



Jean Laffite in 1804. From a shipboard sketch by Gros, presumably made in or near France, since the artist is not believed ever to have left that country. The original is 25" x 30".

Victory at New Orleans, 1815

A Tale of Rabbit Hunters, Privateers and Old Hickory

by Joseph H. McCracken III

The Battle of New Orleans was an event of such gravity and significance that it really has no equal in the history of our nation. Its consequences were devastating to European despotism and colonial ventures. Most certainly it assured the retention by the United States of the "Louisiana Purchase" and undoubtedly was the foundation for Andrew Jackson's forthcoming political career. As Thomas Jefferson stated in connection with his negotiations for the purchase of Louisiana —

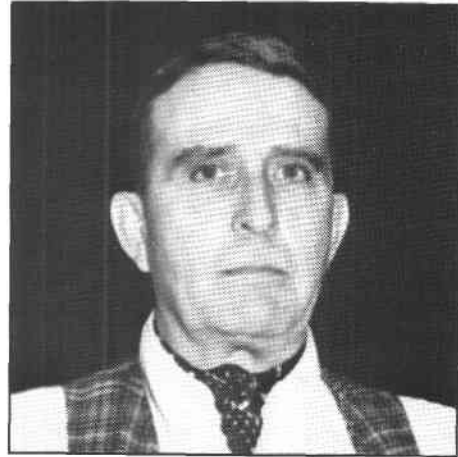
"There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. . . ."

referring to the mouth of the Mississippi, New Orleans and its environs. This victory was forged from many pieces by an emaciated, fever-ridden and exhausted U.S. Army Major-General. The organized U.S. Military Forces were ill-equipped and ill-armed, if at all, and fighting in a location and territory the geography and conditions of which they were completely ignorant. The essence and key to the victory lie in the rallying patriotism of the private American citizen and businessman as he existed in 1814 and 1815. To understand the difficulty and significance of this fight some review of geography and the events of the time is essential.

Barataria Bay¹ is approximately fifteen miles long and six miles wide, protected at the Gulf of Mexico entrance by the islands of Grande Terre and Grand Isle. During the Napoleonic wars creole corsairs and French descendants in the New World harassed English shipping until Great Britain set to work to capture the bases of these privateers. Many of the privateers began to headquarter at Grand Terre, and it was there in 1805 that the Laffite brothers, Jean, Alexandre and Pierre, together with their cousin Renato Beluche, referred to as "Uncle Reyne," made headquarters and brought some organization to these activities in the Gulf and Caribbean. During most of his life Alexandre Laffite was known by an assumed name, Dominique You (Youx). The Laffite brothers and Beluche built warehouses up and down Barataria Bay, the largest installation being close the the presently existing village of Barataria, which is seventeen miles south of old New Orleans.

The privateers were also preying upon Spanish commerce as well as English, and basically operating under letters of marque from the Republic of Cartagena, which is on the northern coast of South America (now part of Columbia) and which had declared and maintained its independence from Spain since November of 1811. There were also a number of privateer commissions issued by France, some of which were granted to the Baratarians for the sole purpose of preying on the English.

From that section of the Louisiana Purchase known as the "Territory of Orleans" the State of Louisiana was established in 1812 as the 18th state. War with Britain was declared June 18, 1812, and the U.S. Congress authorized President Madison to issue some commissions and letters of marque to privately armed vessels, in such form as deemed proper, under the seal of the



United States, for action against the goods, effects and government of Great Britain. Six Baratarians were duly commissioned in New Orleans and Uncle Reyne Beluche accepted one of these in connection with the four-gun schooner, "The Spy."

The war was in its third year before the action moved to Louisiana. Recall that the City of Washington was captured and to a large extent burned in August of 1814; and that fall the British naval offenses against the Atlantic coast moved into the northern Gulf of Mexico area. Also recall that in 1814 General Andrew Jackson was heavily involved in a campaign against the British-allied Creek Indians in Florida.

