Historian William C. "Jack" Davis ended a week-long book tour for his "The Pirates Laffite, the Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf" at the most fitting place possible, the elegantly appointed Laffite Room of the Trolley Station building at Galveston, monthly meeting place of the Laffite Society.

Co-hosts for the book-signing event, held May 29, were Laffite Society member Diane Olson and Midsummer Books of Galveston. Wine was served from an antique back bar in the room.

At 706 pages (including footnotes, bibliography, and index), *The Pirates Laffite* is, in my opinion, the best history ever written about Jean and Pierre Laffite, and the only complete study of Pierre Laffite, who has gotten short shrift from writers in the past, with the exception of historical journal writer Stanley Faye. It is written in a flowing narrative style, and even the 150+ pages of footnotes are entertaining to read, as Davis discusses in them some of his methods for arriving at his conclusions regarding the Laffites.

Accompanying Davis to the Galveston event and to all of his book tour stops was his wife, Sandra. Earlier that week, the Davises had promoted the new Laffite history at similar events at Williamsburg, Va.; New Orleans and Baton Rouge in Louisiana; Pass Christian and Jackson, Mississippi, and at Mobile, Ala.

At the request of Midsummer Books, I introduced Jack to an audience that included members of the Laffite Society and other interested parties, among them a descendant of John Dick, a district attorney who had prosecuted the Laffite brothers at New Orleans.

Although he had originally planned to give a brief presentation before proceeding to the book signing, Davis warmed to the receptive group and gave an entertaining talk about the Laffites for over an hour, with a question and answer session following. Interestingly, he said he had found working on the Laffite book to be probably the most enjoyable research he had done for any of his numerous history books. Most of his histories have focused on the Civil War, and two were nominated for the Pulitzer.

He said he became interested in the Laffites while doing research on James Bowie for his "Three Roads to the Alamo" book. Another of his recent Texas history books is "Lone Star Rising," which includes some information about the Laffites.

Davis told the group about the various places he had done research for the "Pirates Laffite" book, and stressed the importance of the vast holdings of the Notarial Archives of New Orleans, the only archive of its type in the United States. He uncovered many Laffite related documents in the original notarial records there. These archives are in bound volumes by notary and year, with indexing by name in the front of the book. The documents are in English, French and Spanish, representing the polyglot nature of New Orleans.

New information about the Laffites and their associates continues to be found. Just a few days before the final editing of the book, and just in time to make it into the work, Davis learned of a very important 1802 passport for Pierre Laffite establishing Pierre’s residence at Bordeaux at the time. The passport was discovered by Patrick Laffite of France, and is the earliest authentic document connected to either brother.

An important part of the book was a study of the Laffites’ family lives, centering on the placage arrangements they had with their mulatto mistresses, Marie and Catherine Villard. Davis said he may be doing another book studying the tragic effect of what this sort of relationship had on the participants’ family, as Pierre Laffite and Marie
Villard's descendants were embroiled in a heated court battle in the early 20th century to prove they were white and not part black, and they lost the case. All of the family members who testified in that case also lost their white status with the judge's ruling. There are several hundred pages of testimony, according to Davis.

At the New Orleans book signing, Davis said he met Diane Burkett, one of Pierre Laffite's direct descendants through Marie Villard. She is descended completely on the matrilineal line back to Marie Villard. Although Davis noted there are several direct descendants of Pierre Laffite and Marie Villard alive today, he has yet to find any living descendants of Jean Laffite. A son who was born to Jean and Catherine (or Catiche) Villard died as a teenager.

Following the talk, Davis answered questions from the audience. I asked him what he had found to be the most surprising aspect of his studies of the Laffites, and he responded it was their character. Unlike their thuggish cohorts like William Mitchell and Vincent Gambi, he said the Laffites were against violence, and had even made a point in their dealings with the Spanish to stress that they would not help if harm came to those upon whom they spied.

After Davis had signed books, the session concluded with a champagne toast in Jack's honor by the Laffite Society members toward the book's success. Jack and Sandra returned home the next day to Blacksburg, Va., where he is director of the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies, and a history professor at Virginia Tech.