THE SHIPS' OFFICERS
(PART II)
WIL ZAPALAC

[Editor's Note: the first part of this article appeared in the previous issue of The Laffite Society Chronicles.]

Author's Note: I remind the brave and gentle reader that the conjecture about modern-day seafarers with whom I might have worked, and their comparison with Laffite's "boys," is to be taken langue en joue. It would be just the brief and occasional similarities that I noted that were, well, "noteworthy." The older Cajuns seemed generally nonchalant about the subject of Laffite; the younger, almost Camelotian in their beliefs.

Many were the days when I would stand on a tug's back deck with a cold, harsh norther whistling by my near-frozen ears, and even colder Gulf of Mexico waters swirling into already half-filled boots. Stand and wait. And watch. Soon, he would appear.

Taciturn, steely-eyed. Jaw grimly set. The captain. And in his "hunt" mode.

And many a time I would quickly mentally check over my recent list of duties; hoping I was not the unfortunate gazelle for whom the "deck lion" was angrily searching.

And just where was one to hide on a boat, anyway? On the mast? May as well take a noose up with you. So I would stay out on the cold, windy, wet deck, doing whatever mindless chore it might be. And then, hear the confrontation. No matter where. And wonder with what choice terminology the unfortunate crew member was being blasted.

Just as "Commandante" Laffite had his dueling fields to settle differences between officers, modern-day boat companies have their own methods. One is a $500 fine for openly fighting on board vessel. Wheelhouse personnel figure that at $250 per fist. Seamen would be looking at a week's wages. In either case -- and always at the discretion of the captain -- it was a thought-provoking deterrent.

The following information was gleaned while meandering through the Ben C. Stuart, Mirabeau B. Lamar, and J.O. Dyer papers, respectively.

Luis d'Aury, or Louis Aury, was more of an irritant than an officer, or even a follower, of Laffite. Although able to lead men effectively -- at least in the business in which he labored -- Aury seems to have been hot-tempered and boisterous even for one of Laffite's "boys."

Aury began use of Snake Island (Galveston) before Laffite. And made ready use of it, at that. The Stuart papers show that he might have been on the island when Laffite's government was forming in April 1817, was left out (or better, did not care to be "brought in"), and sailed off in May 1817, leaving behind Richard Espagnol's Devorador. Espagnol was Assistant Treasurer of Laffite's "stock company."

Reasons for leaving the vessel remain a mystery. It might have been just left in Espagnol's care, or it might have been damaged, or it might have formed part of a gambling or business debt. Or all of the above.

Aury did return approximately around late June or early July of that same year; blustering after Laffite, with wine or rum bottle in hand, more than likely. He demanded that Laffite leave the island; to this Laffite calmly refused. Then Aury demanded that he be allowed to rejoin Laffite's corsairs, to which Laffite also refused.

Then, strangely (and almost comically), he demanded money for improvements that he (Aury) had made to the island. Rousselin (Head Treasurer) is then mentioned, and Laffite replies that all back wages to Rousselin have been paid, and that he refuses to pay for anything else. There is no mention of the vessel Devorador. In a rage, Aury stumbles back to his unnamed vessel, vows vengeance, and sails off. The vengeance, in the form of two letters, is quick to come but rather lame, noting other acts that were committed against "the Boss."

These letters, reportedly still in existence in J.O. Dyer's time, are presumed to have gone to Manuel Herrera, and to Beverly Chew in New Orleans. Herrera might have been one of Laffite's old Baratarians that had stayed behind in Louisiana. Chew was the forever-irksome U.S. Customs Collector at New Orleans. The "Mr. Customs Man." The letters accused Laffite of not bothering with letters of marque, but of instead indulging in outright piracy.

Leaving Galveston, Aury is said to have sailed to Florida to assist Sir Gregory McGregory, who is listed as an "officer of my secret police" by Laffite in The Journal of Jean Laffite.