THE SHORT LIFE OF DOMINIQUE YOU;
NEW ORLEANS' MOST POPULAR MAN

By Lionel Bienvenue

According to Jean Laffite's memoirs, his oldest brother, Alexandre Frederic, was born in 1772 in Port-au-Prince, San Domingue (now Haiti). His parents were Marcus Laffite and Maria Zore Nadrimal, both of French birth.

The senior Laffite had been in the Morocco leather trade in both Spain and France before the family removed to the New World. After settling in Port-au-Prince, Marcus established a leather business and shop. His sons were expected to work with him. Jean and Pierre, and later their brothers Marcus and Henri, took up the leather trade -- but Alexandre could never settle down to it.

He went to sea first with his uncle, Rene Beluche, who was about the same age and a native of New Orleans. After several voyages in the Caribbean and to Africa and Europe, Alexandre signed on aboard a corsair commanded by Captain John Puilijon, a veteran privateersman.

Alexandre and Captain Puilijon cruised the Caribbean and Gulf of Mexico for several years and made periodic visits to the Laffite family at Port-au-Prince. During these visits, Alexandre and Puilijon would regale the Laffite boys, especially Pierre and Jean, with stories of their seafaring adventures. Captain Puilijon told them never to disclose their real names or places of origin while privateering. At about that time, Alexandre decided to adopt the nom de guerre Dominique You.(1)

In 1801, Dominique You left the Caribbean to go to France and enlist in Napoleon's army. While in the Napoleonic service, he became an expert artillerist and rose to the rank of captain. It is thought that both Jean and Pierre Laffite, as well as Rene Beluche, spent some time with Dominique while he was in the French army. They may have encountered General Jean Humbert, Field Marshall Robin and Captain St. Geme at this time -- all of whom were to play important roles in the Battle of New Orleans.

While Dominique and Beluche were still serving in France, Jean and Pierre became privateers and were smuggling slaves into Pensacola,
Mobile and New Orleans. On one occasion, in 1803, they brought three vessels, laden with slaves, up to the northern port cities of the Gulf of Mexico, but were unable to off-load their cargo due to new trading regulations. They sailed westward and finally dropped anchor off the islands of Grand Isle and Grande Terre. There the Laffites met Louis Chighizola, Francois Rigaud and Jean Perrin, local fishermen, who were delighted to peddle the slaves for the privateers.

The Laffite brothers decided to stay at Barataria and established their headquarters there. The first privateers' and smugglers' convention was held at Grande Terre Island early in 1805. Dominique and Beluche were able to join the Laffites at that time. Also involved were Vincent Gambi and Beluche's cousins, Eugene and Jerome LaPorte. The latter were bookkeepers; their family owned the house known today as Madame John's Legacy (birthplace of Rene Beluche) and another building which was to become very important to the privateers' operation, the place known to us as Laffite's Blacksmith Shop.

Jean Laffite was elected "bos" of Barataria and directed the smuggling and privateering operation from Grande Terre. Pierre Laffite, with Rigaud and Chighizola, set up on Grand Isle. Perrin established the Temple and Little Temple in Barataria, while Gambi and Beluche went out privateering. The LaPorte brothers and Dominique You proceeded to New Orleans.

Dominique was described as a short man, perhaps five feet and four inches tall; dark and swarthy, with flashing black eyes and an aquiline nose; and shoulders twice as broad as an average man's. The left side of his face was scarred by powder burns, making him appear ferocious. Dominique had a reputation for being strong and stubborn as an ox.

We assume that the LaPortes set up their "front" operation at the blacksmith shop on Bourbon Street and the house next door in 1805. Dominique took a cottage at the corner of Love (now Rampart) and Mandeville streets in the Faubourg Marigny, near Joseph Sauvinet, the Laffite's new business agent.

