FANTASY ARCHAEOLOGY:  
THE SEARCH FOR LAFFITE'S TREASURE  

Robert C. Vogel

Be forewarned: this is an excursion onto the wild side of history. Stories of treasure troves buried in Louisiana, Texas, and elsewhere by Laffite the Baratarian pirate have been a staple of regional folklore since the nineteenth century. All along the Gulf Coast, but especially the sector between Pensacola and Corpus Christi, indigenous stories of Laffite's lost treasure have been handed down for generations (some have been kicking around for more than 150 years); transmitted orally and in print, endlessly renewed and varied by individual repetition; forgotten, and then reinvented to satisfy the tastes of new audiences. Because of their readers' familiarity with the myth of the "Pirate of the Gulf," as well as the abiding public fascination with getting rich quickly through the chance discovery of a mysterious lost treasure, these stories have been especially appreciated and widely circulated.

Many of the most enduring Laffite treasure legends incorporate traditional elements of "lost treasure" folklore, which is itself an ancient phenomenon that is world-wide in scope. The important thematic elements in this folkloric tradition may be briefly summarized as follows. First, there is a fabulously rich treasure of some kind, deposited by Laffite while on the run from the authorities. It is lost and in a remote or mysterious location. It is sometimes guarded by ghosts or is cursed. Sometimes there is a map, a diary, or some other document which records the location of the treasure, but it is either too cryptic to be useful or has mysteriously disappeared. Some form of ill-luck always attends the searchers of the trove: in most variations, an intrepid male explorer stumbles upon the treasure but somehow loses the location. His story entices future hopefuls to search in vain for the hidden wealth, sometimes with terminal consequences -- ergo, the treasure remains "lost."  

In 1931 Frank Dobie, the dean of Texas folklorists, published a collection of Southwestern lost treasure stories, to which he contributed what many regard as the classic Jean Laffite buried treasure story (one which was already very old when Dobie first heard it sometime near the end of the nineteenth century). It goes like this: Somewhere near the mouth of the Lavaca River is a buried treasure trove of gold, silver, and jewels that was hidden by Jean Laffite when he was fleeing for his life. Laffite's schooner, The Pride, heavily laden with plunder, had been overtaken by an American warship in the Gulf and chased inshore. Unable to elude his pursuer, Laffite ran the Pride into the mouth of the river, where the gunboat dared not follow. There he divided the treasure among his men and bade them flee. With two trusted companions, he then proceeded with his own personal chest a short distance inland, to a spot hidden from view by tall grass, where he had the men dig a hole, deposit the treasure chest in it, and cover it with earth. Using a compass and a Jacob's staff, Laffite took bearings on two nearby clumps of oak trees to fix the precise location of the treasure, then pounded the brass surveyor's staff into the ground over the chest, leaving a foot or so exposed. The pirates never made it back to reclaim their loot. Many years later, a black herder found the Jacob's staff, pulled it out of the ground, and used it to tether his horse. Back at the ranch, his boss recognized the staff when he saw it and ordered the herder to take him to the place where the staff had been found. This proved to be impossible and the buried chest of pirate treasure was never found.
What may at first seem to be a primal Texas tale in fact contains recurring elements from other legends of pirate treasures buried in Louisiana. Perhaps the most persistent of these has its epicenter within the Lake Charles city limits. The core of the legend is that Laffite frequented the Calcasieu Parish area during the years he was based at Galveston (i.e., circa 1817 to 1820). At the time, the region was wilderness except for the tiny settlement on the southwestern shore of Lake Charles, named for frontiersman Charles Sallier dit Savoyard. Laffite had captured a Spanish treasure ship out on the Gulf but was chased into the mouth of the Calcasieu River by a United States man-o'-war. Sailing up the Calcasieu, Laffite's schooner slipped around into a little cutoff of Contraband Bayou to hide from his pursuer; once the immediate danger had passed, the pirates made their way down the Contraband into the lake and anchored in front of Sallier's cabin. After offloading the treasure and burying it, Laffite's men brought off the schooner's armament and placed their cannon behind an improvised breastwork on top of a large shell midden; then they scuttled the schooner in deep water and settled down to wait for the American warship, which never made it through the tortuous passage into Lake Charles. After several days, Laffite purchased a replacement schooner from Sallier, had his men dig up some (but not all) of their treasure, and sailed back out onto the Gulf. For years afterward, the shell beach "fort" was known as Money Hill in an allusion to the pirate booty hidden there. According to local tradition, this episode also marks the beginning of Sallier's collaboration with Laffite, a partnership which came to an abrupt end several years later when Charles came to suspect his wife Catherine LeBleu of having had an affair with the pirate chieftain. In a jealous rage, Sallier shot his wife with a pistol, but the ball glanced off Catherine's amethyst brooch (a gift from the pirate), thus saving her life. Charles ran off and was never seen again.

