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The Pirate in the Business Suit: How Jean Lafitte Changed New Orleans

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Jean Lafitte must have been a daunting and commanding presence when he showed up uninvited in Louisiana Governor William Claiborne's office one day in 1814.<sup>1</sup> A refined and elegant man with a proud demeanor, Lafitte carried with him both the fearsome boldness of a pirate and the calculating shrewdness of an accomplished businessman.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the governor had placed a five-hundred-dollar reward upon his head a year before<sup>3</sup> and continued to threaten his base at the Baratarian island<sup>4</sup> of Grand Terre, just outside New Orleans, did not seem to weaken the privateer's confidence.<sup>5</sup>

Jean Lafitte had important news to share with Claiborne: British vessels were closing in on New Orleans and Jackson's forces would not be able to defeat them alone. He pointed out the governor's ingratitude, seeing as he had provided cheap goods to the people of New Orleans; in fact, he challenged the governor to a duel. Claiborne, however, had the good sense to back down and yield to Lafitte's wishes: he agreed to stop attacking Lafitte's band of Baratarians and instead accept his assistance in defeating the British. In essence, he admitted Lafitte's power and authority in this matter.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Lafitte/Laffite, *The Journal of Jean Laffite: The Privateer-Patriot's Own Story* (New York: Vantage Press, 1958), 54, 55. For a discussion of the validity of this source, see Winston Groom, *Patriotic Fire: Andrew Jackson and Jean Laffite at the Battle of New Orleans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 274-277. Since various authoritative books in the field have cited the *Journal* as a valid source, the author of this work has thought it justified to follow the example of experts. The outcome of the alleged meeting between Lafitte and Claiborne is a historical fact: U.S. officials did indeed accept Lafitte's offer to assist them in the Battle of New Orleans. The *Journal* was believed to have been translated into English originally by a group of nuns. Alternate spellings of the pirate's name include Laffitte and Laffite. For the purposes of this work, the spelling *Lafitte* will be used.

<sup>2</sup> Robert V. Remini, *The Battle of New Orleans: Andrew Jackson and America's First Military Victory* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 28.

<sup>3</sup> Lafitte had displayed a sense of humor by offering a reward for three times that sum for the arrest of the governor. See Lafitte, 48.

<sup>4</sup> So named allegedly in reference to an unreachable island in Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, according to Jane Lucas de Grummond, *The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1961), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Lafitte, 40, 55.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

Lafitte was a powerful figure in New Orleans for a number of reasons. He catapulted himself into the public sphere in an effort to uphold principles that seem to have been ingrained in his mind early on. He was not a bloodthirsty rogue, but he was an outlaw. He was not quite a gentleman, but he was refined. It was perhaps this paradox, and the flawed nature of his character, that allowed him to penetrate the city on many different levels. Although his motives and actions were not always virtuous, Jean Lafitte's paradoxical aspirations made him instrumental in ensuring the prosperity of early nineteenth-century New Orleans; his crucial role in the Battle of New Orleans was the culmination of his contributions to the city and America as a whole.

In order to fully understand how Lafitte attained his level of influence in the affairs of New Orleans, it is imperative to first examine his beginnings. Lafitte was born in 1782 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti,<sup>7</sup> which was then called Santo Domingo or San Domingue, to a family much disenchanted with the Spanish Crown. His mother died too early to be an influence in her son's life, and so Lafitte's maternal grandmother filled her role. She was a Jew who had escaped the Spanish Inquisition, and whose husband had died at the hands of Catholic Spaniards. She indoctrinated her grandchildren in the hatred of Spain, telling stories of the horrors of the Inquisition, and her disposition influenced the thoughts and actions of Jean Lafitte and his brother Pierre throughout their lives. Jean, for his part, viewed America as the antithesis of Spanish oppression: for him, the United

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<sup>7</sup> Jane Lucas de Grummond, *The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1961), 4. One quite different account speculates that he was in fact born in Bordeaux, France. The difficulty in ascertaining the truth of this matter lies partly in the frustrating commonality of the name "Lafitte," and the absence of a generally accepted spelling of the name, which could be used for verification purposes. For further reading, see William C. Davis, *The Pirates Laffite: The Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2005), 1-7. The author of this work prefers to stick with the more oft-told and accepted accounts.

