The Rise of Jean Laffite and his Role in the
Battle of New Orleans

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Editor's note: This piece was written as a college class paper. As a rather comprehensive overview of the Laffite story it should serve well as an introduction for new members and those who seek an overview.

Mrs. Nobles is a finalist for the Gilder Lehrman Foundation Scholars Program and is being sent to New York for a week of study under some of the country's leading historians. She hopes to discuss Laffite with some of them. We wish her well.

On the morning of September 3, 1814 the British warship Sophie\(^1\) volleyed a cannonball towards a sloop headed for a pass that separated Grand Terre from Grand Isle, the two islands the border between Louisiana and the Gulf of Mexico, and the base of the South's largest smuggling operation. To the north sprawled a bay that connected to the largely uninhabitable Barataria Swamp. Untouched by law, the maze of bayous, islets and muck stretched seventy miles all the way up to New Orleans. It was the kingdom of Jean Laffite, the infamous French pirate and undisputed leader of the Baratarian underworld,\(^2\) and an ambivalent American the British hoped to entice to their side.

The British artillery forced the sloop aground. The Sophie then dropped anchor and launched a dinghy that waved a white flag. The War of 1812 was in full swing. Earlier in 1814, England, along with its coalition, had exiled Napoleon to Elba. In August the same year the English had captured and burned Washington D.C. Now the most powerful militia in the world planned to occupy New Orleans, then ascend the Mississippi River, make junction with their 10,000 troops in Canada, and choke what was left of the United States.\(^3\) It was a goal few doubted unattainable. But here on their southern campaign the British were hampered by an ignorance of Louisiana's terrain, and were anxious to meet the man who knew the area better than anyone else.

At the time it was known that Laffite laundered goods headed for New Orleans, the principal port where Gulf privateers could safely dispose of prizes and sneak cargoes into the United States without clearing customs.\(^4\) It was also known that Laffite was politically well-connected, disciplined and literate, speaking English, Spanish and perhaps Italian, and was most comfortable in Bordelaise, a regional patois French. More important, he had done what no one had so successfully done before — he organized the Gulf of Mexico smuggler captains into an efficient conglomeration. The laborers who worked on and guarded the ships were called "Baratarians." These rough dockhands were a hodgepodge of sailors, bored farm hands and misfits from the armies, prisons and slave pens of France, Spain, Mexico, Italy and the newly freed Island of Haiti. Like the man they called "bos," they were technically American, yet mostly identified with France, and swore loyalty to no one country.

Aside from his reputation, though, who was this master of organization, the
corsair who regularly snubbed his nose at the United States Navy and customs and revenue authorities and, in reality, controlled a large chunk of the Gulf’s maritime commerce? Was Jean Laffite a bloodthirsty pirate? Legitimate privateer? Modern-day Robin Hood, or combination of all?

Not only was Jean Laffite a mystery to the British, but in New Orleans, where he was widely known, little documentation existed proving his identity. Since he spent adulthood skirting the law, it was advantageous not to own a birth certificate or any record that would threaten his fluid allegiances. Most likely, however, he and his business partner and older brother (or maybe half-brother)5 Pierre were born in Bordeaux, France, as sons of a merchant. In the late 1700s the brothers immigrated to the Caribbean island of San Dominique, then migrated as refugees to New Orleans. Although there is evidence that Pierre immigrated to Louisiana earlier, Jean Laffite’s first recorded appearance is in an 1809 letter written by Esau Glasscock who had spotted the twenty-nine-year-old Jean playing cards at a New Orleans ballroom, and described him as “...tall, with pale skin, and he has large dark eyes. He is clean-shaven except for a beard extending part-way down his cheeks.”6 At the time of this sighting Jean and Pierre had already been fine-tuning their merchandising skills by wholesaling from warehouses on Royal Street. Their goods, including illegal slaves from Africa, came from privateers who the brothers eventually muscled into selling to them exclusively. Although such a coup would suggest cunning and force, the New Orleans historian Charles Gayarre gives benevolent clues to Jean and Pierre’s personalities by writing that they “...were men of limited education, but intelligent, active; their manners were cordial and winning—of a sympathetic nature, bold and capable of creating an almost irresistible influence over congenial spirits.”7

