JEAN LAFFITE AND CORSAI R S ON GALVESTON BAY
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Galveston Island, between Galveston Bay and the Gulf of Mexico, is a 27-mile-long, 3-mile-wide, barrier sand bar, just off the Texas coast. Uninhabited for eons except for roving bands of Indians, the island supported salt grass, rattlesnakes, and a few scraggly trees, but no potable water. Its only asset for civilized humans was its excellent deep-water harbor, which was protected by a pass which could be easily defended. The location eventually drew the attention of nineteenth-century maritime marauders.

Three corsair or privateer captains controlled Galveston Bay from 1816 through 1820; they were Luis Aury, Jean Laffite, and Pierre Laffite. There were other captains on the bay during this period but they were of minor importance.

Luis Michael Aury, a French sea captain, was involved in the revolution in New Granada with Simon Bolivar. Aury was commissioned a lieutenant and given command of the insurgent naval squadron at Cartagena in August, 1815. The Spanish blockaded the port but Aury forced his way through, escaping to Aux Cayes, Haiti. Bolivar and other main leaders of the revolt escaped also, and planned another expedition from Aux Cayes. Dissension developed between Aury and another naval commander, and in the spring of 1816, when the expedition sailed, Aury stayed behind1.

An informal organization, called by the Spanish "The New Orleans Associates," contacted Aury and enlisted his support in an expedition against Mexico. The Associates occasionally cooperated in enterprises, including filibustering, smuggling, and sometimes outright piracy. Edward Livingston, John Grymes, August Davezac, John K. West, Jean and Pierre Laffite, Vincent Nolte, Bartholome Lafon, and other prominent men were in the group. The Associates' plan was to establish a port, capture Veracruz, and invade the interior provinces of Mexico2.

Aury arrived at Galveston on August 8, 1816, in his flagship Belonia, commanded by Captain Alexander. The harbor lay on the bay side of the island. Entering the pass between Point Bolivar and Galveston Island, the ship struck a shoal and lay there for two days until a high tide floated it free. Taking water through damaged seams, the Belonia entered the bay and anchored in the harbor. On August 8, Aury's other vessels appeared off the pass, and a comedy of nautical errors began. Aury, yet to learn caution, ordered the schooner Netherlander to be brought in. The ship went on the shoal and remained in the surf. Aury, belatedly, sent Captain Alexander to sound the pass and bring in the ship Felix. The Felix joined the schooner on the shoal. On August 10, the ship from Malaga tried the south pass and went on the beach, then a brig and another ship were added to the wreckage. The only ships brought into the harbor were the Belonia, in a damaged condition, and the Centinela.

Aury put his two hundred black and mulatto Haitian recruits to salvaging the stranded vessels. The disgruntled sailors, who had been promised prize money to spend in New Orleans and who did not relish laboring on a deserted sand bar, mutinied on the night of September 7. They shot Aury, set fire to the Belonia, and departed for Haiti with the ships Criolla, San Fernando, and Centinela.

Aury's wounds were not serious, and on September 10 he welcomed Jose Manuel de Herrera to the island. Herrera was the ambassador of the Mexican Republicans. The New Orleans Associates had sent him to take possession of Galveston in the name of the Mexican Republicans and to establish a prize court. He was to remain with Aury as resident commissioner. With Herrera was Henry Perry, an ex-quartermaster of the United States Army, with about 120 men, whites commanded by Colonel Henry D. Feire and blacks by Colonel Joseph Savary. On September 13, the checkerboard Mexican Republican flag was raised and Herrera issued a proclamation that the island belonged to the Mexican Republic. Aury was made governor of Texas and from that day he called himself "general," no longer subordinate in his eyes to a military chief as he had suffered in the past3.

The commune on the island consisted of a ninety-foot-square earthwork mounted with some six cannon, a few cabins of plank and sailcloth, and others of reeds, wattles and thatch4.
General Francisco Xavier Mina, famed Spanish guerrilla leader, arrived late in November on Galveston Island planning to invade Mexico with a force of 140 men, no rations, and no money. The Associates in New Orleans, disliking Mina's plans for invasion, broke relations with Mina and Aury.

Jean Laffite arrived on Galveston Island on March 23, 1817, in the schooner Devorador, captured by his brother-in-law Laurent Maire. Laffite had just returned from a covert survey trip to Arkansas and the Red River for the Spanish Royalists when he was sent to Galveston to observe the situation there.

Mina decided to sail for Soto de la Marina, New Santander Province, and on April 7, 1817, the expedition departed Galveston under convoy of Aury and his privateers.

Laffite says in his diary that on April 8, seeing that Aury had abandoned the port, he and his men named officers and established an administration under their direction. Laffite left Galveston on April 18 for New Orleans.

Aury arrived back in Galveston on May 3, gathered his men, and sailed on the eighteenth to establish his new base of operations at Matagorda. He remained there for about two months, where he again lost many vessels to inclement weather, sandbars, and miscalculations. With the remains of his fleet he returned to Galveston Island. Aury's plans to reclaim his old base were frustrated by Pierre Laffite, who charmed away so many of his crew that he abandoned Galveston for good on July 21, renouncing his commission to govern the island and denouncing the Laffites. Aury's career ended four years later in the Caribbean on Old Providence Island, when he was thrown from his horse and fatally injured.

