THE LAFFITES—THE EARLY LOUISIANA YEARS

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For all their later notoriety, Jean and Pierre Laffite lived most of their lives in the shadows. As a result, nothing like a conventional biography is possible for them. Rather, their careers are a blank canvas with only intermittent outbursts of color to illuminate certain episodes and periods. We know nothing with certainty of the years leading up to their early manhood. Neither their places nor dates of birth are known with any certainty. Rather, they simply appear in the Louisiana record, Pierre in 1803 and Jean six years later in 1809. Even then, their early Louisiana years are known only in skeletal outline, and it is not until 1810 that we begin to see fuller pictures of their lives. Then, after just a decade, they recede back into the documentary mist again, their lives and careers after 1820 almost as cloudy as their origins.

Setting aside the later legends and questionable recollections, what we have to interpret their first years in Louisiana are just a couple of dozen contemporary documents, sources that help to build a skeleton and stimulate much speculation and logical inference. The picture that emerges even from this, however, runs counter in several places to the long assumed conventional Laffite story, yet it is a picture that is essential to establish and inform the succeeding decade of their lives that is so much more extensively recorded.

Traditionally the earliest contemporary reference to the Laffites was assumed to be the advertisement in the New Orleans Le Moniteur de la Louisiane, September 18, 1802, announcing the new firm of “Hearico and Lafitte,” ironworkers and tool makers, newly arrived in the city, and specializing in equipment for lumber and sugar mills. Their establishment was located near the St. Louis Cathedral at the corner of the Place d’Armes. Unfortunately, it cannot be confirmed just what the first name of this Lafitte may have been, and no Lafittes are listed in the city directory at that time. Nor can Hearico be easily identified, though he might have been a Charles Herrico or Henriad who appears in records in 1805.1 Even in the 1850s some people were already skeptical of the identification of Jean and Pierre Laffite as blacksmiths, though others, among them their associate and sometime counsel John R. Grymes attested to their having practiced that trade, though that recollection came more than forty years after the fact and Grymes himself may not have been in New Orleans at the time of the supposed smithy’s operation.2

However, there quite certainly was a Lafitte with a bona fide connection to blacksmithing. The WPA Index to Colonial Court Records, at the Louisiana State Museum, reveals that at the time the index was prepared in the 1930’s, Box 83, Book 4087 of the collection contained an 1803 document whereby "Pierre Lafitte," an innkeeper in New Orleans, bought a slave at auction from an unidentified seller. There follows a two-word sentence: "Master blacksmith." It could mean either that Lafitte was the blacksmith, or--more likely--that it was the slave. Unfortunately, the original document itself disappeared from the collection sometime prior to its microfilming in the 1980s, a common problem with this collection. Thus no signature or other potential information is available further to identify this Pierre Lafitte. Is he the partner of Hearico? Perhaps. Is he one and the same as Pierre Laffite, brother of Jean? Probably not. Nevertheless, this document does show that in 1803, the same year that Pierre Laffite first appears in the official records in New Orleans, there was an innkeeper of the same name—though a different spelling—who had at least a smithing connection, and this could be the origin of the ironworking tradition, of which more later.
Pierre Laffite first appears unequivocally on June 6, 1803, when he stood before notary Pierre Pedesclaux to register his purchase of a property at what is today 902 Royal Street, at the corner of Dumaine, from Marguerite Landreaux, the widow of Julien Vienne. The documents refer to him as being already a resident of New Orleans, and suggest that he lived on Royal Street. His full and unmistakable signature appears on the document, just as he would sign it for the next decade until he started abbreviating his given name. It is perhaps significant that Vienne, a native of Normandy in France, had been a merchant and shipowner in San Domingue. Probably more significant in light of later recollections that the Laffites had a warehouse on Royal Street, is the fact that Vienne had been a merchant and importer in New Orleans, too, and immediately adjacent to the lot purchased by Pierre was another on which Vienne had a substantial warehouse.