States was a land of tolerance, freedom and opportunity, and he held the Declaration of Independence in high esteem.<sup>8</sup>

These early-formed opinions would greatly impact the sides Lafitte chose to support as an independent privateer. For example, his ships mostly sailed under the flag of Cartagena, which opened its port to the Baratarians in 1811, shortly after having severed ties with Spain. In this circumstance, the slave trade flourished and Lafitte's privateering business brought blacks from Cartagena, where they were dropped off from Africa to his base at Grand Terre off the coast of Louisiana to be sold. Lafitte and his family, which now included his wife and children, had fled there some years earlier to escape the new black government of Haiti. Lafitte displayed his notions of Creole superiority, Creole in this case meaning a person of Spanish-French descent, by helping others like himself flee as well.<sup>9</sup> This pattern of adhering to firm, if questionable, principles extended to his relationship with the port city of Louisiana as well.

The lifelong values that Jean and Pierre Lafitte held were further influenced by the fact that they grew up in the shadow of the accomplishments of their privateering older brother, Alexandre Lafitte.<sup>10</sup> The boys, who were quite close in age, were captivated by Alexandre's prowess, and longed for the day when they, too, would sail the high seas and amass treasure.<sup>11</sup> However, one marked difference emerged to set Jean apart from his brother. Where Pierre was rough in his demeanor, Jean was composed. Where Pierre wore a traditional pirate's outfit, bright colors and sported a slightly disheveled look, Jean donned the latest gentlemen's suits. In short, Pierre was content

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<sup>8</sup> Lafitte, 9, 11, 14.

<sup>9</sup> De Grummond, 4, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Also known as Dominique Youx or Frederique Youx.

<sup>11</sup> Lafitte, 15.

with the role of a removed outcast, but Jean coveted the acceptance of high society as well.<sup>12</sup>

This aspect of his personality is crucial to understanding why a man with a thriving smuggling business would bother to set up a blacksmithing shop in the mainland city, or why he passed the time at all with honorable men of New Orleans.<sup>13</sup> Lafitte did not limit himself to the crude side of his business: he insisted that he was not a *pirate*, as the governor alleged, but a *privateer*, working with the permission of the government of Cartagena. This, in fact, was a flawed distinction as he applied it to his own business, since several Baratarian ships were found to have been stolen.<sup>14</sup> Lafitte's strategy of appealing to and inserting himself into the richest strata of the city worked nicely: men and women of the upper echelon felt comfortable frequently canoeing to his bazarre at what was known as the Temple,<sup>15</sup> a midway point in the labyrinth of Barataria Bay, and did not hesitate to buy slaves, jewels, and whatever else the Baratarians had smuggled in. The money this smuggling brought into the city helped finance the construction of new homes, too.<sup>16</sup> In this manner, Jean Lafitte ultimately won the support of a good ten percent of the population of New Orleans,<sup>17</sup> including a well-known lawyer, Edward Livingston.<sup>18</sup> It is Livingston whom Lafitte refers to as "my lawyer,"<sup>19</sup> the very one who suggested that he present himself before Claiborne to offer his assistance.

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<sup>12</sup> Winston Groom, *Patriotic Fire: Andrew Jackson and Jean Laffite at the Battle of New Orleans* (New York : Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 72, 73.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 73, 77, 78.

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Marx, *Pirates and Privateers of the Caribbean* (Malabar: Krieger Publishing Company, 1992), 275.

<sup>15</sup> So named because it is believed to have been a place of Indian worship.

<sup>16</sup> Groom, 75, 76, 78.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, 275.

