US Navy Captain's Cruise Raises Questions About the Jean Laffite Death Story

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A U.S. naval officer's unsuccessful pirate chase in 1823 raises considerable doubt about the accuracy of a contemporary Colombian newspaper's claim that Jean Laffite died in a sea battle between his Colombian privateer General Santander and two Spanish ships in early February 1823 off the Triunfo de la Cruz point of Honduras.

The Cruise and Disaster of the Revenge

Lt. Uriah P. Levy, a hotheaded, previously court-martialed naval officer eager to restore his reputation, went after Laffite in the Caribbean in late January 1823 before Comm. David Porter’s newly formed Anti-Piracy Squadron had even finished gathering at Norfolk, Va., to patrol Cuban waters.

The first Jewish-American US naval officer, Lt. Levy, 30, had been called back to service in late 1822 after President Monroe overturned his 1819 court-martial over a fight he had with another officer over an insult. He was given command of Gunboat No. 158, also called the Revenge, a 90-ton schooner whose normal duties were to provide protection to American merchantmen from pirates rampant in the Gulf of Mexico, particularly between Cuba and Florida. Additionally, the Revenge transported and delivered gold and silver specie between Kingston, Jamaica, and American ports such as Savannah and Charleston. She often sailed in tandem with the US Schooner Louisiana, Capt. John Jackson.

Levy had never been involved in a battle with a pirate vessel before, but he was keen to make his mark in the Gulf Coast waters off of Cuba and Florida, where pirates regularly terrorized merchantmen. When the captain and his small crew of 30 sailed from Charleston, S.C., on December 1, 1822, they had no idea how ill-starred the last cruise of the Revenge would be. What started out as just another standard convoy mission to Havana turned into an obsessively driven quest for Jean Laffite that came perilously close to costing the lives of all aboard by misadventure off the Mosquito Coast.

The Revenge had convoyed two different batches of merchantmen (four ships and two brigs) through the Double Head Shot Keys to Havana by the end of December 1822, and then cruised around the Bahama area beforeanchoring at St. John’s de Los Remidos, where a boat was sent ashore and the crew destroyed a line of what Lt. Levy called "piratical telegraphic stations." Just exactly what these stations were was not explained in Levy's account, but they were likely makeshift towers for semaphore communication by flag code.

Once at Matanzas, Cuba, the Revenge proceeded to Barracoa in search of a pilot in order to go after two pirates who had just taken $10,000 in specie from the unarmed Spanish schooner Dolores on its way from Vera Cruz to Havana.

The Revenge officers were keeping a watchful eye for anything out of the ordinary when on the evening of January 6, near the Cayo Romano, they spotted a sail in the darkening fog but couldn't make out what the suspicious-looking ship was. Due to the dead calm, Lt. Levy ordered the sweeps out and pulled towards the stern of the ship to investigate. Once close enough, Lt. Levy hailed the Spanish vessel, getting no reply, but an immediate volley of grapeshot and canister, one of which narrowly missed striking Levy in the head as it lodged in the Revenge’s foremast behind him. The Spanish captain, also on the lookout for pirates, had mistaken the Revenge for a
Colombian privateer. Holding his men back from returning fire, Levy sent over a boarding party that was detained for four hours, with the Spaniards intermittently sending warning shots overhead. Levy sent a crewman over with his US commission to show to the antsy Spaniards; whereupon the captain, Oligario de lo Cueto, finally hailed and said his ship was the Voluntario, from Old Spain bound to Havana, and armed with 18 long 12-pounder guns. The Spaniard said he and his officers had been sure due to her method of approach that the Revenge was a Patriot privateer, and because they did not like to trust a boat to go over, they had fired first. The Revenge had but one long 18-pounder, and several carronades, so any battle would have been seriously mismatched. De lo Cueto made a weak apology for the mistake of firing on an American naval ship, but Lt. Levy, still nettled from almost having his head blown off, declared to the Spaniard the apology was insufficient, that his conduct was base and cowardly in the extreme, and there would be some accounting made for the friendly fire with Spanish authorities once the Revenge arrived back at Havana. Fortunately, no one was injured in the fray, but the Revenge suffered some minor damage. Due to a heavy storm which soon kicked up, the Revenge proceeded to Barracoa and stayed at anchor there while replenishing their food and water until the weather cleared and they were finally able to sail for St. Jago de Cuba. They were still in search of the pirates who had robbed the Dolores.

According to a Revenge crewman’s published letter of January 11, 1823, the inhabitants of Barracoa praised Lt. Levy for not firing on the Voluntario and saving lives on both sides. During the encounter, Levy had told the crew that nothing but his care for them prevented his returning the Spaniard’s fire, but the inequality in point of size would have resulted in a dreadful slaughter, and he valued one of the Americans’ lives above a dozen Spaniards. The crewman added that although the Revenge had cruised in every hiding spot possible to cloak a pirate around that area of Cuba, they had found none, and no prizes. He expected to only go as far windward as Jamaica, but he would soon find out his captain had other plans.

