JEAN LAFFITE: CATALYST TO JACKSON'S VICTORY AT NEW ORLEANS

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With the notable exception of the late Dr. Jane de Grummond's *The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans*, none of the modern histories of the Battle of New Orleans adequately credit the valuable, even crucial, role privateer-smuggler Jean Laffite played in that campaign's American victory.¹

Most scholars think the only significant thing Laffite did for the Americans was supplying them with 7,500 quartz flints needed to fire their guns. But the flints were only part of the assistance given by Jean and Pierre Laffite. As Andrew Jackson's ebullient biographer Alexander Walker said in the introduction to his 1856 work *Jackson and New Orleans*. The splendor of the closing victory of the Battle of New Orleans has obscured many features of that campaign which contributed largely to the final success.²

The glory of that miraculous American victory at Chalmette is so vividly limned with General Andrew Jackson's dynamic leadership and crushing defeat of the battle-seasoned men who fought Napoleon, that the little thread that began this whole singular picture is almost lost to the eye. A closer inspection and careful study of old documents, letters and actions unravels the initiator of the deeds which developed into Jackson's stellar success at New Orleans. That catalyst was provided by none other than Jean Laffite, leader and "bos" of Barataria's smuggler and privateer base on the Gulf.

Imagine, if you will, a British New Orleans, an English province stretching from Louisiana to the northwest territories, British control of trade traffic on the Mississippi River since 1814. Imagine United States history so radically altered as to be unrecognizable, like a bizarre parallel reality. All of that would have happened if Jean Laffite had not forwarded to New Orleans legislator, Jean Blanque, the British letters he had received a few days before from the hands of Capt. Nicholas Lockyer of the British ship *Sophie* on September 3, 1814.

Twentieth century military historian, Robin Reilly, observed that "it is curious to reflect that to a significant extent Andrew Jackson owed his election as President of the United States to the aid of the Laffites and their band of Baratarian pirates."³

The British approached Barataria in the early fall of 1814 thinking to easily acquire without bloodshed the light sloops of the privateers, plus the Baratarians' knowledge of the best approaches to New Orleans. They presented Laffite documents proving their intent, and tried to bribe him with a captaincy. After allowing his men to hold the British officers overnight in a brig, Laffite released them the next morning, telling them he needed some time to think the offer over. The same day, Laffite wrote a letter to Blanque and to Gov. William C.C. Claiborne to accompany the packet of official letters he had received from Capt. Lockyer, and sent the lot to New Orleans posthaste by his fastest courier, who arrived in the city on Sept. 6.⁴

By forwarding the British letters to Blanque, Laffite served as the spark for a series of actions, starting with the governor's council called the evening of the 6th when Blanque presented Laffite's packet to Gov. Claiborne. Although the council was unsuccessful in drawing General Andrew Jackson away from Mobile, it did lead to brewing public unrest and dissension in the city and surrounding area which was ameliorated only by Jackson's arrival.⁵

Almost all historians agree that without Jackson's presence and commanding leadership, New Orleans would have been a fast, nearly bloodless conquest when the British invaded later that month. If Laffite and the Baratarian had sided with the enemy, British troops could have moved easily and rapidly to a point above New Orleans, using the privateer's small sloops.
that had a more shallow draft than the large British warships.6

Along with their expeditionary forces that gathered at Jamaica, the British had brought all the supplies and materials needed to set up a provisional government. Some wives and daughters also were on the warships, a sign the British feared no resistance on the seas.7 Even though by the time of the Battle of New Orleans peace had been presumably settled through the Treaty of Ghent, if they had successfully invaded New Orleans, the British would most likely have ignored the treaty and remained as an occupation force, controlling trade traffic up the Mississippi from the Gulf Coast, changing history dramatically. Even Jackson, years later as he was leaving the presidency, agreed to that viewpoint8. Simply put, if Laffite had not forwarded the letters to Blanque and the authorities at New Orleans, Gen. Jackson in all probability would not have been at Chalmette when the British forces arrived off Lake Borgne. He would have been waiting for them to attack at Mobile. The implications for alternative history in that event are vast.

Some may question this train of revisionist thought by stating that Jackson was under direct orders from President James Madison to defend New Orleans, and that’s why he marched there. But, as biographer Marquis James pointed out in footnotes to The Life of Andrew Jackson, it was "not until after Jackson had departed for New Orleans in November (1814) did (Secretary of War) Monroe begin his oft-cited requests for the General to hasten to the defense of the city."9 Secretary of War Monroe’s first letter regarding an imminent attack on New Orleans by the British was not written until Dec. 7, after Jackson had already arrived in that city.10

Because the skeptical governor’s council members mostly believed the British letters were fraudulent, Commodore Daniel Patterson asked for and got permission to execute earlier plans and attack Barataria to eliminate any threat from that direction. He and Ross proceeded with their gunships down to Grande Terre by the slow route (the only route they knew), allowing Laffite and his men plenty of time to get most of their valuable goods to other places. The night of the council meeting, Jean’s elder brother Pierre, held prisoner in the Cabildo for almost four months, mysteriously and fortuitously broke out of jail and was soon with Jean at Grande Terre.11 On Sept. 10, Jean Laffite wrote another letter to Claiborne, once again offering his services to the Americans, before leaving with Pierre to a nearby friendly plantation, most likely on the German coast of Louisiana.

