JEAN LAFFITE AND SOUTHWEST LOUISIANA
PART I: THE LAKE CHARLES AREA
by Robert C. Vogel

The Calcasieu River, which flows from northern Vernon Parish into the Gulf of Mexico, was a well-known water route used by Indians, explorers, early settlers -- and, according to local tradition, the Calcasieu provided the pirate Jean Laffite and his men with a convenient means of transporting contraband into Louisiana from their base at Galveston. No one has ever found any pirate treasure anywhere in southwest Louisiana, yet legends persist to the effect that a significant portion of the pirate booty was dumped or buried when Laffite was being pursued by the navy or revenue service, and there are many who believe that some of the loot may still be found in the vicinity of Lake Charles. Indeed, Contraband Bayou, which flows through the City of Lake Charles, was named in allusion to the strongly held local belief that Laffite's treasure lies buried somewhere along its banks.

The first European families to settle at Lake Charles, the LeBleus and the Salliers (the city was named for Charles Sallier), are credited with having coexisted with Laffite's pirates. Legend has it that the earthen embankment at the old Barbe House on Shell Beach Drive (on the site of the original Sallier home) was built by Jean Laffite to protect a two-room cabin he had built there for his use. According to one of the old stories collected by the Federal Writers Project in the 1930's, there used to be an old barn on the old LeBleu plantation near Iowa, Louisiana, which had served as a rendezvous for Laffite and his crew. Half a century later, fishermen and trappers still talk of various Laffite pirate schooners scuttled in one or another of the isolated bayous, the outlines of which are no longer visible, although their timbers could be seen just below the surface during living memory.

While there is little documentary confirmation for any of these stories, it is certain that gangs of smugglers and filibusters were active in the Calcasieu district while it was part of the disputed "neutral ground" strip from 1806 until 1819. The region was very sparsely settled, and the myriad of bayous, islands, chenieres, bays, inlets, and marshes facilitated intercoastal smuggling, though it is doubtful that pirate schooners ever put into either the Calcasieu River or Lake Charles. Naval operations directed at interdicting the Galvestoneers was focused on the direct sea approaches to New Orleans (Barataria Bay, the mouthes of the Mississippi, the Rigolettes, Bayou St. Jean) and on the larger navigable streams such as the Bayou Teche and Bayou Lafourche. Navy records do not show any cuttinng-out expeditions against pirates on Lake Charles or the Calcasieu, although the New Orleans squadron did occasionally make prizes of unlucky pirates found loitering around the mouth of the Sabine River. It seems most likely that the bulk of the contraband between Texas and Louisiana -- particularly the traffic in African slaves -- was moved overland, via the Old Spanish Trail.
The Calcasieu district shares with Barataria Bay, Galveston Island, and other well-known Gulf Coast pirate hangouts several important environmental characteristics. These are: its remote location in a (pre-1840) borderland region, its relatively limited habitable land area, vegetation dominated by sea marsh, and barrier islands. Although crowded with shipping today, in their natural state (i.e., pre-Army Corps of Engineers), these were not really seaports at all -- indeed, Barataria Bay, Galveston Bay, and the Calcasieu were barely navigable under optimal conditions in the early 1800's, even by shallow-draught sailing ships.

EXCERPT FROM AN 1816 REVIEW OF LATOUR'S HISTORICAL MEMOIR OF THE WAR IN WEST FLORIDA AND LOUISIANA

Early in 1816, the Philadelphia publisher John Conrad & Company published A. Lacarriere Latour's Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana in 1814-15--with an Atlas, translated from the French by H. P. Nugent. The following is the concluding paragraph of a lengthy (34 pages) review which appeared in the July 1816 issue of The North American Review (vol. III, no. 8), a Boston literary journal.

We are pleased with this work of Major Latour; the narrative of the military events is minute and interesting, and the appendix contains an invaluable collection of state papers. Besides the general interest which the work possesses for citizens of the United States at large, it is so peculiarly interesting to the inhabitants of the Southern section, that we presume a second edition will be wanted, and under this impression, we offer a few suggestions to the author. If the translation be carefully revised, some French idioms may be corrected. We should recommend too, the striking out several epithets that occur in the work, in speaking of the enemy, such as "atrocious, ferocious, savage, &c., &c." [and] the calling rockets a "diabolical invention." This is railing, [and] as a matter of taste, they should be expunged. They are probably not more ferocious and plundering than other nations; it will be better therefore to narrate the facts without qualifying epithets; these will be supplied when necessary by the feelings of the reader. Besides, it is one of the great evils of war, that morality must give way before it; the end must often justify the means; and one side is frequently obliged to resort to the very conduct which had been execrated in the other. For instance, when the British made a disgraceful overture to the Baratarians, General Jackson, in a proclamation, spoke of these latter, considering them to be pirates, as a "hellish banditti:" yet the policy or self-preservation obliged him to employ them when their services were offered, and having rendered very essential ones, he recommended them for that pardon, which was afterwards granted by the President [emphasis added]. In another case, he has given an account of a Tennessee...