The Burning of the *Vengeance* and *Franchise* at Savannah in 1811

Pam Keyes

Two French privateer ships from Barataria, *La Franchise* and *La Vengeance*, blazed near the wharf at Savannah, Ga., on the night of November 15, 1811. The privateers were victims of an unruly mob who had savagely fought their crews before torching both ships.

Tempers had flared first in a brawl two nights earlier between American and French sailors at a Savannah brothel when one American was killed and one French privateer mortally wounded. The next day, there was another fight on a street in which two Americans were killed. Simmering resentment among the factions involved had sparked the townspeople's and American seamen's wharf attack on the French privateers on the afternoon of November 15.

According to a report to the French Consul by *La Franchise's* Capt. Jean Chevalier and *La Vengeance's* Capt. Charles Lomine, the two ships had been waiting for some French sailors to come from Charleston before the *Franchise* could leave on a cruise and the *Vengeance* on a voyage to France when "five or six French sailors had a fracas with some American and English sailors at a brothel, one American was killed in the fight, and a French sailor stabbed to death." Officers sent an armed force on board the *Vengeance* and *Franchise* and carried off 34 crewmen to jail to be interrogated about the fight. The next morning, the crew was found innocent with the exception of seven men, who were held for further questioning while the rest were released that afternoon. "They (the authorities) only arrested the French and set at liberty the American and English seamen who were equally culpable," complained Chevalier.

Accounts about what happened next to spark the riot's emotional powder keg differ widely according to the French and American viewpoints. All that can be agreed upon was that some sailors were killed near the brothel, some were killed at the wharf in the riot, and both ships were destroyed.

One witness who was likely the most accurate observer said the deaths of the two Americans in the fight "threw the whole city into a ferment...a party of the Americans resolved to destroy the privateers." They planned to march in a body from the dead men's funeral, board the privateers, carry them into the stream and torch them. "But while proceeding with the funeral, information came that the privateers were hauling from the wharf. It was determined to attack them immediately and about 50 men armed with clubs, hatchets, axes, cleavers, muskets and pistols, and a few swords...boarded the *Franchise*, driving the privateers into the water, but not until several were wounded on both sides and about a dozen guns fired by the two parties." Two of the wounded Americans later died, and one (Capt. Miller) had a blinding shot through both eyes and the bridge of his nose, yet survived.

Sifting through the reports shows how variable the viewpoints could be: a Savannah newspaper writer says after the French crewmen were released from the jail, they "had hardly reached the wharf before they assaulted two sailors who called for help. Capt. Miller and Capt. Pierce, with four or five others, 100 yards off, came, Capt. Miller with a saber, the others unarmed. They had proceeded but a few paces before Miller received a musket ball in his face from a window of the second story of a warehouse on Anceaux' wharf, then five or six muskets fired from the same window by which one Negro was killed, and a seaman shot in the foot. The Americans rushed on board the privateer (*Franchise*) and into the house. Two of
the crew (of the privateer) were killed, seven wounded, and the remainder made prisoner." Seventy-nine privateers, mostly French, but also some Italian and Portuguese, were lodged in the jail. In another account by an American, the French privateers were heading back to their ships and had a scuffle with some other sailors, soon to be followed by a "large number of captains and mates of vessels and seamen... proceeding in a body with the American flag towards the wharf where the Franchise was lying. As soon as they appeared, they were ambushed and fired upon by the privateers from a loft on the wharf, while one or two shots were fired from the privateer. Capt. Miller of the brig Champlin received a shot through his head and a seaman belonging to Capt. Howland's vessel was killed." Chevalier's letter to the consul contains a vastly different version of what happened, designed to inflame French sentiment:

