How a Monthly Magazine Spread the Laffite Legend

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A previously unknown excerpt published in the December 1815 issue of the monthly Analectic Magazine appears to be the origin of the Jean Laffite legend that still thrives today, nearly 200 years later.

The 19-page excerpt was the very first appearance in print of part of Arsene Lacarriere Latour’s Historical Memoir of the War in Louisiana. Most significantly, it was the first published report of Jean Laffite’s own account of what happened with the British visit to Barataria in September 1814, and his aid to the US by dispatching the British letters to Gov. Claiborne through Jean Blanque, along with the offer of his own help. The other portion of the excerpt was taken from the Jan. 8 battle account.

Time has shrouded the significance of the Analectic Magazine’s excerpt. Indeed, even the existence of this pre-publication excerpt was unknown to archivists and historians until this issue happened to appear at auction on eBay this summer.¹

Latour’s history did not see print until March of 1816 in Philadelphia, when it was published by John Conrad and Co., and sold by subscription for $5 each with an accompanying atlas of battle maps drawn by Latour. The two-volume set had disappointing sales even though the reviews were good. Latour barely broke even with his publication costs.²

Because Latour’s book sold poorly and was not widely read by the general public, the book version could not have been the source of the Laffite legend itself. But the Analectic Magazine pre-publication excerpt is a prime candidate for the wellspring of the legend, even to the preponderance of early Laffite stories always using the “Lafitte” spelling as seen in Latour’s work. (This has come down all the way in modern times to the Jean Lafitte National Historic Park spelling, which went with Latour’s spelling as authentic).

Although Latour and Jean Laffite were friends, and there is evidence that Jean proofread Latour’s original manuscript account of the Barataria portion to correct some aspects, the spelling of Jean’s last name was never corrected. Both Jean and Pierre Laffite always spelled their name “Laffite” in their signatures on documents and letters.

Published in Philadelphia by Moses Thomas, the Analectic Magazine was a highly popular literary and US Naval chronicle with a vast readership due to a far-ranging distribution network throughout the United States. The Analectic was distributed in New York City and Albany, N.Y.; Trenton, N.J.; New Haven and Hartford, Conn.; Boston and Salem, Mass.; Baltimore, Md.; Washington, D.C., and Georgetown; Alexandria, Richmond, Petersburg and Norfolk, Va.; Savannah, Ga., and last but not least, New Orleans.³ Thus when the magazine landed in readers’ hands from a week to one month later, Laffite’s account about the British offer and his rejection of it made the news in one gigantic media scoop.

The timing of the Latour excerpt couldn’t have been better. Jean Laffite was in Philadelphia with Latour as the magazine went to press, preparing to go to Washington to try to get a meeting with President Madison to address reimbursement for the raid against Barataria conducted by Commodore Patterson in the Fall of 1814. It is not known whether or not Laffite did set to confer with Madison, as there is no acknowledgement from Madison concerning Laffite’s letter to him, but it seems certain Madison and his presidential advisors were all aware of the Analectic excerpt, particularly since Latour claimed he had met at least twice with Secretary of State James Monroe to...
discuss his book. The article also could have boosted Laffite's prestige with Spanish minister Luis Onis, whom he met in Philadelphia in November 1815.

The Analectic excerpt may have made Jean Laffite a national patriotic hero, but Jean seems not to have taken notice of his increased celebrity. Acting under his new cloak of acting as a Spanish spy for Onis, Jean returned to New Orleans in mid March 1815, and left a couple of weeks later with his friend Latour for an expedition into the interior of Arkansas to spy on the Americans for Spain. By the time they returned to New Orleans in November, 1816, Jean stayed only for a few months before heading to Galveston aboard the Devorador in March 1817, to become once again a corsair operating on the fringes of the law.

If the Analectic excerpt from Latour's history is what made Laffite a folk hero, then Latour was the best publicity promoter Jean Laffite ever had. Those who may question just how influential the Analectic Magazine really was have only to look at another item published for the first time there in magazine form, in the November, 1814 issue: a poem titled “The Defense of Fort McHenry,” which of course became the lyrics of our national anthem, “The Star Spangled Banner.”

Endnotes:

1. The Analectic Magazine,


4. Smith, op.cit.


6. http://www.answers.com/topic/1809?cat=technology. In 1809 the Literary Gazette is first published and later becomes the Analectic Magazine under the editorship of Washington Irving until 1814. By 1817, the monthly had become a service magazine of the US Navy and later published mostly book reviews until it ceased publication in 1821.