

Elyse: This episode of History Detectives comes from Texas, and our first investigation starts in the port town of Galveston.

Wes: This slender strip of sand on the Galveston, Texas, gulf coast, one of the vital ports for the Caribbean today, is packed with cruise liners, cargo ships and grain silos. But in 1817, pirates and privateers ruled these rugged seas. And later, Hollywood romanticized their skullduggery. Chief among them was Jean Lafitte, the so-called "Prince of Pirates." A fearless cutthroat in a cutthroat's world, Lafitte was known to take no prisoners. His ruthlessness was legend.

Tukufu: Believe it or not, one woman here in Galveston thinks she has something that links her to Lafitte in this coastal city's rough and tumble past.

Wes: Hi, I'm Wes Cowan.

Tukufu: And I'm Tukufu Zuberi, and we've come to Galveston, Texas, to investigate a mystery of the high seas.

Wes: Moore Memorial Public Library director Susie Monkla keeps the spyglass in Texas City, Texas.

Susie: It's, in recent years, been forgotten. People don't really come in and ask to see the spyglass anymore, and I think that's a little bit of a tragedy because there's so much history involved in this artifact. It reminds me of the rugged pioneers that settled this area.

Wes: Can I take a look at it?

Susie: Sure.

Wes: Wow, what a great object. How did the library come to own this?

Susie: The spyglass originally belonged to James Campbell, who was Texas City's first settler. And it's been passed down from generation to generation and about 20 years ago, one of the descendants gave the spyglass to the library.

Wes: Now, how did James Campbell come into possession of this spyglass?

Susie: Well, Campbell was a sailor and the legend has it that he was a pirate. According to what the family has told us, the spyglass was given to Campbell by the pirate Jean Lafitte.

[Laughter]

Wes: Oh, that's great. Isn't that a great story?

Susie: Yeah.

Wes: Now, what is your question for us?

Susie: Well, my first question is, does the spyglass date back to the 19th century? Was James Campbell

really a pirate along with Jean Lafitte? And is it possible that this spyglass could have been a gift from Lafitte to Campbell?

Wes: Wow, those are some great questions. And they're going to require some research on our part, but we're gonna do this as fast as we can and get back to you with an answer.

Susie: All right. Well, I'm going to trust you to take care of our spyglass because this is Texas City's oldest artifact.

Tukufu: I need to find out what was happening 200 years ago along the coast of Galveston. In the early 1800s, the new world exploded. Young colonies rebelled against old empires, the fledgling United States aggressively expanding. And as maps were drawn and redrawn, trade alliances shifted like the wind. An astute businessman, Jean Lafitte knew how to profit from his times. He's a pirate smuggling in 1807 in violation of the U.S. embargo act, a sanction designed to strangle the British economy. An American hero in the war of 1812, switching sides to fight the British on behalf of the U.S. and by 1817, a mercenary in Galveston attacking the Spanish from his base Campeche. Lafitte and his men were ruthless in their pursuit of profit, engaging in the illegal slave trade and driving the Karankawa Indians from Galveston. I have to learn more about Campeche and how James Campbell fits in. I ask Don Willette, professor of maritime history at Texas A & M in Galveston. What was it like in Campeche back during this period?

Don: Quoting Steve Martin, this was "A wild and crazy place." At its peak, there was about 2,000 pirates here, over a hundred structures, beer joints, gin joints. This was a moneymaking deal. See, these pirates -- at their peak, Campeche earned about \$2 million a year.

Tukufu: Now have you ever heard of James Campbell?

Don: Well, if you're from this neck of the woods, you've heard of James Campbell.

Tukufu: All right, all right! Now, who was he?

Don: He was one of Lafitte's most trusted captains.

Tukufu: So Lafitte and Campbell did know each other. That's great!

Don: He made him an awful -- lots of money. First year out, he captures five Spanish ships, over \$100,000 value. Secondly, and far more importantly, early on, Lafitte gets wind of a possible mutiny here on the island -- okay. -- to overthrow him. Again, with \$2 million a year income, why not?

