The Enterprize Midshipman’s Letters

Pam Keyes

About a year ago through the mail from an antiques seller in Spartanburg, S.C., I obtained a collection of three very old “stampless” cover letters, all written by the same young US naval officer, Cyrus A. Branch. This article tells his story.

The small brig lay becalmed with slack sails in a sea of wax off the Florida Keys. Just finished with his watch for the day, a young officer took out his writing desk, smoothed a sheet of paper and began to write to his brother back home so far away in Virginia:

“U.S. Brig Enterprize At Sea
March 6th 1820
Since my last from New Orleans we have been to the town of Galvestown, in the possession of General Laffite...”

The author of this historic, recently discovered letter, was the real-life midshipman made famous in the United States Magazine and Democratic Review July 1839 story, “The Cruise of the Enterprise, a Day with LaFitte.” His name was Cyrus Branch.

In the tale of the visit by the Enterprize crew to Galveston, it is said that a brunette quadroon woman was “flirting dreadfully with our Mid, so far as dividing oranges into quarters and drinking silent healths could go” until Laffite darted her such a concentrated sharp look that it scared her away from the diners.

Continuing with the letter,

“(General Laffite) who was released from prison in New Orleans, on, or about the 8th of January 1815 where he was confined under a charge of Piracy. But on condition of his being released he bound himself and crew to serve under General Jackson, during the attack of the British forces. You no doubt recollect of his having fought Bravely on the 8th_

After the ratification of the treaty with Great Britain, General Laffite established himself at Galvestown (an old Spanish settlement) and under the Venezulan (sic) flag carried on a war against the King of Spain.

From Galvestown, Laffite cruisers fitted out and not being able to take a sufficient plunder from the Spaniards, commenced their depredations (sic) on all Neutral flags. It was intended that the squadron fitted out under Capt. Henly against the Amelia Islands should have acted against Galvestown also, but this part of the expedition was laid aside from what cause I know not.

Lately the depredations (sic) on our coast by pirates under commission from this place, has been so frequent, that our government came to a determination of rooting them from their hold. To effect which Comm. Patterson has been authorized to offer such terms as would best be likely to rid us of such Neighbours. Laffite did agree to raise the fortification from the village and evacuate the port, on condition that a free passport be granted for himself and effects which being agreed to, he fired the Buildings before our arrival with his passport and intends the destruction of the fortification as soon as he is
ready to Leave the place which will be in all this month. He intends joining Com Aury at the Providence Islands. Com. Aury has sorten sail and is said to intend an attack against Port Amoa on the main.

We are now on our passage for Kingston, Jamaica, for the purpose of taking specie to Charleston and New Orleans, after which we expect to return to New York, I suppose about June next. On our arrival in New York I shall leave the Enterprize and endeavor to get orders for the yard, for the purpose of benefitting (sic) me by study. There is a school established on board the Washington for studying mathematicks, (sic) which I shall attend, and when the board convened in the fall, shall present myself for examination.

Give my Love to all the family and believe me your Brother, Cyrus I shall write my sister the first port I arrive at.

This letter was addressed on the stampless cover to Christopher Branch, Esquire, Manchester Virginia, and bears a “Ship 20” postmark.

The Branch Enterprize letter is important as it confirms the date at which Jean Laffite was preparing to leave Galveston, plus it attests to a previously unknown fact, that Lt. Lawrence Kearny, captain of the Enterprize, brought Laffite the passport from Patterson. Interestingly, the Branch letter also adds further insight to Laffite’s stated plan to join Aury at Old Providence. Although Cyrus makes no mention of the dinner given by Laffite to the Enterprize officers, it is obvious he was with Laffite at the same time Kearny spoke with him.

One curious aspect of the letter is the Enterprize’s mission immediately after leaving Galveston. Some unknown party loaded the small, 84-foot ship’s hold with specie at Kingston, Jamaica, to deliver to Charleston, S.C. and New Orleans. This most likely was a hidden Masonic agenda, as that was their business financial network. Kingston controlled Masonic activities at Charleston, which controlled New Orleans Masons. The specie likely was to be used to further the political and banking interests of Masons.

Alas, poor Cyrus apparently failed his coursework for advancement, or else his plan to study did not materialize because he was away at sea: US naval records show he attained only the rank of a midshipman before his death in a duel in May 1821 at Havana. No detailed information about the duel has been located.

In researching Cyrus Branch, a birth date was not found, but he was the illegitimate son of Daniel Bernard and an unnamed Branch woman. Cyrus and his brother Christopher were raised by Mary Fleming Branch of Manchester, Va., just across the river from Richmond. He was the great-nephew of Mary’s brother, William Fleming, a prominent Continental Congressman and judge who likely got Cyrus his appointment to the US Navy in 1814.

Very little is known about Cyrus Branch other than the intelligent, observant tone of his letters. He must have received schooling as his penmanship, grammar and spelling are all remarkably good for a young man of the early 1800s. A short history of Branch can be pieced together from the two other letters written about other US naval vessels earlier in his maritime career:

The first letter was sent to William Fleming at Summerville, Va., and is dated April 27, 1815:

“Dear Uncle,

I this day received my orders to join the sloop of war, Torch, commanded by Capt. Chauncy. She is a very handsome vessel for her size, and sails very fast. I could wish to be on board of a larger vessel, but must be content with my present
situation, for a while. The fleet is near by ready for sea, and a part of them will go down to the hook tomorrow; I shall go on board in the morning as my vessel is one, that is to drop down.

My situation will not be one of the most pleasant nature at first, as I am not acquainted with any of the officers by whom she is commanded; yet I flatter myself that by my good conduct and willing exertions to do my duty, that I shall gain the confidence of my superiors and by so doing pass my time ease and contentment.

