The publication of Jack C. Ramsay, Jr.'s Jean Laffite, Prince of Pirates (Eakin Press, 1996, Austin, Texas) should prove of great interest to students of the life and times of the privateer. The book is well written and includes copious end notes and a substantial bibliography. These characteristics, coupled with the substantial academic credentials of the author, and a verbal style not imbued with the overly flowery and melodramatic language of, for example, Lyle Saxon's Laffite the Pirate, lend the volume an air of significant credibility.

In attempting to sort fact from fiction - always a struggle with our subject - Mr. Ramsay deserves credit for taking a stand on Laffite matters long in dispute. For example, he believes that Jean and Pierre were born in the French colonial Caribbean, probably Saint Dominique (present day Haiti); that Jean died in the Yucatan in the mid-1820's; and that "The Journal of Jean Laffite," although perhaps dating to the mid-nineteenth century, was not authored by the buccaneer but by Mathew Laflin, ancestor of the man who in 1948 brought the journal to light.

The city of New Orleans is transferred among three sovereignties in less than one month in 1803: from Spain, to France, to the United States (this last shift a result of the Louisiana Purchase). The largely French population of the city is unhappy with the change of allegiance from France. Renato Beluche and Jean Laffite are spectators at the public ceremony in which New Orleans officially becomes American territory.

Chapter 2: "The Lady New Orleans"
Under European control, New Orleans had flourished and developed while being granted a great degree of independence. Now, with the inhabitants already chafing under new American rule, authorities seem determined to impose unaccustomed restraints on marine commerce - especially, the "no questions asked" permission to use its harbor to even those ships of questionable endeavor, such as privateering in general and slave trading in particular.

Chapter 3: "The Louisiana Connection"
Although the origin of Jean and Pierre Laffite is cloaked in mystery, the author believes they were born into French colonial society, probably on Saint Dominique (present day Haiti), and moved to Louisiana in the 1780's. As a young man Jean became familiar with the Mississippi delta topography and its mercantile and plantation society, including a member of the latter and a later cohort, Renato Beluche.

Chapter 4: "A Mistress in the City"
The ambiance of New Orleans in the early years after the 1803 annexation is a colorful one: the threat of yellow fever, the burgeoning population, the social life, and the mixed-race society (Creole, mulatto, quadroon, octoroon) from which Jean Laffite chooses a mistress.

Chapter 5: "In Serious Straits"
The delta economy is growing, and the mercantile mechanics of New Orleans in the first decade of the 1800's, from importation of cargoes, to their warehousing (an occupation which Jean Laffite pursues for a time), to their retail distribution, are efficient. But even as the economic boom attracts entrepreneurs, governmental restrictions throttle them: toughened laws on slave trading, embargoes on
overseas shipping (a reflection of tensions with Great Britain that would culminate in the War of 1812), and more consistently applied Customs duties.

Chapter 6: "A Seaward Island"
The topography of the bayou country of Grande Terre, and the difficulty of navigating its narrow channels, provides protection from the authorities. Grande Terre becomes a home to some with legitimate occupations (i.e. fishermen), but also to others (including Renato Beluche and, by 1807, Jean Laffite) with the illegitimate one of privateering. The mechanics of quasi-legal sea raiding are described, as are several examples of the increased penalties meted out to those who are apprehended for engaging in this activity.

Chapter 7: "Kingdom by the Sea"
The Laffite operation expands after 1810, with Pierre acting as agent in New Orleans while Jean organizes and administers the work on Grande Terre. To minimize the time required to transport goods from Grande Terre to New Orleans, a retail outlet is established between the two settlements at an Indian mound in the swamp called "The Temple." A slave revolt in 1811 focuses unwanted negative attention on Grande Terre, through which the slaves were found to have entered the country.

Chapter 8: "A Nation Goes to War"
Varied are the attitudes of Congress and the nation toward the international tension, and manifest is the state of unpreparedness for military activity of the United States, at the opening of the War of 1812. Louisiana has achieved statehood. The government is increasingly concerned with privateering, which costs the country Customs revenues which are sorely needed for the war effort. Members of the Laffite crew, including Jean and Pierre, are ambushed and arrested by the authorities, but are released on bond.

Chapter 9: "A Bold Gesture"
Jean registers a brig as the first step in obtaining a letter of marque from the United States to use in the war effort. His appearance in New Orleans also makes clear that he will not be treated as a hunted fugitive, despite the indictment against him. The government increases its criticisms of his affairs, and he is no longer esteemed in some circles after reports of sea raid atrocities become widespread in New Orleans. Still, Grande Terre flourishes.

Chapter 10: "The British Menace"
Laffite is besieged on all sides: by a British warship off Cat Island in June of 1813; by another order for his arrest in New Orleans; by a challenge to his authority by some of his band, including Vincent Gambi. Tales of debauchery on Grande Terre circulate. Although the brothers still have influential friends, Pierre is imprisoned in New Orleans. Interestingly, the author does not believe the famous legend that it was Jean Laffite himself who posted a reward for Governor Claiborne after the latter posted one for him.

