PIERRE AND JEAN LAFFITE:  
GOING TO  
THE PRIMARY SOURCES  

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Historians and biographers are always on the lookout for primary sources—journals, diaries, narratives, family papers, letters, deeds, wills, ledgers, government and business records—that provide the raw material for successful scholarship. Avocational researchers and even those with a casual interest in a subject will also want to go to the original sources to seek authenticity or to find that tangible link to the past which so often brings history to life. Consulting primary sources is, as Martha Stewart would say, a good thing for anyone who is seriously interested in writing or reading about history.

The quantity of primary source material that is directly related to Pierre and Jean Laffite is not particularly voluminous, but it is widely dispersed and not all of it is easily accessed. The great bulk of the archival data is contextual, in the sense that it did not originate with the Laffite brothers themselves, but was written by their associates, their adversaries, and in rare cases by disinterested third-party observers. Indeed, much of the Laffite historical record consists of documents generated by clerks, attorneys, bureaucrats, naval officers, soldiers, and government functionaries. While some of the documents exist in printed form or have been reproduced on microfilm, most are unpublished manuscripts deposited in public archives. Quite a bit more than half of the documents discussed in the following pages were composed in English and some of these have been translated into that language by scholars, but many important texts are available only in their original Spanish or French. A sizable proportion of the archival data consists of file copies of letters and reports that take the place of originals that failed to survive the vicissitudes of nearly two centuries, and some groups of documents duplicate the materials deposited in other collections.

Major concentrations of Laffite archival material are found in the Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain; the National Archives, Washington, D.C., and Fort Worth, Texas; the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; and the Archivo General y Publico de la Nacion, Mexico, D.F. In addition, individual Laffite documents and groups of related records are located in the holdings of the Center for American History at the University of Texas and the Texas State Library, Austin; and the Historic New Orleans Collection, New Orleans. Some minor manuscript items have been deposited with other research collections in Louisiana and Texas.

By far the largest and most important body of documentary data about the Laffite brothers is located in Spain. The Archivo General de Indias or AGI is housed in the Casa Lonja in Seville and its vast holdings include the Papeles Procedentes de Isla de Cuba, the working papers of the colonial administration at Havana, Cuba, that were transferred to Spain after the Spanish-American War. Several legajos (bundles) of documents contain items pertaining to the activities of the Laffites and their fellow travelers during the period 1812-1821. These include the intelligence reports compiled by the Spanish consuls at New Orleans as well as a considerable amount of correspondence generated by secret agents, informants, and other operatives on the ground in New Spain and the United States. Of particular interest are more than a score of letters written by the Laffites and their closest associates, describing in detail the affairs of the privateers and filibusters and the efforts of secret agents 13-A and 13-B to secure their royal pardons; a letter recommending Pierre Laffite for service as a Spanish spy with a biographical sketch of the pirate compiled by his
fellow turncoat, Dr. Juan Mariano Picornell, in 1815; and Jean Laffite’s diary of his clandestine visit to Galveston in March-April, 1817. Stanley Faye and Harris Gaylord Warren mined the Cuban Papers for Laffite material, which they used to great effect in their books and articles. However, while Faye and Warren had to rely heavily upon photostats and typescripts of Spanish documents collected for American libraries under the auspices the Carnegie Institution of Washington during the early decades of the twentieth century, modern-day researchers can conveniently access the Seville collections on microfilm through several major research institutions in the United States. The starting point for work in the Cuban Papers is Roscoe R. Hill’s Descriptive Catalog of the Documents Relating to the United States in the Papeles Procedentes de Cuba Deposited in the Archivo General de Indias at Seville (Washington, 1916).

While a considerable quantity of correspondence and other documents relating to piracy and filibustering, including numerous Laffite items, remains in Havana as part of the Archivo Nacional de Cuba (formerly known as the Archivo General de Cuba), the majority of these appear to be copies of items deposited in other archives. In addition to the Cuban Papers, the AGI contains the Audiencia de Santo Domingo and the Audiencia de Mexico, where colonial authorities also grappled with Baratarian corsairs and Texas filibustering expeditions. Important documents concerning Galveston and Pierre Laffite’s “great stroke” are preserved in the expedientes of the Spanish mission to the United States, which form part of the Seccion de Estado at the Archivo Historico Nacional in Madrid.

