REFERENCES IN GRAY’S DIARY: INVESTIGATIVE LEADS FOR LAFFITE RESEARCH
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One of the most fascinating documents archived in the Galveston and Texas History Center at the Rosenberg Library, Galveston, Texas, is the diary of Colonel William F. Gray. While it is extremely interesting that Gray’s diary details the people he met and the places he visited, it is more intriguing that he references surveys, charts, maps and documents of others who preceded him in their visitations to Galveston Island and the surrounding area. If these important resources are still in existence and can be located, they may prove invaluable in pinpointing the site of Laffite’s settlement on the island and in revealing other information about him.

Gray, a native of Virginia, was a pious, versatile man who was intensely interested in everything around him. During his several visits to Texas in 1835, 1836 and 1837, and after seeing the liberty-loving Texas soldiers at San Jacinto, the determination of Texas leaders at the signing of the declaration of independence, and the courage of Texas settlers in Houston, Gray was convinced that this latter city was the place for him and his family.

Gray moved to Houston in 1837, where he lived until his death in 1841. He was a publisher, postmaster, Freemason, military man, lawyer, clerk of the Texas House of Representatives, Secretary of the Texas Senate, and clerk of the Texas Supreme Court.

The first mention of Galveston Island in Gray’s diary was on January 10, 1836. He was in New Orleans and had a long conversation about Texas with A. J. Yates, who thinks that “Galveston Bay will become the principal commercial depot of Texas” and that a group of New York capitalists have purchased a league of land on the island, “including Laffite’s old fort on which they design building the city of Galveston.”

Gray reported that on January 2 he had met a Mr. Yates, a New York lawyer, who had told him that he was going to settle a plantation on Galveston Bay. Yates related that he would go into the cattle business, buy some native Mexicans who had forfeited their liberty by debt, and use them as herdsmen. While talking, Yates showed Gray a chart of Galveston Bay which was made under his direction by an old sailor. Gray borrowed it to copy. Gray recorded that he was much interested in Mr. Yates and his plans because he was very intelligent and gentlemanly.

Further research about Mr. Yates revealed that upon arriving in Texas in 1835, he applied for a headright in Lorenzo de Zavala’s colony. He located near the town of Liberty, where he lived until 1841 when he removed to Galveston. There he began publishing the Daily Advertiser. In 1851 he moved to San Jose, California, where he practiced law until his death in 1856. Opal Rosson wrote her M.A. thesis at the University of Texas (1939) on Mr. Yates, it was titled “The Life of Andrew Janeway Yates.” (Author’s note: has any of our readers seen this thesis?)

After Gray talked to Mr. Yates, he relates in the diary that he wrote a letter to Mrs. Gray on January 10. Perhaps much more information about Galveston is contained in this letter, as well as in the chart commissioned by Yates and copied by Gray, but it is not known if they still exist and can be located in any surviving Gray and Yates papers.

On February 28, 1836, while at Washington (present-day Washington-on-the-Brazos) for the election of members to the new convention (he was not elected as he had hoped), Gray met Lorenzo de Zavala, whom he noted as “the most interesting man in Texas.” He recorded that Zavala was a native of the Yucatán, Governor of the State of Mexico for five years, minister of the fiscal department, and Ambassador to France from the Republic of Mexico, which latter post he renounced when Santa Anna proved recreant to the liberal cause.

Zavala had resided for some time in the United States. He then was living on Buffalo Bayou, near Galveston Bay. He was a fine writer and had published a volume recounting his travels in the United States; it was printed in Paris in the Spanish language. Gray wrote himself a note to procure a copy and a letter to Mrs. Gray on March 5 which perhaps mentioned Zavala. (Author’s note: it would be interesting to locate (a) the memoirs/papers of Zavala and search for mention of Laffite either in Galveston or the Yucatán, and (b) Colonel Gray’s letter to Mrs. Gray in the Gray papers.)

