BARATARIA: THE STRANGE HISTORY OF JEAN LAFFITE, PIRATE
by
LOUIS-JEAN CALVET

An inquiry into the authenticity of Jean Laffite’s “Diary”, translated from the French
by Dorothy McDonald Karilanovic

INTRODUCTION

In 1998, Louis-Jean Calvet, French author, wrote a book entitled Barataria: l'étrange histoire de Jean Laffite, pirate. In a postscript chapter, Le Dossier Laffite (The Laffite Case), Calvet gives an overview of the familiar historical elements of the history of Laffite which have come down to us from well known writers, travelers, diarists, and researchers. In this account, Calvet presents his observations and conclusions, especially on the authenticity of the controversial Journal of Jean Laffite alleged to have been hand written in French by the pirate Jean Laffite in the years 1845-1850.

Prior to publication of his book, the author visited the Sam Houston Library and Research Center in Liberty, TX where he was able to examine in hand the various documents in the Laffite collection, the textual material of which had been acquired in 1975, and the pictures, in 1989, as a result of a gift from Texas Governor Price Daniel. Calvet states he was able to examine up closely the famous Journal, obtaining a photocopy for his research; also the family Bible in which Laffite is supposed to have written the names and birth dates of family members; the daguerreotype representing him with his family; and the small painting attributed to [Manuel de] Franca. In the course of examining the diary and attempting to decide for himself if the document could, in fact, be a forgery, the author makes several observations. He states that in most cases the Journal offers no new facts, but is an exposition of those already known, suggesting that if the diary is in fact a forgery, the forger would only have needed to be well informed of the facts stated, only needing to re-state them from a new perspective.

The text also has errors, says Calvet. One reads that Jean Laffite left Galveston in March, 1821, a date repeated by all after the publication of The History of Texas by [Henderson K.] Yoakum in 1855 and apparently not known as an error by the writer of the diary or by the translator(s). For in fact a document discovered in the American Federal archives, a letter from the commandant of The Enterprise to the commandant of the Secretary of State of the Navy, shows that this event actually took place in 1820, not 1821. The author also points out the puzzling discrepancy of the date of death of Jean Laffite's brother Pierre, stated in the [Ignacio] Rubio Marie records as being November 9, 1821, as opposed to the information given in baptismal records in New Orleans, indicating that Pierre was the father of several children well after 1821.

Calvet goes on to choose three areas of interest, each of very different nature, but all, he says, at least in part verifiable. He outlines these areas as follows: 1) Information which is in the Journal of the marriage of Pierre Laffite and of his descendants. 2) Laffite's genealogical tree given in the family Bible, that is to say, the dates and places of birth of his father, his mother, his brothers and sisters, the given names of the latter. 3) What is said in the Journal of the meeting of Jean Laffite with Karl Marx and Friederich Engels.

Following, then, is a direct translation of Calvet's text (pages 292 through 305 in his chapter Le Dossier Laffite), presenting his findings relative to his investigation in the above three areas.

D. K.
Let's start then with the first area of interest: Pierre Laffite. According to Lyle Saxon [Laffite author], he would have had important descendants:

- A son in 1808, Pierre, of which one does not know the name of the mother, who was raised by the Sauvinets and would have married a Cuban, Marie Berret, from whom he had a son, François, born August 23, 1828. In 1838, a François Laffite is in fact buried in the St. Louis Cemetery: this could possibly be an infant, who died at 10 years of age (or at 13 as we will see further on).

- A daughter with Adelaide Maselari, Marie Joseph, born October 27, 1810. According to Saxon, she was still single in 1830 and lived with the Sauvinets, some friends of the brothers Laffite, at 141 Hospital Street. I, on my own, found mention of the marriage of a Mary Joseph [sic] Laffite with Joseph Loquevick, April 6, 1838, in Caddo parish, and this may be she even if in this age girls generally married before the age of 28 years.

- Then from Marie-Louise Villars, a quadroon woman, a woman one-quarter white, with whom he had, always according to Saxon, seven children of which the eldest, Rose, was born August 28, 1812.