Jackson, after completing the campaign against the Creeks, requested additional troops for the further campaigns in Louisiana and Alabama, but they were not forthcoming and he reached Mobile, Alabama, in August of 1814, with the British having captured Pensacola, sixty miles away. Not having enough troops, he sent messages for military assistance from Tennessee, Kentucky and Mississippi regulars as well as militia and frontier scouts. Jackson, himself, together with a portion of his regulars, reached New Orleans December 2, 1814.

The following is excerpted from the *Journal of Jean Laffite*, written at St. Louis, Missouri, Tuesday, February 10, 1846, when Laffite was sixty-four years of age:

"... The English were twelve kilometers to the Southeast of New Orleans and were quartered on the plantation Bienveneau and the plantations LaCoste, Villere and LaRonde. They numbered 14,660 well trained soldiers from the Napoleonic Campaign.

"The arrival of General Jackson the first Thursday of December brought hardly any reinforcements for New Orleans and its environs. His appearance and that of his soldiers in ragged uniforms provoked general astonishment.

"I was becoming more and more impatient with the attitude of the city notables . . . I could not waste any more time waiting for a chance that would put me face to face with General Jackson.



Jean's older brother and comrade, Alexander Frederic Laffite, at the age of forty-eight. Alexander, a privateer in his own right, was closely associated with several of his brother's major ventures. He was widely known under the names of Frederic Youx and Dominique You.

"With a few officers of my staff, I came across the General at the Northeast corner of Saint Philippe and Royal Streets . . . In spite of the respect I had for his uniform, I must say that the General's intelligence seemed much inferior to mine . . ."

"Later the General received us in his office at 106 Royal Street and inquired if we had information to give him regarding the enemy. We suggested measures for immediate defense, which were accepted on Sunday, December 4th."

The population of New Orleans at the period of these events was approximately 20,000, of which approximately 5,000 were slaves, and of which total population only approximately 2,000 healthy men were available for militia or regular troop engagements, and not more than 300 of this 2,000 were Anglo-Saxons. Jackson's chief concern was the critical lack of arms, ammunition, flints, cannon, etc. Laffite and the Baratarians had previously furnished to the city approximately 500 muskets and 7,500 flint pistols.

In September several British ships anchored off Grande Terre and immediately sent written messages to Jean Laffite offering him a captaincy in the Navy and a stipend of 30,000 British pounds sterling. Such amount was of no consequence to Laffite for his many warehouses around New Orleans and South Louisiana held perhaps 10 to 20 times that amount in value of merchandise, and most important a considerable amount of arms, flints, powder and cannon shot of all varieties. Laffite began to delay the British in an effort to gain time for the American defense. In a letter dated September 10, 1814, Laffite wrote to Governor Claiborne advising him of the offers of the British Navy of a commission and a stipend of sterling, as well as pointing out the face of the impending and inevitable invasion of the United States by the British. The warning went unheeded.

The U.S. Navy was virtually non-existent in the Gulf, with the closest friendly seapower being owned and operated by the Baratarians. The Louisiana Legislature was informed of the Baratarians' activity against the British, their letters of marque from Cartagena and their devotion to the United States, their only crime being the smuggling of goods through customs. The method of disposal of ship's prizes taken by the Baratarians was by sale to the merchants in the City of New Orleans who were allied with the Laffite brothers.

A year earlier Governor Claiborne had issued a proclamation against the Baratarians as follows:

"I, Governor of the State of Louisiana, offer a reward of \$500.00 which will be paid out of the Treasury, to any person delivering John Lafitte to the Parish of Orleans or to any other sheriff in the state, so that he, the said John Lafitte may be brought to justice. Given under my hand at New Orleans on the 24th day of November, 1813.

Signed William C. C. Claiborne"

Two days later the citizens of New Orleans and Southern Louisiana laughed among themselves as another handbill appeared in public places, reading something as follows:

"I, Bos of Barataria, offer a reward of \$1500.00 which will be paid out of my Treasury, to any person delivering Governor Claiborne to me at Isle au Chat (Cat Island) west of Grand Terre near the mouth of Bayou Lafourche. Given under my hand at Grand Terre on the 26th day of November, 1813.

