Laffite Society studies famous, mysterious island swashbuckler
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Notorious pirate Jean Laffite, who lived some of his 34 years on Galveston Island, died about 1823, but the neighbors are still talking about him.

The mystique that surrounded the man and the myths continue and has been embraced.

Laffite (sometimes spelled Laffitte or Lafitte) and the idea of swashbuckling pirates are found across the island: shops, restaurants, a hotel and a subdivision are all named for the genre of pirates or Laffite. There's even a group of serious Laffite aficionados in Galveston who meet, eat, drink, discuss and travel — all with the Laffites in mind.

Jean Laffite and his older brother Pierre lived in Galveston from around 1817 until 1821, where they commanded a band of buccaneers.

Their fort, called Campeche, was furnished with booty stolen from captured ships. Legend has it that they were smugglers and thieves, and were ordered off the island by the U.S. government — even though Galveston and Texas were not yet part of the union.

'Burned everything'

Laffite Society president Ed Jamison said the group, which has been meeting since 1994, is both a social and an academic organization. Members have traveled to other cities such as New Orleans and the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico to see Laffite-related museums, monuments and artifacts.

"The truth is, Jean Laffite didn't leave much on Galveston. We know he was here, but when he left, he burned everything, so there are no traces," Jamison said.

But before that, Laffite settled in with his buccaneers and built his home, Maison Rouge, on a small piece of land on what is now Harborside Drive at 14th Street.

According to a historical marker on the site, Laffite is said to have burned the village and then fled, sailing to the Yucatan.

Another building was erected on the site in 1870, over the cellars of Maison Rouge; remains of that structure can still be seen. The property today is owned by Dale Olson, one of the Laffite Society's founders.

Jamison said the group has a long-range plan of creating an annual Galveston festival based on the pirate theme and the Laffites.

'Certain mystique'

"It would be a fun opportunity for locals as well as visitors. The theme of pirates is entertaining and would be a good merchandising opportunity for businesses and for Galveston Island," Jamison said. "There is a certain mystique that goes with pirates and people seem to like that."

In addition, the group would like to travel to other destinations where there is historical evidence of Laffite sightings.

The Laffites have given local writers and musicians fodder for plays, movies, musicals and scores of books about the shenanigans of the two brothers. Island resident Jim Nonus, who has been sighted more than once in knee-high black boots and other pirate regalia, and who has written several short plays, performed for society members during their annual gala.

The plays are based on factual information, but are Nonus' creations.

Search for answers

Most historians note that brother Pierre was probably the more interesting of the two, but it is the renegade Jean who has captured the imagination of the Laffite Society. The group meets at 6 p.m. on the second Tuesday of each month at The Meridian, 2228 Seawall Blvd.

New members are encouraged to join. Interestingly, the Laffites are thanked by the Society "for providing just enough facts to make it interesting and more than enough secrets to make it challenging."

The search for answers continues.

Credit for the pictures on the next page goes to Jennifer Reynolds of the Galveston County Daily News.

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Dale Olson, left, one of the founders of the Laffite Society, and Ed Jameson, president of the group, stand at the historical marker on Harborside Drive where it is believed Jean Laffite built his home, Maison Rouge. According to legend, Laffite burned the village before moving to the Yucatan in Mexico.