[Editor's Note:] Society member, Gary Fretz, has been doing much basic and difficult research on the Laffites. Many of us have been looking forward with eager anticipation to see what he is doing and finding. We pushed him to let us know through an item in the Chronicles. This article is a set of notes, brief sketches of his work and a request for assistance. We look forward to the full report when it is ready.

Participants in the profession of privateering in the early 1800's generally had short careers. Jean and Pierre Laffite were the exception in that they operated their perilous business for almost 20 years. They reached what seemed to be the pinnacle of success on more than one occasion only to lose everything. One would think that as clever as they were, some plans would have been made to retire and enjoy the fruits of their hard and dangerous work. Human nature is immutable—most people who lose everything once and make plans to ensure that it does not happen again. Because the Laffites could trust very few associates, their families would be the natural custodians of some hard assets. It is the goal of this research to identify some authentic Laffite descendants and to determine what happened to the legacy of the Laffites. What happened to their families? Was there any treasure passed on to them? Did they carry on the business?

According to the Archdiocese of New Orleans Sacramental Records, Jean and Pierre Laffite clearly had children with the Villars sisters. These "second generation American Laffites" and their baptism, marriage or birth dates were:

- **Rose Villars**, born to Pierre Laffite and Marie Louise Villars on August 28, 1812. When Rose was baptized, one of her sponsors was Martin Lafitte, described as her brother.

- **Joseph Laffite**, born on May 2, 1821 to Pierre Laffite and Marie Louise Villars.

- **Jean Laffite**, born to Pierre Laffite and Marie Louise Villars on October 27, 1816.

- **Jean Baptiste Lafitte**, baptised May 20, 1811. The father's name is obscured and the mother's last name was Villars.

- **Manuel Lafitte** was born on January 10, 1818 with one parent listed as Louise (as in Marie Louise?) Lafitte but the father's name was obscured. This is probably another son of Pierre Lafitte.

There may have been more children with other women. For example, we see an entry for the birth of Marie Josephe Laffite, daughter of Pierre Lafitte and Adelaide Maselari on October 27, 1810. Miss Maselari was from Santo Domingo and Pierre is listed as being from Bayonne in France. Remember these last three words.

There was a Pedro Lafitte born to Pierre Lafitte, and Juana Delas in the marriage records. This Pedro Lafitte, Jr. married Maria Veret of Baracoa, Cuba on December 16, 1820. They had a daughter named Maria, born September 17, 1823.

Author Lyle Saxon stated that Marie Josephe Laffite and son Pierre (a.k.a. Pedro) were known to be living at the
home of Savinet, Laffite's attorney in 1830.

Daughter Rose, according to the Sacramental Records, married Andre Tessier and had five children with him in the New Orleans area. Their numerous descendants have now been tracked through the 1890's. A granddaughter of Rose, according to 1930's author Lyle Saxon, was involved in a lawsuit filed in New Orleans in 1920. Saxon opened the court records, discovered some descendants and claims they told him many "family stories" if he agreed to keep their identities secret. This secrecy was "necessary" because Rose was either an "octaroon" (had 1/8th Negro blood) or a "quadroon" (1/4 Negro). Even though she married a white man and all traces of the African-American heritage had disappeared in subsequent generations, her granddaughter was still classified as "Negro" on her birth certificate. This granddaughter told her new husband, discovered this "scandalous" entry on her birth certificate. The granddaughter filed a lawsuit against the New Orleans Board of Health to have her birth certificate changed to "white" and lost. The husband was angry that she had not disclosed this fact before they were married, so he filed for divorce and won the divorce suit. At that time, it was illegal under Louisiana law for a white to marry a black. Research is being conducted now to find these same court records and authentic descendants. After extensive research, nothing corroborating Saxon's allegations has been found.

The rest of the Laffite "second generation" including the Villars sisters seem to disappear from the U.S. Census, Marriage, Death and Sacramental Records after 1831. Did they all succumb to disease at an early age? It is possible, but perhaps there is another explanation.

According to Cuban author Francisco Mota in his book Pirates in the Caribbean (submitted by Robert Vogel, translated by Jeff Modzelewski), Pierre Laffite found himself no less than in Havana, where he was hoping to collect part of the pay for their espionage, payment that had been authorized by a Spanish Royal Order on the 2nd of March, 1820. The Laffites planned to spend their final years in our capital. Here, in Havana, they had purchased a ranch situated in what is today the crossroads of Correa (Street) and Calzada de Jesus del Monte (Street), a place that for many years has maintained the legend that under its ground is hidden part of the treasure of these pirates....

An historian based in Baracoa, Cuba, Dr. Alejandro Hartmann Matos, advises that this area of Havana was indeed settled by wealthy French planters in those days. Throughout the 1800's, there were cafes and bakeries serving French food, French signage was common and French West Indian architecture prevailed.

