Once upon a time and almost lost to memory, but still remembered by some a few years ago, people spoke about an island called Cayo Cristo. The island is close to the Port of Isabela, from where the Undosa River flows into the ocean after passing by the village of Sagua La Grande and coming from even further away as far as the town of Santo Domingo in the province of Las Villas.

Back at the turn of the 19th Century, that island had a very peculiar population of men of the sea. They were fishermen, traders, and some dedicated to that “other” business that needed much help from the authorities.

I am talking about piracy, which sometimes aside of being a necessity (due to the commercial monopoly that the island suffered from for many years) was also very profitable. Like the modern financiers who trade in the market and in a moment of luck can either turn into millionaires or lose everything, those gentlemen of Cayo Cristo had their ups and downs. Back then they used to say that the “arm” (of the law) was very far away, coming from Santa Clara...and the warehouse where they stored goods to be distributed was at the Caves of Jumanagua. This became a way of earning a living. If it was not legal, it was at least tolerated and life went on among the peaceful population of Cayo Cristo. Some of them were known for their not-so-stellar reputation and they were called “Muslims”, meaning semi-retired pirates or buccaneers.

Incredible stories about what there was inside those houses circulated around. They spoke about gold-embroidered quilts and tablecloths, treasure chests buried in Cayo Cristo and also on nearby Cayo Esquivel. There were scary
stories about old people pleading that when they died they wanted their ears covered to avoid hearing the voices of the spirits of all the people they had assassinated after stealing their valuables, or the voices of those abandoned on secluded beaches during low tide with their bodies buried in the sand up to their neck so they would slowly drown with the change of the tide.

One day in the year 1821, a ship under the command of a distinguished man with a Moorish look and a crew of fourteen men arrived at the island and stayed. Later on, it was known that the captain had brought his wife with him. Only a few had seen her because she did not leave the ship until her new house was ready to receive her. The captain said his name was “Breton” and he also said he was half Spanish and half French admitting to speaking both languages. He sometimes went away with his men leaving the wife alone in the house. She would not go out unless he was back at home. On one of his trips he brought her a clavichord. The beautiful, young wife played that instrument very gracefully but only for the husband and in the house.

Most people did not even know what she looked like because they had not seen her and nobody would ask about this. Captain Breton appeared to be an expert with the sword and had a reputation to be very good with firearms. In other words, in that small and isolated community of Cayo Cristo the main character of this story was like royalty in asylum. He acted very different from the other people and looked especially distinguished in comparison to the rest of the men that came with him. Nevertheless, he understood his people. He got along with everybody and was highly respected by the entire population.

The years went by and Breton’s daughter Maria (the only child they had) was growing up, but that lifestyle of trading free of taxes was sometimes difficult. The Captain’s trips started becoming longer. It was a mystery about how and where he got the money to keep their luxurious lifestyle.

One day, and this will help us understand another aspect of his personality, a ship with American registry broke down near Cayo Cristo. While the ship was being repaired, the second-in-command came to town and after having a few drinks he lost control of himself and got into a fight. The fight was broken up but after a while, armed with a pistol, he went house to house looking for his aggressors until he reached Captain Breton’s house. Breton surprised everybody by talking to the drunk in perfect English (it was not known that he spoke this language) and he chased the man out with a pistol. The drunk was chased all the way to his longboat that took him to his ship.

The talk of the town (like any small town that didn’t have much excitement) was the cloistered life that Breton’s wife lived during his trips away. Her beauty, her refined manners and her ability with the clavichord (which other women were not familiar with in that town) had the town very intrigued. Some details about the life of the Bretons were known. Their domestic employees, with the exception of a black one named Yambi, would make comments about how the family lived. Yambi was Breton’s faithful employee and never made any comments. It was known that the Bretons usually spoke French in the house, although they spoke Spanish with the townspeople and servants. In some cases, when they didn’t want anyone to understand, they would speak English among themselves. The captain would speak to Yambi in English, most likely to keep the other workers out of their conversation.