<sup>18</sup> Groom, 78.

<sup>19</sup> Lafitte, 55.

Although a wealth of examples could be cited to display Lafitte's connection with the powers that be, it must be noted that he never seemed to fit perfectly in either the world of the Baratarians pirates or the world of the refined mainland rich. He was not fully accepted into high society; wealthy men considered him a suitable drinking companion, but would not invite him into their homes.<sup>20</sup> He therefore created for himself a sort of palace on Grand Terre, complete with exotic furnishings and fine wines, which he used to impress the British guests he deceived for two weeks just before the Battle of New Orleans.<sup>21</sup> From these headquarters he used his diplomatic skill, which differentiated him from other pirates, to direct the whole of the Baratarians, which were divided into two rivaling factions.<sup>22</sup> His Baratarian leadership seems to have been a substitute for the acceptance he longed for in American high society, and this longing was a contributing factor in his decision to turn down Britain's offer and aid General Jackson in the Battle of New Orleans.

To maintain his leadership positions, Lafitte made sure that his enterprises benefited, when possible, only those whom he thought worthy. These groups included himself and his family, French Creoles, and rebelling countries in Spanish America. Paper money was just coming into vogue in early nineteenth-century Louisiana, and French Creoles who were used to hard money were skeptical of the new currency. Thus when Lafitte showed his ill-begotten 12,600 hard pounds to Joseph Sauvinet, an important businessman in New Orleans at the time, Sauvinet was impressed enough to become his business partner. This "in" enabled Lafitte's business to grow rapidly. By the time Britain offered \$30,000 to enlist his aid against New Orleans, Lafitte's wealth

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<sup>20</sup> Groom, 72, 73.

<sup>21</sup> De Grummond, 40.

<sup>22</sup> Groom, 75-77.

included more than a million dollars' worth of smuggled goods stored in the warehouses at Grand Terre. Lafitte wrote that in addition to having helped many Creoles flee Santo Domingo after the slave rebellion,<sup>23</sup> he enjoyed the support of the French-speaking legislators, who largely sympathized with Creoles.<sup>24</sup> That is, until Lafitte's business got out of hand and the Baratarians were publicly condemned because customs officials were losing revenue. Finally, Lafitte's hatred of Spain easily translated itself to his support of countries that broke from Spain, such as Cartagena<sup>25</sup> and, eventually, Mexico.<sup>26</sup> As an older man, Lafitte's childhood values mixed with values he appropriated for his persona as a philanthropic privateer during his lifetime, and he turned out to be more of a Britain-hater than a Spain-hater;<sup>27</sup> in a sense, he was Americanized.

The fence Lafitte straddled between lawlessness and diplomacy has barred him from many textbooks and historical records. It must be acknowledged, however, that Jean Lafitte and his Baratarian entourage did have substantial political effects on Louisiana, and on American history, since the War of 1812 did so much to shape how Americans thought of and defined themselves, and their confidence in the strength of the nation. As mentioned before, he was well acquainted with such influential men as the lawyer Edward Livingston; as well as Lafitte's business partner, Joseph Sauvinet;<sup>28</sup> Jacques Reynard, a veteran of the Revolutionary War and a resident of Grand Isle, near Grand Terre; the legislator and investor Jean Blanque; and countless other notables.<sup>29</sup> As a privateer, he resented the primarily Spanish and British laws that outlawed his trade, and

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<sup>23</sup> De Grummond, 6-8, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Lafitte, 39.

<sup>25</sup> Charles Gayarré, *History of Louisiana*, vol. 4, (Gretna: Pelican Publishing Company, 1974), 302-304.

<sup>26</sup> William C. Davis, *The Pirates Laffite: The Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2005), 401. Jean and Pierre Lafitte worked to uphold Mexican authority at Galveston.

<sup>27</sup> Lafitte, 153.

<sup>28</sup> Lafitte, 43.

