When Was Laffite's Journal Written?

Reginald Wilson

In 1942 a man walked into a bar on Bourbon Street and announced in a loud voice, "I'm John Laffite, the great grandson of Jean Laffite". Can you imagine the excitement and the questions? "Well, what ever happened to ole Laffite after he left Galveston?", "I bet he was a pirate down in the Caribbean", "No, he lived a quiet life on some island", "Where did he die?". John was directed to the home of Ray and Sue Thompson, the local Laffite aficionados. Ray and Sue could not believe their good fortune that finally they were going to be the lucky ones to answer many unanswered questions about Laffite.

John told them that he had inherited from his grandfather, Jules Laffite, many ledgers, bill of sales, reports of ships coming in and going out, family photo albums, the family Bible, six journals, etc. and even the rocking chair and bed that Jean Laffite slept on. One Journal was written by Jean Laffite telling the story of his life. He did not have any of these items with him but he told them he would return next year for another visit. John returned but he failed to bring any of the items he had spoken about. After several months the Thompasons decided John was not who he claimed to be and sent him on his way.

The Journal, supposedly written by Jean Laffite telling his life's story, finally ended up in the hands of Gov. Price Daniel along with about seven or eight other items. These he donated to the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center in Liberty, Texas, where they are now on display.

John Andrechyne Laffite died February 20, 1970 in Columbia, S.C. Several years ago, Jean Epperson, a member of the Laffite Society, obtained John Laffite's retirement records from the Railroad Retirement Board. He was an impostor. His real name was John Matejka, son of John and Mary Matejka, Bohemian emigrants. How, when, and where John came in possession of the Laffite family memorabilia, we may never know for certain.

When was Laffite's Journal written? Most assume that it was written about mid nineteenth century. A few others state that there is nothing in the Journal that could not be found in the New Orleans libraries with a few months of research. The Journal is a 13"x8"x1" slightly burned leather bound volume, written in French, 257 pages. Ralph O. Queen found that the ink used was iron oxide, its ferrous content permeating the paper, and another ink called Gallnut. The Journal's paper, a linen based type used before 1850, contained several types of water marks, one being a large fleur-de-lis, none of which were on record with the Institute of Water Marks. Queen further reported that the ink "cannot be readily removed by washing the paper". It was written in first person from 1845 to 1850, and at the end of each "chapter" there is Jean Laffite's signature. The above would make one think that perhaps it was written at those dates, but a blank Journal could have been purchased in 1940 and the iron ink could have been hand made.

There is strong evidence that the Journal was not written by Jean Laffite. Reports by Jean Epperson and Gary Fretz indicate that he was killed in a gun battle in 1823 off the shore of Honduras. There are numerous local and family events written about in the Journal that happened after 1823. This would indicate that it was written by someone very close to Jean Laffite such as a secretary, associate, or family member that was familiar with the early life of Jean Laffite and also had family papers, Jean Laffite's ledgers, notes, letters, cargo and freight lading, order and purchase receipts, etc. The Journal definitely was NOT written by John Matejka nor anyone that he might have hired to do so.
There are a number of obstacles that one would have to overcome in order to write the Journal in the 20th century. First, we know that the Journal was written by 1942 when John Matejka (aka John Laffite) visited Ray and Sue Thompson. John probably had it many years before this as suggested by his application to Social Security in 1937 on which he did not use his true father's and mother's name. To have used his father's name would have made a permanent record of who he really was. He left the space blank for his father and wrote Mary Pauline Fontenelle for his mother. (He misspelled both Pauline and Fontenelle)

If the Journal was written in the Twentieth Century, it would have had to be written after July, 1940 for several reasons. In the Journal translation by Gene Marshall pages 117, 118 the Journal gives the secret numbers assigned to a number of different members of De Sedella's organization. These numbers were known only to a very few men. They had to be kept top secret in order for Pierre to carry out his secret mission, aka Pierre's Great Stroke. It was not until Stanley Faye wrote "The Great Stroke of Pierre Laffite" published in the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, July 1940, vol.23 #3, 93 pages and 7 Chapters, that the outside world learned about Pierre and Jean's work as spies for the Spanish and the numbers assigned to those men working with De Sedella. Stanley Faye was fluent in both Spanish and French. During his retirement, he spent many months in the Newberry Library, Chicago, deciphering the longhand French writing on microfilm from the archives of Havana to find this information. Another individual could have made this same discovery by deciphering the French microfilm at Newberry or some other library that had copies of these same microfilms or could have gone to Havana and studied the archives there.