This would lead us to nine infants, but these pose some problems. According to the archivist of the Archdiocese of New Orleans, who performed for me the research in the baptismal books, François Laffite was not born in 1828 but in 1825 of Pierre Laffite, born at Bordeaux, and of Marie Veret (and not Berret). And the couple already had a daughter, Marie, born between 1822 and 1824. But who is this Pierre Laffite? Is he, as Saxon writes, the son of Pierre, the young infant that Esau Glasscock saw, or, rather, is he the father, the brother of Jean? In fact, if Pierre "the younger" was born in 1808 and if it is rather he who appeared to cohabit with Marie Veret, he would have been between 14 and 17 years old on the birth of his first child. On the other hand, how would he have been able to be born in 1808 at Bordeaux at a time when his father was in New Orleans since 1804? For this it would be necessary to suppose a trip of the father or of the mother in Europe of which we find not a trace. All this then leaves us to think that this would be, rather, Pierre "the elder" who, with Marie Veret or Berret, has two children, Marie and François. This would bring his direct descendants to at least eleven children. Nevertheless, the archivist of the Archdiocese of New Orleans only found mention of four of them, issuing from three different mothers (which seems to perturb him a little for he underlines in his letter "with different mothers' names"), "avec des noms de mère différents") to which is added in 1827 or 1828 a John Baptiste "Laffite et Devilliere" [sic] (but to be precise the text is difficult to read). As follows, the details of the birth:

- Marie Joseph Laffite, both in 1810, daughter of Pierre Laffite, of Bayonne and of Adelaide [sic] Maselari, of Santo Domingo.

- Jean Laffite, born in 1816, son of Pedro Laffite [sic] of Bordeaux and of Maria Luisa Villard, of New Orleans (this birth is noted in the book of "free persons of color" in the St. Louis Cathedral, the following appear in the book of whites).

- Maria Lafitte [sic], born between 1822 and 1824, daughter of Pierre Lafitte [sic] of Bordeaux and of Maria Veret of Baracoa, Cuba.

- François Lafitte [sic], born in 1825, son of Pierre Lafitte [sic] of Bordeaux, and of Maria Veret of Baracoa, Cuba.

- Jean Baptiste Lafitte [sic] and Devilliers, [sic] born between 1827 and 1828.

It seems then that the truest hypothesis may be the one that makes Pierre the father of all these children, which would prove that he was still living in 1825.

With, here still, a mystery: Why does this father declare himself, as is the case, to be born in Bayonne or in Bordeaux? We will see later on that he was without a doubt not born in either one of these towns, but a constant practice of the two brothers consistently without cease was to mix their identities to conceal to the mainstream their movements.

If Pierre Laffite is then definitely present in the archives of the Diocese, Jean, in contrast, never appears there. Lyle Saxon claims that he had a child with the young sister of Marie-Louise Villars, Catherine, but gives neither date nor reference, and in this absence it is difficult to follow up on.
On the other hand, in the *Journal of Jean Laffite*, written then much later, one does not find, regarding Pierre, any mention of Marie-Louise Villars nor of Marie Veret who well and truly existed. But, according to this text, Pierre had been married to a certain Françoise Sel, the daughter of a painter originally from Santo Domingo, of whom he had four sons, Jean-Jacques, Pierre-Charles, César Edouard and Eugène-Louis, and two daughters. And one does not find any trace of these six births in the archives of New Orleans. On these different points, then, it is difficult to grant credit to the *Journal*, except to admit that its writer had “forgotten” three women and their infants and that, besides, the children of Pierre and of Françoise Sel had never been registered in the church. 3

Let us move on then to the genealogy of the Laffite family. If one believes the information written on this by Jean Laffite in the family Bible, his father, Marcus Laffite, would have been born in Pontarlier in 1744, of Jacques Alexis Laffite (he, himself, born in Saint-Jean d’Angély) and Yvonne Delsilles (born in Saintes in 1718, died in 1752), and died September 3, 1818 in Philadelphia. He would have married, in December, 1765 in Nice, Maria Zora Nadrimal, 17 years old, born in Dax September 22, 1748, died in Port-au-Prince May 9, 1783. It is necessary here to underline an important improbability: according to the text of the Bible, the marriage of Marcus Laffite and Maria Nadrimal took place in “Nice, Provence, France”. Now, in 1765, in the time written in the *Journal*, Nice was not French but Italian, and Provence ceased at Var. Furthermore, the archives in the town of Pontarlier, where the records of 1537 to 1792 were cleared out and copied in alphabetical order on cards, do not give any trace of the birth of a Maria Zora Nadrimal in Dax.

