

2012 Crabtree Oration-William Claiborne

“Joseph Crabtree and Jean Lafitte dance with the Green Fairies and save America”

Mr. Chairman, Madam President, Elders, Scholars and guests.

It is with great honor and no small measure of trepidation that I appear before you this evening. I say trepidation because I have an enduring memory of last year’s Crabtree dinner, when Bryony Cosgrove finished her delightful Oration and my wife, Alma, said, “Wow, imaging having to follow that.” “Yes,” I said, before unwittingly rising to propose a vote of thanks.

It’s been said that I’m an old journalist, which is true. For nearly half a century I toiled in the fields of reportage, not scholarly research, and I’ll understand if some of you believe that ‘never the ‘twain shall meet.’

But in 1963 the late Philip Graham, a brilliant but tragic newspaper publisher (who was the husband of Katherine Graham, an equally brilliant publisher who was my boss and colleague at The Washington Post for 32 years) famously defined journalism as *“the first rough draft of history.”*

Graham was right, of course, in the sense that historians have long relied on newspaper dispatches as a primary source.

But let me instead turn to a previously unreported drama that nearly two centuries ago ensnared our exemplar, Joseph Crabtree, in a dangerous liaison with three very dissimilar people: a notorious pirate, a powerful American governor_ and a legendary American general.

It was a liaison that in the space of a few weeks turned the tide of war and changed the course of American history.

As you know, the Battle of New Orleans on Jan. 8, 1815 was the pivotal battle of the War of 1812, in which the U.S. Army defeated the British and ultimately sent the loathsome Redcoats scuttling back to their inclement little island for the second time in three decades.

Besides Crabtree, three key figures during the lead-up to that epochal battle were Gen. Andrew Jackson, Louisiana Gov. W.C.C. Claiborne, and the notorious pirate, slave trader, and reputed murderer, Jean Lafitte, who, with his older brother, Pierre, ran a hideout for French-American corsairs in Barataria Bay, in the Gulf of Mexico.

A defining event of this phase of the war was a series of back channel negotiations that led to Lafitte's gunships being outsourced to the American side, thereby dooming the British to defeat.

Since I am a descendant of W.C.C. Claiborne I've had access to some intriguing bits of anecdotal and documentary evidence about those secret meetings, which ended with Crabtree seeming to have betrayed the British forces---although probably in mitigating circumstances.

Crabtree's decision to form this unholy *cabal of convenience* almost certainly was influenced by a taste he had developed for the dangerously hallucinogenic drink absinthe, a green-colored, wormwood-based libation that was hugely popular in New Orleans at the time. Drinking absinthe was—and still is---called “dancing with the green fairies.”

By the way, the Louisiana governor is one of several famous American ancestors of mine. The others include William Claiborne, the Virginia Colony's first Secretary of State, and “Billy” Claiborne, who was a member of the Clanton Gang of cattle rustlers who made an embarrassingly brief appearance in the *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* in Tombstone, Arizona, before running away when he realized he had forgotten to bring his gun.

At the outset of my research all I had were *rumors* passed down through generations of the Claiborne family of a mysterious missing link who was said to have brought Claiborne, Jackson and Lafitte together.

Enlisting Lafitte's help would not have been an easy task because Claiborne had earlier sent revenue agents to harass Lafitte's headquarters

and seize his weapons. The governor and Laffite had even posted handbills all over New Orleans offering large rewards for each other's capture.

But I submit to you tonight that Joseph Crabtree was the missing link in that crucial mediation-- a role that Americans might regard as heroic but which certainly would have led the Great Polymath to the *gallows* under the British Treason Act of 1814 had he been exposed.

As I contemplated this shocking possibility I remembered an old saying from my newspapering days: "This story's too good to check out."

However, since I was now committed to scholarly research and not just grubbing around for an easy scoop, I knew I had to check it out.

The first question was: how did Joseph Crabtree, an urbane, multi-talented gentleman who had innumerable achievements in the fields of philosophy, art, poetry, science and mathematics--to name just a few--get mixed up with a scoundrel like Lafitte, who, according to his biographer, Jack C. Ramsay Jr., was a "fatal lothario with women and a cold-blooded murderer of men."

None other than Lord Byron is believed by some to have been referring to Lafitte when he penned the last line of his verse "The Corsair" in 1814: "He left a Corsair's name to other times, linked with one virtue and a thousand crimes."

Also, it seemed self-evident that high-profile politicians like William Charles Cole Claiborne and respected generals like Andrew Jackson don't just waltz into the well-guarded redoubts of pirates and chat up people like Jean Lafitte. The strait-laced Virginian planter with Puritan forebears, and the steely-eyed Army general both would have felt out of place among the dark-eyed and saucy Creoles of French-Spanish blood.

Clearly, *somebody* had to have acted as go-between to arrange the secret *tête-à-têtes* that would ultimately lead to Lafitte's decision to help the Americans—a decision to which Lafitte referred in a famous handwritten note to the governor proclaiming, "*I am the stray sheep, wishing to return to the sheepfold.*"

When I learned that Prof. Kathy Burk, in her oration at University College, London, had included a reference to Crabtree being at the Battle of New Orleans, the proverbial light bulb flashed in my memory.

