Did Jean Laffite Marry Christina Levine?

Reginald Wilson, M.D.

It is only in Laffite’s Journal, the three copy books and the Resume de Leurs Vies report that tell of the marriage of Jean Laffite to Christina Levine (Lavine, Lavigne, Lavein, Lawein). These same sources state that this couple had three children: Jean Antoine born on January 4, 1801 in Port-au-Prince, Lucien Adrian, born May 7, 1802 in Port-au-Prince, and Denise Jeannette, born August 2, 1804 aboard ship off Grande Terre. Christina died following the birth of Denise. No birth, baptismal, marriage, or death records have been found for any of this family. Denise married Francis Little. From other sources it is known that this couple had 5 children: Eugene, Jesse, Francis, Eunice, and Lois Ann.

It is odd that the small copy book reverses the birth of the two boys, showing that Lucien was born first on January 4 and then Jean Antoine was born on May 7. The Journal and copy books are all in the same handwriting - that of Antoine. How did this mix up happen? Could it have been that since both boys were born close together they later did not know which one was born first? Christina died when they were ages 2 and 3. Could it have been that later the foster parents did not have this information? Their father had little or nothing to do with them until they were older teenagers. Christina’s death was most likely due to post partum hemorrhage.

It is also odd that Jean would take his two young sons and his 9 month pregnant wife aboard ship for a sea voyage. There are only two seaports that a ship from the Caribbean would likely be going to in the United States: Mobile or New Orleans. How did this ship find itself 90 miles West of New Orleans off of Grand Terre, a bare island? The only habitation in that area would have been a few families on Grand Isle. The 1810 census officially enumerated 63 residents in 10 households with 15 of these residents being “free persons of color”. The households were: Darbonne, Pison, Charles, Humphreys, Sanders, Dugat, Coulon, Odonby, Emperpr, and Herico. Three not listed, probably because of their “occupation” were: Rigaud, Chighizola, and Egle. The reason for this ship being located off of Grand Terre remained a puzzle until Marshall’s translation of the journal was published in 1999. Here it was found that the 1958 translation had omitted one whole sentence that read: “My daughter Denise Jeanette was born on August 2, 1804, on board the vessel of my brother. This brother could not have been Pierre because in 1804 he did not own a boat. It had to be Dominque You (Alexander Frederic Laffite). In all probability he had a load of captured goods and was on his way to Cat Island out from the mouth of Bayou Laforche. Cat Island was a low, sand bar type island 10 miles out in the Gulf. Ships from the Caribbean and Gulf would unload their captured goods here then small sail boats or luggers would pick up the loot, sail up Bayou Laforche to deliver the goods to Laffite’s warehouse at Donaldsonville.

Although there are no official records of a marriage of Jean to Christina, there is substantial evidence in the Journal making reference to it:

“I was married at the age of eighteen to Christina Levine who was born on the island of Saint Croix and was of Danish Jewish descent.........(Denise’s) husband, Francis Little, was a furniture manufacturer ..........my daughter and her husband live near St. Louis; they now have five children.......my two grandsons, Eugene and Francis..........my wife died giving birth to Denise Jeannette”. In the Journal, Christina is mentioned twice, Antoine eight times, Lucien six times, Denise nine times, Francis Little three times, and grandsons Eugene and Francis one time each. The three grandchildren not named were Jesse, Eunice, and Lois Ann. Some list the name Sylvester as a grandchild.

Part of the Laffite collection at Sam Houston Library, is a ledger and two smaller
"autograph" type books that contain poems and stories written by members of the Laffite family and their friends. Most of the poems were favorites of the writers. A few were original poems and most all are signed and dated. The dates range from 1801 to 1888. The Jean Laffite - Christina descendants have entered the following number of writings: Denise Jeannette 3; Eunice Little 2; Eugene Little 5; Lois Ann 5; Antoine 2 plus a family genealogy; F.R. Little 1; Francis Little Jr. 2. There are 8 entered by Jn Laffite in French and dated in the 1830s and 1840s. The handwriting is the same as the handwriting in Laffite's journal, therefore, these were written by his son, Antoine. It is known that Jean Laffite was killed in a gun battle in 1823.