Chapter 11: "The Stray Sheep"
In the autumn of 1814, the British attempt to persuade Laffite to enlist on their side in the campaign for New Orleans, while the privateer, adept at deception, instead conveys this information to the American government in that city and offers his band's allegiance. [Editor's note: a copy of the cover letter to Jean Blanque described in the first two paragraphs of page 51 is in possession of The Laffite Society, and its original French was, to the extent that legibility permitted, transcribed and translated in December 1996 by Jeff Modzelewski for Dr. Reginald Wilson, both Laffite Society members.]

Chapter 12: "A Bloodless Conquest"
A successful raid by U.S. Commodore Daniel Patterson on the Baratarians nets some $4,750 in captured vessels and booty. The mid-September 1814 raid is precipitated by American fears that Laffite will throw his lot in with the British. The eighty Baratarians captured and brought under arrest to New Orleans include Dominique Youx, but the Laffite brothers are absent, perhaps hiding out on a plantation up-river.

Chapter 13: "Hellish Banditti"
General Andrew Jackson's arrival in New Orleans on December 1, 1814, is immediately followed by his realization that the city is completely unprepared for a British attack. His change of opinion, from viewing Laffite's band as "hellish banditti" to valuing them for military support and for their influence on the attitudes of the New Orleans populace toward the approaching warfare, is thus a practical one. Laffite agrees to side with the Americans if Jackson will push for the desired pardon for the privateers for past offenses.

Chapter 14: "Beyond the Fog"
The British approach New Orleans by water through Lake Borgne, and on December 14,
1814, under Vice-Admiral Alexander Cochrane, win a naval defeat over U.S. forces led by Thomas A.C. Jones. The British win five American gunboats and gain control of Louisiana's inland waterways.

Chapter 15: "Desperate Need"
With the British Navy in Lake Borgne and its land forces approaching from Baton Rouge, Jackson declares martial law in New Orleans. Multiple skirmishes occur in and around the city, with Laffite's men actively involved in the fighting. One contemporary account credits Laffite for saving the city through providing scarce supplies such as flints, possibly from secret stores known only to the Baratarians.

Chapter 16: "Hardships and Fatigues"
Continued preparations by both sides culminate in the decisive battle of January 8, 1815, which effectively ends the British campaign against New Orleans. Casualties on that day are 291 killed and 1,262 wounded on the British side, and 6 killed and 7 wounded on the American side. General Jackson publicly acknowledges Renato Beluche, Dominique Youx, and Jean and Pierre Laffite for their contributions to the victory.

Chapter 17: "The Celebration"
Jackson orders a religious and military celebration of the victory, but forbids further public parties for fear that the British have not left the Gulf Coast and may plan a new attack on New Orleans. His insistence on the continuation of martial law leads to a decline in his popularity with some sectors of the citizenry. When news of the signing of the formal peace treaty with Britain is received, the city finally has its grand celebratory ball. On February 6, 1815, President Madison officially pardons all members of the Laffite band who assisted in the defense of New Orleans.

Chapter 18: "A Restless Yearning"
The responses of Laffite's men to the pardon are varied: some accept it and abandon their previous sea-raiding ways, while others do not. Vincent Gambi is one of the latter, continuing his marine plundering on the wrong side of the thin line between legality and illegality. Renato Beluche, on the other hand, continues his activities legally under a letter of marque; he eventually becomes a national hero in Venezuela, where he is buried. Still others, such as Louis Chighizola (a.k.a. "nez Coupe"), resettle in Grande Isle and elsewhere in southern Louisiana.

Chapter 19: "Mistresses and Espionage"
In March of 1817, Jean Laffite sails for Galveston. He and Pierre have agreed to become informers for the Spanish Crown, and there is news of revolutionaries plotting on the island to overthrow Spanish rule in Mexico. Laffite arrives and meets Louis-Michel Aury and Francisco Xavier Miña. When the latter two men depart the island on April 7, 1817, to pursue their revolutionary goal, Laffite takes control of Galveston Island.

Chapter 20: "Immune from Attack"
The Aury-Miña expedition ends in failure. Only Aury lives to return to Galveston, but he quickly realizes that his revolutionary purposes are inconsistent with the mercenary ones of the new master of the island, Jean Laffite, and his men. Indeed, Laffite has re-created Grande Terre on Galveston Island, and his commune's activities again begin to attract unfavorable press in New Orleans for jeopardizing merchants' livelihoods through the fear his seafaring business causes in international shippers.