Signed Jean Lafitte"

The U.S. forces had several gunboats on the Mississippi River which were attacked by the British and captured or destroyed on December 14th. Much effort was put forth to devise subterfuges to give the British the impression that Jackson had a much larger contingency of troops for the defense of New Orleans than he in reality had available, and at one point the British assumed that he had some 20,000. Five days before Christmas General John Coffee and his contingent of approximately 2,000 Tennessee regulars, volunteers and backwoodsmen arrived, as did a contingent of several hundred Mississippi militia, frontiersmen and Choctaw Indian scouts, and General William Carroll and his several thousand men were in town. Jackson established his headquarters five miles below New Orleans on the Macarty Plantation, with the main defense line also passing through the Chalmette Plantation bordering the Rodriguez Canal.

The British invasion was under the command of Sir Edward Michael Pakenham, and the majority of their encampments and gun positions were on the Villere Plantation, and it was that encampment that the U.S. armed schooners Carolina and Louisiana began, on the 23rd day of December, to harass continually with cannon fire. Unfortunately, the Carolina was lost to British gunfire four days later.

Jackson had available the large contingent of frontiersmen from Tennessee and other southern states which he affectionately referred to as "rabbit hunters." They had their own special method of irritating the British during the dark hours and would creep in close to a camp, carefully kill off sentinels and guards with knife, tomahawk or gun, and generally raise all sorts of hellish harassment by way of shouting and moving about in the dark with carefully aimed gunfire. The British would arouse, form a column and prepare to meet an entire marching army—but none was there! These "false alarms" created by the rabbit hunters had the effect of keeping the

British Army on continual nervous edge. Some of the British officers make mention of unsportsmanlike conduct of the Americans, specifically stating "those savages have no knowledge of how war should be fought!"

Laffite assisted in the location of the American defense line and cannon positions, and particularly took careful pains for the position of the batteries which were to be ultimately commanded by his brother, Captain Dominique. It was a French engineer who suggested to the American troops that the filling of the hollowed redoubts with cotton bales, three or four deep, and the construction of wooden platforms placed over them, made them secure for heavy cannon. Captains Dominique and Uncle Reyne checked out the majority of the artillery emplacements, they themselves installing and manning Batteries Nos. 3 and 4, which contained two 24-pounders. Other Baratarians furnished the artillery expertise for Battery No. 2 commanded by Lt. Norris, and other batteries under Lt. Crawley, both of the U.S. Navy. Laffite records in his *Journals* that Jackson was furnished 6,400 kilos of powder, 1,720 kilos of flints, not to mention other arms, cannon, etc., from his warehouses.

