

# *Jean Lafitte in the War of 1812*

*A Narrative Based on the Original Documents*

BY EDWARD ALEXANDER PARSONS

**O**UT of the secret archives of the British Admiralty comes the first paper in the last episode of the final conflict between England and America.

From almost the beginning of the War of 1812 the British thought of invading the Mississippi Valley. That meant the capture of New Orleans, a Latin city whose people, alien in race, faith and civilization, had been taken over by the Louisiana Purchase less than nine years before and had been admitted to statehood but seventy-one (or rather forty-nine) days before the United States declared war (June 18, 1812). On reflection it seemed a reasonably vulnerable door by which to enter the world's richest and potentially greatest valley.

The British spy system was keen, accurate and logical. As the eighth month of war was accomplished (February 19, 1813) the "Observations relative to New Orleans," by Captain James Lucas Yeo (afterward Sir James) addressed to Viscount Melville, First Lord of the Admiralty, was on its way to London.

Captain Yeo who has a most picturesque record of daring achievements, became Commander-in-chief of the English naval forces on the Great Lakes. He could have qualified as chief intelligence officer in any organization, nay as Inspector of Scotland Yard.

Here is his report:

The City of New Orleans is not Fortified, nor furnished with the means either for Hostile or Defensive operations.

Almost the whole of their Troops (consisting of undisciplined Militia) have been sent to Mobile for the purpose of seizing on Pensacola and every other part of the Spanish Possessions in West Florida.

It lies about eighty miles from the mouth of the Mississippi the Navigation of which is very safe after passing over the Bar, with only two small Forts to oppose you, at a place called English Turn. It is my opinion that a Frigate, lightened as much as possible, might pass the Bar with safety. There is no possibility of any information of your approach arriving at the City before you;

The Banks of the River are composed of soft mud, and the Town, which is embanked to protect it from inundation, is consequently ill calculated for Bombardment; The American Naval Force at present, consists only of two Brigs, a Schooner, and ten or twelve Gun Boats. Their Land Force at Mobile is about five thousand militia. At New Orleans there is nothing but Faction and discontent and the American Party is by far the weakest. The Indians are implacably hostile to them, which, added to their internal discord, would operate much against them. New Orleans is full of shipping—It is their Depot for the chief Produce of the Interior parts of Louisiana and other Places, which are sent down the Ohio and Mississippi to New Orleans, to be from thence disposed of.

It is not for me to presume to judge of its Political Expediency, but from the information I have been able to obtain and the little Local knowledge I have acquired, I am persuaded there is nothing that would cause more alarm and consternation than the bare apprehension of our Black Troops being employed against them;

The Population of the slaves in the Southern Provinces of America is so great, that the People of Landed Property would be panic-struck at the sight of a Black Regiment on their Coast, and nothing would more effectually tend to make the War with this Country unpopular, than the knowledge of such a measure being in contemplation. The best Season for any active operations on that Coast is between the month of April and the middle of July, after which you are subject to hurricanes, and before that time to violent Freshet down the Mississippi. The retention of Pensacola to the Spaniards is of vast importance to us, not only in a Commercial point of view, but as an excellent Port for any small Blockading Squadron in that Quarter, there never being less than Eighteen feet water on the Bar. It affords an abundance of Provisions, as well as Spars long enough for any ship in the Navy. A Frigate may find Lower masts growing so near to the edge of the River, that, when cut down, they would fall into it. The Americans have a strong Party in Cuba, particularly at the Havanna and St. Jago, at the latter Place they find means of disposing of their Prizes, altho' the Governor forbade my sending any into the Havanna. The American Government sent a Person, a little before the War, to the Havanna in the Character of consul General, but the Governor refused receiving him under the Plea that no such character was ever admitted into the Spanish Colonies. He next attempted to secure an insidious footing in the country, with the alledged motive of arranging the Merchants' accounts, but this also was

refused him. The Americans have sent down towards Mexico a great number of adventurers under the pretext of assisting the Insurgents.

James Lucas Yeo,<sup>1</sup>

Captain

19th Feby 1813.

In the active dossier of the Admiralty this alluring, tempting picture of easy conquest, rich booty, and spectacular victory germinated and constantly grew until it assumed the proportion of a magic scene of golden adventure and political opportunity. No wonder it provoked the Viking spirit of Cochrane, the Vice-Admiral. No wonder that to some of the advisers all other actions, including the audacious thrust of General Ross, who with a small force of 4000 dared to invade a nation of ten millions, destroy its Capitol and threaten the city of Baltimore, were considered as mere diversions for the greater event to come—the conquest of the valley of the Mississippi and the fabulous city that was its guardian. No wonder that my Lord Castlereagh, Britain's prime minister, according to the newspapers of the day, boasted in Paris salons, "I expect that at this time" (when the news of the Victory at Washington reached Europe) "that we are in possession of New Orleans, and have command of all the waters of the Mississippi."