<sup>29</sup> Davis, 33, 174, 183.

so he carefully chose his alliances so as to align against these two powers whenever possible.<sup>30</sup> Since he possessed so much capital, it was often in the interest of the people of New Orleans to side with him, even when this meant ignoring government edicts. The extent of Lafitte's political influence is best seen in his impact on the Battle of New Orleans, which will be discussed shortly.

As mentioned before, Jean Lafitte's meddling reached into the social scene of New Orleans. He was described as somewhat of a ladies' man, though not as much as his brother Pierre. When he was eighteen, Lafitte married a Danish Jew, Christine Levine, who lived on the island of St. Croix and whose father was a merchant who did much business with privateers. She bore him two sons and a daughter, and died upon giving birth to this last. Pierre's wife then took the boys and Jean's sister Yvonne raised the little girl.<sup>31</sup> Thus Jean was more or less freed from the bonds of fatherhood and family life, and those closest to him were his brothers Pierre and Alexandre, and his fellow Baratarian pirates. Jean's social life can hardly be separated from his work: both mixed together to constitute the person Lafitte, who was at once pirate, businessman, and diplomat in all settings. Ultimately, his decision to assist Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans would be the result of a mixture of personal and business-related motives.<sup>32</sup>

The decision also had to do with the fact that he thought of himself as intelligent and skilled, and therefore an asset to any army. Early on, Lafitte had been given both an academic education and a military one. He was tutored well until he was fourteen, when he was sent to a private school on Martinique, but it was at the island of St. Christopher that Jean and Pierre received their military training. The brothers' firsthand experience as

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<sup>30</sup> Lafitte, 42.

<sup>31</sup> Lafitte, 21; Arthur, *Jean Laffite*, 19, 23, 255. Found in De Grummond, 6, 7.

<sup>32</sup> De Grummond, 5.

privateers began with their apprenticeship under a relative and pirate, Renato Beluche.<sup>33</sup> So Jean Lafitte came out well-rounded; he knew the intricacies of piracy, dueling, and business deals, and seemed to enjoy all three.

While his multiple talents were crucial to the outcome of the Battle of New Orleans, it made his decision to support Jackson a complicated matter; one aspect of Lafitte alone would not supply all of the thinking behind the action. What is known definitively is that on September 3, 1814, a group of men showed up in Barataria Bay that consisted of neither privateers nor their customers: Grand Terre was awakened by a cannon shot their sloop fired. Naturally, the pirates ran to see what the cause was, and five of them jumped in a canoe to row toward the sloop. The answer: British agents sent by Colonel Edward Nicholls seeking the audience of none other than Jean Lafitte himself. A tall, swarthy man stepped forward and told the agents, Captains Lockyer and McWilliams, that they would have to hop in the boat and ride with them to the island if they were so intent upon speaking with Mr. Lafitte. The captains agreed, and left the safety of their boat. As soon as they arrived, the tall man turned to them and surprised them by saying, "I am Jean Lafitte."<sup>34</sup>

Captain McWilliams quickly produced a packet of letters addressed to him. Lafitte cordially invited the captains into his home, and there, with an ever inscrutable expression upon his face, he read the first letter. It was the colonel's proclamation to the citizens of Louisiana stating that he had enlisted the military aid of countless Indians. The second letter was from Captain William H. Percy, and it threatened to destroy his base if Lafitte refused to support the British in the war. This, however, was not enough to sway

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> De Grummond, 37.

