Of Journals and Diaries

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Members of the Laffite Society are well aware of the arguments concerning the "Journal" of Jean Laffite and its one time owner and possible creator John A. Laflin (or Matejka, or Nafsinger, or Laffite, or Laffite, etc.). This article is not an argument for or against the journal's authenticity, but a comparison of the journal with another controversial Texas historical document.

The "Diary" of José Enrique de la Peña purports to be a first hand account of the Texas Revolution by an officer of Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna's army. Its original owner, Jesús Sanchez Garza, self published the document in 1955 in Mexico as La Rebelión de Texas - Manuscrito Inédito de 1836 por un Oficial de Santa Anna. There is no record of the diary prior to this. Carmen Perry translated and published it in 1975 as With Santa Anna in Texas: a Personal Narrative of the Revolution by José Enrique de la Peña, with Texas A&M University Press. Its publication in the United States generated much hoopla and media attention since it contained one paragraph detailing the execution of David Crockett following the battle of the Alamo. This became the "hook" and With Santa Anna is never mentioned without reference to this passage.

The "dairy" itself is an unbound stack of handwritten pages within a larger collection of de la Peña and related materials now in the Center for American History at the University of Texas at Austin.

The Laffite "journal" and de la Peña "diary" have a number of similarities. Both tell the story of legendary events and people in Texas history. Although called a journal and diary respectively, implying a first hand immediacy to their stories, neither is such. The Laffite document is in the form of a memoir supposedly written some time between the 1840s and '50s. The de la Peña document is obviously a researched work more resembling an historical novel. It is definitely not something written during the 1836 Texas campaign. True believers in the document began referring to it as a memoir in the 1990s when questions about its authenticity first became public.

It should be noted that the de la Peña document contains three or four handwritings, sometimes changing in the middle of a passage, not one of which is de la Peña's. Curiously, there is a handwritten diary of events of the Texas campaign in the collection, and it is in de la Peña's handwriting. However, it contains none of the juicy details of the published versions and the published versions make no mention of this actual diary.

A bit of smoke and mirrors authentication is common to the journal and diary in their published forms. An illustration in the Journal of Jean Laffite shows a handwritten page from the holograph. Superimposed over it is a letter on Library of Congress Stationary dated September 5, 1956 and bearing the signature of David C. Mearns, Chief of the Library's Manuscript Division. It reads:

"We have examined, and now return the leaf from an account book which you enclosed in your letter of August 11. The paper compared favorably with other specimens of the early nineteenth century; the record could have been made in or about 1830. The small scrap which contains writing in French appears to be on paper of somewhat earlier manufacture."

The letter appears to authenticate the journal until one realizes that there is nothing in the letter linking it to any Laffite papers. Mearns wrote his findings in response to a brief letter enclosing a page from a receipt book and nothing in the letter connects that book to Laffite.
Library of Congress records show no evidence that a group of Laffite papers were sent there for examination at the time. In addition, the name of the addressee of Mearns' letter had been obliterated before it appeared in the published Journal.  

Both published versions of the de la Peña "diary" contain an illustration of a handwritten letter supposedly signed by de la Peña. The letter serves as a prologue in Sanchez Garza's and Perry's versions. The photo of the letter seems to bear verification of de la Peña's signature replete with official looking stamps from the Mexican Archives. Actually the signature does not match de la Peña's authenticated handwriting, and the verification and stamps are on a 3” wide piece of blue paper glued to the letter. Lines are blurred in the Perry version so that the verification and stamps seem to be right on the letter itself. There is nothing on the blue paper connecting it with the letter to which it has been affixed.  

There are similarities in the contents of the documents. The Laffite of the journal and the de la Peña of the diary are very close in temperament and personality as evidenced in certain passages. Both are:

Deeply concerned with accuracy.

Laffite:

The manner in which I shall begin this story of my life will no doubt involve me in some years of research before I can collect the necessary proofs of Authenticity.

De la Peña:

I had to take some time to verify those acts which I was not an eyewitness and to obtain more accurate information about, important objectives which I achieved by collecting the daybooks from the various sections that constituted the Army.

Noble defenders of the truth:

Laffite:

Only in this way shall I be free of the fear of contradiction and only in this way can I hope that my words will expose the deceit and cunning of degenerate writers—both present and future—and their slanderous conjectures and erroneous fairy tales about me. At the same time, I may hope to prevent others from multiplying such conjectures and perpetuating a false legend.

De la Peña:

The accumulation of lies told to falsify the events published in national as well as international newspapers... the honor and self-esteem of every military man who participated, so deeply hurt by the great inaccuracies in the official records as to dates, deeds and places and above all the honor of the country, deeply compromised by its leaders and not less by the truth and the atrocity of its crimes—these are the principal causes which compelled me to publish the diary I kept during the time I served in this unfortunate campaign.

Patriots:

Laffite:

At one time I did all I could to save that same nation from complete annihilation in order to preserve the liberty founded on that most sacred document, the Declaration of Independence.

De la Peña:

If in bringing forth my notes I accomplish the noble objectives I have pursued in vindicating the honor of this unfortunate nation.

Selfless volunteers:

Laffite:

Without receiving any compensation for myself.
Diary do not prove that John A. Laflin penned both of them. However, handwriting expert Charles Hamilton, who had a good deal of experience with John A's work certainly believed he did, and stated so in the revised edition of his book *Great Forgers and Famous Fakes*. He also wrote a certification stating his belief that the handwriting in the “diary” was that of John A. Laflin. 9

The similarities do indicate some type of common origin and argue against either Jean Laffite or De la Peña as authors of their respective memoirs.

Endnotes:

4. *Journal of Jean Laffite*, 9; and *With Santa Anna*, xxviii.
5. *Journal of Jean Laffite*, 9; and *With Santa Anna*, xxiv.
7. Ibid.
8. *Journal of Jean Laffite*, 62; and *With Santa Anna*, 52.