

JEAN LAFITTE: THE REEL STORY

While the truth surrounding the life and death of Jean Lafitte has been debated for over 200 years, one thing is certain, Lafitte was both an outlaw and a hero – an enigmatic character born for the silver screen. While taking creative liberties with the truth, Lafitte has been the subject of many films. Here are a few:

1913 – *The Buccaneers* – Universal Pictures – directed by Otis Turner and starred David Hartford as Jean Lafitte.

1919 – *Millionaire Pirate* – Bluebird Photoplays – directed by Rupert Julian and starred Monroe Salisbury as Jean Lafitte.

In the early eighteenth century, pirate leader Jean Lafitte fights another pirate and wins a beautiful girl recently captured with a treasure. Although the girl offers herself to Lafitte to save her English lover, Lafitte makes him walk the plank. The girl then delivers a curse that Lafitte and his descendants will never know the true love of woman.

Two hundred years later, in the West Antilles, painter Paul Winthrop poses Joe, a pearl diver, as a pirate. Seeing the painting, each envisions the earlier situation. Later, Joe finds the buried treasure, and sails to New York, where he learns that the portrait has also attracted wealthy Lily Demorest and her suitor, Robert Spurr, a "financial pirate." Joe kidnaps Lily for Paul, who timidly loves her, but he decides to keep her himself, until Lily's cry for Paul reminds

him of the curse. Joe returns Lily to Paul, and takes his contentment from thinking of their happiness.



1926 – *Eagle of the Sea* – Paramount – directed by Frank Lloyd with Ricardo Cortez. Captain Sarazac was the rumored name used by Lafitte in public as he wanted to hid his true identity.



Captain Sazarac--actually the notorious buccaneer Jean Lafitte--saves Louise Lestron from harm while attending a masked ball in New Orleans, being given in honor of Gen. Andrew Jackson. The hall is invaded by John Jarvis and a band of mock pirates, among them Sazarac; Jarvis unmasks the buccaneer, and General Jackson gives him until dawn to leave town. Colonel Lestron, a French patriot, wishes to send the *Seraphine* to rescue Napoleon from St. Helena and invites Lafitte to lead the ship; but he declines and exposes her uncle's plans to Louise.

When she is sent away on another ship, Lafitte abducts her, but in New Orleans, Crackley, leader of the insurgents, imprisons Lafitte and his followers. The *Seraphine* is captured by a Spanish man-o'-war on which the colonel has followed; and with the aid of Louise, Lafitte and his men are freed.

1938 – *Buccaneer* – Paramount – Directed by DeMille with Frederic March as Lafitte.



In August, 1814, as the British seize and burn the President's Palace in Washington, D.C., Senator Crawford of Louisiana plots with British naval officers to attack New Orleans. Meanwhile, the *Corinthian* sets sail from New Orleans carrying Marie de Remy, whose sister Annette loves privateer Jean Lafitte, who is wanted by Governor Claiborne. Lafitte and his thousand pirates hold Barataria, a territory of bayous which separates the ocean from New Orleans and claims allegiance to no nation.

When pirate Captain Brown sinks the *Corinthian*, breaking Lafitte's rule never to attack an American ship, the sole survivor is a Dutch girl, Gretchen, who falls in love with Lafitte. On the advice of Crawford, the British bribe Lafitte to lead them through the bayous to attack General Andrew Jackson's army at New Orleans. Lafitte, however, convinces his men to fight for "the only shore that has let [them] stay" and turns the letters of conspiracy over to Claiborne.

Now a man of honor, Lafitte proposes to Annette. Crawford, however, convinces Claiborne that Lafitte's letters were forged and when Lafitte's men greet the American ships, they are met with cannon fire and taken prisoner. Lafitte escapes, however, and when General Jackson learns of Crawford's demands for surrender, Lafitte offers his army of pirates in exchange for their pardon and a head start of one hour for his own escape.

Behind bales of cotton, aided by Dominique You, ex-cannoneer for Napoleon, Lafitte defeats the Scottish army, while Jackson fights the British. That night at the victory ball, when Annette sees Gretchen wearing Marie's dress and the miniature of her mother, she demands to know the whereabouts of the *Corinthian*. As leader of his men, Lafitte takes responsibility for Brown's crime and is about to be hanged when Jackson fulfills his promise of Lafitte's escape. As Lafitte's ship sails, Gretchen, at his side, swears her loyalty to him.