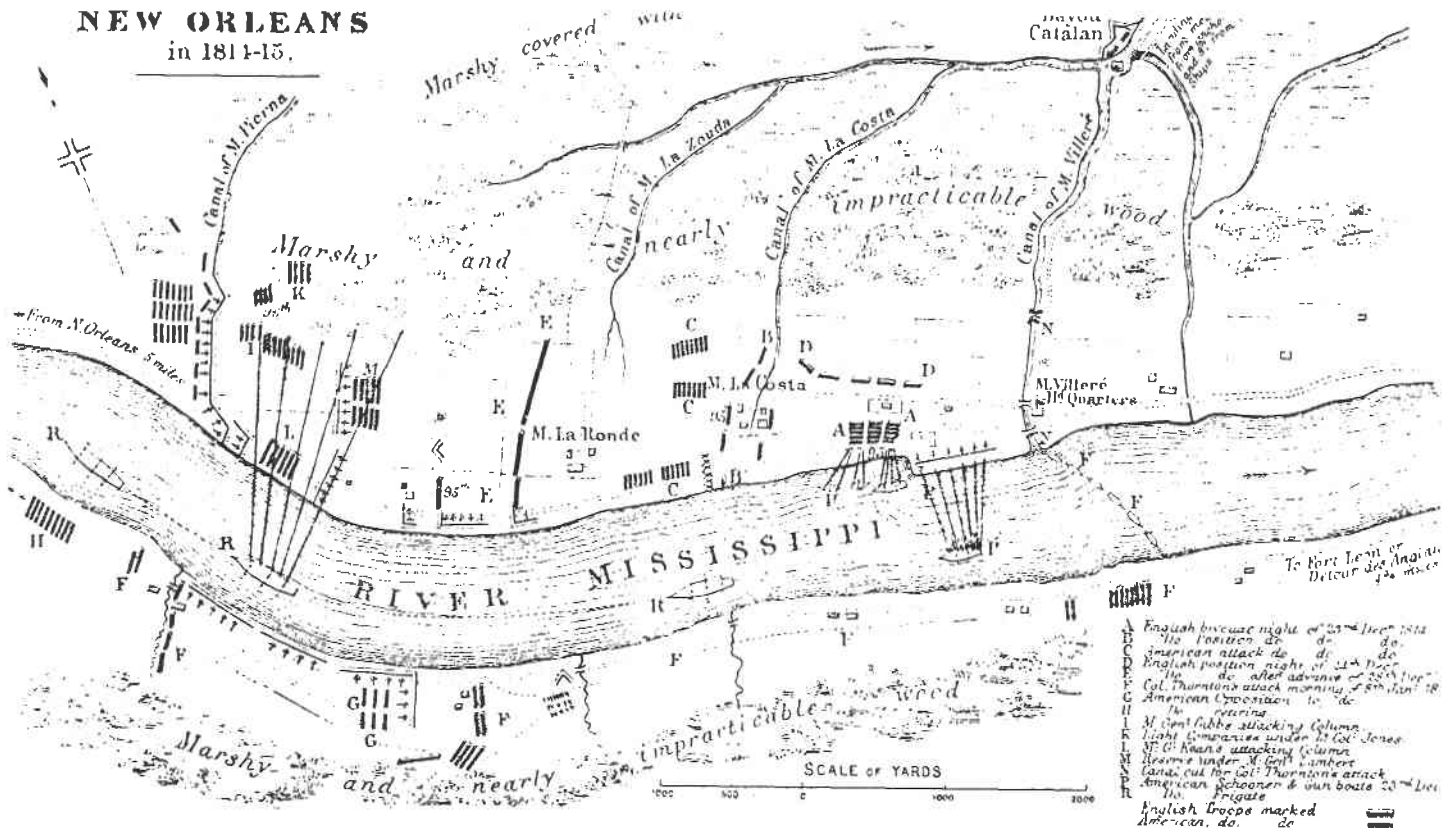
Early in the morning of December 28th the British Army began artillery fire consisting of hot shot and Congreve rockets which had never before been seen by the rabbit hunters. These were simply very large varieties of what we today know as the fireworks skyrocket except that they were shot in a horizontal or level flight path toward the American lines, swooshing close by overhead and falling to earth and setting forth a small black powder charge. Jackson counselled the troops to "pay no attention to the rockets, boys, they're mere toys to amuse the children."

The American force's other gunboat, the *Louisiana*, was maneuvering in the Mississippi in such positions that it commanded the field in front of Jackson's line. When the land batteries and the *Louisiana* opened up their fire it wrought heavy devastation on the British line, and the best estimates were that there were approximately 200 of the British forces killed that day.

Subsequent to the shooting match of December 28th, the rabbit hunters, or "dirty shirts" as they were referred to by the British, continued their harassing tactics during darkness, and occasionally toted along a 6-pound mortar, shooting at anything that moved, and in this way terrorizing the British camp. One observer noted that they killed not less than fifty British soldiers and severely wounded many more by this method of "assassination."

