As a member of The Laffite Society with an avocational interest in foreign languages, and as a person involved in reading and collecting information of an historical nature on the lives of the privateers Jean and Pierre Laffite, I have had many opportunities, principally stemming from the requests of fellow Society members, to examine documents in French and Spanish whose translation into English would be beneficial.

At the inception of The Laffite Society in August, 1994, publisher and Society member Don Marler asked if I would be willing to translate some handwritten phrases from the Laffite Collection at the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center in Liberty, Texas, into English, and to respond as well to a request for information from a French genealogical study group. This casual inquiry gave birth to an almost full-time sideline of rendering into English historical information (and into French and Spanish, correspondence) for the personal interests of Laffite Society members, and for the archives of both the Society and of the aforementioned Sam Houston Center.

When one considers that making a typewritten transcription of often scarcely legible handwriting in centuries-old Spanish or French, and of then converting this transcription into an accurate yet flowing English translation, is a task which requires not only a knowledge of Romance languages and an attention to detail, but a "good eye," as well, it is understandable that this "leisure task" is for me not only an informative, but also a challenging, one.

As I have occupied myself with this assignment over the past two and one-half years, I have come to realize a hidden benefit of the effort - that of another dimension of knowledge to be gained. The act of translating or interpreting a handwritten document does not merely make possible the conveyance of content and sense, but also, with repeated attention, appears to allow one to almost see or feel one's way into the fleshy substance of the hand that penned that document!

As I sit at my desk in a quiet corner, a soft light perfusing the "expectant" text which rests before me, brow furrowed with purpose, intently peering through a magnifying glass with pencil poised to jot down the letters of the word I am anxious to identify - I find that in this act of contemplation there has quietly stolen into my awareness the sense of a presence, of a personality, and that with frequent association in this context, one comes to feel a friendly intimacy with the writer.

To make easier the often difficult and time-consuming task of untangling and deciphering the letters of a highly individualized 19th-century writing style such as that of Jean Laffite, one can slowly trace the curling lines of the letters in a given word with the index finger. This act of gingerly touching and following the shape of the letters seems to permit a connection with the author's personality.

Some, including a few graphologists, say that "emotion, as well as other characteristics, can be expressed in the shape of a line." One might try the above experiment with any specimen of handwriting (although, I suspect, the more florid, the more "graphic", the better). In this sense, one need not be a translator of foreign languages to experience the benefits of continuity with the past.

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