The Laffite brothers and Beluche took turns at taking privateers out onto the Caribbean. The Baratarians were capturing mostly English shipping during this period. Dominique came onto a fine vessel Jean had captured, had it refitted as a corsair and named it El Tigre. Other privateer captains in the fleet included Beluche, Gambi and Chighizola. By this time, Spain was allied with Britain in the war against Napoleon, so the Laffites' prizes included Spanish vessels. Thousands of refugees, slave and free, were brought in to Barataria from the West Indies.

Dominique had been overseeing the sale of contraband in New Orleans, at Maspero's Exchange in the city and along the coast. The Laffites
decided in 1812 to hold regular weekend auctions of slaves and goods at the Temple, a large shell mound in the Baratarian swamps, located about mid-way between Grande Terre and New Orleans. The auctions became a huge success, attracting large gatherings of Mississippi River planters. It must be remembered that anyone who purchased a slave or any other goods at a Laffite auction was guilty of violating the smuggling laws of the United States; and almost the entire free population of the Mississippi Delta region participated!

Louisiana became a state in 1812, with William Charles Cole Claiborne (formerly the Territorial governor) in the executive office. Six weeks later, (4) the United States declared war on Great Britain. Six American privateers were commissioned at New Orleans during the War of 1812, one of them Rene Beluche's Spy. The Royal Navy applied a blockade along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. The privateers were about the only ones who could get through.

It was during the years 1812-1815 that the empire of the Laffite brothers reached its zenith. The organization expanded to nearly 6,000 men and 98 ships. We estimate that by 1815, the Baratarian privateering and smuggling operation was the biggest business in the United States. Ships were being built in Philadelphia, Charleston and Baltimore as well as in New Orleans. The Laffites had agents in all these cities, as well as Saint Louis, Cincinnati, Natchez and Natchitoches. Operations were being carried out in Texas, Mexico, Cartagena, the West Indies, the Red River Valley and into the northern and western stretches of the Louisiana Purchase territories.

In August, 1813, Dominique captured two British slavers off the island of Barbados, which he delivered successfully to Grande Terre. He took part in several defensive actions against British men-of-war during this period. In April, 1814, aboard El Tigre, Dominique took an armed British merchantman off Nautla, Mexico. Returning from Nautla with the merchantman and a Spanish felucca, Dominique founded the New Orleans association with ten thousand dollars in silver contributed by the Mexican revolutionaries. The association members included: Edward Livingston, John Randolph Grymes, Abner L. Duncan, John K. West, Pierre Duplessis, Benjamin Morgan and Captain Henry Perry, U.S.A. Dominique loaded the captured felucca with 80,000 pounds of gunpowder and returned to Nautla on June 20, 1814.

While Dominique was thus involved, Gambi and Beluche commanded squadrons operating in the Gulf, destroying Spanish and British shipping. These captains were able to keep Grande Terre well supplied with captured vessels and their cargoes.

When the British visited Grande Terre on September 3, 1814, Jean Laffite's forty warehouses there contained prize goods worth more than one million dollars. The British officers offered him a bribe of thirty
thousand dollars. They also offered to free Pierre Laffite from his cell at the Cabildo, where he had been a chained and manacled resident since his arrest in July, 1814.

It was at this time that John Grymes resigned as District Attorney and became Pierre's lawyer. Even with the help of powerful friends, Jean and Dominique could not spring Pierre from the calabozo. The brothers did persuade a legislator, Jean Blanque, to carry the message of the British offer to Governor Claiborne. The Governor would not believe them and ordered a joint navy-army expedition to attack the Laffite establishment at Grande Terre. The Baratarians, commanded by Dominique, decided not to fight the Americans and dispersed into the swamps and bayous. Some gathered at Last Island and Caminada after the Patterson-Ross expedition departed; many were taken prisoner.

While the attack was going on, Jean Laffite and his friends arranged Pierre's escape from the Cabildo.

