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The Journal of Jean Laffite: Its History and Controversy

Robert L. Schaadt

Whether defined as original order or the history of ownership, provenance is one of the guiding lights of the archival profession, the key that guarantees the validity of documents in the archives. Archival material is rarely questioned, and authorship is seldom a topic of intense discussion. One assumes that the signer of the letter penned it except when secretaries were known to have been employed. Perhaps as a profession, however, archivists are too trusting and rely too often on provenance as a guiding light.

What does an archivist do when a document is questioned, and the provenance is arguable? What is the obligation of the institution when the document not only is challenged but also changes history? During twenty-four years in the archival profession, this author has had close encounters with obvious facsimiles, clever forgeries, documents claimed to be one thing and turned out to be something entirely different resulting in a total loss of market value, and even a few homemade fakes.

The Journal of Jean Laffite,¹ however, is the only document encountered that falls into that category of true controversy, for it changes the death date of the privateer, and thus history.

The Death of Jean Laffite

For over a hundred and twenty years, Texas and Gulf of Mexico historians commonly referenced the fact that Jean Laffite died in 1824 (or 1825 or 1826) off the coast of Mexico's Yucatan peninsula during a hurricane. His journal places his death on 5 May 1854 in Alton, Illinois, under an assumed name. If Laffite's death in the mid-1820s were proven or even fairly well established, the journal would become another mystery; and historians, writers, and Laffite enthusiasts could ignore it as a primary source. The proof has yet to surface. The following 1886 version is but one of many tales recorded about Jean Laffite's death:

The tragic fate of this pirate king is told and retold by those who recollect the event. Just at a time when some of Lafitte's ships were away from the place of rendezvous, a strong force was set against him. He encountered it near Contoy and fought bravely but his ship struck a rock and sunk. He took to the boats with eight or ten men, and succeeded in landing on a sandbank called Blanquilla, but was pursued and surrounded. One by one all his men fell; still he

¹ The spelling of the surname Laffite is a controversy in itself. According to the *Handbook of Texas* it was spelled Laffite with an acceptable variant spelling of Lafitte. There are many documented variations and even common misspellings. The Laffite Society of Galveston chose the spelling of Laffite since that was how Jean Laffite normally signed his name. This is the version used here, except that alternative spellings in original documents have been preserved.

refused to surrender, and was killed there, defending himself as long as there was breath in his body.²

The earliest notation in the historical record, however, dates from 1836. Mirabeau B. Lamar recorded the entry in 1855 as information received from James Campbell, who thought the year to be either 1821 or 1822. Campbell, a colleague of Laffite's, swore that in 1836 William Cochran, Laffite's first lieutenant, had told him:

Lafitt sailed to the Southard and made the Cape Cartouch, dividing the Hondoras and Mexico, met a large ship and made up to her for action. She had 14 guns and made a sever fight; LaFitte was badly wounded in the action and lost several men. He captured her; and after holding her twenty-four hours the supercargo ransomed her for one hundred thousand dollars, her cargo being estimated by the invoices at three times that sum. Cochran being first Lt., Lafitt put him in command of the capture vessel as prize-master. Lafitt and Cochran now ran to Vera Cruz [*sic*] and ran off on waiting for the ransom, which was to be paid in twenty-four hours . . . and a sever wound inflicted on LaFitt himself . . . Lafitt beat up to Venezuela, where he died of his wounds.³

According to William Bollaert, writing in February–March 1842 in Galveston, Texas, Laffite “cruised about for a short time in the Gulf, went to the island of Margaritta near the

² Alice D. Le Plongeon, *Here and There in Yucatan* (New York: Book Composition & Electrotyping Co., 1886), 7.

³ Charles Adams Gulick, Jr. and Winnie Allen, eds., *The Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar* (Austin: Von Boeckmann–Jones Co. for Texas State Library, 1925), 4, pt. 2: 22.

Orinoco and reported to have died in the Uycatan peninsula in 1826."⁴ In 1843 Bollaert added, "General LaMar tells me that after Lafitte left Galveston there are no authentic records concerning him, but it is probable he is dead."⁵

In his 1857 "Recollection of Early Texans," J. H. Kuykendall included the reminiscence of Judge Thomas M. Duke about Laffite's death, which the judge believed had occurred in 1825 or 1826:

In the year 1841 while I was collector of customs at Pas Cavallo, an old Portuguese sailor lived with me for some time. He said Lafitte went from Merida to the Indian village of Celan(?) where he died. His old follower attended him in his last illness and after seeing the remains of his beloved commander interred in the Campo Santo of Merida, went to Honduras. The old sailor did not remember the year of our Lord in which Lafitte's death happened⁶

These are the primary records that document Jean Laffite's death from the early to mid-1820s. Other authors, especially popular and newspaper writers, have stated over the years that there is a marked grave and record of Laffite's burial in Yucatan, but none of the reports has been

⁴ W. Eugene Hollon and Ruth Papham Butler, eds., *William Bollaert's Texas* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1956), 16-17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 160. William Bollaert also wrote "Life of Jean Lafitte, The Pirate of the Mexican Gulf," *Littrell's Living Age* 32 (March 1852): 433-46.

⁶ "Reminiscences of Early Texans," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 4 (January 1903): 252. This article is from "Recollection of Early Texans" collected by J. H. Kuykendall in 1857 which was included in the Stephen F. Austin Papers.

substantiated.⁷ Popular histories published in 1855 and 1893 accepted the date of 1826.⁸ In his 1939 Texas textbook, Joseph L. Clark more cautiously wrote, "They [Laffite brothers] remained there [Galveston Island] until 1821, when they aroused the displeasure of the United States, whose navy set them wandering, never to be heard of again."⁹ No one seriously challenged this until the 1950s when the Jean Laffite Collection became available to several writers and an English translation of the Journal of Jean Laffite was published.