So, under the theory that the Laffites took the compensation from their spying activities and purchased a Cuban "retirement ranch," new research was commissioned one year ago in the Cuban National Archives. The goal of this research is to confirm if the Laffites owned this plantation and to prove who the authentic descendants are. There is a significant number of Laffites living in Cuba today and some claim to be descended from the corsairs Jean and Pierre Laffite.

Unfortunately the present Cuban government restricts research into old property records and genealogy is viewed as "elitist". The property records are a sensitive subject because some plantations and homes were arbitrarily seized by the government in the 1960's. The government does not want this issue dredged up. So, we were denied access to the property records. Nevertheless, here is what we were able
to uncover in the other Cuban National Archives and through other sources.

- Francisco Mota, who wrote about the Laffites' purchase of the ranch near Havana, cited information from an earlier author, Jose L. Franco. Franco's best-known book is Politica Continental Americana de Espana en Cuba (Academy of Sciences of Cuba, 1947), which discussed Jean and Pierre Laffite, their descendants and Cuban connections. Franco said that Jean and Pierre Laffite were from the Oloron region of France near the Spanish border. The major seaport and largest city of this region is Bayonne. Remember, this is the city Pierre Laffite claimed as his birthplace when his daughter Marie Josephe was born. The Oloron region is about 50 miles south of Bordeaux, which is the other area the Laffites claimed to be from.

In another book by Jose Franco entitled Historical Essays, he states that:

- Jean and Pierre Laffite's children were sent to France for their education. Maybe this is why many of the "second generation" Laffites, including the Villars sisters, disappeared from New Orleans?
- Jean Laffite was murdered on the coast of Cuba in 1825. (This assertion does not agree with the other more recently accepted theories of his demise).
- The children of the Laffites then moved to Cuba from France. Some "friends of the Laffites" recovered some "goods of the pirates" and the children were "settled in Havana". In one context, it may be interpreted that these "goods of the pirates" were used to financially support the children.
- The descendants of the Laffites were living in or near Havana at the time Franco was writing his book.

Additional information has come to light from a different source. There is a Vilma Laffite living in Havana today (at 3102 30th Street) in the beach area, who claims to be a great-great granddaughter of the corsairs. She claims descent through a Juan/Jean Laffite born in 1818 to either Jean or Pierre Laffite but she, so far, cannot prove this connection. Could this Juan Laffite be the son of Pierre born in 1816 (and not 1818 as Vilma says) as noted in the New Orleans Sacramental Records? According to Vilma, this Juan Laffite married Eugenia Laffite who had a son named Adrian Laffite. Adrian's son, Vilma's grandfather, was Alfonso Laffite and he was a prominent planter in the province of Havana. Vilma's aunts Maria Luisa Laffite and Olga Laffite now live in Miami. Remember that "Maria Luisa" Villars was the name of Pierre Laffite's mistress who may be the ancestor of Vilma.

In April, 1820, 459 French colonists with 122 children arrived in Havana, Cuba to inhabit some new French real estate developments. The streets had just been laid out and houses were under construction. Twenty-eight colonists were from New Orleans and twelve were from other parts of Louisiana. A Jean Laffite was listed as a property owner but the specific location of his property is not given nor is his origin. The French settlements were located in several different areas of Cuba including Cienfuegos on the south coast and Caunao in the north central region. The Cuanao River empties on the north coast near the islands where Jean Laffite was known to anchor in the spring of 1822. (This information is from the Cuban National Archives, Gobierno Superior Civil, leg. 133, no. 19,998 and leg. 630, no. 19,892).

Two other independent sources place Laffite in this area at this time. The Governor of Puerto Principe, in his regular communique to the central government in Havana, reported on March 19, 1822, that Jean Laffite and 30 men were anchored at Rincon Grande in a two-masted vessel. Then Captain Stockton of the U.S.S. Alligator,
in the *Louisiana Gazette* (June 18, 1822), reported that Laffite plundered the American sloop *Jayon* April 11th near Xibara. So, perhaps Laffite’s “retirement ranch” and “safe-house” was in this area and he also had property closer to Havana?

Cuban Ministry of Finance Records state that in 1836 a Juan Bautista (Jean Baptiste) Laffite was established as a merchant in Havana. Could this Juan Bautista be the same “second generation” Jean Baptiste Laffite born in New Orleans? In 1855, Juan Bautista Laffite’s business failed and a nephew named Juan Laffite, “a native of Paris, filed a claim as a creditor in the bankruptcy proceeding”. (Ministry of Finance - Clerk’s Office, Legago 213, no. 15 in the Cuban National Archives). Maybe this Juan, who was labeled as a “native of Paris”, was actually the Juan who was born in New Orleans and sent to Paris for his education?