After first tacking across to the Island Inagua, the Revenge sailed through the Windward Passage between Cuba and Haiti and arrived at Kingston, Jamaica, where repairs were made to the areas onboard damaged by the Voluntario, more provisions and water were obtained, and, most interestingly, the hold was loaded with $50,000 in specie freight. On January 24, Levy and crew departed Kingston headed for Cape Antonio along with a convoy. Before the Revenge left, Kingston merchants had petitioned Levy to proceed to the Bay of Honduras to protect the commerce from piracy by Laffite in that quarter, especially as there were some American vessels at Balize "anxious for convoy." At Grand Cayman, the Revenge hove to from the Jamaican convoy, initially intending to check out the Isle of Pines area, but then the captain learned to his extreme interest "the celebrated Laffite," public enemy no. 1 for pirate hunters, had provisioned at Grand Cayman a few days past, and had sailed for the Mosquito Coast. Seizing the opportunity to possibly capture the notorious Laffite! Levy ordered all sails filled to run straight for Balize but was buffeted by a northern gale for four days of the journey.

On January 31, the Revenge arrived at the British trading port of Balize, where Lt. Levy was asked to convoy several American vessels preparing to leave within 7 or 8 days’ time. What he heard from the local authorities only intensified his desire to immediately chase Laffite. The Governor and magistrates of that area said they would furnish him a locally experienced pilot at their own expense to navigate the coral reefs, atolls and low draft harbors if he would go after Laffite for them as he was harassing too many ships in the Gulf of Dulce area at the bottom of the Bay of Honduras. Again, the Revenge quickly weighed anchor and left to hunt after Laffite on February 2.
According to Lt. Levy's account, he scoured the coast inside the Reef through the Sapodilla Keys over to Omoa, where he learned Laffite's *General Santander* privateer had taken a sloop three days before, between the rivers Lieu and Port Sal to the east. Heading east closely following the shoreline and beating the ship against the ENE trade wind, the hopeful pirate hunter did not find Laffite anywhere around Port Sal, but was informed by an inhabitant that he had been at anchor at Triunfo de la Cruz two days earlier. Tacking slowly on to the Triunfo point of land near the present-day city of Tela, the captain was dismayed to discover he had just missed catching Laffite, who had sailed away the previous evening!

Lt. Levy said his last hope was to find the "Pirate of the Gulf" at what the locals called his accustomed haunt, the island of Utilla. Once there, the *Revenge* checked out both the east and west harbors "but (alas!) he was not there." It is notable to mark that not only did the *Revenge* not catch sight of the *General Santander*, but there also were no sightings of the two Spanish ships which supposedly were in the battle with Laffite off Triunfo de la Cruz on the night of February 4. The gold freight in the *Revenge* hold made her draw a deeper draft than normal, so it is possible some of the shallower inlets could not be explored sufficiently, but the schooner's sailors should have been able to catch sight of sails at a distance of around 8-10 miles.

Lt. Levy reluctantly had to break off the chase after the elusive Laffite because he was overdue back at Balize to convoy the ships to the US.

Setting sails to take advantage of the prevailing wind, the *Revenge* was at Glover's Reef late the next afternoon, anxious to return to Balize even as darkness fell as they navigated the treacherous reef area with its tricky currents. Suddenly, the supposedly experienced pilot made a grievous error, and on February 12 the ship struck the breakers on Main Reef. According to the *Revenge* logbook, the captain immediately ordered the helm to put aport, but the helmsman yelled back that the rudder had gone. The ship was fast among the rocks. All attempts were made to pry her free by lightening her load: guns and ballast were thrown overboard, plus the yards and masts were struck and sent on deck, but the ship would not budge. From midnight to 4 a.m., the crew dumped bread from the lockers and everything else that could be removed as the sea was breaching over the deck. Lt. Levy later said he believed any minute all would be lost (including the gold specie) as the rising waves would pound the ship to pieces. Frantically, they fixed makeshift rafts to save the goods and crew. Even the small cutter could not possibly pass over the reef at the time. With first light, the sailors discovered to their consternation that their ship was on the reef about 40 miles to the south of Balize. Even worse, the ship's bilge had filled and rocks were penetrating through the steerage on her bottom. The captain's quarters were awash, his library and possessions lost, along with those of the other officers. By 6 a.m., the stores and saved provisions were moved to the forecastle area, and Midshipman Harby managed to make it over the reef in the *Revenge*’s cutter to seek help at Balize. Later that morning, Lt. Levy saw a pilot-boat schooner well back from the reef. That ship's crew could not assist them least their vessel be dashed on the rocks too. The rafts were completed to carry the rigging and stores over the reef, and by early afternoon of the second day, one raft succeeded in passing over the Reef. Lt. Levy was worried for his crew, however, as storm clouds were brewing and the weather was taking on a "very wild appearance." He urged part of the crew and officers to leave him on the ship and pass over on the cutter to the schooner on the other side of the Reef, as he thought the *Revenge* would surely sink that night. Some of the crew refused to do so and stayed with him, no doubt thinking any moment might be their last as the storm-whipped sea continually swept over them throughout that night.

