The town of Duson might today be called McNaughton if a young man from Quebec had not been forced to change his name while running from the British, then doggedly kept a vow made to his estranged family.

Cornelius Duson, as he was known in Louisiana, was the father of legendary Sheriff C.C. (Curley) Duson and of W.W. Duson, who were pioneer developers in southwestern Louisiana. The brothers would be largely responsible for the early beginnings of Rayne, Crowley and Eunice, forming canal companies that would open the prairies of Acadiana and lure settlers here.

Their father was born Cornelius Duson McNaughton in June 1819 at Point Louis, across the St. Lawrence River from Quebec City, the youngest of six sons of William McNaughton and Catherine Lambert.

In 1837, when the French rebelled against the British government of Canada, all of his family except 17-year-old Cornelius remained loyal to the British.

"But," biographer William Henry Perrin writes, "our young hero...had a bosom friend and companion, one S. Lambert, whom he had learned to love from childhood. Through Lambert's influence, he was induced to join the French revolutionists."

Cornelius was called before a family council, and his father and five brothers begged him not to disgrace the family by joining the attempt to overthrow the government. They warned he could be killed in the insurrection, or, if the French lost, hanged for treason afterwards. They held his action would pit brother against brother.

"But Cornelius...had his course mapped out, and his convictions were too strong to be changed," Perrin says. "He (told his family) that if the French cause was lost they would never hear from him 'til the grass grew green over his grave."

The English captured Lambert and seven other rebels and jailed them in Ottawa, but Cornelius escaped capture. According to the Perrin account, he then went to Ottawa, met the jailer, and attempted to "get him drunk and steal the jail keys." But the jailer stayed sober.

"After they had returned from a dram shop to the jail, (the jailer) suspected evil designs in his new acquaintance and ordered him away," Perrin recounts. But "Duson had thrown his cap on a heaped wood in the jail...and, when ordered away, ostensibly reaching for his cap, picked up a stick, knocked the jailer down, secured the keys..." and helped his companions to make their escape.

The rebels decided to flee to the United States and made their way to Kingston, a settlement on the Canadian side of Lake Ontario, where Duson's cousin ran a ferry. The cousin, however, refused to ferry them across to the U.S. side. So Duson and his companions stole the boat and ferried themselves.

British soldiers chased them, killing some of them and shooting Cornelius through the thigh. But he eventually got to Boston, where he learned that the British were offering a reward for his capture. He dropped McNaughton from his name and continued fleeing southward.

He made his way to the vicinity of Lake Arthur on the Memphremagog River and befriended John Webb, a former sea captain from Essex, England. Duson and Webb's 15-year-old daughter, Sarah Ann, and their home on May 6, 1843. He became a tanner and saddler, as was his father-in-law, and moved to St. Martin Parish, where he died in 1857.

"He often related the story of his youthful experiences to his family," Perrin tells us, "and how, among other things, his brother Michael broke an engagement to (Lambert's) sister because of the loyalty of the Duson family to the French cause. But of the mystery of the name he bore, he breathed not a word."

He told his wife, however, that he wished that after his death his sons should re-establish family ties, and he told his doctor to warn him of impending death—apparently so that he could then reveal his true family name. But Cornelius died suddenly, away from his family, and with him died the secret.

Nonetheless his two sons visited Canada in 1884 to try to find their family. First they visited Lambert's sister, the one-time sweetheart of their uncle. But she said she'd never heard the name Duson. Then they found Lambert himself, but he, too, was sure he'd never heard the Duson name.

Finally, when C.C. Duson began to relate the tales his father had told him, Perrin says, "the feeble old man (Lambert) burst into tears, and with an effort rose to his feet and said, 'No, no, I see it now. You are Con's children. Your name is not Duson, but McNaughton. Let me led you to your people.'"
Duson
Continued from page B-1

Lombert told the brothers that the McNaughton family had long before secured a pardon for Cornelius, and had sent men to Boston and placed advertisements elsewhere in search of him, but all in vain.

It was not until later that they also learned that their father had had a friend in St. Martin Parish who visited Quebec regularly, and who had secretly kept Cornelius informed about his family. They found that Cornelius had known about the pardon and that he knew that his family was searching for him.

“But,” as Perrin tells it, “with terrible determination he kept his vow, and his people never did hear of him ’til ‘green grew the grass over his grave.’”