"A most detestable plan was hatched to assassinate them (the French privateers who were jailed and released) unarmed and defenseless. At 4 p.m., a troop of American and English sailors armed with sticks, firelocks and pistols raised themselves under orders of W. Fountain, captain of the brig Hetty of Philadelphia, and Miller, captain of the brig Champlin, N.Y. These were abetted by principal leaders in Savannah also armed with bludgeons and pistols. All rushed in with horrid yells on the Franchise and assassinated seven or eight seamen on deck." Another witness said shortly before the riot occurred, Capt. Lomine struck an unarmed youth with his saber, supposedly unprovoked, on the wharf side as he was attempting to board the Vengeance. By this time, a call to arms had been sounded in the city, with a drum roll alert, bringing the Savannah Volunteer Guards and the Republican Blues militia units. Other rioters were battling French sailors desperately trying to get the Vengeance underway. Savannah Mayor William Bullock arrived at the scene with the Savannah Volunteer Guard and pleaded with the agitated mob to keep the peace, committing the Vengeance to the protection of the militia corps, who had boarded her to protect the French and escort them to the jail for their own protection. By then, the rioters had successfully cut away the Vengeance's anchors and destroyed almost all her rigging so the ship could not escape. The Republican Blues conducted the Vengeance and Franchise crews to the jail while the Savannah Volunteer Guard stayed to defend the slowly drifting Vengeance, the Franchise burning a few hundred yards away. Some of the militia tried to approach the Franchise before she became engulfed by flames, but reversed course quickly when they realized the powder magazine could blow up and kill everyone close by. The town guardsmen onboard the Vengeance stayed for nearly eight hours, repelling a number of boat crews determined to board her at point of bayonet, until 11:30 p.m. The remaining French crewmen were placed in the hold for their own safety. Frustrated in their boarding efforts, the assailants prepared a flat boat covered with tar and set it afire within 20 yards of the privateer. The Vengeance could not be maneuvered out of the fire's..."
way due to being unable to pass by, plus the guardsmen were too exhausted to do anymore after defending the vessel for several hours in the cold wind and light rain, especially when they saw it was inevitable the ship would catch fire. They disembarked with the French crew, and the Vengeance, like the Franchise before it, burnt to the water's edge.12

One witness later dramatically wrote that the guards actually had "resolved that the graves then open to receive the still bleeding bodies of their murdered comrades should not be closed until they had been illuminated by the flames of the privateers."13 However, the leader of the guards later denied that intent, stating his men would not have fought for eight hours to delay the satisfaction of seeing her burn, if that was what they had truly wished.14

Another writer said he thought the city's militia had saved the French privateers from certain death: "Taking all circumstances in view, it is very astonishing that the crews of the privateers were not all murdered on the spot. The civil authority, particularly the mayor of the city, used every possible means of having the vessel (Vengeance) saved from destruction, and the crews carried to prison to save them from being massacred."15

Lomine claimed that some of the French sailors who were at areas across town rushed to the scene when they heard the drum call to arms only to be waylaid by the mob. He said the captain of arms and second master of the Franchise were "felled by cudgels, then stabbed with swords or bayonets." He also said after the ships were burned, "murderous gangs went to houses of naturalized Frenchmen" and that both he and Chevalier had to conceal themselves for a few days before reporting the attack to the consul.16

Chevalier attested to his consul that during the three to four months his Franchise sailors had been at Savannah before the riot, the police had not been called on them for the slightest complaint. He said the "outrage" was "shocking" proof that English visitors had spread their hatred for the French to the Americans. He also theorized that one of the reasons for the privateers' destruction was the fear by English smugglers on Amelia Island that the French would seize their ships on their way to sell contraband at Savannah and Charleston unless the threat to safe passage was removed.17

Unacknowledged by Chevalier and Lomine was the anti-French sentiment that had been smoldering among the Savannah citizens for several months prior to the riot, since the Vengeance had first arrived in port to refit, on July 5, 1811.18 As the ship fired a salute upon sailing up the river that day, it was returned in acknowledgement by the Revenue Cutter, James Madison, with the Vengeance crew giving three cheers which were immediately returned by the friendly cutter's crew. Savannah residents were critical of the US cutter's amiable response to the French privateer.19

Fitted out at Charleston, the Vengeance had just returned from a cruise to South America, where Capt. Lomine said a battle had been fought between 10,000 native Mexicanos and 5,000 European Spaniards in which the former were vanquished with many killed and wounded, besides losing two cannons.20