On September 10, 1814, Jean wrote to Governor Claiborne, requesting a pardon for the Baratarians. Jean wrote: "I have never sailed under any flag but that of the republic of Carthagena, and my vessels are perfectly regular in that respect. If I could have brought my lawful prizes into the ports of this state, I should not have employed the illicit means that have caused me to be prosecuted..."

Pierre, meanwhile, having taken ill during his stay in the Cabildo, was sent to a plantation on Bayou La Fourche to recuperate.

Both Dominique You and Rene Beluche were captured by Patterson and Ross in their raid on Grande Terre. They and eighty others were taken back to New Orleans, along with twenty-six captured vessels, among them Beluche's General Bolivar. Dominique and his men were locked up in the Cabildo while the navy and military made claims against more than sixty thousand dollars' worth of goods taken from the Baratarians.

In the summer of 1814, General Andrew Jackson was promoted to command of Military District No. 7, which included Tennessee, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Jackson and his 2900 men arrived at Mobile about the same time British forces under Colonel Nichols took Pensacola. Jackson sent for reinforcements from Tennessee and Kentucky and began preparing to defend New Orleans.

While the British were making their initial unsuccessful attack on Mobile, Jackson received a packet of letters from Claiborne, including the correspondence between Laffite and the British. Jackson at first refused any aid from the Baratarians. Arriving in New Orleans, Jackson added Livingston, Grymes and August Davezac, all Laffite associates, to his staff. Following the disaster on Lake Borgne, Jackson reconsidered, realizing that he needed all of the resources at hand if the Americans
were to avert total disaster.

Following Jean Laffite's orders, Dominique and Rene Beluche re-
ported for service at Fort Saint John with the other Baratarian prisoners
to begin training two artillery companies. Jean Laffite remained at Fort
Saint John through most of the British invasion.

In his journal, Laffite noted that he contributed more than 400
artillerists and 366 guns to Jackson's army. These men were whipped into
shape by Dominique and Beluche; one battery was placed at the Temple,
another at Fort Petite Coquilles on the Rigolets with a third at Fort Saint
Phillippe on the Mississippi. Some men and guns remained at Fort Saint
John, on Lake Pontchartrain.

When the British attacked the American line at Chalmette on December
28, Dominique, Beluche and the other Baratarian artillerymen were lined
up along the Rodriguez Canal. Dominique and Beluche took command of
Battery No. 3, which included a long-barrelled twenty-four pounder. One
British officer described the battery as "a motley group of men traversing
and elevating a gun for the purpose of throwing lob shot over the heads
of the outposts and into the principal bivouac." He continues that one
of the artillerymen was decked out with a red woolen cap, another with
the hat of a miller, etc.

In the famous Artillery Duel of January 1, 1815, the Baratarian
gunners were conspicuous. Dominique was standing on the parapet at Battery
No. 3, studying the enemy through a spy-glass, when a cannon ball whizzed
by and scorched his army. He screamed a curse and shook his fist, crying
in French, "I'll make you pay for this!"

After calming himself, Dominique ordered his gun to be loaded.
His first shot knocked the biggest British gun to pieces. Beluche fired
his twenty-four pounder while Dominique re-loaded. These two kept up a
steady, alternate fire. After forty minutes, five enemy guns were dis-
mounted. These losses, in addition to seventy casualties and a shortage
of ammunition, caused the British to cease firing.

Early one morning, Jackson was riding the line, and smelled the
wonderful aroma of coffee brewing. He reined in at Battery No. 3 to share
a cup with Dominique, who was brewing it in his old tin-coated iron French
drip pot. Jackson told Dominique that the coffee smelled better than the
army's and asked where he had gotten it; was it smuggled in? Dominique
grinned and said, maybe so, and filled Old Hickory's cup. Later Jackson
remarked: "If I were ordered to storm the gates of hell, with Captain
Dominique as my lieutenant, I would have no misgivings of the result."

At the main engagement on January 8, Battery No. 3 was in action
from dawn until two o'clock in the afternoon. American artillery did
terrific damage to the British lines and batteries. More than 2,000
British dead were reported.