One man however could not be deceived. He saw the folly, the futility, the mistake of policy involved. "Plunder was its object," calmly wrote Lord Wellington, in a personal letter. "I knew and stated in July that the transports could not approach within leagues of the landing place . . . this evil design defeated its own end."

But the British spy's fatal description possessed the mind of Sir Alexander Cochrane, who could not be persuaded from the scheme. He originated the expedition and was the father of the mighty armada which rendezvoused in the Greater Antilles at the western tip of Jamaica, November 24, 1814.

There were at least thirty-one ships of 1220 guns and eleven transports, from the enormous *Tonnant* of eighty guns, captured at Nelson's Abukir, to the little schooner *Pigmy* of six guns.

<sup>1</sup> James Lucas Yeo, *Observations Relative to New Orleans*, original Ms. in Bibliotheca Parsoniana, New Orleans (La.-Am. MSS. No. 1008).

With it was the elite of the British navy: "Cochrane, Malcolm, Trowbridge, Gordon, Codrington, and Thomas Hardy in whose arms Nelson died at Trafalgar."

The transports, with very secret orders from Lord Bathurst, carried the so-called army of the Chesapeake, over 3000; and the men brought by Keane numbered nearly 4500. Some 7500 seasoned veterans of the Peninsular war, trained men of Scotch, Irish, and English regiments of world renown, were officered by such men as Pakenham, Keane, Gibbs, Lambert, and Thornton. The marines and sailors added at least 1500 fighting men. This formidable array of ships and men, the English Armada, sailed for the Gulf coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama. It met the proverbial storm or hurricane on December 9th, and later the greater storm of the unique resistance to their invasion by the Creole, French, Spanish, Italian, American, and Anglo-American people of the United States.

Many colorful scenes were to be enacted ere the great denouement of the drama on the field of Chalmette—the Battle of New Orleans.

The vanguard of the coming invasion was the arrival of the brig *Orpheus*, in the bay of Apalachicola, in the summer 1814. The Creek Indians were enlisted in the British cause and plans laid against Fort Bowyer at Mobile.

But the real forerunner of the great invasion was the sloop of war carrying the troops of Edward Nicolls, an intrepid Irish soldier noted for his courage and brutality. He stopped at Havana, August 4, 1814, where he endeavored to obtain the cooperation of the Spanish Captain General. He failed; yet, undiscouraged, sailed for Pensacola, which he forcibly made his headquarters.

He had heard of the smuggler, buccaneer, or gentleman pirate Jean Lafitte and his men at Barataria. He must have considered them privateers.

Now there are two lands, Egypt and Louisiana, that the mariner approaches impercipiently, the navigator alone perceiving the sea-waste composed of the black loam and golden soil brought down by the Nile and the Mississippi.

Westward of the Mississippi, almost due south of New Orleans, there is a region of land and water, where marsh, slight elevations of terra firma, bays and lakes, small streams and bayous, in endless intricacy, contend for the mastery. Escaping from the Cretan labyrinth was a simple game in comparison with the successful threading of this tortuous maze. Starkly picturesque in flora and fauna is this enchanted region of primeval state: ancient cypress, gray-bearded with Spanish moss; willows weeping over slow flowing streams; dank vegetation guarding all entrance and exit to and from a place fatal from the miasma of decaying vegetation slowly forming a new world; a secret place, often wrapped in the impenetrable fog of its frequent changing temperatures; a maritime jungle; the habitat of alligator, possum, wolf, and bear and the creeping things of earth; the ideal hide-out of the most formidable of all creatures, the fearless racketeer, who, protected by the law and the weaknesses of human nature, plys his universal game. When the sun shows, this is a terrestrial paradise of winged fowl and innumerable fish.

As a wall protecting this region from the sea are several islands, furnishing safe harbor, bold lookouts, and ample ground for settlements. In the center of a crescent described from the Southwest Pass of the Mississippi to Marchand Bay, or Bayou Lafourche, lies the island of Grande Terre. Behind stretch the waterways and trembling prairies that make of the hinterland a perfect "hideaway."

Grande Terre was the capital of the Free State of Lafitte. Here the debonair Jean Lafitte, the younger, and his brother Pierre held despotic sway in a little world free of the embarrassing restraints of formal society. This was the clearing-house for the disposal and sale of the cargoes captured by the lawless crews of the Lafitte Brothers who did a large and prosperous business with the nearby emporium, New Orleans.

To this place and to its chief, Colonel Nicolls sent Captain Lockyer to deliver written proposals and to add verbal persuasion to the Lafittes and their followers to espouse the British cause.

