IN MEMORIAM: WILLIAM DALLAM SIMPSON, 1926 – 2002

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[Author's note: On Tuesday, August 12, 1997, The Laffite Society met at Simpson’s Galleries in Houston, Texas, to hear Mr. William D. Simpson discuss the provenance of the so-called Journal of Jean Laffite. The Society’s Dr. Reginald Wilson taped the presentation, and current Laffite Society Editor of Publications Don Marler transcribed, in condensed and paraphrased form, the remarks into an article which appeared in a subsequent issue of The Laffite Society Chronicles. The author is grateful to Mr. Marler for allowing him to draw upon that article to prepare the following.]

One of the most intriguing of the questions related to Jean Laffite is whether or not the manuscript we commonly call The Journal of Jean Laffite is truly what its title suggests – the autobiographical memoirs of the famed privateer.

Its veracity would mean that Laffite lived until the middle of the nineteenth century, his seafaring ways far in the past, his handwritten recollections in French providing a valuable first-hand account of an important era in the history of the Americas as they saw colonialism draw to a close and the young United States of America begin its ascendance to becoming a major player among the nations of the world.

But even if fiction, the Journal must be considered a work of art, and no less an integral thread of the Laffite saga than other items proved factual.

Laffite aficionados lost a strand in this thread of the Journal when Mr. William Dallam Simpson passed away on Saturday, June 22, 2002. Were it not for his lengthy involvement with fine arts and antiquities, the Journal might not have come first to Simpson’s attention, and thence to its current repository at the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center in Liberty, Texas. From this locale the Journal has served, and will continue to serve for years to come, as a fascinating source document whose merits will long be discussed and debated.

Simpson was born on March 1, 1926, in Durham, England, grew up in Galveston, and later moved to Houston. He served our country as a Marine in World War II, and after attaining his university education, became a Baptist minister. He labored long and hard against difficult odds to advance the cause of civil rights in conservative east Texas.

But it was perhaps the founding of Simpson Galleries, one of Houston’s largest and most prestigious art and antiques auction houses and now a third-generation family enterprise, which set Mr. Simpson on his interective trajectory with the fact and legend of the privateers Laffite.

Aware of Simpson’s knowledge about valuable artifacts of the past, some time around 1969 Mr. Richard Santos, of the Bexar Archives in San Antonio, contacted him. An older man called John Lafflin, who also went by various other names, including John Laffite, and who represented himself as the great-grandson of the famous privateer, had approached Santos to try to peddle the manuscript of the Journal. Santos was astounded at the document, as he believed that some of its content was proven true by documents of which he had sole custody there at the Bexar Archives, and access to which Santos felt certain this older gentleman could not have obtained.

Interested in the find, Simpson drove to San Antonio and met with Santos. Later, Simpson met with Mr. John Jenkins of Austin, a collector whom Santos had also contacted, and with Lafflin himself. Discussions were held, during which it was noted that Lafflin was a coarse, peculiar, and distrustful sort, but also obviously completely incapable of forging the manuscript whose sale and purchase were under consideration, which lent credence to its authenticity.

The negotiations were difficult. Lafflin exhibited, in the opinion of at least one observer, feelings of paranoia, stating several times that individuals had attempted to steal his collection in the past. He did not even want to show the potential buyers any originals, but only photocopies. However, Simpson told him that as he could not sell from photocopies, so neither would he buy from them.

Finally, Simpson and Jenkins each put up one-half of the total purchase price agreed upon of $15,000. Even the cash settlement was problematic. Santos had
referred Laflin to Jenkins, but had not at first alluded to Simpson, and Laflin refused Simpson's check for $7,500. Jenkins eventually paid the full amount and Simpson reimbursed him $7,500.

Simpson did not inventory the collection. He and Jenkins agreed that Jenkins would keep custody of, and market, it, and that it would be sold only as a set, not piece-meal. Santos may also have had an agreement to act as agent for Jenkins.

About a year later Jenkins asked Simpson if he wished to buy his interest in the collection, and Simpson did so. He did not look at the documents for a year or so, until Laffite researcher John Howells of Houston asked if he might help determine its authenticity or lack thereof.

The most impressive argument in its favor was the testimony of an FBI handwriting expert, Mr. Ralph Queen, that the handwriting of the *Journal* matched that of a document in the Federal Archives in Fort Worth that is known unequivocally to be in Laffite's hand because it had been in continuous custody of the federal government since 1819. The handwriting of the *Journal* was also declared to be the same as that of Laffite in letters he wrote to General James Long which now reside in the Lamar papers at the Texas State Archives.

In 1975, Governor and Mrs. Price Daniels expressed an interest in the collection. They and Simpson sat at a table in his galleries that had once been in the English Parliament and agreed upon a sale price of $20,000. About three years later, in 1978, Daniels donated the collection to the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center in Liberty, where it resides to this day.

The Laffite Society mourns the passing of Mr. Simpson. This author believes that Mr. Simpson has, by now, in the great beyond, learned the truth from Jean Laffite and John Laflin as to whether the *Journal* is, in fact, authentic, and we of the Laffite Society would welcome a sign as to the answer.

*In pace requiescat.*