In an effort to find facts that would help to prove this marriage, I decided to see if there was a Levine family on Saint Croix in the late 1700s other than John Levine that married Rachel Fawcett. There are only two towns on St. Croix, Christiansted, the largest, and Fredericksted, both with a public library. On January 4, 2006, a letter was written to the archivist of the library in Christiansted requesting the following information: "Was there a census made in 1780, 1790, or 1800? Was there a family Levine (Lavme, Lauwein) listed other than John Levine that married Rachel Fawcett? If so did they have a daughter, Christina?" A check was enclosed for $25.00. The letter was never answered nor was the check cashed. On March 6, 2006, a similar letter requesting the same information was sent to the archivist at the library in Fredericksted. A check was enclosed. Nothing was heard so on May 22, 2006, another letter to the Christiansted library requesting that if they did not have a census report for those years, I would appreciate the name and address of an office that had this information. Again nothing was heard nor was the check cashed.

Using the internet I found that on St. Thomas there was a University of the Virgin Islands. The same request was made to the archivist of the University Library. A check was enclosed. No results. I did note that there was a University Branch on St. Croix! For the fourth time I again made this information request. No answer. I noticed that at this library there was a collection of funeral programs that had started in 1992. Each program was 4 pages that included a two page obituary. There had not been a Levine death since 1992, which might indicate that there were no Levines on St. Croix. I estimate this list had 2,000 names. Did John A. Laffite (aka John Matejka) really know Lois Ann Little? In two separate letters to Audrey Lloyd he stated that he first met her when he was 9 years old and she was about 60 years old. In each letter he gave a brief description of her. He stated he saw her many times until she died in 1914. He also said that he had met 3 of Denise's children when he was about 8 years old. John A. was a known forger and a faburcator. However, John A. is the only known person to have had a connection to this family. If he was truthful about his relationship to Lois Ann, then this is proof that Jean Laffite did marry. To go one step further, Lois Ann in one of her poems called Jean Laffite her grandfather. In another poem she writes about Jean Laffite, his character, and his non-existing treasure. (Exhibit A) Another poem dated 1856 was for "my Uncle Antoine".

Did Denise Jeannette marry Francis Little? There are several passages that indicate that she did. In the Journal Jean Laffite said:

"My son-in-law, Francis Little"......"Her husband Francis Little was a furniture manufacturer"..........."He (Francis Little) had the rank of Captain on my vessels when he retired he became a manufacturer of furniture".

Francis' brother, John is also listed twice as one of Laffite's captains. A number of St. Louis' 1850s city directories carry the advertisement for the John Little - Francis Little manufacturer of furniture. In the 1857 City Directory an advertisement is found for Jesse Little as a cabinet maker, located at 71 North 3rd, residence, the City Hotel. Was this Jesse the son of Francis and Denise? The residences of Francis and his brother John are not found listed in the directory. The Journal states they lived near St. Louis, which would be outside the city limits. John A. Laffite Matejka stated in a letter to Audrey Lloyd that Denise lived with the George Allen family in Mobile and attended school there. At the age of 14 she was sent to live with the Dumay St. Martin family at Donaldsonville, Louisiana. Another source also states that Denise, as a
teenager, lived with the St. Martin family. The Résume de Leurs Vies report, states:

"Jean entrusts his daughter with Mrs. Beaubourg who entrusts her with some reliable friends, the Dumay family, who live in Donaldsonville".

The Jean Laffite - Christina Levine marriage has only questionable evidence that this union ever took place. This questionable evidence is found only in the Journal of Jean Lafitte, 3 copy books, Résume de Leurs Vies report, and John A. Laffite's (aka John Matejka) 32 letters to Audrey Lloyd in Midland, Texas. Even more questionable is information from the Lafitte family Bible. Did Jean and Pierre really go to St. Croix as part of their education and study under Nicholas Cruger? Years later did Antoine and Lucien leave France and go to St. Croix to visit relatives or just to see where their father spent some time as a youth? Did they even go to St. Croix?

The best evidence that Jean did marry, have 3 children and 5 grandchildren was the claim by John Matejka (aka John A. Laffite) that he actually knew Lois Ann Little. John stated this in two letters on file in the Sam Houston Library Box 1 file 53. According to the 1900 Douglas County, South Omaha City census John was born in 1893. Lois Ann was born 1840, therefore, John would have known her from about age 10 until age 21 when Lois Ann died in 1914 at the age of 74. How did John come to possess the Journal and the 3 copy books? Probably in some manner from Lois Ann, the only member of the Lafitte family that he knew. Numerous entries by family members in the copy books are good supporting evidence of Jean's marriage and descendants.