Tukufu: M-hm, yeah. He discusses it with Campbell and Campbell takes care of the situation. He rubs out the mutineer and they are brothers in blood. Now, have you ever heard of -- anything about Jean Lafitte giving James Campbell a spyglass?

Don: To be honest with you, no, I haven't.

Tukufu: Do you think it's possible?

Don: Hell, yeah! One of your best captains, I'd reward him.

Wes: So Campbell was really one of Lafitte's most trusted men. I wonder about the spyglass. Is it from the same period? For 20 years, spyglass expert Brad Finch has studied the technology of antique telescopes. I know you're an expert on spyglasses and I've brought you one that I want to talk to you about.

Brad: Great.

Wes: Let's go over here.

Brad: Great.

Wes: Brad, big moment of truth for me. Great spyglass. Has an even greater story. This spyglass belonged to a guy named James Campbell, who was a pirate. It was supposedly given to him by Jean Lafitte. What I need to know is, how old is this spyglass?

Brad: Well, the spyglass here, just looking at it right off, is 19th century. It's brass. It's a little dirty and tarnished with age, which it should be. And we can pull it out and we can see that it's a 2-draw telescope in design. You know, now I notice that there is an inscription on the barrel of this scope: "Steele & Son, Liverpool, day or night."

Wes: Now, I assume that that helps us date this.

Brad: This helps us immensely, having a signature on here. "Steele & Son, Liverpool, day or night." These were 19th-century makers, first quarter of the 19th century. And the terminology of day and night is referring to the fact that they could use it in the day or in the evening hours. So this most likely is a first-period-of-the-19th-century spyglass used by a ship captain.

Wes: Wow! So it is possible that this spyglass was owned by Jean Lafitte?

Brad: Very possible. Fits right into that period design wise. Of course, with the signature, it cements it into that first part of the 19th century, right about the time that he was operating.

Tukufu: So the spyglass is from the right period, but did Lafitte really give it to Campbell? I'm going to the Sam Houston Library in Huntsville, Texas. They have a special collection of papers relating to Jean Lafitte. Maybe I'll find something here. And who is this? This is the infamous, the famous Jean Lafitte. And he's carrying a spyglass in his hand. This is very, very interesting. Robert Shatt is the director/archivist at the Sam Houston library.

Robert: This is the journal of Jean Lafitte. And the authenticity is in controversy, but we do know that the signature appears authentic. The ink, paper, and binding is authentic. Even though the authenticity is in dispute, many of the facts are accurate.

Tukufu: I learned that by 1821 Lafitte's privateering activities against the Spanish crown outlasted their usefulness. Spain ceded Florida to the United States and Lafitte was now more hindrance than help. Having met its expansionist goals, the U.S. government targeted Campeche to be shut down. Here we go. "On Sunday, January 7th, 1821, a warship appeared near the port." And here it is: "Captain Campbell left in a dinghy and returned, saying that it was the United States warship the 'Enterprise.'"

And of course this is the ship where the American government tells Jean Lafitte that he has to leave Galveston.

"I never saw Captain James Campbell again after the day when we burned Galveston."

So after Jean Lafitte left Galveston, burned it to the ground, all of his crew ordered away, he never saw James Campbell again. According to this, Lafitte could not have given Campbell the spyglass unless it was made before 1821. But can we rely on the memoirs? I decided to visit the Rosenberg Library in Galveston, where I made a very interesting discovery. This is an interview with James Campbell, Galveston bay, 10th June, 1855. All right! Campbell's interview confirms the memoirs. James Campbell and Jean Lafitte were together around the time Lafitte burned Galveston. We have said that Campbell sailed four days "Before Lafitte's final departure." With the understanding that they would meet again in the future. Right? They never met again. And the reason was the death of Lafitte. So here, around 1820, 1821, Lafitte dies, and that severs the relationship between Campbell and Lafitte. But I still don't have anything, any reference to a spy-glass.

