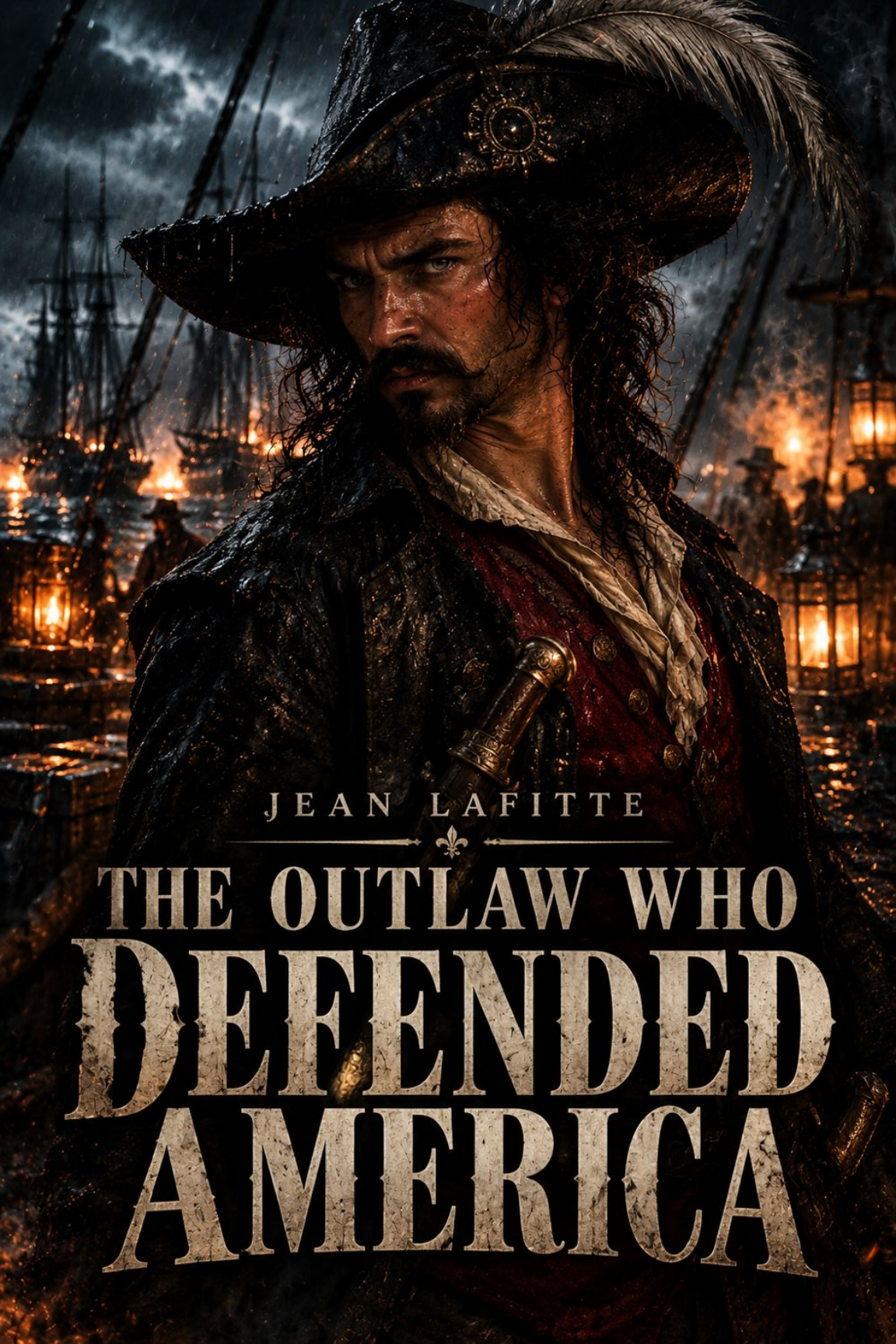




JEAN LAFITTE

THE OUTLAW WHO
DEFENDED
AMERICA

Jean Lafitte
The Outlaw Who Defended America

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A Note on Names, Dates, Money and Evidence

This book is about a man whose name is spelled two ways, whose sums of money grow in the retelling, and whose own words reach us mostly in other people's handwriting and one translator's English. A few conventions are needed before the story starts. They are set out here once so that the text does not have to stop and explain them each time.

