Bartholome Lafon, Bernardo Lafon and Ramon Lafon were contemporaries from New Orleans. Each, at one time, followed the corsair trade and made his unique contribution to history. An interest in the three Frenchmen initiated research to determine if they were related or if their activities coalesced.

Bartholome Lafon, was born in 1769, in Villepinte, France the son of Pierre Lafon and his spouse Jeanne Roumieux. He was the oldest of the corsair Lafon trio and the most prominent. He was a successful architect, engineer, cartographer and businessman in New Orleans before debt and commercial reverses plunged him into bankruptcy and piratical endeavors. He became a friend and partner with Pierre and Jean Laffite, and in 1817 the Laffites put him in charge of the Galveston Island commune for a short time. Physically Bartholome has been described as a stocky little man.

Among Bartholome’s outstanding accomplishments, was the survey in 1803 of Galveztown on the west bank of the Amite River, near its confluence with the Iberville River for the Spanish Commandant, and his design and plat of Donaldsonville, Louisiana for William Donaldson in 1806. His maps included, “Carte Generale du Territoire d’Orleens et une Portion du Territoire du Mississippi” in 1806 and “Entrada de la Bahia de Galveston” for the Spanish in 1816. He didn’t sign the 1816 map but the Spanish Governor of Texas, Martinez acknowledged receiving a map from Lafon in August 1817, and historian Stanley Faye assumed that Lafon had made the 1816 map of the entrance to Galveston Bay. Bartholome also designed public buildings, bridges, drainage systems, a lighthouse and many private homes in and near New Orleans.

His liaison with Modest Foucher, a free woman of color from Haiti, produced two children; a son, Pierre Barthelemy called Thomy, and a daughter, Carmelite. Thomy became the most important philanthropist in nineteenth century New Orleans. His wealth obtained through shrewd land speculation, money lending and perhaps his fathers hidden assets. He never married and his sister became a Carmelita nun.

Ships owned by Bartholome were the Little Napoleon, a 13 ton felucca registered in New Orleans July 27, 1816, master Germain Le Grand, and the schooner Carmelita. The Carmelita was obviously named for his daughter. The ship’s registry has never been found and it was written that Jean Laffite borrowed $2,800 and purchased the ship from Bartholome.

Bartholome Lafon died of yellow fever, in New Orleans on September 29, 1820.

Bernardo Lafon was born in Canada about 1773. Nothing is known of his early years until he surfaced in New Orleans. On May 14, 1803 he advertised in the New Orleans Moniteur that he was the captain of a vessel that would take cargo to France. A description in later years stated, “Captain Bernard was moderately tall and lean, a son of the sea who liked a fight.”

He fitted out an American schooner in 1811, in New Orleans, and armed it unlawfully as a French privateer. He named it the Diligent. A 40 ton ship she had one 4-pounder swivel gun and carried about 20 men. At this time Bernardo held a privateering license from no one.
In his new cruiser Capt. Bernardo captured a Spanish schooner off Cuba on March 11, 1811. In November he iniquiously visited Havana and was jailed for piracy. His cagy lawyer demonstrated successfully to Havana that Bernardo was an honest American merchant sea captain and that there had been a case of mistaken identity; thereby securing his release.

In June 1812 the United States declared war on Great Britain and Bernardo applied for a privateering commission. He sailed out of Norfolk, Virginia August 7th in his ship Comet, probably the rechristened Diligent. Cruising southward toward Cuba, he stopped at Havana then on to Baracoa. Robbing several British vessels on the way, he headed for Pensacola before returning to New Orleans. The Spanish governor of Pensacola arrested him again as a French pirate and the same sequence was replayed. Confusing him with the well known Bartholome Lafon, and unable to prove who Bernardo really was, the Spanish released him again.

In the spring of 1814 Bernardo prepared the brig Flor Americana to sail for the south with a small crew and a full passenger list. Sailing about the end of May, at sea Captain Lafon turned the brig into a republican privateers man for Cartagena. The kidnapped passengers seized the Captain, put him in irons and late in August they returned to New Orleans. The Spanish had the proof of his misdeeds at last and he was found guilty of piracy on October 24, 1814.

