Since its inception in 1994, the Laffite Society has taken multiple “field trips” to New Orleans and other locales in Louisiana. The Crescent City is, therefore, rather well-known to La(fitians. Nevertheless, it was with excitement that members again planned to travel to the city of Jean and Pierre Laffite, Andrew Jackson, Edward Livingston, and John Grymes, beginning Thursday, June 19, 2003, for a four-day excursion. For the bulk of the Society contingent, whose origin would be Galveston, the trek to New Orleans would entail a one-way drive of some 345 miles.

The focal point of the trip was to be a walking tour of French Quarter sites with connections to the Laffites and renowned – or infamous! – Laffite author Lyle Saxon. The walking tour was to be researched, planned and led by Pam Keyes, but due to a rather serious automobile accident only weeks in advance, Pam was forced to cancel her travel plans. In an attempt to fill this void, Kathy Modzelewski began to develop a tour of her own. When Pam graciously offered her script in absentia as well, our group became the beneficiary of an expanded itinerary.

Laffite aficionados have little difficulty filling spare time in New Orleans, and with this in mind, Kathy purposefully avoided placing restrictions upon attendees that scheduling too many group events might have caused. However, as a happy medium, and still desiring to keep a Laffite focus to the out-of-town jaunt, Kathy planned two other group activities in addition to the walking tour.

The second group activity, scheduled for Friday evening, June 20, was dinner at the Pelican Club, an occurrence which is almost a tradition with Laffite Society excursions to New Orleans.

For the third planned activity, Kathy struck inspirational pay-dirt. She had wanted to arrange a swamp tour, available from a number of outfits in the country south of New Orleans. One outfit was headquartered in the town of Jean Laffite [formerly Laffite], and in making the arrangements, and while in chance communication with Society member Tom Halko in that town, Kathy discovered that the Perrin Cemetery, featured in a photograph on page 119 of the Ray M. Thompson book The Land of Laffite the Pirate, was situated on land owned by Tom. The small cemetery was the mythical site of the graves of Jean Laffite, John Paul Jones, and Napoleon Bonaparte.

The result of the communication between Kathy and Tom led to nearly a full day’s outing consisting of: a private talk and tour of the Perrin Cemetery with descendant Ed Perrin on Saturday morning, June 21; lunch nearby at Jan’s Cajun Restaurant; and a swamp tour beginning at 2:00 p.m. with Captain Cyrus Blanchard of “Lil’ Cajun Swamp Tours.”

During the Laffite Society’s regular monthly meeting on Tuesday, June 17, Kathy presented an overview of the trip, and early on the morning of Thursday, June 19, she, along with hubby Jeff, appeared at Dale and Diane Olson’s home in Galveston to carpool to New Orleans. The only, and slight, apprehensions they shared were the possibility of rain in New Orleans, and the uncertainty of finding a Dairy Queen from which to order a Blizzard in Baton Rouge—-a road of despair down which they had traveled several years earlier.

Counteracting the fear of these possible disappointments was the joy inherent in the semi-secret plan hatched by Jeff and Kathy to stop in Baton Rouge, locate the tomb of Lyle Saxon, and drink a toast to the author at his gravesite. Thanks to advance research by Kathy, the group located Magnolia Cemetery in Baton Rouge at 2:45 p.m. and entered through the North 19th Street entrance. In the absence of a caretaker or a map of the “residents,” Kathy, Diane, Dale and Jeff fanned out in search of the gravesite of Lyle Saxon. Within about ten minutes, a holler from Dale announced that he had found it!

For future reference, the following are the directions to the grave. The cemetery comprises four quadrants with a covered gazebo-like structure at the center. Enter the cemetery through the 19th Street gate and proceed about 150 feet (perhaps about one-half the way) from that entrance toward the central gazebo. Look to the left, in Section 1,
and find the tombstone clearly marked "Cannon" just off, and facing, the road. The Saxon gravesite is immediately past the Cannon plot as one walks away from the road, but with the tombstones aligned perpendicularly to the Cannon marker and road, facing to the right as one walks toward them across the Cannon plot.

