AN ACCOUNT OF LAFFITE’S FORMER CREWMEN IN 1850

Edited by Frederick J. Stielow

The romantic allure of the Laffite brothers has attracted writers from Major A. Lacarriere Latour and his Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana (1816) to current members of the Laffite Study Group. A few of the early commentators were fortunate enough to interview retired Baratarian privateers and smugglers in person. The following are excerpts from an account published in the New Orleans Daily Crescent on September 7, 1850, and contain some interesting views from the men who returned to Barataria after the Battle of New Orleans.

Grand Terre Island, August 25, 1850

Eds. Crescent: Induced by the sultry heat of an August sun to exchange for a while a residence on the banks of the Mississippi for a visit to the shores of the Gulf, we embarked one quiet evening in a fine whale-boat . . . After a fatiguing row against a heavy wind and strong tide, we crossed the bay of Barataria about ten miles wide, and were soon laying our cramped limbs in the tiny waves which wash the sands of Grand Terre Island. This place was the rendezvous of the famous Pirate of the Gulf --the architype of Byron's celebrated Corsair. Here memory and imagination soon hurry you into the mysterious shadows of the past, vainly endeavoring to glean further knowledge of this singular character . . .

Knowing personally several individuals who were engaged as contrabandists in the service of Lafitte, information has been frequently obtained relative to his operation on this island. He is represented as of small stature, reserved in his manner, and not naturally inclined to cruelty. He passed much of his time ashore, attending to the transmission of such articles as were brought in by his cruisers; and from his perfect familiarity with the geography of this district, visiting the city at frequent intervals and at no risk of detention. His want of ferocity was, however, made up for in the blood thirsty nature of his lieutenant, called by my informant Vingt-Cinq [Vincent] Gambi—whom they represent as of hideous contenance, and delighting in acts of cruelty . . . This monster, he says, however, met a fate he richly merited—being killed in an attack on one of his own men, who had given him some offence.
About two or three years ago there lived an old man here, by the name of Feekee [Eaglo or Aigle], who openly admitted his connection with Lafitte's party. He lived in a state of primeval simplicity, in a small hut, with two wives and their broods . . . The old fellow used to say that the point of land near his house was the place of which Vingt-Cinq Gambi made his prisoners walk the plank—the water there being very deep. Yesterday we rowed over the spot, and, as our little craft danced over the sea, the low murmurs of the ocean waves seemed to sing the requiem of these departed spirits. Another of his adherents (named Ringo [Francois Rigaud]) is now living about four miles from this place on the island of Grand Isle. He can furnish numerous legends of Lafitte's exploits—and from some source has acquired an independence of $25,000 or $30,000 . . . Another of Lafitte's men (whose dexter paw I have often shaken) lived in my vicinity on the river; but, alas! Although he braved bullets and breakers that ruthless scourge, the Cholera, has gathered him to his fathers. Before his door an iron swivel stood, and on his wall hung a handsome sword . . . But peace to his manes: the gay spirit if fled, and the grassy turf now covers all that remains of "Vieux Jimmy."

. . . With its labrynth of lakes and bayous this is certainly a great district for smuggling; once within the bayous I would defy detection from all the officers of New Orleans.

. . . But I am at the end of my paper, and must bid you good night. Yours, etc.

PORPOISE.