A group of people who came to the island were very curious about the Bretons and decided to pay a visit and meet the Captain. Among the group was a priest who spoke French and had a great time talking to Captain Breton and his wife. The luxurious dinner service and silver and gold dinnerware had an aristocratic style that left everyone amazed. But none of the visitors were able to arrive at any conclusion about the Bretons’ origins. Nobody had a clear idea of who they really were or where they came from or if they were not what they pretended to be.
The daughter was growing up surrounded by the mysterious origin of her parents which without any doubt seemed to be very different from the rest of the inhabitants of the island. There were rumors saying that he was an exiled nobleman, maybe a retired corsair or a pirate chief who lived in this tranquil refuge to enjoy his wealth. They said the trips were only an excuse, that his real wealth was kept in treasure chests and that he had many of them buried in special places for the future.

Concerning the beautiful and refined Mrs. Breton, people said that there was no question she came from a wealthy and noble family that gave her a very special education. This was very obvious. Like him, she spoke several languages and played that clavichord in the peaceful nights of Cayo Cristo and it sounded like heavenly music. Her beauty, her clavichord and her special personality had Captain Breton (or whatever his real name was) completely enchanted.

In time, the legend of The Man From Cayo Cristo would take the most diverse shapes. There were rumors about him in the neighboring towns of Isabela and Sagua La Grande. People said that the daughter looked more and more like her mother as she grew up. They also talked about her mother, in the absence of proper schooling in this remote place, had taken on the education of her daughter. In that house of Breton, full of refinement, a flower was flourishing, but she was also affected by melancholy. There were many things she did not know and she didn’t dare to ask.... Her intuition told her that she shouldn’t ask about all those things that were part of the mystery surrounding their life, especially anything relating to a subject always kept in secret: her parents’ past. The girl who was becoming older observed that there was a room in the house that was always closed and that was locked at all times when her father left on those mysterious ocean trips.

One day, she couldn’t wait anymore and asked her mother what was in that room and why was it always locked?

- “Sweetheart,” the mother said, “In that room is a treasure chest with documents and important papers of your father and he wants it locked.”
- “But my father... he has secrets?”
- “Oh...all men have them, and the woman who wants to know them has to be discrete.”
- “Mother, there are many things I wish to know about my father, about you and about myself. Where are you both from?”
- “You will know everything in time. You’ll learn everything and that day you will understand many things and you will be proud of who you are, but that time has not come yet. You still have to wait.”

Little Maria remained quiet but full of curiosity. Everything she had overheard in town came to her mind such as comments with double-meanings and envious phrases. She started analyzing the strange life of her mother. She lived only for her father and even though he seemed to adore her, she was like a prisoner-queen.

And what about that treasure chest? What did it have inside? Did it only have papers? Was it full of gold coins? Maybe he was the chief of a group of pirates that robbed, looted and killed and this was his normal way of making a living? Maybe her mother was his captive...but a love captive...and this is why she hid from the world? She couldn’t hold it in anymore and on the secluded beach where she was analyzing all this, she broke into tears. Then all of a sudden, the sound of that conch that they used as a horn brought her back from her daydreaming. It was the sound of her father’s boat. She got up and went towards them... She noticed that her father was not with them. This surprised her because he was usually leading them. The faces of these men that were less trustworthy as she grew up had very weird expressions. They looked very serious and sad; she had never seen them like this before. They were walking towards her house without mentioning her father. Where was he? She realized
something serious had happened....She followed them convinced that she would find out as soon as he got home. So to her house they all went and there explained to her mother what had happened. The Captain had died; they said from a fever that killed him in just a few days. Soon the news traveled through the island: Captain Breton had died on the faraway coast of Yucatan. Since it was so far away, they couldn't bring his body back. He was given a Christian burial in a town not far from where he died. These tough men acted like children; they didn't know what to do. The widow – who only lived for him – appeared paralyzed. She wandered around, silently, hardly eating...she never played the clavichord again.

Everything that belonged to Breton died with him. Everything that surrounded his life disappeared as mysteriously as he did. His men left and never came back. Later on there were rumors that the widow gave them the ship and they, without a leader, preferred to go somewhere else. One evening, around dusk, they left Cayo Cristo and disappeared. They never came back nor did any other ship related to that mysterious man that had become a legend. The widow, Breton's beautiful and young wife started aging like a rose past its prime. She aged quickly, got sick and soon after died.