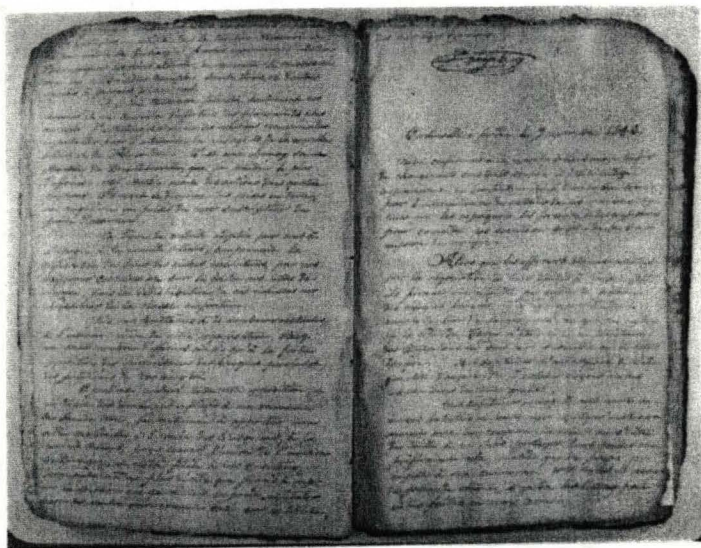
John Andrechyne Lafitte

The first hint of the journal's existence came in the 1940s when a man by the name of John Andrechyne Lafitte (John A.) began making inquiries about his great-grandfather Jean Laffite. After retiring from the Missouri Pacific Railroad,

⁷ Newspaper articles, including photographs, have been published of the grave marker for Jean Laffite but none has been verified, and serious researchers dismiss all. The earliest appeared in the *Galveston Civilian & City Gazette* in 1855. *The Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar*, 4, pt. 2: 30. There is documented information about the burial in Yucatan of Jean Laffite's brother Pierre with whom he was often confused, but even this record is not 100 percent reliable. Michel Antochiw, Merida, Yucatan, to Dorothy McDonald Karilanovic, Galveston, 22 August 1995, and "Year of 1821 Summary Investigation Against the Englishman Don Jorge Schumpph Relative to the Pirate Don Pedro Lafitte, His Death and Burial in the Port of Dzilam," *Centro de Apoyo a las Investigacion Historica de Yucatan, Documentos Historicos Peninsulares* (Merida, Yucatan, Mexico: Instituto de Cultura de Yucatan, January 1995), Laffite Society Research Collection, Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center, Liberty, Texas (hereafter cited as LSRC, SHRLRC).

⁸ H. Yoakum, *History of Texas* (New York: Redfield, 1855; reprint, Austin: Steck Co., 1935), 1: 204. John Henry Brown, *History of Texas, 1685-1892* (St. Louis: L.E. Daniell, Publisher, 1893), 1: 71.

⁹ Joseph L. Clark, *A History of Texas, Land of Promise* (Dallas: D.C. Heath and Company, 1939), 77. Clark used the spelling Lafitte.



The Journal of Jean Laffite, Jean Laffite Collection. Courtesy of Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center, Liberty, Texas.

John A. opened several trunks left to him in 1924 by his grandfather Jules. The bulk of the documents and books were in French, and John A. was not certain what he had inherited from his family since they seldom spoke of its history. He did know that they descended from the Gulf pirate and that the “trunk archives” including the journal documented this fact. According to Sue Thompson, who met him in New Orleans when he contacted her and her husband Ray about the documents in 1942 or 1943, John A. dreamed of fame and fortune based upon this heritage.¹⁰

He told them then that he was a retired railroader, could travel anywhere on railroad passes, and had all the time in the world to pursue his search. At that time John A. knew little

¹⁰ Mrs. Ray Thompson, Gulfport, MS, to Pamela Grunewald, 15 October 1975 and 12 December 1975, LSRC, SHRLRC.

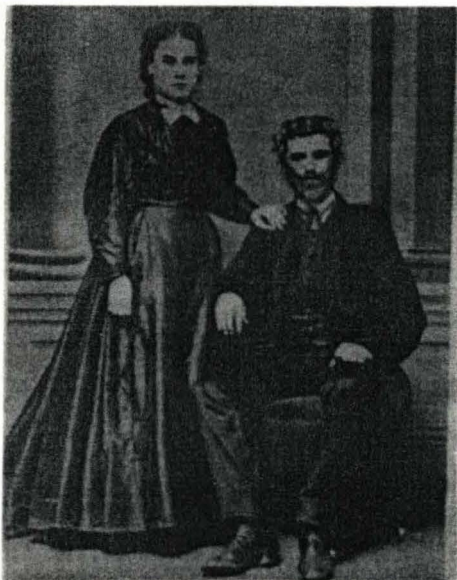
about Jean Laffite and seemed mainly interested in finding Laffite treasures. The Thompsons noted his eccentric personality, but when John A. promised to share his treasure of documents they rolled out the red carpet for him. They also introduced him to Tulane University and Louisiana State University history professors.¹¹

On 13 May 1947 in Atchison, Kansas, notary public Ethel MacAdow certified a birth information sheet for John Andrechyne Lafitte, the only official record that has surfaced to document his heritage.¹² This certificate, based upon family Bible records, gives his birth date as 4 June 1893 at Omaha, Nebraska, the son of Leon Jean Lafitte, born in the State of Louisiana on 10 March 1865, died on 16 April 1898. Leon was son of Jules Jean Lafitte, born in Baltimore, Maryland on 4 April 1834, died 10 October 1924, in St. Louis, Missouri. Jules Jean was the son of Jean Laffite and Emma Hortense Mortimore, and he (Jean Laffite) was born on 22 April 1782 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, died on 5 May 1854 in Alton, Illinois.¹³

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² The majority of states did not require the recording of birth and death certificates until after 1900, and individuals born earlier commonly had a birth information sheet notarized to provide a delayed birth record for social security or other retirement purposes.

¹³ John Andrechyne Lafitte, Certification of Birth Facts, 13 May 1947, Jean Laffite Collection, Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center, Liberty, Texas (hereafter cited as JLC, SHRLRC). Several scholars and genealogists have searched local government records of Kansas or Nebraska for documentation of John Andrechyne or Leon Jean Lafitte without finding census or other records.



Jean Laffite and his second wife, Emma Hortense Mortimore, ca. 1854, Jean Laffite Collection. Courtesy of Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center.