The name

The brothers usually signed themselves *Laffite*: two f's, one t. The letter Jean sent to President Madison from Washington on 27 December 1815, now in the Madison Papers at the Library of Congress and transcribed on Founders Online, is signed "Jn Laffite".

Almost nobody else spelled it that way. American officials wrote *Lafitte*. Governor Claiborne, putting a price on him in November 1813, called him "John Lafitte". Andrew Jackson's address to the army of 21 January 1815 praises "The brothers Lafitte". Arsène Lacarrière Latour, whose *Historical Memoir* of 1816 is the essential printed source for 1814, manages both in the same book: *Lafitte* in his narrative, *Laffite* in the documents printed in his appendix.

The spelling on the cover, JEAN LAFITTE, is the one the legend made famous, and the one on the town, the national park, the bar on Bourbon Street and the historical markers.

So the rule in this book is simple. **In running prose, the historical men are *Laffite*.** Inside quotations, titles, place names, markers and films, the spelling stays as printed, which usually means *Lafitte*.

When the book speaks of the figure of legend, it uses the legend's spelling. Chapter 1 explains why the difference is worth keeping.

A few other names wander. Dominique You, the Baratarian captain, was born Frédéric Youx at Sète and was no relation. Jackson spelled Renato Beluche "Belluche". The British officer whose proclamation opened the approach of 1814 is Nicolls in modern works and Nicholls in Latour's printing. Latour's "captain Williams" appears to be the officer Parsons calls McWilliams. The colony on the western end of Hispaniola is Saint-Domingue until 1804 and Haiti after; English writers called it San Domingo.

Dates

Dates are given in the form *16 September 1814*.

Where two sources give different dates for the same event, the book gives both and says so. The customs inspector John Stout was killed on 20 or 24 January 1814, and the book says "in January 1814". Nicolls's proclamation is dated 19 or 29 August 1814 depending on which reading of Latour's printing one trusts, and the question is left open. Where a date rests on a single later source, the source is named in the sentence.

Two dates deserve a warning now, because both are wrong on bronze and in print. The Laffites left Galveston in May 1820, not 1821. And Jean Laffite did not die at Alton, Illinois, in 1854. On the best evidence he died of wounds on 5 February 1823 off the coast of Honduras, and that too is graded probable rather than certain.

Money

The money of the Gulf in these years was the silver dollar. French-speaking New Orleans called it the piastre, and the two words can be read as the same coin. Sums are given in dollars, as the sources give them.

No sum in this book is converted into modern money. That is deliberate. Conversion is where the legend does some of its best work.

Latour reports that the British offered Laffite thirty thousand dollars. In a magazine sketch of 1851 it had become thirty thousand pounds. A popular article of 2006 turned it into more than two million dollars in today's money. Claiborne's reward of \$500 was answered, in the legend, by a counter-reward from Laffite that stood at \$15,000 in 1851 and has been drifting downwards ever since. The only honest way to deal with money is to say who named the figure and when.

Latour, and the English of 1816

Latour was Jackson's chief engineer in 1814–15, knew the Baratarians personally, and printed their correspondence. His *Historical Memoir of the War in West Florida and Louisiana* was written in French and translated for him by H. P. Nugent. It was published in Philadelphia in 1816.

This book quotes Latour in his 1816 English. That English is a translation, and it is said once here so that it need not be said on every page: **when Laffite's letters of September 1814 are quoted, the words are Nugent's English for Laffite's French**, which was itself probably a secretary's hand.

Latour must also be read in two halves. His appendix prints documents, and several of them can be checked against originals. His narrative tells stories about Laffite that could only have come from Laffite, and he was later Laffite's fellow agent in the pay of Spain. The rule, applied throughout: trust the appendix as documents, and weigh the narrative as Laffite's own version.

The layers of evidence

Every statement in this book sits on one of five layers, and the text tries always to say which.

Period documents. Proclamations, letters, naval and army reports, court writs and newspaper notices written at the time. This book reads them in named transcriptions: Founders Online for Laffite's 1815 letter and Claiborne's letters to Madison; the American

Presidency Project for Madison's pardon; Bassett's *Correspondence of Andrew Jackson*; Gayarré's 1866 printing of Claiborne's proclamations; Patterson's and Ross's reports of the raid on Barataria; Parsons's 1940 transcriptions from manuscripts he owned; and Latour's appendix.