In addition to these tactics, each morning the gunboat *Louisiana* would drop down river, bring its guns to bear on the British camp and destroy anything that they might have built during the previous night, driving General Pakenham to complain of "those contemptible militia." To make matters worse for the British, when they attempted to construct new battery positions and began digging through the area, they would strike water, flooding everything.

By January 1 Jackson had seven effective battery positions which could shoot a total of approximately 225 pounds, far less than the British capability. On that New Year's Day, 1815, the American camp was alive with parties, consisting of cooking, whiskey drinking and singing, the songs being Yankee Doodle and La Marseilles, with friends coming down from New Orleans to join in the festivities. That day the British began an



Map of British Captain H.H. Moorsam showing American and British positions below New Orleans (from Cope's *History of the Rifle Brigade*).

attack and aimed heavy fire at the batteries commanded by Dominique and Uncle Reyne, they having done the major part of the damage to the British on December 28th. When Jackson approached the battery, Dominique was standing on the redoubt, studying the situation through a telescope, when a British cannonball whizzed by and burned his arm. It is reported that he let out an oath in French, probably along the lines of "SALE BATARD ANGLAIS"³ — then calmed himself and instructed his crew to prepare the guns with solid and hot shot and bombs.

The first shooting from the batteries knocked out the largest of the British artillery pieces, collapsed their foundations and killed six men, and Uncle Reyne and Dominique alternated from their positions and kept shooting. Within forty minutes the American batteries had dismounted five enemy guns and disabled eight more to the extent that they could not be pointed and fired. This left the British with only nine guns.

Simultaneously, Commodore Patterson aboard the Louisiana brought his guns to bear on the British line placed along the Mississippi levee and silenced them, and it should be remembered that some Baratarians cannons were aboard and aiding the Louisiana's guns with their accurate fire.

On January 4 General John Thomas arrived with approximately 2200 Kentucky militia and backwoodsmen, some of whom were from Indiana; however, approximately two-thirds of the Kentuckians came without any guns, having worn them out in the northern campaigns. Jackson was stunned and one observer recorded his statement as:

"I don't believe it — I have never in my life seen a Kentuckian without a gun, a pack of cards and a jug of whiskey."

They had expected to be armed in New Orleans, and several days before a search had been made of every house in New Orleans for guns, even turning to fowling pieces. All of the muskets acquired from the Natchez, Mississippi, businessman Servoss had been issued to General Carroll's troops when they encountered the shipment coming down the river to New Orleans — the scarcity of shoulder and handguns was critical. Don't overlook the ladies of New Orleans because they had spent considerable time sewing cloth sacks for the bagging of gun powder from its storage barrels. Governor Claiborne had taken on the obligation of parceling out arms and ammunition and at one point Jackson sent an urgent message to the frightened Governor, who had procrastinated in delivery:

"By the Almighty God, if you do not send me balls and powder instantly I shall chop off your head and have it rammed into one of these field pieces."

Living conditions were of course almost unbearable, the Tennessee, Mississippi and backwoods Kentucky contingencies camping virtually in mud, if not in fact ankle deep in water. One bright spot for Jackson was the camp of the Louisiana Creole volunteers and the Baratarians, where, according to the General, they made excellent coffee! Captain Dominique remained constantly with his battery, and the General made the comment at one time — "If I were ordered to storm the gates of Hell, with Captain Dominique as my lieutenant I would have no misgivings of the result."

The final fight took place on January 8, 1815. Pakenham mounted his horse at daybreak and strung out his British troops in a heavy fog and mist and began the march forward. When the fog lifted they were within four hundred yards of the

American lines, which instantly came ablaze with cannon fire consisting of grape shot, canister and chain shot, not to mention "langrage." Pakenham rode forward looking for one of his chief commanders, and finding he had been killed by cannon shot, took command of that section of the British line and was almost instantly killed by a rifle shot and cannon fire. Jean Laffite and several U.S. officers had spent the night of the 7th at Fort Saint Charles, between Chalmette and New Orleans, and arrived after the fight was finished. The conflict has lasted only approximately twenty-five minutes, but the American artillery continued intermittent shooting into the afternoon. Finally British Officer Lambert sent a flag of truce and surrender to Jackson and asked for permission to bury the dead, which he not only granted but detailed some of his men to assist the British in gathering up their dead and wounded. Something just less than 2,000 British soldiers had been killed that day and the Americans in their line has less than 100 killed and wounded! The total British casualties since the night of December 23rd were approximately 3,000, with the American forces losing about 300.

