MYSTERIOUS PAINTING IN THE CABILDO

Jean L. Epperson

A very dark, unsigned, oil painting on a mahogany board hangs in the Louisiana Historical Museum in the Cabildo on Jackson Square in New Orleans. The picture contains the figures of four men, which legend says are the only authentic likeness of Jean and Pierre Laffite, Dominique Youx (You) and perhaps Renato Beluche.\(^1\)

An early brochure published by the Louisiana Historical Museum attributed the painting to artist John Wesley Jarvis. Jean Laffite was in Galveston at the beginning of 1820 and never left until the early spring when he vacated the island for the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean. He was not seen thereafter in New Orleans. Contemporary sources record Jarvis in New Orleans only during five winters; 1820-21, 1821-22, 1828-29, 1829-30, and 1833-34.\(^2\)

Gary Fretz, a member of the defunct Laffite Study Group and a member of the Laffite Society, visited the Museum last year. He and his wife took some good colored pictures of the painting. Tamra Carboni, museum curator, told them that the painting had been examined under ultraviolet light in the 1960s and the name “Ezra Ames” was discovered under layers of overpaint. It was unlikely also that the artist was Jarvis since he did not arrive in New Orleans until the 1820s. She continued saying that it is believed that the picture was simply a genre scene and did not depict the brothers Laffite. Fretz added that the painting was reputed to have hung in a bar called Café des Refugies, a rendezvous of French refugees during the 1800-1820 era, and that it was given to the museum after the bar closed.\(^3\)

Stanley Clisby Arthur wrote in Jean Laffite Gentleman Rover that the painting hung in a water front doggery owned by Dominique Youx in New Orleans. Further research has not confirmed that Youx ever owned or operated a bar in the city.

Recent information from Douglas Haller, Director of Collections of the Louisiana State Museum, has shed considerable light on the background of the painting. He states that the painting was originally attributed to John Wesley Jarvis but the only signature on the painting was that of Ames. There is no picture underneath the surface one. (Artists sometimes reused old canvas or boards, painting over pictures by other artists.) The painting appears to have been originally loaned by, then purchased from Dr. I. M. Cline who possibly traded another painting with Rev. Marshall Manel (or Manal) in order to obtain this particular painting. The Museum accepted the painting in 1917. Mr. Haller continues writing that the title of the painting is given in five different ways:

- **Laffite and His Lieutenants** in an article from The New Orleanian (Sept. 6, 1930) vol. 1, #1.
- **Genre Laffite Brothers** on a conservator’s report.
- **Jean and Pierre Laffite and Dominique You** from a cutout in an unidentified magazine.
- **The Gamblers** in correspondence about the painting.
- **Dominique You and the Laffite Brothers** (The Baratarian Pirates and possibly Rene Beluche) on a curatorial worksheet, but not accepted as official for our database.

Mr. Haller closes with, “Which ever title is definitive I’ll leave to your discretion. So, as you can see, there is much speculation about this painting and not much which is absolute.”\(^4\)

Ezra Ames was self taught as a portrait, miniature, landscape, sign and carriage painter. Born in 1768 in Framingham,
Massachusetts, he died in 1836 in Albany, New York. He was a prolific artist, undertaking all types of subjects, but the vast majority of his paintings were portraits. Ames' biographers wrote that his contemporaries did not consider him to be a first class artist. He lived most of his life in New York and was never known to have visited New Orleans. Some of the Ames paintings have been attributed to Jarvis as Ames copied some of Jarvis's techniques. 5

It is believed that Ames painted the picture of the four unknown men and someone painted over his signature at a later date for their own purposes, perhaps to sell the painting suggesting that it was a portrait of the renowned Laffites. A connoisseur of American artists and paintings would have known that Ames was never in New Orleans.

Readers may draw their own conclusions, or not, as the case warrants. Legends can be fun and fanciful but not always factual. Facts can be dull but thought provoking.

ENDNOTES

4. E-mail Douglas Haller to Jean L. Epperson, April 2, 2002.

An oil painting attributed to John Wesley Jarvis. It portrays Jean LaFfite lifting a noggin of rum as he sings a bawdy sea chanty. Pierre LaFfite, standing and filling a clay pipe, while Dominique You holds the little brown jug. The figure on the left may be René Beluché. The original, painted on a mahogany board, hangs in the Cabildo, Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans.
Color photo of the Jarvis painting provided by Gary Fretz and his wife who enhanced the photo, using computer enabling processes.