Maria, who was already eighteen and who was still with two of the former servants and the faithful Yambi (who professed the daughter the same loyalty he gave her father) had no more reason to live in Cayo Cristo. She moved to Sagua La Grande, where she became known as Maria Rodriguez. Before departing, she gave away many things and sold others. The talk about all the wealth of the family again ran through the little town.

The townspeople were disappointed when she moved out. They were expecting to see big treasure chests full of gold and silver but this didn't happen. Maria, wisely advised by Yambi, had taken her precautions. Yambi had a small fishing boat and one night took that treasure chest that had intrigued Maria so much when she was a child. He took it to the house that Maria had bought in Sagua La Grande not long after her mother had died and she decided to leave Cayo Cristo. After Maria left Cayo Cristo, the last vestige of Captain Breton disappeared. The only thing left was the legend that is still around about that pirate and his beautiful captive lover, a captive for love.

Many years went by and what happened with this story is the same as what happens with wine....it got better as it aged. Maria married a man with the last name of Alonso, she had a family and they were happy. She grew old and finally felt that pride about her origin that her mother spoke about. Indeed, she understood everything now and also justified her mother's existence. She finally knew that her mother was not a prisoner but a lucky lover who escaped with the man she loved and got to share with him a paradise of happiness. Finally Maria was happy and as the years passed she saw the story from another perspective. Far from trying to hide it, she liked to talk about it and to remember those early years.

One day, my grandmother was talking to Maria. At that time she was known as Mariquita because she was already seventy-three years old. Her daughter, Alicia had married my grandmother's brother, Juan Antonio Someillan. (Editor's note: According to the Gaceta de Colombia and the Gaceta de Cartagena, after Jean Lafitte died, the third-in-command of his ship, Francisco Someillan, captained the ship back to Cartagena. This is a rare French surname and these Someillans may be related). In between conversations, they spoke about Cayo Cristo and its old inhabitants.

Dona Mariquita, who developed a sense of humor with age, told my grandmother: “The truth is that those of us who were born on the island are descendants of buccaneers, pirates and smugglers, but who cares? Next to so many thieves, elegantly dressed and even with big titles like the doctors you see nowadays, our pirates had what these others lack: personality and
courage! Besides, there is nothing more romantic than being kidnapped by the pirate who is also the man you love. In other words, I would say that seeing the way they were and how they risked their lives every day, not only am I not ashamed of who I am but I am also proud of my origin."

“But your father was Captain Breton, wasn’t he?” my grandmother asked.

“Yes and no,” Dona Mariquita replied. “He was known in the key by that name and also by the name of Rodriguez, which is the name I have now, but that wasn’t his real name. I only knew this years later, after he had died.”

Bringing back past memories, she continued: “My mother told me everything one day... poor woman, she didn’t live long after that; she could not endure the separation any longer. She followed him soon after he died.”

Without being able to cover her emotions any longer she continued. “My mother belonged to one of the most distinguished families of Louisiana and they lived on a plantation north of New Orleans, which was one of the places my father visited frequently. She was educated at Ursulines in New Orleans, the school for young ladies of the high class... being prepared for a great marriage, but she fell in love with a man that was not exactly what her family wanted for her. She fell in love with him and he fell in love with her. This was a secret love because he, who was a gentleman, never wanted anything from his bad reputation affecting her. She thought that is why my mother said that ‘he doesn’t deserve her’. This is why it was always a secret because he knew that one day he would have to leave and he didn’t want to be known that she had been the pirate’s girlfriend, especially when people spread rumors that she had been his lover. He knew the games of society and he knew they feared and respected him, but they were also capable of betraying him.”

After a few seconds and remembering many things she had not examined in a long time she said: “This is why the night he came to say goodbye, after he explained why he was leaving (Louisiana), she didn’t think twice about leaving with him. He didn’t want to take her, but she asked and begged him, she told him that the day he was not next to her, that would be her death, as it happened later on. This is why, due to the extreme secrecy of this love that was not suspected by anyone, people thought he had kidnapped the most beautiful flower of New Orleans. Nobody knew the truth, that it was she who asked him to take her with him. They vanished from Louisiana and nobody there ever heard from them anymore.”