Interestingly on this very same day, June 6, 1803, Pierre sold the same property, thus limiting the only verifiable instance of land ownership in Louisiana by either of the Laffites to only an hour or so. The reason for the quick turnaround is not given, though it was not at all uncommon. What is most important is the association of Pierre with a merchant's property and a widow who owned a warehouse next door. Since leases were not necessarily recorded by the notaries, it is probable that any warehouse or other property used by the Laffites was leased. Still, they will appear in time in connection with another property in the Veaux Carré, an association that is itself a part of Laffite legend. Pierre went back to notary Pedesclaux on July 29, 1803, to register a debt owed to Pedro Alarcon, but then he disappeared from the New Orleans record for almost two years.

Dumaine in that period was known as the “Street of the Stores,” and would have been the place to be if Laffite was a merchant. And certainly Pierre Laffite was a merchant, though his next documentary appearance is rather surprising. In the manuscript archives of the Spanish government of West Florida, now in the vault of the clerk of court’s office in the East Baton Rouge Parish Court House in Baton Rouge, are found three important documents that have been overlooked and ignored ever since they were first identified by Stanley Arthur during his WPA survey work in the 1930s. Indeed, in the typewritten transcripts and translations of these archives prepared under Arthur’s direction, he made note—mistakenly—that they were the first archival appearance of Pierre Laffite in Louisiana, but then—and typically—failed either to see or appreciate the significance of their content, and even misdated them to 1806 in his one passing reference to them in his book Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover.

On October 16, 1804, Josephine Patin, a widow of Pointe Coupee, a small community on the west side of the Mississippi opposite Baton Rouge, and then a part of the Louisiana Territory recently purchased by the United States, appeared in court in Baton Rouge and gave her power of attorney to Pierre Laffite, “a resident merchant of this post.” The importance of those words needs to be emphasized. In October 1804 Pierre Laffite was either living in, or at least had a residence in, Baton Rouge in Spanish West Florida. Equally to the point, he was known as a merchant doing business in Baton Rouge, and when Julian Poydras, civil judge for the United States in Point Coupee witnessed the document, he attested that he knew both Patin and Laffite and witnessed their signatures as being “the same which they usually make,” meaning that Pierre was in court enough prior to this date that Poydras knew his signature. And it is the very recognizable Pierre Laffite signature, the same that had already appeared on the notarial documents in New Orleans the year before.

Mrs. Patin gave Pierre her power of attorney specifically to appear before courts in New Orleans, Spanish Havana and Vera Cruz, or any other jurisdiction to sell two slaves belonging to her, one named Jacob and the other Pierrot, who were sent to the penitentiary in
Pensacola for five and ten years respectively, as a result of the 1796 revolt of the slaves at Pointe Coupée. This may have been "boilerplate" language, or it may mean that the merchant Pierre sometimes had business in Havana and Vera Cruz, and Mrs. Patin anticipated that he might be visiting those places in the near future, which she could only assume if he had told her so. Two weeks later on October 30, 1804, Pierre Laffite appeared in Baton Rouge again with Patin’s power of attorney and sold one of the slaves to Esteban Folche, appearing before Don Carlos de Grand-Pré, colonel of the Royal Army and civil governor of the post of Baton Rouge. Significantly, the governor testified that he knew Laftite by sight, suggesting that Pierre was not a stranger in Baton Rouge, either. A few days later, when Julian Guedri of Baton Rouge sold three slaves to Clement Lacour, a resident of Pointe Coupée, Pierre appeared again in Baton Rouge and witnessed the document.

Just when Pierre Laffite began his trading and at least intermittent residence in Point Coupée and Baton Rouge is undetermined at the moment, but certainly it calls for a thorough examination of the early records of both East Baton Rouge and Point Coupée Parishes. Just what sort of business he engaged in is also unknown as of this moment, though at that time Point Coupée enjoyed a thriving trade. A visitor the year before remarked that "stores ... are springing up daily," making it unnecessary for planters to go all the way to New Orleans for merchandise. Moreover, "boatmen peddlers" or caboteurs, most of them French sailors, plied the river in pirogues selling staple goods from landing to landing. Laffite's connection with Point Coupée seems to have lasted at least until November 1805, when he sold a slave to a man from the village, though recording the sale with a notary in New Orleans. In fact, he may have been active there as late as 1810, as will be seen.