Let us pursue analysis of information in the family Bible. The first daughter, Marie, was born in Digne January 3, 1767, and died in April, 1811 in Port-au-Prince. Then the couple left France for Santo Domingo, with little Marie and her grandmother. There it is that the following children were born:

- Anna (August 28, 1769-April, 1811).
- Alexandre Frédéric (April 14, 1771, Port-au-Prince, November 15, 1830, New Orleans).
- Henri (Port-au-Prince, January 6, 1775-Cartagena, November, 1840).
- Yvonne (Port-au-Prince, May 26, 1777-1779, March, 1850).
- Pierre Laffite (Port-au-Prince, October 21, 1779- St. Louis, Missouri, March 9, 1844).
- And finally Jean, born April 22, 1782, in Port-au-Prince.

We add to this René Beluche who, in the *Journal*, many times is present under the spelling Reyne Beluche, as the uncle of the Laffite brothers.

This list is composed above all of names of which we have no trace but one, Alexandre Frédéric, who passed to posterity under the name of Dominique You or Youx, according to the sources. We have many a time encountered this pirate captain who, with his boat *La Superbe*, boarded three ships in 1806. You was, all throughout the known and proven history of the Laffite brothers, at their sides, their advisor, their favorite captain. But was he truly their older brother? As a matter of fact, we do not have any difficulty following the trail of Dominique You, for, after the facts that we have related [cited in a previous chapter], he remained in New Orleans and he died there. On this occasion, the parish priest, L. Muni, writes in his register (Book X, p. 185, Act No. 1139):

"... the body of the deceased Dominique You was buried, formerly ship captain, age about 58 years, native of Saint-Jean-d'Angély, department of the Charente-Inférieure (France) ..."

And we have there an exemplary case of our problem. In fact, the writer of the *Journal*, whomever he may be, could not be unaware of the date and the place of the death of You, and he gives to them then: November 15, 1830 in New Orleans. But he adds the date and the place of his birth (April 14, 1771, Port-au-Prince), and thus enters a contradiction with the church register. Is Frédéric then named You or Laffite? Is he born in Santo Domingo or in Saint-Jean-d'Angély? In the parish books of Saint-Jean-d'Angély, one finds no trace of Dominique You. On the other hand, this name under different spellings (Hiou, Hyou, You, lou, Hioux, Youx), is very present there. One encounters there, in
fact, for the period that interests us, three families where the name is not always spelled in the same fashion. [1] The Hiou family: Alexandre Hiou (fisherman, born in 1743) and Marie Gharau (born in 1753), their sons Brice Hiou (shoemaker, born in 1769) and Alexandre Hiou (born in 1797, "brumaire year 5"). [2] The You or Hiou family: André You (stone cutter) and Marie Jaubertin (or Gamberthie, or Jauberte), their infants Jean-Baptiste Hyou, born "the 24 thermidore - year 9 (1801), Auguste, born the "7 fructidor - year 10 (1802), and Marguerite, died in 1820 at 2 years of age. [3] The Iou family (sometimes Hioux or Youx): Pierre Iou (barrel maker) and Marie Briffou, their children Pierre, dead in 1770 at 11 years of age, Marie Iou, born in 1764 (baptized at 7 October 22, 1771) and Marie, born in 1773.

Dominique You, then, does not appear in these registers. But his patronyme [surname] You, lou, or Hiou, is in France extremely rare, and the coincidence is all the same striking: dead in New Orleans November 15, 1830, "at the age of about 58 years, born in Saint-Jean-d'Angely", according to the death register, he would be then born in 1772 and could have been the son of Alexandre Hiou, the brother of Brice Hiou. But one sees here that there are only hypotheses.

With regard to René Beluche, his life is well known, and he would not be known in any case to be the uncle of the brothers Laffite. Born in New Orleans December 15, 1780 of a French father originally from Tours, became, after his collaboration with the Baratarians, admiral of the fleet of Simon Bolivar, he will die in exile in 1860. His remains were exhumed in 1963 and repose now in Caracas along side of those of Bolivar and other Venezuelan heroes.

These different biographical particulars hardly lead to giving credit to the miraculously discovered Journal.

There remains the third point on which I indicated research, the relations of Jean Laffite with Marx and Engels in 1847. In his Journal, Laffite states that he leaves St. Louis for Europe in June, 1847, and returns to America in January, 1848. He holds a discussion of a socialistic tone, explaining that he has always dreamed of a change in the relations between men, that he does not support the suffering and misery of men and that, rightly so, things remain to do, in Europe and in America, to change the state of the world. Follows is a list of the people that he met: Louis Bertillon, in whose home he lived in Paris, Michel Chevreul, Louis Braille, Augustin Thierry, Alexis de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Jules Michelet, Urbain Leverrier, François Gaizot, Louis Daguerre. And he states precisely that he stayed in Paris, Berlin, Brussels (Anvers) and Amsterdam.