Captain Lockyer delivered a packet of papers to Jean Lafitte, all of which we have:

(1) A letter, dated Pensacola August 30, 1814, from the Honorable Sir William H. Percy, captain of H.M.S. *Hermes* to Nichs Lockyer Commander of H.M. Sloop *Sophie* directing him to proceed to Barataria;<sup>1</sup>

(2) A letter, dated September 1st, 1814, from the Honorable Sir William H. Percy, captain of H.M. Ship *Hermes*, to Lafitte (Lefeete).<sup>2</sup>

(3) A Proclamation, dated Pensacola August 29, 1814, by Lieutenant-Colonel Edward Nicolls to the Natives of Louisiana, Spaniards, Frenchmen, Italians and British, settled or resided for a time in Louisiana. This proclamation was enclosed in the following letter from Nicolls to Lafitte.<sup>3</sup>

(4)

Headquarters, Pensacola,  
August 31, 1814

Sir,

I have arrived in the Floridas for the purpose of annoying the only enemy Great Britain has in the world, as France and England are now friends. I call on you, with your brave followers, to enter into the service of Great Britain, in which 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, and I invite you on the following terms your property shall be guaranteed to you, and your persons protected: in return for which I ask you to cease all hostilities against Spain, or the allies of Great Britain.—Your ships and vessels to be placed under the orders of the commanding officer on this station, until the commander-in-chief's pleasure is known but I guarantee their fair value to you at all events. I herewith enclose you a copy of my proclamation to the inhabitants of Louisiana, which will, I trust, point out to you the honourable intentions of my government. You may be an useful assistant to me, in forwarding them; therefore, if you determine, lose no time. The bearer of this, captain M'Williams, will satisfy you on any other points you may be anxious to learn, as will captain Lockyer of the *Sophie*, who brings him to you. We have a powerful reenforcement on its way here, and I hope to cut out some other work for the Americans than oppressing the inhabitants of Louisiana. Be expeditious in your resolves, and rely on the verity of

Your very humble servant,  
Edward Nicolls  
Commanding His Britannic Majesty's  
forces in the Floridas.

To Monsieur Lafite  
or the Commandant  
at Barataria.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Bibliotheca Parsoniana: La.-Am. MSS. No. 1023.

<sup>2</sup> Bibliotheca Parsoniana: La.-Am. MSS. No. 1024.

<sup>3</sup> Bibliotheca Parsoniana: La.-Am. MSS. No. 1026.

<sup>4</sup> Bibliotheca Parsoniana: La.-Am. MSS. No. 1025.

In the early morning on September 2, H.M. Sloop *Sophie*, anchored off Grande Terre and shot its signal gun. Lafitte immediately put out in a small boat to ascertain the cannon's summons. Seeing Lafitte's boat approaching, the gig of the British brig, with Captain Lockyer of H.M. Navy, Captain McWilliams of H.M. Army, and a Lieutenant, left to meet him. Lockyer stated his rank and nation and asked for Lafitte for whom he had an important communication. The master of Baratavia replied that the person they desired could be seen in Grande Terre and invited them ashore. He finally disclosed his identity but cautioned them to conceal the true object of their mission. The motley forces of Baratavia were nevertheless threatening and hostile, and during a short temporary absence of Lafitte's, actually imprisoned the British officers. But Lafitte returned immediately, released them with profound apologies, and entertained his guests in regal style with the far-famed Creole cuisine and finest wines from the Spanish main served on the costly plate of some unfortunate prize of the Mexic sea.

Our host was tall, well formed, with black hair, olive complexion, keen eyed (I will not say they were Visigothic), of easy manners, much self-reliance, with a good opinion of himself, yet with-all, when his volubility did not lead him into gasconadry, he was wary in important matters, perhaps suiting his manner to the person and occasion.

He was said to have been born at Bayonne, in the Basses-Pyrénées, (whence so many of our native Creoles trace their immediate descent). His father was a French Gascon, his mother Spanish, or rather of that unknown people which we call Basques, who in this corner of Europe bestride the mountain barriers of France and Spain. His native place was renowned as the birth-place of the bayonet and as the purveyor of hams.<sup>1</sup>

In his best manner he treated his guests and saw them off—delivering his written answer, in French, to Nicolls' letter, in English, direct to Lockyer.

<sup>1</sup> Bayonne hams are extolled by Master Rabelais (*Gargantua*, ch. 3) and Mistress Margaret of Navarre (*Heptameron*, nouvelle, 28).

He wrote as follows (English translation):

Barataria, 4th September, 1814.

Sir,

The confusion which prevailed in our camp yesterday and this morning, and of which you have a complete knowledge, has prevented me from answering in a precise manner to the object of your mission: nor even at this moment can I give you all the satisfaction that you desire; however, if you could grant me a fortnight, I would be entirely at your disposal at the end of that time—this delay is indispensable to send away the three persons who have alone occasioned all the disturbance—the two who were the most troublesome are to leave this place in eight days, and the other is to go to town—the remainder of the time is necessary to enable me to put my affairs in order—you may communicate with me, in sending a boat to the eastern point of the pass, where I will be found. You have inspired me with more confidence than the admiral, your superior officer, could have done himself; with you alone I wish to deal, and from you also I will claim, in due time, the reward of the services which I may render to you.