It is worth noting that from July 29, 1803, until this November 1805 sale, Pierre disappeared entirely from the documentary record in New Orleans, at least allowing the speculation that he had been spending that time upriver. By early 1806 he was back in New Orleans, however, or at least making frequent visits. Between January 10 and April 14 he made a series of slave sales in the city. Then on April 21, 1806, he appeared in person before Pedesclaux on an entirely different sort of business.

The hundreds of French nationals killed in the late uprisings on San Domingue created a considerable legal problem in the settling of their estates back home. The absence of bodies, death certificates, or any other form of certain proof of death, required heirs to secure sworn testimony from people who had witnessed the death of the deceased before they could be declared legally dead and their estates settled. On this date Pierre Laffite provided testimony that he had witnessed the death of a Mr. Gabauriau of Gornac Sur Garone, killed on the Place St. Pierre in the slave revolt at Cap Français. Pierre did not sign the document, but it states that he appeared before the notary in person.

Of far more significance is what the document says and implies. Laffite identified himself as a "native of Pauillac, France." Of course many birthplaces have been offered for the Laffites, but it may be significant that one of the only other ones directly contemporary and provided on a document directly related to the Laffites, is the statement on the 1813 crew list of the Superbe at the Historic New Orleans Collection, which identified Jean Laffite as a native of Bordeaux. Bordeaux is a city, to be sure, but it is and was a general name for a region as well, and Pauillac is in the Bordeaux. Research is now underway in and around Pauillac to see if any record of the Laffites is to be found there.

The other salient fact, of course, is that in order to witness the killing of the unfortunate Mr. Gabauriau, Pierre—and presumably Jean—had to be in San Domingue and Cap Français during one of the revolts. In the 1780s there was a family named
Gabriau living in Sainte-Rose, very close to Cap Français. Certainly there were also Lafittes and Laffites, and it has been a common assumption that Pierre and Jean Laffite probably came to Louisiana along with the rest of the exodus of white refugees from San Domingue. Marc Lafitte of Léogane lived in Port au Prince and was proprietor of a hospital, but more interestingly, he was also a notary, and naturally the speculation arises that he may have been the same notary Marc Lafitte of New Orleans with whom the Laffites did considerable business beginning in 1812. There was also a Pierre Lafitte living in Port-au-Prince in the 1790s, a merchant from St. Marc noted as having fled to Savannah, Georgia, in 1794. This does not make a connection between these Lafittes specifically and the New Orleans Laffites, but Pierre’s affidavit does finally and definitely establish his presence at least on San Domingue during the revolts.

That would be Pierre’s last personal appearance in New Orleans for three years. The inference that he spent those years trading in Spanish West Florida gains added weight from a power of attorney registered before notary Pedesclaux, on May 21, 1806. In it “Pedro Larralde” granted his power of attorney to “Pedro Laffite.” That the paper was written in Spanish itself suggests a possible West Florida connection, but then the document actually refers to Laffite as “a resident of Pensacola” who was in Pensacola at that time. Ten days later Pierre sent a representative to sell a slave for him in New Orleans, and that transaction also refers to him then being in Pensacola.

What was Pierre doing in Pensacola? When did he go there and how long did he remain? These questions and more will probably never be answered. Unfortunately, virtually all of the Spanish city and governmental archives at Pensacola were loaded aboard a ship for transfer to Havana when Pensacola passed into United States hands in 1819. Tragically, the vessel got within sight of the Cuban coast and then sank—a victim, ironically, of freebooters—taking a treasure trove of history to the bottom. We only know at the moment that Pierre does not appear again until April 7, 1809, when he sells a slave and the document lists him as a resident of New Orleans. Thereafter he is once again frequently in the city recording slave sales and other transactions throughout 1809 and 1810. It is significant that several of the slaves he sells are natives of Africa, suggesting recent illegal import, while at least one came from San Domingue.

