JAMES LONG, THE LAST FILIBUSTER
PART ONE: FAILURE OF THE FIRST EXPEDITION

JAMES LONG AND JEAN LAFFITE, 1819
Jack Watson

The purpose of this two-part article is not a biographical sketch of James Long. There is a chronology attached and it will serve that purpose. My objective is to cover four events between 1819 and 1822. These events shaped the James Long story and each leaves lingering questions for further study. The four subjects are:

1 - The failure of the first expedition
2 - Jean Laffite and James Long in 1819
3 - What happened at La Bahia in 1821
4 - James Long’s death in 1822

The Failure of the First Expedition

In the spring of 1819, in Natchez, Mississippi, James Long was selected to lead an enthusiastic crowd of expansionists with the goal of forming a military expedition in order to take Texas away from the Spanish. This group of filibusters was furious about the just negotiated Adams-Onis Treaty, whereby in return for Florida the United States ceded any claim to Texas and established the Western border of the U. S. at the Sabine River. This group had significant financial backing among their supporters, not only in Natchez, but other Southern cities, particularly New Orleans. They raised $500,000, organized their military unit, gathered supplies and rode out of town in June, 1819, headed for Texas. They had over 150 armed men on horseback and their departure was celebrated by cannon fire, loud local bands, and cheering spectators.

John Jamison advised U. S. Secretary of War John Calhoun that the expedition looked like puppies riding on a chariot, looking back, and telling themselves “what a dust we make”. He told the Secretary that the whole thing was a “ridiculous farce, and would end like all bubbles”. The U. S. government had plenty of reasons to hope that the expedition would fail. In fact, they tried to stop it along the way, nearly arresting Long before he left Natchez and then capturing and confiscating critical supplies and ammunition in Louisiana on its way to the filibusters in Nacogdoches. The U.S. government had clandestinely supported all previous private military attempts into Spanish Texas with money and supplies. But now they had just completed tedious negotiations with the Spanish that resulted in the Adams-Onis Treaty. This important treaty had not been ratified by the Spanish crown however, and the Spanish were very much concerned about any military foray by Americans across the Sabine. Long’s mission had the potential to torpedo the whole thing. This last filibuster movement in East Texas was as large if not larger than the Magee-Gutierrez expedition in 1812. It appeared to have the greatest chance of success. The $500,000 has been called an exaggeration by some historians. However, adjusted for inflation the figure would be a little over seven million in today’s dollars. It’s not hard to imagine a political organization with enough followers raising that amount in a short time today.

One has to wonder what possessed this man James Long. At the age of 25, he was a retired U.S. war hero, a physician and surgeon, and a successful businessman. He had a lovely young wife, Jane, and
a young daughter with another child on the way. Mirabeau Lamar refers to him as “the very hero for a tale of love and war”. Harris Gaylord Warren describes him this way, “he was an ambitious drifter who sought in vain for fame, fortune and importance”. Maybe it was just youthful indiscretion that pushed Dr. Long into putting all his wealth and family in jeopardy. He took off into the wilderness with 300 armed cowboys and left his poor pregnant wife back home. She only had to travel 250 miles to get to Nacogdoches. She had a newborn and was in bad health. Because of weather, it took her and her traveling aide over 20 days just to reach Alexandria, Louisiana! Two and a half months later, in September 1819, she reached Nacogdoches, having left her children with relatives and friends along the way. Lamar says it was Jane’s idea to go, but Lamar got all his information from guess who, Jane Long. James Long didn’t hang around anywhere too long. Within a few days of Jane’s arrival he was headed off to Galveston Island in order to try and convince the privateer Jean Laffite to join his expedition.

