THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE BARATARIANS AT GALVESTON IN 1817
by Beverly Chew
Edited by Robert C. Vogel

[Ed. Note: Beverly Chew (1773-1851) was a Virginian who migrated to Louisiana before the Louisiana Purchase, where he became a partner in the New Orleans mercantile firm of Chew & Reif. After the War of 1812, Chew was appointed collector of customs for the port of New Orleans. According to the Dictionary of Louisiana Biography (vol. I, p. 175), "Chew's hostility to the Lafitte brothers of Barataria became legendary while he was in that post." After leaving government service, Chew remained in New Orleans, where he had a long career in banking. The following pages are excerpted from Chew's report to Secretary of the Treasury William Crawford, dated New Orleans, 1 August 1817, printed in The American State Papers, Foreign Relations, (vol. IV, pp. 134-135). I have reorganized the original text into paragraphs and modernized spellings.]

I deem it my duty to state that the most shameful violations of the slave act, as well as our revenue laws, continue to be practised with impunity by a motley mixture of freebooters and smugglers at Galveston under the Mexican flag, and being, in reality, little else than the re-establishment of the Barataria band, removed somewhat more out of the reach of justice; and, unless the officers of the customs are provided with more effectual means for the enforcement of the laws, the treasury must suffer incalculably.

To give you a more correct idea of this establishment, it will be necessary to be a little prolix, which I beg you will excuse. Galveston is a small island or sandbar, situate in the Bay of St. Bernard on the coast of Texas, about ninety miles west of the Sabine [River], within the jurisdictional limits claimed by the United States in virtue of the cession of Louisiana to them by France. The establishment was recently made there by a Commodore [Louis] Aury, with a few small schooners from Aux Cayes, manned in a great measure with refugees from Barataria and mulattoes. This establishment was reinforced by a few more men from different points of the coast of Louisiana, the most efficient part of them being principally mariners (Frenchmen or Italians) who have been hanging loose upon society in and about New Orleans, in greater or smaller numbers, ever since the breaking up of the establishment at Barataria. Colonel [Henry] Perry commanded one party of about eighty or ninety men of this community, who had been enlisted principally as soldiers within our jurisdiction; and Mr. [Jose Manuel de] Herrera, coming with a few followers from New Orleans, brought up the rear . . . [Herrera] then announced the establishment to the world by a proclamation, attested by a Frenchman by the name of Morin, very recently a bankrupt auctioneer in New Orleans, as Secretary of State.
From this new station, fed and drawing all its resources from New Orleans, and keeping up a regular intelligence through a variety of channels with their friends here, an active system of plunder was commenced on the high seas, chiefly of Spanish property, but often without much concern as to the national character, particularly when money was in question. The captures made by their numerous cruisers (many owned by citizens of the United States) were condemned by a pretended court of admiralty there as prizes, and the cargoes introduced into this State, principally in a clandestine manner. The vessels thus condemned have generally come here under new names and with the Mexican flag. Some of them have been detained by the United States naval force for hovering in our waters and others have been libelled for restitution by the Spanish consul, in behalf of the original owners. And though several trials have come on before the honorable United States District Court for the District of Louisiana, and [the] claimants have never been able to produce proof of the Government of Galveston having ever been authorized by the Mexican republic, restitution has been decreed in several instances.

There is no evidence of the establishment having been made or sanctioned by, or connected with, a Mexican republic, if one be now existing; and the presumption of such an actual establishment under such an authority is strongly repelled by the illegal and piratical character of the establishment, and its ambulatory nature. It is not only of very recent origin, but is clothed with no character of permanency; for it was abandoned about the 5th of April, and transferred to Matagorda, leaving [at] Galveston only an advice boat to advertise such privateers and prizes which might arrive there of the spot on which they had fixed their new residence. Some days after the abandonment of Galveston [by Aury], several privateers arrived there, and among the rest the General Artigas, commanded by one G. Champlin, of New York, with two schooners, her prizes, the Patronila, with one hundred and seventy-four slaves, and the Enregueta, with one hundred and thirteen slaves; and also a Spanish and a Portuguese vessel, and the American schooner Evening Post, of New York, Calvin Williams, master, prizes to . . . Captain Maurice Nicholas Jolly.

Among the most conspicuous characters who happened to be then at Galveston were many of the notorious offenders against our laws who had so lately been indulged with a remission of the punishment, who, so far from gratefully availing themselves of the leniency of the Government to return to or commence an orderly and honest life, seem to have regarded its indulgence almost as an encouragement to a renewal of their offences. You will readily perceive I allude to the Baratarians, among whom the Laftites may be classed foremost and most actively engaged in the Galveston trade, and [who are] owners of several cruisers under the Mexican flag. Many of our citizens are equally guilty, and are universally known to be owners of the same kind of vessels. A number of these characters being at Galveston after the
abandonment, readily saw the advantages that would result in the re-establishment of a government at that place, its situation so immediately in the vicinity of our settlements being much preferable to Matagorda; their views being entirely confined to introducing their captures into this State.