Why so many Laffite legends coalesce around this particular lost treasure theme are so frequent and similar is not known. Perhaps there was some historical basis for the legend. However, it is more likely that these stories are a reflection of a traditional impulse to construct treasure legends along a limited number of favored pathways.

Complementary to the folkloric aspects of pirate treasure is the physical search for specific treasures (as well as shipwrecks and other lost objects) associated with Laffite. As the title of this paper suggests, more often than not the driving force behind this quest has been historical fantasy, not folklore, manifested in a set of unfortunate misconceptions, fanciful historical interpretations, and misguided theories about Laffite, the Baratarians, and the history of piracy in the Gulf of Mexico.

The search for Laffite's treasure began within a few years of his historical exit from the Gulf of Mexico and persists to the present day. From the beginning, the quest has been framed by the notion that pirates buried treasure. Although hidden treasure has been a favorite theme in pirate stories since ancient times, there are very few documented cases of pirates who actually buried their plunder. Even during the Golden Age of Piracy on the Spanish Main, when the rewards of buccaneering were greatest, most freebooters preferred spending their loot over caching it on the beach. Notwithstanding that there have been only a mere handful of finds of authentic pirate "treasure" anywhere in the western hemisphere, in fantasy archaeology, as we shall see, belief is always paramount over evidence.

Typically, the search for Laffite's treasure was undertaken by an individual or a small group of like-minded adventurers who were nearly always white men. Greed and adventure were the main motivations. The first critical task of every treasure hunter was to decide upon which treasure trove to seek. More often than not, this required some research to establish an historical basis for the undertaking and thereby legitimize it.
Once the treasure hunt was conceptualized, the immediate objective was to find some landmark (a high bank or island, the mouth of a river, etc.), where some scrap of pirate lore indicated the presence of Lafitte or one of his numerous lieutenants; preferably, this spot was distant from any densely settled place, where there were no prying eyes, and where it was practicable to dig. If they intended to comply with the letter of the law, the treasure hunters either secured permission from the legal owner or purchased an interest in the tract—most often, they simply trespassed. If they intended to comply with the letter of the law, the treasure hunters either secured permission from the legal owner or purchased an interest in the tract—most often, they simply trespassed.7 Arriving at the chosen locality, they commenced to prospecting by digging, oftentimes randomly, and nearly always with completely negative results. Invariably, the next task was to enlist the support of financial backers enticed by the prospect of sharing in the pirate loot which lay just beyond the reach of the original searchers. A crude speculation was thus provided and if things went well the treasure hunters found themselves in a position to further improve their situation by spending other people's money.

Although treasure hunters invariably observed the greatest secrecy possible in their operations, word inevitably got out and if the project received favorable attention, other freelancers would soon appear, and in their wake usually came a newspaper editor or magazine feature writer.8

Treasure hunting has an obvious alliance with history as well as traceable roots in the Victorian antiquarianism that was the cradle of modern archaeology. Indeed, it would be safe to say that the search for Lafitte's treasure has been pervaded by a general intellectual atmosphere of armchair speculation about his role in national and local history. Although most authors with any pretensions to scholarly merit have dismissed Lafitte's treasure as the stuff of legend and folklore, successive generations of history writers have legitimized the search for hidden pirate treasure through their dissemination of misinformation about Lafitte and the Baratarians (albeit unknowingly, for the most part). All of the best known "standard" works on the subject, for example, tend to inflate the numbers of ships and men employed by the Lafitte brothers as well as the booty amassed by the colonies of adventurers at Barataria and Galveston.9 The Journal of Jean Lafitte, a counterfeit Lafitte memoir with fantastic claims (including secret treasures) that surfaced in the 1950's, added to the volume of spurious data and invalid interpretations; reference citations to the Journal continue to crop up in academic publications.10 And while the state of scholarly knowledge of Lafitte has always been very broad but quite shallow, some of the purported findings that have poured forth from popular historians and biographers would make any good novelist blush. Popularizing Lafitte, with the inevitable allusions to his buried treasures, lost forts, and sunken ships, remains a priority for local history compilers throughout the Gulf South.11