Late in the day the British began evacuation of their dead and wounded and again they were hampered by the swampy, muddy conditions of the terrain, not to mention the alligators which had made night camping very hazardous. At one point Jackson was advised that the British were unable to evacuate approximately 80 soldiers too badly wounded to be moved. He dispatched his own Surgeon-General, Dr. David Kerr, together with some American personnel, to assist in caring for these wounded. Before boarding their ships and leaving for home on January 18th they buried a considerable number of their soldiers in the swampy areas close to the battlefield, but heavy rainfall soon caused the bodies to rise and surface — legs, arms and heads appearing in many places, and the effluvia was horrid!

Jackson's General Orders of January 21, 1815, praised all corps and units that were involved in the battle, and particularly complimented Dominique and Uncle Reyne, who, together with Jean and Pierre, had provided so much, if not in fact all, of the flints, powder and cannon shot as well as some cannon.⁴ Jackson and the Louisiana Legislature recommended to President Madison that the Baratarians be granted full pardon, and on February 6, 1815, Madison issued that pardon, which authorized the dismissal and vitiation of all lawsuits, indictments and prosecutions against them.

Subsequent to the granting of this pardon some of the Baratarians resumed their privateering against British and Spanish shipping. The Laffite brothers moved on to establish new bases in Texas at Galveston and its environs, and it is interesting to note that while in Texas, Jean had several business ventures with the "Bowie brothers," one of whom undoubtedly was James. Jean Laffite later left Galveston at the request of the U.S. Navy, adopted several assumed names and virtually vanished from American business and social circles. For approximately 125 years historians believed an unsubstantiated rumor that he had died in the Southwest Gulf off the Yucatan Peninsula and was buried either on an island or on the Mexican mainland. In truth and in fact his substantial wealth enabled him to live and function in business circles in comfortable anonymity, and he took residence at various times in Cincin-

nati and St. Louis. The truth of his death at age 72 years is taken from the Laffite family bible as follows:⁵

"May 5, 1854 Alton, Illinois Our Father died will be with
Our brother Glen Henri will be with Uncle Pierre in Heaven
Jean Laffite decede Le 5 Mai 1854 a Alton, Illinois"

Alexandre Frederic Laffite—Dominique You—one of the foremost patriots and providers in the Battle of New Orleans, sailed on a few occasions with the other Laffites, but retired from those ventures and opened a tavern in New Orleans where he died November 14, 1830, and was buried there in St. Louis Cemetery No. 2.

In March, two months after the victory, New Orleans Federal Judge Hall issued a contempt citation on Jackson for certain actions that the General took in preparing for the defenses against the British, including freeing certain prisoners, suspending the writ of habeas corpus and even jailing the Judge. Dominique and Uncle Reyne came very close to carrying the Judge to the Mississippi River for a bath, but the General restrained them, then pleaded nolo contendere and paid a thousand dollar fine. Guess what happened to Old Hickory after that!

NOTES

¹The early inhabitants named the Bay for Sancho Panza's imaginary island empire in *Don Quixote*.

²Please note Governor Claiborne's anglicization of Laffite's name.

³Through the courtesy of our colleague, Dean Taylor, this old French oath is translated "dirty British bastard."

