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June 2010

Pirates burn Galveston

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Pirates burned Galveston to the ground – but not recently.

The pirates were led by Jean Lafitte. Rather than trying to pillage Galveston, they were fleeing in order to avoid an impending assault by a naval task force.

Jean Lafitte and his older brother Pierre began their free-lance privateering in the Caribbean in about the year 1800. By 1807, they had established a base on the island of Baratavia, in Baratavia Bay in the new United States Territory of Louisiana. The Lafitte's oversaw operation of a fleet of corsairs that plundered vessels in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. Merchandise seized was often sold in the thriving black market in New Orleans. In their spare time, the Lafitte brothers engaged in smuggling. Both the piracy and the smuggling brought the Lafitte's to the attention of federal officials, including the Customs officers in New Orleans, the Revenue Cutter Service (predecessor of the US Coast Guard), and the US Navy. Several vessels operated by Lafitte were seized by the Revenue Cutter Service, but illicit activities continued. The Lafitte brothers were arrested and jailed in New Orleans. After posting bail, they fled back to the relative safety of Baratavia Island. During the War of 1812, when the British Navy tried to recruit the Lafitte brothers, they negotiated an arrangement with US Army General Andrew Jackson to assist in the defense of New Orleans in exchange for pardons for past offenses. The Lafitte brothers and their band of Baratavia pirates fought well during the Battle of New Orleans and duly received their pardons.

After the War, the Lafitte's and their friends promptly returned to their prior practices. Needless to say, this made them quite unwelcome by federal officials. By the middle of 1816, things were becoming difficult on Baratavia Island. The Lafitte brothers and compatriots decamped, looking for an alternate base.

Also in 1816, Mexico was engaged in a war of independence from Spain. Mexican rebels worked out an arrangement with Louis Michel Aury, another privateer, for him to set up operations on Galveston Island in sparsely settled Texas. [There was a surfeit of pirates in the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea at that time.] He would provide logistical support to the rebellion and harass the Spanish Navy. The Mexican Government would provide him with

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Letters of Marque so as to possibly legitimize his activities and would provide whatever protection it could. Aury duly established a small base on Galveston Island.

Jean Lafitte moved his men and vessels to Galveston later that year. Showing more profit potential than Aury, it did not take Lafitte long to win over the loyalty (if that is the right word) of the pirates and privateers in Galveston. Aury soon departed for Amelia Island, Florida (but that is a different story which will not be pursued here). Lafitte was not only engaged in piracy and smuggling, he was also involved in duplicitous diplomacy. At the same time that he was reassuring the Mexican rebels that he had taken over the role of Aury, he was telling the Spanish Government that he was spying against the Mexicans on their behalf. There is little evidence, though, that Lafitte provided material support to either side in the Mexican War of Independence.

The base at Galveston Island, now renamed Campeche, soon became the pirate headquarters for the entire Gulf of Mexico, attracting a growing number of miscreants and law-breakers. Lafitte and his band built gambling houses, boarding houses, saloons, and houses of prostitution. Lafitte built a home/fortress called Maison Rouge (the Red House) to serve as his headquarters. Cannons were installed on the roof.

It had everything a pirate needed. It was a protected harbor. It was near a ready market – Houston. Most importantly, from Lafitte's perspective, was the jurisdictional situation. Galveston was in a legal vacuum. It was outside the reach of traditional government and law enforcement. The island was claimed by both Spain and Mexico, but neither had the capability at that time of exerting their authority. The United States was reluctant to act directly against the island, since it was part of a foreign nation. Thus, the pirates could plunder at will in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean and then scurry back to Galveston to dispose of their ill-gotten gains and replenish for another foray.

By 1821, the United States Government had gotten totally fed up with the activities of the Lafitte brothers at their headquarters on Galveston Island. The *USS Enterprise* was dispatched to advise Lafitte to cease his piratical activities. Jean Lafitte received the message politely, but continued as before. Several months later, in May 1821, the *Enterprise* returned, but with a flotilla of Navy and Revenue Cutter Service gunboats. Lafitte stalled for several days while he made preparations.

On the night of May 7, 1821, the pirates set fire to most of the buildings in Galveston (including Maison Rouge) and quickly departed in their fastest vessels. Rumors persist that, prior to his hasty departure, Lafitte buried some of his ill-gotten gains on Galveston Island and in surrounding locations.

The US naval force was not required to fire a shot, thus avoiding a diplomatic confrontation with the Mexican Government, which by that time was in the final stages of winning its War of Independence.

As governments became better established throughout Latin America, the possible refuges for pirates rapidly disappeared. Several operated off the coast of Cuba for a few years, but increasing pressure from US naval forces and from the Spanish colonial government on Cuba brought that to an end. The traditional piracy problem in the Western Hemisphere was largely resolved, not so much by defeating the pirates at sea (although that occurred with regularity), but by destroying or otherwise eliminating their shore bases.

It is unclear how much of this history translates to the situation in the current problems in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden. There seems to be a consensus, though, that these modern-day pirates will not be totally defeated until law and order are returned to the coastal villages of Somalia.