Laffite Researcher, BEWARE!!!
Wil Zapalac

With all the mysteries and puzzling info surrounding the privateer Laffite, it is small wonder researchers of the man/legend are so fascinated and persistent. Hard, cold facts are few and far between ... scattered throughout the fables and tales of the bayous ... and, elsewhere, like a trail of doubloons, on a long stretch of wind-blown beach. Any research leads, at all, are hard sought and can go from sizzling 'hot' interest to bitterly cold disillusion.

A good case in point is what this writer encountered only a scant time ago. It was somewhere in April or May ... of this century. Perhaps 2004. Perhaps.

I was headed into the third floor, archive section of the 'Rosey', Galveston's foremost and premier Rosenberg Library, when the attendant of the front desk questioned my intent of quest. After grudgingly filling him in, he smiled and informed me that the old days of brittle, faded hard-copy sources were gone. At least for what I sought. "Micro-film, mezzanine level," he noted and returned to his work at hand. My main source, at times, at the 'Rosey'?

This is no secret to true Laffite researchers that have ventured to Galveston Island and used the facilities of the 'Rosey'. The present-day name is some hybrid of the Isle and surrounding areas, yet in days early on it was simply called the 'Gazette'. Another name was also involved but, in all, such was what Jean Laffite may have been looking for ... the highly controversial Dogwood Press release, "The Journal of Jean Laffite'. On page III of the Journal, Laffite laments of having no press (newspaper) to defend him. That fact was true, regardless if the Journal was a total fake or of true nature.

Yet, this article is not about whether the Journal should be thrown in the campfire or rescued from it. It is about the tale that is about to unfold. Info in the 'Gazette' really runs the gauntlet and staggers the modern day imagination. So as not to lose anyone, I will reiterate that the 'Gazette' was the news publication on the island, at least 18 years after Laffite had disbanded his people.

As to the news gauntlet the paper did run, there appear factual reports of Texas Indians being tricked into false peace treaty meetings and then being murdered, in Austin, Texas. Along with the Texas Indian Wars is mentioned all manner of news. Fictional romantic love stories appear. So innocent and naive that even a jaded script writer in nowadays L.A. would sigh. Also noted was a good number of ads and price lists ... of all types of items. Apparently, doctors back then had concluded that the cocoa leaf was useful in human hair shampoos.

Of course, many political opinions and constant articles of what heard lately of the East Coast.

All printed from 1838 and on ... with many gaps of issues.

As it also happens in research, at times, one may be looking directly at a real gem of a find and still totally miss it. Such was the case of what I read, probably for more than twice or more, that morning. It was there, right at the top of the page's right-hand column, hardly hidden at all. Yet, somehow I had blundered past it. Over and over. But, for some odd reason, perhaps it was the sound of Laffite's ghost, softly chuckling behind me ... but that morning it leapt out at me.

The column's heading read, and still does read, 'COMMERCIAL'. This was followed by a second heading announcing 'Port of Galveston', and then were what could have only been listings of ship's movements, headed appropriately, 'Departure' and 'Arrival'. Further into the column, other business was printed, such as passengers, fares, happenings, etc.
There, at the very first of the 'Departed' listing was the date-Dec. 4, 1837(?). After that swung out the name 'Laffite', slightly smudged, then the name 'Haviland' and then 'Columbia'. "What the #$%^?", I muttered to myself and then glanced to see if my profanity had attracted the library's gendarmes.

Quizzedly peering back at the column, I double-checked and read the same. 'Laffite, Haviland, Columbia'. The second listing showed for Dec. 5 and the names 'Patrick Henry' and then 'Hood' and then 'Houston'. The third was Dec. 6 with 'Albert Gallatin', 'Sterret' and 'Houston', again.

Look at this, I thought. A captain named Laffite departing on the vessel Havilland for Columbia. A day before Captain Henry and two before Gallatin, both headed up the mud ditch to what was then ... swamp Houston.

And such it is with excitement. The pulse quickens and the heart jumps. I felt as though I had just asked a girl to dance, at the dance hall, and received a nod. But something was odd. Something was telling me that someone at a previous Laffite meeting had mentioned something of the item. So, at the next meeting, I inquired and only got curious looks and shakes of the heads. No one had ever seen such. Just how could that be, I wondered. And how did I notice it?

Elation was now turning to perplexion. NO ONE? Dorothy Karilanovic, a long-time Laffitian, recommended that I make a copy of the find and submit it to the Archives of the Society. That, at least, made some sense. So I ventured back to the library.

It was then that the girl at the dance apparently changed her fickle mind, for, as I prepared the necessary machinery for the work, I studied the rest of the column. Chagrin began to build. I spotted the following ... 'Captain Sterret'. Now what I wondered? 'Captain Sterret'? Was the reporter or the editor for the Gazette already into the rum that day? Then I noted, with agitation, that for Dec. 4, the entry showed 'STMR. Dayton', 'Jenkins', 'Houston'. That ... unfortunately ... was the 'Steamer Dayton'. The first name on the listings was not a captain but ... alas ... the #$%^#! vessel's name!

Ah, wreckage and rum at the rocks of the beach, all for the following of the wrong lantern. As luck, or the lack of it, would have it, all three of the first mentioned vessels had masculine names. If just one had been named the 'Pretty Jean' or something, this tale would be of no value.

And so fellow researchers take heed. And take your time. And, if so betricked, take aspirin. Oh, yes. For those that might want to know, the actual sailing of the 'Laffite' to Columbia, on that day, went for a mere ten dollars. American. Fini.