Treasures of Jean Laffite
by John L. Howells

Treasure books and old newspaper articles have many stories of Laffite's treasures supposedly secreted in secure hiding places in southern Louisiana and near Galveston. Few have reported finding treasure, possibly because the finders didn't wish to advertise their good fortune.

That there were treasures buried on and around areas occupied by Laffite's men is born out by statements made by Captain Lambert, one of Laffite's lieutenants. He claimed that although Laffite was in constant communication with New Orleans, and made many deposits there, he hedged losing it all by secreting a considerable amount.

On page 130 of the Journal of Jean Laffite (New York, 1958), Laffite mentions that his officers buried large amounts of gold "seven leagues west and two leagues north of the town of Saint Augustine," as well as "some Spanish silver and gold coins . . . on the Island of Pecan," and that some objects of value were "secreted in estuaries around Bayou Teche near New Orleans." In the original manuscript, now preserved in the Sam Houston Research Center in Liberty, Texas, two pages have been neatly removed from the journal where Laffite described his hidden treasures. These two pages were evidently removed before the journal was given to the nuns who translated it for the 1958 publication.

Charles Hayes' 1879 History of Galveston (Austin, 1975) relates the story of the author's unsuccessful attempt to secure the papers from an individual (unfortunately unidentified) who had been Laffite's private secretary, "which would give a very accurate account of the character and extent of Laffite's operation" -- and which might have given clues about treasure.

Another person who knew Laffite and his associates, and who would have had knowledge of pirate finances and activities, was Colonel Warren D. C. Hall, who resided for over ten years at the famed Three Trees ("Laffite's Grove") on Galveston Island, where he died in 1867. Hall had been an attorney, was active in the Aury, Perry, and Long filibusters attempting to overthrow Spanish
rule in Mexico, and later became Secretary of War in the Republic of Texas. Hall was interviewed for the 1857 Galveston City Directory and provided a description of Laffite, but no in-depth interview was ever recorded from this responsible source about Laffite's Galveston establishment.

Early newspaper articles reciting stories by old salts, who were supposed to have served under Laffite, mention possible treasure sites like Pecan Island in Vermilion Parish, at Thompson's Bluff on the Calcasieu River, and at various places along Contraband Bayou near Lake Charles. One old document cites a cache of 70,000 doubloons buried on Kelso's Island, which appears on old maps of Cameron Parish near the Calcasieu-Cameron parish line. (A doubloon contains one ounce of gold, worth $15 in Laffite's time, now valued at over $350.) Most of these revelations were supposedly death bed bequeaths to relatives who were unable to locate the exact site and mentioned the facts to "trusted friends" who leaked the details to reporters.

In the Galveston Weekly News of May 25, 1874, there is a long article about a Houston physician who was attending a dying old fellow who described a vast amount of gold, silver, and precious stones concealed in a well near Tampico, Mexico. At first he doubted the statement, but when the man died declaring it to be the truth, he began to seriously contemplate "going for" the treasure. The doctor and two friends secured the necessary equipment and spent three weeks following the dead man's directions, but returned empty handed.

In his book, Wave of the Gulf (San Antonio, 1938), Jesse Ziegler mentions that as a boy he had pointed out to him members of "Laffite's Gang." Ziegler's grandparents, who came to Galveston in 1845, described them as a "rum-soaked, motley crew" who wore the scars of a hard and violent life. Among them was "Crazy Ben," who wore earrings and looked like a typical pirate. These fellows never seemed to work, yet paid for their necessities and booze with old Spanish coins.

Workers employed by the Federal Writers Project collected numerous local stories of Laffite's treasure. According to Houston: A History and Guide (1942):

Jean Laffite's occupation of Galveston Island and his journeys up the nearby streams gave rise to much treasure lore. As late as 1912 a chest containing old Spanish coins, believed to have been cached by pirates, was unearthed by fishermen after W. D. Warren had found a crested silver cruets at the mouth of the San Bernard River. Legends have persisted of gold buried by Spaniards and Mexicans, and so diligent have been the searchers that Dead Man's Lake has twice been drained and excavated: first by Dr. W. F. Dearing, and in 1930 by the Sullivan brothers of Houston. A story that the gold of General Santa Anna lies buried somewhere in the salt marches of the San Bernard has inspired many a
futile search; yet in 1929 a pot of gold estimated to contain $2,000 was dug up at the corner of Houston and Washington Avenues where a filling station was being erected. That discovery brought forth many almost forgotten tales. Great holes yawn along the shores of San Jacinto Bay, where pirate ships once anchored, and others along the routes followed by Spanish and Mexican caravans, indicate the perennial labors of treasure hunters.