Moments later, my grandmother, who was very interested in this story asked her, “And when did this all happen?” "In 1821." Mariquita then started at the beginning of the whole story: “My father arrived in New Orleans the year the United States purchased Louisiana and soon became a respectable citizen in this locale. My mother told me he was friends with the most important men and she mentioned some of them like Morel and Grymes who were lawyers. Mr. Sauvinet helped him with money and Latour, who I met years later, was a lieutenant who came to visit him at Cayo Cristo from Isabela along with many others. Well, the war came and my father offered his support (more than 1,000 men and some naval ships) and thanks to his help New Orleans didn’t fall into British hands. After the victory, my father realized that even after everything he had done, he was not accepted by most. Things were changing, the Spanish and French style of living was disappearing. There were many new faces, he realized that he didn’t belong here in this new society and decided to leave those places in which he had lived all those years – Grande Terre, Barataria, Caminada, New Orleans and he left, vanishing from Louisiana. In part, also because his establishment had been destroyed, his wealth greatly depleted, he was marked with a reputation of being a pirate, a vulgar and bloody pirate, he who was a corsair, who had his privateer’s license given to him by the Port of Cartagena, in the republic of Colombia.” At this point, Dona Mariquita opened the treasure chest that had belonged to her father, took out an old Letter of Marque and showed it to my grandmother as
she continued. “This one was from Colombia, but he had another one from Mexico. It was strange... that even though he was French, he never tried to get one from France. Maybe because he was Bonapartist or because of the distance, I don’t know it and then Dona Mariquita grabbed a miniature and a drawing of a ship and showed it to my grandmother.... “This is a miniature of Napoleon that my father appreciated a lot; Jean Baptiste Sel who had painted it, gave it to him. Jean Baptiste’s daughter was married with an uncle of mine (who I never met) but he was one of many names that my mother used to talk about.

Continuing with her story, she told my grandmother, “Yes, my father was a Bonapartist. He and a group of people were preparing an expedition to rescue Napoleon from Santa Elena, but it didn’t happen because Napoleon died. They were going to use this ship – and she showed my grandmother the drawing of the ship she had placed on the table next to Napoleon’s miniature – it was called LA SERAFINA and the group of patriots was large. My mother said that there were many names of very well known people from New Orleans such as Girod, General Lallemand, Bossiere, and of course, that one other person my father called Uncle Dominique. He came to visit us one time at Cayo Cristo. I remember him very well, a small chubby man, very lively and talkative.” “That Bossiere,” my grandmother interrupted, “was he a French sailor?” “Yes, he was French and I think he was the owner of the ship they were going to use to rescue Napoleon. Yes, he was Saint Ange Bossiere” my grandmother clarified, I know him, he was married to my grandmother whose family was from New Orleans. She lived there back then, he was her first husband, leaving her a widow after his tragic end. “Most likely is the same person,” Dona Mariquita said, “My mother used to say that he was known for his bad temper, there were some stories that proved that. Well, going back, my father left Louisiana in 1817, taking his men with him, that big group that had its base of operations in Barataria. He had to leave; after all he had done for the population from whom he didn’t even get a wooden medallion, as my mother used to say.”

Taking pause in that long story, Dona Mariquita went back to put the treasures in her father’s chest, continuing later with her conversation: “He left Louisiana and after looking a lot, he decided to establish himself in a similar place to the one he had left, and he did so on the coast of Texas, on an island he named Campeche. He didn’t last long there either; four years later he had to abandon the place and he burned his house destroying everything he had there. This time, disappointed about life, my father left with the woman he had always loved, to that remote and isolated place where I was born: Cayo Cristo.”

She continued explaining to my grandmother how her father had disappeared from the world he had lived in. His men spread out throughout the Gulf, each one taking his own way and father after reuniting with my mother came in the only ship he wanted to keep, VICTORIA. He used to say that this name was an irony. They came to Cayo Cristo, to that secluded place where nobody knew him. That was my father; this is his story, that’s how Jean Laffite was. He was a pirate, yes, but he was also loyal to a country that never understood him and to which its destiny could have been very different if it was not for the help of my father in such a decisive moment. I could also add that he was a good friend, a good husband and a good father. Life takes you to paths that sometimes you don’t know where they are going to end, and he ended up being the last pirate of those times, when men were real men.”