In a letter sent from Brussels at the end of the month of September, which is found also in John Lafflin's documents [John Lafflin, alleged great grandson of Jean Laffite], he gives other details:

Brussels the 29 of September 1847
M. De Franca
St. Louis, Mo.

Pine St. 7 and 8

Sir,

I leave Brussels for Paris next in three or four weeks. I will go to Amsterdam, then in route to America. I had a number of conversations with Mr. Marx and Mr. Engels, but I refused to participate in the meetings with the other debaters to form the manifesto, because I did not want to be known or identified with the other men.

Mr. Engels went with me to Paris in order for me to prepare the list to finance Mr. Marx and him, for a long time in advance to continue their manuscripts and to have them put in texts on Capital and the Worker. From the beginning it seems to me that the two young men are those [?]5 gifted with abilities and talents, and which I believe strongly are the best chosen for qualities suitable in the statistical research on "The Category of Capital", Value, Price, and Benefit.

They penetrated into a forgotten time in the history of the
exploitation of man by man in its stages. From serfdom, feudalism, slavery and the salaried slave, discovering that exploitation is at the base of everything bad. This had taken much time in order to prepare the Manifesto of the Workers of the World [The Workers' Manifesto]. A great debate took place between the two young men and with others in Berlin, Amsterdam, Paris, and others in the Swiss Republic.

I am enthusiastic about the manifesto and some other projects for the future and support with all my heart the two young men. I hope and I pray that the projects become the adhesive for a strong doctrine in order to strike the foundations of the highest dynasties and make them fall into the teeth of the lower classes.

Mr. Marx advises me and notified me not to plunge in entirely with the manifesto in America for there are others with the same [illegible] for New York. But I hope that Jean or Harry show the manifesto to Mr. Joshua Speed and he in turn can show it to Mr. Lincoln. I know that nothing can intimidate him otherwise, he shares the same risks, his occupation in Washington would be a sacred promise that the path I am on is in conformity with continued politics at present in the republic of Texas.

Mr. Marx accepts some of my writings on the communes that I had been forced to abandon at one time, weighing carefully the rules and regulations not based on any strong foundation like he names, a pure and simple utopia without preamble or a manifest body on which one builds. I was in agreement with the two young men on this date in regard to my utopian dreams of the past, the sacrifices made in order to preserve the most grand manuscript that was composed and its constitution, with the stars and the stripes to last eternally, but not with those in power to abuse or exploit them.

Oh! In my fear, I covered the abuses [J'ai du couvert les abus] practiced in the last part of the same year after the Dragon was uprooted and annihilated. I described my second commune which I was forced to disband and to abandon with a fire of the 3rd of March, 1821. I then made the resolution to re-direct myself without concealment to not ever again help those who oppose my principles.

I must come to a close. I will bring several manuscripts and the manifesto. I hope that Jules and Glenn are making progress at the school with Mademoiselle Wing and Mademoiselle Burgess. I know that they have lots of patience as professor. Glenn is not as strong as Jules.

My best wishes and good health.

Your devoted servant,

Alex Jn Laffite.

One sees that the French written by the presumed Laffite is peculiar. Is it possible that after about forty years passed in the United States he had at this point lost his maternal language at a time that he had lived a long time in Louisiana, among French speaking persons? One can doubt this. In fact, there are too many bizarre, incorrect formulations in the text for it to have been written by a French speaking person. Added are numerous anglicisms, like "J'ai refuse de participer dans les conferences [to participate in] avec les autres debatteurs [debaters]" or "J'y a une fois" which [Stanley] Arthur translates "some time ago" or "one time", "once"... One finds the same characteristics in the text of the Journal. The dates there are systematically given in the English style ("Monday the 4th of January 1817, Thursday the 4th of March 1847, Monday the 2nd of December 1850, etc."); "langage" and it is written "language". One finds there without cease amazing forms in French which appear completely obvious when one looks for their equivalent in English: "battre une retraite" for "battre en retraite" (English - to beat a retreat),
"expectation" for "attente", "des foules sympathiques à l'équipage" for "favorables à l'équipage" (English "sympathetic"), "Les vice-roi du Mexique ne sentaient de relief" (English - "to feel some relief", the soldiers "célébrent le triomphe et la victoire" for "fêtent" la victoire (English - to celebrate), etc. There is often the impression in these texts, the Journal, like the different letters of Laffite, that they were written by an English-speaking person, first thought of in English and drafted in French, indeed, translated from English. And if this characteristic has not ever been emphasized up to now, it is without a doubt because the researchers inclined toward the history of Jean Laffite have been English-speaking persons in the majority and were not aware, perhaps, of the incoherences in the French text.12