In Treasures of Galveston Bay (Waco, 1979), Carroll Lewis reports that:

In 1961, Douglas Zwieer, a Houston attorney, purchased the site of Laffite’s home ‘Maison Rouge,’ located at Avenue A and 15th Street in Galveston. He hired two unemployed laborers to clean up the site which was overgrown with weeds and littered with trash. Soon after the job was completed he happened to find out that one of the laborers had just purchased a new home that cost about $12,000 and the other helper had bought a new $14,000 house. This was quite an achievement for two men who had recently been in the ranks of the unemployed. Was it possible that these two workers discovered some of Laffite’s buried treasure while clearing out the debris?

Although Treasures of Galveston Bay has been out of print for nine years, it is the most complete recording of legends of hidden, lost, or buried treasure in that area.

When metal detectors first became available after World War Two, I remembered tales told by an old time Houston resident: every spring in the early 1900’s, his father would take him fishing on Clear Lake (near the present site of the Houston NASA Space Center). His father told him that before the great 1900 hurricane, Clear Lake had been a deep freshwater lake that emptied into Galveston Bay, and that Laffite’s captains would bring their ships into the lake to soak their hulls in the fresh water for several weeks to kill barnacles. Since that area was still unpopulated in the early 1900’s, evidence of the pirates’ campsites were still evident, and occasionally he found broken pieces of muskets and cutlasses.

In the early 1950’s, with my newly acquired metal detector, I worked the Clear Lake area, hoping to find an abandoned cannon or something large enough to survive over a hundred years. I did uncover caches of iron cooking pots, utensils, and numerous hand-blown wine bottles, but attached no significance to these finds and left them there. Years later at a bottle collectors’ show I learned that collectors would pay fifty to a hundred dollars apiece for such bottles!

Legend has it that Laffite’s treasury had $800,000 when the great hurricane of September 1818 hit Galveston and wiped out his settlement. The Maison Rouge, although badly damaged, was the
only building left standing. According to diaries of refugees of General Lallemand’s expedition, who were at Galveston at the time, five of Laffite’s ships anchored in the bay were sunk. Laffite went to New Orleans to get financing from his agent, Joseph Sauvinet, and the New Orleans Associates. This implies that the $800,000 was also swept into Galveston Bay.

The following story is from Ray Miller’s *Galveston* (Austin, 1983):

Confederate soldiers discovered some old coins in the sand while they were building breastworks on the beach at Galveston during the last year of the war. The account in the “Tri-Weekly” described the coins as Spanish doubloons. The paper said there were several thousand of them. Everybody supposed they were part of Laflitte’s loot.

The Official Records of the War of the Rebellion contains the report of a Confederate cavalry troop on patrol near Matagorda in 1864 who bivouaced on the beach in a heavy rain storm. Next morning, when the wind and rain had subsided, the troopers discovered a pile of nearly a thousand doubloons just fifty yards from their camp, which had been uncovered by the wind. The coins had apparently been in a chest, which had rotted away. The officer in charge mentioned the find in his report of the reconnaissance, noting that the coins were divided among the troopers.

THE HOUMA INDIANS AND JEAN LAFFITE’S TREASURE
by Janel Curry

The Houma Indians have inhabited the coastal marshes of the Mississippi River Delta since about 1800. Their occupation of this area, which ranges from Bayou Dularge in Terrebonne Parish to as far east as St. Bernard Parish, accounts for a great deal of the tribe’s oral history and folklore about Jean Laffite. In fact, the Barataria region is at the center of Houma territory and until recently was a major hunting, fishing, and trapping ground for the tribe.

According to the Houma oral history, two of Laffite’s men married into the tribe in the early 1800’s. The first of these, named Solet, accounts for the present-day Houma family of the same name. The other, Jean Naquin, was said to have arrived at Isle de Jean Charles (the most isolated Houma settlement), "from the south, up through the swamp," implying a connection with Laffite’s Baratarians.

The Houma folklore about Laffite that has survived to the present day includes treasure stories. These treasure stories are very typical and are of a genre that is by no means peculiar to coastal Louisiana. They contain two almost universally repeated elements. The first is that the person who volunteers to guard a