And now, and only now, does Jean Laffite appear for the first time in the contemporary documentary record. Up until this period the records are completely silent about Pierre’s younger brother, and we can only speculate as to why. Was he simply overshadowed in their business by his older brother? Was he even in Louisiana? Did he stay in West Florida during these years, or was he perhaps as some have speculated involved in privateering out of Guadaloupe and Martinique. As yet, we simply do not know (at least from sources available in the United States). However, in December 1809 one of the most significant of all Laffite documents was written, providing the first mention of Jean and the earliest and still most detailed descriptions of both brothers, as well as some telling hints about their personal and professional lives at the time.

The document was a letter written from 18-year-old Esau Glasscock of Concordia Parish, Louisiana, to his brother Edward. Unfortunately it may no longer survive. At least its whereabouts are currently unknown. In the 1920’s it belonged to Mrs. Elizabeth Dix Perrault of Natchez, great-granddaughter of Thomas Glasscock, and thus a great-niece of Thomas’s son Esau. She made the letter and other family papers available to Lyle Saxon when he was researching his book Lafitte the Pirate, published in 1930. Mrs. Perrault, however, died in 1929, leaving two children who are believed to have divided all of the family memorabilia in her hands. Her daughter married Robert Calhoun of Vidalia, and their daughter, Anna Calhoun is still living and inherited what her mother had of Elizabeth Perrault’s papers. Elizabeth’s son
Francis D. Perrault inherited the other half of her family effects. He had only one child, Francis D. Perrault, Jr., and when that gentleman died childless in 2000, the other half of Elizabeth Perrault's family papers passed to that same Anna Calhoun, who thus has virtually all of what Elizabeth Perrault left at her death in 1929. She confirms that the Esau Glasscock letter is not among the things she has, and that she does not now recall the document. 24

We are left to wonder what might have become of the letter. Perhaps Elizabeth Perrault loaned the actual document to Saxon during his research and he either lost or inadvertently destroyed it. Since she died in 1929, a year before the publication of Lafitte the Pirate, perhaps Saxon simply never got around to returning it to the family if it had been loaned to him. It does not appear to be in his surviving papers, some of which are in the Special Collections at Northwestern Louisiana State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana, but his papers are scattered, and what survives seems to be chiefly what he wrote to others rather than his own personal files. Maybe the letter was simply lost in the transfer of Mrs. Perrault's effects, or just fell apart over the years. Saxon did note that it was already torn and fragile when he examined it in the 1920s. And perhaps it still survives, but is in the hands of some collateral member of the family. After all, it had been written to Edward Glasscock, and we can only speculate on how it found its way into the hands of Elizabeth Perrault, who was a grand niece and not a direct descendant. Perhaps Edward's descendants loaned it to her as she collected materials for Saxon, and it is now back in the hands of some distant Glasscock cousin.

Of one thing we may be certain. Saxon did not invent the letter or those portions of its contents that he actually quoted. Saxon is often derided as a mere fictionalist. Certainly he was not an historian in our accepted definition of the word. Rather, he romanticized using genuine sources for the framework of a story that he then liberally embellished with context drawn from his imagination, though still based on general sources. However, when Saxon dealt with historical documents, his only real vice was correcting spelling and adding punctuation, and when he put such material in quotations it is clear that he was dealing with an actual document before him. Consequently, when Saxon quotes from the Glasscock letter about young Esau's impressions of Pierre and Jean Lafitte, he is clearly using a genuine source. On the other hand, when he has Esau walking down to the corner of Bourbon and St. Philip to meet Pierre at the brothers' blacksmith shop, none of the description is in quotation marks, and we may safely assume that Saxon is inventing a scene based on the common acceptance in 1930 that the Lafittes did actually operate and live in a smithy.

The Glasscock letter cannot be reconstructed in its entirety, though we know that it covered several subjects, including an eventful trip from Concordia to New Orleans, and young Esau's impressions gained walking about the streets of the city. Most of this Saxon merely paraphrased, and may well have enhanced, but since his primary interest was the Lafittes, it is reasonable to assume that he substantively quoted all portions of the letter that dealt with Jean and Pierre. Those quotations as they appear in Lafitte the Pirate can be reassembled to produce the following abstract relating to the Lafittes:

Concordia Parish, Louisiana

December 1809

Dear Brother Ned,

I have seen the notorious Captain Lafitte, and our father has bought six likely negroes from the barracoon at Grand Terre. . . .

