THE FINAL YEARS OF JEAN LAFFITE

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The last years of Jean Laffite's life were filled with action, grief and misfortune. His crew mutinied, his brother died, he was jailed, he escaped, then he reportedly ended his life violently in a sea battle while flying the red flag signifying "no quarter".

Preparing to abandon his base on Galveston Island in 1820, Jean Laffite sent Captain William Mitchell and the schooner Pegasus to New Orleans for supplies and men. Pierre Laffite was also aboard. Arriving dockside March 7, 1820, they began provisioning and recruiting. About ninety men enlisted to cruise for four months on a brig of 22 guns under a flag called the Patriot Flag of white, red and blue (Republic of Mexico). The recruits were to receive a bounty of Galvez-town. Before all preparations were finished, the vessel was seized on March 18, impounded by the United States Marshall $30.00 each on boarding the brig in and charged with piracy. A trial ensued. The government did not prove its case and the Pegasus was returned to Mitchell. He took the schooner back to Galveston with the supplies and men for Jean.

Pierre left New Orleans for Havana where he was hoping to collect part of the promised pay for his and Jean's espionage services for the Spanish Crown. The Laffite brothers planned to spend their final years near Havana and had purchased a ranch situated in what is now the crossroads of Correa and Calzada de Jesus del Monte. This home was enjoyed by their descendants as the brothers did not survive long enough to live there.

Loading the brig New Enterprise and the armed schooner Minerva with men and supplies, Laffite torched the village on Galveston, slipped across the bar and out to sea May 12, 1820. George Schumph, the master-at-arms of the brig, said their destination was Santa Catalina (Old Providence) Island in the Caribbean Sea where they were to join Luis Aury.

Sailing along the coast of Mexico, Laffite's ships fell in with the Spanish schooner Constitution on May 22 and seized her. She was in route to Veracruz from Cadiz and was loaded with 1,200 barrels of Spanish whisky, 900 bottles of oil, a trunk of belts, 200 handkerchiefs and other cargo. Clemente Camara, a fisherman, disposed of the ship's goods for Laffite from his ranch in Cancun.

After the capture of the Constitution, three or four of Laffite's crew left the Minerva and returned to New Orleans. They were put on trial for piracy in the United States District Court in July. They pled not guilty, claiming they were misled about the purpose of the voyage. Jacques La Croix, Michel Lebrequeut, James Louis Roeuy and possibly Alexis Pacou, all subjects of the King of France, were found guilty but were later pardoned by the President of the United States.

Sometime between June and September Jean captured another ship described as an "unworthy coastal vessel" of eight cannon owned by Don Vincente Millet, and commanded by Don Pedro Cuppull. The ship was going from Tampico to Campeche.

Jean and Pierre Laffite made their base of operations on Isla Mujeres, an island off the coast of the Yucatan. In September 1820 Jean's crew mutinied, put officers of the brig New Enterprise on shore and turned the ship in to custom officials at the Balize in the Mississippi River. This probably happened because Jean's privateer commission from the Republic of Mexico had expired and the men would have been classed as pirates if they had continued to sail with him.

The Louisiana Courier reported February 22, 1821 that (Pierre) Laffite, the brother of the celebrated pirate, (Jean) Laffite, departed Charleston,
South Carolina on board the schooner Nancy Eleanor. Pierre was thought to have been conferring with the notorious slaver Le Maître.\footnote{11}

Miguel Molas, a pirate turned government agent, attacked the Laffite’s base on Isla Mujeres in November 1821. During the ensuing skirmishing Pierre Laffite was mortally wounded. Jean sailed around the island and repeatedly attacked Molas but was not able to rescue his brother and companions. Left on the beach when Molas retreated into the hills, Pierre, George Schumph, and Lucy Allen, escaped by boat northward along the coast. Pierre died on a small rancho three leagues from the lookout of Dzilam. His body was taken to Dzilam and given a church burial sometime during the first ten days of November. Schumph was jailed and interrogated and Lucy, ill, was left in Dzemul. The tribunal conducting the investigation of Pierre’s death received information that the captain of the pirate boat, more than likely Jean Laffite, arrived in Merida and stated that in view of the state of independence of the Mexican Empire he had stopped seizing ships and offered his help in returning them and their cargoes to the owners.\footnote{12} Typical of the quixotic reactions of Jean Laffite when he learned his prizes were not Spanish.

The Mexican coast no longer offering Spanish prizes or safe haven, Jean sailed into the Gulf toward Cuba. No doubt he was despondent over his brothers death and he became reckless and careless.

The historian, Francisco Mota wrote, “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 still belonging to him from his yesteryear’s powerful squadron was destroyed by cannon fire by a brigantine of the English navy off the 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 (now Camaguey) 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 Camaguey coast.”\footnote{13}

The narrative continues saying, “The report of the governor of Puerto Principe, dated the 19th of March said that Jean Laffite is established in a pirate gaiaro (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.”\footnote{14}

The Louisiana Courier of November 29, 1822 reported, belatedly, that Laffite wrecked on the Island of Cuba, was apprehended and brought to Porto Principe, jailed, and escaped with the help of influential persons, thus confirming the Mota narrative.