Be so good, sir, as to favour me with an answer, and believe me yours, &c.

Lafitte.<sup>1</sup>

Having lulled the English into a temporary belief in his acquiescence to their tempting offer, the subtle Master of Barataria, decided with promptitude, skill, and power to play the age-old game of "double-cross."

His decision involved the consideration of the following factors: a Frenchman operating an illicit business in America's newly acquired province of Louisiana; his customers, the merchants and people of Latin New Orleans; his trusted agents, acquaintances, friends, citizens of that cosmopolitan city. He knew both the gay, self-sufficient, excitable Creole, of his own race, who would fight for a mere peccadillo. He knew the American frontiersman of English, Scotch, and Irish breed and he respected their free, bold, and dependable character. These were the people he profitably knew. It is true he was proscribed by the government, both State, represented by Governor William C. C. Claiborne, and United States, represented by Commodore Daniel T. Patter-

<sup>1</sup> Bibliotheca Parsoniana: La.-Am. MSS. No. 1031.



son. There was a price on his head, and his brother Pierre was actually in prison in New Orleans.

The English were British, strangers, nay, actual enemies of his blood from before Crécy and Agincourt. They were invaders come from far to fight men of their own race and of his, on the frontier of civilization. The chances were always against them. As a mere sporting proposition the bet was in favor of the Americans.

The Latin and American people of Louisiana were his permanent neighbors. Besides, this appeared a wonderful opportunity to make peace with the government of the United States, release his brother, and wipe the slate clean of the perilous past with its ever haunting accusations.

And so the die was cast, the irrevocable decision made that come what might the Lafittes would throw their forces to the American cause. If they were repelled and utterly rejected by the Americans, even then they would not go over to the British side. In that event, in order to remove all doubt as to their determination to fight with the Louisianians, they would entirely leave the scene of action; they would go away.

Such was the wise and firm resolve of the man of whom so little is known that you may call him the pirate of the Gulf, the un-nautical blacksmith of the city, the attractive gambler in men and merchandise, the buccaneer who played a constant game with life and death. He was the Master of Barataria who had gathered from every race and clime men, who in their day had been guilty of every crime. These he ruled with a perfect control, from the beautiful islet Grande Terre, sparkling in the tropic sun of the Gulf of Mexico, or from wherever Jean Lafitte might be; for he was the capital and citadel of his illicit empire.

Therefore to his secret agent at New Orleans, a royal merchant and prominent member of the Louisiana legislature (how changless is human nature and her chronicler History throughout the ages) he wrote:

Barataria, 4th September, 1814.

Sir,

Though proscribed by my adoptive country, I will never let slip any occasion of serving her, or of proving that she has never ceased to be

dear to me. Of this you will here see a convincing proof. Yesterday, the 3d of September, there appeared here, under a flag of truce, a boat coming from an English brig, at anchor about two leagues from the pass. Mr. Nicholas Lockyer, a British officer of high rank, delivered me the following papers, two directed to me, a proclamation, and the admiral's instructions to that officer, all herewith enclosed. You will see from their contents the advantages I might have derived from that kind of association. I may have evaded the payment of duties to the custom house; but I have never ceased to be a good citizen; and all the offence I have committed, I was forced to by certain vices in our laws. In short, sir, I make you the depository of the secret on which perhaps depends the tranquillity of our country; please to make such use of it as your judgment may direct. I might expatiate on this proof of patriotism, but I let the fact speak for itself. I presume, however, to hope that such proceedings may obtain amelioration of the situation of my unhappy brother, with which view I recommend him particularly to your influence. It is in the bosom of a just man, of a true American, endowed with all other qualities that are honoured in society, that I think I am depositing the interests of our common country, and what particularly concerns myself.

Our enemies have endeavoured to work on me by a motive which few men would have resisted. They represented to me a brother in irons, a brother who is to me very dear! Whose deliverer I might become, and I declined the proposal. Well persuaded of his innocence, I am free from apprehension as to the issue of a trial; but he is sick and not in a place where he can receive the assistance his state requires. I recommend him to you, in the name of humanity.

As to the flag of truce, I have done with regard to it everything that prudence suggested to me at the time. I have asked fifteen days to determine, assigning such plausible prettexts, that I hope the term will be granted. I am waiting for the British officer's answer, and for yours to this. Be so good as to assist me with your judicious counsel in so weighty an affair.

I have the honour to salute you,

J. Lafitte.<sup>1</sup>

Anxiously Lafitte wrote to his agent, Mr. Blanque, again on September 7, 1814:

Grande Terre,  
7th September, 1814.

Sir,

You will always find me eager to evince my devotedness to the good of the country, of which I endeavoured to give some proof in my letter

<sup>1</sup> Bibliotheca Parsoniana, La.—Am. MSS. No. 1022. All of the Lafitte letters were written in French, except the letter of Pierre Lafitte, Jan. 3, 1820, which was written in English. All of the French letters are given in English translation.

of the 4th, which I make no doubt you received. Amongst other papers that have fallen into my hands, I send you a scrap which appears to me of sufficient importance to merit your attention.

