Bronze Plaque Marks Place of Francis T. Nicholls' Birth

Family Home No Longer in Existence

By CLAIRE PUNKEY
(Times-Picayune Staff Correspondent)
DONALDSONVILLE, La. —
In the shadow of the Ascension Parish courthouse on the Donaldsonville Elementary School grounds a bronze plaque historically marks the birthplace of Francis T. Nicholls.

It was 130 years ago, on Aug. 20, 1834, that Louisiana's future Confederate general, governor and supreme court chief justice was born to Judge Thomas C. Nicholls and Louisa H. Drake Nicholls.

The house of his birth no longer stands and other structures occupy the grounds on which he played as a boy.

However, the street on which he once lived, Attakapas, is now Nicholls Ave., changed by resolution of the town council on Jan. 16, 1888.

That was the year Francis T. Nicholls began his second term as governor, a term which would find him in a successful fight against renewal of the Louisiana Lottery's charter.

It so happened that this future chief executive of his state was born in a gubernatorial election year that saw Edward Douglas White of Bayou Lafourche win that office.

Nicholls was only a few months old when a severe smallpox epidemic hit this locality and raged unchecked for some time. But he was to escape its ravages and go on to distinction in his state and valor on a battlefield in the years ahead.

He returned to Bayou Lafourche and his law practice as the countryside put down its weapons and picked up its plows.

In 1876, he was inaugurated governor of Louisiana, and a large delegation from Bayou Lafourche traveled by train to New Orleans to see the ceremony.

S. B. Packard, a United States Marshall, also claimed the governorship and was inaugurated the same day.

When Federal troops in Louisiana failed to support him and President Grant would not interfere his government began to crumble. With removal of troops from the South by the newly-seated President Hayes, Packard withdrew his claim to the office.

His second term as governor behind him, Francis T. Nicholls became chief justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court.

It was on his plantation in the vicinity of Thibodaux that he died in 1912, less than a year following his retirement from the Court for reasons of health.

Today in Thibodaux on the bank of Bayou Lafouche a monument in the form of a state college stands as a tribute to the greatness of one of Louisiana's finest sons.

OFFICER, LAWYER

Before he would come to grips with the conflict in which he would lose an arm and a leg fighting for the Confederacy Francis T. Nicholls would spend time as an army officer and then as a lawyer on Bayou Lafourche.

He entered West Point in 1851, emerging in 1855 as a second lieutenant of artillery assigned to the Florida Everglades. He was at Fort Yuma on the Colorado River in 1856 when he resigned his commission to return to Louisiana for the study of law.

He began his law practice in 1858 in Ascension Parish, moving later to Assumption Parish for partnerships first with Alphonse Gentile and later his brother Lawrence, Mexican War hero, who would die in the Confederate cause.

In the Spring of 1860, he married Miss Caroline Guion of Lafourche Parish.

When war came he and his brother Lawrence formed a company of Assumption and Ascension Parish volunteers called the Phoenix Co.

Later, with Francis as captain and Lawrence as first lieutenant, it became Company K of the 8th Louisiana Regiment. Francis moved up to a lieutenant-colonelcy and Lawrence became company captain, a rank he held when killed in the battle of Gaines' Mills.

At Winchester in a charge Francis T. Nicholls was shot in the left arm. He was taken prisoner, exchanged in September, 1862, and appointed colonel of the 15th Louisiana, a new regiment.

Within a few days he was named a brigadier general and assigned to the Second Louisiana Brigade in the vicinity of Fredericksburg.

LOSES LEFT FOOT

His brigade helped turn Union forces back near Chancellorsville. It was there, in a nighttime encounter, that a shell killed his horse and accounted for the loss of his left foot.

Active service ended for him, and in August, 1864, a hundred years ago, he received command of the Lynchburg District.

Later that year he went to the Grans-Mississippi Department as superintendent of the conscript bureau, remaining at headquarters in Marshall, Tex., until the war's end.