The ships Alligator and Grampus of the United States pirate hunting squadron of Commodore David Porter reported engaging Laffite and other raiders in a hot skirmish off Sugar Key, Cuba on May 1, 1822.\footnote{15}

An article dateline December 25, New Orleans, from the Boston Newspaper, The Independent Chronicle and Boston Patriot, of January 25, 1823 reads: “The Schr. Columbus Ross, at this port from Jamaica, on the 26th November, Lat 19, Long 82, fell in with the Colombian private armed schooner, Gen. Santander, Capt. John Laffite, 95 days from Carthagena on a cruise; had captured 2 Spanish vessels, one of which they had manned for Carthagena. Capt. Laffite treated us with the greatest politeness, without even looking at our papers of cargo, and convoyed us for two days, until he judged us out of danger of Pirates. He sent us about 30 4 10 shot for our gun, when we informed him we had none, and offered us any other supplies he could furnish. The Gen. Santander is a schooner of about 40 tons, with a brass 4 lb on a pivot.” This was the last contemporary source noted by the author that Jean Laffite was still alive.

It is interesting to note that The Rhode Island Republican newspaper of June 4, 1823 stated, “South American News: the Colombian national schooner General Santander, Capt. J. Smith,
arrived in New York on Sunday last, in 16 days from La Guaira, having on board His Excellency Senator Leandro Palacios, Consul General, ..."16

A long time respected J. Laffite researcher writes, "(Simon) Bolivar had no privateers at sea in 1822-23 (he never had any use for Aury or Jolly and his government formally abolished privateering on 6 October 1821), but the government of Colombia/Venezuela did apparently from time to time hire private armed vessels to perform naval functions mostly against pirates and ex-privateers rather than Spanish merchant marines."17

When and where did Jean Laffite die? The prevalent and often repeated story is that he died in the Yucatan in 1827 or 1828. This story originated with the Mirabeau B. Lamar Papers which were published in 1922. Captain S. R. Fisher wrote to Lamar in February 1836 saying that a turtle fisherman named Gregorio told him that Laffite died of a fever near Teljas, a small village on the Yucatan, about 1828. In May of 1838 Fisher again writing to Lamar said Laffite died at Lasbocas, on the north coast of the Yucatan, about 1827 and was buried at Salam (sic).18 It is obvious that Fishers source was talking about the death of Pierre Laffite in 1821 and not Jean Laffite.19

Some authors have said that Jean died off the coast of the Yucatan in a hurricane, another stated that he died in Venezuela of wounds suffered in a battle with a Spaniard, yet another wrote that he was assassinated by Cuban associates in the slave traffic. None have given supportive documentation.

The most recent account of Jean Laffite's death was contained in a publication entitled, The Journal of Jean Laffite, published in 1958 by John A. Laffite, the self-acclaimed great-grandson of Jean Laffite. This account relates that Jean returned to the United States a few years after leaving Galveston in 1821 (he actually left in 1820) lived until 1854 when he died in Edwardsville, and was buried in Alton, Illinois.20 John A. Laffite was actually the son of John and Mary Matejka, Bohemian immigrants into Omaha, Nebraska in the 1880s. John, while working for the Southern Pacific Railroad, changed his surname twice, from Matejka to Nafsinger to Laffite.21 Later he changed the spelling to "Laffite" when he discovered that was the way Jean signed his name. Although many researchers have tried to authenticate the lineage that John A. recorded, in detail from Jean Laffite, they have never met with success. The Journal of Jean Laffite is undoubtedly a fictional account whose original source is a mystery.

A few researchers have suggested that Jean spread stories of his death to confuse the authorities. It is more realistic to assume that rumor and mystery surrounding his death gave rise to fanciful suppositions.

The earliest account of Jean's death was published on March 19, 1823, in the Gaceta de Cartagena (Cartagena Gazette) in Cartagena, Columbia according to the Mexican historian, Rubio Mané. The article said that Jean Laffite died in a naval battle fighting in the service of the liberator of South America, Simon Bolivar.

Two other 1823 accounts of Jean Laffite's death were published in United States newspapers. The Washington Gazette, April 23, 1823 ran this item, "We learned this morning of the arrival at this port this morning of the schooner Gleaner, Saunders of Portsmouth, N. H. from New Orleans, that he was boarded on the 10th inst. by a boat from Commodore Porter's squadron, and informed by the commanding officer that a British sloop had captured a piratical vessel of 60 men, commanded by the celebrated Lafitte, who has been for a long time notorious as a pirate and smuggler on the Florida coast and Barataria, and that he was killed in the action." The second publication, the Niles Weekly Register, Baltimore, April 26, 1823 noted, "It is stated that a British Sloop of war has captured a piratical vessel that had a crew of sixty men, commanded by the celebrated Laffitte, who has been for a long time notorious as a pirate and smuggler on the Florida coast and Barataria, and that he was killed in the action." The second publication, the Niles Weekly Register, Baltimore, April 26, 1823 noted, "It is stated that a British Sloop of war has captured a piratical vessel that had a crew of sixty men, under the command of the famous Lafitte. He hoisted the bloody flag and refused quarter, and fought until nearly every man was killed or wounded — Lafitte being among the former."22

A lurid and romanticized account of the sea battle and the death of Laffite was published in 1837 in a
book entitled, *The Pirate's Own Book: Authentic Narratives of the Most Celebrated Sea Robbers.* Although the story lacked names and sources it may have been based on facts but was so embellished with "penny dreadful prose" that historians later discounted it.

