The Saga of James and Mary Campbell,
Especially Mary
Jack Watson

This paper is part two of my own study of James and Mary Campbell. Part one concerned a successful attempt to visit and photograph the Campbell Family Cemetery at Campbell Bayou, near Swan Lake. I had noticed in the Laffite Chronicles from 1996 a field trip to the site was planned but later cancelled. I live within two miles of the site, and without permission, I ventured onto the location in search of the cemetery one day camera in hand. I got my pictures. Unfortunately, I learned later just how toxic this area is. It classifies as a Super Site Toxic Waste facility, governed by the EPA. An elderly family member keeps up the cemetery but the place is ruined forever for any type of habitation.

Part two is a much more detailed account of the lives of James Campbell and Mary Crow Sabinal. James and Mary met on the Red River in 1814. He was 28 and she was 14. Two years later they married at Crow’s ferry on the Sabine River just north of present day Orange, Texas. Mary’s stepfather, Isaac Crow owned the ferry. James had been involved in filibustering, smuggling, and privateering, and gave it up temporarily to try and settle down to a married life and cattle raising there on the Sabine. After a year, he convinced Mary that they needed to join Jean Laffite at his new base on present day Galveston Island. The place was called Campeche, and Laffite was building a privateering base to plunder Spanish shipping in the Gulf of Mexico. The next 46 months of James and Mary’s lives were spent in Campeche and Bolivar, and were at a time and place of extraordinary happenings in Texas history. Between 1817 and 1820 the population of Laffite’s camp increased from about 100 to over 1000 men, two wives, and a few mistresses. Mary’s later descriptions of life there among people from all over the world led by a pirate who was a legend in his own time provided the majority of historical descriptions of the settlement that we read about today. 1820 was a pivotal year in the marriage of James and Mary. Laffite had agreed, at the request of the U.S. Navy, to abandon the island and burn Campeche. James was to sail before Laffite and meet him later near the Yucatan in Mexico. Mary remained in Bolivar at the fort of Las Casas under the command of Dr James Long. Dr Long was a filibuster, intent on taking Texas from the Spanish. Mary’s experience during the 10 month stay at Las Casas is what makes this story very interesting. I’ll get to that later.

From the experience at Galveston the Campbells moved back to the Sabine River and lived for a while at a place called Pine Bluff near Orange. In 1826 they moved to a settlement in the Atascosito district near present day Liberty, Texas. By 1829 they moved to a settlement at Double Bayou south of Anahuac. They were enumerated in the census of 1826 for the district and Mary listed her name as Mary Crow, wife of James Campbell. James and Mary were officially married in a baptism and wedding presided over by Padre Muldoon in Anahuac in 1832 for multiple couples. The purpose of these official events was to qualify these people for claims for land grants in the area from the Spanish authority. James and Mary applied for such a grant. In 1835 they moved to Galveston’s Deer Island. I know Deer Island because I fish around it. It is an enhancing place and today is the most important birding areas in Galveston Bay. But I can’t imagine anyone living on it. It is isolated, desolate, and without water. A hurricane in 1837 destroying most of their belongings convinced the pair to move to their final home on Virginia Point. They obtained 1500 acres on the Point, and over the rest of their lives, farmed, marketed, built a home, raised a family and started filling a family cemetery.

In reading and studying about the Campbells I used over 17 different books, letters, articles, and newspapers. A few of these sources need to be described at this point because they become part of the story. A primary source was an historical paper by W.T. Block, done in 1990, named “A Buccaneer Family in Spanish East Texas, A Biographical Sketch of Captain James and Mary Campbell”. The paper is well researched and is very detailed. However, as we shall see, it is missing something. Another primary source is Mirabeau B Lamar, former President of The Republic of Texas, and a prolific writer.
Lamar interviews James Campbell in 1852 and it portrays many episodes in the life of Jean Laffite while on Galveston Island from the viewpoint of James Campbell 32 years later. In Lamar’s papers, volume II, under the title “The Long Expedition 1821”, is his narrative of the events at Fort Las Casas at Bolivar during that important 10 month period of 1920 and 1921. It was important in the life of James and Mary Campbell, and it was also important in the fate of Dr Long and his quest to take Texas from the Spanish. Finally in primary sources is a series of personal letters between W T Block and Jean Epperson in 1991, right after Block wrote his famous biography of the Campbells.

Important secondary sources include the 1916 book Early History of Galveston, Volume I, by Joseph O.Dyer, a Galveston Daily News interview with Mary Campbell when she was 79 years old, and the pension file for James Campbell from the National Archives. A complete bibliography is included at the end of this paper.