By 1810 the Laffites had a monopoly on local contraband. Virtually everything smuggled in and out of New Orleans first passed through them. Later that year, their enterprise suffered a setback when the fall of the Republic of West Florida cut off a much-used smuggling route, but the formation of the dubious South American country of Cartagena opened another when it issued letters of marque to privateers to prey upon the ships of Spain, the one country the United States considered neutral. Privateers were owners of ships who secured commissions to capture ships from a country’s enemy. Privateering was legal, but always stipulated that the privateer and issuing country share in the loot. However, with few controls and the port of Cartagena rarely visited, these South American commissions were largely considered licenses for outright piracy.

Jean was now Grand Terre’s undisputed king, and Pierre, that year physically hampered by a stroke, remained a go-between in New Orleans. There the new government was increasingly dismayed by illegal and provocative activities taking place off the coast, but since Governor Claiborne was hesitant to upset the planters and bargain-hungry French, he moved with caution to stop the smuggling.8

The vocal Gallic majority had evolved from the legendary French prisoners, homeless people, destitute children and unguarded girls9 who originally settled New Orleans, and had long ago mingled with Indians, Germans and the few Spanish who had ventured in during Spain’s colonial rule. French nationalism had been bolstered when, in the late 1700s, French, free black and slave refugees (likely including the Laffites) had escaped to New Orleans from the Saint Dominique slave riots, and were followed by Frenchmen evicted by Spain from Cuba. Besides the heavy Latin/French population, New Orleans also boasted the largest free black community in North America, even larger than New York.10 These gens de couleur libres, free people of color, owned property and slaves, and worked as merchants, artists and planters. Although relegated to a lower social caste, they did mix well culturally with the French-speaking whites, as well as with Indians and slaves, and together with the latter formed two-
thirds of the population and spoke variants of the white man's French.

In this era of rapid change, slaves, freedmen and whites were not allowed to intermarr, but it was common for white men to take mixed-race mistresses, one of many practices that appalled the English-speaking Americans. Jean Laffite, for at least a time, took such a companion, Catherine Villars, a quadroon and the sister of Pierre's mistress Marie. Jean spent most of his time on Grand Terre, but he did make sporadic visits to Catherine. Historian Lyle Saxon claims that Wite and Catherine had a son, Jean Pierre, who was baptized by Father Antonio de Sedella, or 'Pere Antone' at the Church of Saint Louis in New Orleans. Despite this claim, however, whether or not Jean had children is still a matter of controversy.

Unlike representatives of the new American government, the morals and living standards of New Orleans' overwhelmingly Catholic population were laissez-faire at best. The locals' favorite pastimes were gambling and drinking. Sailors and laborers wandered the levees all hours of the night. It was the tail end of the so-called "Golden Age" of piracy, yet known pirates freely roamed, and were not only tolerated but even admired. Residents fancied themselves as sophisticated as Parisians, but were in fact grossly undereducated and lived in wooden, crowded houses that lined muddy, filth-strewn streets. John Pintard, a visiting New York merchant did, however, make a backhanded compliment to the cuisine by saying that "...all luxury [is] confined to what is put on the table to be eaten, and here profusion abounds." Not surprisingly, corruption was widespread. In 1790 a Frenchman named du Breuil noted that all contracts in New Orleans were made "under the chimney," dishonesty having been practically elevated to an art form, in no small part due to the generations of smugglers that had thrived under Spanish rule.