Our research has also uncovered a number of subsequent Laffite marriages and births in Cuba and New Orleans during the 1850-1890 era. If we can prove an undisputed link to our Jean or Pierre Laffite then we will establish a list of descendants and publish this. But for now, this is all we have.

The following timeline-summary of the activities of the Laffites in their final years is presented to correlate the new Cuban research results with what we knew previously. This information is from primary-source contemporaneous newspaper articles and government reports.

The Final Years of Jean and Pierre Laffite

After the Laffites sailed away from Galveston for the last time in May, 1820, they were known to be operating in the Isla Mujeres, Yucatan, Mexico area. This strategic location was excellent for intercepting the smaller, more vulnerable treasure-laden Spanish ships sailing from Vera Cruz to Havana. This was a time when Spain and France were at war and the larger armed vessels and many Spanish troops were called back to Spain to defend the motherland. Because the colonies were stripped of troops and ships, the South American Independence movements were energized and the services of privateers were in demand.

Here is what we know or think we know of the last years of the corsairs:

- **The Archives of the Indies in Seville (Independence of the Spanish Colonies files, catalogue 3886, report dated January 18, 1821)** state that the corsair Jean Laffite had captured the merchant frigate *Castor Limena* on August 12, 1820 off the coast of Vera Cruz, Mexico. The Spanish sent a “posse” after Laffite and recaptured the *Castor Limena*.

- Pierre Laffite was encountered on the beach at the north tip of Isla Mujeres on September 5, 1821 by a Mr. Fisher, the marooned mate of the schooner *Evergreen* which was reported in the *Louisiana Gazette*, March 14, 1822. Laffite gave the wounded Mr. Fisher shelter and “appeared to have considerable authority over the other privateersmen”.

- Pierre Laffite died after a gunfight on the island of Cancun between his band of privateers and Mexican Royalist forces on November 9, 1821. Pierre’s body was brought to the village of Dzilam by George Schumph, Laffite’s armorer, and buried by a priest named Don Jose Gregorio Cervera. Pierre’s consort, Lucy, was supposedly pregnant with Pierre’s child. She later gave birth and Pierre’s descendants supposedly still live in the Dzilam area. Depositions of Schumph, who was suspected as a revolutionary activist, were taken by the Mexican authorities just after Laffite’s death, so we
have many details about Pierre's last days. Meanwhile, Jean Laffite was busy working his trade around the coast of Cuba. In January, 1822, Laffite's fleet was destroyed by an English brig. He swam to shore near Santa Cruz de Sur and was jailed in Puerto Principe for several weeks. Laffite was later sent to the hospital in San Juan de Dios. On February 13, 1822, after faking a serious illness, he escaped from the hospital and fled to the Camagueyan coast. This has been documented in several newspapers including the Louisiana Gazette of November 29, 1822. On March 19, 1822 the Governor of Puerto Principe reported that Jean Laffite was anchored in a small two-masted vessel with 30 men in the anchorage of Rincon Grande, one league from Vario, adjacent to Boca Carabela (on the north-central coast of Cuba). On April 13, 1822, Captain Stockton of the USS Alligator reported that "the famous Laffite" plundered the American sloop named Jay two days earlier on the north coast of Cuba (according to the Louisiana Gazette, June 18, 1822). Laffite was seen with a group of four ships including the Colombian privateering schooner named Cienego on April 11th. The Alligator later captured the Cienego off Nuevitas. The pirates were then reported to be taking refuge in Xibara and the local governors along the north coast were said to be giving protection to the corsairs. It seems that whenever the U.S. or British anti-pirate squadrons gave chase, the corsairs would simply flee to a friendly village ashore. The corsairs were selling their goods at deep discounts to the locals and this is why they were warmly welcomed in the small villages away from Havana. Since it was against international law for the U.S. or British naval forces to land on Cuban soil without permission, the corsairs had a viable survival plan as long as they could outrun their pursuers. According to the Colombian Secretary of War and Marine, Tomo 1265, Folio 3, The Colombian schooner General Santander sailed from Santiago de Cuba to Cartagena by way of Curacao on May 28, 1822. There were thousands of French refugees living in Santiago and it was known as a haven for French corsairs. This researcher speculates that Jean Laffite escaped from Cuba on this voyage from Santiago and arrived in Colombia on June 11, 1822. Since Laffite had lost all his large ships, he knew that Colombia was the best place to gain a privateering captain's appointment in the fight against Spain. This same General Santander, which Jean Laffite assumed command of, received her privateer's Letter of Marque on August 19, 1822 in Cartagena, Colombia. (Gaceta de Colombia, December 1, 1822). On November 26, 1822, 60 miles west of Grand Cayman Island, Laffite's Colombian armed schooner, the General Santander encountered the American schooner Columbus Ross. Laffite told the American captain he "had departed from Cartagena 95 days earlier (August 20, 1822) and captured two Spanish ships recently". One of these prizes was sent back to Cartagena for adjudication. Laffite escorted the schooner Columbus Ross, sailing from Jamaica to New Orleans, for two days. The American was treated "with the greatest politeness" and Laffite provided "protection against pirates" for the American ship as they sailed through the Yucatan Straits. When the American captain
admitted that he had no armament, Laffite generously gave him thirty 4-pound cannonballs and a brass 4-pound gun on a pivot. (Independent Chronicle and Boston Patriot of January 25, 1823).

