I

HISTORY

De Soto Parish was named in honor of Hernando de Soto, the Spanish explorer who discovered the Mississippi River in 1541. De Soto founded in Florida on May 31, 1559, at Santa Elena, with 15 vessels, 1,000 men, and 256 captives. The expedition explored the southern part of the continent, including the Tampa Bay region. It was shortly after this important discovery that the Spanish leader died of a fever and was buried in the waters of the great river he found. The message was taken to the Indians from his homeland of his death.

His successor, Alvarado, was chosen from De Soto's body by Quapaw, the king of the Indian confederacy, who boldly told the Spaniards as they put out to sea, "Tell your countrymen that you have lost an ally by Quapaw's side.

As it was, only 50 of the Spaniards escaped and finally reached the other Spanish explorers in Mexico.

Bienville, the famous "Father of Louisiana," who served as governor of Louisiana in the days of French rule, came to Natchitoches in 1700. After a short stay he pushed up the river in the famous village, Natchitoches de Stan de St. Denis was later to establish a village.

St. Denis is another person of historical importance to northeastern Louisiana, for he was the founder of the city and parish of Natchitoches, from which De Soto was born. A relative of Bienville, St. Denis founded the first French settlement in northeastern Louisiana, Natchitoches in August 1738. Born in Canada, the explorer was educated in France, but came to Louisiana to seek his fortune. As a commandant at Natchitoches, he exercised a sovereignty over the Spanish and the Indians in that section of the state for many years.

In 1760, Pedro Delot, or Dellette, of Rayne Parish made a settlement on the margin of the Red River, which he called De Soto, and gave account of the expedition, noting that it consisted of small crews, who were to be paid in cash or goods, and Florida for the next few years. The treaty was signed by Jesus Soto, representing the United States, and Tchickache, chief of the Cherokee Nation, High Adickobin, Muttass, Tchehahime, Asuh, Stockton, Seabot, and other chiefs of the warriors of the Caddo.

De Soto Parish was created eight years later, from the parishes of Caddo and Natchitoches, by Act 86 of 1843. The boundaries between De Soto and Caddo were fixed by Act 152 of 1865.

The first meeting of parish officials was held in a store at Natchez, a settlement that was at the time of the purchase of the land. John W. Wagner was elected first president of the De Soto parish, with James Walch serving as judge and Lewis D. Bousey, sheriff. Dr. W. E. Long was the first postmaster at Natchez, with a post office established in 1856.

The post office, established in 1856, was first located at St. Martinville and then moved to a post office on the St. Martinville and later to the parish of Natchez. Thousands of miles of cotton were brought in from the lower Sabine River valley and marketed near.

Even today, the town, called "Gateway to Louisiana," is located on the Rte. 122, Orleans Railroad, the Shreveport and Houston, Texas, highway, and the Sabine River.

It has a large "trading" population in both Louisiana and Texas.

The town of Logansport was founded in 1830 by a Dr. Logan, who began a ferry across the Sabine River, in addition to his medical practice on both sides of the river.

The citizens of De Soto and neighboring parishes were suffering from the effects of the war
On April 8 and 9, 1864, the battles of Mansfield and Pleasant Hill\(^*\) brought a decisive end to the Federal Red River campaign. Although General Banks and his forces were facing the smaller army of General Taylor this battle marked the turning point of Banks' campaign, for his forces were now routed and driven back as far as Alexandria. Following these two engagements, there was little fighting in Louisiana.

The two armies were drawn up for battle until early in the afternoon, with little action then General Taylor ordered the Vol Verde Texas battery, stationed on high ground, to open fire on the Federal forces, in position on Hony Cut Hill. The Union army failed to attack as the southern general wished, so at 2:30 A.M. he decided to force battle by ordering a general attack.