Now to the original question: Did Jean Laffite marry Christina Levine? There is strong evidence that Jean married, but there are only the unsupported statements that it was to Christina. It could just as easily have been to some other woman in Port au Prince. During the uprising in Haiti most of the records were destroyed. There might not have been a legal marriage, just a common-law union. For several reasons the writer of the Journal may not have wanted this person known to descendants, therefore, a fictitious name and location was used. Further research of the records at St. Croix may find a Christina Levine.

A five page unsigned time line typescript entitled "Jean and Pierre Lafitte, Résume of Their Lives" was found in the public library in New Orleans. This typescript was written in French and stated that in 1801: "Jean marries in Port au Prince, Christina Levine, daughter of a goldsmith-jeweler of New Orleans (she was 16 years old)". The Journal of Jean Laffite states: "I (Jean Lafitte) was married at the age of eighteen to Christina Lavine". This supports the impression that both were teenagers when they were married.

The first city directory published in New Orleans was in 1805. This directory has three Lavignes (French for Levine) listed:

Lavigne, Alexander 36 Faubourg Commune du Haut de la V
Lavigne, Denis 40 Faubourg Commune du Haut de la V
Lavigne, Honori 73 Rue St. Louis

This directory gives only names and addresses. The next New Orleans city directory published in 1811 gives the name, address, and occupation. Alexander and Denis are listed at the same addresses with Alexander's occupation as a baker. This eliminates these two being related to Christina. Therefore, it must be assumed that Honori is Christina's father. Honori is not listed in the 1811 directory. The 1805 directory also listed streets with the ethnic background of the individuals on each street. Honori's street Rue St. Louis, had a large number of whites, very few colored, and a few slaves. Rue St. Louis runs East and West, 2 blocks South of Jackson's Square. This would be in the business part of the French Quarter, a good location for a jewelry store.

During this period Haiti was very unstable. In 1791 Mulattos led slaves in a revolt against the French. There was upheaval, turmoil, death, destruction, disease, and an unstable government that continued in phases in one form or another until 1820. The former slave, Toussant l'Ouverture, seized the colony in 1801 and proclaimed himself Governor for life. The French were forced to flee. Jean, with his family, took the opportunity to leave Port au Prince with his brother on his boat even though Christina was near term pregnant. In 1806
internal quarrels cut Haiti into two countries. Christophe became a tyrannical Emperor.

Did Honori return to Port au Prince to be with his family following the death of their daughter, Christina? Did Honori return soon after 1805 to protect his family and property?

The final answer to the question, did Jean marry Christina, will not come until the marriage record is found. This should be in a Port au Prince church. Christina's birth and baptismal records may be in Port au Prince or they may be in France. Trying to find 200 year old documents in a war torn country, may be a problem.

Endnotes:


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 149. Other sources state that Sylvester was a son. Perhaps Sylvester was a first name with Eugene as a middle name and Eugene preferred to use his middle name.


5. There is another Cat Island east of the Mississippi Delta. This island has hills and permanent residences. Pirates used this island as a base at times.


8. John A. stated his full name was Eulethere Irenee Marie Jean Andrechyne Laffite, born June 4, 1893, at Childs Point, Sarpy County Nebr. This little community was apparently absorbed by the expansion of Omaha as it no longer exists. For more information on John A. see *The Laffite Chronicles* Vol. XI, No. 2 Oct. 2005.

9. A time line typescript in French written by an unknown author entitled “Jean and Pierre Laffite, Resume of Their Lives,” was found in the vertical file at the New Orleans Public Library, Louisiana Room, Main Branch. It was translated from the French to English by Society member Dorothy Karilanovic, April, 1997. There are no notes or endnotes documenting the sources. The manuscript was not dated, but the last pages loosely follow the *Journal of Jean Laffite*, therefore, it must have been written after the Journal was published in 1958.

10. Ibid.
Exhibit A  An enlarged page from the small copy book in the Laffite Collection, Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center, Liberty, Texas. This gives the marriage of Jean Laffite to Christina Lawein, their dates of birth, place of birth, date of marriage and their three children. The handwriting is the same as the handwriting of the Journal of Jean Laffite. Both were written by Antoine Laffite.

Note the damage from the WSPA Radio-TV station fire.