THE DUVAL MUTINY ABOARD THE HOTSPUR ON CAPTAIN CAMPBELL’S FINAL VOYAGE

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During Captain James Campbell’s last privateering voyage in the Gulf of Mexico for Jean Laffite, he faced down a mutiny aboard his topsail schooner Hotspur in which sixteen men were killed.

There are two accounts of the mutiny, and they differ only in minor detail.

One version of the mutiny appeared in Ben C. Stuart’s story “Sailed with the Noted Sea Rover”, which appeared in The Galveston Daily News, on February 7, 1909. Although the story is about Captain John McHenry, it contains statements by Charles Cronea about the mutiny aboard Captain Campbell’s ship.

Captain Campbell, in his autobiography, gives three lines to the mutiny. However, his widow, Mary Sabinal Campbell mentions it in a biographical sketch of her done by Charles W. Hayes, in Galveston, History of the Island and the City, published in 1879, and reprinted by an Austin, Texas publishing house in 1974.

At the time of the mutiny, Charles Cronea was 14 years of age. In his old age, during an interview (By Ben C. Stuart ?), the year before his death by a Galveston news reporter, Cronea tells of the mutiny, and how Captain Campbell put it down.

Here, in Stuart’s 1909 story is the Cronea report on the mutiny:

“Charles Cronea, for many years a resident of Bolivar Peninsula, where he died in the early ’90s at a very advanced age, served for a time on one of Lafitte’s [sic] privateers commanded by Captain James Campbell.

“He was very young (14) at the time and was made cabin boy. (He also is reported to have served as a gunner aboard the ship, the Hotspur, manning a carronade along with Jean Callistre and Crazy Ben Dolliver.)

“The vessel was equipped at Baltimore, where many of the merchants were engaged in fitting out privateers. Cronea related this incident shortly before his death:

I don’t know what he intended to do after that. I knew there was going to be a meeting, but didn’t know it was going to take place that night. The men Duval got to go into the meeting were all French, except one and he was a Catalanian. The old crew were all Americans. Duval handed up a cask of brandy and gave it to the men. If it hadn’t been for that he might have succeeded, but the brandy spoiled it all. Duval’s men were on watch when the attack was made. Other members of the crew and the captain were all below.

Duval and his men could have called up the captain and killed him or made him a prisoner. They made the attack just about night(fall). Campbell went on deck and the mutineers surrounded him. But they were drunk and didn’t have any plan. Some wanted to kill the captain, and others were for letting him go or making him a prisoner.

When they were quarrelling he put out his arms and brushed them aside, made one jump and landed in the cabin. But at that time the Americans who were not in the plot came on deck. The captain handed out the arms to them and the mutineers didn’t last any time. The whole fourteen of them were killed. The
Catalonian was the only one who put up a good fight. He had a knife and killed two Americans, but he didn't have a chance to do any more damage, for his head was taken off with a cutlass.

"Duval was the only one of the mutineers who wasn't killed. They had a trial on board and he was condemned to be shot, but Campbell interfered and saved his life."

Here's the way May Sabinal Campbell describes the mutiny:

"During the late fall of 1820, Gustave Duval entered into a conspiracy with Thomas Cox and James Clark, the latter two being deck officers, along with all of the Frenchmen except Cronea who had boarded the Hotspur at Padre Island, with intent to seize control of the ship, kill the remainder of the crew and divide all the spoils of the battle that were aboard.

The mutiny was planned to take place while the conspirators were on watch and Captain Campbell and the remainder of the crew were below deck.

The conspirators, however, began drinking rum before the mutiny began, and when Campbell came up on deck, the only one who was sober enough to do so attacked him with a knife. Campbell returned below deck and armed his loyal crewmen with guns. Eventually all of the conspirators were killed, but not before two of the loyal crewmen were killed and others were wounded.

The Hotspur was soon aground in Southwest Louisiana near the Mermentau River."