On top of the lax culture, unfavorable commerce laws and resulting shortages made the locals stubbornly refuse to give up their practice of buying contraband goods cheaply. Cotton and sugar were creating unknown wealth, and with the booming economy, city dwellers increasingly sought imported wares. More exorbitant luxury was found on the surrounding plantations where moneyed gentility insisted on fine imported furniture, spices and fabrics. These commodities came in through the Caribbean then to New Orleans, an important port city that, until 1825, enjoyed a monopoly of trade between the Northeast and the Middle West. This brisk exchange was crucial to an economy that was based virtually on agriculture, and had little or no hard industry to produce sought-after goods.

Legal commerce had also been stifled when Jefferson responded to British and French shipping restrictions by enacting the 1806 Non-importation Act. A year later the act was suspended, but the bolder Embargo Act forbid all international trade and virtually closed all lawful commerce with other nations and opened the door to privateers and smugglers. In 1809 Congress repealed the Embargo Act and passed the Non-intercourse Act, opening trade to all nations except Britain and France. Although the experiments ended in 1810, the Embargo, Non-importation and Non-intercourse acts helped pave a shadowy avenue for bargains. It was an avenue that led to and from Grand Terre, and one New Orleans residents didn't want to abandon.

Aside from scarce merchandise, most of the population, both white and freedmen, also demanded slaves. In 1808 congress ratified a law that banned the importation of slaves born outside the United States, a ruling that was catastrophic for plantation owners, most of whom didn't blink at the prospect of illegally buying field hands from Laffite's barracoons, slave pens, on Grand Terre for $150 to $200 each, whereas in the city legal slaves cost up to $700.
Other impediments to legal commerce included customs duties, tariffs and taxes, and since Jean Laffite didn't pay any of it, he undercut any legitimate market. His overhead only included sharing half the profits with Gulf privateers.

When war broke out with England, the U.S. Navy consisted of just twenty-two vessels. Desperate to defend its waters, the United States gave letters of marque to 526 privateers. By the end of the War of 1812 the Navy had captured only 254 enemy ships, while privateers had captured 1,300.

Careful to grant commissions to only reputable owners and captains, only six were issued in New Orleans. Tainted reputations and a desire to retain all captured prizes kept Jean and Pierre, and most of the privateers, away from American certification. One coveted American letter of marque did go to a member of Laffite's organization, Stephen Debon who owned the Spy; Renato Beluche was master of the Spy, and was the son of a plantation family, and who regularly unloaded on Grand Terre. Of the numerous captains choosing Grand Terre over lawful enterprise, other notables were the Italians Vincent Gambi and Louis "Nez Coupe" (lost nose) Chighizola. Dominique You, an expert artillery and hardened veteran from Napoleon's army, sailed under the Bolivian flag. You also held a commission from Cartagena, and was reportedly one of Jean's favorites.

Jean and Pierre themselves owned ships with names like the Dorada and the Petit Milan, and like every other captain docking on Grand Terre, proclaimed themselves legal privateers. Some privateer prizes did actually make it through United States Customs in New Orleans, but the majority was unloaded on the inner coast of Grand Terre at the spot where old maps of Louisiana show "Smuggler's Anchorage." There Laffite provided secure harborage, then assured efficient distributions for booty by barge and pirogue to dozens of auction sites like the shell island called "The Temple," and at Cat Island, Grand Terre, and at warehouses in New Orleans, all locations that were visited regularly by supposed law-abiding citizens.

With the reluctant Americans regularly blurring the line between legal and illegal, Louisiana's first Protestant, English-speaking governor, William C.C. Claiborne, found himself continually failing to bring order to the area. He wrote to President Madison: "Sir, the more I become acquainted with the inhabitants of this Province, the more I am convinced of their unfitness for representative Government...[due to] the machinations of the few base individuals." One of those "base individuals", no doubt, was Jean Laffite, a widely-accepted smuggler who was handsome, witty, well-spoken and, above all, French.

