IN WHICH YEAR DID LAFFITE ABANDON GALVESTON: 1820 OR 1821?
A SELECTED REFERENCE BASE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH, WITH SOME OPINION ON THE ISSUE
KATHY AND JEFF MODZELEWSKI

LET'S HEAR IT FOR 1820!

1.) The Story of Jean and Pierre Lafitte the Pirate-Patriots
   Including a Note on the Indispensable Victory at New Orleans January 8, 1815
   A Publication of the Louisiana State Museum (Issued March 20, 1938), James J.A. Fortier, Editor
   and a reprint of
   "Historical Sketch of Pierre and Jean Lafitte the Famous Smugglers of Louisiana, 1809 - 1814"
   by Charles Gayarre
   by courtesy of Howard Memorial Library, New Orleans

   "John [Laffite] is mentioned as having settled at Galveston, Texas, in 1816, and to have occupied it until 1820,
   when he was expelled from that locality, some say by the Mexican government, and others, by the United
   States."
   [p. 73, in the Gayarre portion of the book]

2.) The Handbook of Texas II
   The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, Texas, 1952

   "...Jean Laffite abandoned Galveston early in May, 1820, and sailed away to Mugeres Island off the coast of
   Yucatan."
   [from a passage on "Jean Laffite" authored by Harris Gaylord Warren, pp. 4-5]
   [Authors' Note: An additional reference from the Handbook, from an article on "Galveston County," p. 57,
   appears to contradict the above citation in stating: "Laffite, hunted by the United States government for
   plundering an American vessel, burned Campeche and left...in 1821."]

3.) "The Life and Times of Jean Laffite," Volume XII, No. 1 (Spring, 1992)
   Published by The Laffite Study Group

   When Did Jean Laffite Actually Leave Galveston?

   Most books and encyclopedias give March 21, 1821 as the date of his final departure
   from Galveston. This erroneous date was probably carried forward by historians
   from the otherwise excellent Yoakum's History of Texas published in 1855. But in
   the U.S. Federal Archives, Record Group 45, #108, Office of Naval Records, Captains
   Letters, Vol. I, for 1820 is Lt. Lawrence Kearney's [sic] report of Laffite's departure to
   Commodore Patterson, dated March 7, 1820, and Patterson's cover letter passing
   along Kearney's report to the Secretary of the Navy, Smith Thompson, Washington,
   dated March 17, 1820, reproduced as follows:

   U.S. Brig Enterprise
   Off Tortuga, March 7, 1820

   Sir:

   I was at Galveston on the 27th ult. and found the force there to consist of one Brig,
   two Small Schooners, and one Felucca and but few men attached to them.

   Laffite has burned his house and embarked on board the Brig. There is no doubt of
   his intention to abandon the place immediately, his works of defense razed to the
ground, his vessels are preparing for sea and only wait a favorable time to cross the Bar for which purpose the Brig is lightened, her draft of water being too great.

He assures me he will fully comply with the stipulations of the agreement to abandon the place and will cruise no more in the Bay of Mexico. A few houses are yet standing for their present conveniences which are to be burned as soon as they can get over the Bar. The Felucca, now used as a lighter for the Brig, he will not carry with him, but also burn, together with all useless vessels or boats.

The preparation already made induce a belief that full compliance on his part may be depended upon.

I am very Respectfully [sic] Your Obedt. Servt.,
(signed) Lawrence Kearny

Comg. The U. S. Brig Enterprise

Com. Dan. T. Patterson
Commdg. New Orleans Station

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Published by The Laffite Study Group

This source cites Col. J.S. Thrasher's "Early History of Galveston" from the Galveston City Directory, 1866-1867, in stating that "Laffite left Galveston on May 12, 1820, sailing into the veils of mystery."

ALL IN FAVOR OF 1821, SAY "AYE"!

5.) The Buccaneer (The Story of Jean Laffite)
(Originally Published Under the Title, Jean Laffite, Gentleman Smuggler)
by Mitchell V. Charnley
Grosset and Dunlap, Publishers, New York (published by arrangement with The Viking Press)

In a passage which does not lend itself to a concise citation, Charnley states that Laffite's final departure from Galveston occurred on May 11-12, 1821.

[from Chapter XXXII, entitled "Finis"]

6.) The Handbook of Texas
The Texas State Historical Association, Austin, Texas

"Laffite, hunted by the United States government for plundering an American vessel, burned Campeche and left...in 1821."

[from an article on "Galveston County," p. 57]

[Authors' Note: An additional reference from the Handbook, from a passage authored by Harris Gaylord Warren on "Jean Laffite," pp. 4-5, appears to contradict the above citation in stating: "...Jean Laffite abandoned Galveston early in May, 1820, and sailed away to Mugeres Island off the coast of Yucatan."]

7.) Laffite the Pirate by Lyle Saxon

"Historians disagree concerning the date of Jean Laffite's departure from Galveston; some writers assert that he left the island as early as May 12th, 1820, while others give various dates in 1821. William Bollaert, one
of the most painstaking and accurate chroniclers of the buccaneer's history, speaks of the exodus as taking place 'on an unnamed day, early in 1821.' And I am inclined to agree with him."