When Patterson and Ross arrived at Barataria on Sept. 16, they met with no resistance, and took Dominique You, Renato Beluche, and several other Baratarians prisoner. They also confiscated all the ships and cargo present.12 Interestingly, Gov. Claiborne inadvertently had approved the arrest of his own wife’s relative, as Beluche was Susana Bosque Claiborne’s first cousin once removed.13

Gov. Claiborne had not concurred with his skeptical council about the validity of the British letters. Their contents worried him, and he forwarded them on to Jackson at Mobile, deciding to err on the side of caution if need be.

Laffite’s importance in the American success becomes clearer when one examines the correspondence and subsequent actions of Gov. Claiborne, Edward Livingston and Jackson. Starting with Claiborne’s forwarded packet, Jackson over the next couple of months received increasingly more pleas from both Claiborne and Livingston to come to New Orleans, especially during the latter part of October and early November, but these failed to budge Old Hickory from his post until it was almost too late.14 In retrospect it is interesting to note the British explanation for their failure to invade a city which even the tactical genius Napoleon had said was not defendable--New Orleans.15

Articles in the Royal Gazette of Kingston, Jamaica said that Jackson had been well informed "by private letters from Carthagena" and that "the enemy received such particular information respecting the Expedition, they were fully prepared to receive us." There was no truth to any part of this British whitewash.16

Jackson’s information about the British intentions for Louisiana that fall came straight from Laffite’s packet which Gov. Claiborne had forwarded to him at Mobile
in mid September 1814, along with a letter in which he evidenced support for Laffite: "There is in this city a much greater Spirit of Disaffection than I had anticipated, and among the faithful Louisianians there is a Despondency which pales all my preparations...Laffite and his associates might probably be made useful to us."17 However, Old Hickory scoffed at the packet's authenticity, not to mention sending to Claiborne on Sept. 21 an address that chastised those who would place any confidence in men who have courted an alliance with the "pirates of Barrataria (sic)" further implying that Louisianians had been insulted by Nicholls' proclamation asking for allegiance against the Americans as it had called on them to "associate...with...this hellish Banditti?"18

Obviously, Jackson did not know Claiborne was related by marriage to one of the "pirates of Barrataria." As James points out, General Jackson made a major blunder in initially rebuffing the help of Laffite, but his mind was changed largely by friend (and fellow Mason) Livingston, the New Orleans lawyer who had created a power base there as the chairman of the Citizens for Defense created after news of the British letters alarmed the city. Livingston also happened to be the leader of the secretive New Orleans Association, not to mention the Laffite brothers' attorney.19

At a meeting of the Citizens for Defense at Tremoulet's Coffeehouse on Sept. 15, 1814, the brilliant orator Livingston eloquently summed up the situation: "Fellow citizens! the navigation of the Mississippi is as necessary to two millions of our western brethren, as the blood is to the pulsation of the heart--those brave men, closely attached to the union, will never suffer, whatever seducing offers may be made to them--they will never suffer the state of Louisiana to be subject to a foreign power, and should the events of war enable the enemy to occupy it, they will make every sacrifice to recover a country, so necessary to their existence. A war ruinous to you would be the consequence--the enemy to whom you would have had the weakness to yield, would subject you to a military despotism of all others the most dreadful; your estates, your slaves, your persons would be put in requisition, and you would be forced at the point of the bayonet to fight against those very men whom you have voluntarily chosen for fellow citizens and brethren."20

The effect of Livingston's speech was a growing worry and indecision among the populace of New Orleans. Meanwhile, General Jackson dug in his heels at Mobile and waited throughout the month of October for reinforcement troops from Tennessee to arrive and bolster his defenses around Fort Bowyer. During October, 2,500 militia from the area were organized and equipped at Fort Hawkins, Georgia, before joining Jackson at Mobile. At the time, Fort Hawkins was the principal depository for army supplies and rations for troops involved in both Indian fighting and the War of 1812.21 Jackson waited until virtually the last day to head toward New Orleans because he was adamant that the British would invade through "the Mobile."22

Through spy reports, Old Hickory closely followed the British movements around Pensacola and the east. Late that summer, noting the forces were making preparations for some action (in Jackson's mind, the most advantageous military target being Mobile), Jackson wrote on August 22 to Gov. Claiborne to prepare a Louisiana militia which might be "called to face an invading enemy beyond the boundary of the state, to stop his entry into their territory (Louisiana)." In response to Jackson's letter, Claiborne published on Sept. 5 militia orders directing the militia of the two divisions of the state to hold themselves in readiness to march, and to be reviewed at Baton Rouge on Oct. 1.23 Claiborne would meet the next day, Sept. 6, with council members to discuss the packet received that day from Laffite.