But it is a question then of indirect proof and presumption. How to verify this amazing autobiography according to which Laffite would meet in Paris a variety of personalities? The persons cited in the Journal were all, for certain, living at that time, and Laffite would have been able to meet them: Louis Adolphe Bertillon, whose house he would have stayed in Paris (1821-1883); Michel Chevreul (1786-1889), Louis Braille (1809-1852), Augustin Thierry (1795-1856), Alexis De Tocqueville (1805-1859), Jules Michelet (1798-1874), Urbain Leverrier (1811-1877), François Guizot (1787-1874), Louis Daguerre (who in fact is named Jacques, 1787-1851). But this does not absolutely prove that he had actually met them. Marx and Engels remain on whom we will fix our attention at more length.

Jean Laffite would have then sojourned in Europe from June, 1847 to the beginning of the month of January, 1848 (on his return, he writes to his wife in New York the 8th of January). During this period (from August, 1846 to the end of 1847), Marx is living in Brussels, but moves now and then (to England and Germany). In the letter of September 29, Laffite declares having been "in numerous talks with Marx and Engels. He makes reference to a project that he calls "the Workers' Manifesto of the World"; and a little later, he writes: "I am enthusiastic about the manifesto and of the other projects". Then, he explains that Engels went with him to Paris:

"Mr. Engels went with me to Paris for the purpose of my preparing for him a list to finance Mr. Marx and him for a long time in advance in order to continue their manuscripts and to have published Capital and Labor". In the Journal he says nearly the same thing, without making references to some publications, explaining that he opened a bank account in Paris to finance Marx and Engels and to help them in their revolutionary enterprise. And it is this passage which caused Stanley Arthur to write that Laffite financed the publication of the Manifesto. Now, here it may be necessary to question closer the chronology. The Communist Manifesto was written at the request of the second Congress of the Communist League, meeting together the end of November and the beginning of December, 1847 in London, a city in which Laffite, according to his statements, did not go. The first congress, meeting some months earlier, at the beginning of the month of June, also in London, had decided to publish a "Profession of communist faith" which was entrusted to Engels. The idea was to make a kind of catechism, in part a series of questions ("What is communism and what do the communists want, what is socialism and what do the socialists want", etc.) to which responses, for certain, would be provided. Laffite, declaring that he had left St. Louis for Europe in June, arrives then after this congress. Engels puts himself to work, writing, stroke by stroke, two texts, a Plan for a Profession of Communist Faith, in response to the list of questions established by the Congress, and the Principles of Communism, based on a list of different questions that he, himself, had drawn up. In a letter to Marx of November 24, 1847, he alludes to this "profession of faith", explains that he is engaged in working on it, but that the catechistic form does not seem appropriate to him, and he suggests a new title, that of Communist Manifesto. This is the first time that this form appears in their correspondence, and we are then two months after the letter of September 29 in which Laffite speaks of the "manifesto". The second congress of the League of Communists meets then at the end of November-beginning of December in London. There, Marx and Engels make the proposition to replace the "Profession of faith" by a Manifesto, a proposal which will be adopted at the beginning of December. The congress entrusts the draft
of it to Marx who, being inspired by Engels' preliminary work, will deliver the text in February, 1848. In all of this, there does not appear in any part the title "Manifesto of the workers of the world" cited by Laffite, who, in view of the dates, was able to be conversant with the plan of the "Profession of communist faith", but was not able to read the text of the Manifesto which was not written when he returns to the United States. It is equally impossible that he had brought to the United States some samples of this Manifesto. For, he writes very clearly in the same letter: "I hope that Jean or Harry shows the manifesto to Mr. Joshua Speed and he in turn can show it to Mr. Lincoln" and I will bring several manuscripts and the manifesto". This is to say, that a slight shifting in the dates, some months, will make it possible for us to conclude that the Journal of Laffite is a forgery.