1939 – *Old Hickory* – Warner Bros. – directed by Lewis Seiler and starring George Renavent as Lafitte. The film featured four key incidents in the public life of Andrew Jackson, one addressed his victory at the Battle of New Orleans in 1812 after an alliance with pirate Jean Lafitte.

1950 – *Last of the Buccaneers* – Columbia – directed by Lew Landers with Paul Heinreid as Lafitte.

During the War of 1812, pirate Jean Lafitte helps General "Stonewall" Jackson defeat the British and endears himself to Belle Summers, the beautiful niece of wealthy shipowner George Mareval. Later, when the governor of Louisiana refuses to return his ships to him, Lafitte captures a recently provisioned ship belonging to Mareval. He then offers his services to the consul of Venezuela, whose country is at war with Spain. Knowing that as long as he loots only Spanish ships, the American authorities will leave him alone, Lafitte promises to return for Belle and takes to the seas.



As the months pass, Lafitte and his buccaneers establish a kingdom on the island of Galveston in the Gulf, and Lafitte builds a castle, which he names the Maison Rouge. The spoils from his raids are kept in tunnels which, if threatened, can be destroyed by a pulling a secret lever.

When pirate Cragg Brown attacks an American ship against Lafitte's express orders, he is hanged. In New Orleans, the news that one of Lafitte's ships has plundered an American vessel angers the people. Belle is convinced that Lafitte is innocent and offers to prove it. Under safe conduct from the authorities, Lafitte takes Belle to Galveston, where she plans to prove that the bills of lading for the goods in his warehouse do not correspond with those from the missing American ship.

Shortly before her wedding day, however, Belle finds a document that proves that Lafitte does have the loot from the American ship. Not knowing that Lafitte has hanged the responsible man, she gives the authorities in New Orleans information that will enable them to capture Galveston. Just before the soldiers arrive, Belle learns the truth about the capture of the ship, but it is too late to stop the invasion. When the soldiers are about to search the tunnel, Swallow, the daughter of one of Lafitte's loyal workers, pulls the secret lever, and the treasure is buried forever. Lafitte forgives Belle, and the two lovers escape in a fishing boat.

1958 – *Buccaneer* – Paramount – directed by Anthony Quinn and Yul Brynner as Lafitte.

In late 1814, New Orleans has been under the control of the United States for less than a decade, and Gen. Andrew Jackson, who has been leading the fight against the British for the past two years, realizes that to win the war, he must maintain possession of the vital, still-wild port. With Washington, D.C. having been captured by the enemy, the outcome of the war lies in Jackson's hands. Desperate to prevent an impending blockade by the British, Jackson heads to New Orleans, despite warnings that notorious French Creole pirate Jean Lafitte is the de facto ruler of the city and especially of Barataria, the outlying swamps.

Meanwhile, in New Orleans, Lafitte flouts territorial law by selling his booty outside city limits, thereby avoiding paying taxes, while also secretly courting Annette, the

daughter of Governor William Claiborne. At one rendezvous, Annette protests that she can no longer see Lafitte, as he is defying the American cause, which her father is attempting to solidify. The pirate replies that he has forbidden his men from attacking American ships and tells her that she can be the queen of Barataria, regardless of who rules New Orleans. Annette dismisses Lafitte's offer, stating that she needs a man of whom she can be proud.



Later, at the harbor, Capt. Brown, one of Lafitte's men and the father of the fiery Bonnie, one of the pirates, watches as a strongbox of gold is loaded onto an American ship. The ship also carries Annette's younger sister Marie, who is eloping with her beau. Despite Lafitte's prohibition on attacking Americans, Brown orders his men to capture the ship, the *Corinthian*, and after securing the loot, burns the vessel without offering aid to those trapped aboard. Only young cabin boy Miggs is saved, and Lafitte is so horrified when he learns of the vicious crime that he has Brown hanged.