On 6 March 1948 city of St. Louis officials suggested to John A. that he contact Charles van Ravenswaay, the director of the Missouri Historical Society in St. Louis, to follow up on his historical inquiries about the city.¹⁴ He wrote to Dr. Ravenswaay on 19 June of that year, remarking that he had “many letters on file from investigators and newspaper writers since I gave photostats to the Galveston Texas Public Library.” He stated that he wanted to verify information

¹⁴ St. Louis City Hall to John A. Lafitte, Kansas City, 6 March 1948, LSRC, SHRLRC.

about his grandfather and the location of St. Louis streets and cemeteries.¹⁵

The contacts and correspondence between Ravenswaay and John A. continued for several years until Ravenswaay received a letter from Clyde H. Porter in 1951, and by 1953 Ravenswaay had come to question the journal's authenticity.¹⁶ Porter's letter contained the following story related to him from a friend, Frank Glenn:

Four years ago a railroad employee named John Lafeytte came to the Cuban representative here in Kansas City asking if there is any way of checking Cuban port records to find the coming and going of certain ships about a hundred and forty years ago. After several months of this sort of thing he proposed that Mrs. Espinoza [*sic*], the Cuban's wife, translate a manuscript for him and get it published, they to divide any profits. This has been done and Glenn has

¹⁵ John Lafeytte, Kansas City, to Charles van Ravenswey [*sic*], St. Louis, 19 June 1948, LSRC, SHRLRC. He also explained that ". . . My ancestor never used name Sylestor Lafflin. He used name: John Lafflin." This is the only time that John A. Lafeytte used the name Lafflin in a letter, and he is referring to the fact that only Jean Laffite used it as a alias. John A. never stated that he, his father, or grandfather used the surname Lafflin, but many writers continue to use that name in referring to him. When or whether he changed his name from Lafflin to Lafeytte is unknown, and genealogical research on the question has so far been unproductive. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the assumption is that John A. Lafeytte never used the surname Lafflin. Recently, Texas historian Jean Epperson determined from the files of the Employees Prior Service Records at the United States of America Railroad Retirement Board that John A. Lafeytte used the surname Nafsinger from 1913 to 1947. Nafsinger is thought to be his stepfather's surname.

¹⁶ Charles van Ravenswaay, St. Louis, to Mr. Lewis, Alton, IL, 18 November 1953, LSRC, SHRLRC.

the book to publish The book purports to be the autobiography of Jean Lafette, the pirate, written when he was an old, old man living at Alton, Ill., under the name of Lafflin. It fits together perfectly. Glenn feels if it is a true autobiography, it is a find of the century On the other hand Glenn feels it cannot possibly be anything but a fake and don't know what to do about it

Now for the bad parts—The owner is a freak who will not allow anyone to know where he lives and moves every three months—he still fears the wrath of the British. He is known to be a collector of old paper. He visits old bookstores trying to buy end papers from hundred year old books they are tearing up for one reason or another. He has hidden the original book and will not again produce it. . . . I forgot to say that Glenn tried to find Lafette letters to compare with this manuscript and so far has not been able to find anything that was not presented to this museum or that library by this man John who owns the book.¹⁷

Stanley Clisby Arthur wrote *Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover* published by the New Orleans Harmanson Press in 1952. It was followed in 1955 by Doubleday & Company's *The Corsair, A Biographical Novel of Jean Lafitte, Hero of the Battle of New Orleans* by Madeleine Kent, who may have been the woman mentioned in Porter's account.¹⁸ These two works,

¹⁷ Clyde H. Porter, Kansas City, to Charles van Ravenswaay, St. Louis, 21 November 1951, LSRC, SHRLRC. Frank Glenn told this story to Clyde H. Porter who passed it on to Ravenswaay, not a rare occurrence in this saga.

¹⁸ Stanley Clisby Arthur, *Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover* (New Orleans: Harmanson, 1952); Madeleine Fabiola Kent, *The Corsair, A Biographical Novel of Jean Lafitte, Hero of the Battle of New Orleans* (Garden City, New

both based upon the "trunk archives," ignited the public debate about the death of Jean Laffite and his life after leaving Galveston.

John A. continued to work with his family papers and apparently tried to authenticate the materials. On 4 May 1955, he sent samples to the Harris Laboratories in Lincoln, Nebraska, for testing of the paper and ink. Lewis E. Harris replied on 2 June that they were more than seventy-five years old.¹⁹ On 11 August 1956 John A. also contacted the Library of Congress. On 5 September David C. Mearne, chief of the Manuscripts Division, replied that the paper John A. had submitted for testing compared favorably with other specimens of the early nineteenth century and concluded that the record could have been made in or about 1830. Mearne added that the small scrap that contained writing in French appeared to be on paper of somewhat earlier manufacture.²⁰

York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955). Madeleine Kent was the pen name for Mrs. Espinosa. Presently, this author has not documented that this is the same Espinosa as the wife of the Cuban Kansas City representative, but it appears that Madeleine Kent is the same person referred to in Frank Glenn's story. It is unknown how much of the "trunk archives" was shared with either author. See Memorandum of Agreement, 3 September 1952, between Doubleday & Co., Inc., Madeleine Kent de Espinosa, William Espinosa, John A. Laffite [*sic*], JLC, SHRLRC.

¹⁹ Lewis E. Harris, director of Harris Laboratories, Lincoln, NE, to Mrs. Lula Surratt, Kansas City, 2 June 1955, Jean Laffite Collection File, Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center, Liberty, Texas (hereafter cited as JLCF, SHRLRC). John A. confused things by having the return letter addressed to one of his in-laws, his wife being Lacie Surratt Lafitte.

²⁰ David C. Mearne, Washington, D.C., to John A. Lafitte, Kansas City, 5 September 1956, JLCF, SHRLRC. This letter begins "Dear Mr. _____." Again, another mystery is why John A. obliterated his name on this letter, but the envelope is addressed John _____ (again whited out), Kansas City. It is unclear which book was examined. Some researchers have attempted

In 1958 *The Journal of Jean Laffite: The Privateer-Patriot's Own Story*, copyrighted by John A. Laffite [sic], appeared under the imprint of Vantage Press, a well-known subsidized publisher. The introduction to the volume declared: "Writing, in French at home, or as he traveled about the country, he worked at the task from 1845 to 1850. This volume is a translation of that journal." This translation was supposedly done for John A. by nuns in New Orleans, but unfortunately phrases and even paragraphs were left out. The first edition of the book sold quite well, but most of the stock was lost in a fire. Copies are now quite rare, commanding a price as high as \$500.²¹

Throughout the 1960s, John A. traveled to Florida, New Orleans, and Galveston, making public appearances and visiting people as the great-grandson of Jean Laffite. Two fires—one at his house in December 1959, and one at a Spartanburg television station in May 1960—damaged or destroyed part of his collection.²² In 1966 he arrived in Galveston for the pirate celebration and attempted to sell his

to locate his correspondence with the Library of Congress without success. Apparently, John A. was establishing credentials for his book since the Mearne letter was included in the publication by Vantage Press, which may account for removing his name.