Claiborne may have expressed frustration with corruption, but when it came to action he tread lightly around local heroes. Certainly the Laffites were Frenchmen first, but since loyalties could go to the highest bidder, the privateers and smugglers could seriously compromise the security of New Orleans and south Louisiana. Add that to New Orleans' isolation from the rest of the country and the Creole ingrained hatred of their new government, and the political climate for Claiborne was, at best, ticklish, a quandary heightened by England's propaganda telling residents that a British victory would return the region to Spain.

When war was officially declared, the government realized they'd have to crack down; illegal merchandise meant no revenue, money desperately needed for defense. On November 10, 1812, John R. Grymes, United States district attorney, charged Jean Laffite with violating the revenue law. Six days later Andrew Holmes and the 24th U.S. Infantry surprised Jean and Pierre smuggling in contraband, and peacefully hauled them in to the customs' officials in New Orleans. On November 19, the Laffites were formally charged, paid their bond, but then promptly forfeited and returned to smuggling, their daring winked at by
friends who held powerful seats in government.\textsuperscript{29}

Laffite's audacity grew, so much so that, even while still under indictment, he submitted an unsigned request for a letter of marque from the French consul at New Orleans for his brig \textit{Diligente}. He listed his age as 32, his name as ship's captain of a crew of ninety-one, and his birthplace as Bordeaux. On March 2, 1813 the registration certificate was granted\textsuperscript{30}, but he never did follow through with the process.

Although tales of brutality followed the exploits of the privateers, many stories circulated that Jean Laffite usually treated his captives and slaves, as well as strangers, humanely, and at times was even generous and hospitable. Gayarre, known for expressing the popular view of French New Orleans, agreed and wrote:

\begin{quote}
I cannot but think that they were mere smugglers, eager for ill-gotten lucre, it is true, but averse to shedding blood, which they always did reluctantly in those armed collisions to which they were sometimes exposed. Indeed, it was manifestly their interest to abstain from deeds of atrocity, which would have been fatal to the success of the illegal pursuits...\textsuperscript{31}
\end{quote}

One example of Jean's softer side is shown when plantation owner Thomas Martin was stranded on an uninhabited island after a Gulf storm, and two days later was taken aboard a ship by its captain who fed him and his shipmates and gave them sherry. The men spent the night onboard, and the next day the captain sailed them to safety. That day Martin found out that the helpful stranger was the notorious Jean Laffite, a host who'd been anything but fearsome. Some time later, in the middle of the night, Laffite knocked on the Martins' door and asked Thomas Martin to deliver a letter to a contact in Donaldsonville. Although it is speculated that Martin may have helped Laffite turn himself in to Governor Claiborne and Andrew Jackson some time before the Battle of New Orleans, the details of the appeal are unknown, but it is acknowledged that Thomas Martin was more than happy to oblige Laffite's request.\textsuperscript{32}

But as plundering off the coast became more aggressive and Laffite threatened to monopolize the city's import trade, complaints grew loud, no matter how gentlemanly his reputation. The merchants Laffite undercut were especially vocal. Also, Pierre was wanted by creditors, and many had not forgotten an 1811 slave revolt that, though impossible to tie to Laffite, was attributed to illegal San Domingue slaves that Laffite was known for smuggling.\textsuperscript{33}

\textit{Niles' Weekly Register} reports that on March 15, 1813 Governor Claiborne issued a proclamation denouncing the "banditti" who "commit depredations and piracies against the vessels of nations at peace [Spain] with the United States," and on April 7, the government filed cases against Jean and Pierre.\textsuperscript{34} On October 14 customs officials again surprised Laffite's smugglers in the act, but this time gunfire left William Randall, a government volunteer, with a bullet in his thigh. True to his nature, Jean Laffite hauled off the goods he'd been defending, then left to find a doctor for the wounded man.\textsuperscript{35}