It is obvious that the search for Lafitte's treasure has also been interwoven with and unraveled from some of the core elements in Robert Louis Stevenson's masterpiece of piratania, Treasure Island, which first appeared in American bookstores in 1883.12 Without any doubt, the most forceful impact on Lafitte treasure seeking has come from two enormously popular books published roughly a century apart. Joseph Holt Ingraham created the cult of Lafitte the pirate-hero when Harper & Brothers released his romantic novel Lafitte: The Pirate of the Gulf in 1836.13 The influence of Ingraham's blockbuster upon treasure hunting during the middle decades of the nineteenth century must have been exceedingly strong; one measure of its influence is the outpouring of vernacular history writing about Lafitte that appeared in mainstream publications such as DeBow's Review between the 1840's and the 1870's, many of which cite it. Ingraham's success may have also prompted Boston bookseller Charles Ellms to publish his classic, The Pirates Own Book, the following year.14 The historical (as opposed to folkloric) contents of these works was highly variable but together they formed the baseline of the
Victorian era treasure hunter movement. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Jean Laffite was well established as a popular hero in both fictional and historical writing but there was no definitive, book-length Laffite biography until publication of Lyle Saxon's pseudo-historical but eminently readable Lafitte the Pirate in 1930. Inspired in no small part by the success of Saxon's book and Cecil B. DeMille's swashbuckling film The Buccaneer (which premiered in 1938), by the 1940's, public and scholarly interest in Laffite was running quite high within the Gulf South region and the country in general; yet, most of the Laffite writing remained speculative and romantic but generally uninformed by the critical analysis of primary sources - and, therefore, perfect grist for the treasure hunter's mill.

Hunting for buried treasure was a popular Victorian era sport and nowhere is the phenomenon better documented than in southern Louisiana, where the folkloric map of the coastal marshlands is dotted with Laffite's lost treasures. Notwithstanding Laffite's historical association with New Orleans, the Mississippi River, Barataria Bay, Grand Isle, Lake Pontchartrain, and the Bayou Lafourche region, the attentions of the majority of nineteenth century treasure seekers were focused on more remote areas in the southwestern part of the state, with the lower Mermentau, Calcasieu, and Sabine rivers, English Bayou, White Lake, Big Lake, Grand Chenier, Caillou Island, Hackberry Island, Pecan Island, Kelso Island, and Jefferson Island emerging as recurrent treasure hunter hot-spots. Local historians have recorded major outbreaks of digging for Laffite's gold along Shell Beach Drive and Contraband Bayou ("so named because of Jean Laffite's known activities along its banks") in Lake Charles. Shortly after the turn of the century, one Joseph Choate (alias Price Choate), an alligator hunter from Vermilion Parish, swindled about a dozen investors from Abbeville and Lafayette when he hatched a scheme to recover a cache of Laffite gold worth "ten million dollars" he claimed to have discovered stashed in a brick vault near White Lake. Over $10,000 was subscribed and a three-mile long canal was dug through the marsh -- but in the end, the investors lost their money and the promoters were sent to the state penitentiary. In the 1930s, WPA field workers recorded a billboard on the highway near Vinton that proclaimed "this is where Lafitte Buried His Treasure Beneath 40 Gum Trees." Farther down the coast in Texas, and especially around Galveston Bay, Laffite's treasure is also deeply embedded within the fabric of local history and folklore. According to one local historian, the oral tradition of buried pirate gold was until quite recently particularly strong around the mouth of the Sabine River, where "almost every bayou and shell bank on Sabine Lake or the Neches River had its own 'patron,' or ghost, as the guardian of Lafitte's gold . . . generations of money hunters scoured the lake shores and marsh ridges, carrying 'maps' and strange detecting devices." Stories of unsuccessful searches for treasures allegedly buried by Laffite and his associates take up about one-fourth of the only comprehensive overview of Galveston area treasures. Since the 1840's, a veritable army of treasure hunters have dug in vain for Laffite's lost gold at the Three Trees, Maison Rouge, Clear Creek, and other sites around Galveston. The bays and islands around Corpus Christi, supposedly a popular hideout for Laffite and his gang, have also attracted generations of treasure seekers.