²¹ *The Journal of Jean Laffite: The Privateer-Patriot's Own Story* (New York: Vantage Press, 1958). This was copyrighted and published by John A. Laffite [sic]. No credit was given for translation. Mrs. Ray Thompson to Pamela Grunewald, 15 October 1975. Dr. Gene Marshall, associate professor of Languages for McNeese State University, began work on a new translation in the fall of 1998.

²² *The Spartanburg (SC) Herald*, 17 May 1960, JLC, SHRLRC, and JLCF, SHRLRC. The fire singed the journal and several of the other documents at the station, but none were lost. These events took a rather bizarre turn when John A. claimed that he had lost gold doubloons in the house fire and sued the television station for negligence. His suit was not very successful.

papers to the Rosenberg Library there.²³ By the summer of 1969 the seventy-six-year-old John A. who had relocated to San Antonio and then Midland, Texas, started contacting Texas dealers and others in order to sell his family collection since he desperately needed the money.²⁴

That same year Richard Santos, from the Bexar Archives in San Antonio, informed William Simpson and Johnny Jenkins of Houston about an old man who had come to him with some papers. Santos had reviewed them and claimed, "It is the most astonishing thing I have ever seen, because some of the things in these papers could only be proven by things in my archives, and I can assure you nothing has been salted here." Santos also warned them that the old man was somewhat strange.²⁵ Simpson and Jenkins then met John A. in Austin and, after negotiations, agreed to buy the collection for \$15,000 with each paying half.²⁶ About a year later,

²³ John D. Hyatt, Galveston, to John A. Lafitte, Pacolet, SC, 2 January 1967, JLCF, SHRLRC. John D. Hyatt declined, stating that the purchase price of \$10,000 was too high, but expressed a future interest in the collection.

²⁴ Offering a sale price of \$1000, Charles Hamilton of New York requested two slave order documents for his 9 July auction and wished to take the entire collection on consignment. Charles Hamilton, New York, to John Laffite [sic], San Antonio, 9 July 1969, LSRC, SHRLRC. By 1969 and probably earlier, John A. started occasionally signing his name Laffite rather than Lafitte; and when he felt like it, his signature began to mimic Jean's, demonstrating another one of John's peculiarities. When correspondents wrote to John A. Laffite, he never corrected this misspelling of his surname.

²⁵ Don C. Marler, ed., "The Acquisition of the Laffite Journal," *The Laffite Society Chronicles* 4 (February 1998): 20.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20–22. Simpson recalled, "He [John A.] did not want to show us the original collection, but he had numerous photocopies of it which he was willing to display to us. I refused, saying I could not sell from a photocopy and would not buy from one."

when Jenkins needed cash, he sold his half to Simpson and delivered the entire collection to him.²⁷

On 20 February 1970 John Andrechyne Lafitte died in Columbia, South Carolina. According to his death certificate, he was a retired engineer from the Missouri Pacific Railroad and had been born on 4 June 1893 in Nebraska.²⁸ Thought by many to be very peculiar in personality, John A. was well liked by some and scoffed at by others. His personality had alienated many people who therefore discounted his claims and the family papers. Sue Thompson described him as "illiterate but very shrewd and wily—eccentric, bombastic, paranoid [*sic*] and easily alienated if you did not agree with him."²⁹ William Simpson characterized John A. as "very curious and highly paranoid, who thought that many people including the Thompsons and Charles Hamilton wanted to steal his collection."³⁰ He added, however, that John A. "was not, by any stretch of the imagination, what we would call a 'literate' man," and Simpson believed that he would have been incapable of faking the collection.³¹

²⁷ *Ibid.* When John A. refused Simpson's check, saying "Mr. Santos sent me to this man, but I don't know you," Jenkins paid him in full. Simpson then paid Jenkins for his half.

²⁸ Death Certificate, South Carolina, JLC, SHRLRC. On the death certificate, his surname is spelled LaFitte.

²⁹ Mrs. Ray Thompson to Pamela Grunewald, 12 December 1975, LSRC, SHRLRC.

³⁰ Marler, "The Acquisition of the Laffite Journal," 22.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 21.



John A. Laffite and Audrey Lloyd of Midland, Texas, November 1967, Jean Laffite Collection. Courtesy of Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center.

The Jean Laffite Collection

In 1970 William Simpson took the collection he had purchased from John A. to New Orleans, Louisiana State University, and the Rosenberg Library. "They were highly skeptical of my collection and critical of John," remembered Simpson, who was shown a *Time* article that included a photograph about Mr. Laffite being a mail fraud. "So I put my collection away thinking I might not have an authentic collection. For more than a year I never looked at the

collection.”³² Simpson's interest revived in 1973 when he loaned the collection to John Howells, a Houston Internal Revenue Service employee and pirate buff, who was married to a Laffite descendant. Howells then began the process of comparing the journal's signatures to known Laffite documents and having the collection analyzed. By 1974 he was completely convinced that the majority of the papers were original and genuine.³³

In 1975 Howells showed the journal to Joyce Calhoon, the first director of the Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center, and Miriam Partlow, a Liberty County historical author, at a meeting of the Harris County Historical Society. They in turn mentioned the collection to Partlow's nephew, former Texas Governor Price Daniel, and Howells subsequently sent Daniel copies of some of the documents. In June, Daniel, who was then serving as an associate justice of the Texas Supreme Court, expressed to Joyce Calhoon his desire to follow up their contacts. She spoke on his behalf with William Simpson, who arranged for her to inspect the collection at his Houston galleries.³⁴ On 16 July 1975 Simpson's agent William J. Burch sold Daniel “the entire

³² Ibid. Simpson added, “Later, I learned that *Time* had mixed up the pictures. They showed this Mr. Laffite's picture and the article was about another Laffite who was a criminal in New Orleans—a waiter in New Orleans.”