Since the departure of the officer who came with the flag of truce, his ship, with two other ships of war have remained on the coast, within sight. Doubtless this point is considered as important. We have hitherto kept on a respectable defensive; if, however, the British attach to the possession of this place, the importance they give us room to suspect they do, they may employ means above our strength. I know not whether, in that case, proposals of intelligence with government would be out of season. It is always from my high opinion of your enlightened mind, that I request you to advise me in this affair.

I have the honour to salute you,

J. Lafitte.<sup>1</sup>

His brother Pierre Lafitte escaped from the calaboose (the jail) at New Orleans, and joined Jean at Grande Terre. The following letter was written to Governor William C. C. Claiborne (spelled by Lafitte "Clayborne"):

Sir,

In the firm persuasion that the choice made of you to fill the office of first magistrate of this state, was dictated by the esteem of your fellow-citizens, and was conferred on merit, I confidently address you on an affair on which may depend the safety of this country.

I offer to you to restore to this state several citizens, who perhaps in your eyes have lost that sacred title. I offer you them, however, such as you could wish to find them, ready to exert their utmost efforts in defence of the country. This point of Louisiana, which I occupy, is of great importance in the present crisis. I tender my services to defend it; and the only reward I ask is that a stop be put to the proscription against me and my adherents, by an act of oblivion for all that has been done hitherto. I am the stray sheep, wishing to return to the sheepfold. If you were thoroughly acquainted with the nature of my offences, I should appear to you much less guilty, and still worthy to discharge the duties of a good citizen. I have never sailed under any flag but that of the republic of Carthage, and my vessels are perfectly regular in that respect. If I could have brought my lawful prizes into the ports of this state, I should not have employed the illicit means that have caused me to be proscribed. I decline saying more on the subject, until I have the honour of your excellency's answer, which I am persuaded can be dictated only by wisdom. Should your answer not be favourable to my ardent desires, I declare to you that I will instantly leave the country, to avoid the imputation of having co-operated towards an invasion on this point,

<sup>1</sup> Bibliotheca Parsoniana, La.-Am. MSS. No. 1021.

which cannot fail to take place, and to rest secure in the acquittal of my own conscience.

I have the honour to be

Your Excellency's, &c.  
J. Lafitte.<sup>1</sup>

And finally a confirmatory letter by the elder Lafitte (Pierre) was sent to their agent, Blanque, September 10, 1814.

Grande Terre  
10th September, 1814

Sir,

On my arrival here, I was informed of all the occurrences that have taken place; I think I may justly commend my brother's conduct under such difficult circumstances. I am persuaded he could not have made a better choice, than in making you the depositary of the papers that were sent to us, and which may be of great importance to the state. Being fully determined to follow the plan that may reconcile us with the government, I herewith send you a letter directed to his excellency the governor, which I submit to your discretion, to deliver or not, as you may think proper. I have not yet been honoured with an answer from you. The moments are precious; pray send me an answer that may serve to direct my measures in the circumstances in which I find myself.

I have the honour to be, &c.

P. Lafitte.

P.S. I join with this the letter for Mr. Claiborne, which I submit to your judgment. Should you think, from its contents, that it may be delivered or communicated to him, you will do either, as you think proper. I send it to you under cover; after having read it, I request you to seal it.<sup>2</sup>

A council of state (i.e. committee of defense), was held to determine the genuineness of the letters and whether the council should deal with the pirate leader. The decision was against having any intercourse with the Lafittes. Major General Villere alone dissented and it is said Governor Claiborne agreed with him. There is a tradition that a message was sent to Lafitte to do nothing for the present. However, it is certain that the friends of the Master of Baratavia in New Orleans promptly notified him that the expedition of the U.S. Naval and Military forces so long

<sup>1</sup> Bibliotheca Parsoniana, La.-Am. MSS. No. 986.

<sup>2</sup> Bibliotheca Parsoniana, La.-Am. MSS. No. 1020.

sought for and urged by Claiborne was being completed and would sail momentarily for the privateer's stronghold to destroy it. Though the time was certainly inauspicious and the action of the government tainted with a kind of ingratitude, the expedition was sent against the Baratarians, in spite of the loyal gesture of the privateers and the proffer of valuable service. In truth, the urge of adventure and of gain within the law was too strong to allay. For long had the illicit fabulous wealth of Baratavia been the current topic on the streets and by-ways of New Orleans. On the island of Grande Terre there was and is a shell mound of the Indians called the Temple and popular imagination pictured it as the treasure-house, not of archaeological bones and pottery, but of baskets of pearls and jewels, sacks of pieces-of-eight and golden doubloons, and spoils of rich argosies sacked at sea—a realization of the Arabian dream of Ali Baba's cave.

