

San Jacinto River Authority Kids Page

INDIANS, PIRATES AND TREASURE, OH MY!



Everyone enjoys a good mystery, especially about exciting people and places in history when the story twists and unravels some unusual connections. Take, for example, this Gulf Coast tale of a pirate, an Indian chief and an American “princess”...

No one is quite sure where **Jean Laffite** was born. Some say he had French aristocratic roots; or perhaps he came to the U.S. from a Caribbean island. It is generally believed that he and his half-brother Pierre arrived in the Gulf Coast area around 1803. Jean was reputed to have been a swashbuckling pirate captain. He and his band of buccaneers captured and plundered ships that sailed the Caribbean, with a preference for treasure-laden Spanish galleons. He was praised by many who welcomed the steady flow of black market goods into southern Louisiana during desperate economic times.

Hundreds of miles away in South Carolina, a privileged young woman -- the daughter of a U.S. Vice President and wife of the Governor of South Carolina -- boarded a schooner, the *Patriot*, on December 31, 1812 to visit her father, Aaron Burr. **Theodosia** was in frail health. She hadn't done well in the humid, mosquito-infested south and she was mourning the loss of her 10 year old son to malaria. Her father, who had left the country in exile after being tried and acquitted for treason in 1807, had finally returned home to New York and she wanted to join him there for a visit.

The *Patriot*, famous for her speed, had earlier served as a privateer commissioned by the U.S. government to menace British shipping. The ship had been thoroughly refitted and repainted, with guns dismounted and hidden below decks, but it is likely that the cargo of plundered treasure was still on board when Theodosia and the small crew set sail that New Year's Eve, never to be seen again.

Over the years, speculation has grown about Theodosia's fate and that of the rich cargo onboard the *Patriot*. Was she shipwrecked off the coast of North Carolina where ships frequently went aground during horrific storms? Is it possible, as some have suggested, that Jean Laffite himself might have recognized the ship, and captured the cargo along with her famous passenger? Some claimed to have seen Theodosia in New

Orleans...could the infamous pirate have taken her there?

In September 1814, during the War of 1812, the British had a plan to seize New Orleans. The pirate Laffite was suddenly in great demand for his seafaring skills, not only by the British -- whose offer Jean rejected -- but by the Governor of Louisiana and subsequently by General Andrew Jackson who commanded the American forces. After the Battle of New Orleans on January 8, 1815, it was the consensus that Jean's pirate soldiers armed with the guns and ammo provided by the Laffite brothers -- and what Jackson himself acknowledged as their “courage and fidelity” -- made all the difference in the victorious outcome in the defense of New Orleans.

Basking in the glow of being “everyone's hero”, Jean asked the U.S. government to have his ships -- the same ones he had commandeered in defense of Louisiana -- restored to him. Arguing that the vessels had also been used in less honorable pursuits before the war, the government denied his request. He was bitter and angry and left New Orleans for good. Jean resumed his life of adventure on what is now Galveston Island, and his fleet once again preyed on ships in the Gulf of Mexico while boldly flying the black pirate flag.

After relocating his smuggling operations to Galveston, Laffite settled into a French pirate's extravagant mansion, and converted the upper level into a fortress with cannon facing toward Galveston harbor. In about 1819, some of Laffite's men had taken a **Karankawa** chief's daughter to the mansion and his warriors attempted to rescue her. Armed only with bows and arrows against the formidable cannon, the Karankawa were soon defeated. It is at this Gulf Coast mansion, now in ruins, where Laffite's treasure is rumored to have been buried, but has never been found.

Here's an unusual twist to the story. Another legend surrounding Theodosia's fate involved settlers who reported encountering an old Karankawa warrior who wore a gold locket engraved with the name “Theodosia.” He claimed that a woman gave him the locket and, after explaining she was the daughter of a great chief of the white men, had died in his arms. ♦