Jean Laffite was to write in his journal: "My brother Alexander, who was the most expert marksman in the battery, had with one shot knocked the English general Packenhan from his horse, tearing off both his legs."

Andrew Jackson praised the Baratarian cannoneers and marvelled at the merit of the soldiers and Beluche's marksmanship. The Baratarians remained on the battlefield twenty-two days. They were pardoned by President James Madison in February, 1815.

Dominique's health had been deteriorating since before the battle and as his suffering increased, he began to drink more. When Jean and Pierre moved to Galveston, Dominique elected to stay behind in New Orleans, where he married and ran a tavern. The establishment was located at the corner of Saint Ann and Water Street; Dominique's wife was the bar-maid. He remained in this occupation until his death in 1830. Many of his souvenirs from the army and privateering were hanging around the walls. According to Stanley Cisby Arthur's Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover, young Abraham Lincoln visited the tavern twice, while he was working on keel boats along the Mississippi. Dominique and his wife kept a house, on the corner of Love (now Rampart) and Mandeville Street.

When Alexandre Frederic Laffite, alias Dominique You, died on November 11, 1830, all businesses in New Orleans closed and flags were flown at half-mast. L'Abbeille and the other newspapers published notices, calling on friends to attend Dominique's funeral. All remembered the words of Andrew Jackson: "Captains Dominique and Beluche were stationed at Nos. 3 and 4. The general cannot avoid giving his warm approbation... of the gallantry with which they redeemed the pledge they gave at the opening of the campaign to defend the country."

"Captain Dominique You, well known for his virtues and his intrepidity, cherished and esteemed by every Louisianian and American, for the signal services which he rendered this State and Union during the invasion of the British, is no more," wrote the editor of the Courier; "Captain Dominique, to whom fortune has never been very favorable, died almost in want; but no sooner did these circumstances become known to the members of the city council, than they hastened to pay the sacred debt which this city owed for the efforts of this brave man, by procuring the suitable necessities for his funeral at the expense of the corporation. Our Legion [the Louisiana Legion, a militia company], who ever know how to appreciate worth, and services rendered to the country, paid military honors to their old companion in arms, and numerous citizens of all classes accompanied his remains to the abode of rest."

Dominique You was carried to Saint Louis Cathedral, where a Mass for the Dead was celebrated. The cure recorded Dominique's funeral in the burial register of the cathedral (5) and the body was taken to Saint
Louis Cemetery No. 2. Dominique was interred with full military honors and the rituals of the Masonic rite -- for many years, Dominique, like so many other refugee men from the French West Indies, had been a member of Masonic Lodge La Concorde No. 3 in New Orleans. A tomb was erected over his grave and the people of New Orleans bestowed perpetual care upon it.

On the marble slab of the tomb, below the Square and Compasses of Masonry, is inscribed a verse from Voltaire:

Intrepide guerrier sur la terre et sur l'onde,
Qui sut dans cent combats signaler sa valeur;
Et ce nouveau Bayard sans reproche et sans peur
Aurait pu, sans trembler voir s'écrouler le monde!(6)

- Notes -

(1) Sometimes spelled Youx. Dominique signed many documents "frederiex youx" -- always without using capital letters.


(3) Madame John's Legacy is to be found at 632 Dumaine Street, in the Vieux Carre. The traditional site of the Laffite Blacksmith Shop is preserved in the building at 941 Bourbon Street.

(4) June 18, 1812.

(5) The entry for Dominique You's burial in the register of the Saint Louis Cathedral states that the deceased was a native of "St. Jean d'Angeli, department de la Charente Inferieure (France)" and aged about 58 years. Saint Louis Cathedral, Burial Register, Book X, p. 185, Act No. 1139.

(6) In translation:

This warrior bold on land and rolling sea,
In a hundred battles proved his bravery;
Nor had this pure and fearless Bayard known
One tremour, though the world be overthrown!