The Vengeance bore a large, rich cargo of specie, cochineal and dry goods. She was admitted to the port as a "merchant vessel" rather than a privateer, and allowed to dispose of her cargo in order to repair her damages and re-fit, to the amount of $17,000. An anti-French Savannah editor snidely remarked that the amount was "moderate enough, considering that the principal injury she had sustained was that of having been "chased" by a British frigate."21 Giving vent to the townspeople's resentment, the editor said, "Is it not remarkable...whenever a French privateer is under the necessity of putting into one of our ports in distress, she always happens to have a
valuable cargo on board? How many American vessels has this privateer La Vengeance "plundered, burnt and sunk," during her last cruise?22

The British ship of war Halifax had unsuccessfully pursued the Vengeance in mid April through early May, following her departure from Charleston for points southward.23 Earlier in February, 1811, on her regular route to Barataria and the Balize below New Orleans, the Vengeance had taken among several prizes a Spanish brig from London bound to Pensacola. The brig's dry goods were brought to Charleston. At that time, the schooner Vengeance was said to have one nine pounder gun and one six pounder barbet, with a crew of 48 men.24

Capt. George Sheriff, of the Balize pilot boat, said he had often seen La Vengeance with prizes. In early January 1811, Sheriff was trying to salvage a Spanish brig that had gone on shore following its capture by La Vengeance. He said the Vengeance captain told him her commission had only 30 or 40 days to run, which was too short a time for them to proceed to France, so they needed to get rid of the brig. He did not see the Vengeance again until May 20, when she had another commander. Sheriff commented in his report he suspected the privateer to be furnished with a set of false papers.25

After the Vengeance had been at Savannah for nearly a month, on July 31, 1811, Capt. Lomine and some of his officers narrowly missed getting captured by a British sloop of war when they were on their way in the smack Defiance to Charleston to have new sails made for the Vengeance. The French privateers had the old sails of the Vengeance on board in order to get a new set, using them for a pattern, to enable the privateer to "continue her labours in her vocation." One day out from Savannah, the smack was brought to by the British sloop of war Emulous, with her prize, the French brig Adele, in company. The Defiance was allowed to pass without suspicion, as the Vengeance officers kept themselves out of sight.26

More trouble loomed for Capt. Lomine and company at Charleston. On September 2, 1811, grocery store operator, William Chambers, was stabbed in the heart by Jean Chocolate, a crewman with the Vengeance. Chambers had quarreled with a few privateers the day before at his grocery and forced them to retreat with a cudgel. The next night, they "increased their numbers and armed with knives and clubs attacked Chambers at his home." Four were arrested, but Chocolate escaped temporarily. He was later found hiding under a bed at a boarding house, his clothes still soaked in his victim's blood.27 The Vengeance crewmen had worn out their welcome in Charleston. Lomine and the rest quickly returned to Savannah. There they would learn their notoriety as murdering ruffians would be most unwelcome and would ultimately result in the loss of their ships.

Following the destruction of the Franchise and Vengeance, a New Orleans letter writer gave some interesting history about their Baratarian connections. He said the Vengeance, earlier known as the Danish merchantman Christianstadt, had sailed a couple of years at New Orleans and was equipped as a freebooter after her name change. The Franchise, earlier called L'Aigle, had cruised off New Orleans "for a long time, and Chevalier, her captain, sent more than one cargo by the Bayou of Barataria, and Mons. Maronne's Mill Race to this city." The letter writer went on to say "we have either a manufacture of commissions, or the remains of a shipment from Gen. Ernouf before the fall of Guadeloupe, which are disposed of in blank at a low rate; and when at sea the cruiser is then described as a vessel fitted out at a French port, according to the laws of France."28 The Franchise also had been the subject of an official complaint from Luis Onis to the American State Department in early 1810 over her captures of Spanish ships in the Gulf Coast off New Orleans. The department referred Onis back to the New Orleans courts, which had
already decided in favor of Chevalier and the Franchise as being a legal French privateer. 29

Lomine and Chevalier had operated their privateers from a Baratarian base at the same time as Renato Beluche, who under his alias Pierre Brugman, was captain of a French privateer schooner, Jenny, for New Orleans banker and powerful politico Jean Blanque. Beluche earlier had unloaded cargos from captured prizes at both Cat Island and Grande Terre, to be smuggled inland to New Orleans.

