The Dark Fate of Andrew Whiteman

By

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Baratarian smuggler Andrew Whiteman’s life had been a series of “perilous adventures” encompassing both the cause of the start of the War of 1812, as an impressed seaman, and the end of that battle, at the Chalmette Plantation, fighting for the US 44th Infantry under General Andrew Jackson’s leadership. Some three years after the Jan. 8, 1815 American victory against the British, the very New Orleanians Whiteman had helped save would hang him because he had followed Jean Laffite’s orders during a smuggling shooting incident in 1813. (1)

Through a quirk of circumstance, Whiteman was one of the Baratarians who hadn’t been eligible for the clean slate of a presidential pardon for past wrongs which was proffered to the others to get them to help fight against the British during the invasion in December 1814. That is because the native Philadelphian was already a private in the service of the United States Army, 44th US Infantry, under Col. George Ross. (2)

Whiteman was given the death sentence following a guilty verdict in a trial by jury in New Orleans in early 1818. He was charged with shooting with intent to kill a man named M’Koy who was helping temporary customs agent Walker Gilbert contend with smugglers in the Donaldsonville area of the Mississippi River on Oct. 14, 1813. The charge was a capital offense of shooting with intent to commit the crime of murder, even though M’Koy hadn’t been hit by the shot. (3)

Criminal court records of 1817-1818 New Orleans for the Whiteman trial have not been located in any archive, but the result of the sentence, possibly due to its cruelty and ironic story, was published in newspapers on the East Coast within a month. (4)

It was only a short walk from the Cabildo jail to the temporary gallows set up on Jackson Square on that early spring day on March 2, 1818. The Catholic priest and hangman waited for Whiteman and the sheriff to ascend the steps, the noose was placed over Whiteman’s neck, tightened at the back knot, and the hangman waited while the priest gave the last rites. Then the sheriff gave the signal, and the trap door swung open beneath the condemned man’s feet.

At the age of 15, Whiteman had first gotten a job as a sailor on a merchant vessel in 1802 at his home port of Philadelphia. His parents, while not wealthy, were respectable. He was adventurous and soon joined the fledgling American naval squadron, serving in the Mediterranean with them to quell the Barbary pirates of Tripoli and Algiers in 1805 at the conclusion of the First Barbary War.

Returning to Philadelphia after his discharge with the Navy, Whiteman again sailed for the merchant service. Unhappily sometime before 1808 his unnamed ship was stopped by the British frigate ship La Virginie and Whiteman was impressed for duty even though he was an American. Transferred not long afterward to another British ship, somehow Whiteman managed to escape and made his way by sea back to the United States in time for the outbreak of the War of 1812. (5)

Between 1793 and 1812, some 15,000 American sailors were forcibly taken by the British from merchant ships at sea to supplement their naval fleet during the Napoleonic Wars with France. (6)

It isn’t known how the young sailor made his way to Barataria, only that he said he joined Jean Laffite’s crew of privateersmen in 1812 there, at a time when the Laffite smuggling and privateering venture was just beginning to become a significant problem to local revenue agents and Spanish shipping in the Gulf of Mexico.

Trained by his time with naval officers to obey, Whiteman also followed Jean Laffite’s orders to the letter, without question. He was to pay dearly for that.
According to a deposition Whiteman gave in a New Orleans courtroom on Nov. 24, 1813, on Oct. 14 of that year he had been with Jean Laffite, a fellow smuggler named Scott, and three unnamed mulatto men at the home of a man named Gaudin close to the Donaldsonville area near the levee of the Mississippi River when they got word that Walker Gilbert and some men were taking some goods earlier seized from the Laffite's downriver to New Orleans in a keelboat. Some six miles upriver of New Orleans, the Laffite group found the Gilbert boat being pulled by ropes and poles down the river by a man on each side of the banks. Three men were on top of the Gilbert boat, and Gilbert was inside the cabin. Laffite sent Whiteman, Scott, and one of his other men in a pirogue to board the keelboat while he stopped the cordeller. Jean told Whiteman to “fire in case of being fired at” and to demand the boat’s surrender with the threat that Jean would fire upon it from the bank otherwise.

Whiteman and Scott boarded the keelboat, as Scott called in French for Gilbert and his men to give up. William Randall, one of the men who had been on top of the cabin, darted inside to load his musket, but Gilbert already had his ready, and fired some buckshot at Scott’s head as he entered the cabin holding two pistols. Scott fired back, hitting Randall in the thigh, and then Whiteman fired his musket into the cabin and demanded that Gilbert give up Laffite’s goods. Laffite and the mulatto with him then jumped into the boat from shore, and Gilbert and his men surrendered. (7)

Randall and Scott were the only ones injured in the incident, although a man named M’Koy with Gilbert must have been in the cabin as well, and narrowly missed injury when Whiteman fired without hitting anyone.

The smugglers recouped their goods, then transported Randall to a house upriver where he could get medical attention. The next day, the goods were taken across the river to buyers from New Orleans. Gilbert and the others were released to return home to the Donaldsonville area, but instead, Gilbert wasted no time in filing a complaint in New Orleans against Jean Laffite (Case #0573 United States vs. Jean Laffite). (8)

Jean Laffite avoided arrest, but Andrew Whiteman did not. He was arrested and brought before the court slightly over a month later, during which he gave a detailed report in his deposition of some of the history of the Laffite smuggling and privateering operation in addition to the incident with Gilbert. (9)

After Nov. 24, 1813, Whiteman seems to have left the Baratarians for other work closer to New Orleans. He does not appear in the records again until April 25, 1814, when he testifies for a grand jury. The testimony he gives at this time directly results in Pierre Laffite’s subsequent arrest in June in the French Quarter. (10)

His role as an informant for the authorities at New Orleans made Whiteman a prime target for Baratarian reprisal, so that was likely the reason he chose to take the safest route and join the Army at New Orleans.

