Rubio Mañé's The Pirates Laffite  
And  
Jeff Modzelewski’s Translation Of Same

Presented at The Laffite Society - Monthly Meeting Tuesday, April 14, 2009

Jean and Pierre Laffite were legends in their time, and much was written about them during, and has been ever since, that time. A good portion of the Laffites' lives was spent in the United States, and therefore, understandably, much of what has been chronicled of them is in English. Additionally, if one's sole language is English, references to non-English Laffite-related text, such as occur in footnotes and bibliographies, may not "sink in," contributing to a false impression of an even greater preponderance of English-language material.

But much of the Laffites' lives and activities transpired in non-U.S. and non-English-speaking territory, and, naturally, records and literature about the Laffites have been written in the languages of those regions.

For example, most researchers believe the Laffites were born either in France or in present-day Haiti, the latter a French colony until 1804, when Jean was about 23 and Pierre some years older. We may therefore assume that some documentary evidence in French of the Laffite family exists or existed in an archive of France or the French Caribbean — for example, birth, baptismal, notarial, etc., records.

The Laffites were also active in Spanish-speaking regions. For example, they acted as spies for Spain near the end of Mexico’s fight for independence, and Jean was jailed in Cuba for a short time in 1822. Documentary evidence in Spanish of these events likely exists or existed in a Spanish or Spanish colonial archive, such as the noted Archive of the Indies in Seville.

As a third and final example of Laffite activity resulting in Spanish-language records, and the one most germane to tonight's talk, the Laffites plied the waters around the Yucatán Peninsula after departing Galveston in 1820. Of this activity we do not have to surmise, but instead know for certain, that there exists documentary evidence, and we know this because of the efforts of a man named Jorge Ignacio Rubio Mañé.

Rubio Mañé was born in Mérida, the capital of the Mexican State of Yucatán, in 1904. He enjoyed a multicultural education; he was a historian, an academic, and a prolific writer. Rubio Mañé died in 1988, just eight days short of his 84th birthday. He entered the annals of Laffite research because he discovered a piece of historical data about them that refuted the long-time erroneous belief that Jean Laffite had perished off the coast of the Yucatán in late 1821.

In 1935, while researching a non-Laffite-related topic in the Archive of Notaries Public in his native city of Mérida, Rubio Mañé came upon a file labeled "Year of 1821. Investigative Proceedings against the Englishman D. George Schumph." This file contained the transcript of a judicial inquiry regarding a Canadian from Quebec named George Schumph, of 26 or 27 years of age. In November, 1821, Schumph had docked at the northern Yucatán port of Dzilam de Bravo and
made his way to Mérida. If not sufficiently noteworthy that a young man from Quebec should arrive at this destination in the first quarter of the 19th century, something else on board would make it so – a dying man with the renowned surname of “Laffite.”

Schumph was detained on suspicion of complicity with pirates, and specifically, of complicity in a gun battle between these pirates and civil authorities off the coast near Cancún. Schumph disclaimed such involvement, but in the course of his testimony he reveals that Pierre Laffite, the older brother of the more famous Jean Laffite, was wounded in that skirmish, was brought ashore, died, and received a proper Christian burial in the Yucatán town of Dzilam on November 10, 1821.

This single item discovered in the judicial proceeding - that it was Pierre, rather than Jean, who perished in the Yucatán in late 1821 – is of importance to Laffite scholars. Up to this time, it was believed that it was Jean who had perished in this manner and at this place and date. Erroneous citations had been perpetuated over the decades, as new references cited faulty older ones which could no longer be corroborated. Rubio Mañé’s discovery, to be sure, did not determine where and when Jean did in fact die, but it did oblige Laffite students to return to the research trail with respect to this question.

