Laffite & the Press

By Sir Jack D.L. Holmes

An unflattering comment on the activities of Jean Laffite appeared in the New Orleans press. The Louisiana Courier for Friday, November 29, 1822 (p. 3, col. 1), informed its readers:

"We have been informed that the famous LAFITTE (sic) of piratical memory, after having been wrecked on the island of Cuba, being destitute of all means of living and of escape, had been discovered and apprehended by some inhabitants who had brought him to PORTO-RICHO, when he had been thrown into a dungeon. Unfortunately for mankind, Laffite was recognized by several influential persons of the place to whom he had formerly rendered some service and who facilitated his escape. We cannot avoid applauding the feeling of gratitude who (sic for which) moved those persons to break the chains of their benefactor, but at the same time, we cannot too deeply regret, that the monster who has shed so much innocent blood, should have, perhaps, for the hundredth time, escaped the sword of justice, which has been so long hanging on his guilty head."

Reviews

"After the Fact - The Art of Historical Detection," by James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1982 $19.50) sheds a new light on historical research, focusing on the study of individual's motives and attitudes and the environmental influences which helped shape events in history.

The authors point out how even a first-hand account may be severely mis-leading by recounting Captain John Smith's description of the Indians near Jamestown. As Smith was no scholar, he could only describe the Indians in relation to what he saw them as, rather than what they may have really been. For example, an Indian he described as "priest-like" may have simply been wearing ornamentation which suggested a priest to Smith.

Environmental and cultural influences are well worth studying according to the authors, for public attitude often determines how an event will unfold.

Although the closest the book gets to Southern history is a description of slave accounts and a re-telling of the Huey Long legend, the book is well worth reading for its interesting perspective on historical research.

——Pam Keyes, Ed.

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