humbert, and two Irish and five French officers were aboard the New Enterprise, which left New Orleans on February 19, 1818, for Galveston. Could this engraved seal have been the same one that is now found on page 212 of Jean Laffite’s Journal?

The seal is circular and 3.25 inches in diameter. It is typically Mexican. An eagle, wings spread, holds a wriggling snake in its mouth. The journal seal is raised, firm, and gives the appearance of silver. However, Robert Schaadt, director of the Sam Houston Regional Library, believes this to be thick, heavy silver or gold foil.

The under parts of the eagle’s wings are a bronze/gold color. The feathers on the wings are easily seen, as are the scales on the snake. The border is silver filigree, much of it now tarnished and worn in spots.

In the lower left is a capital “N” with a superscript “O.” In the lower right is a capital “Y” with a superscript “DS.” Could the “N°” stand for “Notarial” or “New Orleans”? The “Y DS” probably stands for “Y Dios” – “and God.”

Dr. Wilson believes that Jean Laffite originally placed this seal on page 212 of the Journal because he intended to end the document at that point (although, more than a year later, after returning from Europe, Laffite did add more to his journal). He placed his privateer seal here to prove, as he always said, that he was not a pirate but a privateer.

By imprinting his seal in the Journal beneath his signature, he apparently believed it would be an unquestionable way to authenticate the document as his creation. But Laffite obviously did not realize that the passage of time sometimes blurs the significance of historical items, so that something which would have been easily recognized in his day could be quite obscure to the modern-day person, even an experienced researcher of history.