And at the end of her long conversation with Dona Mariquita, my grandmother asked a few more questions to clarify some items about the main character of this story, to which Dona Mariquita replied: “Indeed my father was a ladies man – like any other man – but not because he chased them. The women, and he had several, fell in love with him. He was a widower from a previous marriage – but he never spoke of this – My mother told me that a daughter from that marriage was with him when he had to leave Campeche in 1821.
(Editor’s note: Jeannette?) He left her with friends of the family and some years later, after he was living in Cayo Cristo he went to her wedding. It seems that she married very well. I never heard anything about her again. I do remember that my father had said that he finally had a daughter by the name of Maria, which was his mother’s name, but he never spoke about her either. I was named Maria after my mother.”

“Maria?”, asked my grandmother.

“Marie, in French, and then she revealed something else….Marie Dubois was my mother’s name” (Editor’s note: we checked with Ursulines Academy in New Orleans for a Marie Dubois who would have attended between the years 1800-1815 and there were no Marie Dubois’ listed in their records; however they added that there were a number of Maries with no last name recorded that could be this person. Records from this era are scant and not very legible).

After these words, Dona Mariquita looked tired after this conversation that had made her look in her distant memories to recall names, dates and anecdotes and she then stayed quiet for a while.

Dona Mariquita came back to the subject and told my grandmother:

“My father’s men, even though they had the typical rough appearance of sailors, were not bad people. I remember them, I was a bit afraid of them and, just in case you are interested, I have this notebook where my father wrote their names. Taking the notebook, she gave it to my grandmother who read “Antonio Angelo, Pedro Fernandez, Juan Juanillo, Jose Recio, Manuel Lopez, Mateo Zambrana, Pedro Liguet, Diego Salgado.”

My grandmother stopped reading because at that point Dona Mariquita went to the living room and called her. “Here I keep my most precious memory from those times which is that part of the story I just told you, and pointing to one corner of the living room she showed me a piece of furniture kept there like a relic. “My mother’s clavichord, here it is, this was the true treasure of the pirate, which to me is more valuable than all the gold in the world.” Sitting down at the instrument, her fingers moved over the keys.

Conclusion:

This little known version about the final days in the life of the gentleman of the seas, Jean Lafitte – buccaneer, pirate, patriot, and adventurer – and of his life on Cayo Cristo, was almost kept a secret by the townspeople of my village, Sagua La Grande. This story came to me from my grandmother’s side of the family. My great grandmother Felicite de Lamarlere-Galuchat was married in her first marriage to the famous French sailor Saint Ange Bossiere. After his death, she married Jean Baptiste Someillan, whose grandson – my grandmother’s brother – later on married Alicia Alonso, Dona Mariquita’s daughter and Jean Lafitte’s granddaughter. Through my grandmother who knew Dona Mariquita and who told her many years ago, in 1895 – when the latter was seventy-three and my grandmother was thirty-four – is how I know the story. (Editor’s note: this means Lafitte’s daughter was born in 1821-22). This is how I learned the story related to Cayo Cristo and this man who was probably the last of the romantic era of buccaneers, an era that is history.

Lastly, this story is not intended to be an historical document because it is influenced by the emotions of the orally transmitted legends. These types of stories are above history itself and are part of the patrimony of the places and they live in the cultural traditions even after factual history has been forgotten.

And this is how the story ends, this is how the man – with a unique personality, who had all the virtues and defects of his time – enters history as a legend, going – from the lively New Orleans to the secluded Grande Terre, then to Campeche… From there to the remote Cayo Cristo. From this place, he enters history surrounded by the magic of his legend, always surrounded by that group of strong sailors with strong voices that sang the song of the pirates of Barataria.
And I end this story about the man who lived in Cayo Cristo for a while and who originated that legend that was around in my grandmother’s time. I want to end this story with the last verses of Lord Byron’s poem that expresses – with the singular musicality characteristic of this poet – what this mysterious man – our character – left through his life; these words sound like they were written for him:

“He left a corsair’s name
To other times,
linked with one virtue and
A thousand crimes”

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**TIMELINE OF JEAN LAFFITE SIGHTINGS**

April 1820: A French real estate development near Cauno and Salado, near present day Cienfuegos, Cuba sold a ranch to a Jean Laffitte. Many French people settled here.