Chapter 21: "Suspicion"
The "Maison Rouge," so named for its red color which serves to increase its visibility and apparent size to approaching vessels, is constructed on the Galveston Bay side of the island. Jean Laffite actually lives aboard the anchored vessel the Pride, and uses the Maison Rouge for ceremonial occasions. Laffite is an adept administrator of the island's operations, and arranges the apportionment of shares of captured booty, gives instructions for entry to the harbor, and requires newcomers to swear oaths of allegiance acknowledging him as supreme commander.

Chapter 22: "Blatant Misrepresentation"
A loophole in an 1818 law regarding slave trading provides additional business opportunities to the Galvestonians, who bring slavers to port and arrange for their transport across Bolivar Roads; the slaves are then marched to Lake Sabine and ferried across into the United States. Initial peaceful relations with Karankawa Indians sour violently, an autumn 1818 hurricane devastates the settlement, and George Graham of the U.S. Navy comes calling to question by which authority Laffite has occupied the island.

Chapter 23: "A Balancing Act"
Lieutenant Larry Kearny aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise visits the island, and although Laffite
maintains that he is not a pirate, the government's representative makes clear that it is wished that the privateer abandon the settlement. Laffite promises to leave, but sets no date. Others arrive in the vicinity. Charles Lallemant and a group of French expatriates intend to start a colony inland on the Trinity River, but Laffite informs on them to Spain and the ill-planned colonization is doomed. Laffite likewise informs on Texas revolutionary James Long, but the privateer can no longer appease Spain, which clearly considers him a pirate.

Chapter 24: "A Body Left Dangling"

When a band of Laffitians led by a man surnamed "Brown" attacks a Louisiana plantation home in September 1819, public opinion sours on the privateer, and the U.S. Navy under J.R. Madison aboard the U.S.S. Lynx visits the island. Laffite hangs Brown on a beach-front scaffold in view of the U.S. vessel, and allows the remaining perpetrators to be taken into government custody. In December 1819, U.S. authorities capture a copy of the privateering commission issued to two of Laffite's men arrested for piracy off the Louisiana coast, and the government finally has its documentary evidence of piracy.

Chapter 25: "Sails in the Sunrise"

In the spring of 1820, Lieutenant Larry Kearny of the U.S.S. Enterprise again comes to call at the island, and extracts from Laffite a promise to quit Galveston. Members of the band have slowly drifted away as Laffite's reputation turned negative and as penalties administered for piracy are increasingly reported by the news media, and in fact, Kearny's party reacts with surprise at the sparsely-manned settlement. Early in 1821 Laffite departs.

Chapter 26: "An Isolated Cove"

Since he speaks Spanish and has been in contact with authorities in Havana, Laffite sails for Cuba, which he views as perhaps the last safe haven for those of his occupation. Continued tales of pirate atrocities make the news with an increasing frequency. By the late fall of 1822 Laffite appears to have abandoned Cuba after being captured, transported to a Haitian prison, and escaping. Reports of his destination vary from Charleston, South Carolina, to Buenos Aires, Argentina, and one report even tells of his death in action against a British sloop of war.

Laffite finds sanctuary on Isla de Mujeres off Mexico's Yucatan coast. He does not attempt to re-establish a sea-raiding base, but welcomes the easy access to the jungles of the nearby mainland should flight be required. Surviving on seafood and supplies from off the island, he dies in 1826 or 1827, the opulence of his former surroundings on Grande Terre and Maison Rouge long since a memory. His death (possibly from a fever) and burial take place in the Yucatan, but different sites for these events are reported, and his grave is thought to be unmarked.

Epilogue: "The Lure of the Sea"

Perhaps Laffite wanted the various legends told about him to create confusion regarding some of the aspects of his life. His existence begins nowhere and ends nowhere, as far as historic certainty extends. What of the multitude of rumors of buried treasure? the tale that he rescued Napoleon from exile on St. Helena and brought him to be buried in Laffite's old haunts in southern Louisiana? What, even, of Laffite's physical characteristics, the statistics of which are themselves subject to differing accounts? Was he a good man or bad? a legal privateer or an illegal pirate? For certain, he was not a man who could have accepted the government's pardon and turned to a staid, conformist life.

Appendix A: "The Journal of Jean Laffite"

In 1948, John Andrechyne Laffin brought to light a manuscript which he claimed was a journal written by Jean Laffite over the years 1845 to 1850. After much discussion and analysis, substantial controversy still exists regarding the author of the manuscript. The paper stock and ferrous ink with which the document was created appear to date unquestionably from the mid-nineteenth century. However, the conclusions of handwriting experts are debatable, and some of the journal's substance can also be interpreted so as to cast doubt that the privateer was its author. Author Ramsay's opinion is that the journal was created by an ancestor of John A. Laffin's who, because of a mental aberration, came to believe that he was himself Jean Laffite, "Prince of Pirates".

Appendix B: "Capt. Dominique Youx's Company, December 23, 1814 - March 16, 1815; Battery Number 3"

A roster drawn from Louisiana in the War of 1812 by Powell A. Casey, 1963, Baton Rouge.