On May 12, 1814, Whiteman enlisted as a private in the 44th US Infantry with company commander Capt. Joseph J. Miles. A description of Whiteman comes from the enlistment roll: he was 27 years old, 5 feet, 8 ½ inches tall, with hazel eyes, dark hair and a fair complexion. He listed his occupation as “sailor.” He probably had a lean and wiry build from climbing rigging to set sails and similar work.

As a soldier with the 44th, Whiteman served in all the battles that took place during the British invasion of Louisiana, including the Battle of New Orleans. (11)

Whiteman also had been one of the 70 members of the 44th who had helped assist Commander Daniel Todd Patterson and Col. George Ross in their raid of the Laffite stronghold of Grande Terre in September, 1814. One can only wonder what the captured Baratarians must have thought when they saw their former compatriot among the American raiders.
After peace was declared between the US and Britain in February 1815, Whiteman’s enlistment came to a close when he was mustered out and discharged in April 1815. (12)

According to a newspaper account about Whiteman in the American Daily Advertiser of April 8, 1818, “Since the peace and subsequent reduction of the army his (Whiteman’s) career has been extremely vicious; his associates have commonly been the most abandoned villains who fly to New Orleans in order to escape the hand of justice at home; his residence has been in brothels and Catalan shops (bars), those sinks of iniquity and receptacles of plunder, where the experienced malefactors may find patrons and coadjutors and the uninitiated are sure to meet with prompters and instructors.”

It remains a mystery why the shooting charge was brought up against Whiteman some five years after it had occurred. Possibly he had gotten into a fight or duped the wrong person at a bar. Perhaps he knew too much from his smuggling days about a New Orleans merchant or authority figure, and they decided to pull political strings to silence him forever, least he spill more information to some other grand jury.

The mysterious M’Koy who Whiteman is said to have targeted with his gun in 1813 is a shadowy figure unable to be found in the archives. He apparently only assisted Gilbert that one time, then faded into obscurity again.

It is impossible to tell who testified against Whiteman at his 1818 trial, but the most likely scenario is his own deposition from 1813 was probably used against him, in addition to Gilbert’s deposition at that time.

A measure of Whiteman’s character may be garnered from the description of his last days: “(He) met his fate with great fortitude; during the awful scene of preparation at the place of execution he exhibited not the slightest sign of fear. In prison after his condemnation he confessed to the several clergymen who visited him, that he had perpetrated a number of crimes, some of them deserving capital punishment. Two or three days before his execution he appeared to be deeply penitent, and expressed a lively hope of forgiveness at the throne of mercy.” (13)

The contemporary news account of his end shows that the newspaper writer thought Whiteman received justice for his crime:

“We hope that the example of Whiteman will convince the gang of assassins who infest the city of New Orleans, and whose crimes cry aloud to Heaven for punishment, that Justice, though slow, is sure, and will at last assuredly overtake them, although they may triumph in their wickedness and laugh at the idea of detection; above all, we hope it will convince them that the criminal laws of the state are equally just and terrible in their inflictions, and not a mere cob-web, to be evaded by the ingenious or prostrated by the powerful.” (14)

Almost as soon as he was hanged, Andrew Whiteman was forgotten; the story of his trial and execution quickly became yesterday’s news, and only the keelboat capture and some contents of his depositions about the Laffites were published in history accounts of later years. Everyone forgot about Andrew Whiteman, except for one person Jean Laffite.

In the controversial Journal of Jean Laffite, he wrote on Nov. 9, 1846:

“On March 2, 1818, John (?) Whitman was hanged in New Orleans for having struck down an officer of the Confederate Army in 1813. His trial dragged on until, finally, he could not absolve himself of firing first. His attorneys cost me 9,000 dollars. The execution of John Whitman gave the papers the chance to widely publish false news about my commune.” (15)

Why would Jean Laffite have paid a fortune in legal expenses to try to save the man who had ratted out Pierre to the grand jury? More importantly, if the Laffite Journal is a fraud, how did the writer get the information about the execution correct except for the first name and the spelling of the last name? That information has not been published in any history book. The author of this article only
learned that the execution information in the Journal was correct when a search was done of 1818 contemporaneous newspapers online at the request of a friend, Aya Katz, host of the Historia Obscura blog.

Whatever the case, Andrew Whiteman led an adventure-filled life almost rivaling those of his associates, the Laffites. Sadly, he was a Battle of New Orleans Baratarian hero whose past crimes were not expunged because he had joined the American cause too early to be eligible for pardon.

FOOTNOTES

(1) Poulson’s American Daily Advertiser (Philadelphia, PA) April 8, 1818.

(2) Andrew Whiteman, Register of Enlistments in the United States Army 1798-1914, National Archives.

(3) Poulson’s.

(4) Poulson’s; Spirit of the Times, Carlisle, Penn., April 13, 1818; New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette, Concord, N.H., April 21, 1818; Baltimore Patriot, Baltimore, Md., April 17, 1818; Washington Review and Examiner, Washington, Penn., April 27, 1818, and Evening Post, New York, N.Y., April 17, 1818.

(5) Poulson’s.

(6) http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/british-navy-impressment


(8) October 16, 1813, United States vs. Jean Laffite, Case #0573, National Archives Fort Worth.

(9) Davis, Pirates Laffite, pp. 119-121.

(10) Whiteman deposition, Nov. 24, 1813, Sabourin, Tulane.

(11) Whiteman, Register of Enlistments.

(12) Ibid.

(13) Poulson’s.

(14) Ibid.