Lafitte's confidence or convince him to abandon his principles and support the British. Far from acquiescing, he instead asked the Englishmen how he would be rewarded once the war was over, and American lands were in British possession, should the outcome be in England's favor. Lockyer pointed out that it was not exactly in Lafitte's interest to support the government of Louisiana, which at the time held Pierre in jail and officially considered the Baratarians to be outlaws; furthermore, he promised the aforementioned \$30,000 reward. Even this offer did not prompt a speedy response from the pirate; rather, he served his guests fine foods and allowed them to stay the night, providing them with all the comforts that Barataria could offer.<sup>35</sup>

Meanwhile, Lafitte wrote a letter asking Colonel Nicholls to grant him a fortnight's time to consider the matter. Having done that, he wrote a powerful letter to Jean Blanque, whose past business deals with privateers and current political influence could not but help the Baratarian cause.<sup>36</sup> In it he described America as "my adoptive country" that "has never ceased to be dear to me,"<sup>37</sup> hinting that personal principles might override financial or political incentives in this matter. At the same time, however, he acknowledged that to accept Colonel Nicholls' proposal might have been the key to freeing his imprisoned brother, suggesting that personal incentives might indeed be mixed with political ones. When the letter reached the governor, he called a legislative committee to decide what to do. The passage that mentioned Pierre led some members to dismiss the document as a simple ruse to get him out of jail. The committee decided to send General Daniel Patterson to destroy the Baratarian base.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> De Grummond, 37-41.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 41, 42.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid,42.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 42-44.

While these proceedings took place, Pierre managed to escape from jail, and Jean composed a letter to Claiborne that tried to assure him of his goodwill. Jean then set about moving his arms and munitions to different Baratarian islands away from Grand Terre, expecting the British to be relentless when they learned he had been stalling for time. As Pierre was ill and not much help, he left Alexandre in charge at Grand Terre. When Patterson's boat, the *Carolina*, approached, Alexandre ordered his pirates to abandon ship rather than fire at an American vessel. Patterson destroyed the warehouses and imprisoned Alexandre. When they reached New Orleans, Patterson charged his brothers with piracy and jailed them, too. It is a case of wonder that after all this damage, Jean Lafitte still opted to support his oppressors against his other enemy, the British.<sup>39</sup>

By all accounts, General Jackson was as skeptical as Patterson of trusting pirates at first, but he at last came around to realize that their military experience, their knowledge of the land, and the numbers commanded were offers he could not refuse; his own few troops were mere grains of sand in the face of a British boulder. At the very least, being on good terms with the inhabitants of the Baratarian islands would be crucial to a naval victory.<sup>40</sup> When Jackson and Claiborne learned that in addition, Lafitte had squirreled away plenty of munitions, they resolved to release the captives and accept their help. Furthermore, Jackson promised to help the Baratarians attain an official pardon from President Madison once the mess was over.<sup>41</sup> It is ironic that a pirate, Jean Lafitte, would prefer this offer to a monetary reward, but it must be remembered that he was highly concerned with acquiring the status of a gentleman. In addition, his support echoed his earlier claims in his letter to Jean Blanque that he was a patriot who sought to

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<sup>39</sup> De Grummond, 42-48

<sup>40</sup> Remini, 49, 162.

<sup>41</sup> Davis, 209.

save America from its enemies,<sup>42</sup> even if those enemies were American officials themselves. It is important to note that Lafitte repeatedly justified his illegal operations by asserting that his business served the common good of New Orleans, as it lowered the prices of oft-consumed goods,<sup>43</sup> and he did not see smuggling as immoral because he insisted that customs officials were corrupt.<sup>44</sup> The prosperity of New Orleans was at the heart of his interests, be they personal, business-related, or otherwise influenced.

The first task that Jackson assigned to Jean Lafitte, and that he undertook willingly, was an order to show Major Michael Reynolds and fifty of his men to the Temple so that Reynolds could construct a fortification from the British on one of the seven entrances to the port. Meanwhile, Pierre and Alexandre were presented various other tasks, and these last two seemed to have had the most physical impact during the actual battle. True to his gentlemanly taste, it seems that Jean Lafitte hung behind, satisfied with having set things in motion and not giving in to Colonel Nicholls' offer.<sup>45</sup> According to Lafitte, it was his own patriotism toward Louisiana that enabled the ensuing American victory on January 8, 1815.<sup>46</sup>

Jackson displayed a certain stubborn hardheadedness with regard to the Baratarians for quite some time; it took a great effort on his part to humble himself and admit that his numbers and supplies were extremely limited, as was his own knowledge of the canals and bayous that were crucial to keeping the British at bay. When he finally accepted Baratarian aid, things fell into place and the victory at the Battle of New Orleans

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<sup>42</sup> De Grummond, 42.