Pushed to the limit, on November 24 Claiborne issued a five hundred dollar reward for Laffite. Laffite, in turn and true to style, replied by printing flyers that offered a one thousand dollar reward for Claiborne. In January Laffite was unfazed and yet uncaptured, and held a massive slave auction at the Temple. At the sale, an American revenue officer, John Stout, was killed. Six months later, on the pretext of an outstanding creditor judgment, Pierre was ambushed during one of his frequent trips to New Orleans, and arrested and jailed in the Cabildo.\textsuperscript{36}

Laffite immediately began thinking up ways to free his brother, and, like any good politician, hoped to sway public
opinion to his side by using the press. On August 18, a local English-language newspaper published an anonymous letter signed by “Napoleon, Junior,” warning that if Pierre were convicted and Barataria dismantled, then everyone would be poorer. But, despite the propaganda, attitudes were changing, and even the strongest supporters of Barataria could do little to bring Laffite aid.

Laffite’s enterprise was at a desperate turning point. The September morning when the Sophie and its British Captain Lockyer appeared, Pierre was still in prison and Laffite’s contacts had earlier informed him that the federal Commodore Daniel Patterson was planning to wipe out Grand Terre. For four years Laffite had been the boss of Grand Terre and subversive toast of the city, but he was sinking fast in a quicksand of turmoil caused by political change, cultural differences, mixed allegiances and war. But at this moment he had to deal with the HMS Sophie, and before the smoke from the battleship cleared, five Baratarians in a skiff met the British dinghy halfway. Captain Lockyer asked for Laffite, and was told that he was on the island. Lockyer then made his first mistake and willingly followed the skiff onto shore where he learned that one of the Baratarians in the skiff had indeed been Laffite.

Trapped, Lockyer faced over two hundred hostile Baratarians. Laffite called off his men as best he could. A dead captain would only provoke England into battle, a skirmish he knew he couldn’t win. Laffite must show courtesy to Captain Lockyer, or at least keep him alive, a feat that would not be easy if the Baratarians dragged the enemy “spies” upriver into the fearful and passionate City of New Orleans. Besides that, there was a chance the meeting might be mutually beneficial. Not only did the Americans have Pierre, but deep down inside Laffite likely wanted America to win the war. Although Laffite was probably planning to relocate to the Mexican Coast, his fortunes would benefit if the war’s victor was the slave-owning country of America and not the abolitionist British. Now he needed to convince Claiborne he was on his side, and what better way to prove allegiance than to hand over British secrets.

Laffite politely listened while Lockyer revealed five documents: One, dated August 13, was from Lt. Col. Edward Nicholls asking Laffite and the Baratarians to join with England. Another, dated August 30 from King George III’s forces, ordered Lockyer to contact Laffite and the Baratarians to offer the status of British subjects, as well as land that would not be reverted to Spain.

A third document was from Captain William Henry Percy to Nicolas Lockyer commanding him to find out the status of missing British merchantmen and, if he didn’t receive cooperation, to destroy Barataria. Also enclosed was a proclamation to “Natives of Louisiana” by Lieutenant Colonel Edward Nicholls imploring the French residents to assist the British in “liberating from a faithless, imbecile government, your paternal soil.” A final letter was addressed to Jean Laffite from Nicholls offering him the British rank of Captain, along with land and property, if he and his men abandoned their piracy. Today a legend circulates that $30,000 was also part of the British bribe, but this claim has never been substantiated.