On March 21, Gray and many other gentlemen, including Robert Tripplett, left for Harrisburg (see below). On March 23, he visited the home of Zavala on a point at the junction of Buffalo Bayou and the old San Jacinto River (the present San Jacinto running some distance off). He reported that the house was small, and that it contained one large room, three small bed closets, a porch, a kitchen, etc. He met Mrs. (Emily) Zavala, who was 27 years old, a native of the
State of New York, and whose maiden name was West. She was Zavala's second wife. Gray mentions that Zavala was 47 years old.

Further research has revealed that Zavala was born in 1789 in Tecoh, near Mérida, Yucatán. He was a member of the Yucatán Provincial Assembly in 1820-1821 representing Yucatán in the Spanish Cortes in Madrid, until he learned of the Mexican declaration of independence. He was a member of the Mexican Constituent Congress and the Mexican Senate from 1822 to 1826.

Gray reported that the Zavala's had one son, Lorenzo Zavala, Jr., who was born in the Yucatán. He must have been born during the period Laffitte lived, and supposedly died, there. Perhaps Zavala, Sr., may have encountered Laffitte or may have written about him in any journals he may have kept.

Zavala received an empresario contract on March 12, 1829, to introduce five hundred families into Texas. On October 12, 1830, he, with David G. Burnet and Joseph Vehlein, transferred his empresario contract to the Galveston Bay and Texas Land Company. Zavala left Texas for a period and went back to Mexico, but he returned to Texas in July, 1835, where he bought a home (built c. 1822) on Buffalo Bayou from Philip Singleton and installed his family in December. Following the battle of San Jacinto, the Zavala home, just across the bayou from the battlefield, was used as a hospital for wounded Texans and later for wounded Mexicans.

Between 1820 and 1832, Zavala published a number of works on Mexican politics; probably the most important was his two-volume "Ensayo Histórico de las Revoluciones de México, desde 1808 hasta 1830," which was printed in Paris in 1831-1832 and reprinted in 1845 and 1918. Also, Raymond Estep wrote his Ph.D. thesis at the University of Texas (1942) entitled, "The Life of Lorenzo de Zavala," and this is another source worthy of research.

The diary goes on to report that on April 6, 1836, Gray boarded at Clopper's Point (New Washington), near present day Morgan's Point, the steamboat Cayuga, bound for Galveston Island. He was accompanied by Robert Trippett (from Kentucky via Tennessee), a Dr. Neblett (from Virginia), and Nathaniel I. Dobie of Harrisburg, Texas (Author's note: do any readers possess information on Dobie?). On April 7 they passed to the west of Pelican Island, "the harbor being between that island, Galveston Island and Point Bolivar." He went ashore with Trippett and Neblett from the harbor and walked across the island and around its head by the beach, where he enjoyed for the first time a full view of the great ocean. "The fresh breeze from the south brought the waves in with a noise resembling a great waterfall."

"Trippett and Neblett measured off two sections of ground here [Author's note: where is a copy of said survey, if it exists?], as the site of a future town [Galveston]," which included "the site of Laffitte's old fort, the shape of which, and some remains of his operations, in the shape of broken bottles, crockery, bricks, nails, etc. are still visible [Author's note: is this description of the site the first one since Laffitte's leaving Galveston Island?]"

While in New Orleans on December 31, Gray recorded that Trippett had made a conditional purchase of land in Texas [Galveston] of A. C. Allen, dependent on his being satisfied with the title, etc., after having looked into it. Gray further records that "the whole island is low, no part that I have seen ten feet above ordinary tide, and I am told has all been overflowed since the settlement of the country." (Author's note: As far as I know, there were no major hurricanes after Laffitte left Galveston until Gray arrived that could have damaged what was left of the site. The hurricane of 1818 occurred during Laffitte's habitation, and there was a hurricane in October, 1837.)

Gray further reports that "the shores are very shoal and no part presents a good site for a city. But no other place can vessels drawing more than two or three feet approach within two or three hundred yards of the shore. The Island is forty miles long-only three trees on it [he was probably told this, as he does not recount going to the west end of the island]. No habitation, except for many birds, cranes, curlews, gulls and pelicans; fine pasturage. A great number of deer on the island. The best entrance to the harbor is from the east. (See Canty's Chart.)" (Author's note: who was Canty, and does his chart exist in any archives?) A. C. Allen also told Gray that he and a company of New York owned a league at the harbor where they intended to build a city. Gray records that Burnet said that it had never passed from the government.