Since antebellum times, Gulf Coast adventurers have known that chestfuls of doubloons were not the only objects of value which might have been left behind by Laffite and the Baratarians. The rush to obtain artifacts linked to Laffite the pirate began in the 1840's and Gilded Age antiquarians searched frantically for traces of various Laffite "forts" at Grand Terre, Galveston, and other points. One of the results of this mania for Laffite-iana was the acquisition and display of hundreds of unprovenienced artifacts of questionable authenticity, many of
which eventually found their way into museum collections. Another was the accumulation of a body of pirate ship folklore, and it was not long before reports of shallow water shipwrecks purported to be "pirate" schooners sparked the curiosity of relic hunters and antiquarians. Popular interest in underwater fantasy archaeology received further stimulus whenever government-sponsored river and harbor improvement projects dredged up old ships' timbers, tackle, and the odd cannon. Interest in salvaging artifacts (and treasure) from various "Laffite ships" continued to grow in the twentieth century when several sensational underwater finds were reported. 29

The case of the "lost pirate ship" in Lake Miller, near Wallisville in Chambers County, Texas, offers a classic example of fantasy archaeology; where the hopes of the treasure seekers outran the evidence from the very start. Like every treasure hunt, it begins with a fantastic tale of pirate gold. According to local lore, when Laffite was ordered to leave Galveston in 1820 he loaded up his flagship the Pride with his goods, including five bear skins full of doubloons, and sailed into the upper reaches of Galveston Bay, where the vessel ran aground and sank in the mouth of a small lake near the mouth of the Trinity River. The Pride was so heavily laden that she sank before the gold could be taken off; the treasure was never recovered, owing to Laffite's hasty departure from Texas and subsequent death in a sea-fight. 30

Sometime around 1850 this "lost treasure" legend manifested itself in the serendipitous discovery of an old wreck lying at the bottom of Lake Charlotte, near the mouth of the Trinity River on upper Galveston Bay. A local settler named Jake Sherman had cut down some oak timber growing on the natural levee at Lake Charlotte and was floating the saw logs down to the river when they snagged on a submerged obstacle which, upon inspection, turned out to be the deck and timbers of a wooden vessel. Eventually, the wreck disappeared beneath the mud and silt of a swammpy wetland which came to be known as Lake Miller, but the site was remembered by local folk and its location was allegedly marked by a large iron spike driven into the trunk of a tree. It is not recorded precisely when the connection was made between the wreck and Jean Laffite, but by the 1930's Jake Sherman's grandson, E. H. Sherman of rural Wallisville, was convinced it was the remains of the Pride with its bear skins full of doubloons. 31

The first attempt to recover artifacts from the wreck was made in 1940. In 1935, Mr. Sherman had alerted area newspapers to the sunken pirate ship and proposed constructing a coffer dam around the wreck so that the site could be dredged and the treasure plucked from the mud. He was able to convince some area businessmen of the plan's practicality and they put up money for the recovery operation. However, as Lake Miller was submerged land and therefore state controlled, a permit was required from the General Land Office of Texas before any excavation work could commence. The treasure hunters applied for the exploration permit but were rebuffed by the Land Commissioner, who cited a lack of statutory authority for licensing treasure hunting. 32

The search for "Jean Lafitte's flagship" resumed after the war, when in August 1949, an outfit calling itself K & B Exploration Co. placed an advertisement in the Houston Post and other newspapers, wherein the owners stated they were in possession of a device capable of finding deeply buried items and offered to share the proceeds with anyone who could furnish a good treasure location. 33 Within a few weeks the second Miller Lake expedition was underway, using World War II surplus mine detectors and metal probes to confirm the presence of the wreck, which by that time was buried underneath about sixteen feet of sediment. With Sherman and another local man as partners, K & B successfully obtained a state land office exploration permit, said to be "the first of its kind ever issued," to build a casement around the wreck, pump out the mud and water, and recover the
pirate gold and other artifacts -- with the stipulation that the state school fund would receive 25% of the proceeds. Somewhat mysteriously, the permit was cancelled less than a month later when the Land Commissioner claimed the treasure hunters had not followed proper leasing procedures. The expedition leaders were ordered to cease and desist and the project quietly folded.

