I am a direct descendant of the famous privateer Jean Laffite. I know, I know, anyone who has seriously researched the life of this gentleman has likely come across half a dozen people who claim, with varying degrees of credibility, that they, too, are descendants of Laffite, so most of you readers are now thinking, "I've heard that one before." But in my case it is true. It really is! Please bear with me as I elaborate.

My mother is a proud product of good, full-blooded Irish stock. Her ancestors, for multiple generations extending well back into the nineteenth century, have hailed from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, "The Steel City," which lies at the point where the Allegheny and Monongahela Rivers unite to form the mighty Ohio.

Now, as you might believe, Jean Laffite did not die in Mexico a few years after he departed Galveston, as some incorrectly assert. Various items of documentary evidence, including the justly celebrated The Journal of Jean Laffite, ably reflect the fact that the privateer did not experience his demise from a tropical fever in the jungles of the Yucatan, nor in a battle with other pirates just off its coast, but instead eventually abandoned the seafaring life, settled down to become a gentleman farmer in the American Midwest, and died a natural death in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Jean Laffite, in his later years, engendered a son named Etienne (the French Christian name corresponding to the English "Stephen"), who in the 1880's sailed first down the Mississippi to its confluence with the Ohio, and then up the latter to its origin at Pittsburgh. As shrewd a businessman as his renowned father, Etienne Laffite anticipated the enormous growth that Pittsburgh's burgeoning steel industry would soon experience as the Industrial Revolution matured, and he decided early on that he would grab for himself a piece of the action.

As coincidence or fate would have it, Etienne Laffite became acquainted with, courted, and later married, my mother's paternal grandmother. Her son - my grandfather - would recount to my brother and me, when we were young boys, tales of the privateer, anecdotes that had been passed down by word of mouth, generation after generation. We have even conserved a whittled, eight-inch-tall wooden figure of a pirate, and the aged knife that produced the piece, as tangible keepsakes of its alleged carver, the great Jean Laffite himself.

At this point in the article, allow me to interject that if any readers have swallowed my claim in the preceding verbiage - that Jean Laffite sired a son named Etienne who settled in Pittsburgh, married my great-grandmother, and is thus my direct ancestor - I would like to discuss with them the sale of some prime real estate which I own, at a true bargain of a deal. Excepting the fact that my mother's family really does hail from Pittsburgh, this article's introductory text is a product of my imagination.

That piece of creative writing does, however, highlight just how easily a myth can arise and, given the right sets of ears upon which to fall, can grow to achieve a good deal of acceptance with little or no documented fact to support it, especially as the years recede and reliable sources capable of corroborating the alleged truths have themselves long since passed into history.

Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1973 edition: G. & C. Merriam Company, Springfield, MA) defines a myth as "a traditional story of ostensibly historical content whose origin has been lost...[a story] that serves to unfold part of the world view of a people or explain a practice, belief, or natural phenomenon...a person or thing having only an imaginary or unverifiable existence."

If we note in the preceding definitions the use of the phrases "ostensibly historical," "origin has been lost," and "unverifiable existence," we realize that we are discussing possible flotsam and jetsam drifting - or careening through the hallowed halls of methodical historical research.

Myths might be separated into four broad categories:

- Theogonic - Stories which narrate the origin of the gods
- Aetiological - Stories of fictive events which are assigned as causes of given rites or customs
- Nature - Stories in which phenomena of nature are fictively described as to their origins
- Culture - Stories in which some hero (man, god, or animal) imparts the arts of life to man
Within the preceding framework, we would categorize myths involving Jean Laffite as “nature” myths.

There exists a direct, inverse relationship between the quantity of documented fact extant regarding a subject, and the ease with which myths about that same subject come into being and are promulgated. The more copious the documentation, the more scarce the myths. The more scarce the documentation, the less the constraint exercised by known fact, permitting myths to be born and to thrive, often from a need for psychological closure where missing knowledge has left a void.

Since so much that relates to Laffite is either undocumented or is supported by documentation whose veracity is questionable, it is easy to understand that Jean Laffite has become the center of many myths in the one and three-quarters centuries since he flourished.

Before examining examples of Laffite myths, I raise, as an interesting semantic aside, the question: what is the difference between a myth, and a theory or hypothesis? To be sure, the first term tends to bear a negative connotation, the latter two a positive one. Is a myth more outlandish, more farfetched, more lacking in support? Is a theory more probable, its suppositions more scientifically quantifiable? Is the distinction between a myth and a theory/hypothesis a blurry one, such that one person's theory might be another person's myth?

Let us look now at concrete examples of Laffite myths. For a first example, we know not the date and place of his birth; no baptismal certificate or civil birth record has been passed down to us, and Laffite himself is supposed to have provided differing “facts” on this matter depending upon what he judged that his audience most desired - or, in Laffite's opinion, needed - to hear. Did the privateer first touch earth in Bayonne, France? in present-day Haiti? or in another place? Since there can be only one factual location, all others alleged must be myths, but can we - how do we - discriminate between the former and the latter?

Neither do we know the date and place of the privateer's death; we possess no death certificate, and are ignorant of the existence, if any, of a marked grave. Did Laffite die in the Yucatan within five years of departing Galveston? Or did he abandon his seafaring ways and settle down as a gentleman farmer somewhere in the American Midwest? The latter possibility is supported by The Journals of Jean Laffite, but these diaries are supposed by not a few researchers to be themselves apocryphal, and if so, are simply another Laffite myth.