Accordingly, a meeting was called on the 15th of April, and it was resolved to re-establish the Government . . . And thus, without even the semblance of authority from the Mexican republic, they immediately proceeded to condemn vessels and cargoes as good prizes and to introduce them into this port; and, among the rest, the cargo of the Evening Post. It was some time before this was known here, great pains having been taken to keep it secret. Since it has been known, I have felt it my duty to report all vessels and cargoes which have arrived here from Galveston to the district attorney, who has had them arrested under the Spanish treaty. But, owing to the unfortunate absence of the judge, no decision can be had thereon. These steps of the officers of the port have irritated the Baratarian gentlemen and their connections to a high degree and representations filled with falsehoods will probably be made against them [i.e., the federal officers], particularly on the score of emnity to the patriotic cause. As well might a man be accused of being an enemy of personal liberty who arrests and confines a robber, as that the officers of the port of New Orleans should be accused of being unfriendly to the revolution in the Spanish provinces because they attempted to prevent a lawless establishment at Galveston from violating the laws.

The prizes made by the privateers under the Mexican flag . . . [contain] a very large amount of merchandise, such as jewelry, laces, silks, linens, britannias, muslins, seersuckers, calicoes, etc., all of which are repacked in small bales, of convenient size for transportation on mules, and the greatest part introduced clandestinely. Other articles, such as iron, nails, tallow, leather, glassware, crockery, cordage, beef, etc., are brought here in their prizes. It is stated, and universally believed, that Captain Champlin sold the slaves captured in the Patronija and Enreguita to the Laffites, Sauvinet, and other speculators in this place, who have or will resell [them] to the planters. And the facility offered to smugglers by the innumerable inlets are too obvious, on a view of the map, to doubt: but they either are or will be all introduced into this State, without the possibility of the officers of the revenue being able to prevent or punish them: more especially as the great portion of the population are disposed to countenance them in violating our laws.

A few days ago, information having been given that one of our citizens had gone to [Galveston] with a very considerable sum in specie to purchase slaves for himself and two other planters, I determined to make an effort to arrest him on his return, and immediately purchased a fine boat on account of the Government (which had been lately captured by a party I had sent on Lake
Ponchartrain, and condemned for a violation of the slave act) which I have sent under the command of an active, enterprising inspector, with a military guard of twelve men ... I cannot but hope the Government will see the necessity of giving instructions to the naval force on this station to prevent the re-establishment of Galveston; otherwise the bay [Gulf of Mexico?] will no longer be safe for any flag. Since they have been denied shelter in Port au Prince, they have no other asylum than Galveston.

On the part of these pirates we have to contend with, we behold an extended and organized system of enterprise, of ingenuity, of indefatigability, and of audacity, favored by a variety of local advantages and supported always by force of arms; and, unless they may be met by correspondent species of resistance, the results of the contest are of very simple calculation.

INDIAN TROUBLES

The following is taken from Albert S. Gatschet's "The Karankawa Indians," Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology Papers, I (Harvard University, 1888):

While Galveston island was occupied by the well-known pirate Lafitte, some of his men in 1818 abducted one of the Karankawa women. To revenge this injury, about three hundred of these Indians landed on the sand-bar, near the "Three Trees." When this became known, two hundred of the adventurers, armed with two pieces of artillery, immediately proceeded down the island to meet the Indians, who after a stubborn fight and the loss of about thirty men withdrew to the mainland. After Lafitte had evacuated his position upon that island, Dr. Parnell visited it in 1821 to hunt for treasures supposed to have been buried there by the freebooters. He found some Indians, attacked them and put them to flight. The historian Yoakum believes that it was through these attacks that the Karankawas subsequently became so hostile towards the colonists in the wake of Stephen Austin.

The Karankawa (also spelled Caranchua) Indians historically lived along the Texas coast between Galveston and Corpus Christi bays, where they followed a semi-nomadic, hunting and gathering lifestyle. Because of their fierce resistance to European encroachment on their territory, and because they practiced ritual cannibalism, the Karankawa struck fear into the hearts of successive generations of Texans. They were especially dreaded by shipwrecked sailors. Decimated by warfare and ravaged by European diseases, the surviving remnants of the Karankawa nation fled to Mexico in the 1840’s.