[from Chapter XXX, entitled "Fragments"; additional text in the chapter entitled "The Last of Campeachy" also makes manifest that Laffite was still in Galveston in 1821]

8.) Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover by Stanley Clisby Arthur
Hermanson, New Orleans, 1952
[Note: This work drew heavily upon The Journal of Jean Laffite as a source]

Saturday, March 3, 1821, those on board the Enterprise, anchored directly off Galveston Bay, kept watch as, one by one, privateers found the channel, sailed out of the harbor, crossed the bar and, with canvas filled with a soft spring breeze, vanished into the far reaches of the blue-green waters...it was the gentleman rover himself who first applied the torch...Soon a roaring flame swept Campèche and the Maison Rouge...In this fashion, so says the Encyclopedia Britannica, Jean Laffite "sailed away into the legendary realms from which he had come." [from Chapter 22, entitled "The Exodus"]

9.) The Pirate Laffite and the Battle of New Orleans by Robert Tallant
Random House, New York, 1951; Illustrated by John Chase

...in 1821...United States ships entered the harbor and the officers called upon Laffite. They told him Campeach had to go...The officer in charge...would order his ship...to destroy the village unless Laffite and his men left it. That night Laffite set fire to Campeachy. Men aboard the USS Enterprise saw it burst into flames during the night. When they went ashore at dawn they found only ashes and rubble. [from Chapter 20, entitled "New Orleans, American City"]

10.) The Journal of Jean Laffite: The Privateer-Patriot's Own Story
Dogwood Press, Woodville, Texas, 1994

On Saturday, March 3, 1821 I saw Lieutenant Kearny and his crew for the last time...Preparations had been made to blow everything up with powder...Everyone left the island at four o'clock...Homes were put to the torch and blazed all along the shore. My ships headed toward the south. Four leagues out at sea I could still see Galveston on fire, looking like a sunset. That was the last time that I saw the Gulf of Texas.

[p. 119]

11.) Jean Laffite Prince of Pirates by Jack C. Ramsay, Jr.
Eakin Press, Austin, Texas, 1996

"Early in the year 1821, Jean Laffite was forced to keep his promise to Kearny and Patterson...As the sails of Laffite's schooner disappeared beyond the ocean's rim, even the off-shore islands of Texas had become, once more, a desolate waste of windblown sand." [from Chapter 25, entitled "Sails in the Sunrise"]

[End note #20 to Chapter 25 states that "The fact that privateers continued to sail from Galveston as late as September 1820 would indicate that a remnant remained on the island until late in the year or early in 1821," citing the September 30, 1820, issue of Niles' Weekly Register, Volume XIX, p. 80, as its source.]

12.) Galveston: A History by David G. McComb
University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1986
"The most remarkable description [of Laffite], however, resulted from an 1821 visit by the U.S.S. Enterprise. Because of piratical depredations, the United States ordered Laffite to leave Galveston and sent the Enterprise to enforce the order. Following the visit of the Enterprise, Laffite burned Campeachy, departed on his ship, Pride, and disappeared into the mists and legends of history."

[pp. 36-37]

13.) History of the Island and the City of Galveston, Volume I, by Charles W. Hayes
[Completed in 1879, but not published until 1974]
Jenkins Garrett Press, Austin, Texas, 1974

After having seen the last vestige of his town one mass of cinders and ashes, and having fully complied with his promise to Lieutenant Kearney, he assembled his favorite crew of sixty men, under command of William Cochrane, his trusted Lieutenant, on board of his vessel, the Pride, and, on the 12th of May, 1821, with a favorable wind and tide, sailed out over the bar, followed by the vessels of his faithful adherents, and "looked his last" on the scenes of his many triumphs.

[p. 62]

SOME OPINION ON THE ISSUE

It is possible that the opinion espoused in the introductory paragraph of the reference in this article numbered "3", from "The Life and Times of Jean Laffite" - namely, that Laffite's departure from Galveston happened in 1820, but was erroneously listed as occurring in 1821 in Yoakum's seminal History of Texas, said error thenceforth perpetuated by later works - is true. However, another, and perhaps more interesting, view is that the departure did indeed occur in 1821, as could be supported by the following.

Although in this same reference "3," the reproduced letter from Lawrence Kearny of the Enterprise to Daniel T. Patterson would seem to present incontrovertible evidence in support of the earlier of the two years, it is important to note that Lieutenant Kearny acknowledges in this letter that he did not actually witness Laffite leave the island. Although the Maison Rouge had apparently been burned, Jack C. Ramsay, Jr., in Jean Laffite Prince of Pirates (see Chapter 21, entitled "Suspicion") writes that Laffite actually used that structure only for ceremonial occasions, and lived aboard the vessel Pride anchored in the harbor. Thus, a house on land was not necessary for the privateer's comfort.

In addition, Mr. Ramsay notes that the population of the Laffite colony in Galveston had dwindled markedly in its latter days (see Chapter 25, entitled "Sails in the Sunrise"). The torching of unneeded dwellings might thus not have negatively impacted the remaining residents, yet would have deceived the Navy into believing that Laffite's departure was imminent when in fact it was not.

Could Laffite - a known master at deception - have actually gone to the extent to which he seemingly did, in order to convince Kearny that he was leaving Galveston immediately, but then lingered on for another year?

Note, finally, that it is possible that the multiple visits by the U.S. Navy to Laffite in Galveston (in Jean Laffite Prince of Pirates, Mr. Ramsay cites four; in chronological order, they are: one by George Graham; one by Lawrence Kearny of the Enterprise; one by J.R Madison of the Lynx; and a second by Lawrence Kearny of the Enterprise) themselves gave rise to inaccuracies about which was the final visit of the series. As was mentioned above with regard to Yoakum's History of Texas, such errors, once committed to print, could have been perpetuated through the years in subsequent publications which used these earlier ones as sources.

[For support for Mr. Ramsay's text related to Navy visits to Laffite's Galveston, Laffite's daily residence on board the Pride and not in the Maison Rouge, and the dwindling of the colony's numbers, see especially, in his aforementioned work, Chapter 21 and its end note 7; Chapter 22 and its end notes 34-36; Chapter 23 and its end notes 1-11; Chapter 24 and its end notes 5, 7-9, and 11; and Chapter 25 and its end notes 10-12 and 14.]