Latour's narrative. Written within two years, by a man who was there, from what Laffite told him.

Later recollection. Chiefly an anonymous naval officer's account of a visit to Laffite at Galveston, printed in the *Democratic Review* in July 1839, twenty years after the event.

The legend layer. A chapbook of 1826, Joseph Holt Ingraham's novel of 1836, Charles Ellms's *Pirates Own Book* of 1837, and above all an unsigned sketch in *De Bow's Review* in 1851, which supplied the counter-reward, the thirty thousand pounds and the image of Laffite at the guns on 8 January. Later popular books, Lyle Saxon's *Laffite the Pirate* (1930) most of all, carried this layer into the twentieth century.

The Journal. A French-language manuscript that surfaced in 1948 in the hands of a man later exposed as a forger, claiming to be Laffite's memoir of the 1840s. Nothing in this book rests on it. Chapter 3 says why, and Part Seven tells the whole story.

Two modern biographies stand behind much of the narrative: William C. Davis's *The Pirates Laffite* (2005) and Jack C. Ramsay's *Jean Laffite: Prince of Pirates* (1996). This project reached both only through intermediaries that cite them, and so they are named in the prose and never given page references.

Quotation marks

Words appear inside quotation marks only when they were read in one of the named transcriptions above. Nothing is quoted from memory, from a paraphrase, or from a popular book's version of a document. Nothing is extended or improved.

Everything else is reported. Where a period phrase reaches us only through a modern historian's report, as the earliest reference to Jean

Laffite does, it is set in italics and the historian is named. That is a signal to the reader that the words are old but that this book has not seen the page they are on.

Preface

There is a story about Jean Lafitte that everybody knows.

A French gentleman pirate rules a kingdom of a thousand cutthroats in the swamps below New Orleans. The governor puts a price on his head, and he answers with a larger price on the governor's. The British offer him a fortune to join them in the invasion of Louisiana. He refuses, rides into the city, and offers himself to Andrew Jackson. On 8 January 1815 he stands at the guns on the line while the redcoats fall, and he saves New Orleans, and with it, in the grander versions, America. Pardoned, he sails for Texas, buries his treasure under three oaks, fakes his death, and lives out his days in the American Midwest under another name, writing his memoirs. His blacksmith shop still stands on Bourbon Street and serves drinks.

It is a wonderful story. It has a hero, a villain, a war and a twist.

Very little of it can be shown to be true.

What is not there

The counter-reward for the governor's head has no surviving handbill. Its earliest printed version found so far is from 1851, when it stood at \$15,000, and it has shrunk in every retelling since.

The fortune is not in the British letters. They offered him the rank of captain and land after the war. The only mention of money is Latour's account of what the British captain said aloud, and the only person who could have told Latour that was Laffite.

No document puts Jean Laffite on the line on 8 January. The picture of him at an embrasure, his voice heard along the works, first appears in the same sketch of 1851.

The blacksmith shop belonged to another family from 1773 to 1833. Nobody connected that building with the brothers in print, so far as anyone has found, until 1883.

The earliest datable treasure story is a letter of 1853 describing a séance.

And the memoirs surfaced in 1948, in the hands of a man who has a chapter to himself in a standard book on American forgers.

This is not to say that all of it is *false*. That is a stronger claim, and this book makes it only where the evidence will carry it. But it is not *shown*, and a surprising amount of what everybody knows about Jean Laffite turns out to rest on one anonymous magazine article written a generation after he disappeared.

What is there

What is there is harder going, and much better.

There is a proclamation of 24 November 1813 in which the Governor of Louisiana offers “a reward of five hundred dollars, which will be paid out of the treasury to any person delivering the said John Lafitte to the Sheriff of the Parish of Orleans”. There is a packet of British letters, which Laffite himself sent to New Orleans, and his own letters sent with them. There is the report of the American naval officer who destroyed his base on 16 September 1814, twelve days after Laffite had handed over those letters. There is a note from Jackson three months later sending Laffite to guide the troops guarding the Baratania approaches. There is Jackson’s address to the army of 21 January 1815, which says in print: “The brothers Lafitte have exhibited the same courage and fidelity; and the general promises that the government shall be duly apprized of their conduct.” And there is a presidential pardon of 6 February 1815 which forgives the Baratarians, without naming one of them,

for having refused to join the enemy “upon the most seducing terms of invitation”.