The Laffites' occupation of Galveston Island from 1817 through 1820 was much better documented than that of their predecessors. Jean, the "Bos" and self-proclaimed governor of Galveston, built Maison Rouge, his residential fortress, on the remains of Aury's fortifications. There has been much speculation as to why it was named the "Red House." One author said that it was painted red so that it could be seen easily from the sea. This explanation seems unlikely, as the building was on the bay side of the island and could not be seen at sea no matter what color it was. Another writer thought it was built of mahogany or red cedar and appeared red in the sunlight. Mrs. Mary Franks, who operated a boarding house nearby, said that Laffite's house was lined with tin to keep out the rats which were plentiful on the island.

Jean Laffite called the settlement "Campeche." In the summer of 1818, at the peak of its development, a thousand persons were reputed to have inhabited the commune. Sea raiders and their companions converged on the island to take advantage of the Laffites' maritime prize court and distribution of letters of marque, disregarding the fact that the Laffites had no authority from any legitimate government for these activities, although Jean cruised as a legitimate privateer with a letter of marque from Venezuela. His vessels flew the yellow, blue, and red tricolors of Venezuela, and later hoisted the Mexican flag.

Campeche consisted of a mixture of log, plank, canvas, and thatched structures. Storage buildings, saloons, a commissary, boarding houses, and even a billiard hall were said to exist.

The Laffites were in the pay of the Spanish government as spies while preying on Spanish and English shipping. Duplicity, charm, and self-enrichment characterized many of their actions.

French exiles led by old Napoleonic soldiers arrived on Galveston in early 1818, to claim Jean's assistance in reaching a place to establish a colony on the mainland. He helped them to ascend the Trinity River to settle at the Orcoquisa Bluffs. The Frenchmen began an encampment which they called "Champ d'Asile." This illegal establishment lasted only a few months. Being forewarned, the French returned to Galveston just ahead of Spanish troops sent to expel them.

Colonel George Mason Graham, a troubleshooter for the acting Secretary of War, James Monroe, arrived at Galveston in August with the message that the United States claimed all the land from the Sabine to the Rio Grande, and that Laffite must abandon the island. Laffite was described by Graham as living in a large brig of about 353 tons firmly fixed in the sand of the bay about four hundred yards north of the fort. Laffite agreed to leave, but apparently Graham was acting without supreme authority. Graham left the island accompanied by General Lallemant.

Everything went well on Galveston Island until the great hurricane in September of 1818. The storm destroyed the commune and inundated the island. Many lives were lost and Maison Rouge collapsed. Famine threatened. Laffite not only had to provide for his own people but for many of the French colonists who were still there.
One of his solutions was to take all of the blacks on the island and sell them at the slave market in New Orleans. Jean lamented later that his settlement was never the same after the storm.

The year 1819 did not go well for Jean Laffite. Several of his captains were apprehended for slave stealing and piracy.

During the summer, George Brown and a small band of his men made a raid up Bayou Queue de Tortue ("Tail of the Turtle") in Louisiana to a plantation where they ransacked the house and made off with ten slaves. The United States schooner Lynx, patrolling in the Gulf waters, was notified of the raid and sailed immediately for Galveston. Lieutenant James M. McIntosh went ashore and demanded Brown and his men for punishment. Laffite hung Brown and turned over the four men who had accompanied Brown.

On August 29, 1819, Laffite's captain, Jean Desfoixes, of the armed vessel El Bravo, captured the Spanish schooner Filomena. Desfoixes in turn was captured, while under sail for Galveston with his prize, by two United States revenue cutters. Desfoixes and his men were tried and convicted as pirates and sentenced to be hung. In their possession had been found prize allotment instructions from Jean Laffite. Laffite summoned his attorneys and went to New Orleans to defend his men but to no avail.

Negative public opinion and desertions at Galveston left the Laffites ready to abandon the commune and move on to other quarters. Lieutenant Lawrence Kearny in the United States brig-of-war Enterprise was sent to inform Jean Laffite that he must vacate the island. Granted two months in which to prepare his leave, Jean burned Campeche in early 1820 and sailed away into oblivion and legend. Lieutenant Kearny wrote to Commodore Daniel Patterson from the Enterprise off Tortuga on March 7, 1820, that he had witnessed the destruction by fire of the commune on Galveston Island.

The Laffites were gone from Galveston Bay but a few of the inhabitants of Campeche remained or returned to cruise the bay later, including Captain James Campbell in the schooner Hotspur, Andrew Roach in the felucca Texas, Burrel Franks in the sloop Reindeer, John McHenry, and probably others.

Endnotes
2. Ibid, 119, 141.
4. Ibid, 634.
5. Ibid, 635-636.
10. Ibid, 22.
11. Ibid, 23.
13. Robert Bruce Blake, Bexar Archives Transcriptions, Green Cover Set, Volume 8, Felipe Roque de la Portilla report on May 15, 1818, of his interrogation of prisoners. Clayton Genealogical Library, Houston, TX.
15. Faye, op. cit., 697.
17. Blake, op. cit.
18. Warren, op. cit., The Sword Was Their Passport, 210-212.
20. Warren, op. cit., The Sword Was Their Passport, 222.
23. Ibid, 191-203.