The battle which ensued was one of the fiercest of the entire Louisiana campaign, climaxing the charge and capture of the Federal battery composed of nine pieces, on Hony Cut Hill. The ferocity of the fighting is illustrated by the fact that every field officer of the Confederate forces was killed, as well as by the terrible losses of the northern army. Every man in one Illinois regiment was either killed or wounded, or captured. Among the famous southern officers killed at Mansfield were Col. Leopold Armand and Brig. Gen. Alfred Mouton.

Under cover of darkness, General Banks ordered his army to retreat southwest, and his men were overtaken and defeated again the next day at Pleasant Hill.

There were numerous casualties on both sides and the wounded were moved to private homes, churches, and schools for treatment. The dreadful affair resulted in the Mansfield cemetery. Mansfield Female College is said to have been turned into a hospital for the wounded after the battles.

The campus of the Pierce and Payne College has been donated to the state by the Louisiana Conference of the Methodist Church, to be converted into a historical park commemorating the battle fought between Old Pleasant Hill and the college campus. The site of the old town is marked by a brick cistern, standing now beside the Jefferson Highway. H. L. Kennedy and T. W. Hardee also have purchased land and given it to the state for a portion of the memorial park.

The story of the war brought disappointment and despair to the parish. Col. Winchester Hall, in his book, The Story of the 6th Louisiana Infantry, gives an account of the battlefield of the 26th and 27th regiments. Written at a camp near Mansfield on May 19, 1865, it follows:

"The 26th Louisiana gathered around the flag they had hoisted over their camp with infinite credit. While the band played a dirge, it was torn in pieces, and a piece given to each member as a memento. Not a word was spoken, but hardly an eye was dimmed with a tear.

"The 26th Louisiana gathered around its colors. Again a dirge was played by the band. The company was taken down and torn in pieces. Silently, with heavy hearts and eyes that spoke more than words each member took a piece. I broke the staff and burned it.

"After the disbanding, the 26th took up its line of march homeward and maintained its organization until the members one by one dropped out of ranks as they reached their respective dwellings. I remained with them until we came to a place where our routes were in different directions. I stood in the road and shook hands with each as they filed by me, saying, 'I wish you well. May you meet better days.’ Such was the dramatic end of war in De Soto."

The reconstruction period at the end of the war was full of violence and hardships for all, but no records of severe racial strife in the parish are noted. It should be said, however, that the first circle of the White League, later the Knights of the White Camellia was organized in the parish in 1871.

The Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northwest Louisiana, published in 1890, describes one event which took place in the same year. It follows:

"A party of citizens arranged to rob the president of the police jury (John Wagoner) who held in his possession a good deal of script and money. Going to his house about midnight, they engaged the Negroes in a quarrel, with the object of bringing out John Wagoner."

The ruse was successful, and taking the old president to a secluded spot some distance away, they returned to rob the house. Meanwhile, the Negroes had given the alarm, and M. Surrey, a Frenchman who was a guest of Wagoner’s, determined not only to defend the house but also to rescue his host. On his way through the darkness he saw the robbers approach, so he opened fire and killed one, wounding two others. He saved Wagoner and the Negroes.

De Soto had only begun to recover from the rigors of Reconstruction with the completion of the Texas-Pacific Railroad through the parish to Shreveport in 1884. Up until this time the parish had depended entirely upon water transportation for freight and passengers. After the track was laid various warehouses and storage points along the lakes, rivers, and bayous, then was taken to its final destination by ox wagon.

However, in 1876, parish citizens voted 203 to 159 to aid the Texas and Pacific line, and in 1880, a group of an even greater majority, 900 to 478, for aid to the Kansas City road. The T-P line passed two miles outside of Mansfield, thus necessitating a new line from the town to the main line at South Mansfield. The towns of Oxford and Pilcani developed along the railroad below Mansfield, and Grantham and Stonewall, and Gloster above.