January 1822: It was reported that Jean Laffite’s ship was destroyed by an English brig. Laffite swam to shore near Santa Cruz del Sur, Cuba, and was captured and jailed in Puerto Principe (modern day Camaguey) for several weeks. He faked a severe illness that allowed him to be hospitalized in a low-security hospital in San Juan del Dios and escaped on the night of February 13, 1822.

March 19, 1822: The governor of Puerto Principe reports that “the pirate Jean Laffite is in a small two-master with 30 men in the anchorage of Rincon Grande, 1 league from Vario adjacent to Boca Carabela.” (Editor’s note: this is near the subject area where Laffite supposedly had a wife...one translation of the Spanish “Rincon Grande” means “large hideout”....)

April 11, 1822: Laffite was reportedly with a group of four pirate vessels including the Colombian privateering schooner CIENEGO near Xibara, on the north coast of Cuba (reported by the Louisiana Gazette of June 18, 1822). This group of 180-200 pirates was being pursued by the U.S. Navy vessel ALLIGATOR for plundering an American sloop named JAY off Xibara and a Scottish brig (whose entire crew were murdered off St. Domingue). ALLIGATOR captured CIENEGO off Nuevitas, Cuba after the crew had mutinied. The pirates were selling the plundered goods in Xibara and in Holguin for “One doubloon per horseload” under the protection of the Governor of Holguin and the commandant of the fort at Xibara. Some of the stolen goods were seen in the house of the Commandant of the fort and this angered the American Navy men. The Navy vessels caught up with the four pirate vessels but the pirates escaped by sailing shallow draft boats over the shallow reefs where the Navy vessels could not venture because of their deep draft. ALLIGATOR departed the area on May 18, 1822 as the pirates had vanished.

May 18, 1822: The armed Colombian schooner GENERAL SANTANDER departed Santiago de Cuba bound for Curacao and Cartagena. It is believed that JL was on board this voyage.
August 19, 1822 the GENERAL SANTANDER received her privateering commission and Letters of Marque from the Colombian government while she was in Cartagena (according to the Colombian Secretary of War and Marine Affairs records housed in the National Archives).

September 4, 1822 the National Gazette of Philadelphia reported that “…the famous Laffite acquired command of a 40 ton ship (the GENERAL SANTANDER) in Cartagena and was making preparations to embark on a privateering voyage”.

November 26, 1822: Laffite encountered the schooner COLUMBUS ROSS (sailing from Jamaica to New Orleans) 60 miles west of Grand Cayman while captaining the GENERAL SANTANDER. He told the captain he left Cartagena around August 21 and he captured two Spanish vessels that were sent back to Cartagena for adjudication.

March 19, 1823: GACETA de CARTAGENA reports that JL died in a naval battle in the service of Simon Bolivar off the coast of Omoa, Honduras on February 4, 1823. Franco Simeillan assumed control of the GENERAL SANTANDER after Laffite died and he is recorded as returning to Cartagena on March 10, 1823 with captured goods consigned to Mr Martin. The Simeillan/Rasco family of Cuba claims descent from Jean Laffite and Marie Dubois.

One more note: there was a marriage recorded in the Nuestra Senora de la Asuncion church of Baracoa (Book 4, Folio 50), Cuba in March 5, 1853 and the groom Lorenzo Gustavo Laffitte (born 1835) declared that his parents were Bartolome Laffitte Mane and Zella Degas and that the paternal grandparents were Juan Laffitte (our Jean Laffite) and Juana Maria Mane. Could this be the “Marie Dubois” from Louisiana? The descendants are living in Florida and the north coast of Cuba and some claim to be descendants of Jean Laffite.

Gary Fretz, Licensed and Bonded Yacht and Ship Broker
Clavicord

Drawing of Captain Breton

Cayo Cristo - 1922