<sup>43</sup> Remini, 9.

<sup>44</sup> Lafitte, 40.

<sup>45</sup> Davis, 212-217. Lafitte wrote that he stayed at Fort Saint Charles for a time, before running onto the battlefield, but no account aside from his affirms this. Scholars have speculated that he stayed at the Temple or maybe Grand Isle the entire time. For the pirate's account, see Lafitte, 61. For further discussion and speculation, see Davis, 217, 223.

<sup>46</sup> Lafitte, 61.

began to seem plausible. Of course, Jackson preferred to take the credit himself, and the victory could not but help in his presidential election.<sup>47</sup>

Claiborne, for his part, did not help expedite the preparations for the battle, as he let politics get in the way too often. His vanity was hurt when he realized how powerful the Baratarians really were, and how much sympathy they got from many people with whom he was well acquainted. He seemed to understand that their knowledge, skill, and supplies constituted a sort of untapped gold mine, but he did not speak out against the committee's vote to reject Jean Lafitte's letter to Jean Blanque and proceed with plans to destroy Lafitte's headquarters.<sup>48</sup> He was timid when the time came to free the Lafitte brothers and accept their assistance, since the decision weakened his public appearance, shaking his previous firm edicts stating that the Baratarians were pirates and outlaws. In the end, however, he and Jackson did follow through on their promise to write President Madison and ask him to pardon the Baratarians. Madison consented, and Lafitte had the satisfaction of knowing that, at least on paper, he was a legitimate hero.<sup>49</sup>

There can be no question that the outcome of the Battle of New Orleans was due in large part to Jean Lafitte's behind-the-scenes work. It is not simply the fact that he helped the American side, but the fact that he *did not* help the British, that makes his contributions all the more notable. Had he allowed Colonel Nicholls to use Grand Terre as a base of operations, the English would have easily infiltrated the city and overtaken Jackson's ragtag of an army. Instead, Lafitte's determination to act as he thought a gentleman would, while maintaining some semblance of control over his business enterprises, led him to support his adoptive country in the best way that he could. He

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 54, 58, 59.

<sup>48</sup> De Grummond, 44.

<sup>49</sup> Davis, 204, 224.

alone was steadfast in his determination to crush the British regiments, no matter who else he had to side with. For what reasons he felt this way, one can only speculate. But it seems that throughout his life his grandmother's voice echoed inside his head, reminding him of how terrible the Spanish were, and fostering anti-imperialism at every level of his existence.

New Orleans gained more than it lost from Jean Lafitte's influence in its affairs. Lafitte changed the face of New Orleans, making necessary items affordable, dressing women in fine necklaces and earrings, and flooding markets with money to stimulate the city's economy. The government may have lost some money when the Baratarians bypassed customs officials, but the pirates made up for this when they turned over their arms, supplies, and munitions to help the American cause. It mattered not that the battle did not have any influence on the terms of the treaty that ended the War of 1812; the victory was a crucial one anyway, in that it lifted the spirits of the American people, inspiring confidence in their national strength and pride in the tenants upon which their mother country had been established. Perhaps Lafitte gave so much to New Orleans out of a love of America. Perhaps he did so in an attempt to justify himself in the eyes of true gentlemen. Perhaps he simply hated Spanish imperialism so much that he was happy to support any country that shared his anti-imperialistic sentiments. What more can one conclude when studying a pirate, whose very word is subject to dispute? One can only infer that strong feelings backed that word, feelings that manifested themselves in his old age when he said, "Down with the British Dragon!"<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Lafitte, 153.

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