Set in Champ d’Asile
Betje Black Klier, Ph.D

[Program chairman note: The Laffite Society had the opportunity to hear from Dr. Betje Black Klier, Ph.D., as our program speaker in Nov, 2012. In addition, Dr. Klier will be a featured speaker at the Laffite Seminar next April. According to Dr. Klier the story of Champ d’Asile “has been the residence of my soul and intellect for two decades”. The following is a letter to the Laffite Society in reference to her talk last fall.]

Laffite Society: While preparing the manuscript for Set in Champ d’Asile, it was essential to accurately identify several maps of the area and plans of the colony. Questions of maps of the Trinity River and the Gulf of Mexico often send me to my friend the local map guru, Jean Epperson. After two decades of ready assistance, I made a discovery with which to reciprocate her generosity. Lo’ and behold, in November 2012, Jean accepted my gift from Spain without surprise and reciprocated with additional clarifications from Laffite Society members, Dorothy Karilanovic and Jeff Modzelewski, who, in 1995, had been studying a copy of the same map from the Rosenberg Library. Being ardent researchers, they had requested an original from the Archivo General de la Nacion in Mexico City. Dorothy graciously provided me copies of her working papers of this "Photographic Reproduction of the original map of the Bahia de Galveston fechado en 1810." In January 1996, their colleague Tom Oertling published an article in the Laffite Society Chronicles that included Dorothy and Jeff's translations of the texts and the image of the so-called 1810 map. Based on the documented 1815 arrival of Colonel Henry Perry and former Napoleonic General Jean Amable Humbert, Tom refuted the accepted 1810 date of the map. In her book Filibusters, Pirates and Privateers of the Early Texas Coast, Jean furthered the argument by suggesting that Bartholomé Lafon should be considered as the possible mapmaker because the published letters of Governor Antonio Martinez mention that Lafon sent him a map in 1817.

During the same years, I was searching for the cartographer of what I always called the "ubiquitous map" of the colony of Champ d’Asile—"ubiquitous" because it appears in numerous publications, always without proper credit. Lopping off the miniscule signature below the line drawn around the map may have yielded a more attractive map for publication, then subsequent publications followed suit. In my quest to acknowledge the cartographer, in the Spanish National Archives I discovered serendipitously copies of the maps of Galveston Bay because the same cartographer—Valentín Ampudia—prepared all of them in the same year.

The 1819 map of Galveston Bay that I sent to Jean as a "thank you" and "surprise" does not prove that she is wrong about Lafon. Instead, Ampudia's map contributes to the on-going conversation about the identity of the cartographer who produced the previously called "1810 map." Furthermore, knowing his name this does not rule out the possibility that Lafon provided the survey of the Gulf Coast, as Jean suggested. Although a few exceedingly versatile men, such as Lafon and his partner Arsene LaCarriere Latour, worked in the region, we must remember that not all cartographers are artists or surveyors, nor are all engineers warriors or architects. Someone must have waded into the Gulf, but we don't know whose feet got wet, just whose pen dipped into the ink. After all, government cartographers have access to previous documents. They are expected to further knowledge by synthesizing new discoveries with
previous information before presenting the improved conceptualization in an attractive format. Now, more issues arise for the Laffite Society to tackle. For instance, Did Lafon's map(s) reach Mexico City? Was Ampudia present at the dismantling of the colony on the Trinity in October 1818? The recent mandate of the European Union to make historical materials available on the World Wide Web enriches the possibilities for uncovering our past every day. (Too bad for us, Mexico isn't under the same mandate.)

Thanks to all who contributed to constructing this story, now somewhat debugged and tweaked. I hope all Laffite Society debuggers and tweakers will look forward to an illustrated Valentine from me, featuring the cartographer's warnings to ship captains and instructions for avoiding pirates. Or perhaps you do not wish to avoid pirates?

Betje Klier