Stanley Faye's article only names two individuals who were given a secret number: "Pierre Laffite was No.13, 13-A or 13-uno, his brother, No.13-bis, 13-B or 13-dos". The Journal lists 13 who were given a number, therefore, the Journal could not have gotten the number list from Faye's article. If Jean Laffite did not write the Journal, there were only one or two persons who knew this list who could have passed this information on to someone who did write the Journal, most likely a family member. This could have been given verbally or passed as written information.

On page 65, the Journal, (Marshall's translation), tells of Jean Laffite at the age of four being visited by his Uncle, Jean Laffite, and Uncle Jean's Uncle, Bernard Miramon. These two were on their way to Mexico where, after several years, they were exiled. A person writing the Journal in the 20th century would not have known about this until after Charles Ramsdell published his article in *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, April, 1940. Ramsdell accidentally found this information while going through the archives in Mexico City. This folder (over 100 pages) tells the story of "Juan Lafita y Miramon". At that time Ramsdell was under the impression he was reading about Jean Laflite, the privateer patriot. Now, another individual could have found this folder in the Archivo General before 1940.

On page 134 (Marshall's translation) Laffite tells of sending four carpenters, five masons, and two blacksmiths to repair his fort on the mainland 45 kilometers from Galveston and 21 kilometers from the Trinity River. The presence of five masons would indicate the foundations were at least partially stone. This stone would have been available from the ballast of abandoned ships at Galveston. Local foundations would have been of wood as no stone was available in this area. About 30 years ago, I found two elderly individuals who were born and raised in Felly. Felly is the part of Baytown, Texas that is closest to Tabbs Bay, part of Galveston Bay. These two told me that when they were children, they occasionally went over to the bay front to play. (1900 - 1910). In the Evergreen area there were old foundations of a house that everyone said were where the pirates had lived. One playmate found the remains of an
old 1820 vintage pistol. The distance from Galveston to these foundations is almost exactly 45 kilometers. By water, the distance from the Trinity River, going South around Fisher's reef, is in the range of 21 kilometers. In 1850 there were accurate charts of Galveston Bay. I doubt anyone could find the location of this house or fort in any library and even now find it without the above information.

With the information presented above, it seems impossible that the Journal could have been written in a few short months between July, 1940 and 1942 with all the other information that it contains. Furthermore, the researcher would have had to be a person fluent in French and knowledgeable in Spanish, to write the Journal. He would also have to find a blank Journal, linen based type, make or find the iron style ink, and use a steel pen and he would have to have been good at copying the handwriting of others.

If a person in 1940 - 41 were able to research old newspapers, books, autobiographies, maps, historical quarterlies, private unpublished papers, archives, etc., and find all the information that is in the Journal, there is NO WAY THAT THIS PERSON COULD HAVE WRITTEN THE GEN. LONG LETTER OR THE LE BRAVE DOCUMENT. These were written in 1819. Ralph O. Queen, a handwriting expert with 40 years experience, after examining the Journal, the Long letters, and the Le Brave document, stated that all three were in the same handwriting. Mr. Queen had experience in criminal investigation of handwriting identification for the Houston Police Department, the State of Texas and the Federal Government. He was a member of the International Association for Identification, whose membership is limited to persons with extensive legal experience in detection of forgeries. After my in-depth study of these same three documents, I came to the same conclusion, the handwriting is the same. Therefore, it must be concluded that these three documents were written by a person who was on Galveston in the Fall of 1819 to write the Long letters and the Le Brave document and then lived long enough to have written the Journal in 1850.

After the September 1818 storm, the Galveston commune began to diminish for a number of reasons; living on a sandbar was no picnic; capture of Spanish treasure ships was now almost nil; the United States, England, and France had joined to clear the Gulf of pirates, and there was not any future for the Island of Galveston. Of those few still on Galveston in the Fall of 1819, consider all possible individuals that had the knowledge to write French, then delete those that did not live to 1850. This leaves a list of three or four at the most. Take the handwriting of these three or four, and compare them to that of the Journal. It is a very simple matter to match one of these handwritings to that of the Journal. The result is you not only have when the Journal was written but also who wrote the Journal! Who did write the Journal?

Laffite's Journal was written in the 19th century.

Endnotes

1. John Howells, "Handwriting Analysis of the Journal of Jean Laffite" Unpublished paper included as part of this piece. On file with Jean Laffite papers, Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center, Liberty, Texas


List of other persons given numbers:

John West F-28
Abner Duncan F-5
Manuel Morenos F-6
John Desfarges F-7
Robert Johnston F-9
John Grymes F-11
Ed. Livingston B-7-F
F. Dupuis 17-J
Jules Arceneaux F-13
Gen. Wilkinson 13
Arsene Latour 7-C
Pierre Gaul D4
David DeForest 17-D
Alexander Laffite 13-D
Gen Ariza 45-V