James Campbell was born in Ireland in 1786 and died on Galveston Bay in 1856. He moved to the Americas at the age of four and his family settled in Baltimore, Maryland. As a young man James apprenticed in ship mast building and at the age of 26, joined the U S Navy in 1812. He was just in time for the War of 1812, and served in combat on Lake Erie under Commodore Perry. James was commended for his bravery, but after the war, he left the military and headed for the Gulf of Mexico. Once there, out of New Orleans, he began a maritime life of adventure, smuggling, privateering and filibustering. He joined Aury and Mina in their effort at taking Texas from the Spanish. He also must have come in contact with the Laffite brothers, Jean and Pierre.

While delivering and selling goods on the Red River in 1814, he met Mary Sabinal and went to her home in 1816 to marry her. In 1817 James and Mary joined Laffite in Campeche. This was an incredibly active three year period for James. For the first year Laffite kept him on shore with numerous jobs including maintaining a storage depot at Bolivar Peninsula and building barracks to house enslaved peoples until they could be sold to Louisiana plantation owners. These barracks where near present day Deweyville, Texas, close to the Sabine River for easy transport. After proving himself for a year, James was assigned a vessel, the Hotspur, and commenced to plunder Spanish commerce on the high seas. He quickly became the most productive of all of Laffite’s men. On his first sortie he returned with over $100,000 in cash and a like amount of goods aboard another vessel in tow. He was sent by Laffite to New Orleans on business, and later to Baltimore to purchase ships. He was used by Laffite to spy on Captain John Marott and expose him for his attempted theft. In Lamar’s interview in 1852, James goes into more detail about that three year period including Laffite’s subsequent duel with Marott. According to James Campbell it was he who went to the USS Enterprise holding off the Port of Campeche and met Captain Kearny of the U S Navy. Campbell reportedly dined with Kearny before returning with the navy captain to meet Jean Laffite on the island. James describes and interesting 1832 meeting with an old comrade in arms and fellow privateer under Laffite, Captain Cochrum of the Mexican Navy. Cochrum had sailed with Laffite in 1820 and was with him when he was fatally wounded in battle in 1823. He confirmed to James Campbell, the fate of Jean Laffite. James also talks with Lamar about the mutiny that occurred concerning Gustav Duval as James returned to Campeche late in 1820 or early 1821. There appears to be several versions of this event. It is important to remember that James left Campeche four days before Laffite did in May of 1820. His plan was to meet with Laffite at the Yucatan later. That meeting, of course, never happened. James sailed to Cuba, the Yucatan, and on to Vera Cruse where he picked up Duval before returning to Galveston Bay.

One thing about James Campbell was that he did it all. I mentioned in part one that his life could have been a Hollywood movie staring John Wayne. Think about it. An immigrant from Ireland as a child later becomes a war hero in the War of 1812. He goes to the Louisiana Gulf coast seeking adventure on the high seas. He pairs up with the most famous pirate of them all, Jean Laffite and becomes an important part of that period in Texas history. Then he gets to settle down, stays married to the same woman for 40 yrs, raises a family and becomes productive citizen and Texas patriot. The most ironic part of this life of his was the circumstances of his death. At the age of 70, in 1856, he sailed a boat solo from Virginia Point.
to Galveston, something he had probably done many times before. He was caught in a squall, went missing for 3 days and was found drowned in the bay. In my mind only John Wayne could have played that part.

Mary Campbell was born in 1800, on the Sabine River. She died at her homestead near Virginia Point in Galveston County Texas in 1884. She had a number of names. Her maiden name was Sabinal. Her father was Cabineaux, and he owned a ferry on the Sabine north of present day Orange, Texas. A horse on the ferry kicked Cabineaux and he died from the injury. Isaac Crow married his widow and I suppose the ferry came with her. Finally she married James in 1816 and tacked Campbell on to the list. She listed her name in the 1826 Atascosito census as “Mary Crow, wife of James Campbell”. I would call her Mary Sabinal Cabineaux Crow Campbell. An interview with Mary done by the Galveston Daily News in 1879 provides us with one of the very few eyewitness accounts of what Jean Laffite’s Campeche looked like. She described a sort of shanty town with 100 huts that extended west to about where 13th street in Galveston is today. She said the population of the settlement went from about 200 to over 1000 between 1817 and 1820, consisting of men from everywhere in the world, two wives, and several mistresses. Mary testified that everyone got along very well. She said some of the huts had glass window but most had sails for windows. According to Mary she saw Laffite almost daily and always referred to him as the “old man”. He was 36 but she was 18. This must have been an incredible and unforgettable event in the life of this 18 year old illiterate girl. Her husband was a top producer for Laffite and I feel sure she had more luxury in life with the stolen goods available than she ever did before or after that short period. Another glimpse into Mary’s character is a 1964 interview from the Galveston Daily News with Mable Dick, granddaughter of Mary. Some very colorful stories are spun here about Mary’s marriage and subsequent life. What we have here however is a newspaperman interviewing an 80 year old lady about events first relayed to her by her 80 year old grandmother who was described as senile. W T Block says that the interview “stinks to high heaven”. When Campeche was burned by Laffite in May, 1820, it appears Mary took refuge at Bolivar Peninsula. She was housed at a Fort built and run by filibusters under Dr James Long. The fort was named Las Cassas. James Campbell had left for a last sortie four days before Laffite with plans to meet him later, and I feel sure, to eventually return to Bolivar and pick up Mary.