He [Pierre Lafitte] is a strapping man of middle size with light hair growing low on his forehead. His eyes are dark and his teeth very white. He speaks English with a strong accent of French. He assured me of our father's safety, saying that the trip was arduous and
difficult, and that unfavorable winds and tides sometimes delayed the boats, etc.

He [a little boy with Pierre] is the son of this Mr. Lafitte by a previous marriage.

He [Jean Lafitte] is tall, with pale skin, and he has large dark eyes. He is clean-shaven except for a beard extending part-way down his cheeks. He greeted our father as an old friend, as they had spent some days together in the boats.

[Later Esau saw Jean again] this time in company with a quadroon woman, hardly more than a child, with liquid black eyes, such as many of them possess, but somewhat too thin for my taste.

Though this abstract is brief, it contains much of substance. First there are the directly contemporary descriptions of the two men, the fullest that we have, and it should be added that they comport well with all of the other contemporary descriptions of the Lafitte by those who knew them. Second there is the confirmation that the Lafitte are already involved in the illegal importation of slaves, with Jean managing the operation on Grand Terre while Pierre lived in New Orleans and handled affairs there. Thus all of those slave sales conducted by Pierre in the months immediately before and after the Glasscock's visit are probably documentary proofs of the illicit family business. Then there is the mention of Pierre Lafitte having a son with him, though not by the woman in whose company Esau found Pierre. Saxon describes this scene. Since it is not in quotations, it is not included in the above abstract, but if Saxon was not inventing in this instance, then the woman with Pierre was a current wife or mistress, "swarthy and dark," and recently arrived from San Domingue. This would seem to confirm the statement of Felipe Fatio in March 1818, to the effect that Pierre had a son named Eugène aged about 16, meaning he would have been born in 1801 or 1802, and thus would have been 7 or 8 and definably "a little boy" when Glasscock saw him. It also hints at a relationship of Pierre's confirmed by material that will follow shortly. The letter also links Jean with a quadroon girl, though there is nothing by which to attempt to identify her.

Most interesting of all, however, is Glasscock's opening statement that he has met "the notorious Captain Lafitte." While Saxon assumes that Glasscock is talking about Jean, in fact there is nothing in the statement or in the material quoted to indicate just which of the brothers young Esau meant. Immediately questions arise, and ones not easily answered at the moment. Which Lafitte did he mean, and on what basis would he have referred to either as "captain" in late 1809? The earliest firm evidence we have of one of them actually exercising command of a vessel comes in 1813, when Jean is listed as captain of the brig Diligente owned by his brother. "Does Glasscock's using that title indicate that one or the other of the Lafitte was commonly known as "captain," and does that therefore mean that one of them was actually commanding merchant or privateering craft prior to the War of 1812? Or, since the Glasscock letter definitely puts Jean on Grand Terre at least occasionally as of late 1809, was he already essentially acting as overlord or "bos" of the smugglers operating there, and being acknowledged as such by being called "captain"? Neither should it be forgotten that a man in charge of a number of slaves was sometimes addressed as "captain," though this seems the least likely explanation.

We can only guess at the significance of Glasscock's use of the title, but it should be remembered that he actually employed two adjectives to define that unspecified Lafitte. The other word was "notorious," and again questions arise. What had either Lafitte done as of the end of 1809 to be regarded as "notorious"? Moreover, considering that the Glasscocks came from Concordia Parish, across the Mississippi from Natchez, Mississippi, some 200 river miles upstream from New Orleans, we have to ask what the Lafitte had done by this time to earn an unsavory reputation so far from the
presumed center of their operations. One portion of the Glasscock letter that is paraphrased, but not quoted, by Saxon, is a conversation between Thomas Glasscock and John R. Grymes, in which Grymes suggests the Laffites as a source of slaves, and Glasscock protests that he has heard that they were outlaws. Perhaps this is the origin of their notoriety, though it is interesting that Glasscock might think they were outlaws, when neither Laffite will actually run afoul of the law until 1812.