The expedition sailed for Grande Terre. It captured many of the Baratarians and much loot; it destroyed the place and returned to New Orleans with its prisoners and treasure. The Lafittes escaped into the hinterland determined to maintain their pacific attitude toward the Americans and their willingness to fight for them.

Governor Claiborne loudly praised the victor (Commodore Patterson, U.S. Navy) and commented in his letter to the Secretary of the Navy, October 25, 1814:

Captain Patterson will have reported to you the fortunate result of his late expedition against the Pirates smugglers of Baratavia. . . . For the present the Pirates and smugglers are entirely dispensed—But to prevent their reassembling a naval force on this Station, in Peace or in War, will be indispensable.<sup>1</sup>

But more adventurous days were in store for the men who guarded the gateway of the valley than sacking the stronghold of gulf privateers.

All was astir in the cosmopolitan city of New Orleans with its Creole, French, Spanish, Italian, German, English, and Ameri-

<sup>1</sup> William C. C. Claiborne, Letter to Secy. of the Navy, Oct. 25, 1814, Bibliotheca Parsoniana, La.—Am. MSS. No. 1017.

can population, not to mention the free men of color such as Savary the Santo Domingan who did brilliant gunnery at the great battle at Chalmette, January 8, 1815.

At last Andrew Jackson arrived (December 2, 1814) with his strong prejudice against the Baratarians whom he called "a hellish bandetti" and of whom he said that he would not call upon either pirates or robbers to join him in the glorious cause he had to defend. Local friends of the Lafittes tried to dissuade him. Governor Claiborne suggested to the Washington government leniency towards the captives of the recent expedition and the Legislature passed placating resolutions. Finally Edward Livingston, the brilliant American advocate, who was the personal counsel of the Lafittes, was made one of the aides to General Jackson. At last even the rock disintegrated, General Jackson and Jean Lafitte met, I shall always believe, through the clever, insinuating persistence of Mr. Livingston. Governor Claiborne proclaimed the friendly attitude of the Legislature, requested the U.S. District Attorney and Federal Court to nolle prosequi the case against the Baratarians and pledged himself to ask for them a full pardon from the President of the United States in return for loyal service in the American cause. The Baratarians flocked to the standard of Jackson.

On December 22, 1814, we find General Jackson writing to Major Reynolds ordering him to fortify the "Temple" and giving the following definite instructions:

Mr. Jean Lafitte has offered me his services to go down and give you every information in his power you will therefore please to afford him the necessary protection from Injury and Insult and when you have derived the information you wish furnish him with your passport for his return dismissing him as soon as possible as I shall want him here.<sup>1</sup>

This is a fascinating letter, confirming the understanding between Jackson and Lafitte, and containing two quaint injunctions: to protect Lafitte from *injury*—we are convinced he was entirely capable of doing that for himself; to protect him from *insult*—this

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Jackson: Letter to Major Reynolds, Dec. 22, 1814, Bibliotheca Parsoniana, La.—Am. MSS. No. 1019.

was not so easy, as no one can adequately protect oneself from insult. This probably required an "order" of the General, as it was known that many Creole and other gentlemen of New Orleans objected to being associated with or to fighting with the "privateers," whom many deemed to be pirates.

Indeed Jackson needed Lafitte and every available man with him.

The first Battle of New Orleans, the great reconnaissance of December 23, 1814, was fought. The British were surprised at the attack and its vigor. They missed their chance; for had they continued the conflict, with their members and reinforcements, they could have effected the capture of New Orleans. And so, in the demonstration and artillery duels of December 28, 1814, and January 1, 1815, the Americans held their own.

In the grey dawn of January 8, 1815, on the field of Chalmette, with a small army of poorly equipped regulars, of raw militia of the new State of Louisiana, and the mixed citizens of the most cosmopolitan city in the New World, an astounding victory was achieved over a magnificent army of gallant men who had covered their forces with renown in the Peninsula War and who were yet to attain greater glory on the field of Waterloo.

The Battle of New Orleans was the seal of the Louisiana Purchase. The Louisiana Purchase, the greatest peace-time acquisition of territory in the record of man, made of these United States the most fortunate and most powerful of nations. In the sacrifices of that battle the blood of all the peoples of English speech became an offering for an everlasting covenant of peace between peoples of common origins, life, and civilization.

But on the field of victorious battle, as the last cannon ceased and the last bullet fell, the victor thought of the danger on the western side of the Mississippi where the American Brigadier General Morgan was seriously confronted by the brilliant General Thornton of the British Army. The letter which Jackson wrote at this moment with the paeans of victory still singing in his ears, is one of the most remarkable military documents in our history—a fragile bit of paper with a concluding sentence of arresting simplicity.

Jackson wrote:

Headquarters 7th Military Dist.  
8th Jany 1815

Sir,

This will be handed to you by Mr. Lafitte whom I have sent to you as a man acquainted with the Geography of the Country on your side of the river and will be able to afford you any information you may want with respect to the canals and bayous by which the enemy may attempt to penetrate. I have also sent Genl Humbert a man in whose bravery I have unbounded Confidence, for the purpose of carrying the enemy if necessary at the point of the Bayonet. It is my determination he shall be dislodged at all events and I rely upon your determination, with the aid I have sent you, to accomplish it, they are not more than four hundred strong and your task not a difficult one; we have beat them here at all points, with a loss on their side of at least a thousand men.