Lyle Saxon is buried in a plot of the Chambers family. Immediately next to him to the left lies Catherine Chambers Saxon (1868-1915), and on the right, Maude Chambers (1876-1960). On the far side of Catherine Chambers lies Elizabeth Chambers (1863-1951). Lyle Saxon's marker bears the elegant inscription, "Lyle Saxon, 1891-1946. For this honorable man we pay not our last respects, but offer instead, everlasting homage for his noble spirit which so enriched all our lives. Author-Writer-Philosopher."

Anticipating the successful ultimate discovery of the Saxon grave, Kathy and Jeff had prepared a batch of Sazeracs "to go" prior to leaving Galveston. The four now took photos, ruminated about who might have stood on the very same spot in 1946 mourning Lyle's passing, and drank a mid-afternoon toast to the man whose work LaFite the Pirate had inspired all of them. They also wondered how long it had been since Lyle had received visitors. A light rain began to fall and forced the termination of the visit. A small glass of Sazerac was left on the grave in remembrance of Saxon, and probably to the great joy of the transient lurking behind a huge oak tree who had undoubtedly witnessed the bizarre ceremony!

By 3:15 p.m. the group was en route once more toward New Orleans under a densely black cloud. Rain fell but did not much impede progress. The storm was, they learned later, rather more severe in New Orleans itself, fifty-six miles to the south, where an estimated six inches fell in a short period of time!

By 4:45 p.m. they had arrived at the hotel, the Le Richelieu, on the corner of Barracks and Chartres Streets. This was the first stay at this inn for a Society event; the hotel at which the Society has lodged most often is the St. Pierre, closer to Rampart Street. They unpacked, refreshed up, and soon set up the traditional arrival wine-and-cheese repast in Jeff's and Kathy's suite. Soon, a quorum had assembled. Don and B.J. Peak, Ginny and Dave Roberts with daughter Barbara, Margie and Norm Sachnik, and Cindy Nobles all appeared, and the field trip had officially begun. The group drank toasts to: recently departed LaFite Society member Richard Rasche, a fixture on past field trips; to Pam Keyes, for her work on the walking tour, which, due to her accident, she would have to enjoy at a future time; and to Reg and Betty Wilson, Dorothy McDonald Karlanovic, Don and Sybil Marler, Jean Epperson, and other LaFite Society members traditionally in attendance on field trips but absent from this one. Late night found the group walking to the Café du Monde for coffee and beignets prior to retiring.

Friday morning, following breakfast at the patio restaurant of Le Richelieu, and an impromptu "Happy Birthday" toast to Jeff, the walking tour began, with Kathy, Diane and Dale leading the group with Pam's and Kathy's scripted explanations of the various sites. Kathy had printed and distributed a brochure of the entire tour for each attendee. Details of the walking tour will be published separately, but by way of overview, the group saw the following:

- the Ursuline Convent where Pierre was said to have sold slaves to the nuns in 1810;
- Casa Lalande, whose owner, Nicholas Louis de Lalande de Ferriers, Vincent Gambi killed for his betrayal of Pierre to the authorities, which caused Pierre's imprisonment;
- the site of the Old Court House at which Jean Desfarges and Robert Johnson were tried and convicted of piracy;
- the house on the corner of Royal and Dumaine Streets, the only place of property ever owned by the Lafittes;
- the site of the birthplace of Renato Beluche;
- the Daniel Clark home where Jackson was entertained upon his arrival in New Orleans;
- the childhood home of Susanna Bosque, Governor Claiborne's third wife;
- the legendary home of Claiborne;
- the Pharmacie Dufilho;
- the Napoleon House;
- the home of Jean Blanque;
- the old U.S. Post Office;
- Madame Poree’s home;
- the home of Lyle Saxon;
- the home of a LaFite treasure hunter, Dr. Deschamps; and
- Maspero's Exchange.
Rest and lunch were enjoyed at Café Maspero, after which members strolled and shopped the Vieux Carré for the remainder of the afternoon.