³³ Marler, “The Acquisition of the Laffite Journal,” 21; Ralph O. Queen Report, 27 September 1974, JLCF, SHRLRC.

³⁴ Joyce Calhoon, Liberty, TX, to Judge and Mrs. Price Daniel, Austin, 8 May 1975; John L. Howells, Houston, to Miss Miriam Partlow, Liberty, TX, 9 May 1975; and Joyce Calhoon, Liberty, TX, to Wm. Simpson, Houston, 16 May 1975, JLCF, SHRLRC. From 1973 to 1977 the Atascosito Historical Society sponsored the fund raising for the construction of the Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center. It also purchased several collections and manuscripts for the center with designated contributions.

Jean LaFitte Collection, purchased by me from William Simpson." The price was \$12,500.³⁵

Why did Price Daniel purchase this collection? Jean Laffite interested Daniel due to Laffite's activities in Southeast Texas including his assistance to the Napoleon Refuges who established Champ d'Asile on the Trinity River in 1818. Daniel saw the collection as a centerpiece that tied in nicely with the history of Southeast Texas that additionally conjoined with his personal interests.³⁶

In a press release 9 June 1976, the Texas State Library and Historical Commission announced that "Former Governor Price Daniel has purchased the hand-written 257 page Journal of Jean Laffite along with a rare collection of the buccaneer's family Bibles, albums, daguerreotypes, and a contract with his ship captains." The release continued that the first public display of the collection, which was to be donated to the Sam Houston Center, would be at the Regional Bicentennial Dinner at Beaumont on 16 June 1976. Daniel also loaned the journal and other items for display at the grand opening of the Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center on 15 May 1977.³⁷ The collection, which Price Daniel donated to the Texas State Library and Archives Commission on 1 August 1978, included:

³⁵ Receipt of Sale, 16 July 1975, JLCF, SHRLRC.

³⁶ Price Daniel, conversation with the author, March 1983.

³⁷ Press Release, Texas State Library and Historical Commission, [now the Texas State Library and Archives Commission] 9 June 1976. Joyce Calhoun, Liberty, TX, to David B. Gracy, II, Austin, 10 December 1980, JLCF, SHRLRC. The Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center is a part of the Archives and Information Services Division of the Texas State Library and Archives Commission.

1. the original Journal of Jean Laffite, a 13" x 8" x 3" slightly burned leather-bound volume, written in French, 257 pages;
2. a leather-bound ledger book, 13" x 3" x 1.5";
3. two family Bibles (1839, French, 1608–1912 family information; and 1820, French, 1742–1932 family information);
4. a small leather-bound copybook, dating from 1840, property of Julius Laffite containing information on David Crockett, Andrew Jackson and others;
5. a small leather-bound book, printed in 1850, containing newspaper clippings and other entries;
6. twenty-one loose photographs of family and friends dating from 1850–1900 and a photo album;
7. a 6" x 8" portrait of Jean Laffite;
8. an 1806 Laffite ship document; and
9. a large portfolio containing photographs used in Stanley Clisby Arthur's book, *Jean Lafitte, Gentleman Rover*.

On 27 November 1989 Mrs. Price Daniel donated an additional 2.5 cubic feet of materials that included original documents related to the purchase of the collection and research materials that her husband had collected on Jean Laffite. This gift included five folk art paintings, circa 1840, of Laffite family members including Jean, Emma Hortense, and their sons Glen and Jules; correspondence between John A. Lafitte, his wife, and Audrey Lloyd; and Lloyd's manuscript.³⁸

Today the Jean Laffite Collection housed at the center consists of four cubic feet of correspondence, documents, graphics, manuscripts, maps, photographs, publications, and artifacts. Two types of material are represented in the

³⁸ JLCF, SHRLRC

collection: (1) original documents, manuscripts, photographs, and artifacts, 1806–1955, belonging to Jean Laffite or Laffite family members; and (2) collateral correspondence, publications, and other items dating from 1938 to 1985 pertaining primarily to members of the family and the original materials noted above.³⁹ Complementary to it are four other center collections as well as books and publications pertaining to Jean Laffite. The quarterly *The Life and Times of Jean Laffite* and *The Laffite Study Group Newsletter*, published by the society first organized in 1976, supplement the collection.⁴⁰

³⁹ Donor Form, Price Daniel to Texas State Library and Archives Commission, 1 August 1978; and Donor Form, Mrs. Price Daniel to Texas State Library and Archives Commission, 27 November 1989, JLCF, SHRLRC. This collection may contain some items that were added to the collection purchased from William J. Burch via William Simpson. It is thought that Price Daniel received additional correspondence especially dating after 1950, a few documents, photos, and art from Audrey Lloyd of Midland and John's wife/ex-wife Lacie. Daniel added these items and his own correspondence pertaining to the journal. The collection does completely pertain to the "trunk archives" of John A. Lafitte, which explains its arrangement. A finding aid is available.

⁴⁰ Other Laffite Collections at the center are (1) the Foch Laffite Sr. Collection, .25 cu. ft., consisting of manuscripts, photographs, Laffite family charts, legal documents, land claims, Bible entries, maps, and field notes pertaining to Pierre Lafitte, Bouet Lafitte, Jean Lafitte and other Lafitte Family members, 1784–1844, photo copies; (2) the Laffite Society Collection, .25 cu. ft., donated by Randy Pace, Dr. Reginald Wilson, Jim Nonus, Dorothy McDonald Karilanovic, and Jean Epperson, documenting the activities of the Galveston-based organization and their semiannual publication *The Laffite Society Chronicles*, 1994–present; (3) the Laffite Society Research Collection, 2.8 cu. ft., donated by Dr. Reginald Wilson, Jean Epperson, Don Marler, and Dorothy McDonald Karilanovic, consisting of photocopies of original documents, letters, published articles and other historical research materials pertaining to Jean Laffite, Laffite descendants or claimed descendants, the Gulf pirates, and related subjects including inquiries into the Jean Laffite journal, dating from 1969 to 1981 with



Seated: Governor and Mrs. Price Daniel; Standing, L-R: Texas State Archivist John Kinney, Nina (Mrs. John) Kinney, and Frank Horlock (?) of the Texas State Library and Historical Commission; 16 June 1976, Beaumont, Texas; Jean Laffite Collection. Courtesy of Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center.