Another argument militates in this sense. If he had had discussions with Marx and Engels during the spring of 1847, after the meeting of the first congress of the Communist League, Laffite would have been struck by a stormy debate that had occupied this congress, a debate about some projects of Etienne Cabet. The latter wanted in effect to emigrate to the United States: since we are persecuted in France, he said, we go with "Icarie" and we create a colony founded on the principle of the commonality of wealth. The United States had in effect attracted many utopians in the nineteenth century. Victor Considérant, for example, went to Texas to try to spread the ideas there of Fournier, and Cabet, the poet of "icarien communism", recaptured somewhat the same plan. But his ideas will be in a minority after a long debate, and in the first issue of the Communist Review (Kommunistische Zeitschrift) published in London in September, 1847, an entire article is consecrated to the refutation of the "emigration plan of citizen Cabet" One finds there a series of arguments to demonstrate that this plan is unrealizable. One among these deserves mention. The Icariens explains the anonymous author of this article, would all be as persecuted in America as they are Europe, and he continues: "That each one of those who want to go to America with Mr. Cabot begin by reading an account of the persecutions to which the Mormons, a religious-communistic sect, were and are again exposed to over there..." Now, Laffite arrives from America, he goes and returns there, and it is unbelievable that he had not spoken of the Icarian proposals with Marx and Engels, unthinkable that these latter had not examined him on it. If he had retained only one thing about his contacts with the European communists, it would have been this.

Etienne Cabet will start for the United Stated in 1848, will sojourn in New Orleans, then in St. Louis, where he will die in 1856, in the city where Laffite resided! It is then unthinkable that Laffite, if he had participated in "numerous meetings" with Marx and Engels, if he had followed, even from afar, the Congress of the League of Communists, he did not speak in his Journal or in his letters of this utopian socialist who wanted to return to "his country of adoption", the United States.

We move on now to the money that he would have left to Marx and Engels, in keeping with the sense that he certainly has not financed the Manifesto, which was elsewhere published by the League of Communists and not by Marx and Engels with their own funds. One finds not one trace of this financial transaction in the correspondence of Marx and Engels. On September 28, 1847, Engels writes to Marx from Brussels (Marx left for some time in Germany). He does not speak of Laffite there, nor of donation, and the name of Laffite does not appear elsewhere in any part of the correspondence of the two men. This is to say that, even if Laffite had given the money to the two men, we do not have one trace of it.

Then, a forgery, the Journal of Jean Laffite? Very certainly, for the different reasons that we have exposed. But the principal mystery is, of course, the one that concerns the author of these different untruths. Who wrote the Journal? Who wrote the letters? Who wrote on the fly-leaf of the Bible, the pseudo-genealogy of Laffite? And why? The investigation brings us back now to the United States and to the presumed great grandson of Jean Laffite, John Andrechyne Laffite, whom I will call from now on Lafflin/Laffite. Robert Vogel, convinced that the Journal is a forgery, has given to the Rosenberg Library in Galveston.
a manuscript of twelve typed pages in which he presents the state of his research.14 He states there that John Andrechyne Lafflin, railroad retiree, made his appearance in New Orleans in the 1940s presenting himself as the great grandson of the pirate and that he succeeded in convincing the historian Stanley Clisby Arthur of his identity. But, thinks Vogel, all the documents produced by Lafflin/Laffite are false, and his arguments are not without interest. Here is a summary of some of them:

1) Ray Thompson, author of an article entitled The Land of Laffite the Pirate, who met Lafflin/Laffite many times, never succeeded in obtaining from him the slightest proof of his heredity nor to see his documents: he [Lafflin/Laffite] only produced some photographs. In fact, he appeared very much more interested in the documents that Thompson and other researchers could show him. Thompson suggested to him translating the Journal, but he refused. 2) In 1948, Lafflin/Laffite made a visit to Charles van Ravenswaay, Director of the Missouri Historical Society of St. Louis, and showed him photocopies of letters, pages from the family Bible and passages from the Journal. Van Ravenswaay checked the history of the St. Louis families implicated in the pseuodogenealogy of Laffite: nothing agreed. Lafflin had truly existed in Alton, and van Ravenswaay writes to Vogel: “The name that he chose is one of an historically well known Alton resident. It is easy to verify the information on his birth place and his life. I checked the era, and it is perfectly clear that the real man from Alton and the imaginary Laffite cannot have been the same”. 3) Lafflin/Laffite showed Charles van Ravenswaay the picture to which I referred at the beginning of this chapter (it consists in fact of a board of reduced size, painted in a badly done fashion), signed Manuel de Franca (who had lived in St. Louis between 1845 and 1865).15 It did not correspond in any way to the style of this painting, and the clothes of the persons were of a later fashion, from the years 1880-1890. Van Ravenswaay writes: “The man wears a veste fendue [French language scholar Gene Marshall says this is a “split-tailed coat”], the woman, a feathered boa. These clothes were in fashion well after the period in which the portrait was supposed to have been painted. When I remarked to Mr. Laffite about this, he thanked me and declared that he would retouch the portrait...” Now, the reproductions of this picture published in Arthur’s book and in the translation of the Journal are not the same: this is easy to check (I did it, for certain), and the picture has thus really been modified. 4) Lafflin/Laffite had, according to Vogel, spent many years traversing the United States researching in all the archival documents on his “great grandfather”. He would have been seen many times in antiquarian shops in Kansas City buying old sheets of blank paper, and one can imagine that this paper went to serve him in his production of his forgeries.