Although he considered the American government a political adversary, Laffite realized that over the years his host country could have been more heavy-handed, so he never attacked American ships and forbid his captains to do so (although rumors flew that some had broken this rule). For this reason, and because of the riches he made smuggling, the British proposition was hardly an enticement, but Laffite feigned interest and was hospitable. However, the Baratarians did otherwise, and abducted Lockyer and locked him up in their prison. The next morning Laffite managed to free Lockyer, then sent him back to his ship, and an hour later sent the British captain a letter asking for fifteen days to reply.
With the *Sophie* waiting offshore, Laffite dashed off the documents, along with a letter to John Blanque, a bilingual merchant, banker and legislator whom Laffite trusted to make a case to Claiborne, and attest to Laffite's loyalty and plead for Pierre's release. Before the packet made its way into Blanque's hands, Pierre magically escaped from jail, probably aided by a politician, a local merchant or pirates, and on September 7, the *Sophie* sailed away.48

Pierre, back on Grand Terre with Jean and with a token $1,000 reward on his head, then wrote a letter to Claiborne stating that he and Jean were “...the stray sheep, wishing to return to the sheepfold.”49 Although ambivalent, Claiborne didn’t accept the olive branch and was instead swayed by Commodore Patterson and Colonel Ross, his national defense consultants, and allowed the two to attack Grand Terre.50

On the morning of September 16th, Patterson and the *Carolina* arrived to find that Jean and Pierre had earlier escaped, probably to a nearby plantation. Twenty-seven ships were in mooring, and Dominique You was in command and setting fire to whatever would burn. You had probably been instructed by Laffite not to resist. Patterson soon took control, locked up the pirates, and over the next few days captured whatever sailed in. In the end, Patterson burned several privateer ships and kept eight as prizes, along with merchandise, cannon, money and incriminating evidence against supposedly respectable residents.51 No one had been killed, but Laffite's Grand Terre was destroyed. Jean and Pierre stayed at large, but You, along with over one hundred Baratarians were locked up in the Cabildo.

On December 1st, Major General Andrew Jackson arrived in New Orleans. Determined to defend the important but militarily weak South, he found himself faced with fear and apathy from a population that didn’t understand a word he said. In earlier communications he had laid the groundwork for a citizen army offering $124 and 160 acres of land, even to freed men of color,52 but the attempt only attracted 287 men.53 The navy only had two ships, the *Carolina* and the *Louisiana*. Laffite’s ships, however, were impounded and functional, but sat idle since not nearly enough men were on hand to command them. But Jackson abhorred lawlessness. And although facing inevitable attack from the most powerful military in the world, he insisted that the able-bodied Baratarians be kept in prison, and even embellished Claiborne’s term of endearment calling Laffite and his men “hellish banditti.”54

Jackson’s patriotic enthusiasm was infectious. Through his interpreter Edward Livingston, an attorney and Laffite’s counsel against the American government, Jackson was able to rally the locals to build up defenses. But though infused with newfound American allegiance, the citizens of New Orleans lacked everything to sustain a long battle, including men to fight and crew Patterson’s two warships. American artillerists were woefully short on ammunition and gun flints, the latter essential to make what guns they did have fire.

Influential men like Major General Villere of the militia and Bernard de Marigny de Mandeville begged Jackson to enlist Laffite’s help. On December 12 the British fleet was spotted heading towards Lake Borgne, and by now the General was desperate enough to relent. In mid-December Jackson and Jean Laffite met secretly. The details of that meeting have never been made public but it is said that Jackson was impressed with Laffite’s enthusiasm and patriotism, so the General agreed to recommend a pardon for all Baratarians who would fight. Jackson assured Laffite he would fulfill this request,55 and on December 19 the Louisiana Legislature unanimously passed a bill requesting the President to grant full pardons for Laffite’s men.56 Laffite, in turn, provided desperately needed artillery, powder and 7,500 flints. Along with the men from prison, as well as Baratarians hiding outside the city, the two groups totaled over 400.57 Soon, two additional ships were fully manned and Dominique You was
captain of a militia company. Pierre remained near General Jackson as an advisor and, along with Major Michael Reynolds, Jean, presumably under some sort of executive shield, set up reinforcement down the bayous between Grand Terre and the city.