Andrew Jackson  
Major Genl Comdy.

Brigadier Genl Morgan  
Right Bank of the Mississippi<sup>1</sup>

Jean and Pierre Lafitte and the Baratarians had made good. They had resisted the temptation of the offers of place, protection, and prize. They had resisted the provocation of the destruction of their stronghold, loss of their treasures, dispersal and prosecution of their forces.

They had literally lived up to their professions in their letters of September, 1814, to Claiborne and the Americans.

General Jackson, in his grand manner, having called them once "hellish bandetti," did not hesitate, on account of their conduct and services to the American cause, in the "Address to be read at the head of each of the Corps composing the line below New Orleans Jany 21-1815" (published in the *Friend of the Laws*, of the local press<sup>2</sup>), to proclaim, in part:

Captains Dominique and Belluche, lately commanding privateers at Baratavia, with part of their former crew and many brave citizens of New Orleans, were stationed at Nos. 3 and 4. The General cannot avoid giving his warm approbation of the manner in which these gentlemen

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Jackson: Letter to Brig. Gen. Morgan, Jan. 8, 1815, Bibliotheca Parsoniana, La.—Am. MSS. No. 1007.

<sup>2</sup> *Friend of the Laws*, New Orleans, Jan. 24, 1815 (Bibliotheca Parsoniana).



have uniformly conducted themselves while under his command, and of the gallantry with which they have redeemed the pledge they gave at the opening of the campaign to defend the country. The brothers Lafitte have exhibited the same courage and fidelity; and the general promises that the government shall be duly appraised of their conduct.

A curious figure was Jean Lafitte. In the early eighteen hundreds he lived the full life of the adventurous frontier on land and sea, in the deep South, Mexican West, and on the Mexican gulf, playing many parts in the rough heroic drama of early American life: Master of the Forge, gentleman urban agent of the free traders of the gulf, smuggler, violator of the neutrality laws, robber baron of Grande Terre, Master of Baratavia, privateer of the Republic of Cartagena, volunteer topographical adviser and soldier of the American army under Jackson, and finally Governor of Galvez-town, secret agent (No. 13b and No. 19 composita with Pierre) of Spain, and Pirate of the Gulf.

The trail of the Lafittes runs through the early records of the nascent District Court of the United States of America for the Louisiana District, amidst proceedings against piracies, smuggling, and milder civil suits. And wherever you find Lafitte in person, or in one of his various alter egos, there also appears the dapper figure of his astute lawyer, Mr. Edward Livingston.<sup>1</sup>

When Commodore Patterson, U.S.N., and Colonel Ross, U.S.A. returned to New Orleans with the spoils of Baratavia, libels were filed against the property and an order for the arrest of Jean Lafitte issued. This was in the fall of 1814. By the summer of 1815, Mr. Livingston successfully obtained judgments in favor of Vincent Gambia (a lieutenant of Lafitte) for the proceeds of the sale of the seized vessel *Petit Milan*; in favor of Dominique You (a lieutenant of Lafitte) for the proceeds of the vessel *A Felucca*; in favor of John Lafitte for the proceeds of the vessel *The Fly*; in favor of Jean Lafitte for the proceeds of the vessel *The Wasp*; and for sundry goods and merchandise in favor of the said Lafitte.

<sup>1</sup> All this was written before the publication of the authoritative work by Dr. William B. Hatcher, *Edward Livingston, Jeffersonian Republican and Jacksonian Democrat* (Louisiana State University Press, 1940).

As it became impossible, due to governmental vigilance, to revive the stronghold of Barataria, the Lafittes pushed westward, seeking their fortune in Spain's turbulent province of Texas. As Aury departed from Galvez-town Lafitte took possession with a small body of his men, proclaiming some sort of government under the Mexican flag. Lawless blades flocked to his Free State of Campeachy where he built a fort, a residence, and a settlement of perhaps a thousand resolute. When Galvez-town was made a port of entry for the Republic of Texas (October 9, 1819), Lafitte was made Governor.

Spanish diplomacy kept the United States from molesting his little kingdom, as the Spanish Minister to the United States, Luis de Onis, feared that if the United States Navy should dispossess Lafitte of Galvez-town it might be indisposed to surrender it back to Spain (as the boundary was still undetermined between the two countries). Also, it is now revealed that Lafitte was playing the game of triple-cross with Spain, the insurgents of Texas, and the Americans.

So the anomaly of Lafitte's tenure being preserved by the Spanish diplomat, during all of the time Lafitte was seizing Spanish ships and cargoes, and practically effecting the destruction of Spanish commerce in this part of the world, is, perhaps, at last explained.

