The Laffite Study Group

Newsletter

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The Laffite Study Group is a non-profit membership organization for persons interested in Jean Laffite's role in American history, literature and folklore. Membership in the LSG is open to all. Annual dues are $10.00 for individuals and institutions. Life memberships are available for $200.00. Applications for membership should be addressed to: Secretary-Treasurer, Laffite Study Group, 2570 Kevin Lane, Houston, TX 77043.

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THE LAFFITE NETWORK

Research and publications are an integral part of the Laffite Study Group's mission. Members of the LSG receive the quarterly Newsletter, which is oriented toward general interest. The LSG also maintains a series of occasional papers, The Life and Times of Jean Laffite, with articles based on substantive research and primary documents, and reprints of published sources that are out of print or otherwise difficult to obtain. Copies of articles which appeared in the first six installments of the LTJL (1975-1982) may be obtained by writing Robert C. Vogel, 6971 Homestead Avenue South, Cottage Grove, MN 55016. Copies will be billed at 15 cents per page, post paid.

The annual meeting of the Louisiana Historical Association will take place at the Best Western Motel, New Iberia, on 10-12 March.

JOHN A. LAFFLIN AND THE JOURNAL OF JEAN LAFFITE
by Ray and Sue Thompson
edited by Robert C. Vogel

The article which appears below (the first of two parts) was assembled from several letters written by the late Ray Thompson and his wife Sue to Robert C. Vogel in the mid-1970's. John
Andrechyne Lafflin, a.k.a., John A. Lafitte, was the owner of a collection of journals and other documents purportedly written by Jean Laffite. Part of this collection was published as the Journal of Jean Laffite: The Privateer Patriot’s Own Story (New York, 1958). Ray Thompson was a New Orleans journalist and the author of The Land of Lafitte the Pirate (New Orleans, 1943).

We would like to tell you what we know about the alleged Journal of Jean Laffite, as we are very familiar with the story of Laffite’s supposed burial in Alton, Illinois, and the alleged diary he left. In fact, we know well the man who claimed to be a descendant of Jean Laffite.

We first met him in 1942, while we were researching Laffite, as John Andrechyne Lafflin, a burly retired railroader who said his real name was Jean Laffite. We kept in contact with him for well over twenty years, always hoping that he would present some real proof of his ancestry.

Our first meeting with him was exciting, for if his story was true it would prove once and for all who Laffite was and where he died. We invited him to stay in our home in New Orleans for several weeks. During that time, we introduced him to a number of historian friends. They interrogated him at length but concluded he was a fraud. He claimed to have a “family journal” with him written by Jean Laffite, but would not show it to anyone, saying it “would do you no good, it is written in French.” We pointed out that there were many competent translators in New Orleans. The owner of the Lafitte Blacksmith Shop offered to pay for translating any journals or letters he might have. Lafflin refused the offer. During his first stay with us, he appeared to know very little about Jean Laffite. In fact, he seemed more interested in examining records that we had, and was curious about Laffite’s “buried treasure.”

The one item he presented as evidence at this time was a small bible with an inscription on the flyleaf signed “Jean Lafite.” We photostated the bible and inscription -- then compared the signature with known signatures of Jean Laffite. They were quite dissimilar -- worse yet, the inscription appeared to be written with a ballpoint pen! But, being writers, we were hoping Lafflin’s story was true, so we suggested he visit the Rosenberg Library and Duke University to see if he could find anything that would corroborate his story. We gave him a list of all Laffite collections we knew about, and invited him to return to for a longer stay the following summer.

The following year, he spent several months with us, during which time we again tried to get him to show us his "original journal," but again without success. This time he was much more glib about Jean Laffite, but his information was data that could be found in any book already written. We intro-
duced him to Lyle Saxon, the author of Lafitte the Pirate, and Lyle's opinion was also that the man was a fraud. We took him to Grand Isle to meet the descendants of Lafitte's smugglers -- the Landrys, Rigauds, Chignizolas, and Judge Mercedes Adams. They questioned him about things he should have known, if indeed his great-grandfather was Jean Lafitte, but elicited nothing new. Their consensus was the same -- he was not the great grandson of Lafitte. During this visit he spent much time at the Howard-Tilton Library at Tulane University, and at the Cabildo, where he was finally taken in tow by Stanley Clisby Arthur.

On a third trip to New Orleans, he suggested we collaborate with him on a book based on the "journal and all the documents he had now collected," working from a "rough draft" of his version of Jean Lafitte's life. We told him we could not consider it unless we saw the original journal and had it translated. He then went to see Mr. Arthur and before he left told us he was working out an arrangement with Arthur to do a book based on his "diary and documents."

[To be Continued.]

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**TREASURE TALES**

In 1924, the folklorist J. W. Morris collected this treasure tale from John Smith and W. C. Callihan, a couple of old-timers from Liverpool in Prazoria County, Texas. According to Smith and Callihan, Jim Campbell and an "odd character" named Captain Snyder had buried Jean Lafitte's treasure near the mouth of Chocolate Bayou. Sometime in the 1850's, a strange ship appeared off the mouth of the bayou, where it hovered about for several days, frequently shifting its anchorage. This aroused the curiosity of young Smith and Callihan, who waited for the stranger to depart, then headed down to the bayou where they discovered signs of recent digging--and a deep hole with the imprint of a chest still visible at the bottom . . .

The Texas historian Walter Prescott Webb recalled the story of the "iron box" in an article published in the Journal of American Folklore (1915). One night, a sleeping Steve Pipkins was visited by a "spirit" who instructed him to dig up Lafitte's treasure, which was in an iron box buried three feet underground along the bank of the San Antonio River. Trouble was, Pipkins didn't believe in spirits, so he decided not to go looking for the treasure. Finally, his wife nagged him into following the spirit's directions--whereupon, Pipkins found nothing but a freshly dug hole in the ground . . .

RCV