There is also a good deal that the legend leaves out. Jean Laffite was a smuggler. He was a trafficker in human beings: the historian David Head puts the number of enslaved people sold through the brothers between 1809 and January 1814 at about 550. He fenced prizes taken under flags that no court recognised. And within a year of the pardon he and his brother were paid agents of Spain, reporting on the very Americans who had praised them.

The argument

The title of this book is true, but in a narrower and more interesting sense than the legend’s.

Jean Laffite did not save America. The battle did not decide the war, and he was not at the guns. What he did was one thing, once, at a moment when it counted. **Offered a commission and land by the British, he sent their letters to the Americans who had a price on his head, and offered them his men instead.** The Americans raided him anyway. Then, in December, they took his flints, his gunners and his knowledge of the bayous. They thanked him in print twice, pardoned his men, and never gave back most of what they had seized.

The legend has buried that choice under treasure and cannon smoke. This book tries to dig it out, in the order the documents allow, with the gaps left as gaps. It is short on his childhood, because nobody recorded it. It is long on a single fortnight in September 1814, because that is where the record is thickest and the story most surprising.

The brig

It begins, as far as the documents are concerned, with a ship.

“On the 2d of September 1814, there appeared an armed brig on the coast opposite the pass.” That is Latour’s sentence, in the English

of 1816, and the pass was the entrance to Barataria Bay at Grande Terre.

The brig was HMS *Sophie*. Her boat carried a packet addressed to Laffite. In it was a promise from the British commander at Pensacola: "you shall have the rank of a captain; lands will be given to you all, in proportion, to your respective ranks, on a peace taking place". With it came a threat from the naval captain behind him. If the Baratarians would not give up the British vessels they had taken, the Royal Navy would destroy every vessel there and "carry destruction over the whole place".

On the other side of the ledger stood the United States. Its Governor had offered \$500 for Laffite's delivery to the sheriff. Its federal grand jury had indicted his brother Pierre for piracy, and Pierre was sitting in the Cabildo. Its navy was already preparing an expedition against him.

The British offer was better. It was also written down, and signed.

He asked the British for a fortnight. Then he put their letters in a packet of his own and sent them to New Orleans.

How to Read This Book

The book runs in the order the evidence does, which is not quite the order the story usually does.

Part One, Nobody's Son, is about what the record does not contain. It covers the eight or more places where Jean Laffite is supposed to have been born, the two rival reconstructions of his family, his far better documented elder brother, and the refugee city of New Orleans in which both of them surface. It ends in November 1809, when Jean first appears in a document anyone can vouch for. It is deliberately frustrating. The frustration is the point.

Part Two, Barataria, follows the smuggling and privateering base on Grande Terre from about 1810 to the summer of 1814: its geography, its borrowed flags, its captains, its auctions and its buyers, and the governor's campaign against it. One chapter is given over to the trade in enslaved people, and it is told without softening.

Part Three, The Offer, is September 1814: the British brig, the letters, the fortnight Laffite asked for, what he told the Americans, what they decided, and the raid of 16 September that destroyed his base anyway. This is the heart of the book.

Part Four, The Defence of New Orleans, runs from Jackson's arrival in December 1814 to the pardon of February 1815. It separates what the Baratarians demonstrably did (the flints, the gunners, the guides) from what the legend has them doing. It ends by asking directly whether they saved America.

Part Five, The Double Game, follows the Laffites after the war: the failed attempt to recover their property, their work as paid agents of Spain, and the colony at Galveston from 1817 to May 1820.

Part Six, The Last Cruise, covers the Mexican coast, Pierre's death in Yucatán in 1821, and Jean's last command under a Colombian commission, ending off Honduras in February 1823.

Part Seven, The Legend, traces how the man became the story: Byron's poem, the novels, the magazine sketch of 1851, the blacksmith shop, the treasure, the forged Journal, the films and the historical markers. Its last chapter sets out what the record will bear.

The **Epilogue** returns to two of Laffite's own letters, one written from Barataria in September 1814 and one from Washington in December 1815.