Indeed, as will be seen shortly, one of them will actually be an officer of the law within a few months. And if one or both of them are so notorious, we have to wonder why the New Orleans press and the public legal record are completely silent about them up to this time. Is it possible that the notoriety applied to Pierre and that it derived from his dealings in and around Baton Rouge and West Florida a few years earlier? The Glasscock letter thus generates more questions than it answers, yet it remains the earliest really "human" document to get us to grips with the Laffites in the years before they genuinely became notorious.

Less than a year after the Glasscock visit, Pierre shifted scene again to Ascension Parish, which it should be noted is immediately adjacent to Point Coupée and Baton Rouge and some distance upriver from New Orleans. This suggests that as late as 1810 Pierre is still involved in affairs in that vicinity. It is also worth noting that on the west bank of the river in the heart of Ascension Parish sat the village of La Fourche des Chitimachas, formerly known as Donaldson, and which would become Donaldsonville in a few years. This is where by 1813 or 1814 at the latest the Laffites had a base to which they smuggled slaves from Grand Terre.

On July 5, 1810, the Spanish schooner El Bolador, belonging to Vicente Dordoigaité and laden with a cargo of seventy slaves from Africa, was taken off the Tortugas by a privateer flying French colors. The captors took the vessel to Round Bay on the Louisiana coast, unloaded the slaves, and burned her to the water. Shortly thereafter the slaves were introduced into Louisiana and sold in violation of the 1808 prohibition of the African slave trade. Dordoigaité immediately recovered some of them, keeping them in the parish jail, only to have several taken out by force by unknown hands, and in July 1810 the El Bolador's Captain Peter Paillet learned the whereabouts of five of them. He reported them to the sheriff of Ascension Parish, who in time summoned Pierre Laffite, who was either already a "deputy marshal" or whom the sheriff thereupon deputized. Laffite also knew where the slaves were, and that they had probably been taken from jail by a planter named Louis Bourdier.

In company with Paillet, Laffite went to the Bourdier plantation, near Donaldsonville, in September and found a slave boy hidden in an outhouse, and immediately seized him. A few days later he and Paillet went back and found four more slaves hidden in a garret in an outhouse and concluded that they were hidden there by Bourdier, who knew they were illegally imported when he purchased them. These, too, Pierre seized and turned over to the court on September 18, 1810. Interestingly, Paillet then filed a claim under the existing law that when a fine of $1,000 per slave was levied against Bourdier for violating the law, half should go to himself for finding the slaves and turning them in. Pierre himself appeared in the Ascension Parish court to file signed depositions attesting to his role in the apprehension of the five slaves. Then on October 11, Pierre arrested Bourdier himself and delivered him to the jail in Donaldsonville.

In all of the depositions and statements presented to the court in these matters, Pierre Laffite signed his name in full in the same unmistakable signature used in his other documents discussed here, and he was also identified in them all as a deputy marshal. The juxtaposition of time, place, and subject, can hardly be coincidental. Tradition and some early recollections identify Donaldsonville, and more specifically the Viala
plantation, as the location of the Laffite outlet for illegal slave sales, and in the case of the *Ef Bolador* Pierre was in the vicinity and had knowledge of who had purchased illegal slaves. The speculation is inevitable that Pierre himself had something to do with the importation or sale of those slaves, via Jean or other smugglers at Round Bay. Moreover, the gambit of importing slaves into Louisiana, then reporting them to the officials for seizure would be used by a number of later Laffite associates as a means of "laundering" slaves. That is, once the slaves were seized, law required their sale at auction, and half the proceeds went to the individual first reporting or locating them. In this instance, it was Pierre who found them. Secondly, as with Paillet, there was also a 50% finder's fee for reporting illicit slaves, to be taken from the Federal fines imposed on buyers of the banned blacks. Pierre's involvement in this incident as a deputy marshal may well be one such case, by which he had helped import and sell the slaves in the first place. Then he informed the authorities of their likely whereabouts, accepted a deputy marshal's appointment for the interim in order to seize the slaves when he found them, and then in some degree profited from their subsequent sale and/or fines.