Anxious to do something about the British threat, Jackson determined he would surprise the British at Pensacola with a forced march attack of 3,000 men which arrived on Nov. 6. The British blew up Fort Barrancas in advance of Jackson's arrival, and withdrew from the area, leaving Jackson with no victory, and worse, he had deliberately violated the neutrality of Spain and had acted on his own initiative without orders from the US government. He doubled back in haste to unprotected Mobile, returning to his post on Nov. 11 and finding letters from New Orleans waiting for him. Jackson's unauthorized
feint at Pensacola had left both Mobile and Louisiana wide open. Incredibly, Jackson did not leave for New Orleans until Nov. 21, taking a circuitous route presumably to reconnoiter weak points the enemy could attack. It seems obvious his real purpose in taking the slow route was to be able to quickly double back to Mobile if the British pounced as expected. When Jackson finally did arrive with a few of his staff officers at New Orleans on Dec. 2, 1814, the city was woefully unprepared for any sort of British attack. The Patterson and Ross expedition against Barataria had made sure there were no fast privateers available to defend the coast, and there were no less than six possible approaches to New Orleans that the British could choose (Lake Borgne, Lake Pontchartrain, River Aux Chenes, the Mississippi mouth, Barataria Bay and Bayou Lafourche.)

"It is hardly possible to form an idea of the change which his (Jackson's) arrival produced in the minds of the people. Hitherto partial attempts had been made to adopt measures of defence; (sic) the legislature had appointed a joint committee of both houses, to concert with the governor, Commodore Patterson, and the military commandant, such measures as they should deem most expedient; but nothing had been done. There was wanting that concentration of power, so necessary for the success of military operations," wrote Latour in his account of the campaign.

Benson J. Lossing wrote, "He (Jackson) found the city utterly defenseless, and the councils of the people distracted by petty factions. The patriotic Governor Claiborne had called the Legislature together as early as the 5th of October (to discuss defense strategies.) The members were divided into several factions, and there was neither union, nor harmony, nor confidence to be found. The people, alarmed and distrustful, complained of the Legislature; that body, in turn, complained of the governor; and Claiborne complained of both the Legislature and the people. Money and credit were equally wanting, and arms and ammunition were very scarce. There was no effective naval force in the adjacent waters; and only two small militia regiments, and a weak battalion of uniformed volunteers, commanded by Major Plauche...constituted the military force of the city."

In The Life of Edward Livingston author, Hunt, agreed that Lafitte (sic) "immediately divulged the (British) overture to Governor Claiborne and the legislature, and calling himself a stray sheep...offered to devote himself and his followers to the defence of the country, if their services should be accepted, with an assurance of amnesty for their past conduct. The Governor and legislature hesitated; but the communication of Lafitte becoming known at once awoke many citizens, including Mr. Livingston, to the peril impending over the city; and the public meeting, with the appointment of a committee of safety, on the 15th of September, was the immediate consequence."

According to Jack Ramsay in his Jean Lafitte, Prince of Pirates, "Although Lafitte's warnings of an attack had been taken with little seriousness, as the certainty of an invasion became apparent, his credibility was enhanced. The fact he had offered his services to Jackson was widely known. This was an element that helped galvanize local willingness to resist." Ramsay goes on to say that the Lafittes' aid to the American cause was used to "rally members of the French-speaking community around the American standard."

Major Villere pointed out to Jackson that Patterson didn't have enough sailors to man the ships Louisiana and the Carolina, and that Jackson had few artillerymen. Bernard Marigny and the defense committee said the same thing, pointing out how useful the Baratarians could be to the cause. Judge Dominick Hall said the legislature had to pass a resolution demanding procedures be suspended against the Baratarians for four months in order to free the men from jail. The resolution was presented the next day and Judge Hall immediately released Dominque You and the rest of the jailed Baratarians.

When Jackson learned on Dec. 13 that all five of his gunboats on Lake Borgne had been captured by the British, "it caused him to feel great anxiety for the safety of Mobile. He had relied principally upon the gunboats for the protection of the channels by which the rear of Fort Bowyer at Mobile might be gained."
Hunt gave further information about when Laffite's offer of help was accepted: "The offer of Lafitte met with no official response until martial law was declared (Dec. 16, 1814), and Jackson was, practically, dictator. Then the leader of the "hellish banditti" presented his proposal to the new power. He was supported in the application by the favorable representations of many official persons and private citizens. The Commander-in-Chief was not easily convinced. But the calm and confident opinion of Livingston prevailed in favor of the Baratarians." After Jackson declared martial law, no one could leave the City of New Orleans without written permission from the Jackson headquarters.