The labels

Four labels are used throughout, in the sentence rather than in a note.

Documented means that a period document exists and has been read in a named transcription, or has been reported by a scholar who saw it. Claiborne's reward of 24 November 1813 is documented. So is the raid of 16 September 1814.

Probable means the best modern reconstruction, resting on inference from documents rather than on a document that says so. William C. Davis's identification of Pauillac as the brothers' birthplace is probable. So is Jean Laffite's death in February 1823.

Claimed means that someone asserted it without a document this book can trace. That someone may be Laffite himself, or Latour, or a later writer. Where the claimant is Laffite, the book says so, because he was the only witness to several of the most famous scenes in his own life and had every reason to tell them well.

Legend means that the claim first appears long after the events, or is contradicted by the documents, or both. The earliest source found for each legend is named, because the date at which a story enters print is usually the most revealing fact about it.

Where the sources disagree, the point is **labelled contested** and both versions are given. Where the record says nothing, the book says so and stops.

The appendices

The appendices are where the working is shown.

Appendix A is a chronology. **Appendix B** is the cast, from governors and commodores to the crews. **Appendix C** is a table of about forty myths, each with its verdict and the earliest source this project could find for it. **Appendix D** lists what remains genuinely unknown, and is the place to start for anyone who wants to take the work further. **Appendix E** is a short, practical guide to the places, from the French Quarter and Chalmette to Grand Isle, Galveston and the Yucatán coast, saying what can honestly be seen at each. **Appendix F** is a note on the sources and on the limits of this project's access to them.

A reader who wants the story can read the seven parts and stop. A reader who wants to test the story should read Appendix C first, and then come back and see whether the book has earned its verdicts.

NOBODY'S SON

Jn Laffite

The letter is dated at Washington, 27 December 1815, and it is addressed to the President.

It is a petition. Its writer had come a long way to deliver it, and he wanted his property back. The Founders Online editors, who transcribed it from the original in the Madison Papers at the Library of Congress, add a dry note: he had evidently come to Washington in December 1815 to press for restoration of what had been seized from him, and his efforts were ignored. Madison docketed the letter and did nothing further with it that anyone has found.

What it asked for, and why it failed, belongs to Part Five. What matters here is how it ends.

“your Excellency’s very respectful and very humble & Obedeant
Servant / Jn Laffite”

The name at the foot of the page

Jn is the clerk’s abbreviation for Jean, or for John, which is what Governor Claiborne called him. *Laffite* is the spelling the brothers themselves generally used. Stanley Clisby Arthur, a New Orleans journalist and genealogist, went through the city’s notarial records in the 1930s and established that the signatory spelled the name that way. William C. Davis, the brothers’ most thorough modern biographer, put that spelling on the cover of his book.

Hardly anybody else used it. The Governor of Louisiana, offering \$500 for him in November 1813, called him “John Lafitte”. American officials, and English-language documents generally, wrote *Lafitte*.

Andrew Jackson, praising the brothers in January 1815, called them “The brothers Lafitte”. Latour’s *Historical Memoir* spells the name one way in its narrative and the other in its appendix, and in the narrative it calls Jean “Mr. Lafitte, the younger”, which is a useful reminder that even his friends needed to say which Lafitte they meant.

There is a complication. One modern transcription of the same Madison letter, on a website that defends the forged Journal, reads the signature as *Lafite*, with one f. That reading has not been checked against the manuscript, and this book has not seen a facsimile either. Founders Online reads “Jn Laffite”, and so does this book, but the disagreement is a fair warning. In 1815 nobody had yet settled how to spell him, least of all, perhaps, the man himself.

The convention followed from here on is set out in the note on names. The historical man is *Laffite*. The man in the novels, the films, the place names and on the bronze markers is *Lafitte*.

That may look like pedantry. It is the whole argument of this book in two letters. **There is a man who signed his name one way, and a legend that spells it another, and for two hundred years the second has been mistaken for the first.** Keeping the spellings apart is the simplest way of keeping them apart in the reader’s mind.

A man without a hand

Look again at the letter, and at its English.

“At the epoch that State was threatened of an invasion, I disregarded anny other consideration which did not tend to its Safety, and therefor retained my vessells at Barataria inspite of the representations of my officers who were for making Saile for Carthagenas ...”