Just weeks after this episode, Pierre appeared in the documentary record for the last time during that first Laffite decade in Louisiana, and in an entirely different context. On October 27, 1810, a daughter named Marie Josephe was born to Pierre and his mistress Adelaide Maselari. In entering the birth and subsequent baptism in the baptismal register of St. Louis Cathedral, it was noted that the parents lived in New Orleans, and that Pierre came from Bayonne, France, while the mother came from St. Louis Parish of Jeremy, San Domingue.44 The attribution of Bayonne as the place of Pierre's birth conflicts with his own statement four years before that he was born in Pauillac, but it is significant that this register confirms the Glasscock description of Pierre living with a woman from San Domingue. His relationship with Adelaide Maselari—or Masclary—is further cemented on October 26, 1811, when Pierre sold to her a slave woman named Charlotte. Whereas the baptismal register made no mention of the child or the mother being of mixed race, suggesting that Adelaide Maselari was probably white, it is specifically noted in the 1811 slave sale that Adelaide is a free woman of color, confirming Glasscock's comment about her complexion.35

Finally, Saxon, in his embellishing narrative with the Glasscock letter, suggests that Pierre and Adelaide were living at the smithy on Bourbon and St. Philip. Title searches done by the Veaux Carré Commission in the 1930s, and now housed at the Historic New Orleans Collection archives, confirm that at no time did any property at that intersection ever belong to either of the Laffites. Independent research by the author confirms that there is no record of the Laffites ever owning any property anywhere in New Orleans other than the parcel at Royal and Dumaine that briefly belonged in part to Pierre in 1803. Archaeological work at the traditional site of the Laffite smithy, a site for some decades now occupied by a tavern called the "Lafitte Blacksmith Shop," also revealed none of the telltale debris that would ordinarily be associated with a smithy; suggesting that no such enterprise was ever pursued on that site under any ownership.36

Yet there is that tradition of the Laffites and blacksmithing and that site, a tradition that was current as early as the 1850s, and in a roundabout way its origins can now be confirmed. The site of today's tavern never had anything to do with the Laffites. However, across St. Philip, where today stands the Lafitte Guest House at 1003 Bourbon Street, it is a different story. On August 16, 1816, this property was purchased by a free woman of color named Marie Villard. She subsequently sold it, then purchased it again in 1819, though she appears to have lived in it uninterruptedly. On the latter occasion, she purchased it for 9,000 piastres in promissory notes, 7,500 piastres of which was subscribed by Jean Laffite over his signature.37 Prior
to that time, Marie Louise or Marguerite Villard was engaged in a number of property and slave transactions to which Pierre Lafitte was a party either as witness or as surety for promissory notes. Of course this is the Marie Villard who replaced Adelaide Maselari as Pierre's mistress sometime prior to September 1815.

The logical conclusion is that in the established New Orleans tradition of *placage*, whereby white men bought their mulatto or quadroon mistresses houses and maintained them in some comfort, Pierre Lafitte had set up his mistress Marie Villard in the house at 1003 Bourbon. Thus, off and on from the time she first acquired it in 1816, this is where Pierre and Jean Lafitte would have stayed when they were in New Orleans, especially since legend and some documentation also support a relationship between Jean and Marie’s sister Catherine, making Jean’s backing of the repurchase in 1819 the more logical. Thus the Laffites had a very definite connection with the intersection of Bourbon and St. Philip for at least three years. Tradition was right in that. It just identified them with the wrong corner on St. Philip. Add to that the early association of the Laffites with blacksmithing thanks to that 1802 *Hearco* and *Lafitte* advertisement and the 1803 innkeeper named Pierre Lafitte who either was a blacksmith or else employed one, and the dynamics of memory did the rest. No one was lying or inventing. There had been a Lafitte—maybe two—who was an ironworker in early New Orleans, and people with long memories could remember that Jean and Pierre Lafitte intermittently lived on the corner of Bourbon and St. Philip. It was easy for the peculiar workings of the oral tradition to conflate the two, producing a new and utterly erroneous legend out of very definable sets of facts.