Wes: 1821 is a crucial date in this investigation. If Lafitte did give Campbell the spyglass, it had to have been made before Lafitte left Galveston. I'm sending a researcher to Liverpool in England to check out the manufacturer, Steele & son. That should help us pinpoint the date the spyglass was made. Hey, man, how are you?

Researcher: Yeah, yeah, great.

Wes: Great, uh-huh. Were you able to find out anything?

Researcher: Steele & Son stationers, opticians, mathematical instrument makers. They don't appear in the Liverpool directories until 1828 as Steele & Sons?

Wes: Okay. Hey, listen, thanks a lot. I really appreciate it. That's bad news. I'm just going to confirm it. I asked our guy in Liverpool to fax the information, and here it is in black and white. 1828. Now Lafitte left Galveston in 1821, never to see Campbell again. Just not gonna work.

Tukufu: That settles that. Jean Lafitte could not in 1821 have owned a spyglass made in 1828. But that still begs the question: what exactly was James Campbell doing with a spyglass after Lafitte was gone? Now, this is the claim by James Campbell's wife for his pension. We're hoping that this document will give us some window into James Campbell's life. Okay. This is what we're looking for. That in June, 1837, James Campbell, "After visiting New Orleans, he returned from New Orleans with the sloop 'Creole' with a cargo." Okay, and this is in 1837. We know Campbell had a spyglass after Lafitte's departure, and now we know he had a boat. So what was James Campbell doing in Galveston during this time? I met local historian Dale Olson at the sight of what was once Campeche. What did he do here, after Lafitte?

Dale: Believe it or not, he turned to farming.

Tukufu: Was he a successful farmer?

Dale: Well, he chose a terrible place to farm, for one thing. The soil's not very good. It was prone to inundation by Galveston bay. And he didn't have really that much land.

Tukufu: Did he have a ship?

Dale: Yes, he did.

Tukufu: So what was he doing with a ship?

Dale: So it is possible that he engaged in some smuggling, probably not pirating or privateering.

Tukufu: Now, why would he have continued to smuggle?

Dale: There's no evidence that James Campbell was ever a wealthy man, despite all of the prizes he took from the gulf. But the probability is, he needed to turn to those fields for sustenance, to support himself and his family.

Wes: Susie, this has been just a great story. Tukufu and I have had a lot of fun working on this. We've been up and down the gulf Texas coast. I was on cape cod in Massachusetts. We even had a researcher in England.

Susie: Did you really?

Wes: Yup. And we have some answers to your questions.

Susie: You have an answer.

Wes: Okay. James Campbell's spyglass did not belong to Jean Lafitte.

Susie: Oh. Well, that disappoints me, and I know it's going to disappoint a lot of the local historians from around here.

Wes: We do know that James Campbell was one of Jean Lafitte's most trusted lieutenants. However, they parted company between 1820 and 1821, never to meet again. And the dates 1820, '21 are very important for us because we know that the company that made this spyglass, Steele & Sons, were not in existence until

Susie: There's no way that this could have been Jean Lafitte's spyglass.

Wes: That's correct. But this is an important spyglass. It belonged to James Campbell, who was one of the 1828.

Susie: There's no way that this could have been Jean Lafitte's spyglass.

Wes: That's correct. But this is an important spyglass. It belonged to James Campbell, who was one of the most notorious pirates of that period. And to show our appreciation for your sharing this important story with us, we have a gift for you. And here it is.

Susie: Oh, my goodness, look at this. I think we need to put the spyglass right on there. Now, that is beautiful. Oh, yeah. We didn't have anything that looked this classy to display this spyglass. That is lovely. And it says, "This spyglass belonged to James Campbell, 1786 to 1856, Jean Lafitte's loyal captain and a legendary privateer." Wow, that's neat. Thank you.  
beautiful. Oh, yeah. We didn't have anything that looked this classy to display this spyglass. That is lovely.



Episode 7, 2003: Lafitte's Spyglass  
Texas City, Texas

Wes: It's been our pleasure. Well, it's just been great fun, and thank you for having us down.