Authenticity of the Journal

When Price Daniel purchased the collection in 1975, he knew that it was controversial since he told John Howells, "I have kept up with the *Journal* in a general way ever since Stanley Clisby Arthur wrote his book *Gentleman Rover* in

information dating earlier; and (4) Jean and Pierre Laffite Collection, .2 cu. ft., an artificial collection of documents, publications, and information on the Laffites.

1952."⁴¹ Although he realized that historians continued to debate the significance of the journal, Daniel never dreamed of what would transpire once it became accessible to researchers. Later Judge Daniel stated in several ways that he wished that he had never bought the collection, for he did not have time to respond to the critics and it was never his intention to be in the center of the accusations.⁴²

The controversy over the journal's provenance has a long history. In the course of the controversy, speculation easily became fact, hearsay often was not confirmed, and facts were often twisted. There were winners and losers in the debate, and the majority of the figures involved had some personal stake in the outcome. The man claiming to be John A. Lafitte alienated many scholars and writers by his personality and by refusing to share the entire collection at one time, a practice he continued until his death. No doubt he sometimes used people to his own advantage, not an endearing trait. On the other hand, these same people were themselves attempting to profit from the journal by publishing or soliciting a donation for an institution.

Lafitte gave Stanley Clisby Arthur access to the entire collection, and Arthur apparently thought it was authentic when he wrote his book, published in 1952.⁴³ He made no

⁴¹ Price Daniel, Austin, to John L. Howells, Houston, 18 June 1975, JLCF, SHRLRC.

⁴² Price Daniel, conversation with author, March 1983; Mrs. Price Daniel, conversation with author, November 1989.

⁴³ Some Lafitte scholars have disputed this and contend that Arthur may have seen only portions of the collection. In his personal acknowledgments, he states that he relied on former biographies, periodicals, published contemporaneous correspondence, Latour's works, court records, "as well as correspondence, journals, diaries, Bible entries, and other records belonging to the Lafitte family never before published. All placed at my disposal unconditionally and without reservation to their use." He thanked

attempt to distinguish written copies of documents from originals, however, and ignored the fact that part of the collection clearly was not written by Jean Laffite. He referred to it all as Jean Laffite's papers, which caused many of the questionable documents to be referred to as forgeries in future years.⁴⁴

Prior to the Vantage Press publication of the journal, John A. Lafitte had two tests done—one by the Harris Laboratory, and one by the Library of Congress—and they both supported the journal's authenticity. These tests, done in the mid-1950s, do not meet today's scientific standards, and it is not clear what pages of the journal were analyzed or what tests were performed. One cannot dismiss these tests; yet the results are not conclusive.⁴⁵

Few of the dealers attempting to secure John A. Lafitte's potentially lucrative business in 1969 seemed to consider the documents to be forgeries. On 23 September, for example, Charles Hamilton wrote to John A. Lafitte thanking him "very much for your letter of September 20, explaining the circumstances of your sale of Laffite documents to Mr. Jenkins" and added "You already know my high opinion of the value of Laffite's documents and my belief that they would bring a large sum at my sales."⁴⁶ Jenkins himself,

John Andrechyne Laffite [sic] of Kansas City, Missouri, for his generosity in sharing the materials. *Jean Laffite, Gentleman Rover*, 286.

⁴⁴ Many of the questioned originals are not originals, but are entries written by family members in a copybook and on various-sized papers. Producing such mementos was a fairly common leisure activity around the turn of the century.

⁴⁵ Lewis E. Harris to Mrs. Lula Surratt, 2 June 1955; David C. Mearne to John A. Lafitte, 5 September 1956, JLCF, SHRLRC.

⁴⁶ Charles Hamilton to John A. Laffite [sic], 23 September 1969, JLCF, SHRLRC.

along with William Simpson, ended up purchasing the collection from Lafitte in spite of his view that Lafitte was "a very nutty fellow, to say the least."⁴⁷

In 1971 John Howells decided to take on the project of authenticating the Jean Laffite journal in response to doubts expressed by Simpson about its authenticity. Howells first located the Le Brave document in the Federal Regional Archives in Fort Worth and the Laffite documents in the Texas State Archives' Lamar Papers. Simpson and Howells then hired Ralph O. Queen, "Examiner of Questioned Documents," a nationally recognized handwriting expert with forty years experience in criminal investigation and a member of the International Association for Identification. Queen thus became the first and only forgery expert to compare the journal with known Laffite documents.

Between June and September 1974 Queen examined the entire journal and removed two pages of handwriting, dated 7 October 1846 and 24 September 1849, for comparison and testing. He found that one was written in iron oxide ink, its ferrous content permeating the paper, and the other in gallnut ink, and that the journal's paper, a linen-based type used before 1850, contained several water marks. Queen further reported that the ink "cannot be readily removed by washing the paper"⁴⁸ and concluded:

A detailed study has been made of these documents and comparisons have been made of the handwritings appearing on them with handwritings contained on other documents bearing handwritings that have been accepted as being known writings of

⁴⁷ John H. Jenkins to Charles Hamilton, 2 October 1969, JLC and JLCF, SHRLRC.

⁴⁸ Ralph O. Queen Report, 27 September 1974, JLCF, SHRLRC.

Jean Laffite, commonly spelled Lafitte. Some of the documents used for comparative purposes were the Le Brave document, Federal Court case #1440, used to convict Capt. John Desfarges, two Jn Laffite Letters to Gen. James Long in the M. B. Lamar Collection in the Texas State Archives, known as documents #19 and #24. Also various other writings.

These examinations and comparison revealed that there are many individual personal characteristics appearing in the handwriting on the pages from the journal that are identical with characteristics appearing in the known writings.

Due to these findings, it is my opinion that the author of the known writings was also the author of the writings appearing on the two pages from the journal.⁴⁹

On the other hand, some scholars cast doubt on the journal's legitimacy as early as 1962. Frances H. Stadler, manuscripts librarian of the Missouri Historical Society, addressing his archival and historical colleagues, issued a warning about the passing of fraudulent Laffite documents. In his speech, Stadler referred to the contents of letters that Charles van Ravenswaay had written between 1948 and 1951 concerning John A. Lafitte. He did not include the fact that his predecessor had attempted unsuccessfully to secure the collection for the Missouri Historical Society or that his own information was eleven years old.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Frances H. Stadler, "Laffite Documents—Challenge of Validity," *American Archivist* 25 (July 1962): 395-96.