The third day of the *Revenge* wreck, Midshipman Harby and men arrived with two schooners from the Balize to help remove all the rigging and anything else salvageable from the
wreck. Lt. Levy still wanted to try to heave the ship off the rocks, so he obtained a chain and blocks to do so but had to leave the wreck for one day after a heavy gale made such a salvage effort impossible. On February 17, five days after the Revenge had crashed into the rocks, the captain was finally able to make an attempt to haul her off, but then discovered from a diving inspection that every timber was loose off the ship's keel so it was entirely gone and too costly to repair. The reef water having cleared, Lt. Levy abandoned his ship salvage efforts to retrieve the guns cast away earlier since they were found on the sandy bottom. By February 19, everything still of any value had been removed from the Revenge, and Lt. Levy and crew took their leave of the pitiful sight and the reef where they had nearly met their doom. On February 20, the Revenge captain, officers and crew along with their ship's guns, spars, sails and rigging plus the $50,000 in specie left Balize aboard the American schooner Little Sarah. They arrived safely back at their homeport of Charleston on March 17.

Lt. Levy was greatly chagrined at having lost his first command, stating in his account, "Thus terminates a cruise of 72 days, 59 of which the Revenge...was under weigh. During this time, she sailed 3,393 miles; boarded 17 vessels; spoke 11; took charge of 4 separate convoys; assisted one vessel in distress, but captured no pirates." The US Navy conducted a court of inquiry over the loss of the Revenge in June 1823. Levy was exonerated with no action taken.

An Interpretation of Why Lt. Levy's Mission to Find Laffite Failed

In the April 20, 1823, Gaceta de Colombia, the article about Jean Laffite's death states that his Colombian corsair General Santander had chased a Spanish brig and a Spanish schooner from the area off Omoa around the Honduran coastline 20 leagues to just off the Triumph of the Cross (Triunfo de la Cruz) over a period of 17 hours on February 4, 1823, before the schooner turned on him and the battle began in which Laffite and his first mate were both supposedly fatally wounded. Francis Similien, officer in charge, turned the ship away from the battle after an hour and later brought the damaged General Santander to Porto Bello, Panama, on March 10.

The Revenge was patrolling from Balize to Omoa on Feb. 2-3, and from Omoa to Port Sal on February 3-4. The next day, February 5, (when Laffite supposedly died of his wound onboard the General Santander) the American schooner would have arrived at Triumph of the Cross, and at Utilia by February 6. Since they navigated all the way around the little island of Utilia, checking the bays, the Revenge probably was there most of February 7 and 8, before leaving to head back to Balize. Yet the American ship never saw either the Santander or the Spanish brig and schooner. This could have been because at their nearest, the Revenge and Santander and Spanish ships may each have been about 19 miles apart, too far for Lt. Levy to spot. Or there may be another reason altogether—the whole sea battle story could have been a conveniently concocted fabrication by Laffite.

To begin with, it is not credible that the Santander could have chased the Spanish ships from Omoa to the Triumph of the Cross area in just 17 hours' time: the ENE trade wind along that coastal region forced sailing vessels to close haul and beat their way slowly. George Coggeshall, an experienced American merchantmen and privateer during the War of 1812, states in his Thirty-Six Voyages to Various Parts of the World Made Between the Years 1799 and 1841 book that during a February 1821 voyage from Omoa to Truxillo Honduras, following the same course, it took him two whole days in a schooner to maneuver a short distance from Omoa eastward, fighting that opposing wind. Thus it would have been impossible for the Santander to have made an even farther voyage in less than one day on the same heading.

Additionally, both Spanish vessels and the General Santander were damaged in the battle, so logically none of the ships could have escaped quickly very
far after their encounter. By the time the Revenge showed up at Triumph of the Cross on February 5, the tops of some sails should have been spotted in the distance at the very least, considering any ship heading east into that wind would be slow even if undamaged, and any ship going with the wind and heading west would have met the Revenge at some point.

Consider, too, the information Lt. Levy was given by the coastal inhabitants in reverse order: Laffite was said to have sailed from Triumph of the Cross on the "evening" of February 4, presumably for Utilla. At Port Sal on February 4, Levy was told Laffite was anchored at the Cross point "two days before" which would have been February 2. At Omoa on February 3, Levy was told Laffite had taken a sloop near Port Sal "three days past", or around February 1.