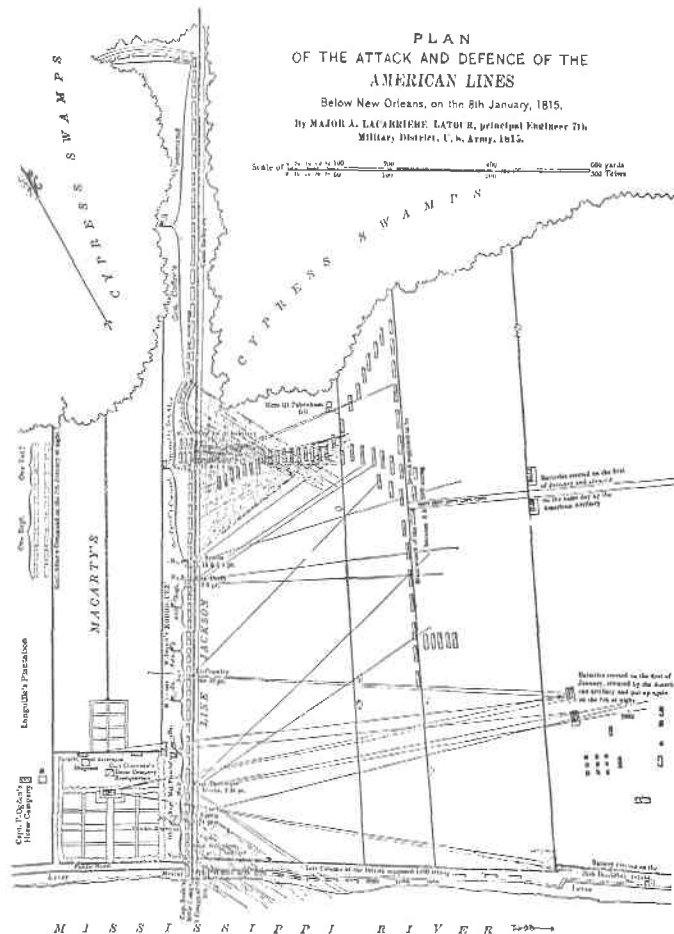
⁴Jackson's General Orders recite various affairs and circumstances of the battle and state as follows: "... Captains Dominique and Beluche and their crews of Batteries Nos. 3 and 4 . . . for the gallant defense of their country . . . the brothers Laffite (sic) have exhibited the same courage and fidelity and the General promises that the Government shall be duly appraised of their conduct."

⁵The Laffite family bible reposes at the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center at Liberty, Texas, by virtue of its acquisition and donation by former Supreme Court Justice Price Daniel.

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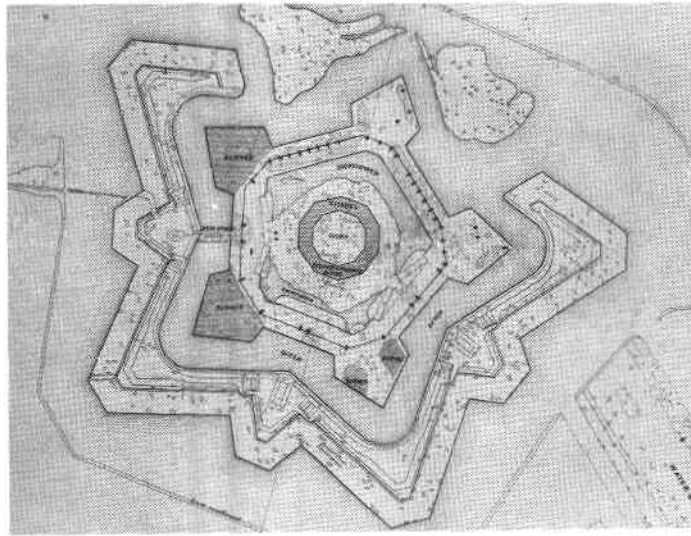
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Latour's map showing British attack on American lines on January 8, 1815.



Fort McComb



Plan of Ft. Jackson, showing the effect of the bombardment by the U.S. mortar flotilla and gunboats, April 18th to 24th, 1862.



Fort Pike