This makes for many things, and I pass over the bewildering adventures of the Lafflin/Laffite documents, lost in a fire, recuperated in part, etc. Even the historian Stanley Arthur, who had, nevertheless, endorsed the authenticity of the Journal, seems to be posing some questions: In a letter of July 4, 1950 [Sam Houston Library, box 6, says Calvet], he remarks to J.A. Lafflin/Laffite that, according to the Journal, Jean is born in Port-au-Prince, whereas in 1813, before the Consul of France in New Orleans, he declares he is 32 years old and that he was born in Bordeaux. We do not have the answer, if it exists, but Arthur, who never had access to the collection of documents, has very certainly been misled.

All this affair then seems to be a forgery from A to Z. And yet, when Lafflin/Laffite died in 1970, in Columbia Hospital, South Carolina, his death is registered under the name of John Lafitte (it is necessary to note the difference in spelling), born June 4, 1893 in Nebraska. In the file “father’s name” and “mother’s name”, “not known” was written. Furthermore, the death certificate indicates the Social Security number of this Lafitte (703-03-1367), his address at the time of death (3162 Bagnal Drive, Columbia), his profession (retired Missouri Pacific engineer), as well as the name of his wife (Lacie Surratt). The death certificate has all the appearances of an authentic document, the copy that I possess is certified to be identical. What then?
We enter then into another inquiry which consists in pointing out the connection of this authentic death with his [Lafflin/Laffite's] great grandfather. I have for sure been well employed in contacting the Church of Latter Day Saints, that is to say, the Mormons, who in Salt Lake City possess a great many genealogical documents. But, despite their reputation, they have not been of any use to me. In fact, somewhat paradoxically, the North American genealogies are the least effective; no civil state records exist in the United States before 1918. Furthermore, for what concerns Nebraska, the census of 1880 does not exist for families who had infants less than 10 years, and the one for 1890 is destroyed. Born in 1893 of a father, UonJean Lafflin/Laffite, who would have been, according to the Journal, born in 1865, our Lafflin/Laffite thus escapes us due to a documentary flaw, and the mystery persists.

It is not easy to take this type of inquiry elsewhere into the American governmental system. One is requested before all to give proof of your family connection with the person about whom you inquire. It has nevertheless seemed unusual that the number of American researchers studying “the Laffite case” have not undertaken this investigation. I thus wrote to the president of the Laffite Study Group, requesting if any one had taken up the genealogy of John Lafflin/Laffite. He did not respond, whereas beforehand he had kindly furnished me numerous documents. The Nebraska State Historical Society to which I addressed myself and who had consulted the available sources, declares itself “unable to find person requested”. And the mystery lives on, even if everything seems to prove that the Journal is a forgery.

POST SCRIPT

In 2000, two years after publication of Mr. Calvet's book, Jean L. Epperson, Texas historian, author and genealogist, and long-time member of The Laffite Society in Galveston, Texas reached into an unexplored area of recently discovered records of the Railroad Retirement Board and United States Census Records to discover the true identity of the man calling himself John Andrechyne Laffite (Lafflin/Laffite), alleged great grandson of the pirate Jean Laffite. According to Jean Epperson's article, "John A.", as he is commonly referred to by researchers, was born in Omaha, Nebraska, the son of John and Mary Matejka, Bohemian emigrants. Working for the Missouri Pacific Railroad in 1914, John had used the name "Nafisner", stating later that this had been the name of his step-father. In April, 1947, Epperson states, John filed a "delayed birth certificate", claiming at that time that his name was John Andrechyne Lafitte [sic], son of Leon Jean Lafitte and of Mary Pauline Fontenelle, the latter of whom, according to Laffite Society researcher Dr. Reginald Wilson, no trace of documentation has been discovered to date.