Due to this association among French privateers in 1810-1811, it seems likely Jean and Pierre Laffite had become leaders of the smuggling ring out of Grande Terre by this time, although their names were not yet tied to the place in the contemporary newspapers.

In later times, Lomine would be associated with both Louis Aury and the Laffites briefly before re-joining his apparent friend Beluche in the Venezuelan Navy. 30 Lomine returned to New Orleans, at least briefly, in late December, 1822, and early January, 1823, to sell some slaves to a free woman of color, Oursine St. Ours. 31 He later retired in New Orleans, where he was listed as residing at 340 Burgundy Street in the French Quarter from 1842 to as late as 1850. 32

Chevalier does not show back up in the archives until 1814, when he apparently decided to turn respectable and became captain of the merchantman sloop Dosoris, operating out of Savannah. Apparently the townspeople had forgiven his earlier days as a French privateer. 33 In 1818, he was captain and owner of the sloop John Chevalier, based at St. Mary's, Ga., and running from Key West to Charleston. By 1819, he was back at Savannah, operating a wrecking business with the John Chevalier, salvaging ships lost in the breakers around Key West and the Tortugas. 34 The last notice of him sailing his self-named sloop occurred in 1822. 35

Endnotes:

4. Savannah Republican, Savannah, Ga., Nov. 19, 1811.
7. Ibid.
10. Savannah Evening Ledger, Jan. 18, 1812.
12. Ibid.
15. Savannah Republican, Nov. 19, 1811.
17. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Poulson's American Daily Advertiser, Apr. 15, 1811.
27. Orange County Patriot, N.Y., Sept. 24, 1811.
30. Lomine had commanded the Cartagenian privateer Pinerez for Beluche in 1813 and 1814, Renato Beluche, Smuggler, Privateer, and Patriot, 1780-1860, Jane Lucas de Grummond, Louisiana State University.
MAN IN A BOX
R. Dale Olson

An atypical weekday field trip on Monday 14, April, featured a drive to Angleton and the Brazoria County Historical Museum, at which Laffite Society member, Michael Bailey, serves as curator.

Members in attendance were: Ed Jamison, Kathy Modzelwski, Jeff Modzelwski, George Najarian, Lizette Gaudin, Jim Nonis, Diane Olson, R. Dale Olson, Dave Roberts, Bill Haaga and Lynette Haaga.

The title of the talk by Michael, “Man in a Box”, was sufficiently intriguing to encourage 15 members to attend the 10:30 a.m. talk at the museum. The topic related to the situation existing in hundreds of museums in the United States in which non-monetary donations exceed the museums capacity to catalog, title and display. This backlog of material simply rests in a box.

The “Man in a Box” in this situation was Joseph P. Underwood, 1845-1925. He left numerous documents, items and memorabilia that his family later donated to the Brazoria County Historical Museum. The “box” was a carton of these items that museum staff analyzed, cataloged and presented on display for members of the Laffite Society.

In addition to an explanation of the items in the box, Michael led members through several storerooms where as-yet un-cataloged items ranging from Conquistadore stirrups to felt hats, firearms, cash registers, and thousands of other items are stored, awaiting the attention of museum staff.

The box also contained the following song:

In Brazoria County I was raised,
I feared neither death nor danger,
Until Captain Perkins enlisted me
To be a Texas Ranger

CHORUS

If ever I do get through this war
And Lincoln boys don’t bind me,
I’ll make my way safe back again,
To the girl I left behind me.

He dressed me up in and [sic] old blue shirt
And used me very kindly,
But still I thought my heart would break
For the girl I left behind me.

CHORUS

He took me down to guard the coast
From the infernal Yankees,
And fed me on some tough bull beef
And never gave me thankee.

CHORUS

B.O.B.

West Columbia, April 8, 1913