Rubio Mañé’s interest in Laffite was piqued by the discovery of the Schumph proceeding, which he used as the germ about which to craft a full-length book, published in Spanish in 1938 and titled The Pirates Laffite. He relied on a variety of sources, a major one of which was Lyle Saxon’s Laffite The Pirate, published eight years earlier in 1930 and familiar to English speakers. But Rubio Mañé also used other sources largely unfamiliar to English-only-speaking readers, such as Mexico’s General and Public Archive of the Nation, issues of The Gazette of the Government of Mexico, a collection of documents on the history of Mexico’s War of Independence, and a history of the Yucatán during the Spanish domination.

Although not accessible to non-readers of Spanish, Rubio Mañé’s The Pirates Laffite was not unknown to serious students of Laffite. Indeed, Robert Vogel, a pre-eminent living Laffite historian and a member of the Laffite Society, includes it in his short list of most important Laffite-related works. Dale Olson owned a copy, and in mid-2004, a few days before he traveled to Manchester, England, to speak at an International Trumpet Guild conference, he offered it to me with the suggestion that the translation of selected extracts from it might prove interesting to the Laffite Society, either as a presentation at a monthly meeting, as an essay published in our semiannual The Laffite Society Chronicles, or both.

During the time that Dale was abroad, I looked through the book, considered its overall appeal, noted that despite its many chapters it was not an overly verbose work, and, presuming that an English translation did not yet exist but would be worthwhile, decided to translate it in its entirety. I wrote the most recent edition’s publisher in Mexico and obtained permission to do so.

Rubio Mañé’s The Pirates Laffite, despite the specificity of its title, deals with much more than just the privateer brothers. For example, it discusses Mexico’s battle for independence against Spain in more detail than that to which most Anglo-Americans are exposed unless they purposely study it. Included in Rubio Mañé’s treatment of this topic
are the efforts of the filibusters - those who, without any birth connection to either a colony or its colonizer, voluntarily take part in the former's uprising against the latter. We marvel at young men like Ellis Bean, some twelve years older than George Schumph, a Tennessean by birth, who not only joins the insurgent effort in Mexico, but then travels back and forth between there and the United States attempting to raise money to fund the campaign.

The discovery of the Schumph document also allowed the possibility that the so-called Journal of Jean Laffite is factual, if not to thrive, then at least to cling to life support. The Journal, as many of us already know, is a subject which merits research and unending discussion in its own right. It alleges that Jean Laffite eventually abandoned the sea, moved to the central United States, and died a sort of gentleman farmer in 1854 in Alton, Illinois, today a city of 30,000 on the Mississippi River about 20 miles north of St. Louis, Missouri. Jean's traditional accepted date of death of 1821 in the Yucatán was always one "proof" that the Journal was spurious; the Schumph deposition refuted this.

The Schumph deposition in itself is a fascinating, yet problematic, object of study, for despite clear language identifying Pierre Lafitte as the decedent, other portions of the transcribed testimony to which we have access are difficult to understand or ambiguous. As I discuss in some detail in my inserted footnote (a) to Chapter I of the translation, the deposition scenario was cumbersome from the outset. An English-speaking prisoner had to be examined in Spanish-speaking New Spain. A translator is found who, we are told, knew English because he was born in New Orleans - but into a Spanish-speaking family, and in a polyglot epoch of New Orleans in which one could perhaps exist without knowing English well if he or she knew French or Spanish. Doubtless, the long, run-on sentences and "legalese" of the period add to the confusion of the transcription of the testimony.

As a student of Romance languages, I must say that I undertook the translation as much or more for the linguistic than for the historical appeal. It is a challenge to translate well, for good translations are not literal translations. The better the vocabulary and style of the author, the greater the need for the good translator to possess something of these qualities as well. Rubio Mañé was an educated man and a polished writer, and that set the bar higher than if one were translating, say, a journalist in whose writing fact and economy of verbiage were the most important elements and style less so. It was important to me to do justice to Rubio Mañé's writing ability, not just to his research, yet in the end there were still a number of passages with which I was not wholly satisfied - which still seemed to me to be awkward, although I had reviewed them over and over to try to find a better way to phrase them. But, eventually, one has to "let go" and say that one is done.