The question is, where was the General Santander on February 5, when the Revenge was at Triumph of the Cross? The only likely answer is that Laffite's ship was hiding at Roatan Island, east of Utilla, and quite possibly Laffite was not dying from any wound because no battle had occurred.

There is a significant clue to solving the mystery of the missing General Santander in Levy's logbook account, right at the first: he had found off the coast of Florida among the little islands a series of "piratical telegraphs" which he had destroyed. An early warning system like a telegraph would be handy for pirates to know when authorities were sent after them, and it also would be handy to learn about Spanish merchant ships. The Spanish authorities, however, were not utilizing telegraphic communication in the early 1820s; the French in France were. The General Santander had cruised heavily in the Florida waters in late 1822. Newspapers of that time told about the French system of semaphore coastal communication, using towers and flag codes. Napoleon had even carried a portable semaphore system earlier during his campaigns. Jean Laffite was well versed from his days at Barataria and Galveston on how to mastermind a system of intelligence gathering, and no doubt picked up the semaphore method readily. Quite simply, he must have known at some point that an American naval ship was after him and also that the Honduran and British authorities were not friendly to Patriot privateers anymore. It was time to fake a death and go incognito somewhere else.

Coggleshall in 1821 had stopped at the Port Sal area and noted that he saw "no inhabitants at this place except about half a dozen villainous-looking fellows, each armed with long knife (sic) and machetes." He said they were rumored to be ex-convicts from the Castle of Omoa. Laffite had experience with dealing with similar types of rough individuals, so perhaps he had confederates all along the Honduran coast to tip him off in 1823.

Further underlining the extreme danger of even being suspected of being a pirate in the Caribbean at the time were the fates of 10 condemned pirates who were executed by the British at Kingston, Jamaica, on February 7, 1823, in a merciless multiple hanging without even the presence of a priest for final confession. One of the doomed, a large Spaniard, broke the noose and had to be hung twice, all the while screaming his innocence. By mid February 1823, both the Americans and British had stepped up patrols for pirates in the Cuban waters once Porter's Anti-Piracy Squadron had arrived and set up base at Key West, Florida.

Finally, consider how even Lt. Levy and the Revenge were involved with a fake newspaper story: several American newspapers reprinted a dramatic story from a Captain Ross of Havana of how Levy and the Revenge had captured a pirate vessel named the Hebe after a four-hour battle in the Isle of Pines area during which the pirate captain, with one arm shot off, and seven of his men, took to a boat and escaped to Havana. The story was totally false: the Revenge had not encountered a pirate in the whole time of her last cruise, and Lt. Levy set the record straight when he arrived back in Charleston. So the old saying held true, in that case at least: don't believe everything you read in the newspapers.
Endnotes:


Uriah Phillips Levy was born April 22, 1792, in Philadelphia, and ran away from home to become a cabin boy in 1802, when he was 10, on a small merchantman ship. In 1812, Levy volunteered to serve with the US Argus and was appointed acting lieutenant, rising from the ranks. The ship was captured by the British, and Levy and the rest of the crew were kept at Dartmoor prison until the close of the war. In 1816, when he was sailing master onboard the Franklin, Levy was insulted by a drunken officer over his Jewish heritage. He challenged the man to a duel and killed him, but was found not guilty by a grand jury. Commissioned as a lieutenant in 1819 in the United States, Levy got into a fight with the ship's lieutenant and was court-martialed and dismissed from the Navy. President Monroe later reversed the court martial and gave Levy command of the Revenge. Overall, Lt. Levy experienced six court-martials in his life but overcame them all to finally earn the rank of commodore in the Navy. A great admirer of President Thomas Jefferson, Levy bought Monticello in 1834 when it was in a state of disrepair and preserved and renovated the estate. Members of his family owned Jefferson's home until 1923. Levy later was known in the Navy for having authored a successful bill for the abolition of flogging in the US Navy, a punishment that he believed to be inhumane. He died in 1862.


The other newspaper citations also were found via NewsBank's wonderful and history-rich genealogy research archives, which may be accessed online by subscription at www.GenealogyBank.com.

3. Providence Patriot, Jan. 11, 1823.


5. Charleston City Gazette, Jan 26, 1823.


8. Portsmouth Journal, April 5, 1823.

9. Providence Patriot, March 26, 1823.

10. Connecticut Courant, April 1, 1823.

11. Essex Register, March 27, 1823.

12. Connecticut Courant, April 1, 1823.


14. Thirty-Six Voyages to Various Parts of the World Made Between the Years 1799 and 1841, George Coggeshall, Putnam, New York, 1858.


17. Baltimore Patriot, March 24, 1823.