Praised as a war hero in the Battle of New Orleans, James Long considered himself as a natural born military leader of men. But evidence shows he was no George Custer. He was chosen as the leader of the expedition because the first man chosen, a Mr. Adair, refused the position. In addition to having actual war experience, Long was said to have been the most outspoken and enthusiastic member of the Natchez expansionist mob. The original group seemed easy enough for Long to handle, but by the time he got to Nacogdoches, having gone through the filibuster hotbed of Natchitoches, Louisiana, Long had over 300 men, many of which were veterans of previous expeditions into Texas. Some of these men were on their second and in some cases third attempt. After all their expected supplies were confiscated by federal agents in Louisiana, moral at James Long’s “Camp Freeman” declined significantly. Many abandoned the expedition, and those that remained descended into drunkenness and disorder, especially when Long was away. Long instructed his men to break up into smaller groups and live off the land until he could replace the ammunition and supplies for the Nacogdoches camp. He hoped to obtain this assistance from Jean Laffite in Galveston. But rumor at the camp was that the Spanish had fielded an army of 700 to march on their position and drive them back to Louisiana. Long was successful in signing up Laffite on October 7th, however he never got the supplies and ammunition he sought. Colonel Ignacio Perez attacked the invaders with a ragtag army of 500 that was underpaid, and under armed. Many were barefoot. But the filibusters scattered, with Long’s wife Jane barely making it across the Sabine ahead of the Spanish soldiers. On October 28th, Perez marched into an abandoned Nacogdoches. The first part of Long’s expedition was over in defeat and disarray. James Long had seen the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat in 1819. He had also lost his brother David, killed by Perez’s men as he tried to escape. Why did this mission fail?

The Long expedition had the best chance of success among all the other filibuster attempts. Spain was very weak. It took them three months to put Perez’s army in the field and even then it left a lot to be desired. With what he had, he did an impressive job of routing the invaders and driving them out of Spanish Texas. Had Long been able to march straight from Nacogdoches to San Antonio, fully supplied, he more than likely would have been in a position to end Spanish possession of Texas. The one thing that Long’s expedition lacked was political and financial aid from the U.S. government. All prior attempts to take the territory by Americans had that backing. A letter written to Lamar in 1841 by former Captain Eli Harris of the Long expedition, mentions the ammunition and supplies on barges that were captured by Federal agents in Donaldsonville, Louisiana in July, 1819. Harris claimed those supplies represented $300,000 of the $500,000 raised for the expedition. Intervention by the U.S. government doomed the first part of Long’s mission. Because of the loss, Long had to scatter his men. He lost his momentum and had to desperately seek alliance with a couple of characters he didn’t know and probably didn’t trust, Jean and Pierre Laffite.
James Long and Jean Laffite, 1819

“ships that pass in the night”

This often used phrase from a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1873 has had many interpretations. It is said of people who meet for a brief but intense moment and then depart, never to see each other again. They are like two ships that greet with flashing lights and then sail off into the night. And so it was with James Long and Jean Laffite. Each of these two enigmatic figures needed each other for a short while in 1819, but when that need disappeared, they went on about their ways.

1819 was to be a trying year for Jean Laffite. He was still reeling from the devastation on his commune at Campeche from the hurricane in September, 1818. He had lost many of his vessels and men. There was not enough food on the island to support his flock and even though the remaining vessels where able to bring in stolen Spanish goods, the majority of the goods were enslaved people from Africa. Although this type of cargo was lucrative, their maintenance costs were high. They had to be transported, housed and fed. Laffite had to put them all on sale at a dollar a pound. Adding to their woes was the fact that the Laffites must have realized that their days of operating a privateer base in the Northern Gulf of Mexico were close to an end. The U.S. government had already sent representatives to inquire when he would be leaving, not if he was leaving. Another part of the Laffite brothers’ revenue came from Spain, who, even though she was being robbed on the high seas, was willing to pay the Laffites well for intelligence. That intelligence came from spying on filibusters, particularly the Long expedition. The Laffite brothers were using the Long expedition to alarm the Spanish of an impending invasion. Laffite saw Long as an opportunity to extend his stay and his income. But the Spanish were weary of the brothers’ double dealing. They determined that the Laffites were loyal to no one but themselves, and they were right! Abandoned by the Spanish and threatened by the U.S., Jean and Pierre Laffite might even have considered actually joining the filibusters under Long. We can only say that this more than likely would never have worked. In the fall, things went further downhill for the Laffite enterprise. The George Brown affair, the U.S. capture of the Laffite vessel Le Brave, and the demolition of Long’s men in East Texas sealed the deal. The Laffites were to be leaving North American shores.