Members of my family, particularly my father, my grandmother and my great aunt—who were all from the Deep South even though I was born and raised in New York—used to boast incessantly about Gov. Claiborne’s many history-making accomplishments.

But whenever mention was made of *rumors* of his association with the pirate Lafitte, an awkward silence would hang over the dinner table and the subject would be quickly changed.

Lafitte was my family’s dirty little secret, just as the feckless Billy Claiborne of O.K. Corral fame was never discussed in my house. We children were not encouraged to rattle those skeletons in the closet.

Indeed, the *Conspiracy of Silence* surrounding Crabtree’s role in the Battle of New Orleans goes far deeper than that. The longest street in New Orleans is Claiborne Avenue. Many public buildings are named after the famous governor. Numerous Louisiana civil servants are Claiborne descendants and could easily have covered up any references to the Claiborne-Jackson-Lafitte cabal.

I remembered an innocuous and almost-forgotten incident that occurred in the late 1970s. I was a foreign correspondent based in Jerusalem, and my great-aunt Leticia was 104 years old and living in a nursing home in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. My older sister Ann flew down from New York to visit her and, if I remember correctly, she asked our great aunt about Jean Lafitte and, specifically, about how Gov. Claiborne would have known how to arrange *sub rosa* meetings with a murderous pirate?

“CRABAPPLE,” my great aunt appeared to say in a barely audible voice.

I believe my sister decided that the old dear was a bit confused, so she didn't press the question. But that puzzling comment from a centenarian who was only a couple of generations removed from Governor Claiborne, stayed with me.

I realized, in retrospect, that my great-aunt must have meant Crab-TREE and not Crab-APPLE. Did she know more about the governor and his pirate friend than she wished to reveal to her grand-nieces and grand-nephews? Unfortunately, she passed away not long after that so it's impossible to say.

Lafitte's motives for seeking a secret deal with Claiborne seemed obvious. He must have decided it would be easier to smuggle contraband goods from England past the porous American trade embargo in effect at the time than it would be circumventing a far more efficient British military blockade.

But why on earth would Crabtree, an Englishman, endanger himself by participating in this plot against his own country?

Fifty-seven years of Joseph Crabtree Orations had already produced nuggets of information suggesting that he was hopelessly infatuated with young America's inspirational march to representative democracy, even if he agreed with those among the founding fathers who distrusted the concept of populism and continued to favour elite rule.

We know from previous orations that Crabtree became so enamored of the radical patriot Thomas Jefferson that when Jefferson was envoy to France he provided him with a very large stash of exquisite claret as a token of friendship.

Also that he briefly fought in the Revolutionary War on the Patriots' side (although an Indian raid on the town of Crab Orchard, Kentucky, destroyed all records of his role in that bitter conflict) and helped the DuPont brothers raise capital for a gunpowder mill on the Brandywine River near Wilmington, Delaware, which was an invaluable asset to the Americans during the War of 1812.

Most astonishing of all was the disclosure in Elder John Salmond's 1994 oration that for nearly a decade Crabtree served as a double for George Washington when the first American President was deemed to be too incapacitated by senility and dental problems to appear in public.

In that role, as Salmond demonstrated, Crabtree actually presided over the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, was inaugurated as President in 1789 and gave Washington's Farewell Address in 1796.

Now, I have no doubt that in spite of all of this and other strange pro-Yankee behavior, Crabtree loved England dearly. But perhaps he simply could not bring himself to support the Redcoats when they were on the verge of crushing the democratic revolution which had so fervently inspired him.

We know that in 1773 Crabtree was recruited by the British Secret Service, and, thanks to UCL Elder Tony Smith's 41st Oration, we know that in 1799 he founded a front for a spy network which he cloaked in the guise of the "Crabtree Institute of America," with its intriguing acronym. Who's to say he could not have become a double agent, primed and ready to betray perfidious Albion?

Or could it solely have been a benign form of betrayal, mitigated by the sizable quantities of absinthe that he is said to have consumed at Alex's Coffee House in Bourbon Street, which later was renamed the Old Absinthe House and which still stands today?

[By the way, you shouldn't confuse the ersatz "absinthe" that you see on your tables today with what Crabtree was quaffing. New Orleans absinthe then was at least 85 per cent alcohol and had sufficient amounts of the hallucinogenic chemical thujone (an element found in cannabis) in its wormwood oil to produce enough "green fairies" to befuddle anyone's mind. Such blends today are strictly illegal, of course.]

Anyway, Alex's Coffee House would not be Crabtree's first flirtation with powerful stimulants. As Elder Greg O'Brien revealed in his 2006 Oration, Crabtree and his cousin George, a fellow flute boy on HMS Endeavour, concocted—and enthusiastically sampled—an ostensibly “non-alcoholic” mixture of rhinoceros horn, extract of hemp, crushed dandelion and urine to give to the tee-totaling and seriously uptight William Bligh when he was appointed New South Wales governor in 1806.