Although the mystery of John A.'s true identity has been solved thanks to dedicated research sleuth Jean L. Epperson, others still remain. Namely, 1) If a forgery, who, indeed, then wrote the controversial Journal, alleged to be the diary of the famous privateer-pirate Jean Laffite, written in French in his own hand? 2) Where did John Matejka (a.k.a. Lafflin/Laffite) acquire this document and the other items and documents included in the collection at the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center in Liberty, Texas? And, 3), perhaps the most unsolvable question of all: What motivated a simple railroad lineman to perpetrate such a bizarre hoax that fueled mind and imagination and drove him in search of acceptance and confirmation of an assumed identity for almost thirty years? The legend of Jean Laffite endures, and now, perhaps, will that of John Matejka, a.k.a. John Andrechyne Laffite.

D. Kariilanovic

END NOTES

1. Louis-Jean Calvet, Professor of Social-Linguistics, associated with the University of Provence in Aix - Marseille, France. He is the author of some twenty works. This article is a translation of excerpts from a
chapter in his book entitled Le Dossier Lafitte, which Professor Calvet has granted permission to print.


3. The Journal states that Pierre’s and Jean’s wives, Françoise Sel and Christine Levine, and children lived in Port-au-Prince prior to the Haitian uprising in 1802-1803, hence there most likely would not have been marriage or birth records registered in New Orlean, Bertrand de Suduiraut, French genealogist found a “memoir worthy of belief issued from family archives” relating to the history of one Pierre Lafitte [sic].

This Pierre, born April 12, 1772 at Bordeaux, a former army captain in the Napoleonic campaign, had married a Basque woman, Sabine d’Amespil, December 29, 1793, at St. Jean-de-Luz, who bore him three daughters, names, birth dates some of which are on file. Some years later in about 1810, leaving his wife and children, he disappeared without a trace, appearing “a few years later” as a “condottier” and “leader of mercenary soldiers” and “one of the chiefs taking possession of the island of Barataria”. Suduiraut goes on to say that this Pierre Lafitte, “perfectly identified” in family records, may have been the one who married Françoise Sel, from whom issued a son, Charles Lafitte. If so, Suduiraut states, the marriage to Sel would have been illegitimate if it took place prior to 1821, the year in which Pierre’s first wife, Sabine d’Amespil, had died. About 1838, Suduiraut says, a solicitor from the United States attempted to restore funds to the family of Pierre Lafitte, husband of Sabine d’Amespil, deposited by Pierre in “the banks of North America”, indicating that this Pierre Lafitte apparently had died prior to 1838. Cf. Bertrand Guillo de Suduiraut, Généalogie et Histoire de la Caraïbe, Bulletin No. 63, September, 1994, p. 1152.

4. Here, Calvet states, “Strange French. Stanley Arthur, author of Gentleman Rover, translates: ‘is going with me’. Did he fail to the contrary to understand that the voyage had already taken place?”

5. Author’s brackets. [Unless otherwise noted, information in brackets is that of the translator.]

6. Author’s brackets.

7. Calvet’s note: “Arthur translates: ‘and abandon to the flambeau [torch], which he puts in italics as if it deals with a proper noun. One for a boat? The date, March 3, 1821, seems to indicate that Lafitte makes reference here to the time he left Galveston’.”

8. Calvet’s note: “He [Arthur] translates: ‘I have agreed to the abuses’. Without a doubt it should read, ‘j’ai dû couvrir the abuses”. [“I covered the abuses”].

9. Calvet states: “Arthur translates: ‘and abandon to the flambeau [torch], which he puts in italics as if it deals with a proper noun. One for a boat? The date, March 3, 1821, seems to indicate that Lafitte makes reference here to the time he left Galveston”.

10. The phrase should read in correct French “aux conférences” instead of “dans les conférences”. Also, no word “debateur” exists in French for this meaning.

11. Dates in French are written: “29 septembre 1847”.

"Icarie" from Icarus, Greek mythological figure who, flying too close to the sun, fell to earth. This term refers to a communistic utopia in Voyage en Icarie (1842), a novel by Etienne Cabet (died 1857), a French political radical who, together with other French emigrants, sought to establish a communistic settlement in the U.S. during the latter half of the nineteenth century. According to Time, the last Icarian utopia fizzled out in 1895.


15. Calvet's note here says that the painting can be seen in the Sam Houston Library in Liberty, Tx.