Like the "lost treasure" folklore traditions, all of the canonical Laffite treasure and shipwreck hunting stories share at least two important characteristics in common, regardless of their origin in time or place. First, no credible explanation is offered as to why Laffite would have come to this particular place, let alone why he needed to scuttle an armed schooner far from any navigable waterway or deposit a chest of money along the shifting, muddy banks of a bayou or river estuary. Secondly, there is usually no "fake lore" in the form of elaborate forged documents or treasure maps: more often than not, the treasure hunters' motivations are based on their interpretations of certain historical "facts," most of which are predicated on the assumption that Laffite was a highly successful pirate who roamed the entire Gulf Coast, therefore, he must have left behind buried treasures or lost vessels in out of the way places which cry out for discovery.

The search for Laffite's treasure continues today, though perhaps not on quite the frenzied scale of the nineteenth and early twentieth century operations. Modern-day fantasy archaeology is mainly done by hobbyists equipped with metal detectors. Just as significantly, new attitudes about the role of treasure hunting have developed. Adventure seems to have nudged past greed as the primary motive: it is widely reported on metal detecting websites that people with no interest in seeking large treasures often prospect for doubloons (a practice known as "coin shooting") strictly on a recreational basis. Weekend escapees from the urban rat-race, these modern-day treasure prospectors are said to be seeking health, not wealth. Nevertheless, there are still plenty of old school treasure hunters with incurable pirate gold fever, ready to invest hundreds of hours in metal detecting and digging in mud and sand under the hot sun.

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1 This article (a version of which was presented in the form of a paper at the 47th annual meeting of the Louisiana Historical Association in Lafayette, La., on March 18, 2005) deals with the folk archaeology of pirate treasure hunting, a form of archaeology that is based on vernacular history—indeed, there are some who would feel better if we were to substitute "folklore" for "history." Vernacular history and folk archaeology differ from their respective academic disciplines in that there are no fixed forms or rules: the practitioner is allowed absolute freedom in shifting back and forth between subjective and objective models of the past, the beauty of vernacular history being that, if you don’t like someone’s interpretation of a particular set of historical "facts," you can always rearrange them and introduce new material. Vernacular history is not synonymous with ignorance, nor is folk archaeology some kind of perverse science: both are folkways with near universal appeal that enable people to experience the past on their own terms.


3 This is sometimes referred to as the "El Dorado" theme. For an academic perspective with special reference to Laffite's treasure, see the articles by Frank Dobie, E. G. Littlejohn, Julia Beazley, J. O. Webb, and J. W. Morris in Legends of Texas, Publications of the Texas Folklore Society III, ed. J. Frank Dobie (Austin, 1924), 179-196.

4 J. Frank Dobie, Coronado's Children: Tales of Lost Mines and Buried Treasures in the Southwest (New York, 1931), 319-323. An interesting variant of this legend places the treasure at the mouth of the San Bernard River in Brazoria County: Laffite was driven ashore by a furious hurricane that killed all but one of the pirates. Also surviving the wreck was a female captive, none other than Theodosia Burr, the daughter of Aaron Burr, who was rescued by Indians but died shortly thereafter; J. W. Morris, "The Pirate Ship of


the San Bernard: A Legend of Theodosia Burr Allston," in Legends of Texas, 191-196. This story may have been inspired, at least in part, by the chance discovery of a box of Spanish era coins at Dead Man's Lake, near the mouth of the San Bernard, in 1912; this find prompted at least two private treasure hunting forays in 1930; see Federal Writers Project, Houston: A History and Guide, American Guide Series (Houston, 1942), 165.