There has arrived this morning a vessel from France freighted with news of the most astonishing & unexpected nature: Bonaparte is again master of France, and Louis the 18 is again a resident in England. Such news would not be credited by me, was it not for the undoubted proof that I have before my eyes. This vessel (the Sine-qua-none) is 25 days from Rochelle (Capt. Pond) he brings Bonaparte’s official proclamation to the good people of Paris, as he styles them. Bonaparte landed at Frejus and marched to and took possession of Paris without loosing a drop of blood. I must refer you for further particulars to the public Print and offer you my most affectionate farewell until times may bring me back. I hope with honor to myself and satisfaction to those that feel a wish for my welfare.

Your most affectionate and truly revering nephew,
Cyrus Branch

As a postscript, he wrote:

“My Dear Mother
You will see from what I have said to my uncle what my situation in the fleet is and whether it will be changed after I get up the straits. I can not tell. When you have an opportunity, you may let Mrs. Heth know that I parted with Jack this evening, he well and is thought very much of by his officers. Give my love to my brother and sister and I shall write to them tomorrow if I have time for I have little or none to devote to any but my public duty, it being now past ten.

Give my love to all the family tell cousin Caroline I will bring her a present from the Mediterranean and take to heart my unfeigned and most affectionate love, believe me your dutiful son,
Cyrus Branch”

The Torch was a small schooner active mostly in the Mediterranean from 1814-1816. About a year later, Branch had changed ships to the much larger US Frigate Macedonian (161 feet long) and had gone on an adventure to Carthage. The following letter was written to Mrs. Mary F. Branch:

“US Frigate Macedonian
Annapolis Roads July 18th, 1816

You are no doubt apprised of our arrival at this Place, before this; and also of the success of Mr. Hughes’ mission to Carthage. We were thirty two days from Boston to St. Martha at which Place we first came to an anchor, for the purpose of obtaining the Best information possible of the number of prisoners in the Spanish possessions, and where confined. One making applications to the governor, we were informed that there were a few prisoners in that Place, but that he would not be justified in delivering them without an order from the commander of the forces at Carthage. This being a plausible reason, we got underway and proceeded to
the said Place where we arrived on the 7 of June. Mr. Hughes sent his letters on shore to inform the general of his mission, and the demands of the american government. His communication was well received, and he invited on shore, for the arrangement of the release of the Prisoners. After a few days negotiation it was agreed that the Prisoners should be given up. But the then commanding officer (general Montalbo) refused to negotiate as respected the property seized alleging that he had not received any instructions on that from the commander in chief (general Morillo) who was at distance of seven or 8 hundred miles on an expedition against the patriots. Finding that no satisfaction could be obtained on that point, we got underweigh and returned to St. Martha where we obtained the remainder of the Prisoners. We remained in St. Martha a few days and on the 19th of June go underweigh and shaped our course for the united states. We were Blessed with the finest weather I ever experienced, a thing that is not common in those latitudes. Uncle Fleming I suppose is in Kentucky at present, and you must have heard from him since his leaving Summerville. Therefore when you answer this let me know how he was when you last heard from him, and when he expects to return to Virginia. Tell my sister that she must not wait for me to write, but that she must give me the news of neighbourhoods as soon as possible.

Capt. Worthington expects to go to Washington in a few days and on his return we shall know what will be done with this ship. It is surmised that she will either go to Washington or Norfolk for repairs. If she should be go to either of those Places I think it possible that I may obtain leave to visit Old Summerville once more.

Give my most affectionate love to my Sister and Brother and tell them they must not stand up on Punchbo. Likewise to cousin's Caroline, Eliza, Mary, Graham, Robert and John, and tell them that I shall expect to hear from them all shortly.

Give my love also to our good old aunt Nelly Howel and tell her that I hope to see her yet in a few months. Remember me also to all the rest of the servants. Give my best respects to the families of Salisbury and the coalmine also to Doctor Wooldridge and lady and don’t forget to remember me particularly to my friend Thomas Bolling and tell him I was much disappointed in his not writing me while I was in Boston. My love would appear nearly exhausted, but there still remains much for my dear mother who I hope will still believe me. Her most affectionate son, Cyrus A. Branch

P.S. My health is much mended since I wrote my Brother and I hope when I write again that I shall be perfectly well."

These three letters are all that remains to tell the story of Cyrus Branch, the Enterprise midshipman who visited Galveston. A genealogical search for his family turned up no wife or children, but his brother Christopher has many descendants. Interestingly, Cyrus and his brother were related to Thomas Jefferson through their Bolling kin. The Branches also were direct descendants of Pocahontas.
Founding Laffite Society President Honored

R. Dale Olson Received the Distinguished Alumnus Award

Former President of The Laffite Society, R. Dale Olson, has received the Distinguished Alumnus Award from his alma mater, The University of North Texas, and will be honored at an Awards Dinner in Denton, Texas on Friday, 20 April 2007.

The Distinguished Alumnus Award is the most prestigious conferred by the University. Of approximately 250,000 former students, only 160 have received this honor. Previous recipients include, International concert pianist, Ivan Davis, football player, “Mean” Joe Green, former Miss America, Phyllis George, golfer, Don January, former Press Secretary to President Lyndon Johnson, Bill Moyers, author, Larry McMurtry, jazz trumpeter, Marvin Stamm, and television personality, Phil McGraw (“Dr. Phil”).

Olson is noted for his successes in the fields of professional music performance, brass musical instrument research and design, real estate investment, and his activities related to the history of Texas and the Gulf Coast.

Congratulations Dale! We are proud of you.

But just to keep you humble, don’t forget that behind every good man there is a good woman.