Ascension Dads Meet in 1806 to Lay Parish’s School Basis

By CLAIRE PUNKEY

DONALDSONVILLE, La. — The school bell has rung in the start of another year of study recalling that Ascension parish has long been on the educational scene.

As early as 1806, the year Donaldsonville was founded, learning was in the minds of this area's residents. In that year an assembly of fathers of families was called to elect commissioners toward establishment of free schools.

Two years later, the second territorial legislature passed an act that provided for a school in each parish. The House committee on elections noted that the election conducted here was not in compliance with the letter of the law, but was in accord with its spirit.

In 1812, Governor William C. Claiborne appointed William Conway administrator of the county school of Acadia, of which Ascension was part. When Conway died shortly after his January appointment, he was succeeded in April by Walker Gilbert.

By an 1819 legislative act the parish of Ascension was excepted from provisions of the general school law. The school here was permitted to function as in the past with the exception that its three commissioners were to be named by the governor and Senate, and $600 appropriated each year to maintain the school.

In 1822, P. T. Martin, in charge of the local public school, announced that the school would take boarders.

The building would accommodate 15 students and the board was set at $225 each.

Establishment of a secondary school in Donaldsonville was sought in 1826. Three years later, two former faculty members of the College of Louisiana came to Donaldsonville to open the Lafourche Academy. They were D. Morphy and J. A. Fryer.

A description of the public school here in 1831 was given by Aime Bercegeay. He described it as appearing old and situated on the square which the Donaldsonville elementary school occupies today, and enclosed by a fence, the same as now.

The Johnson Female Academy was incorporated in 1838. It was believed to be named for Louisiana Governor Henry Johnson who had settled in Ascension parish. In 1840 the academy received funds from the state legislature.

On New Year's Day, 1843, the Sisters of Charity came here and established a school for young ladies that became known as St. Vincent's Institute, a name that endures to the present time.

By 1871 there were 12 schools in Ascension parish with a faculty of 17 teachers, and an average attendance in each school of between 50 and 75 pupils.

The parish was clamoring for teachers in 1873 when an advertisement noted that two teachers, preferably women, were wanted in the local school at a salary not to exceed $50 a month for the September opening of classes.

Teachers' salaries in 1877 in Ascension were fixed at $30 a month. In 1878 an appropriation of $10 was allotted to each school for repairs and benches. However, teachers were due for a raise and in 1879 their salaries were increased to $35 a month.

More schools came into existence in the following years, and in 1882 salaries of teachers in these new schools were fixed at $20 a month.

In 1885 the Seminary of Learning was completed in Donaldsonville. The salary of the principal was $75 a month.

Financial difficulties beset school officials in the parish and in 1885 it was decided that schools, excepting those of the seventh and eighth wards, would open for a single month only.

It was felt that even a little schooling was better than none.

Each school area had its particular problems. Over in the New River section, floodwaters played havoc with the school term. It has been noted that on Sept. 10, 1892, those schools, closed during floods, were to be re-opened.

Public schools came to the Gonzales area around 1855 when Adlard Gautreaux taught the first class of some 12 children there.

The early days of education in Ascension parish presented many difficulties. However, in the midst of them, individuals who would become leaders in the locality, the parish, the state and nation learned the fundamentals that would lead them on to their destiny.

The school bell again rings the child into the classroom. Who knows what future giant of fame and fortune is learning in the rudiments of his or her calling sitting at the small desk in one of the parish schools?