Investigation shows that the town of Stonewall was renamed. Originally called Bee Gum, it received its present name from the famous Civil War hero, Stonewall Jackson. A new industry was developed in the town of Oxford, Mr. J. T. Marden, Mrs. J. A. Marden, and Mrs. W. B. Marden bought a registered Jersey cow. As she increased her herd, she began selling milk,
DeSoto Parish Resources and Facilities

DeSoto Academy, and Mansfield Female Academy. Keatchie Female College was established in 1855, while Pleasant Hill Academy, located in the southern portion of De Soto, was set up by Act 295 of 1850. The Mansfield school was incorporated by Act 88 of 1855, and continued as an outstanding women's college until around 1895.

The first newspaper founded in De Soto was the Logansport Advertiser, issued before 1819. The Mansfield Advertiser appeared a short time later, while the News was issued at Logansport in 1839. In 1890, the Logansport News Boy began and has continued ever since, more recently under the title, Interstate Progress. The Mansfield Enterprise has been published continuously since 1911. John Hewitt was the editor for many years, followed by Fenn A. Leaming, the present editor.

The Methodist Episcopal Church was established in Mansfield in 1844, and the Mansfield Baptist in June, 1851. The Christ Memorial Episcopal Church was organized before the Civil War and the church building erected in 1872. Keatchie Baptist, known as Gideon Church, was established in 1832, the Pleasant Hill Baptist in 1854, and the Baptist before the outbreak of the war. Another religious landmark is the Old Rock Chapel at Carmel, built about 1891. Between 1845 and 1850, the first Catholic Church was built on the site where the Carmel church now stands.

In the northern section of the parish, around Glotter and Stonewall, where the elavow-owners, planters settled in the 1840's and 1850's, were built some of De Soto's magnificent homes. One of the finest, "Welcome Hall," was built in 1857 by Col. C. A. Edwards for his nephew. Unfortunately it was destroyed by fire in 1935.

"Lands End," begun in 1851, was not completed until 1858. Its owner was Col. Henry Marshall, a member of the Confederate Congress. "Buena Vista" was built in 1860 and "Rosemont" in 1846. The latter was the birthplace of the White Legion, previously mentioned in connection with Reconstruction in De Soto.

As for geographical boundaries, the parish is bounded on the north by Caddo and Bossier Parishes; on the east by Red River and Natchitoches Parishes; on the south by Sabino Parish, and on the west by the Sabine River, which separates it from Texas. It is watered on its northern boundary by Cypress Bayou; by Wallace Lake and Bayou Pierre on the east; and by the Sabine River and its tributary streams along the western boundary.

Despite the extensive cutting of the timber stands in the parish, it still contains some timber, chiefly oak, pine, poplar, maple, hickory, beech, mulberry, some walnut and a few softwood varieties.

The parish contains ideal conditions for farming, poultry and livestock. The soil produces all crops which may be grown in northwestern Louisiana, such as cotton, corn, oats, feed and forage crops, truck crops, sweet and Irish potatoes, peaches, pears, plums, strawberries and blackberries.

De Soto is in the 11th Judicial District, composed also of Sabine and Vernon Parishes; the 25th Senatorial District, composed of De Soto and Caddo Parishes, with a representation of two state senators. It is in the fourth congressional district, the third public service commission district, and the fourth board of education district.

De Soto has eight wards, with 10 police jury members, and 10 school board members. The school board meets the first Wednesday of January, April, July, and October, while the police jury meets the first Wednesday of each month. There are justice of the peace courts for every ward.

Mansfield, the parish seat, is 40 miles south of Shreveport on the Kansas City Southern and Texas-Pan Railroad, as well as on U. S. Highways 171 and 54 and State Highway 145, with secondary or far-market roads extending through the district. It serves as a trade center for the rich agricultural district by which it is surrounded.

Note: Historical material gathered from Louisiana by Myer Potier; "Cavalier," a Historical Spot in De Soto Parish, by J. A. H. Blanchard, a History of the Waterfall of the Red River, by James Vose Harris; Biographical and Statistical Memoirs of Northcote Louisiana; and material gathered by the History Committee, De Soto Parish Development Board.