5 Federal Writers Project, Louisiana: A Guide to the State, American Guide Series (New York, 1945), 286; and Stewart Alfred Ferguson, "The History of Lake Charles, Louisiana," M.A. thesis (Louisiana State University, 1931), 15. Part of the old shell beach, known locally as Barbe's Shell Bank, survives to the present day offshore from the historic Barbe House, 2709 Shell Beach Drive, the site of the old Sallier home until cabin was moved in 1841. Local observers insisted the pirate fort, first described in an 1866 article in the Galveston Daily News, could still be seen up until the 1930's. 6 One of the earliest, if not the earliest, of the LaFitte treasure stories appeared in Colburm's United Service Magazine in 1846 (part 1, pages 236-242), entitled, "The Pirate of the Gulf; or, The Hidden Treasure." For historical perspective on Americans' money-digging mania, see Alan Taylor, "The Early Republic's Supernatural Economy: Treasure Seeking in the American Northeast, 1780-1830," American Quarterly 38 (1986):6-34. Taylor examined sixty-three treasure hunting episodes, of which forty dealt with pirates.

7 The disregard for landowner rights and the destruction of private property often caused sheriffs to run off treasure hunters, though only those guilty of the most egregious acts of vandalism were usually prosecuted. It was not until the 1970's that the states began enacting antiquities legislation to prohibit unlicensed "archaeology" on public land.


9 The worst offenders may have been Stanley Clisby Arthur, Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover (New Orleans, 1952); Jane Lucas DeGrummond, The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans (Baton Rouge, 1961); and Jack C. Ramsey, Jr., Jean Laffite: Prince of Pirates (Austin, 1996); but several others could be listed as well.


11 Recent examples include: Roberta Marie Christenson, Pioneers of West Galveston Island (Austin: Norteno Press, 1986), 93-100 and passim; Miriam Partlow, Liberty, Liberty County and the Atascosito District (Austin, 1974), 51; Matagorda County Historical Commission, Historic Matagorda County, 2 vols. (Houston, 1986), II:391; Roberta Maria Christensen, Pioneers of West Galveston Island (Austin, 1992), 85, 93-100; Vermilion Historical Society, History of Vermilion Parish, Louisiana (Dallas, 1983), 172; Melanie Wiggins, They Made Their Own Law: Stories of Bolivar Peninsula (Houston, 1990), 101-102; and Henry E. Yoes, A History of St. Charles Parish to 1973 (Norco, 1973), 35, 50.

12 Stevenson (1850-1894) appears to have borrowed a good deal of his background material from Captain Thomas Johnson's enormously popular General Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates (first edition, London, 1724) but is generally credited with inventing much of modern Anglo American pirate mythology.

13 Ingraham (1809-1860) was born in New England but resided in the South, where he composed several best selling romances loosely based on historical themes. His LaFitte (the first edition was dedicated to Longfellow) was a publishing sensation, garnered generally good reviews (though Edgar Allen Poe tomahawked it in The Southern Literary Messenger) and went through several editions, including at least two twentieth century reprints. His son, Col.
Prentiss Ingraham (1843-1904), recycled some of his father's storylines in his popular dime-novels, first published during the 1880's and later reissued in paperback in the early 1930's.

14 The Pirates Own Book; or, Authentic Narratives of the Lives, Exploits, and Executions of the Most Celebrated Sea Robbers (Boston and Philadelphia, 1837, reprinted 1844, 1924); Laffite's less than wholly authentic story is presented on pages 63-85.

15 The Laffites received their first serious historical treatment at the hands of Charles Etienne Gayarre in volume 4 of his History of Louisiana (New York, 1866); Gayarre's article, "Historical Sketch of Pierre and Jean Lafitte, the Famous Smugglers of Louisiana," appeared in the Magazine of American History in 1882. Lafitte legend and history were blended by a succession of Louisiana writers, including: George Washington Cable, "Plotters and Pirates of Louisiana," Century Magazine (1883) and The Creoles of Louisiana (New York, 1886); Grace King, New Orleans, The Place and the People (New York, 1895); Grace King and John R. Ficklen, Jr., Stores From Louisiana History (New Orleans, 1905), 278-287; and Henry Castellanos, New Orleans As It Was (New Orleans, 1895); see also the Historical Scrapbook and Guide to New Orleans and Environs (New York, 1885), 188-190.

16 Lyle Saxon (1891-1946) was one of the leading lights of the New Orleans literary scene during the second quarter of the twentieth century. Lafitte the Pirate was his fourth major book (after Father Mississippi [1927], Fabulous New Orleans [1928], and Old Louisiana [1929]) and it is perhaps the most widely read book about Lafitte; several editions have appeared in hardcover and paperback, most recently in 1989. In 1935 Saxon was named director of the WPA Federal Writers Project in Louisiana and he was responsible for quite a bit of the Lafitte legend and folklore, including some of the treasure stories, that found its way into the famous guidebooks for New Orleans (1938) and Louisiana (1945) and his folklore collection Gumbo Ya-Ya (reprint, 1975).