Several extensive collections of manuscript material relating to the activities of the Laffite brothers in Louisiana and Texas are located in Washington, D.C. The principal depositories are the National Archives and the Library of Congress. At the National Archives, the Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library (Record Group 45) has the letters of naval officers serving in the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean, including reports written by David Shaw, Daniel T. Patterson, Lawrence Kearny, and others describing their efforts to interdict the pirates and smugglers operating from Barataria and Galveston. These records also include letterbook copies of the correspondence between Jean Laffite and the captain of the U.S.S. Lynx in November, 1818, and the January 3, 1820, letter of Pierre Laffite to Commodore Patterson proposing the evacuation of Galveston Island. The General Records of the Department of the Treasury (Record Group 56) contains the official correspondence between the Treasury Department and the Collectors of the Port of New Orleans that describes in detail the federal government’s efforts to suppress smuggling along the Gulf Coast. The Records of the Revenue-Cutter Service form part of the Records of the Coast Guard (Record Group 26) and includes letters from revenue officers and the log books of revenue cutters operating in Louisiana waters. Preserved in the General Records of the Department of State (Record Group 59) are the dispatches from the American consuls in Havana and notes from foreign consuls in the United States containing information relating to Galveston and revolutionary events in Latin America; there are also groups of miscellaneous records relating to filibustering expeditions against Mexico in 1811-1816. The Records of the Office of the Secretary of War (Record Group 107) also contain several items relating to the Battle of New Orleans. Some, but not all, of the records in the National Archives have been microfilmed and the National Archives staff have published guides to most of the major collections. A good place to start research is George S. Ulibarri and John P. Harrison’s Guide to Materials in Latin America in the National Archives of the United States (Washington, 1974).

The Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress has three important groups of papers of interest to Laffite researchers. Probably the best known document is Jean Laffite’s petition to the President of the United States, dated December 27, 1815, which is archived in the Papers of James Madison. Less well known, but probably more
important, are the letters exchanged between Jean Laffite and special agent George Graham during the latter's mission to Galveston in August and September, 1818. The Library of Congress also owns an artificial collection of formerly secret government documents entitled U.S. Department of State Spanish Affairs that deals with Mexican insurgents and filibustering expeditions in 1810-1816, with letters written by Jose Alvarez Toledo, Manuel Herrera, and other patriot notables.

A treasure trove of primary archival data awaits Laffite researchers in the Records of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Louisiana, which form part of Record Group 21 deposited in the National Archives and Records Center-Southwest Region at Fort Worth, Texas. These records consist of the dockets, case files, minute books, grand jury presentments, and other documents relating to the federal court proceedings against the Laffites and other privateers, pirates, filibusters, and contrabandists before Judge Dominic A. Hall in New Orleans. Of particular interest are the criminal and admiralty cases proceedings involving the Laffite brothers and their associates, the records of the court-ordered medical examination of Pierre Laffite while he was in jail awaiting trial in 1814, and the famous 1819-1820 Le Brave piracy case. In the late 1930's, the Louisiana historical records project of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) under Stanley C. Arthur compiled an index, synopses, and transcriptions of some of the piracy case files, but these contain many errors and should be used only as a last resort.

The important sources of Spanish archival material outside of the Archivo de Indias are in the Archivo General y Publico de la Nacion, or AGN, in Mexico City. Collections with key documents relating to piracy, privateering, and filibustering include the Provincias Internas series, which deals with events in Texas; Operaciones de Guerra, with several volumes devoted to military affairs during the revolutionary period of 1810-1821; and Historia, volume 152 of which concerns the activities of Louis Aury and Xavier Mina at Galveston. The AGN also includes the archives of the various provinces, including Yucatan and Vera Cruz. An excellent guide to the Mexican archival sources, though somewhat outdated, is Herbert E. Bolton's Guide to the Materials for the History of the United States in the Principal Archives of Mexico (Washington, 1913).

The most extensive collection of Laffite-related primary source material in Texas is in the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Collection, the core collection component of the Center for American History (formerly the Eugene C. Barker Texas History Center) at the University of Texas in Austin. The documents relating to Jean Laffite and the Battle of New Orleans assembled by New Orleans bibliophile Edward Alexander Parsons were purchased by the University of Texas and remain in Austin; though never fully authenticated, the September, 1814, letters of Pierre and Jean Laffite represent the pirates' earliest known writings. The Papers of Louis Aury, the French privateersman who occupied Galveston in 1816-1817, are also at the University of Texas. But the most important data base is the Bexar Archives, which represent the working papers of the Spanish colonial administration in San Antonio de Bexar and the official papers of the last governors of Spanish Texas, with numerous letters and reports dealing with piracy and filibustering where the names Laffite, Aury, Humbert, et al., appear frequently. In addition to its Texas history holdings, the Center for American History has a large collection of Latin American archival material on microfilm, including numerous items from the AGI and AGN.

The Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, a collection of historical material gathered by the second president of the Republic of Texas, are available for examination at the Archives Division of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission in Austin. Lamar collected two of Jean Laffite's letters to the filibuster James Long as well as items relating to James Campbell, Warren D. C. Hall, and others who were active in Texas during 1810-1821. The July 7, 1819, Laffite letter (number 19 in the Lamar Papers,
Rosenberg accession number 26-0392) is also owned by the Rosenberg Library in Galveston, and the question of authenticity remains unresolved. The Texas History Center at the Rosenberg also has typed copies of dispatches from Felipe Fatio, the Spanish consul in New Orleans, regarding the activities of the Laffites in 1817-1819, made from originals in the Cuban Papers. The Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center in Liberty owns the Journal of Jean Laffite and related papers, the historical validity of which has been called into question by scholars, most of whom regard the Journal as a hoax.

Several important groups of primary documents of particular interest to Laffite researchers are available for study in New Orleans. The Historic New Orleans Collection, a private institution located in the French Quarter, has acquired privateer commissions issued to the brothers Laffite and Dominique You by the French consul at New Orleans in 1812-1813, which are curated in the Pierre and Jean Laffite Collection and the Dominique You Papers. The New Orleans Notarial Archives and the Civil District Court Archives, which are both housed in the Civil District Courts Building, have several property transaction and civil court records bearing the names of the Laffites. The St. Louis Cathedral Archives of the Archdiocese of New Orleans has a number of sacramental records for various individuals named Laffite, including the marriage of Jean Laffite [sic] to Isabel Roche on December 5, 1777, and the baptism of their son Jean (recorded as Juan), who was born on December 27, 1778. Linking any of the individuals named in the cathedral registers to the pirates of Barataria is problematic — inquiring minds should also be aware that Lyle Saxon took liberties with the church records when he wrote his famous historical novel, *Lafitte the Pirate*.

Some of primary source material concerning the careers of Pierre and Jean Laffite has been published in the United States. Harris Gaylord Warren published translations of several important Laffite documents from Spanish and United States archives in the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, under the titles "Documents Relating to George Graham’s Proposals to Jean Laffite for the Occupation of the Texas Coast" and "Documents Relating to the Establishment of Privateers at Galveston, 1816-1817" (1938), and in the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* as "Documents Relating to Pierre Laffite’s Entrance into the Service of Spain" (1940). English translations of the Laffite brothers’ correspondence in relation to the British offer of September, 1814, were first printed in the appendices to Arsene L. Latour’s *Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana in 1814-15* (Philadelphia, 1816), an excellent reprint of which is now available. The Parsons documents were also published in the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* (1940). John V. Clay and Robert C. Vogel translated Spanish consul Felipe Fatio’s June 27, 1818, report on the Laffite scheme to betray the Champ d’Asile colonists (from the Cuban Papers in the AGI) in the 1982 number of *The Life and Times of Jean Laffite*. Some Laffite-related material from Mexican archival sources appears in Hubert Howe Bancroft’s opus, *History of the North Mexican States and Texas* (San Francisco, 1889). William S. Dudley of the Naval Historical Center in Washington, D.C., has edited two fine volumes of documents from the Naval Records Collection, entitled *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History*. Volume one (Washington, 1985) covers the year 1812 and volume two (Washington, 1992) covers 1813; both have sections devoted to the Gulf theater of operations. Some of collector Beverly Chew’s letters to the Secretary of the Treasury, with his graphic descriptions of the events at Galveston in 1816-1817, were printed in an 1818 House Committee on Foreign Relations report on the suppression of piratical establishments that was later reproduced in volume four of the *American State Papers: Foreign Relations* (Washington, 1834). William R. Manning’s three-volume *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States Concerning the Independence of the Latin American Nations* (New York, 1925), consisting of state papers and dispatches, is a rich source of
background information on the privateers and patriots of Mexico, Gran Colombia, Venezuela, and the United Provinces (Buenos Aires).

The Laffite brothers and the Baratarians were a recurring problem for Louisiana's first American governor, and several relevant letters and proclamations were printed in volumes two and six of The Official Letter Books of W. C. Claiborne, edited by Dunbar Rowland (Jackson, 1917). The Papers of Andrew Jackson contain numerous Laffite items in connection with Jackson's New Orleans campaign, many of which were published in John Spencer Bassett's The Correspondence of Andrew Jackson (Washington, 1926-1935) and in volume three of the University of Tennessee Press edition of The Papers of Andrew Jackson (Knoxville, 1991). The Texas Library and Historical Commission published six volumes of The Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar (Austin, 1925), where the Laffite items are found in volume one. Virginina H. Taylor translated and edited The Letters of Antonio Martinez: Last Spanish Governor of Texas 1817-1822 (Austin, 1957), from the governor's papers in the Bexar Archives, which includes numerous references to pirates and filibusters. The Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diaries from 1795-1848 (Philadelphia, 1874-1877), edited by Charles Francis Adams, provides a behind-the-scenes look at the diplomatic problems created by the Galveston colony of adventurers and the State Department's handling of filibustering, privateers, and clandestine operations.

