The Curious Case of the Laffite Bibles
By Pam Keyes

The biggest mystery in the Jean Laffite Collection at Sam Houston Regional Library at Liberty, Texas, is not the Journal of Jean Laffite manuscript, rather, it is the two French Bibles that are part of that same collection. Both La Sainte Bibles were published in French in New York, one in 1820, and the other in 1839, and both contain purported genealogical data relating to the family of the famous privateers Jean and Pierre Laffite, and to Jean’s second wife, Emma Mortimore. Some of these entries are duplicated in handwriting on otherwise blank pages between the two Bibles.

The 1820 Bible bears an 1832 dated French inscription with the flourished signature of Jean Laffite:

“Jan. 1, 1832 Je la presente a ma chere bien amee Madamoiselle Emma Hortense Mortimore De ton fidele Jean Laffite.”

The inscription is opposite the title page.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of these two Bibles is the death information about Jean Laffite, found in handwritten duplicated entries in both, claiming that he died May 5, 1854, in Alton, Ill. (This conflicts with the Colombian newspaper account of the Feb. 5, 1823, death of Jean Laffite on the General Santander privateer off the coast of Honduras due to wounds incurred in a battle with Spanish ships)

Genealogical data written in various penmanship in these two volumes goes from 1608 to 1924, and would seem to contain a wealth of information about Jean Laffite, but none of the material given about him in these books has been located elsewhere in French, Caribbean or US archives. The fact that none of the data has been confirmed independently of the Laffite Collection has resulted in most professional researchers choosing to overlook the Bibles and debunk them as worthless historically. Further, the Bibles’ association with purported Laffite descendant John A. Laffite/Nafusinger/Matejka as part of the Laffite Collection which he sold to William Simpson and Johnny Jenkins in 1969 has made some historians suspect them as possible forgeries.

However, the Laffite Bibles are more than what they appear at first glance. After a thorough perusal through copies of all written pages in the two Bibles, provided by Sam Houston’s staff at the author’s request in the Fall of 2013, some surprising discoveries were made. The most astonishing finding is that the facsimiles of the Laffite Bible data and inscriptions shown in Stanley Clisby Arthur’s “Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover” biography (1952, Harmanson) do not match handwriting of the same statements in either of the Laffite Bibles in the collection at Sam Houston. The Arthur book’s photostat facsimiles were made from some other Laffite Bible that John A. Laffite showed to Arthur, a Laffite Bible which is not, and has never been, a part of the Laffite Collection at Sam Houston.

As an example, see the illustration. At top is the Jean Laffite inscription to Emma found in the 1820 La Sainte Bible. At bottom is the same, taken from Arthur’s facsimile. Note that Laffite is spelled “Lafite” in Arthur’s rendition. Also, note the handwriting differences, and the different positioning of words and letters. The January 1 of the 1820 Bible is January 4 in the Arthur facsimile. The “De ton fidele” endearment of the salutation is faint in the 1820 Bible, heavy in the Arthur version, plus the penmanship is different on the signature itself. It is clearly a different example.

All the Bible entry facsimiles shown in Arthur’s book which were supposedly taken from a Laffite Bible are different from any in the two Bibles at Sam Houston, but the differences don’t stop there. More surprises were found.
On page 220 of “Gentleman Rover,” Arthur reproduces a Jean Laffite signed statement which Arthur says was from a flyleaf of the (Laffite) Bible. The statement says in French, “I owe all my ingenuity to the great intuition of my Grandmother, a Spanish Jewess, who was a witness at the time of the Inquisition.” This inscription is not found in any form in either the 1820 or 1839 Bibles in the Laffite Collection at Sam Houston. The statement is found, in photographic rendition, in the Vantage Press 1958 edition of “The Journal of Jean Laffite,” privately printed by John A. Laffite. The inscription, however, is not the same as the one in the Arthur book.

So we have two different Laffite inscriptions with the same wording about the grandmother, neither of which are found in the two Bibles at Liberty. Where did they come from? There is a clue. In the Vantage Press book, a title page is shown for yet another La Sainte Bible, but this one is a 1798 French one published in Amsterdam!

What happened to the 1798 Bible? Why isn’t it in the Laffite Collection at Sam Houston? And just how many Laffite Bibles were there, after all, with copied writings?

There does seem to be an answer to the conundrum of what happened to the missing pages/Bibles, found in a letter John A. Laffite wrote to Audrey Lloyd of Midland, Texas, in the late 1960s:

“Their (sic) whole or entire family tree of my ancestors three children, two sons, and one daughter were in one bible fly leaf. Another “Bible” of Pierre Laffite’s descendants down and another “bible Hebrew,” and another “A Portuguese Bible” and a “Masonic Bible” were lost in the house fire on Dec. 8, 1959. The 1798 delicate bible was completely soaked with water from fire dept. soaking into charred debris of TV studio fire that ruined it beyond description.”

(This letter to Mrs. Lloyd is in the Sam Houston Laffite Collection, along with other letters from John A. Laffite to Mrs. Lloyd, a writer that he was trying to get to write a book.)

If we take John A. Laffite’s report to Mrs. Lloyd at face value, there were no less than seven Laffite-related Bibles, but five of those were lost to fires.

At this point, given that many researchers and historians think John A. Laffite was a fraud and possibly a forger, most would probably shrug their shoulders and say, so what, all the Bibles are fakes. There is a last surprise, though, a revelation that will show that the Laffite Bibles at Sam Houston are not and could not have been fakes. Instead, they are actually bigger mysteries than the Laffite Journal itself!

The 1820 New York imprint, French edition of the La Sainte Bible is extremely rare in the rare book market. There are none like it listed on the main rare book dealer’s online search engine, ABE.com. Ones which are similar are in the $4,000 range. The 1839 New York imprint, French edition of La Sainte Bible is almost as rare. The early Masonic Bible mentioned in John A.’s letter as being in the original Laffite Collection is even rarer than the 1820 Bible. These early 1800s American imprint Bibles have been of extreme rarity for many years, due to the fact that few were printed at the time, thus there was a very low press run. The ones which do survive generally have family data written in them. A pristine unmarked 1820 or 1839 French Bible published in New York would be almost impossible to find today at any price. The same conditions held true in the 1940s, when John A. supposedly amassed and faked the collection. Even if he could have found such rare Bibles to manifest Laffite forgeries, he could not have afforded them on his paltry railroad engineers’ pay from the Missouri Pacific Railroad.

By the process of elimination and deductive reasoning, the answer seems clear: the 1820 and 1839 Bibles at Sam Houston are genuine. They are not forgeries; the unique and duplicated written information in them about Laffite genealogy apparently resulted from family members copying information between their Bibles, as the penmanship varies widely. The great enigma remains their provenance.
* The Jean Laffite Collection which belonged to John A. Laffite was donated to the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, by former Texas governor Price Daniel in 1978. In addition to the 1820 and 1839 Bibles, that collection includes the 257-page Journal of Jean Laffite French manuscript in a leather bound volume; a leather bound ledger book; a small leather bound copy book dating from 1840; a small leather bound book printed in 1850; photographs of family and friends dating from 1850-1900 (21 loose photos and a photo album); a small 6 by 8-inch portrait of Jean Laffite; an 1806 Laffite ship document, and a large portfolio containing photographs used in Stanley Clisby Arthur’s “Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover” book. Daniel purchased the collection in 1975 from William Simpson of Houston for $12,500. (Source: Introduction, the Journal of Jean Laffite, Its History and Controversy, by Robert L. Schaadt from “The Memoirs of Jean Laffite,” translated by Gene Marshall, 1999, Xlibris Corporation.)