Anny, vessells, Saile, hunderd, artillers, wellfair, Obedeant. This is the English of someone writing in a language that was not his first. Whose English it was is another matter.

The standard claim in the literature is that no sample of Jean Laffite's writing survives except his signature, and that his surviving letters were always written for him by a secretary. The claim is repeated everywhere and sourced almost nowhere, so this book treats it as probable rather than proven. But it fits everything else. His native language was French. He evidently spoke some English, though how well is not well attested, and probably had working Spanish. Davis says that the brothers received only a limited education. None of that means that Laffite could not write. It means that we do not have anything he certainly wrote, apart from a name.

The consequence runs through the rest of this book. Nearly every word attributed to Jean Laffite reaches us through at least one other person. The letters of September 1814 were written in French, probably by a clerk, and survive for most readers in H. P. Nugent's English translation of 1816. His account of his own early life comes from an anonymous naval officer writing twenty years later. His most famous sentence, "I am the stray sheep, wishing to return to the sheepfold", is Nugent's English for a French original.

Even his face is missing. No authenticated portrait of him is known. The oil painting in the Rosenberg Library at Galveston is nineteenth-century, by an unknown artist, and the library itself warns that the clothing is wrong for his period. A portrait in the Louisiana State Museum was long mistakenly believed to show him. A full-length "Gros portrait" of 1804 comes only through the forger who produced the *Journal*, and the original was lost in a fire in 1959.

The nearest thing to a likeness is a description by that anonymous naval officer, printed in the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* in July 1839 and describing a visit to Galveston two decades earlier. It gives a stout man of about five feet ten, with an olive complexion, a small black eye and plain clothes. Because it is retrospective and has reached this project only through a transcription, it is reported here rather than quoted. The better-known picture of a man six feet two inches tall with hazel eyes, in a green uniform and an otter-skin cap, is first found in a magazine of 1903. Nobody has traced it to anyone who saw him.

What survives

The Madison letter is one of a small number of documents that carry his name and can be located.

Founders Online describes it as the received copy in the Library of Congress, docketed by Madison. The Rosenberg Library in Galveston holds a photostat and a typescript of a letter to the President seeking vindication, which is probably the same one, although this project could not confirm it. The library's own catalogue describes its item, cautiously, as possibly written by Jean Laffite.

The rest of the signed material is scattered. The Rosenberg holds a letter of 7 July 1819 to the filibuster James Long and an appointment of 15 May 1818 made in his name as President of the Commune of Campeche, which was his name for Galveston. The Historic New Orleans Collection holds three documents of 1813 concerning a vessel called the *Diligente*, one of them an unsigned request for a letter of marque. The National Archives at Kew hold his letter of 4 September 1814 to the British captain, as the British received it. Spanish intelligence files in Seville hold reports by and about the brothers from their years in Spain's service.

That is not much for a man with his fame, and even this short list is contested. Because the brothers used clerks, the question of which signatures are genuinely Jean's is one of the central problems of the whole subject. It matters most when the forged Journal comes to be tested, because a handwriting comparison is only as good as the documents it is compared with. Part Seven returns to that.

Only the middle

Here is the shape of the problem.

We do not know when or where Jean Laffite was born. The next two chapters set out the candidates. None is documented.

We do not know for certain how he died. The best evidence is a report in Colombian gazettes that he died of wounds on 5 February 1823, off the coast of Honduras, in command of a Colombian

schooner, and was buried at sea. That is graded probable, and Part Six explains why it cannot be graded higher.

In between, his first secure appearance in any document is in November 1809, when he was already a grown man and, by the sound of it, already notorious. After that the record thickens rapidly, and it is thickest between 1813 and 1815.

The reason is not hard to find. **What we know of Jean Laffite is, almost entirely, what governments wrote down while they were trying to catch him, use him or pay him.** Governor Claiborne's proclamations, the federal writs, the naval reports of the raid, Jackson's letters and address, Madison's pardon and later the reports of Spanish officials all exist because the state had business with him. When the state had no business with him, he disappears.

This is a common shape for the lives of men who lived outside the law. It has a particular consequence for a biography. The documented Laffite is a man seen almost always from the outside, by people who wanted something from him, and almost never in a private moment. The legend has spent two centuries filling in the private moments. This book mostly declines to.