On December 23, with the Royal Navy in complete control of Louisiana's inland waterways and the city under martial law, Pierre Lafitte guided General Coffee and his men to a launch position where they drove the British right flank back in this first show of fire-power. Patterson's Carolina and Jackson's troops surprised the British from the front in this battle the Americans won. Several more skirmishes ensued, and on December 27 a British shell blew up the Carolina, leaving only the Louisiana to support Jackson from the river.

On December 28 in Chalmette, six miles south of New Orleans, Dominique You and Renato Beluche took command of two twenty-four pounders and a thirty-two-pounder on Battery Number 3 of Jackson's eight-battery line. The chest-high barricade of cotton bales was fronted by the fifteen-foot-wide Rodriguez canal, the rampart a mile long extending from an impassable swamp all the way to the Mississippi River. On December 29, a twenty-four pounder from one of the Baratarian ships was installed on the west bank of the river. But even with Lafitte's artillery, Jackson was still short on supplies as evidenced in his January 3 letter to his headquarters stating that "Again, I must apprise you that the arms I have so long been expecting have not arrived." The main battle began at dawn on January 8 at the Chalmette battlefield with Major General Sir Edward Pakenham, brother-in-law of the duke of Wellington, commanding between 11,000 and 14,450 seasoned troops, including the famed Scottish Ninety-third Highlanders. Jackson's hastily assembled line consisted of only 3,500 to 5,000, a ragtag conglomeration of United States army troops; Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana militia; free black soldiers; Choctaw warriors; and Baratarian pirates, along with lawyers, politicians, doctors, carpenters and merchants, and any free man who could shoot a gun. But although the match seemed grossly unbalanced, mistakes and uncoordinated plans left the British marching precisely across open ground making them perfect targets for the grapeshot, cannon and long rifles of the American militia, squirrel hunters and pirates. Among those sharpshooters were fifty Baratarians, with Dominique and Beluche at Batteries 3 and 4, along with Gambi and Chigozola, all manning three cannon. Hardly a large contingency, the pirates were highly skilled and motivated by the promise of a pardon and their ingrained hatred of the British.

In the end, the quick, decisive American victory left two thousand British shot, killed or reported missing, while the underdog Americans lost only thirteen. The shocked British called for a halt to the battle, and after a week of sporadic firing on Fort St. Philip, the enemy withdrew through Lake Borgne ending fighting in a war that had actually been halted by the Treaty of Ghent two weeks before January 8.

Although reports of valiant bravery followed the Baratarians' return to New Orleans after January 8, Lafitte's crew probably contributed most to the American cause during the days preceding the battle when their shooting skills were invaluable in the swamps and bayous, at Fort St. John, Fort St. Philip and on the decks of the Louisiana. Even Commodore Patterson, who only months earlier had destroyed Grand Terre, stated that his "...crew is composed of men of all nations, taken from the streets of New Orleans...yet I never knew guns better served..." During the January 8th battle, Dominique, Beluche, Gambi and Chigozola were strategically placed on the right flank for maximum effect. Dominique and Gambi both received wounds. Pierre, continuing to serve as a guide and advisor to Jackson, was on the West Bank. By all accounts, Jean never saw the battlefield and was instead helping to lead defenses
somewhere between New Orleans and Grand Isle. It is reported that he may have arrived at the battlefield around noon, but by then fighting had ceased. But he had earlier provided men and vital guns, powder and flint to the Americans, and for these conciliatory actions was welcomed as a hero.

Accolades poured in, especially to Dominique and Beluche, the two gallant cannoneer. Although they had become patriots for a price, Jean and Pierre again openly walked New Orleans’s streets, and even attended formal celebrations. More significantly, Jackson sent a request for clemency to Washington, and on February 6, President Madison declared that Jean Laffite and the Baratarians be granted a “free and full pardon of all offenses committed in violation for any act or acts of congress of the said United States.” But even though the government now welcomed back the “stray sheep,” America refused to return Laffite’s captured ships and merchandise, and even a personal visit and formal petition to President Monroe met with no success.