17 See, e.g., Theresa Moore Hunter, The Saga of Jean Lafitte: Word Portraits of a Picturesque Southern Pirate: History and Romance of the Texas Coast (San Antonio, 1940); and Ray M. Thompson, The Land of Lafitte the Pirate (Gretna, La., 1943).

18 "Many of the legends concerning treasure are connected with the pirate, Jean Lafitte," Federal Writers Project, Louisiana, 91; cf. Paul Serpas, Tales of Louisiana Treasure (Baton Rouge, 1967).

19 Typical of the innumerable local newspaper stories of various pirate treasure hunts from southwestern Louisiana and the northeast Gulf Coast in Texas will be found in the Galveston Daily News, 21 April 1878, 25 May 1879, 7 January 1884, 25 April 1895, 3 March 1907, 7 February 1909; the Lake Charles Echo, 11 April 1874, 29 March 1875, 9 September 1875, 5 January 1884, 4 July 1885, 13 January 1888; the Lake Charles American Press [title varies], 20 March 1914, 10 June 1932, 11 April 1940, 12 August 1979; and the New Orleans Times-Picayune, 13 November 1960. Some of the very best Lafitte treasure hunt writing is found in "Life and Times of Lafitte," DeBow's Review 11 (October 1851), 385; Maurice Elfer, "Trees Uprooted in Quest for Pirate Gold: South Louisiana Pitted by Seekers of Treasure Said to Have Been Buried by Lafitte or His Men," New Orleans Times-Picayune, 7 November 1926; Meigs O. Frost, "Bayou Folk Dig For Pirate Gold: Dream, Money Machine Point Way to Lafitte's Buried Treasure," New Orleans States, 17 March 1938; Rebecca Harding Davis, "Here and There in the South," Harper's New Monthly Magazine, 75 (November 1887):923-924; and William Henry Perrin, ed., Southwest Louisiana Biographical and Historical (New Orleans, 1891), 247; and Federal Writers Project, Louisiana, 431.

20 Nola Mae Wittler Ross, Jean Lafitte: Louisiana Buccaneer (Lake Charles, 1990), 53; Federal Writers Project, Louisiana, 286; and Maude Reid, "Origin of Some Place Names in Southwest Louisiana," McNeese Review 6 (1954):114; see also Ferguson, "History of Lake Charles," 12-19, an early prototype of "vernacular history" writing disguised as academic history. The earliest published notice of the connection between Lafitte, Contraband Bayou, and the Lake Charles shell bank is a story printed in the Galveston Daily News in 1866. For a modern take on the local treasure lore, see

21 *Lake Charles American*, 30 April, 1909; the special report filed by a reporter covering the trial carried the headline, "Choate, the Treasure Hunter of White Lake is Convicted: Report of Trial Will Interest Lake Charles People Who Have Done Some Exploring Themselves"; a slightly different version of the same story appeared under the headline, "The Treasures of Lafitte," in the *Galveston Daily News*, 27 October 1908. Stories of another "treasure vault," this time near Grand Chenier, aroused treasure seekers twenty years later; *Lake Charles American Press*, 12 May 1938.


23 W. T. Block, *History of Jefferson County, Texas, From Wilderness to Reconstruction* (Nederland, Tex., 1976), 14-15; see also W. T. Block, "Treasure Tale Keyed Digging in East Texas Piney Woods," *Enterprise* (Beaumont), 15 May 1999; and cf. Dobie, *Coronado's Children*, 326-327. Block, a retired journalist and college instructor residing in Nederland, Texas, has written widely about Laffite lore from East Texas and Southwest Louisiana; several of his buried treasure stories are posted on his website (www.wtblock.com).


28 Laffite's "fort" on Galveston held a special fascination for early Anglo American visitors to the island; see William Bollaert, "Life of Jean Lafitte, the Pirate of the Mexican Gulf," *Littell's Living Age* 32 (1852):433-446; William Bollaert's Texas, ed. W. Eugene Hollon and Ruth Lapham Butler (Norman, 1956), 14-17, 84. Anecdotal accounts of Laffite's fort and reputed house ("Maison Rouge") can be found in Hayes, *Galveston*, I:128, 276.