In Barataria, some of the pirates want to kill Miggs, as he is the only witness to the *Corinthian's* fate, but Lafitte protects the lad. Bonnie vows revenge against Lafitte for her father's death, and yells at the others that Lafitte is supporting the Americans only because of Annette.

Soon after, Lafitte is visited by British naval officers who offer him royal pardons, land grants and a fortune in gold if he helps the British take New Orleans. Lafitte's righthand man, Dominique You, ridicules their promise to give Lafitte a captaincy in the British Navy, noting that Lafitte has far greater power as a pirate. Although the British vow to destroy Lafitte if he does not join them, he casually states that he will send them his answer in a week, then dismisses them.

Later, Dominique teases Lafitte about his devotion to Annette, and Lafitte replies that he has come to believe in the ideals America represents, and that at some point in his life, a man must change. Lafitte then takes the letters from the British to Claiborne, who deeply mistrusts him. Lafitte asks only for a pardon for him and his men, and a "place under the American flag," in exchange for joining the Americans, and Claiborne agrees to take the matter to the defense council.

Annette is so thrilled by Lafitte's transformation that she accepts his marriage proposal, but Lafitte's happiness is ruined when he returns to Barataria and discovers that the pirate village has been destroyed by the Americans. Bonnie tells Lafitte that the survivors have been imprisoned in New Orleans, and he

determines to free them. Bonnie, who cannot help loving Lafitte, then begs him to escape with her, but he demurs.

Meanwhile, in the city, Annette castigates her father for betraying Lafitte, while Mercier, a cowardly member of the council, asserts that their only hope is to surrender to the British. His comment is overheard by Jackson, who has just arrived, and the general proclaims that he will burn New Orleans rather than surrender it.

Afterward, as Jackson rests alone, Lafitte sneaks in through a window and holds the general at gunpoint to demand the release of his men. Lafitte offers Jackson a huge store of arms in exchange, and Jackson, impressed by Lafitte's courage, agrees.

As they talk, a young French Creole bursts in with news that the British are burning his father's plantation, only eight miles away. Lafitte helps Jackson devise strategic defense plans, then goes to the jail, where he tries to rally Dominique, who tells him that the men feel betrayed, as they believe that he has abandoned them. Lafitte shows him the pardon for himself signed by Jackson, who has offered to pardon any other pirate who fights alongside him.

Lafitte then leaves, while on the battle lines, the Americans grow fretful, worrying that he will not bring the much-needed supplies. Claiborne arrives with three hundred city dwellers to reinforce the soldiers, although they are still vastly outnumbered by the British. Just as the battle begins, Lafitte arrives with not only the ammunition, but all of his men.

Jackson tells Lafitte that due to the heavy fog, he cannot employ his deadly, long-range Kentucky rifles, and so Lafitte undertakes a dangerous mission, accompanied by one of his men and one of Jackson's Indian scouts. The trio succeeds in sending aloft a fiery arrow to pinpoint the British Army's location, and soon the Americans win the battle.

Claiborne hosts a party celebrating the victory, and both Jackson and Lafitte are feted by the townspeople. The evening is spoiled, however, when Bonnie arrives dressed in the wedding gown that Marie intended to wear, which was taken in the booty from the *Corinthian*. Miggs also appears, and when he is relentlessly questioned about the *Corinthian's* fate, Lafitte comes to his aid by revealing that he was there when the ship was sunk. Lafitte does not place the blame on Brown, however, stating instead that as

the leader, he was responsible. Annette tries to defend her beloved, but the townsmen grab him and plan to lynch him. Jackson stops them, insisting that the pardon offered to the pirates still remains in force, as they stood by the Americans during the battle.

Lafitte turns down his offer, asking only for an hour's "head start." Jackson agrees, and although Annette begs to go with him, Lafitte tells her that he loves her too much to subject her to a life on the run, without a country to call home. Telling Claiborne that while he cannot restore his other daughter to him, he can give him the thing he loves most in all the world, Lafitte places Annette's hand in his, then leaves. Later, aboard his ship, Lafitte sails away with Dominique, Bonnie and the others. Bitterly declaring that they have no flag to fly, Lafitte gives orders to head to sea, and Bonnie joins him at the wheel.

