THE FAMOUS LAFITTES AT GALVESTON

By Charles Gayarre

After the British had been expelled from Louisiana, in 1815, the two Lafittes, who are destined to live for ever in her history, and who, in justice to their memory, should not, in the pages of a truthful and sober narrative, have their actions and character misrepresented as they have been, and will probably continue to be, in the pages of wild fiction, did not depart in haste from the State, like fugitives from justice, and therefore it is not to be supposed, as it is by gullible dupes, that they left treasures buried in any portion of her territory. They took all the time they needed to wind up their affairs, under the protection of the State of Louisiana and of the Federal government, to both of which they had, in the hour of peril, rendered special services that had been taken into due consideration, and had procured for them not only full pardon for past misdeeds, but also an equally full guarantee as to their property, without inquiry into its mode of acquisition. It seems that from New Orleans, when ready to depart, they went to Galveston, in Texas, where they settled with the intention of continuing their depredations on the commerce of Spain, then at war with her rebellious colonies of North and South America, from one of which they pretended to have letters of marque, legally issued.

The possession which they had taken of the island of Galveston was not destined to be of long duration, for in the latter part of August, 1818, Mr. George Graham, who had been in high official position in Washington, under the administrations of Madison and Monroe, arrived at Galveston, and lost no time in addressing to Jean Lafitte the following communication:

Galveston, August 26, 1818

Mr. Jean Lafitte:

Sir: I am instructed by the Government of the United States to call upon you for an explicit avowal of the National authority, if any, by which you have occupied the position and harbor of Galveston, and also to make known to you that the Government of the United States, claiming the country between the Sabine and the Rio Bravo del Norte, will suf-
fer no establishment of any kind, and more particularly one of so questionable character as that now existing at this place, to be made within these limits without any authority. I am, with due respect, etc.

The answer was returned immediately, by Jean Lafitte, in these words:

Galveston, August 26, 1818

I will hasten to reply to the letter with which you have honored me, as soon as you are pleased to acquaint me with the powers that authorize you to propound the questions which you have addressed to me.

I have the honor to be, sir, your very obedient servant.

It seems that Mr. George Graham showed that he was backed by satisfactory credentials, for, on the 28th of August, he received this letter from Lafitte:

Sir: In answer to the letter with which you have honored me on the 26th inst., I have to state, without entering into details as to the motives that had determined me to occupy the fort of Galveston:

That Mr. Aury was in possession and had been constituted Governor of Galveston, in the name of the Mexico Congress, by Minister Erera [sic]. The instability of his character caused him to abandon his post, which was beginning to be something, and which, undoubtedly, would have become of the highest importance.

I was at Galveston at the moment of this abandonment. I conceived the idea of preserving and maintaining it at my own costs. Nobody was disputing my taking possession. In so doing I was satisfying the two passions which imperiously predominate in me, that of offering an asylum to the armed vessels of the party of independence, and that of placing myself in a position (considering its proximity to the United States) to fly to their assistance should circumstances demand it. Securely relying on the uprightness of my intentions, I executed that bold project.

I declare that the most severe orders were given not only to respect the American flag, but also to come to its aid on all occasions; and in this I have acted with a disinterestedness which manifests the purity of my in-

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intentions. I will not expatiate on this subject, as you have fortuitously been a witness to the truth of my assertions.

I have on several occasions written to the Mexican Congress to obtain from them the confirmation of my taking possession, and to procure the appointment of such authorities as are primarily necessary to the organization of a regular and legitimate government; but the circumstances of the existing war having compelled the Congress to abandon the place of their assembling, and to remove it to a very great distance from the sea-coasts, it became impossible for my letters to reach their destination.

I was then ignorant of the fact that the American Government had the intention to claim all the country from the Sabine to the Rio Bravo. My conduct has been frank and loyal, and whatever may be the fate reserved to me, I shall be much obliged to you for carrying to your government the assurance of my obedience, and of my entire resignation to its will.

I know, sir, that I have been calumniated in the vilest manner by persons invested with a certain importance; but, fortified by a conscience which is irreproachable in every respect, my internal tranquility has not been affected, and, in spite of my enemies, I shall obtain (undoubtedly in later times) the justice due to me.

I have the honor to be, with the highest consideration, your most humble and obedient servant.

Jean Laffite.

I will here remark that Laffite does not spell his name as the public generally does, "Lafitte."

On the 26th September, 1818, Jean Lafitte thus addressed Mr. George Graham, who had returned to Washington:

Sir: Emboldened by the kind and obliging dispositions which I have observed in you, I am induced to take the liberty to beg you to have the complaisance to grant your good will to my brother, Pierre Laffite, who will deliver to you the present letter, and inform you verbally of what is going on about this locality on the part of the Spaniards.

As soon as apprised of what was to pass I hastened to
cause my young brother to depart for New Orleans, in order that he should forward the dispatches which I address to my brother, who must now be with you.

