Editor's Page

On The 10th Anniversary of the Laffite Society

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[Editor's Note: At the annual Laffite Society Christmas party the editor presented the tribute to our years of studying the activities of the Laffites. The presentation is offered as the regular feature Editor's Page.]

On this, the tenth anniversary of the Laffite Society, it may be instructive to stop and look at our past, present and future. Such an assessment will involve a brief look at how we started, our stated purpose, how faithful we have been to that purpose and what lies ahead for the future.

In 1975 a group of scholars interested in the historical account of the Laffites formed a loose association known as The Laffite Study Group. This group did not meet on a regular basis but did meet occasionally at professional meetings and the members shared information. The Study Group published Life and Times of Jean Laffite and the Laffite Study Group Newsletter. Laffite Society members Pam Keyes and Robert Vogel were editors of these publications at various times. In addition current Society members, Dale Olsen, Pam Keyes, Robert Vogel, Gary Fretz and perhaps others, were members of the Study Group. The group dissolved in 1990.

In 1994 I republished the Journal of Jean Laffite. Later that year Dale Olson called me about the republication. He mentioned that he and others were discussing formation of a new group and wanted to know if I would be interested. I came to Galveston and discussed it with him. Perhaps encouraged by the public interest shown in the republished Journal, Dale, later in 1994, announced the formation of the Laffite Society with Jim Nonus, Jim Pace, Dorothy Karilano, Dale and Diane, myself and others as charter members.

The stated purpose of the newly formed Laffite Society was:

To encourage scholarly investigation into the life, historic era, and geographic locales associated with Jean Laffite and his associates.

How faithful have we been to this purpose over the last 10 years? What have we accomplished?

It should be noted at the outset that everything we have accomplished has been without paid staff.

1. We immediately began meeting monthly—a schedule that has been maintained for 10 years, having missed only a couple of meetings due to inclement weather.

2. We developed a healthy membership that has included, from the beginning, scholars and interested people from many walks of life as well as libraries, museums, and historical groups. They represent many states and countries including France, England, Australia and perhaps others.

3. We have attracted interest from researchers, writers, television production and genealogy groups.

4. We immediately created a publication—The Laffite Society Chronicles and have published 20 issues of the same.
5. We have gathered a surprising amount of knowledge and documentation, much of which is recorded in books, *The Laffite Society Chronicles* and our archives.

6. We have made presentations at various meetings, of both professional and avocational groups.

7. We have translated many documents to English primarily through efforts of Dorothy, Jeff Modzelewski and Gene Marshall.

8. We have struggled with difficult questions such as:

   A. When, where and under what circumstances did the Laffites (Jean and Pierre) die?

   Did Jean die in the early 1820s after leaving Galveston while engaged in piracy in the Gulf, or did he die on a ranch he owned in Cuba. Did he die, as the *Journal of Jean Laffite* recounts, in Alton, Illinois in the 1850s having raised a family in the intervening years?

   Did Pierre die in the Yucatan in the 1820’s from wounds suffered in a sea battle or in the 1840s as claimed in the *Journal of Jean Laffite*. Most, but not all members, believe both experienced an early death.

   B. Who and what was the man known as John A. Laffite who published *The Journal of Jean Laffite* in 1958, and who claimed to be a great grandson of the privateer? Jean Epperson has answered this question resoundingly.

   C. Is the *Journal of Jean Laffite* authentic? Since the Journal was brought to light, advocated and published by John A., it comes under crippling criticism because of him. In addition the text of the Journal contains material that Jean Laffite would not have claimed. Again, most but not all members believe it is not authentic.

9. If Jean Laffite did not write the Journal then who did write it. Those who knew John A. leave an impression that he was morally capable, but educationally unprepared for writing it. Perhaps he secured assistance in the writing. He sold the manuscript to Texas Governor Price Daniel and it resides in the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center in Liberty, Texas along with a host of other Laffite related materials. Some Society members believe that John A. wrote the Journal while others disagree.

10. Avocational historians have done most of the research and writing for the Society over the last ten years. Those who did no research or writing have served the important function of critic and a listening audience to which presentations were made.
11. I have attended meetings of a fairly large number of different professional groups over the years. Of these, the meetings of professional historians are by far the worst in regard to the nature and tone of criticisms of their fellows, and they are the worst in intra-group dynamics aimed at inhibition of free thought. It has been my pleasure to observe the opposite in The Laffite Society. Free expression of beliefs and ideas has been encouraged at every level. The Laffite Society Chronicles from the beginning has gleefully published controversial and contrary ideas. And those ideas have been freely encouraged and expressed at our monthly meetings -- they are the life-blood of the Society.

12. In pursuit of materials on the Laffites and their associates (as well as for Sazeracs) we have made many interesting field trips. New Orleans (where the Sazeracs are) has been our host several times as has Grand Isle and Grand Terre aka Barataria. We have made other field trips to Natchitoches, Laffite, Laffite National Park all in Louisiana; Sabinetown, Nacogdoches and even Hemphill, in Texas and the Yucatan. For those who made the Yucatan trip the highlight was retracing the route over which Pierre's body was reportedly transported for burial.

13. We have retrieved from the University of Houston the raw materials of an earlier archaeological excavation at the Maison Rouge site and have conducted another dig there. Some of the material recovered has been codified under the direction of member, Sheldon Kendall.

14. We have established a web-page which serves to inform members and the public of our services. Persons inquiring about Laffite materials are referred to the "Laffite Timeline" and the "Q & A" sections of this internet resource.

Where to in the future?

Obviously we have done some things right over the past 10 years, the stress and strain on the local (Galveston) members notwithstanding. Planning and hosting a monthly meeting with few members to do the work is an issue that concerns us all. Can we sustain the pace we have set? Our past president, Jeff Modzelewski, mentioned several times the graying of our membership and pointed as evidence to the several members we have lost through death. Though this sustainability is of concern, we have been fortunate to have younger local people become active members at our most vulnerable times.

Nevertheless, our viability as an organization is an open question. As mature rational adults what should we do to prepare for the future of the organization. Unlike individuals, an organization can live forever, but it would do well to adopt the strategy of an individual -- prepare for the worst and take increased care with a view toward maximum longevity.

What are the immediate steps needed to put this philosophical concept into operation? Among the many options are these three:

A. Continue to entice vigorous new members to provide active leadership.

B. Continue a vigorous program of research, writing, speaking and publishing.

C. Last, but certainly not least, find a
permanent institutional home for our archives. We are limited in our ability to assist researchers in getting access to our material. Asking local members to search through our archives and make copies for researchers located at distances that prohibit their personal visits is an added burden, and one we have understandably not undertaken with much enthusiasm. An organization such as the Sam Houston Regional Library with its large Laffite related holdings, has paid staff and the permanency to undertake this task. And in the event of our unexpected demise this would serves as our will and testament.

In closing I would like to return for a moment to what we have accomplished. We have enjoyed the association with each other. Sometime ago someone asked if we would ever solve all the mysteries and questions about the Laffites. One of the members replied that he hoped not as we would then have no purpose for meeting. Obviously he placed the personal association with members above the material products of the Society. To him the joy of the hunt was not the chase or the kill, but running with the pack. One can hardly disagree.

STEPHEN AND RONALD BROADSTONE WITH DALE OLSON ON THE LEFT MEMBERS
RON AND CYNTHIA GILROY
GUESTS