Further research reveals that Dr. Neblett was Robert Caldwell Neblett, a Virginian, who located on the east bank of the Sabine River in 1833 at what is known as Neblett's Bluff. Many Texan immigrants received medical attention, supplies and hospitality at his plantation. He later moved to Houston in 1840 before locating on a plantation in Grimes County. He died in Anderson in 1871. W. T. Neblett wrote "Neblett's Bluff on Sabine River", which is located in the archives collection (MS), University of Texas.

On April 13, 1836, Gray records that Trippett, Neblett and Dobie left Lynch's (Ferry) and hastened on to Harrisburg in order to get a grant from the government of the land they had located on Galveston and Point Bolivar, in which Gray had taken an interest
equal to his interest in the loan. He further relates on April 15 that that morning Neblett rode out to meet President Burnet to ask him to sign the grant for two sections of land on Galveston Island and one on Point Bolivar.

While Gray was waiting for these gentlemen, who had borrowed his horse to return, he wrote Mrs. Gray an account of Galveston Bay and Island. (Author's note: do these letters exist and would they detail his visit to the site of Laffite's fort in more detail?) He further notes that on May 9, while back in New Orleans, Neblett is much elated with his Galveston scheme and thinks he can make a good speculation in it. Gray also reports that Neblett and seven gentlemen have agreed to take shares in it at $1,000 each, and run all risks. S. W. Williams, James Power, John T. Austin, Alfred R. Guilt, etc., are here and Williams is one of the company that claims a league of land on Galveston.

As of May 14, he was still in New Orleans and was being urged by Dr. Neblett to remain until Triplett arrived, to try and arrange a plan of operations about Galveston, he (Neblett) being obliged to go to the sales at Chockchurna.

"May 25th—Lake Borgne. Triplett arrived last night. Had a meeting with the subscribers to the loan and they refused to accept the form of script which Triplett brought from the Executive of Texas. Appointed a committee to draft the proper form."

"May 30th—sent script to Texas by Gail Borden to be executed and returned as quickly as possible. Also sent by him the proceedings of the meeting respecting the script [Author's note: do these records exist in the Gray papers?]. Settled with Triplett for my twentieth part of the Galveston script. $30 paid in Texas, $66 paid now. It is for Texas script Nos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, one section of which is laid on Galveston Island, where the proposed town is to be (See my receipt). Got from Triplett his plan for the city of Galveston; not satisfactory [Author's note: does this plan exist in the Gray or Borden papers?]."

Further research reveals that Triplett was a wealthy Kentuckian who had amassed a fortune speculating in military script in that state and who held a rival claim at Galveston (see Galveston City Company papers. Menard to McKinney, April 11, 1837). Triplett and nine other U.S. citizens had subscribed to a $200,000 loan for Texas in January, 1836, expecting to receive in return land script worth fifty cents per acre and early location rights. Triplett and Gray staked a claim to a section of land near the eastern tip of Galveston Island. However, they lacked the political influence to receive a title. Later, Triplett joined Menard in the Galveston City Company ownership due to his failure to get his claim recognized. In fact, Michel B. Menard received a grant for Galveston Island on December 9, 1836. (Author's note: Robert Triplett was a cousin of one of my Triplett ancestors.)

The papers and diaries of Gray warrant further review, particularly as they reference other documents, maps, and charts, some of which exist in archives outside the State of Texas. The quest for valid information about Laffite is very challenging, but always interesting and surprising, especially as we discover evidence that others have left behind that reveals their fascination about him too. I would welcome hearing from other Laffite researchers who have investigated some of these sources or would like to do so. This shared information would make interesting sequels to this article, sequels which I invite you to author.

The Laffite Society would like to hear from any of our members and other fellow researchers about their particular areas of interest in regards to Laffite. The Society also welcomes the submission of articles for consideration for inclusion in The Laffite Society Chronicles.

Randy Pace is a founding member of the Board of Directors of the Laffite Society, having served as Second Vice-President and Membership Chair. He is now an Ex-Officio Advisor on Historical Preservation.