Please accept, sir, the assurance of my profound respect.

It would be interesting to ascertain, by consulting the archives of the government at Washington, what was the object of the mission of Pierre Lafitte to that city, and what was the nature of the dispatches to which Jean Lafitte alludes.

Before leaving Galveston, Mr. George Graham addressed the following letter to a Mr. Laforest, who seems to have been an agent of the Government of Buenos Ayres at New Orleans. The writer only uses the initials, "B. A.," but it is impossible to imagine that they apply to any other government than the one we mention.

Sir: The Government of the United States having deemed it necessary, as well for the preservation of their neutral relations as for the protection of their revenues, to break up the establishment that had been made at this place, which is considered as being within the limits of the United States, had dispatched me here for that object, and having found Mr. Laffite entirely disposed to acquiesce in the demands of the government for the abandonment of this position, I have recommended it to him to attach his destinies to those of the Government of B. A. It is therefore that he sends to you Mr. ______ (illegible), a gentleman of character and information, whom I beg leave to introduce to your attentions, to ascertain whether you or any other agents are authorized by your government to issue commissions, or whether they could be obtained through you. What is very important to Mr. Laffite, and what he is particularly desirous of ascertaining, is the practicability of establishing, under the authority of the Government of B. A., a regularly organized court of admiralty in any place or island which he might take from the Spaniards on the coast of the Spanish main, or on that of any other part of South America.

It has not been possible to ascertain what was the answer of Mr. Laforest.

Mr. George Graham did not continue his dealings to Jean Lafitte. After the battle of Waterloo and the final fall of the Emperor Napoleon, many of the officers who had served him zealously, and who were not disposed to recognize the sway of the Bourbons, had sought a place of refuge in North America. Among others there was General Lallemand, who, in companionship with some of his former comrades in arms, had established himself
on the Trinity River, in Texas. George Graham had been instructed by the President to proceed to that spot and ascertain what were the plans and the doings of the French General. Graham acted in conformity to his orders, but when he reached the point where it was rumored that a French settlement had been made, he found out that it was deserted, and was informed that Lallemand had gone to Galveston. It was then that he repaired to that locality, and on the 26th of August, 1818, wrote to Jean Lafitte the letter which we have transcribed in these pages. On the same day he addressed to General Lallemand this communication:

Sir: Though convinced, from what has passed in the interview which I have had the honor to have with you, that you have no interest in the privateering establishment which has been made at this place and that there is no connection between yourself and the persons interested in that establishment, except such as has been imposed upon you by circumstances, it is nevertheless a duty imposed upon me by the instructions of my government to call upon you for an explicit avowal of the national authority, if any, by which you, with the persons under your immediate command, have taken possession of this place, and also to make known to you that the Government of the United States, claiming under the treaty with France by which the colony of Louisiana was ceded with all the country between the Sabine and the Rio Bravo del Norte, will permit no permanent establishment whatsoever to be made within these limits under any authority other than its own.

I have the honor to be, with great consideration and respect, your obedient servant.

General Lallemand proved as pliant as Lafitte had showed himself, and, like him, gave up whatever designs he had entertained as to a settlement at Galveston. He ended his career in obscurity and penury, if we are correctly informed, in the State of New Jersey, after having married in Philadelphia a niece of the famous merchant, Stephen Girard, to whom that city is indebted for the magnificent educational institution in monumental marble which bears the name of its founder.

As to the Lafittes, it is not known to this day what became of them. Probably they carried into execution their plan of going to Buenos Ayres, or else to some other portion of South America.

With regard to the United States, by their treaty of 1819 with Spain for the cession of Florida, they gave up their claims to Texas shortly after they had expelled the two Lafittes and General Lallemand by virtue of these very claims. Hence the Mexicans, having triumphed over the Spaniards in their war of independence, profited by that re-
nunciation and remained in peaceful possession of Texas until they were, in their turn, driven away by the American settlers under the command of General Houston, and the independence of the latter recognized by the United States. Otherwise they might have fared as unsuccessfully in their aspirations as the American settlers who, in 1810, drove the Spaniards from Baton Rouge and the adjacent district known as "West Florida," proclaimed themselves independent, and sought in vain as such to be annexed to the United States, with the privilege of retaining as their property all the public lands. These pretensions were barred by the objection that the United States had never abandoned their claims to the territory in question acquired by virtue of the treaty of cession of Louisiana in 1803, although the Spaniards had been suffered to remain in possession while negotiations were still pending on the disputed subject between the contending parties.*

*It gives me pleasure to acknowledge that I am indebted to General G. Mason Graham, of the parish of Rapides, Louisiana, for the documents used in this article.

[Ed. Note: This article was originally published in The Southern Bivouac, Vol. II, No. 3 (August, 1886), pp. 176-178. The Graham-Laffite letters are preserved in the Library of Congress, Department of State MSS (Special Agents), Washington, D. C.]