George Gordon Byron wrote a romantic poem in 1813. The title of the poem was “The Corsair”.

Here are the first few lines of his poem:

“O’r the glad waters of the dark blue sea, Our thoughts are boundless, and our souls as free. Far as the breeze can bear, the billows foam, Survey our empire, and behold our home!”

And now the famous last lines:

“He left a corsair’s name to other times, Linked with one virtue and a thousand crimes.”
If you have belonged to the Laffite Society for very long, you’ve certainly heard these verses. And you’ve heard it in relation to Jean Laffite, a corsair, a privateer, a smuggler, and a gentleman. Far from Europe and Lord Byron he lived on another continent and in another culture. What linked these two?

Joseph Ingraham put the Byron verse and pirate Laffite together in a romantic novel he wrote in 1837. It depicted a “fanciful Laffite” just full of incorrect descriptions of times and events. It was all fiction but that’s all it took. A London edition of his novel inserted the famous last lines from Byron’s poem and that sealed it. The link is still with us today. It created its own myth- that Lord Byron was inspired to write the poem after reading about Laffite, the gentleman pirate. It created an even more bold connection- that the poem was actually about Laffite. As we shall see, the poet Lord Byron helped set all this up in the first place.

In order to fully understand these links we must first do some things. Number one is to define a Byronic Hero. Then we must look at the very interesting life of Lord Byron, and the autobiographical nature of his works. We need to find examples of the Byronic Hero and then apply the definition to our main subjects, Lord Byron and Jean Laffite. We must hear the story line of The Corsair, and finally propose the question of the day- to what extent, if any, was Lord Byron influenced by Jean Laffite?

Because of my personal ignorance in the ability to understand and appreciate 19th century romantic poetry, I must confess that my interest in Lord Byron is strictly biographical. I am not a fan of poetry or for that matter fiction in general.

Laffite Society member and past officer Pam Keyes wrote an article for the Laffite Chronicles about this subject in 2007. It was entitled “How Laffite Became the Real Life Byronic Hero”. I have corresponded with Mrs. Keys about my article and she has been more that gracious and helpful.

A Byronic Hero is a literary archetype popularized by Lord Byron. The Byronic Hero is an idealized but flawed character. The idea behind a Byronic Hero has been around in Western literature and folklore for a long time but it was in the early 19th century that the young and very popular English poet Lord Byron brought it to the forefront. Even today it continues to appear in literature, television and film. Everyone knows the legend of Robin Hood. The folklore appeared in 15th century England. Robin Hood is a perfect example of a Byronic Hero. He commits crimes- he steals! And he has virtue- he gives to the poor. Prior to Byron’s creation, a bad guy was a bad guy. He had no virtue. And the good guy was all virtue. The idea of a good girl liking a bad boy, well it wasn’t a popular theme in literature.

The Byronic Hero is present in many of Lord Byron’s work. He created and popularized this literary character. Here are some traits of a Byronic Hero. As we go through these traits think about the legends of Robin Hood and Jean Laffite. The Byronic Hero is defiant, mysterious, magnetic, and charismatic. He has been treated as an outlaw or shunned by society for some past crime or trouble past. He is cynical, but cunning and able to adapt. He is jaded and world wary as well as seductive and sexually attractive. He is rebellious. He is melancholy. He’s just a young attractive male with a bad reputation and a hidden virtue. There is always a girl involved and in the end the Byronic Hero’s virtue overcomes any crimes he might have committed in the past. Sound like anyone we know?
Here are some of my favorite examples of a Byronic Hero in modern literature and fictitious media:

Sam Spade- This is a character created by Dashiell Hammett’s novel *The Maltese Falcon* in 1930. Humphrey Bogart stared as Spade in the famous movie. Sam Spade popularized the private detective. He didn’t work within the law and many times he worked outside the law. In the end he accomplished what law enforcement could not, and did it with honor because it was right. His crimes- he was an outsider and suspect. His virtue- he won the day in the end.