In today's world where the tourist dollar can speak loud and long, we can be certain that any locale which has even a remote chance of being the site of the privateer's birth or death would have an interest in claiming such, and as a by-product, would further stoke the myth oven.

Many related stories combine to form a collective root myth comprised of all those claims to descent - such as my facetious one in the beginning of this article - from Jean Laffite. Some of the claimants base their beliefs on their possession of the surname "Laffite" or one of its variant spellings; others have dissimilar surnames, but hold that their antecedents were, for example, the illegitimate offspring of Laffite and a consort, or that their surnames do differ only through the fault of a clerk's erroneous entry in church baptismal annals in generations past.

Whatever their argument, the claimed descendants of the privateer are legion; a surprising number have documented their hypotheses with extensive research, and some have managed to publicize their supposed famous genealogical connection in large American dailies.

The impetus is present for myths about Laffite descendants to grow boundlessly, because our human nature relishes a relationship, however tenuous, with a famous or notorious person. Even though Laffite came to be viewed by a certain segment of the society of his day as a despicable ruffian, the intervening years have converted his notoriety into renown. One would find it hardly more objectionable today to be related to Jean Laffite than to Mickey Mantle or Harry Truman.

Perhaps the most popular of Laffite myths are those involving buried treasure. Unlike the case of persons who claim descent from the privateer - where at least some minimal link uncovered via genealogical research must be asserted - virtually everyone can convince themselves that they, and only they, have deduced the location of a booty trove.

The shifting of shorelines over nearly two centuries; the changes in landmark perspective as palm trees and modern dwellings replace the scrub brush that once represented the only elevation in the topography of a barrier island named Galveston; the time, labor and expense to move cargo by early-19th-century means of transportation to advantageous hiding places; a modicum of study into these and other variables, especially when this study is bolstered by the existence of "treasure maps," could convince
many amongst us that we were one of the few to deduce the location of a cache of valuables.

In addition to these examples of what we might classify as "major" myths concerning Jean Laffite, other "minor" myths also exist. Perhaps most prominent among them, especially from the perspective of much of the Society's membership who are residents of Galveston, Texas, and its environs, is the location of the privateer's "Maison Rouge" on Galveston Island. An archaeological dig was conducted at the supposed site in 1984 with little tangible conclusion; a reprise occurred in the summer of 1996 (see the related article entitled "The 1996 Maison Rouge Excavation" in this issue of The Laffite Society Chronicles), and it is hoped that at a future date the analysis of artifacts unearthed in this latter excavation will yield definitive conclusions regarding the existence of a Laffite-era occupation on the property.

Easy, then, is the process whereby myths are created; much more difficult it is to demythify a topic. This, nonetheless, is what we researchers attempt to do through our study of the life and times of Jean Laffite: we attempt to demythify aspects of his story, to separate the chaff from the grain, to winnow fact from legend.

To "demythify" is to ferret out the actual, the real, the true, the authentic, the genuine, of a topic. It does not always signify the "debunking" (a word imbued with connotations of exposure of flim-flammariness and scam artists) of a hypothesis, but sometimes its confirmation. In this sense, to demythify means simply to determine whether the classification of a story can be changed from "possibly true" to "fact".

The first step in demythifying a topic is to study it in the depth surviving records permit, in sufficient detail and to the extent required to determine what has been documented about its origins. The best result one can hope to obtain is to be able to perform a careful, logical, orderly evaluation which will permit one to either refute the story (confirming it as fact, demythifying it), or will force an acknowledgment that evidence is insufficient to support a conclusion that the myth is not a myth.

The difficulty of this first step increases greatly as time passes, as the availability of original source documents and witnesses first dwindles, then vanishes. Happily for researchers of the coming years, the passage of time will likely prove to be less of a hindrance than it is for us, now that electronic media facilitate the archiving and retrieval of vast amounts of data. As regards the era of Laffite, absence of data might not mean that the support was never there, but simply that it is there no longer.

The second step in demythification is to produce a report which documents the topic of study and its conclusions. Even if one is unable to demythify a topic - for example, because reliable support is no longer available, the analytical procedures and sources employed should be recorded, to save future researchers from "reinventing the wheel" should they pursue research of the same topic at a later (months, decades, generations) date.

To conclude, I will discuss one of the Laffite buried-treasure myths, one possessing a bit of humor. The story recounted in the following two paragraphs is an abstract of an article which appeared in the Galveston Daily News, Section B, page 15, on February 1, 1970, titled "Is Skull That Of Jean Laffite?".

A gentleman who owned and operated a shop in downtown Galveston told how an ancient, weather-beaten Indian came in one day, said that he wanted to go to Beaumont, and, in exchange for some cash, tendered a human skull. The skull bore markings which included a map of Galveston Island marked with an "X" at about the site of the Indian burial grounds on the western part of the island. Also written on the skull were the words "Capt. Gene Laffite 1852."

The shop owner had never attempted to make use of the treasure map, to decipher its faded landmarks or coordinates, but he had taken the skull to some doctors to be dated. The doctors concluded that the age of the skull was not inconsistent with the chronological era of Jean Laffite. The shop owner believed that the skull was that of the privateer, and that someone who both knew Laffite and the whereabouts of the treasure to which the map pointed, made the markings.

Add this, then, to the list of hundreds of buried-treasure stories about the privateer which are prime candidates for energetic efforts at demythification.

Jeff Modzelewski is Editor of Publications for The Laffite Society. He expresses his gratitude to R. Dale Olson, President of The Laffite Society, for the loan of documents from his personal library of Laffite material for use in this presentation and abstract.