Clemency wasn’t enough to ground Laffite. Not one to be tied to rules, Laffite, with Pierre, in 1816 began to spy for Spain, started up a smuggling operation in Galveston, and again traded in illegal slaves. Unable to live life any way but on the edge, Jean Laffite reportedly died violently in a Gulf sea battle in the early months of 1823.

Laffite’s years in New Orleans read more like a Hollywood movie script than a biography, his rock-star aura is still the subject of numerous legends. But it is a fact that Laffite was an entrepreneur, a sophisticated merchant with a silver tongue and tarnished morals, his ethics particularly challenged when it came to slavery, a barbaric practice America was trying to phase out, but one he underhandedly promoted for profit. And on the issue of his questionable patriotism, the question must be asked: Suppose Jean Laffite had agreed to side with the British? What if he had sneaked the crown’s warships up the backwaters to New Orleans and turned loose against Jackson the hundreds of still-free Baratarians, those “hellish banditti” who were experts at guerrilla warfare and knew the layout of the city as well as anyone? Suspect patriot, privateer, villain or not, it must be considered that Laffite’s crucial decision to fight with America may have saved the city from British invasion, the potential victory one that would have surely tested the wording of the Treaty of Ghent, an accord that that wasn’t ratified until February 17.

Besides possible savior, in the broad sense of the word he could also be labeled a pirate, (although he had never been indicted as such) and not a privateer, since, especially in Galveston, he harbored and traded with known sea raiders. Beyond that, he was the product of a culture that for years had accepted smuggling, a region with a chaotic history that was a jumble of forced adjustments to variant political structures, ethnicities and languages that combined to produce the likes of Jean Laffite, an anomaly who could have only thrived in his place and time.

Endnotes
Davis, William C., *The Pirates Lafitte*, (New York: Harcourt, 2005), 2. (William Davis is virtually the only historian who says they were half brothers. He may be right, but his theory has not yet been tested).


Ramsay, Jean Lafitte, 44.


www.USMM.org (U.S. Maritime Service Veterans website)


Ibid, 97.


Ramsay, Jean Lafitte, 32.


Notice from Thomas L. Butler, 7th Military District Headquarters, “To the citizens of New Orleans” (New Orleans: La. Historical Collection; clipping from handbill or newspaper), 49-12-L.


Interview with John F. Wettermark, great-great-great grandson of Thomas Martin, June 10, 2005. Accounts of shipwreck chronicled in Ramsay’s *Lafitte*, p. vii, and agree with Wettermark who states that Martin’s wife Martha and daughter Eliza were on the ship rescued by Lafitte. The “Martin Family Memoirs” in the Melrose Collection at Northwestern State University Library, Natchitoches, Louisiana disagree with this account. Memoirs put date of shipwreck on December 28, 1813.

Davis, *The Pirates Lafitte*, 73.


Ibid, 158.

Ibid, 162-164.


Ibid, 38.


Ramsay, *Jean Lafitte*, 49.

Proclamation to “Natives of Louisiana” by Lieutenant Colonel Edward Nicholls, Commanding His Britannic Majesty’s Forces in the Floridas, August 29, 1814, (New Orleans: Historic New Orleans Collection), manuscript copy, MSS 196, folder 2.


Photocopy of original letter, Per Laffite to Wm. C. C. Clayborne, Governor, Sept. 4, 1814 (Austin: Parsons Collection, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas).


Davis, 191-193.


Ramsay, Jean Lafitte, 62.


TheLaffitesociety.com/WEBPAG-1/Page_42.html


Major General Andrew Jackson to Headquarters, 7th Military District, January 3, 1815; (New Orleans: Historic New Orleans Collection), manuscript letter, MSSS 200, folder 4.

Cabildo Museum website: www.crt.state.la.us/CRT/MUSEUM/CABILDO/cab6.htm


Ramsay, Jean Lafitte, 72.

*Ibid*, 82.
