Donaldsonville Has Various Claims to Greatness, Fame

Town Was Once Capital
City of Louisiana

By CLAIRE PUNKEY
(Times Bayou Lafayette Bureau) DONALDSONVILLE, La. —

Although Donaldsonville in its
generations of existence has re-
mained a small community, it
has in its numerous decades had various claims to greatness and
to fame.

One of these, of course, was
its brief period of glory in hav-
ing the honor of being the ca-
pital city of the state of Louisi-
ana.

Another, that may be almost
lost in obscurity, is its selec-
tion in 1831 as the location for
the United States Surveyor-
General's office, a site from
which all Louisiana work of its
kind was headquartered. Here
maps and the like received ap-
proval or rejection.

During the Civil War this
office moved to New Orleans,
but returned later to its Don-
aldsonville location where it
remained until 1909 when it was
closed, and its plats and notes
were turned over to the State
Land Office.

Land records have long been
an important part of Louisi-
ana's history and growth.
The earliest settlers received
these benefits, and when the
displaced Acadians came to this
area they too received a share.

By the time of the Louisi-
ana Purchase in 1803 all lands
on both sides of the Mississippi
River up to Baton Rouge had
been granted, most of them 40
arapens deep, a few going be-
ond the lake.

The Legislative Council in
1804 authorized Louisiana Gov.
W.C.C. Claiborne to appoint
judges and justices of the peace
and the county judge ex-officio
became custodian of land rec-
ords, as well as sheriff. Here,
in 1805, Gaspard DuBuys be-
came the first county sheriff.

In 1821 John Wilson of New
York was notified by U.S.
Surveyor Thomas J. Freeman
of his appointment as principal
deputy-surveyor in this area.
He was to get $500 a year and 25
cents a mile for examining and
recording surveys made by his
deputies.

He was alerted to acquire
knowledge of the French lan-
guage to be able to converse
with people there. At that time
the Ascension tax total was
$3,641. The land value was
$635,500, and included in taxable
property were two four-wheel
carriages, 18 two wheel car-
rriages and two billiard tables.

Wilson received the books,
papers and the like of his office
from Edward White, in whose
charge they had been left by his
predecessor Gabriel Winter.
After a report noted similar tax
figures in the ensuing year,
with the two-wheel carriages
down to 17, Wilson had some
critical remarks about Winter.

He started out by criticizing
the manner in which the books
and papers were preserved.

He had found the records in
a house belonging to Freeman's
estate and occupied by an over-
seer. "They were crowded into
a couple of drawers in a cup-
board, and appeared as if they
had not been disturbed in more
than a twelvemonth, all the
maps and plans having been
more or less injured by insects,
and many of them rendered to-
tally useless," he reported to
the secretary of the Treasury.

"A great number of the
field notes of surveys made in
the district were missing," he
reported.

In 1827 it was reported that
both sides of the river from
New Orleans to Donaldsonville
were occupied by the wealthiest
planters of the state who were
engaged in sugar cane culture.

A report of the General
Land Office, Washington, D.C.,
to the secretary of the treasury
in 1829, noted that both sides
of Bayou Lafourche "for about 50
miles from the Mississippi have
by means of levees or embank-
ments been reclaimed at the
expense of individuals."

Reclamation of swamp
lands in Ascension Parish occu-
pi ed the legislature as the pre-
Civil War years came to an end.
Among projects were New
River and Bayou McCall.

An item of local history
shows that in 1854, the U.S. Sur-
veyor-General's Office, located
in Donaldsonville, was in charge
of W. J. McCulloch, surveyor-
general, and Thomas H. Weight-
man, chief clerk.

Today, the records under
their care are in charge of Mrs.
Ellen Bryan Moore, register of
state land, and the deputy regis-
ter, assisting her, is Ory G. Po-
rey.