MY THOUGHTS AND THEORIES ON THE JEAN LAFFITE JOURNAL

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Who wrote the Jean Laffite Journal? This question has intrigued many, and numerous theories have been proposed. Herein are some further thoughts and theories on the subject.

The person who said he found the Journal in family papers was John A. Laffite, who represented himself as the great grandson of the French corsair, Jean Laffite. John A. Laffite was actually born June 4, 1893 in Omaha, Nebraska to a Bohemian emigrant family, John and Mary Pavlik Matejka. In subsequent years John Matejka changed or represented his surname as Nafsinger, Lafitte, Laflin and Laffite. Among researchers he is referred to as John A.

A review of some of his private correspondence and impressions recorded by people who knew him personally, reveals a man who had many personality difficulties and mental and emotional problems. Apparently dissatisfied with his humble background, over the years he spun a fabulous story about his famous pirate, great grandfather, Jean Laffite. He may have begun to believe the fantasy himself in later years.

Given the fact that John A. Laffite was not who he said he was, where did he get the so-called Laffite Journal? From 1923 through 1958 John A. was an employee of the Southern Pacific Railroad, and in and out of St. Louis Missouri. During this time the influential Laflin family had business interest in the town.

I theorize that John A. found a book or manuscript about the pirate Laffite, owned by the Laflin family at one time, and acquired it. Thus began his preoccupation with Jean Laffite and his odyssey toward becoming the great-grandson of Jean Laffite. The existing Laffite Journal, written in longhand French, now resides in the Sam Houston Regional Library in Liberty, Texas. It is the Journal of John A., that was sold to Texas Gov. Price Daniel. The flyleaf of the Journal contains this inscription, "To John Laffite Esq. Charleston in the State of South Carolina, this is Humbly Enscribed (sic) by your Most Obedient Servant Mathew Laflin August 23, 1837." The last digit of the date is not readable. Mathew Laflin was a businessman living in Chicago at the time and was anything but "humble". I believe that what Laflin sent to John Laffite in Charleston was a fictional story about Jean Laffite, probably a copy of The Memoirs of Lafitte or The Barratarian (sic) Pirate, A Narrative Founded on Fact by William G. Spear. It was published in 1826 in Providence, Rhode Island and republished many times under slightly different titles. A pseudo Victorian romance novel, it contained very little historical fact. The main character of the story was Mortimer Wilson who spent some time in Charleston, South Carolina. The Journal of Jean Laffite uses the surname Mortimore for the second wife of Jean Laffite and places her family in Charleston, an interesting parallel to the Spear novel. Attempts by genealogists to find wives of Jean Laffite, the corsair, have failed.

The 1830 U. S. Census of Charleston confirmed the fact that a John and a David Laffite were residents. It is conceivable that Mathew Laflin had business transactions with these Laffitites and sent them a copy of the Spear book because of the similarity of the last names.

It is of interest that John A. had a book translated in July 1957 by French teacher and translator, Bess M. Bozell, of Omaha, Nebraska. We do not know...
for sure what was translated into book form. John A. neither spoke nor read French. The French version of the Laffite Journal (Diary) is written from beginning to end with no corrections, revisions, additions or changes of any kind. It obviously was not written over a five year period as a memoir. French analysts in France say the French version of the Laffite Journal was not written by a Frenchman.

During her divorce from John A., Lacie Surrat Laffite wrote to her friend and confidant, Audry Lloyd, "(John has) forged all he has sold. I know, not a hearsay, I saw him do it."

Many have speculated on the handwriting of the Sam Houston Library collection -- Journal, Copy Books, Bibles, etc. No expert in handwriting, I can only say I believe that anyone could have penned the various parts of the collection.

My conclusions are that, after years of research, John A. wrote the Laffite Journal in English. Then had it translated into French and copied in longhand, by a clever forger (perhaps himself) to resemble known Jean Laffite handwriting.

Historians and educators have voiced the opinion that, public school educated, John A. was not capable of writing the Journal, although his private correspondence attests to the fact that he was facile with the English language and the Journal is certainly not great prose. Maybe John A. wasn't so crazy after all. Through his efforts he made a little money, gained a lot of notoriety and amused himself in the process.

END NOTES

4. Bess M. Bozell, Letter written to John A. Laffite July 15, 1957 says to him that the translation of his book was almost ready and that the bill was $225.00. The letter is in the Laffite Collection at the Sam Houston Regional Library and Archives in Liberty, Texas. The letter does not say if the translation was from English to French or visa versa.
5. Lacie Surrat Laffite to Audry Lloyd, september 5, 1969, Laffite Collection, Sam Houston Regional Library and Archives, Liberty, Texas.

[ Editor's note: This is an opinion piece and you are invited to present a contrary opinion.]