The final results of research inquiries on Jean Laffite's death are still not in. Analysis of the existing data leads this researcher to believe Jean Laffite died in the early months of 1823, probably in a sea battle with an as yet, unknown adversary. All reports of his death after this date are nebulous, contradictory, or lacking corroborative evidence.

ENDNOTES

2 Federal Court Records, Case #1509, Fort Worth, Texas. Samuel Hughes sworn testimony, March 18, 1820, concerning the Schooner Pegasus.
5 Federal Court Records, Case #1588, Fort Worth, Texas. Trial of three of Jean Laffite's men; Col. J. S. Thrasher, "Early History of Galveston," *Galveston City Directory* (1857): 62. The Schooner Minerva arrived in Galveston from Cuba in April under Captain Guy R. Champlin of New London. The ship's name had previously been General Artigas and prior to that Captain Champlin gave her to D. Moran and sent her back to Havana to lie in wait for prey. Apparently she returned to Galveston in time for Laffites departure. Descriptions of the brig *New Enterprise* and the schooner Minerva were given in the *U. S. Magazine and Democratic Review* July 1839 by an officer of the brig-of-war *Enterprise*. He reported that the brig was a pretty model of about 200 tons with 16 guns, and the schooner was the very beau-ideal of a pirate, clipper built, with a long, low, black hull and lofty fishing-rods of masts.
6 Archives of the Laffite Society, Galveston, Texas, manuscript, page 20, "Institute de Cultural de Yucatan, Year of 1821 summary Investigation Against the Englishman don Gorge Schumph (Relative to the Pirate don Pedro Laffite, his Death and his Burial in the Port of Dzilan)," Merida, 1995. Translation by Dorothy Karilanovic and Jeff Modzelewski. Later cited as Manuscript Institute de Cultural de Yucatan, etc.
7 Ibid., Manuscript, "Institute de Cultural de Yucatan, etc.", page 16; *Niles Register* January 20, 1821.
8 *Loc. cit.*, Federal Court Records, p. 16.
9 Ibid., Federal Court Records, p. 16.
10 *Niles' Register* September 30, 1820.
11 Personal correspondence, March 31, 2001 Robert Vogel to Jean L. Epperson.
12 Ibid., Manuscript, "Institute de Cultural de Yucatan, etc." Lucy Allen was described as an English-American woman of Mobile. She was undoubtedly the mulatto mistress of Pierre who died in her arms. He had lived in New Orleans with several mixed-blood mistresses in the past, Marie Louise Villars and Adelaide Masclari.. The liaison between women of color and men of Pierre's acquaintance was a common occurrence. Luis Aury, Barthelemy Lafon, and Francois Rene Dupuis had mulatto mistresses and children. Lucy bore a daughter after the death of Pierre. The daughter, Felipa Cedelies married Simon Estrada and sired a son, Jose Yores Estrada whose family of Dzilan are considered to be Laffite descendants.
13 *Loc. cit.*, Mota, Adventures of Laffite, np.
14 Ibid. Mota, np.
January, 2001

No meeting was held. Members attended the annual meeting of The Louisiana Historical Society in New Orleans, LA.

February 13, 2001

President Jeff Modzelewski announced that the office of First Vice-President had become vacant because of a resignation due to family illness, and that the duties of the Second Vice-President had been turned over to Mike Eubank as Membership Chairman.

Mike Eubank reported that some of those who had traveled to the Yucatan in January of this year were able to visit briefly the archives in Isla Mujeres, the Cultural Institute of Mérida, where no data on the Laflites were immediately available, and Puerto Adventuoroso where the CEDAM museum was located. The Municipal Archive in Mérida was closed during the day the group visited. Other sites visited were: 1) San Francisco of Santa Clara church, where some say that Pierre Laflite may be buried; 2) Mission Santa Anna at Dzemul; and 3) the Laflite grave monument at Dzilam de Bravo. Photos of these sites were shown to members. Ex-Officio President R. Dale Olson and Editor-of-Publications Don Marler, who both participated in the trip, will give a more detailed account of sites visited and impressions in due course.

The President reported that he had submitted an article for publication in The Laflite Society Chronicles describing the recent trip in January, 2001 by members to New Orleans to attend the annual meeting of The Louisiana Historical Society at which author/historian W.C. “Jack” Davis was the featured speaker.

Members were reminded of the upcoming symposium at The University of Texas in Austin, TX March 8, 9, 10, entitled The French in Texas, at which Ex-Officio Laflite Society President R. Dale Olson will speak March 9 during the segment from 12:30-2:30 p.m. on the history of the document alleged to...