Campbell devoted only three lines to the Duval Mutiny in his memoirs, it being seemingly painful to him to admit during his old age to the (number of) people he had killed or that conspirators could wish to assassinate him.

"When the ship was in the Gulf off Galveston Island, the Captain put Duval into a boat with two men with instructions to land him and come back. There was a vessel in Galveston harbor and we did not know what she was, so the captain was afraid to go in."

"While the two men were going with Duval we saw a large yacht coming out toward us. The Captain got the men together and asked them what they thought had better be done."

"They agreed that it was dangerous to take any chances for we were very short-handed."

"Half of the crew had been killed in the mutiny. so the Captain, without waiting for the two men who had gone in the small boat with Duval, sailed away, and we never saw them again."

"When Campbell decided to quit privateering, he sailed to a port on the Louisiana Coast and there burned the vessel and disbanded the crew."

The French recruits to privateering in Laffite's band came from a group picked up off Charleston, S.C., and sailed to a location on North Padre Island. Cronea told the writer from the Galveston Daily News that he had jumped ship in New York. His father had apprenticed him aboard a French Naval Frigate in 1818 at the age of 13. A year later, he jumped ship in New York. He and other Frenchmen shipped out aboard a vessel bound for Charleston.

There, he and fourteen other Frenchmen signed aboard a ship said to be bound for Liverpool. But the ship, according to Cronea, "hadn't cleared the bar", when it was luffed, and a schooner running downwind sent a boat across.

The Captain of the English ship mustered his crew and told them the Captain of the schooner wanted fifteen to twenty men to cruise in the Gulf of Mexico.
Cronea and fourteen others volunteered and went aboard the schooner. Cronea remembered it was commanded by a man from Baltimore named Jones.

The schooner ran south, through the keys and into the Gulf of Mexico, “keeping out of the way of everything and flying American colors”, Cronea told Stuart.

The schooner arrived off Corpus Christi and put a total of forty men ashore with blankets and food, telling them they would be picked up.

The next day, Cronea said, a hermaphrodite brig (schooner-brigantine) hove to off the beach and sent a boat ashore.

The officer who came ashore told the forty men they were to sail the brig, which he said was a privateer. Everyone agreed to go, according to Cronea’s memoirs.

“The brig,” he told Stuart, “was under the command of a man we knew as Carroll, but whom I later learned was Captain James Campbell. He was Laffite’s right hand man.”

“The brig bristled with guns and was squared-rigged on the foremast, schooner (fore and aft) rigged on the mainmast and flew five jibs and topsails, and could outsail anything afloat. Seamen of the time said such ships were all winds and no feet”.

The ship, the Hotspur, flew the colors of the Republic of Cartagena (present-day Colombia), Cronea said, and raided Spanish shipping.

When the brig put into Mermentau, Louisiana, after the mutiny, late in 1820, and was burned, with Captain Campbell breaking up the crew, Cronea went ashore for good.

He told about all of these events in an interview in 1892 under shade trees in front of the U.S. Barge office in Galveston.

The reporter at the time said Cronea had sailed his butt-head schooner into Galveston with a load of watermelons from Bolivar Peninsula, and “his hair was white as human hair ever gets, and his black eyes sparkled, and his language was spiced with the choicest profanity.”

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SOURCES ON JEAN LAFFITE AT THE ROSENBERG LIBRARY

ANNA B. PEEBLER

The Galveston and Texas History Center of the Rosenberg Library in Galveston welcomes all researchers interested in Jean Laffite and his times on the Island. The GTHC is one of the best known archives in the state and contains approximately 21,000 linear feet of manuscripts, 12,700 books, 1,500 maps, 30,000 photographs, and numerous newspapers and periodicals, brochures and architectural drawings. The GTHC archives concentrate on collecting local history for Galveston, city and county; however, it also has a good collection of books on general Texas history.

Members of the Laffite Society who have not used the facilities before may want to know that