LAFITTE GRAVE SITE FOUND
Pam Keyes

The search for Jean Laffite's gravesite reminds me of the hunt for the source of a will-o'-the-wisp anomaly in my own backyard, the "Spooklight." Like Laffite's gravesite, this Spooklight's flickering glimmer, seen late at night on a country road near the Oklahoma-Missouri border, has been teasing people for years to find the truth behind it.

Well, the Spooklight's spark is still a mystery, but Laffite's gravesite is not, at least in my opinion.

It is my belief that Jean Laffite is buried in an unmarked grave within a ten-foot radius of a large oak-tree stump on a small hill in the Fosterburg Cemetery, about six and one-half miles northeast of Alton, Illinois. Is there physical proof of this? No. Is there documentary proof? Only the word of his grandson, John A. Laffite, recounting a 1922 visit to the location with Jean's son, Jules, then eighty-eight years of age.

Think about it. Only a few years after Jean was supposedly buried in the Yucatan, the explorer John Stephens was unable to locate the gravesite there. Stephens found that the story of the Yucatan burial of Laffite was substantiated only by the locals via word of mouth. That is how legends are born, my friends.

Modern-day "explorers" seeking to plumb the Yucatan coast for the gravesite are told it was washed out to sea by a hurricane in this century. How convenient! But that does not explain why Stephens could not find it just fifteen years after the supposed "burial."

I always figured that Jean Laffite was buried in a country cemetery near Alton, but the question of which cemetery posed a problem. I had visited Alton once before, a few years ago, but was limited in time and had no opportunity to research possible locations.

A history professor in Alton tried for years to find the cemetery holding the privateer's grave. The Fosterburg cemetery eluded him, but he was missing a crucial piece of the puzzle: John A. Laffite's memory of the 1922 visit.

The Fosterburg cemetery is in the right location, six miles northeast of Alton, walking in a straight line from the train station there; it is located across the street from the Frank Culp farmhouse. A very large barn had stood nearby, north of the house, according to information gathered from current residents by Paul Gardiner of Edwardsville, Illinois.

Today, there is no cast iron fence anywhere in the cemetery, and caretakers do not remember the existence of anything like that. In 1922, John A. Laffite said that the fence was already quite corroded and falling to pieces, and that a large tree had uprooted part of it. In the whole Fosterburg cemetery, there is only one tree which can today fit this description. This tree is located in the northwestern area of the oldest portion of the cemetery, and it has been cut down (and recently - in October of 1998, I could still see sawdust on the stump). This tree's stump has over 150 rings on it.

There is a concrete outline surrounding the area near the stump, and the roots have heaved this up a bit. An 1870 grave marker for a German woman lies extremely close to the south side of the stump.

Although I did not take soil samples to check for iron residue from the fence posts, I am positive such samples taken near the stump would show such a presence, thereby proving that a fence had been there, long ago. Probably not long after Jules and John A. Laffite's visit in 1922, the fence was removed and its disintegrating parts summarily pitched into the small ravine on the western edge of the burial ground.

John A. Laffite said that during his visit the cemetery was overgrown with weeds and suffered from neglect. That is certainly not the case now; the whole cemetery is carefully maintained to the extent that the slightly spongy, loess-like ground has some time in the past ten years received a fresh layer of topsoil to control erosion and keep most of the old, weather-beaten, heavy marble markers from tumbling forward onto their faces. The grass is carefully trimmed to make the place almost park-like in appearance. Indeed, the prettiest area of the Fosterburg cemetery is at the crest of the little hill in the old part, where I believe Laffite is buried, surrounded by the remains of the predominantly German
settlers of the area. Apparently the old residents coveted burial plots on this little hill highly, as the gravestones here - so wind-whipped that it is almost impossible to read the dates on them - are very close together.

The weather was sunny during my morning visit to the Fosterburg Cemetery, but a brisk shower soon swept in as my husband and I headed back to Alton for a brief tour of the city's shops and casino before leaving for St. Louis to spend the night.

At St. Louis, we found a striking irony: a restaurant named "Jean Lafitte's," sitting beneath the Martin Luther King, Jr., Bridge, right next door to the old stone warehouse where Manuel Lisa once sold his goods on the Mississippi River. This restaurant is located in the newly revamped Laclede's Landing area of St. Louis, and the irony lies in the fact that it is only about one-half mile from the site where Jean Lafitte purportedly lived, according to information in The Journal of Jean Lafitte.

The restaurant manager said that he was ignorant of any connection Lafitte had to St. Louis; the restaurant had been named after him to give a New Orleans flair to the dining spot! And what a restaurant it is, with a brick-and-stone atmospheric interior, gargantuan antique walnut back bar, equally palatial chandeliers, and pier mirrors. The food was excellent; we had the shrimp Creole and baby back ribs.

The next day, we toured the antique district of Cherokee Street, an antebellum neighborhood of cobblestone streets in the heart of Saint Louis, full of stately old brick townhouses that surely must have been there in Lafitte's time.

In summary, there is a lot in Saint Louis and Alton still to be discovered regarding both Jean and Pierre Lafitte. For example, Jean's son, Jules Lafitte, is supposed to be buried somewhere in Saint Louis, and the mysterious Wesleyan burial place of Pierre has not yet been found, so additional issues in this locale remain to be researched. I am fairly well convinced that the area of Jean's gravesite has been located at long last. However, as long as controversy remains regarding the validity of the Lafitte journal collection, even the discovery of the gravesite will likely be contested.

I am sure that there were valid reasons for which both Lafittes faked their deaths in the Yucatan in the 1820's. For example, in his biography of Andrew Jackson, written in the 1850's, Alexander Walker, a contemporary, wrote the following about Jean Lafitte:

Let the truth now be told! Time scatters the mist of prejudice and passion, and patient inquiry dissipates the gaudy and ingenious web of poetry and romance. In truthful history Jean Lafitte [sic] must ever occupy a conspicuous position among the gallant spirits of 1814 and 1815, for the brilliancy and efficiency of the services which he rendered his adopted country, whose authorities destroyed his fortune, blasted his prospects, and handed his name down to posterity as that of a blood-thirsty corsair and outlaw, the hero of numerous fictions, written to inflame youthful imaginations and satisfy a morbid appetite for scenes of blood, of murder, of reckless daring, and lawless outrage. A name which he had, by such honorable self-abnegation, hoped to redeem from all dishonor, and connect with conspicuous and patriotic services, became the favorite nom de guerre of every desperate adventurer and roving corsair of the Gulf.