In 1974 Robert C. Vogel, then a graduate student and later the editor of the Laffite Society quarterly,⁵¹ began a correspondence about the journal's authenticity with van Ravenswaay, Sue Thompson, and Hamilton. Even Charles Hamilton had changed his view by then, declaring that all of the documents were forgeries. Hamilton added, "I corresponded with John A. Laffite [*sic*] about five or six years ago, and he finally sent me several documents . . . which took only a glance to identify as a forgery. Later I read an article in *Time* or *Newsweek*—I forget which—about Laffite being involved in several crooked schemes."⁵² This is far different from the Hamilton writing to John A. Lafitte and John Jenkins five years earlier.

Van Ravenswaay, Thompson, and Vogel agreed with Hamilton's conclusions, and all became leading critics of the journal's authenticity, sometimes in public forums such as newspaper articles as well as personal correspondence. Unfortunately, much of this discussion was based on opinion rather than fact, and they utilized each other as their expert source on the "forgeries," although none was knowledgeable about the complete story of the journal. In this debate Vogel brought several important points to light including the fact that Pierre Laffite was often confused with Pierre Boit Laffite and other relations on Bayou Pierre, DeSoto Parish, Louisiana.⁵³

⁵¹ For his latest Laffite publication, see Robert C. Vogel and Kathleen F. Taylor, comps., *Jean Laffite in American History, A Bibliographic Guide* (Saint Paul: White Pine Press, 1998).

⁵² Charles Hamilton to Robert C. Vogel, 26 February 1974, LSRC, SHRLRC.

⁵³ Robert C. Vogel to Pamela Grunewald, 13 February 1978, LSRC, SHRLRC. Vogel stated that he visited the center in November 1977 and examined the collection.

In October 1979 John Howells wrote Price Daniel about the questions of authenticity raised by Vogel and other critics. Aware of Daniel's desire to have another forgery expert examine the Laffite journal, Howells suggested asking a professor at the University of New Orleans who "teaches courses in hand writing identification" to analyze the diary, a project Daniel endorsed.⁵⁴ Marian (Mimi) Bethancourt had studied graphology in 1959 as part of her Loyola University course on art therapy, and from 1970 to 1979 she had entertained at New Orleans conventions by analyzing handwriting.⁵⁵

On 16 January 1980 Price Daniel received Bethancourt's final report along with a copy of her letter to Howells in which she proposed doing two books on the journal: one aimed at the New Orleans tourist trade, another on her analysis itself. Bethancourt declared under oath that she had compared the 1806 Laffite document, the "250 page Journal," and two family Bibles with the 1819 Le Brave document, by submitting the documents to various graphological tests. She found that the 1806 document was original, true and authentic, but the "The Journal and Family Bibles were found to have many discrepancies and are therefore not authentic." Howells added in his cover letter, "She says she was as convinced as Ralph O. Queen, until she examined the personal letters by John A. Lafitte, which Ralph O. Queen did not have an opportunity to do."⁵⁶

⁵⁴ John Howells to Price Daniel, 16 October 1979, JLCF, SHRLRC.

⁵⁵ Mimi Bethancourt Resume, 1978, JLCF, SHRLRC.

⁵⁶ Marian Bethancourt Report, 11 December 1979; John Howells to Price Daniel, 16 January 1980; and Bethancourt to John Howells, 12 January 1980, JLCF, SHRLRC. Bethancourt never communicated directly with Price Daniel. It was always done through John Howells even though she was working for Daniel. Howell's delay in transmitting the final report to

Price Daniel, needless to say, was not very happy with these results. At that point, he learned that graphology, according to the dictionary, is the study of handwriting for the purpose of character analysis rather than authentication of documents and that Howells was incorrect in stating Bethancourt's credentials, especially her status at the University of New Orleans where she in fact taught a graphology course in the continuing education department. Price Daniel never resumed his quest to resolve the question of authenticity, but others continued the debate.⁵⁷

On 8 June 1980 the front-page headline "Lafitte: Pirate's Costly Journal May Be Only a Famous Fake" appeared in the New Orleans *Sunday Times-Picayune*. In his feature article, Clancy DuBos detailed the purchase of the "258-page" journal attributed to "legendary privateer Jean Lafitte" by Price Daniel, then declared it was "a forgery, according to a New Orleans handwriting analyst and other authorities." Quoting Bethancourt, DuBos informed his readers that the journal was "One of the biggest freehand forgeries in American history" and that she "estimated it took between 10 and 15 years to complete." He added, "Coincidentally, Mrs. Bethancourt's conclusions of forgery also are those of Charles Hamilton, a New York handwriting expert . . ."⁵⁸

Publication of Hamilton's book, *Great Forgers and Famous Fakes, The Manuscript Forgers of America and How They Duped the Experts*, in late 1980 fueled the critic's fire but did nothing to resolve any of the conflicts. Chapter 8 opened: "There were a pen and a bottle of Waterman's brown ink, plus a stack of inherited forgeries of Jean Laffite's

Daniel was never explained.

⁵⁷ Price Daniel, conversation with the author, March 1983.