And that is what we know of the Laffites in the first decade of the nineteenth century, or at least what we can establish certainly from directly contemporary documents. More certainly remains to be found, and each new discovery will add more flashes of color to the canvas, though it is safe to say that it will never be as filled as we would like. But then, perhaps that is best, for one of the lures of the Laffites is the very mystery that has always surrounded them, and which in all likelihood always will frame their portrait.38

ENDNOTES


2 "Editorial and Literary Department—Life and Times of Lafitte," *DeBow's Southern and Western Review*, XII (January 1852), p. 112.

3 June 6, 1803, Notary Pierre Pedesclaux, Vol. 43, pp. 222-23, Notarial Archives.

4 July 6, 1775, Note Notary Juan B. Garcia, Vol. 6, p. 178, Notarial Archives.


9 Power of Attorney, October 16, 1804, Archives of the Spanish Government of West Florida, Clerk of Court's Office, East Baton Rouge Parish Courthouse, Baton Rouge, LA.

10 Ibid.
11 Sale of slave, October 30, 1804, Archives of the Spanish Government of West Florida.

12 Record of sale, November 3, 1804, Archives of the Spanish Government of West Florida.


14 Pierre Pedesclaux, *Vol. 52 January, 1806*, p. 15; *Vol. 52, p. 33, January 10, 1806*; *Vol. 52, p. 90, February 8, 1806*; *Vol. 52, p. 120, February 14, 1806*, Notarial Archives.

15 Certificate of Inspection, 1813 [maybe March 2], *Pirate Papers*, Historic New Orleans Collection.

16 April 21, 1806, Pierre Pedesclaux, *Vol. 52, p. 335*, Notarial Archives.


19 Ibid., III, p. 1506.


26 Fatio to captain general, March 1818, Legajo 1900, Archivo General des Indes, Seville, Spain.

27 Certificate of Inspection, 1813 [possibly March 2], *Pirate Papers*, Historic New Orleans Collection.

28 Ibid., p. 6.

29 Libel of Vicente Dordoigaite, n.d., Vicente Dordoigaite vs. £1 Bolador, Case File #0419, Records of the United States District Court for Eastern Louisiana, National Archives Southwest Region, Ft. Worth, Texas.

30 Deposition, September 23, 1810, Case File #0574, United States v Pierre Lafitte, National Archives Southwest Region.

31 Pierre Lafitte deposition, September 23, 1810, Case File #0399, P. N. Paillet v. L. Bourdier, National Archives Southwest Region.

32 Paillet deposition, July 16, 1810, Ibid.

33 Arrest order, October 11, 1810, Deposition of Paillet, n.d., Deposition of Pierre Lafitte, September 28, 1810, Case File #0399, National Archives Southwest Region.
It will be observed that the alleged journal of Jean Laffite, most recently translated and published as The Memoirs of Jean Laffite (Philadelphia, 1999), has not been used as a source document in this article. In the first place, the purpose of the present account has been to deal only with directly contemporaneous documentation, whereas the Memoir alleges in its content that it was written between 1845 and 1850. More to the point, this document is so fatally compromised by inaccuracies, anachronisms, mistakes obviously borrowed from other twenty-first century sources, and examples of impossible foreknowledge, that it cannot be regarded either as written by Laffite himself, or by anyone prior to the 1940s. Interestingly, in its very brief account of the period 1803-1810 covered in this article, the Memoir is almost wholly silent, there having been no substantial published sources for its author to use, whereas if really written by Laffite, there should have been plenty of memory to rely on. It is entirely unaware of established facts of the Laffite’s early lives in Louisiana that were not in print as of the 1940s. For instance, it is ignorant of Pierre’s 1803 purchase of property in New Orleans. It knows nothing of his activities as a merchant at Point Coupee and his Baton Rouge connections, or of his involvement and sometime residence in Pensacola. It says that he was briefly “an American official in New Orleans,” whereas he was actually a deputized marshal in Donaldsonville. The Memoir also repeats the now discredited tradition that the Laffite brothers established a blacksmith shop in New Orleans, in 1805, which we can be virtually certain they did not. More could be said to discredit the document, but this is neither the time nor the venue for that discussion.