There are a number of important printed primary sources in Spanish. Documents from the notarial archives in Merida, Yucatan, relating to the death of Pierre Laffite near Dzilam in 1821 were published by Jorge Ignacio Rubio Mane in the Boletin de la Sociedad Mexicana de Geografia y Estadistica (1940). The Archivo Nacional de Cuba published a volume of documents relating to Mexico, including a number of Laffite items, in Documentos para la historia de Mexico (Habana, 1961) as part of its Publicaciones del Archivo Nacional de Cuba series. Materials from the AGI and AGN relating to Barataria and Galveston also appear in the volume published by the Ministerio de Acuntos Exteriores for the U.S. Bicentennial, Documentos Relativos a la Independencia de Norteamerica Existentes en Archives Espanioles (Madrid, 1976).

Newspapers are an undervalued but critical source of primary source material. In New Orleans, Le Moniteur de la Louisiane, The Louisiana Gazette, The Louisiana Courier/Le Courrier de la Louisiane, The Orleans Gazette and Commercial Advertiser, and Le Louisianais de L'Ami des Lois all printed news items on Barataria and Galveston as well as intelligence obtained from correspondents. In Washington, D.C., the semi-official National Intelligencer, edited by Joseph Gales, routinely printed government reports and correspondence relating to the Gulf region; and in Baltimore, one of the hotbeds of Spanish American privateering activities, Niles' Weekly Register also devoted considerable ink to piracy news and accounts of filibustering in Texas between 1814 and 1825, with several pertinent editorial notes by publisher Henry Niles. Unfortunately, early nineteenth century newspaper editors were not especially critical of the sources of their information and were seldom inclined to undertake anything resembling investigative journalism. Nevertheless, many of the first-hand, eye-witness accounts found in contemporary newspapers are not preserved in any archival collection, and are therefore of critical value in reconstructing the chronology of historical events involving Pierre and Jean Laffite.

The foregoing brief summary of primary sources is by no means exhaustive; there are many other archives and collections of documents that have the potential to yield important data. For example, Laffite researchers have not yet explored to any great extent the archives of the French West Indies and Central America, the traditional stomping grounds of the corsairs. The extent of the material possessed by the national archives of Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, and Haiti relating to republican privateers and filibustering.
expeditions in the Gulf of Mexico is also unknown; it would be strange, indeed, if there were no Laffite documents in Cartagena, Caracas, Bogota, Buenos Aires, or Port-au-Prince, or, for that matter, in Jamaica, Santo Domingo, or Guadeloupe. Presumed to be Frenchmen by birth, traces of the brothers Laffite may turn up some day in one of the European provincial archives, hidden away in some obscure church register or conveyance record. Finally, though far removed from Barataria and Galveston, the Archives Nationales in Paris and the Public Record Office in London would also seem to offer fertile fields for Laffite research.

Summary of minutes
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The Journal of Jean Laffite: the Privateer-Patriot's Own Story.

According to Advisory Board member Dr. Reginald Wilson, French Laffite Society member Sylvie Feuillie is scheduled to present a paper at the symposium.

Advisory Board member Dr. Reginald Wilson reported that he had made an audiotape recording of historian and author W.C. Davis' talk on Jean Laffite presented at The Louisiana Historical Society's annual meeting in New Orleans on January 8 of this year. According to Dr. Wilson, author Davis stated that there is a wealth of information to be uncovered in the Cuban archives and in the New Orleans Notarial Collection. Member Norman Sachnik volunteered to make a copy of the tape for the Laffite Society archive.

In addition, Dr. Wilson mentioned that certain correspondence involving John Matejka (a.k.a. John A. Laffite) had been located in the Missouri Historical Society. Dr. Wilson also stated it had come to his attention that certain persons had remembered seeing a grave marker with the name of Jean Laffite in an "old Catholic cemetery." He also noted for genealogical interest that the name of John Matejka's step-father, "Nofsinger," had an alternate spelling of "Nofzinger."

March 13, 2001

The President expressed thanks to Editor-of-Publications Don Marler for his diligent efforts to get out a timely issue of The Laffite Society Chronicles. Members present received the February, 2001 issue, Vol. VII, # 1 at the meeting.

President Jeff Modzelewski announced again the resignation of two officers and their replacements, and that Mike Eubank is now Web Master for the Society in addition to assuming the office of Second Vice-President as Membership Chairman.

An up-dated membership list was distributed to members presented written reminder from Treasurer Jerry Eubank to send in dues for 2001. The list and reminder is being sent out to other Members-at-Large who cannot attend the regular meetings.

Mike Eubank announced the new Web address as: http://laffite.particjpant.org. Mike asked members to let him know if there are errors or changes to be made on the Society’s Web page.

Press Director Dave Roberts reported he had submitted an article to The Galveston County Daily News about the recent special event trip by members to attend the annual meeting of the Louisiana Historical Society on January 8. The article was not