Notorious

One sentence of the 1815 letter deserves a second look.

"My Conduct Since that period is notorious The Country is Safe & I Claim no merit for having like all the inhabitants of the State, co-operated in its wellfair ..."

The period he means is the invasion of Louisiana in the winter of 1814–15. *Notorious* is being used in the older sense, meaning well known, a matter of public knowledge. He is telling the President that his service was common knowledge in New Orleans and needed no proof.

Six years earlier, in the first document to mention him that historians can vouch for, someone in New Orleans had used the

same word about him in its other sense. Chapter 6 comes back to that.

Between those two uses of one word lies nearly everything that can be documented about the man. The rest of Part One is about what lies before it, which is very little, and about the people who have filled that emptiness with birthplaces, parents, schools, wives and grandmothers. Some of what they supplied may be true. Almost none of it can be shown to be.

Eight Birthplaces

The National Park Service, which runs a park named after him, puts the matter as cautiously as it can be put. Jean Laffite, it says, was probably born in the early 1780s, either in France or in the French colony of Saint-Domingue.

That is the honest position, and it is worth noticing how little it commits to. Two countries on two sides of an ocean, and a decade.

Other authorities have been bolder. The *Handbook of Texas*, in an entry by Harris Gaylord Warren, a serious historian of the Gulf filibusters, says flatly that Laffite was born in Bayonne, in 1780 or 1781, the son of a French father and a Spanish mother, and that the family went to Hispaniola and fled during the revolution. None of those details is tied in the entry to a period document. Warren's bibliography leans on Stanley Clisby Arthur and Lyle Saxon, and Saxon's book of 1930 is, in Davis's judgement, a hodgepodge of legend and lore.

Across the whole literature there are at least eight distinct birthplaces. They are worth taking in the order in which they appear, because the order tells a story of its own.

What was said in his lifetime

The first group is the most interesting, because it goes back to Laffite himself.

Jack C. Ramsay, whose biography of 1996 catalogued these claims, reports that Jean and Pierre themselves said they had been born in Bayonne, the French port near the Spanish border. Other documents

of the period, Ramsay says, give Saint-Malo in Brittany, or Brest. Still other contemporary accounts have him born at Orduña, in the Basque country of Spain, or in Westchester County, New York, just north of Manhattan.

That is five birthplaces in three countries, all in circulation during his lifetime.

This project could not identify the individual documents behind them. Ramsay's summary, as it reaches us, does not say which letter or deposition names Brest and which names Westchester. So these are reported here as claims made at the time, according to Ramsay, and not as five documents this book has seen. Finding them is a job for whoever next reads Ramsay's notes.

What the printers said

The second group is the nineteenth-century printed tradition, and it settles on Saint-Malo.

In December 1919 Gaspar Cusachs, President of the Louisiana Historical Society, read a paper to the Society on Laffite. It was printed in the *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* and it says that he was a Frenchman, born at Saint-Malo about 1781. Cusachs was candid about his sources. His sketch was compiled chiefly from an unsigned article in *De Bow's Review* of 1851, which he thought the most complete account ever written.

So Saint-Malo, about 1781, was in print by 1851. It may be earlier. The claim is widely associated with Charles Ellms's *Pirates Own Book* of 1837, but this project could not read Ellms's wording in full, and the attribution is left unverified.

It is worth noticing that Saint-Malo is also one of the places Ramsay found in the period documents. The printed tradition may have inherited a claim that Laffite really made. It may simply have picked the most romantic of the options. A privateer from Saint-Malo, the old nest of French corsairs, was a better story than a merchant's son from anywhere else.

Bayonne reached the twentieth century through Warren's entry, and from there into countless websites.

What the reconstructors said

The third group is the work of the two modern biographers, and it produces the two serious candidates.

Pauillac, a small port on the Gironde estuary in the Médoc, north of Bordeaux, is William C. Davis's answer, published in 2005. Davis writes that both brothers were born there, Pierre about 1770 and Jean about 1782, to a merchant father by two different wives.

Saint-Domingue is Ramsay's. He speculates that Jean was born in the French colony and brought to New Orleans as a boy by a widowed mother.