James Dean- Even though James Dean only made three major movies, he played the Byronic Hero in all of them. In *Rebel Without a Cause* he was the rebel. As Jim Stark he was a new kid in town, with a troubled past and was treated as an outcast. In the movie *East of Eden* he plays Cade, the no good younger brother that was never going to amount to much, particularly in the eyes of his father and older brother. But in the end he was the hero and seemed to be the only one with enough sense to hold the family together. His crime was that he always was the outcast. His virtue was complex, but to me it the fact that he was so dammed cool.

Victor Frankenstein. This novel was written in 1816, by Mary Shelly, a young friend of Lord Byron’s. The novel was brought to near real life for us with the 1931 movie *Frankenstein* starring Boris Karloff as the monster. Dr. Frankenstein tries to use his talents to help mankind. He wants to create life. The creation of the monster of course turns out ugly and the doctor is painted as the ultimate bad guy, the creator of the monster. Dr Frankenstein’s crimes were that he created a murderous monster. What was his virtue? He was true and valiant in his attempt to help humankind.

Randall Murphy. This character was played by Jack Nicholson the 1962 movie *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Mr. Murphy was in the insane asylum for this bazaar behavior and aggressiveness. But yet, this crazy man restored self dignity to his small band of fellow inmates. His crimes were obvious but what was his virtue? What was it about him that made him the hero of the story?

You see one thing about a Byronic Hero is that you can decide what the virtue of the character is. Some times it's not so obvious.

Lord Byron was a Byronic Hero in real life. George Gordon Lord Byron was born in 1788 and died in 1824. Without a doubt he was one of the greatest British poets of all time. In his own short lifetime he was more popular than a modern rock star in today's world. He was a sensation throughout Europe and the world. He had a troubled life as a clubfooted youngster. Later he led a scandalized life as a young man abusing his nobility status and running up extraordinary debt. And then there was his sex life. It seems the only criterion for a love affair with Lord Byron was being a warm body. He had affairs with just about everyone including married women, unmarried woman, men, and relatives. His exploits scandalized his reputation to the point that he left his native England in a self imposed exile to mainland Europe at the age of 28, never to return. Lord Byron was a bad boy, but not a bad guy. A female acquaintance once described Lord Byron as “Mad, bad, and dangerous to know”.

During his youth Lord Byron traveled in Europe. Having to avoid France and Germany because of the wars of Napoleon, he traveled through and spent time in Portugal, Italy, and Greece. When he left England in 1816, he spent the last eight years of his life in Switzerland, Italy, and finally back to Greece. He died there fighting on behalf of the
Greeks in their war of independence from the Turks. He is still considered a hero in Greece today. He was 37 years old.

Lord Byron is still very popular today. There is an organization known as the Lord Byron Society. It has 36 chapters worldwide and was established in 1971. They publish an annual Journal of articles and have an international banquet each year.

What about the poem The Corsair? It was written in 10 days during the last of December, 1813. This poem provides a major link between Lord Byron and Jean Laffite. What was the story? The hero is Conrad the pirate, who falls in love with Gulnare, a sex slave belonging to a nobleman named Pasha Seyd. Conrad is of course a Byronic Hero. He steals Gulnare away from Pasha Seyd. But when given the opportunity to kill Seyd, Conrad refuses to do it, even though it could cost him his own life. Conrad had been rejected from society because of his crimes, but had the virtue and honor to refuse to kill an innocent man. His other virtue was his overwhelming romantic love for Gulnare.

Jean Laffite was a pirate with virtue, just like Conrad. Lord Byron was a bad boy, but produced the most wonderful poetry. Conrad, Laffite and Byron were Byronic Heroes. Jean Laffite’s crimes were piracy, smuggling, and tax evasion. His virtue was that he acted as a gentleman in his business. Or was his virtue the participation on behalf of his adoptive USA in the battle of New Orleans?

The two men were contemporaries. Byron was born in 1788, Laffite in 1782. Byron died in 1824 at the age of 37. Laffite died in 1823 at the age of 41. They never met of course. We know Byron knew of Laffite. We don’t really know if Laffite knew of Lord Byron. It’s a pretty good guess that he did. The fact is that Jean Laffite was a true life Byronic Hero at exactly the time that this literary phenomenon became so popular in romantic literature.

