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## LAFITTE, THE PIRATE OF THE GULF, AND HIS SEA-ROVERS, LOYAL TO THE AMERICAN CAUSE.



The informant was the celebrated Captain Jean Lafitte, the leader of the reputed pirates of the Gulf, who had been outlawed by an edict of our Government. The circumstances were so romantic and displayed such a patriotic love for and loyalty to our country, that they are worthy of brief mention. As Byron wrote, he

*“Left a corsair's name to other times,*

*Linked with one virtue and a thousand crimes.”*

But this does injustice to these *marauders of the sea*, who put in a plea of extenuation. The disparity of their virtues and their crimes is overwrought in the use of poetic license. Before the period of the conquest of Guadeloupe by the English, the French Government in force on that island had granted permits to numerous privateersmen to prey upon the commerce of the enemy, as our own Government had done in two wars. Now they could no longer enter the ports of that or of any other of the West India islands, with their prizes and cargoes. Lafitte and his daring sea-rovers made of the Bay of Barataria, on the Gulf coast sixty miles south of New Orleans, a place of rendezvous and headquarters for their naval and commercial adventures. From this point they had ready and almost unobserved communication by navigable bayous with New Orleans and the marts beyond. They formed a sequestered colony on the shores of Barataria, and among the bold followers of Lafitte there were nearly one hundred men skilled in navigation, expert in the use of artillery, and familiar with every bay and inlet within one hundred miles of the Crescent City. Their services, if attainable, might be made invaluable in the invasion and investment of New

Orleans contemplated by the British, who through their spies kept well informed of the conditions of the environment of the city. The time seemed opportune to win them over. If not pirates under our laws, they were smugglers who found it necessary to market the rich cargoes they captured and brought in as privateersmen. Barred out by other nations, New Orleans was almost the lone market for their wares and for their distribution inland. Many merchants and traders favored this traffic, and had grown rich in doing so, despite the severity of our revenue laws against smuggling and the protests of other nations with whom we were friendly.

One of the Lafitte brothers and other leaders of the outlawed community were under arrest and held for trial in the Federal Court at New Orleans at this time. From Pensacola, Colonel Nichols sent Captains Lockyer, of the navy, and Williams, of the army, as emissaries to offer to the Baratarians outlaws the most enticing terms and the most liberal rewards, provided they would enlist in the service of the British in their invasion of Louisiana. Lafitte received them cautiously, but courteously. He listened to their overtures, and feigned deep interest in their mission. Having fully gained their confidence, they delivered to him sealed packages from Colonel Nichols himself, offering thirty thousand dollars in hand, high commissions in the English service for the officers, and liberal pay for the men, on condition that the Baratarians would ally themselves with the British forces. After the reading of these documents, the emissaries began to enlarge on the subject, insisting on the great advantages to result on enlisting in the service of his Britannic Majesty, and the opportunity afforded of acquiring fame and fortune. They were imprudent enough to disclose to Lafitte the purpose and plans of the great English flotilla in the waters of the Gulf, now ready to enter upon their execution. The army of invasion, supported by the navy of England, would be invincible, and all lower Louisiana would soon be in the

possession of the British. They would then penetrate the upper country, and act in concert with the forces in Canada. On plausible pretexts the emissaries were delayed for a day or two, and then returned to their ship lying at anchor outside the pass into the harbor. Lafitte lost little time in visiting New Orleans and laying before Governor Claiborne the letters of Colonel Nichols and the sensational information he had received from the British envoys.

It was this intelligence which was borne in haste to General Jackson at Mobile, by the couriers mentioned previously. The Lafittes promptly tendered the services of themselves, their officers, and their men, in a body to the American army, and pledged to do all in their power, by sea and land, to defeat and repel the invading enemy, on condition that the Government would accept their enlistment, pardon them of all offenses, and remove from over them the ban of outlawry. This was all finally done, and no recruits of Jackson's army rendered more gallant and effective service, for their numbers, in the stirring campaign that followed. They outclassed the English gunners in artillery practice, and showed themselves to be veterans as marines or soldiers.

On receipt of this information of Lafitte, confirmed from other secret and reliable sources, the citizens were aroused. A mass-meeting was held in New Orleans and a Committee of Safety appointed, composed of Edward Livingston, Pierre Fouchet, De la Croix, Benjamin Morgan, Dominique Bouligny, J.A. Destrahan, John Blanque, and Augustine Macarte, who acted in concert with Governor Claiborne, and with the Legislature called into session.

*This chapter is an excerpt from "The Battle of New Orleans" by Z.F. Smith*