The two cannot both be right, and they disagree about more than geography. The next chapter sets them side by side.

And the rest

That makes seven. The eighth, Bordeaux, comes from the *Journal of Jean Laffite*, which surfaced in 1948 and gives a birth there in 1780. Some writers attribute a Bordeaux birth to other sources, which may be a confusion of Bordeaux with nearby Pauillac. The *Journal's* version is set aside in the next chapter, for reasons given there.

Two more candidates hang about the edges and should be named only so that they can be dismissed.

A baptism at Natchitoches, Louisiana, on 24 June 1776, of a Jean Baptiste François Lafitte, son of Paul Bouet Lafitte and Magdeleine Grappe, is put forward by some genealogists as the corsair. Nothing connects that child to the man at Barataria except the surname, and there were families called Lafitte in Louisiana documents from 1765. A family tree on a genealogy website gives a birth at Bordeaux on 15 August 1782 to entirely different parents, and mixes in material from the *Journal*. Neither is evidence.

Port-au-Prince, which turns up in popular writing, has no source this project could find, with one exception. The man who produced the Journal, John A. Laflin, claimed in his own family genealogy that Jean was born on 22 April 1782 at Port-au-Prince. That is not a source. It is a symptom.

The birth years spread just as widely: about 1776 in one inventory, 1780 in the Journal, 1780 or 1781 in Warren, about 1781 in *De Bow's*, about 1782 in Davis. A magazine once printed "around 1790". Early in the 1780s is as close as honesty allows.

The eight, with their sources

Set out in a list, with the earliest source this project could find for each, the claims look like this.

- *Bayonne*. The brothers' own claim, according to Ramsay; the *Handbook of Texas*.
- *Saint-Malo*. Period documents, according to Ramsay; in print by *De Bow's Review*, 1851.
- *Brest*. Period documents, according to Ramsay.
- *Orduña, Spain*. Contemporary accounts, according to Ramsay.
- *Westchester County, New York*. Contemporary accounts, according to Ramsay.
- *Pauillac*. William C. Davis, 2005, from French records this project could not see.
- *Saint-Domingue*. Jack C. Ramsay, 1996, offered as a speculation.
- *Bordeaux*. The Journal of Jean Laffite, which surfaced in 1948.

Two features of the list stand out. The first is how much of it rests on one book. Five of the eight reach us through Ramsay's catalogue, and a sixth is Ramsay's own speculation. The second is that the only two candidates offered by modern scholars working from archives are the two that nobody in Laffite's lifetime is recorded as giving. Whatever the brothers told people about where they came from, they did not, so far as the record shows, say Pauillac.

That is less damaging to Davis than it looks. It is exactly what one would expect if the brothers' own statements were chosen for

convenience rather than accuracy, which is the argument of the next section.

Why it paid to be French

Go back to the first group, the birthplaces from his own lifetime, because they tell us something even though none of them can be proved.

Five birthplaces is not a man who had forgotten where he was born. It is a man, or a family, giving different answers to different listeners. Ramsay drew the obvious conclusion. After 1803 it was convenient to be a native of France, because being a French subject rather than an American offered some protection against the enforcement of American law.

The reasoning is easy to reconstruct. Louisiana passed to the United States in December 1803. A citizen of the United States who fitted out armed vessels in American waters to prey on the shipping of a friendly power, and sold the proceeds without troubling a prize court, was breaking American law in several ways at once. A Frenchman sailing under a foreign commission could at least argue that he was something else. Part Two shows how far that argument actually went.

Being French was also simply useful in New Orleans. It was a French-speaking city, and with the refugees of 1809 and 1810 the number of French speakers in it doubled. Chapter 5 explains how.

The Spanish and American claims are harder to read. It is a fair guess, and no more than a guess, that a man who dealt with Spanish officials and American officials over the years found reasons to be born in each of their countries. Nothing in the record shows him doing so deliberately.

The one safe conclusion is that Jean Laffite's birthplace was, for much of his life, a working part of his business rather than a fact about his past. He seems to have treated it as a document he could reissue as required, rather like a privateer's commission.

That is also the reason the question can probably never be settled from the Louisiana side. The answer, if there is one, lies in a baptismal register on the other side of the Atlantic, and it is to that register, and to its rival, that the next chapter turns.

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