The Last Voyage of Jean Laffite:

- In the Gaceta de Colombia, April 20, 1823 (and in the Gaceta de Cartagena, no. 63), Jean Laffite’s demise is chronicled. This article was translated by Paula Covington, the Latin American and Iberian bibliographer with Vanderbilt University. Thanks to Ms. Covington for helping to find this newspaper article in her collection. (My explanations and clarifications are in parentheses).

Naval Combat

The Colombian corsair General Santander, a 43-ton schooner under the command of Captain Jean Laffite gave chase at 5:00am on February 4th, when she was 20 leagues off the fort of Omoa (Honduras) and the Triumph of the Cross (a monument nearby), to a brig schooner and a Spanish schooner until 10:00pm. The schooner brig, after an hour of combat and close to surrendering, made signals with lanterns to the schooner which immediately turned on the corsair. At this time, Captain Laffite, mortally wounded, rallied his crew and passed command of the ship to his second-in-command who suffered the same fate. The third-in-command, Francisco Similien, after the death of the second-in-command, continued combat until 1:00am and because it was impossible to continue, he turned the ship about. The two Spanish ships did the same who, without a doubt, were very damaged by the corsair’s shots. The loss of this brave naval officer is moving, and the boldness with which he confronted the superior forces that attacked him, demonstrates the tremendous honor that follows him into death. The schooner brig had aboard twelve cannons and the brig had six with a 16-pounder in the rear.

Comments:

- My speculation: Laffite’s mistake was that he misjudged the amount of armament on one of the Spanish ships. Most merchant ships of that era had a single small gun mounted on the stern to shoot at pursuers. This Spanish schooner brig had twelve cannons. Under the veil of darkness on the high seas and in heavy winds it can be difficult to assess an adversary’s firepower.

- Omoa is the site of the largest Spanish fort in Latin America. It was originally built to protect shipments of silver from the mines at Tegucigalpa, Honduras. In Laffite’s day, this fort was at the edge of the beach but today the beach has accreted out several hundred yards so the fort is now a long walk to the beach. Corsairs would typically patrol the sea lanes off Omoa, out of range of the fort’s cannons.

- It is not known what happened to Jean Laffite’s body but he was probably “buried at sea”. It was also customary at that time to preserve the corpse of a famous person in a barrel of rum until the vessel reached home and a proper funeral could take place.

- The General Santander cleared into the port of Porto Bello, Panama on March 10, 1823, on their way back to Cartagena, according to naval records in the Colombian National Archives (AGN) and Francisco Similien was noted to be in command at that time.

A researcher will travel to Havana in February, 2003 and appeal to the Cuban government for access to the property records. If anyone can add to this information or is in a position to help us in the research, then any assistance is appreciated.

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April. With the assistance of American agents, he successfully conspired to oust Gutierrez from command of the rebel army. Under Toledo's leadership, the Republican Army of the North was destroyed by the royalists at the Battle of Medina River on 18 August 1813. Toledo escaped to Louisiana and arrived in New Orleans in early November 1814, where he was arrested and charged with violating U.S. neutrality. Released on his own recognizance, he participated in the Battle of New Orleans as a volunteer officer attached to Andrew Jackson's staff. Afterwards, his activities with the Mexican revolutionaries and Baratarian privateers led the U.S. attorney at New Orleans to prosecute Toledo for planning illegal military expeditions against Spain. Once again, he was released on his own recognizance but failed to appear before the court--at the time, he was sailing to Boquilla de Piedras on board the Baratarian schooner Petit Milan to attend a conference with Mexican rebels. Toledo soon had a falling out with Humbert and the other filibusters and decided to abandon the Texas project. By the time he reached Washington, D.C., in August 1816, newspapers were reporting that he had been "purchased" by the royalists. In fact, Toledo was granted a full pardon by the king and entered government service as Madrid's expert on North American affairs. He died in 1858.

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Many thanks to Jeff Modzelewski for his editing and verification of the translation of many documents from the Spanish versions over the past year and to Jean Epperson for all her help.

Research efforts continue and The Laffite Society will be updated as new information is uncovered. Assistance of any type is appreciated.

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