Returning to the hunt, I found a document in the “Official Letterbooks of W.C.C. Claiborne (1801-1816), edited by Dunbar Rowland, director of the Mississippi Dept. of Archives and History, which gave me final, irrefutable proof that Crabtree had, indeed, engineered the back channel talks between Lafitte and Claiborne.

The confirmation came in a letter from Gov. Claiborne to a Paul Hamilton, a U.S. Navy Department civilian administrator in New Orleans, asking him to confirm that Crabtree would get Lafitte into the decisive battle with the British.

To Paul Hamilton

New Orleans Dec.20 1815.

Sir,

I have received disturbing information concerning the expected attack by the advancing forces of Great Britain, Ireland and the islands against the City of New Orleans. If there was ever a just and necessary occasion for employing the type of unorthodox measures that I proposed in my previous letter to you, surely this is it. Please instruct *Wergulu* to complete his contacts on my behalf with the French gentleman. It is the only measure that could preserve the independence of the Nation, make our Government respectable at home or abroad, and, I trust in God, we shall make its miseries recoil most heavily upon the invaders. Confusion to the enemy!

I am, Sir,

Your obdt. Servt. W. C. C. Claiborne

Who, then, is *Wergulu*? Well, as scholars of Anglo-Saxon history would know, *Wergulu* is Olde English for the Crab Tree, or Crab Apple tree, one of the pagan medicinal plants invoked in the “Nine Herbs Charm,” which was recorded in the 10th Century Lacnunga manuscript:

*This is the herb that is called 'Wergulu'.
A seal sent it across the sea,
a vexation to poison, a help to others.
it stands against pain, it dashes against poison.*

Clearly Gov. Claiborne was using what he thought was clever code name for his unofficial envoy, Crabtree, whom he viewed as a powerful antidote to the poisonous British troops that were then marching on New Orleans, to pass along to Lafitte.

Never mind that the governor appears not to have considered British military intelligence capable of cracking this somewhat obvious cipher, or even guessing that Lafitte was the “French gentleman” mentioned. The important thing is that on Wergulu’s signal Lafitte would come to the aid of the vastly outnumbered American regiments.

Now, I’m aware that there are other possible and contradictory, explanations for Crabtree’s astounding behavior before and during the War of 1812.

Professor Burk tells us that quite by chance Crabtree had learned that Thomas Jefferson was a second cousin of his old tutor and nemesis at Queens College, the contemptible Jacob Jefferson, and as a result developed an irrational malevolence toward all people named Jefferson. According to this theory Crabtree, in the uniform of a British light infantryman, even wielded a torch in the infamous destruction of the American capitol in August of 1814.

Distinguished scholars, I am not adverse to such disputation. After all, the engines of journalism are conflict and controversy. Furthermore, after reading scores of Crabtree orations I had developed a tolerance to such inconsistencies, including his apparent ability to be in different parts of the

world at the same time, or even to beget offspring years after undergoing a sex-change operation at the age of 60.

Crabtree was an extraordinary man who did extraordinary things.

Anyway, as we all know, the Great Master more than redeemed himself at the Battle of Trafalgar, the Battle of Waterloo, the Congress of Vienna and other milestones of World history.

As a postscript to these events, allow me to share with you a little known vignette which was recorded by Catholic nuns during the last desperate hours of the Battle of New Orleans, and which is now known in New Orleans as the "Miracle of the Ursuline Nuns."

With the outgunned Americans bracing for the last desperate British onslaught, the nuns of the Convent summoned the faithful to pray before the statue of Our Lady of Prompt Succor. The worshippers cried all night for the Virgin Mary's intervention, and just as Communion was about to be offered, a messenger ran into the chapel and shouted that the British had been defeated!

For years afterward, rumors persisted that a mysterious and well-spoken Englishman had stood with the worshippers for a part of their vigil. Could that stranger have been Crabtree?

We know from military histories that as British soldiers assaulted the American ramparts at the Rodriguez Canal an unidentified subaltern disregarded an order by British Gen. Edward Pakenham, the Duke of Wellington's brother-in-law, to fetch scaling ladders for the assault, thereby dooming the attack to failure. The miscreant was said to have then disappeared from the battleground.

Could Crabtree have been that subaltern? Then, overwhelmed by guilt, did he flee from the fateful battle to the Convent to pray for redemption?

Yes, I know he was not known to favour Papism. But in 1812 you'd be hard-pressed to find a church in New Orleans that wasn't Roman Catholic, so where else could he have gone?

As we ponder the mystery of Joseph Crabtree's alleged sympathies for the revolutionary enemies of England, we wonder if the Great Polymath had been brought to trial for treason against the Crown would there have been sufficient evidence to yield a guilty verdict?

That's the trouble with historical research. There are always more questions than answers.

But I began this oration with Philip Graham's characterization of journalism as the "first rough draft of history" only three months before he took his own life after a long battle with severe depression. I would like to close with the full quotation of what Graham said that day to his foreign correspondents. It reflects a perhaps cynical but nonetheless honest view of the juxtaposition of journalism and history.

Graham said: "So let us today drudge on about our inescapably impossible task of providing every week a first rough draft of history that will never be completed, about a world we can never really understand."

On that uplifting note, I thank you.

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