The Quest for the Best Early Laffite History

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The best and first book to relate the history of the Battle of New Orleans and Jean Laffite's participation in that event is Arsene Lacarriere Latour's wonderfully detailed account, *The Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana*, published in 1816 in Philadelphia. Sadly, even the book's 1965 facsimile reprint edited by the late Dr. Jane de Grummond is difficult to find, so many people never get a chance to read this work.

Historians through the years have agreed that Latour's comprehensive history of the British invasion of Louisiana and subsequent battles is the best on the subject. The book includes a fantastic appendix of letters to and from principals in the events, among them several from Jean Laffite. Latour was a close associate of Jean. A separate volume in the original edition has detailed maps of all the battles.

According to Dr. de Grummond's introduction to the facsimile edition,

"Henry Adams, author of *History of the United States*, said: "Latour was a trained French engineer, whose services were extremely valuable, not only during the campaign but afterwards, for he subsequently wrote a History of the War in West Florida and Louisiana which was far the best military work published in the United States till long after that time and furnished the only accurate maps and documents of the campaign at New Orleans. One might add that all accounts of the Battle of New Orleans written by American historians since that time have been based on Latour's Memoir. English historians have, for the most part, ignored the War of 1812."

Later in the introduction, Dr. de Grummond wrote:

"Not only did Latour know at first hand all the details, vulnerable and otherwise, of the whole coast area, but he also understood the importance of the Baratarians and their leaders—Jean and Pierre Laffite, their oldest brother Dominique You, and Renato Beluche. All of these were of French descent. The section of Latour's book that deals with the Baratarians is most enlightening. They felt the same hatred toward England that Latour felt, and had the same desire to get revenge, and so they were loyal to the United States."

The original first edition of Latour is extremely rare, as is the 1965 facsimile reprint published in Florida. When copies are located, first editions of Latour have been offered for sale by antiquarian book dealers for prices up to $4,500, and the 1965 work, $150.

According to an essay on rare book collecting at the Robert F. Lucas Antiquarian Books website (www.lucasbooks.com), "the concept of a "rare book" is easy to comprehend - it is a book which is seldom encountered and presumably exists in very small numbers. To define the term "rare book" is more difficult ...."

He prefers to define it, "based on the frequency it is seen by the bibliographer, collector or antiquarian book-seller who is searching for copies on a continual basis."

Lucas says: "A rare book is one encountered only occasionally by those working with and/or collecting books in the specific genre. A book that is encountered about once every five years or less frequently is a rare book (In the case of a specialized bookseller, in his/her stock) (in the case of a collector - having a specific opportunity to purchase the book) (in the case of a bibliographer, locating a "previously unrecorded" copy). A very scarce book might be encountered more frequently, but less often than once a year, perhaps once every two to four years. A scarce book is normally encountered approximately once a year by those actively seeking it. An uncommon book may be in the stock of a speciality book-seller four or five times a year, but is not always readily available as is a common book."
Theoretically you should have no problem finding a fine copy of a common book at any time, an uncommon book may take a bit of searching."

My search for a Latour first edition occurred shortly after I first became acquainted with the work when Dr. de Grummond gave me a copy of her edition during a visit to her Baton Rouge home in the 1980s. My personal quest for an 1816 first edition was to span over 20 years before I finally located one for $500 in 1999 at a used book store in Tennessee. It was missing the accompanying atlas with the battle maps, but that wasn't important to me considering I had finally found the one rare Laffite book that was always at the top of my book search lists.

Over the years, you might say the 1816 book had become sort of my Laffite "holy grail" of books, as I never expected to find a copy for sale. I figured they were all in libraries, and not very many of those. I truly never expected to find a copy for sale at a price I could afford.

When my search first began, I used the free search services offered by book dealers across the United States and advertised in such publications as The Antique Trader. It was through such venues that I located a copy of the very rare Vantage Press edition of the Journal of Jean Laffite for $25, a real buy!. In 1982, the search service located an 1816 Latour at Chalmette, La., for me, but it was too pricey at $1,000 since it was in fine condition with the atlas volume. The search continued, with no more Latours turning up for sale in over 19 years, and then something wonderful happened: the internet brought thousands of bookstores together online, and searches for even the extremely rare became much more successful: I finally found my Latour through a Bibliofind want list on the internet. And within three months of finding it, two more 1816 Latours surfaced (albeit at extremely high prices), and just in the past month, another one has become available also (again, for an astronomical amount). But that is in the nature of online book searches.

My Latour is in fair to good shape, bound in full calf, with the frontispiece portrait of Andrew Jackson, although oddly it is a different portrait than the one shown in the 1965 facsimile reprint. According to book reference works dealing with historical volumes, some of the 1816 Latours didn't even have the portrait at front. The best aspect of my book is the pink bookplate on the front endpaper, signifying it was owned by the Military Depot, Quartermaster General's Department. According to the used book dealer, my book was sold by the Shreve Memorial Library at Shreveport, La., to help raise funds for flood repairs. It has a Shreve Memorial Library stamp on the title page.

Finally finding the Latour has made it a bit challenging to think of more rare books to look for on the internet, but there are a few that I have been working on without too much success lately.

In addition to the Bibliofind search service on the internet, one excellent source of Laffite books are the internet auctions on eBay. I have purchased several rare books, including all my Niles Weekly Register bound volumes, in that manner. Internet auctions are particularly challenging as you do not know until the last few seconds of the auction if you're going to win the item or not, as sometimes there is another bidder willing to pay more than you, and able to "snipe" (last second bid) faster than you can.

In summary, if you are looking for a rare book (Laffite-related or not) take heart from my tale and keep up the search, one will turn up, trust me.