Bernardo Lafon died at the age of forty-two in 1815 and was buried in St. Louis Cemetery #1 in New Orleans.

Ramon Lafon was born about 1791 of French ancestry, the son of Antonio Lafon and his wife Catarina Barbarron. His important, but little known contribution to history, due to his contraband maritime activities, was the founding of the Texas town of Port (Point) Isabel at the southern tip of the state.

His first documented appearance was on October 10, 1820 when he arrived, as a mariner, in New Orleans, aboard the schooner James Lawrence from Baumma, Cuba.

Don Martin de Leon, Texas rancher and later impresario, drove a large herd of horses and mules to market in New Orleans from his ranch at the mouth of the Aransas River, in 1822. Having sold his animals for a good price he was probably celebrating his good fortune when he met Ramon Lafon, a reputed smuggler and pirate, and Carlos Lazo. Carlos was an ex-Spanish soldier who had deserted the post of Refugio Mission in Texas in 1814, and apparently went to sea. Lafon suggested to de Leon, that he was in command of a schooner and knew a secluded harbor near the mouth of the Rio Grande River, where de Leon could make a good profit by loading the vessel with luxury goods from New Orleans and selling it in Texas.

The good harbor for deep draft vessels was El Paso de Los Brazos Santiago at the tip of Texas, known to mariners as an excellent place to smuggle contraband into the country. Jean Laffite, the gentleman pirate, was said to have used it. Goods could be off loaded there and transported overland by mule train to Congregation del Refugio (Matamoros), bypassing tax duties.

De Leon chartered the vessel, loaded it with goods and sailed to Texas with his new friends. They arrived at Brazos Santiago on January 18, 1823 on the 40 ton schooner Isabel. Lafon and Lazo had previously been accused of piracy and de Leon promised them that he would get them acquitted of the charge. When they arrived at the port, Lazo required de Leon to leave his son, Felix on board as security for his return to the vessel and the payment of all costs. The merchandise was sold for a good profit and de Leon made good on his promise to have Lafon and Lazo exonerated of the piracy charges.

Lafon was 32 years old in 1823 and he met and fell in love with Angela the daughter of Rafael Garcia of Matamoros. They were married April...
1, 1824 in the church of Nuestra Senora del Refugio in Matamoros.20 Lafon apparently encouraged his new family to move to the land side of the anchorage of Brazos Santiago as he intended to continue with his lucrative maritime trade.

Garcia heirs claimed that the Santa Isabel, later Point or Port Isabel, area was settled in 1826 by two separate ranches or farms of their family, and in 1828 Rafael Garcia was granted 32,355 acres of Potrero (pasture) de Santa Isabel by the state of Tamaulipas.21 The area had previously only been used as a summer resort by Mexican families.

Ramon Lafon remained in trouble with the Mexican authorities for importing contraband material through 1828.22 He and Angela had two daughters, Maria Austina and Maria Menata who died in 1825 and 1828, and there were probably other children as well.23 It is not known what eventually became of Ramon but it is assumed he was deceased when his wife Angela remarried on December 12, 1842 to Anastacio Parrodioy.24 Five years later she was using the name Garcia de Tarnova when proving her claim to the Santa Isabel land.25 The three pirates Lafon were not related nor did their activities intermesh. As individuals they left an indelible imprint on the history of their era and should not be forgotten.

END NOTES

11. Ibid., Faye, 9.
12. Ibid., 10, 11.
13. Ibid., 11.
15. Ibid., Bos, 118.
17. Victor M. Rose, The Settlement of Victoria, Texas (San Antonio: Lone Star Printing Co., 1961), 152; Adan Benavides, Jr., The Bexar Archives 1717-1836
(Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 556. The Lazo family was among the first families to settle Victoria, Texas with impresario de Leon.

18. Matamoros Archives and Calendar 1811-1854, Barker History Center, University of Texas at Austin. Volume IV 1823-1836.


23. Father Nicolas Balli, Death Records 1800-1828, Matamoros, Mexico.


---

Map of Port Isabel
Adapted from
King Ranch
Tom Lea, Vol. 1 p., 27
Ships of Commodore Luis Aury sunk--upper right down: *Infatigable, Favorito and La Campechana.*

Courtesy of Rosengerg Library, Galveston, Texas