29 *Galveston Daily News*, 15 September 1903, 23 January and 11 February 1970; *Houston Post*, 12 August and 9 September 1959, 22 June 1980. The tale of the sunken "pirate ship" widely believed to be near the mouth of the Mermentau River seems to have originated with James Campbell, a self-proclaimed Laffite "lieutenant," who lived on Galveston Bay; in their old age, Campbell and his wife both gave interviews about the wreck of the privateer Hotspur off the mouth of the Mermentau River; see *Galveston Daily News*, 25 April 1895 and

30 J. H. Harry, "History of Chambers County, Texas," M.A. thesis (University of Texas, 1940), 17-18; notes of an interview with Ralph T. Lagou of Anahuac by Peggy L., 1978; affidavit of W. N. Sherman of Beaumont, notarized in Jefferson County, Texas, 2 February 1978; these and other materials relating to the "Lafitte Ship" in Lake Miller have been collected by the research library staff at the Wallisville Heritage Park and Museum.

31 Houston Chronicle, 31 May 1935; The Progress, 6 June 1935.

32 Houston Post, 30 December 1939 and 11 June 1940; Austin American, 9 July 1940; Liberty Vindicator, 12 June 1940; "Lafitte Ship" file. Sherman's partners in the first Miller Lake expedition were Grover Cleveland Chambless, Jr., of Beaumont and B. F. Williams of Anahuac; they also had backing from the Herbert interests in Houston. The treasure hunters retained the services of Price Daniel (1910-1988), a lawyer and sitting state representative from Liberty, to represent them in their request for a state permit to explore for a "certain boat known as Jean Lafitte's flag ship." Daniel went on to serve as United States senator, governor, and state supreme court justice, and in 1969 he purchased the Journal of Jean Lafitte from two Texas document dealers, which he later donated it to the Sam Houston Regional Library at Liberty.

33 K & B Exploration Company was owned by B. J. Krigar and Leo T. Behne, Jr. (1927-1999) of Houston. Krigar and Behne were army veterans who had acquired some World War II surplus mine detectors.

34 Houston Post, 19 August 1949, 25 August 1949, 28 August 1949, and 4 September 1949; The Progress, 25 August 1949 and 8 September 1949; "Lafitte Ship" file. The Land Commissioner was Giles Bascom (b. 1900), who had headed the Land Office from 1938 until 1955; he was later forced to resign over the Veterans Land Bank scandal and served time in prison.

35 The treasure hunters may have been deterred by the presence of John A. Lafitte (sic) of St. Joseph, Missouri, who read about the Lake Miller expedition in his local newspaper [St. Joseph News Dispatch, 19 August 1949]; Lafitte, who claimed to be the great-grandson of the pirate, suggested that he had a right to a share in any treasure recovered; Lafitte to E. H. Sherman, 22 August 1949, "Lafitte Ship" file. John A. Lafitte was the perpetrator of the Lafitte Journals hoax. The Lake Miller shipwreck site is now controlled by the Army Corps of Engineers and is off-limits to treasure hunters.

36 Alexander Graham Bell is credited with inventing the first metal detecting device in 1881 and a crude portable metal detector was patented by Gerhard Fischar in 1925; the first practical metal detectors were used during World War II to detect land mines; after the war, civilians started purchasing army surplus mine detectors for treasure hunting. Hand-held metal detectors using very low frequency (VLF) technology appeared in the 1960's; Roy T. Roberts, "The History of Metal Detectors," Western & Eastern Treasures, September 1999.

37 See, e.g., Successful Treasure Hunting, "Who Hunts for Treasure?" (www.th­ ers.com/who.shtml); All Kinds of Buried Treasure (www.oldandsold.com); International Treasure Exchange (www.treasure.com); Alan Hassell, "Lure of
Pirate Treasure" (www.treasurenet.com), last updated 1998; the Bounty Hunter Metal Detectors site (www.detecting.com); and Thomas Thomas, "Tom's Personal Metal Detecting and Treasure Hunting Web Page" (www.thomasthomas.com).