For nearly ten years, the Laffite Society has tried to dine as a group at the Pelican Club, in Exchange Alley off Rue Conti, at least once during each field trip to New Orleans, and this trip maintained that tradition. Not able to join the group until this Friday afternoon, June 20, were Dan and Jo Ann Cote from Galveston, who arrived after driving through rather severe rain between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. At 5:00 p.m. the group assembled in the hotel lobby and walked or drove the approximately ten or twelve blocks to the Pelican Club where, as usual, the fare was excellent. On Friday nights New Orleans comes alive, so all took their time returning to the hotel, some even spending a few hours at Harrah's Casino to attempt to get even with it for past indignities therein suffered.

At the Casino until midnight, and after a walk back to the hotel, Jeff and Dale shared a scotch on the rocks and sat up until 1:30 a.m. talking. It is often during these late night visits that some of the most interesting personal perspectives of the overall Laffite story emerge. The next day would bring about a change from the sophistication of the Vieux Carré with its beautiful restaurants and pricey antique stores. We were going to the swamp!

On Saturday, June 21, Society members again took breakfast at the hotel, and then car-pooled to the town of Jean Laffite. Member Tom Halko was to meet us and be our guide to the famous gravesite. After lunch, Captain Cyrus Blanchard would take us into the swamp.

The beautifully photographed book, The Land of Laffite the Pirate, by Ray M. Thompson, was published in 1943 and presents excellent old black-and-white photographs of the lower Louisiana area taken by Eugene Delcroix. This book shows a picture of Mary Perrin, the wife of a descendant of one of Laffite's associates, standing near a gravesite near the town of Jean Laffite. According to legend, this grave contains the remains of John Paul Jones, Jean Laffite, and Napoleon Bonaparte.

A reception committee awaited Society members in the small settlement of Jean Laffite. Tom Halko, Ed Perrin, and several others had donuts, coffee, and fruit juices ready for a light post-breakfast/pre-lunch snack. The old gravesite pictured in The Land of Laffite the Pirate lay across a small parking area from the reception place, and, perhaps for the first time in sixty years, Laffite scholars gazed upon the grave which was said to hold the bodies of John Paul Jones, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Jean Laffite. We have all heard this legend for years, but Ed Perrin placed it into some sort of perspective.

According to Ed, Mary Perrin, his ancestor through marriage, believed as follows. Napoleon Bonaparte was actually rescued from exile on St. Helena by Jean Laffite, who left a double to confuse the English. Laffite was planning to take Napoleon back to Louisiana, but the former French general died en route. He was buried on the site in Jean Laffite. According to this same legend, John Paul Jones became bored with peace after his naval career, joined Laffite, and finally died aboard his own privateer. He was buried in the same place. Later, Jean Laffite was killed in a battle with a British ship and, before dying, gave orders to be taken back to the little town to be buried with his two friends, Bonaparte and Jones.

Mary Perrin started the myth with no documented, or even reasonable, support, and she was apparently the only one who believed the tale, while later descendants totally discounted her claims. The grave probably holds the remains of Manuel Perrin, Jr., the son of John Emmanuel Perrin, an associate of the Laffites. Manuel Perrin, Jr., was the great-grandfather of our guide, Ed Perrin. Mary Perrin had been married to Manuel Perrin's brother, so she was a distant aunt through marriage to Ed Perrin.

Ed Perrin explained the somewhat confusing geography of the Barataria region and told how the settlement of Laffite gained that single name in 1903 and, in the 1950s, became known as "Jean Laffite."