But it was too good to last. His men interfered with American ships. The first time, an American vessel near the mouth of the Sabine was their victim. Lafitte, alarmed, promptly hanged his captain, Brown, and America was appeased.<sup>1</sup> In 1820, however, an American vessel was scuttled in Matagorda Bay. Orders were issued to Lieutenant Kearney of the U.S.S. *Enterprise* to destroy Galvez-town.

Lafitte did not fight. Finding persuasion vain, he gave a feast to the Naval Officers, made certain distribution of property among his men, disbanded most of his followers, and abandoned his

<sup>1</sup> Lieut. J. M. McIntosh, "A Visit to Lafitte," in *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, vol. II, p. 435.

second free state. But not, however, until he had exhausted the power of the pen. Unable to resist with the sword the force of the United States, this resourceful man, through his brother Pierre, played his last trick with the persuasive letter (the last written word we have of the Brothers Lafitte) of January 3, 1820, addressed to Commodore Patterson:

New Orleans, January 3, 1820  
To Commodore D. F. Patterson, Commanding  
Officer for the New Orleans Station.

Sir,

Persuaded that the communication of which this letter is the object, can conveniently be made to you only; it will, I hope, be received as an apology for the liberty I take of addressing myself to you.

Too long since, the names of the Lafittes have been the object of general execration, as well here as abroad; tarnished and devoted to contempt in publications without any foundation; and always found assimilated and attached to the criminal undertakings of a gang of Pirates of all countries; the audacity of which increases by impunity, and who have lately committed depredations and atrocities of all kind on the Sea coast, and even within the jurisdiction of this State. It would not be difficult for me to prove that such Bandetti never were engaged, kept in pay, or protected by me, or my Brother in our different transactions at Galvez-town; and his late conduct in that country with regard to one of them, ought to destroy the least suspicion. But, as the non ratification of the treaty by Spain gives to the Government of the United States the jurisdiction as far west as the Rio Bravo del Norte under the purchase of Louisiana; and as the establishment at Galvez-town, lying within those limits, was formed as conquered from Spain, by the Mexican Republic, and Republic of Texas; to put an end to all things, and to shew to the whole world that I never contributed to the violation of the sacred rights of nations, or would offer resistance or offence to the Government of the United States; and in the view of restoring all confidence to the foreign trade directing itself towards this place; and to destroy all fears which the Establishment of Galveztown might occasion; I now offer myself to you, Sir, willingly and at my own risk and expence, to clear Galveztown, and disband all those which are to be found there; taking the engagement for myself and my Brother, that it shall never serve as a place of Rendez-vous for any undertakings with our consent, or under our authorization. If the offer I make to you, Sir, can receive your approbation, I shall stand in need of no other thing but the necessary permit to prevent any embarrassment in the enterprize offering at the same time any satisfactory security for its unforeseen results, with permission to all those to be found there, to return where they may choose.

If my Demand is accepted, nothing shall be wanted on my part to bring it to a good result; and if you contribute to the general welfare by securing the Commerce and the inhabitant against the audacious attempts of Ruffians; I shall be indebted to you, Sir, for giving me the opportunity of striking out the odious epithets affixed to my name by my enemies; and of evincing to the Government of the United States my earnest desire to comply with the Laws; and as far as may be in my power to conduce to the safety of the Commerce of this Port, and ridding the Gulf of Mexico of Cruizers obnoxious to the Government. I remain, Sir, your most Humble and obedt. Servant.

Pierre Lafitte

P.S. In case you take the present in consideration, I beg to leave to call on you on the day you may be pleased to appoint.<sup>1</sup>

But the Navy would not make the deal.

Again he failed. He went away. He had been driven from Louisiana. He had been driven from Texas. Unable to establish a suitable abiding place on the islands or mainland of the Spanish Main, he sailed the trackless seas, with clandestine visits to ports unknown, from the mouth of the Oronoco to Yucatan<sup>2</sup> where the curtain falls on the tragic drama of the last corsair of the West. We do not know his end.

In the morning, out of the mist that settles in fall and winter upon the marsh and low lands, the bayous, lakes and rivers of the Delta of the Mississippi, he came, and for one brief, heroic, historic episode in his fabulous life stood erect in the noonday sun, and then, at eventide, as the fog falls upon those lands and waters, he went away into the kindly oblivion of legend out of which he came.

<sup>1</sup> Bibliotheca Parsoniana, La.—Am. MSS. No. 994.

<sup>2</sup> He is said to have died in 1826 and to be buried in the campo santo of Djilam. But it now would appear that Pedro Lafitte in November, 1821, was on a small island near the euphonious Island of Women. That he was attacked by soldiers under Captain Don Miguel Molas; that he was wounded and died and was accorded religious burial at Djilam, near Merida, on the Eastern coast of Yucatan. (J. Ignacio Rubio Mane, *Los Piratas Lafitte* [Mexico, 1938], p. 231.)

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