1820 was a significant year for Mary. To understand how significant, another story needs to be told and characters introduced. Please bear with me. It will come together in the end. James Long was from Natchez. He was a physician and surgeon, a successful merchant, a war veteran of the battle of New Orleans, an adventurer and filibuster. He was married to Jane Long, daughter of the famous and controversial American soldier and statesman James Wilkinson. He and his followers declared Texas independent and free from Spanish rule, and where promptly beaten and chased back into Louisiana by the Spanish. By 1919 he and the last of his band of followers established the last hold out at Bolivar Peninsular, still hoping to mount a military victory over the Spanish and take Texas. He was backed financially by his own money but also by his father in law Wilkinson. By 1919 his financial backing came from Elensar Ripley of New Orleans, a resigned American general, also interested in the taking of Texas. Ripley introduced into the plot Don Jose Felix Trespalacios, a Mexican revolutionary and native that was very popular at home and dedicated to taking Texas. Ripley felt the combination of Long and Trespalacios would be the key to victory. Trespalacios brought with him a nephew, one Don Santiago Modella. Other important participants were Benjamin Milam, John Austin, and Warren D C Hall. Dr Long and his men were at Fort Las Cassas from mid 1819 to September 1821. During this time there were many trips back and forth between Bolivar and New Orleans. For much of their stay in Texas, Jean Laffite and his famous Campeche where right across the Bolivar roads. In fact Long came to the island to convince Laffite to join him in his military adventure. Laffite had too much on his plate for nation building. Besides, he was employed at the time as a spy for Spain to keep an eye on Dr Long and his men. By early 1820 Laffite was committed to leave Texas and burn Campeche. After that he couldn’t care less about Long’s dream. During late 1919 and early 1920 Long and Warren Hall lobbied Laffite extensively
requesting him to leave them supplies and ammunition. Numerous references indicate they were somewhat successful, particularly in obtaining lumber and buildings they moved to Las Cassas from the island. Laffite didn’t give them any arms however. Laffite reportedly left them lumber to build a suitable house for Jane Long. Could he also have arranged from them to build a house for Mary Campbell?

It makes sense that this is the case. Mirabeau Lamar writes that Mary Crow had a house within Fort Las Cassas. Mary was one of two wives in Campeche and she was the wife of his most trusted lieutenant, James Campbell. Laffite and James Campbell weren’t going to burn down the settlement and leave Mary to the elements and Indians. They had leverage over Long and Hall who were actively soliciting supplies. I feel that they got Hall to agree to take Mary in. There is evidence that Hall and Campbell established a life long mutual respect here. James and Mary’s first son was named Warren Campbell after Warren D C Hall. Besides, Long was gone to New Orleans in frequent visits and didn’t return to Bolivar until June, so Mary would have moved in while he was gone. At any rate, by May, 1820, James Campbell and Jean Laffite were gone and Mary was a refugee in Fort Las Cassas awaiting James’s return. According to Lamar, Mary was a big controversy at the Fort. The next 10 months there were very interesting indeed.

Long returned to Bolivar in June only to meet Hall headed the other way at High Island. Hall was to go to New Orleans, then Alexander, and return with Jane Long and Colonel Modella. Long returned to a near mutinous Las Cassas and had his hands full just keeping his men together. He also had Mary Crow to put up with. For the next four months I feel James Long and Mary Campbell developed a very mutual disrespect. In November 1820, Hall returned with Mrs Long and Modella. Dr Long and Modella clashed from the start.

The prose of Mirabeau B Lamar is distinct, and no one can say it like him. Let me quote him in his description of the happenings there at Fort Las Cassas. As to why Long and Modella didn’t get along he says “there was a woman connected to the affair so it supersedes the necessity of seeking any further cause”. If Lamar didn’t have much respect for women, he didn’t have any respect for Mary Crow. About her he says “she was not equal to the upper 10,000, but almost equal to the upper 10,000 in many respects, especially in the liberal use of her tongue”. He goes on “no orator could excel her in fluency and certainly no one ever surpassed her in the provoking character of her rhetoric”. According to Lamar “her freedom of speech as well as her manners became finally a source of great annoyance to the ladies in the Fort, and a general disturbance in the whole garrison. Her expulsion became inevitable”. This 20-year-old spark plug from East Texas just didn’t fit in here. About Modella, Lamar describes him as “weak, vain, and impulsive. He had some ambition, strong resentments, and not a particle of principal or prudence”.