Long and Laffite exchanged correspondence in late June and early July. Long invited Laffite to join his Republic and serve as governor of Galveston, which would become the new Republic’s port of entry. Laffite begged for time to consult with his brother who was in Washington D.C. lobbying the Spanish for more spy money. Laffite gave Long just enough encouragement to string him along until September when he sent Long a written proposal for union between the two. The letter was delivered by two attorneys. Long must have been impressed. On October 7th, 1819, in Galveston, he met with Laffite for the first time and they both signed documents to finalize the deal. Laffite biographer William Davis said it best, “The Laffites were once again serving two masters and getting ready to betray one”. By this time Perez had crossed the Brazos River and was beginning to round up and chase out Long’s scattered participants. Long’s brother David was killed. Long got word of the rout on his way back to Nacogdoches. His wife had been safely evacuated to Louisiana. The Long expedition was all but dead and the Long/Laffite merger went nowhere. By the time he secured new financing for the second part of his mission and returned to Bolivar in the spring of 1820, Laffite was leaving the U.S. coast forever. Long allowed his wife Jane to
dine with Laffite one evening in Galveston accompanied by Long aide Warren D.C. Hall. James Long declined an invitation to join them. He didn’t trust Laffite, and for the famous privateer, Long no longer offered him opportunity. These ships had just passed.

**CHRONOLOGY**

2/9/1793- James Long born in Virginia

January, 1815- Long serves under Andrew Jackson as field surgeon at the Battle of New Orleans. Recognized for bravery.


1817- The Longs move to Natchez, Mississippi.

February, 1819- Adams-Onis Treaty finalized.

May, 1819- The Long expedition organizes in Natchez.

June, 1819- Long and his army of 300 men enter Texas and capture Nacogdoches.

6/22/1819- The Republic of Texas proclaimed and Supreme Council created with Long as President.

6/24/1819- Long’s first letter to Laffite delivered in Galveston by two emissaries. Long invites the privateer to join his expedition.

6/28/1819- Jane Long leaves Natchez for Nacogdoches to join her husband.

7/7/1819- Laffite writes to Long begging time but hinting strongly that he favors August, 1819- The first newspaper “Texas Republican” is published in Nacogdoches. Long sends second delegation to Galveston.

9/16/1819- Ignacio Perez gets orders to drive Long out of Texas. Jane arrives in Nacogdoches.

9/30/1819- Laffite sends letter carried by two attorneys with proposed legal arrangement for the merger.

10/7/1819- Long and Laffite apparently meet for the first time in Galveston. Agreements confirming the union are signed by each.

10/10/1819- Perez crosses the Brazos River

10/26/1819- Long completes evacuation of Nacogdoches in defeat.
10/28/1819- Perez occupies Nacogdoches.


4/6/1820- Long, accompanied by his wife Jane, returns to Bolivar’s Fort Las Casas. The second part of his mission begins.

May, 1820- Laffite leaves the U.S. coast and burns Campeche.

June, 1820- New Supreme Council convened at Bolivar. Colonel Ripley declared President.

July, 1820- James Long battles the Indians on Galveston Island. He kills 40 and drives the natives from the island.

August, 1820- Supreme Council declared Galveston as port of entry for the new Texas Republic and a tariff established at 15%.

January, 1821- Don Santiago Modella, nephew of Trespalacios, is “executed” by Long at Bolivar. This possibly sealed Long’s fate in Mexico City later.

9/19/1821- Long leaves Bolivar with 50 men and captures La Bahia via the Bay of Copano.

October, 1821- Long and his men surrender at La Bahia to Perez. They are treated poorly and marched to Monterrey.

March, 1821- Long finally released and brought to Mexico City

4/8/1821- James Long shot and killed in Mexico City under suspicious circumstances.

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