On the wall of the small reception house hung a well-executed drawing of two ships by A.C. Raymond. Tom Halko explained that Raymond was a French Canadian who came to the southern Louisiana area, lived in the New Orleans suburb of Algiers, and became interested in the history of Laffite. The drawing was labeled, "Laffite being chased [sic] by American Brig [sic] of war about 1821. Laffite's ship was call [sic] La Fierte (The Pride). Capt. Jean Laffite (1780-1826), Buccaneer.
May 19, 1989." A.C. Raymond died several years ago.

Jan’s Cajun Restaurant was the planned site of lunch after the Perrin Cemetery tour, and everyone there enjoyed the typical seafood prevalent in the area.

The settlement of Jean Laffite lies across the Bayou from a small island which now houses new, expensive weekend homes. In the past, however, this area was the subject of one of the most widespread myths related to the privateer. In the 1950s, a court hearing was held to ascertain ownership of a strip of land for the mineral rights of which large oil companies were determined to owe royalties. Early ownership was traced to Francois Boutte. Descendants of Boutte, numbering in the thousands, were paid small yearly royalties. One legend holds that Boutte and Jean Laffite were the same individual. Therefore, many Boutte descendants throughout the United States incorrectly assumed they were in reality descended from Jean Laffite.

The irony of the story is that, although numerous people claim a relationship to Jean Laffite, Ed Perrin suggests that virtually no one in or around the settlement of Jean Laffite claims such descent! Even more ironic, no one except descendants of the Perrin family feel that their ancestors were in any way connected to the privateers. The myth continues, and it is one with which Laffite Society members are quite familiar. One of the most commonly appearing themes on the Laffite Society Internet site is that of individuals who think they are related to Laffite.

By 2:00 p.m. the group had driven the several miles to the dock of the “Lil Cajun Swamp Tours” and the home of Captain Cyrus Blanchard. Captain Blanchard’s ancestors have lived in the Barataria area since the late 1700s. Captain Cyrus’s boat was a modern, well-outfitted tour boat designed to accommodate perhaps sixty or so guests. The Captain is essentially an environmentalist, as evidenced by his deep concerns about erosion of the bayous, destruction of wildlife, and the noise pollution caused by those swamp tours using air boats. His knowledge of the intertwined bayous is extensive, and he was able to describe with precision the location of many structures now gone, such as shipyards and oil company buildings, the victims of past hurricanes.

Captain Cyrus followed the current trend of throwing marshmallows into the swamp to attract the omnipresent alligators to the boat. Jeff wondered aloud if the evening swamp tours were treated to the sight of these same alligators giving themselves insulin injections on the banks of the bayou?

The light rain which had fallen during the visit to the Perrin gravesite and the drive to Captain Cyrus’s boat gave way to bright sunshine, and the afternoon was a first-hand show-and-tell lesson about the swamps of Louisiana.

Early evening found the group back in the hotel, having snacks and drinks, and recounting the events of the day. Replicating Lyle Saxon’s movements in such a situation, all strolled to the Café du Monde for coffee and beignets before retiring.

Some members attended church early Sunday morning, June 22, and resumed shopping trips before departing for their respective homes later in the day. The Olsons and Modzelewskis spent several hours at the French Market, at the bar back at the Le Richelieu Hotel, and at a bookstore out of the French Quarter, on Magazine St., and before they realized it, it was 6:00 p.m.! Thus they began their own journey back to Galveston rather later than planned.

As we have written before in these pages, field trips of the Laffite Society represent perhaps the highest level of camaraderie and exchange of Laffite-related information. Members become better acquainted and usually find themselves discussing the more esoteric issues related to the story of the Laffites, without the need to support their suppositions with documentation, and in a more informal environment than that of the monthly meetings. The trips are open forums during which all feel free to pose even the most basic questions about the Laffites.
Mr. Ed. Perrin, Norm Sachnik, unidentified local man and Dave Roberts.

Photo courtesy--Diane Olson

Lyle Saxon Gravestone--Magnolia Cemetery
Baton Rouge, La.
Note the Sazeracs left in memoriam.
Photo courtesy--Diane Olson

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