Modella and Mary became friends. Lamar says he had “amicable social relations with the obstreperous fair one”(Mary), and “he patronized her in her evil disposition toward others”. Modella’s insubordination would have challenged any military commander. He was finally arrested by Long and accused among other things of the following:

“Accused Dr Long of dishonest acts. Wrote threatening letters to everyone at the Fort. Refused to do duty. Withheld rations to the troops. Declared the garrison be put to the sword.”

Besides Mary, Modella had an ally in a fellow Mexican Antonio Coelho. He did his best to calm the waters between Modella and Long and succeeded in having him released. Modella would not be deterred however and attempted to put forth a forged letter from Trespalacios giving him command of the Fort. Long had him confined to his quarters. About the same time Modella and Mary proceeded to verbally attack the wife of a Captain Taylor resulting in Long ordering Milam and Austin to move Mary’s house out of the fort. Modella then wanted to join Mary there but was refused permission. He went anyway. According to Lamar “he went to Mary’s house and it cost him his life”. Long sent guards to bring him back. On the way back to the fort, he was met by Long. Modella challenged Long and came at him with a knife. Modella was shot by Long’s guards and died later. Modella was a popular figure among
Mexican patriots. His reported “execution” at Las Cassas for insubordination was not accepted well. It had to affect the relationship between Long and Trespalacios as well as Long’s reputation in Texas among the native Mexicans fighting for their independence. For Dr Long the killing might very well have determined his fate. In September, 1821, Long invaded Texas and captured Goliad. He was subsequently captured and marched to Mexico City. By this time the Mexicans had won their independence from Spain. Eventually, he was recognized by the new government as a fellow patriot fighting for the same cause and treated with respect by authorities in Mexico. Unfortunately, he was killed there under mysterious circumstances and according to most sources, at the orders of Felix Trespalacios in retaliation for the murder of Modella.

Before Long left Bolivar, in February or March 1821, James Campbell returned to the island of Galveston under the alias of Capt. Carrol. There he experience the Duval mutiny, was chased off by Long’s men to Louisiana, and lost his prize and ship. A short time later, he returned to Bolivar by land, was treated “coolly by Long”, and took Mary up the Sabine to raise a family.

Poor Mary! It wasn’t her fault she was involved in an international incident. Lamar blasted her and continuously referred to Long as “our hero”. Here was this 20 year old woman who had spent the past 36 months among a band of pirates and outlaws where she was the Campeche Queen, suddenly thrust into a military community with strict rules and regulations. The people she dealt with where more than likely educated and considered themselves a class above this East Texas brat pirate wife with significant “rhetoric”. Dr Long had an interesting set of rules for the fort, no corporal punishment and no foul language. According to Lamar anyway, Mary was a chronic violator of the second rule. Perhaps the only way she knew how to deal with the ostracism she might have encountered was to give them a good cursing out. I feel that the reason she went to Las Cassas was to wait out James’ return, and she did. The only other indication as to the true nature of Mary Crow’s character was the Galveston Daily News interview in 1879. In describing Mary the writer had said that she had “grown up to womanhood amid scenes little calculated to develop anything like manners, and whose graces of mind and person where the offspring of nature alone”. Of course his source, other than the 79 year little old lady he was interviewing, could have been Mirabeau Lamar.

I was privileged to have access to a series of personal letters between W T Block and Jean Epperson from 1991, right after Block wrote his famous comprehensive biography of James and Mary Campbell. In a letter from Jean praising Block’s work, she referred to the “other Mary” and said she loved the description of Mary in Lamar’s letters. Block wrote back shocked. He said he missed it. He told Jean “it’s hard to believe this Mary Crow was our Mary Campbell, but there is no doubt”. Block went on to suggest that there was possibly a romantic relationship between Long and Mary. I don’t believe it for a second. Dr Long prided himself for his morality and when he and Mary where at the fort Long was awaiting the arrival of his wife Jane. There would be no way to hide an affair between the two among such a small group of people. Instead I feel Long and Mary clashed from the beginning.

After I finished part one on the Campbells I asked Jean Epperson for a new subject to research. She told me I hadn’t finished the last one. She said I needed to tell the story of the “other Mary”. And a very interesting story it is. There is room for more research on the story. I’m sure there are other accounts of what happen at Fort Las Cassas in 1820. All we need to do is find them.

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