And now the famous footnote to the 9th printing edition to The Corsair. This footnote and edition was printed in early 1815. The footnote by Lord Byron referred to the last line in the poem “linked by one virtue and a thousand crimes”. In this lengthy footnote Lord Byron, in a couple of sentences, says this- if you don’t think a pirate can have virtue, check out this newspaper story from New Orleans about this guy Laffite. He then goes on to quote verbatim the whole article from the American newspaper. The article described the nature of smuggling and privateering in Barataria Louisiana. It identifies Jean Laffite as the leader of the illegal operations. It tells the tale of the dueling wanted posters between Laffite and Governor Claiborne. It describes an incident where Laffite’s men were being stalked by the authorities, when the officers themselves were ambushed and captured by the pirate and his men. Even though this man had threatened Laffite’s property and his life, Laffite treated him as a gentleman, releasing him to return to New Orleans, and even offered him some money, which he refused. This newspaper article that Byron quoted in the footnote was published in November, 1814. It was first printed in The National Intelligences and then quoted extensively in the Boston Weekly Messenger. At the earliest, Lord Byron could have read this article in December 1814, or January 1815.

Recapping the timeline here is very important. The poem The Corsair was written in December, 1813. The “Pirates of Barataria” news article was written in November, 1814. Lord Byron’s footnote referring to the article was printed in January, 1815, and this was just as the Battle of New Orleans occurred. Lord Byron could have known of Jean Laffite before the newspaper article but it’s not documented anywhere.
The question has always been whether Jean Laffite inspired Lord Byron to write *The Corsair*. What do the biographers say about it? Ingraham of course wrote fiction, but he set up the connection. Charles Gayarre, in the first serious biography of Laffite, tried to correct it in the mid-nineteenth century. Lyle Saxon correctly states that Lord Byron is in a large way responsible for Laffite's legend. But he is totally incorrect in stating *The Corsair* was written in 1816, and that Lord Byron wrote the poem after reading about Laffite at the Battle of New Orleans. In Jack Ramsay's biography of Jean Laffite in 1996, he leaves the influence question open. He says it was *believed* that Byron based his poem on the life of the pirate but also points out that it was Ingraham's fiction that actually linked the last lines of the poem to Jean Laffite. William Davis in his 2005 biography flatly says there was no Laffite influence on Lord Byron. He correctly points out that the Battle of New Orleans was fought over a year after Byron wrote the poem. One thing all the biographers accept is that the link is there and it permanently binds the stories of Lord Byron and Jean Laffite.

Jean Laffite must have read the newspaper story sometime after December, 1814. The footnote was printed in early 1815. Davis was correct about this. What about the idea of Byron reading earlier American news articles and accounts of Laffite before then? He might very well have known about Laffite in 1813, before he wrote the poem. In Pam Keyes' article she leaves this possibility open for those who would think Laffite influenced Lord Byron.

Other facts would argue against influence. Almost all literary scholars agree that Lord Byron's work was autobiographical. If one reads the story line in other Byron romantic poems this becomes apparent. Another factor is that the Byronic Hero was created and popularized well before the writing of *The Corsair*. Lord Byron had written *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and *The Bride of Abydos* in 1812 and early 1813. Also, Lord Byron had other experiences as a young man with pirates as he toured Europe, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean. These could have influenced him to create a virtuous pirate. The poem seems to take place in Europe and specifically the Mediterranean. Nothing in the story resembles Jean Laffite other than the fact that he and Conrad were both pirates and of course, they were both Byronic Heroes.

It is nice for us to know that Lord Byron recognized Jean Laffite as a real life personification of the character he had written about. I feel that Lord Byron was delighted to read the newspaper account in late 1814. He must have said "Look here, a real pirate with virtue, just like Conrad". Did Jean Laffite influence Lord Byron to write the poem? Was the poem written about Laffite? I don't think so, but the door is open to further research and for sure, other opinions. You see, the legend of Jean Laffite can be as mysterious as the man himself.