⁵⁸ Clancy DuBos, "Lafitte: Pirate's Costly Journal May Be Only a Famous Fake," *New Orleans Sunday Times-Picayune*, 8 June 1980.

and other historical figure's handwriting that created more havoc in the world than the pirate and his crew of cutthroats." Hamilton attacked John A. Lafitte as a forger and peddler of phony documents,⁵⁹ without examining the Sam Houston Center's collection. Instead, he based his prose primarily on statements given by Ray Thompson, Charles van Ravenswaay, and Robert C. Vogel, whom he characterized as "probably the world's greatest expert on Jean Laffite" and the primary source of his information.⁶⁰ Hamilton's own account contains many discrepancies, especially regarding his role in attempting to acquire the papers from John A. Lafitte, and misquotes Vogel.⁶¹

After 1980 Laffite researchers and enthusiasts continued to debate the collection's authenticity, and in recent years the journal has continued to have many supporters. Laffite Society member Dr. Reginald Wilson has spent several years pouring over the entire collection and authored a 1996 paper

⁵⁹ Charles Hamilton, *Great Forgers and Famous Fakes, The Manuscript Forgers of America and How They Duped the Experts* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1980), 121, 129. Hamilton developed a tendency to glorify John A. Lafitte referring to him as the "greatest forger in America" especially when he contended that John A. had forged the Diary of Jose Enrique de la Pena. For this forgery certification, see Bill Groneman's book, *Defense of A Legend, Crockett and the de la Pena Diary* (Plano, TX: Wordware Publishers, Inc., 1994), 147. Again, Hamilton had never viewed the original diary. He repeated this same charge in Dale Walker's book, *Legends and Lies: Great Mysteries of the American West* (1997). Hamilton continued to refer to John A. as Lafflin when there is no proof that he used this surname.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 122-23.

⁶¹ In Vogel's defense, it should be noted that he did not appreciate Hamilton's characterization. Vogel was the first person to attempt to understand the provenance of the journal and had collected many letters from people who knew John A. Lafitte. Robert C. Vogel to Price Daniel, 12 June 1980, JLCF, SHRLRC.

in which he examined the handwriting and found it to be authentic. Long-term Laffite researcher Pam Keyes wrote as recently as 1996, "I fully believe 90% of your Jean Laffite materials are authentic, and the proofs of their authenticity are readily at hand. Yes, even proofs that Robert Vogel would have to accept."⁶²

Vogel's own 1998 summary of his position contained a note of uncertainty about the journal's authenticity, but without reservation he denounced its credibility as a historical record:

Of course, much of the evidence supporting the charge of fraud against John Andrechyne Lafflin and his Journals of Jean Laffite is quite circumstantial in nature. I cannot prove beyond any reasonable doubt that the journals were written by anyone other than the real Jean Laffite—but I believe that I have proved conclusively that the Journal of Jean Laffite: The Privateer–Patriot's Own Story is filled with inaccuracies, inconsistencies and several glaring and out-right distortions of the truth. I cannot show that Jean Laffite died in Yucatan in 1825 or '26—but I can question the reliability of the journal's account in the light of certain known facts regarding the character of Jean Laffite. Even if Jean Laffite did write his memoirs in Saint Louis in the 1840s—and I do not believe that he did—are his observations

⁶² Dr. Reginald Wilson Paper, LSRC, SHRLRC; and Pam Keyes, Miami, OK, to author, Liberty, TX, 11 November 1996, JLCF, SHRLRC. During their studies in 1996 and 1997, Pam Keyes and Wilson noticed a seal in the original journal at the end of Laffite's life story, a seal that only a privateer commissioned by Cartagena would have had. It physically marked the change in the journal's subject; after it, Laffite began his discourse on Karl Marx, governments, and philosophy. Pam Keyes and Dr. Reginald Wilson, "The Saga of the Seal," *Laffite Society Chronicles* 4 (August 1998): 2–5.

accurate and reasonably objective? To this the answer must be no—The Journal of Jean Laffite is at best a highly unreliable source of information on Laffite's role in American history during the turbulent years 1803–1830.⁶³

An Archivist's Perspective

The Jean Laffite Collection is typical of most family papers, a hodgepodge of documents including photographs that are identified only by the writing on their backs, newspaper clippings, and other rather mundane items.⁶⁴ The journal appears to be as authentic as the rest of the collection and contains a wealth of information that cannot be readily found in primary sources. There are no credible studies to prove that the journal is a forgery, and Ralph O. Queen, the only forgery expert who has examined the journal to date, concluded that it was authentic.

These materials are heavily used and quite popular with a wide range of patrons, from seventh grade Texas history students to authors of Laffite biographies. More requests are probably received for copies of the Journal of Jean Laffite than any other individual manuscript held by the center. The Sam Houston Regional Library & Research Center also has an obligation to continue to collect all information on the journal and its controversy and to inform researchers that

⁶³ Statement of Robert C. Vogel, 1998, JLCF, SHRLRC.

⁶⁴ There is no doubt some documents are copies made by a family member or perhaps even written by John A. Lafitte, in spite of his claims to the contrary. The entries in the copybooks, for example, are not in the same writing as the journal, which was obvious at first glance, and yet people claimed that the copybook was written by Jean Laffite and signed by David Crockett and Andrew Jackson. This particular book looks very similar to many of the scrapbooks maintained by people at the turn of the century and that probably was how family members used it.

there is body of literature that is highly critical of the document.

Historians do have the right to be skeptical of the Journal of Jean Laffite as they should be of any source that has a questionable provenance, but they should not totally dismiss the Jean Laffite Collection. No doubt the paper and the ink of the journal should be tested by a totally independent party using the most modern methods.⁶⁵ However, even if such tests proved beyond any doubt that the volume came from the correct time period, it would not end the controversy.

When Robert Vogel visited the center in March 1999, we speculated on the many possibilities of the journal's origin. After agreeing that it seemed highly unlikely that John A. Lafitte could have forged the French journal, we concluded the following possible scenarios: (1) the journal is indeed the work of Jean Laffite; (2) the journal is a forgery and a fraud; (3) the journal was an eighteenth-century novel written by Jean Laffite based upon his memory; (4) a family member or a friend or former associate familiar with the life of Jean Laffite wrote the journal based upon the family papers, which were in turn found or inherited by John A. Lafitte; or (5) the journal could even have been composed in the eighteenth century as part of that era's tide of romantic pirate literature and later discovered by John A. Lafitte. The discussion could have continued for hours.

In his 1940 article, "Why Jean Lafitte Became a Pirate," Charles Ramsdell, Jr., wrote that "Jean Lafitte belongs to

⁶⁵ Unfortunately, testing would require substantial funds, estimated at \$15,000 several years ago. Such tests would not be a prudent investment of limited resources given the other needs of the Sam Houston Center and are therefore not a priority for the center. There are plans to digitize the original French journal for web site access.

folklore rather than to History"⁶⁶ Perhaps Ramsdell was correct.

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⁶⁶ Charles Ramsdell, Jr., "Why Jean Lafitte Became a Pirate," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 43 (April 1940): 465.