With the gunboats gone from Lake Borgne, Jackson was blind to British advances in that quarter, and the invasion was inevitable. Latour notes the "expediency of inviting the Barratarians (sic) to our standard was generally admitted." The governor conferred on the subject with major-general Jackson; and with his approbation issued (on Dec. 17) general orders in which he invited the Baratarians to enroll themselves and march against the enemy, adding that if their conduct in the field was approved by Jackson, that officer would unite with the governor in a request for a "free and full pardon" from the president of the United States.

John Coffee and his 800 men arrived on Dec. 20 from Baton Rouge, and a flotilla on the Mississippi soon brought Carroll and his 3,000 Tennesseans. Carroll also had 1,100 muskets from the War Department. On Dec. 22, Jackson sent Jean Lafitte to the Temple auction site near Barataria to help Major Reynolds fortify it. "Mr. Jean Lafitte (sic) has offered his services to go down and give you every information...Dismiss him as soon as possible as I shall want him here." Beluche and Dominique You and their gun crews erected batteries at Fort St. John on Dec. 23. That afternoon, Jackson was at Fort St. Charles (near the present-day Jackson Barracks) gathering his troops for a defensive strike below the city. Although in Dr. Grummond's account, Jean and Pierre Laffite were said to have been in Jackson's escort that afternoon, only Pierre could have been, as Jean was still at the Temple assisting Reynolds with blocking the bayous and possibly gathering the flints and powder Jean later brought to Jackson. This was the only time following the declaration of martial law that Jean had written permission to leave the immediate vicinity of New Orleans and the battlefield.

By the night of Dec. 23, 4,500 British troops landed. Pierre Laffite and Col. De La Ronde guided Coffee to the swamp side of the De La Ronde plantation where the British were encamped. Meanwhile, Patterson's Carolina crept on the Mississippi beside the British camp. Her crew of 90 men were mostly Baratarians. The notable absence of Jean Laffite from this battle underscores that he must have still been at the Temple area, probably not returning until sometime on December 24 or 25 (the date he next shows up in the records). During the Dec. 23 battle, Latour's historical memoir lists 2,131 men for Jackson and 4,980 for the British. On Jan. 8, Latour says there were 4,000 American defenders with 800 detached. Even after Jackson set up his defense lines along the Rodriguez Canal, he left an opening in the woods the British could have routed around to strike from the flank, but Jean Laffite noticed that and advised Jackson in time to close the gap by extending the line to the impassable swamps, on Christmas Day.

Sometime on Dec. 27, Jean Laffite supervised the installation of two 24-pounder cannons which became Batteries No. 3 and 4. Dominique You, Beluche, and Baratarians including Vincent Gambie were brought in from Fort St. John to man Battery No. 3, the single most effective artillery battery in the Jan. 8 victory.

Although it is unknown exactly when the 7,500 flints arrived from Laffite, Jackson later credited him with donating those flints to the American cause, adding that they "were solely the supply of flints for all of my militia." Nothing is known of the exact actions of Jean or Pierre Laffite between Dec. 28 and Jan. 8, but a pass and letter from General Jackson exist to document Jean's position during the critical morning of Jan. 8. Jackson sent Jean Laffite and General Humbert across the river to aid Brigadier-
General Morgan, who was in command there. Jackson's letter describes Laffite as "a man acquainted with the geography of the country on your side of the river, and will be able to afford you any information you may want with respect to the canals and passes by which the enemy may attempt to penetrate."43

Summing up, Laffite may not have realized at the time he forwarded the British letters just how important his action would be, but its results were unforgettable, especially coupled with his later assistance to the American cause. His true motives for joining the Americans may have been more to do with business than patriotism as some have written, but the manner in which he and Pierre Laffite acted throughout the campaign testifies to their patriotism. Jean Laffite wrote the following to Jean Blanque at the start of his letter to accompany the British packet: "Though proscribed by my adoptive country, I will never let slip any occasion of serving her, or of proving that she has never ceased to be dear to me." Was he sincere when he wrote those words on Sept. 4, 1814, at Grande Terre? Maybe.44

As Frost writes, "in the most remote and exposed points of a united Nation, we often find the most brilliant proofs of patriotism, courage and devotion."48

ENDNOTES

18. Ibid.
20. Sept. 21, 1814 Courrier de la Louisiana newspaper.
25. Ibid.
37. Ibid, 213.
40. Ibid, 229.
42. John S. Bassett, ed., Correspondence of