McKinley St. Designated in Donaldsonville

By CLAIRE PUNEKY

DONALDSONVILLE, La.—Although statehood came to Louisiana in 1812, a period of 89 years elapsed before a president of the United States made an official visit to the historic land that had played a role, while under the Spanish flag, in America’s freedom fight.

William McKinley, the nation’s 25th President, came to Louisiana at the start of May, 1901. Four months later an assassin’s bullet would close his life in Buffalo, N.Y., on Sept. 14.

That eventful visit here of 63 years ago is particularly recalled because on Jan. 29, the 123rd anniversary of the birth of William McKinley in 1843 at Niles, Ohio, will be observed.

Other presidents had seen Louisiana but not in their official role as chief executive. Zachary Taylor, for instance, had lived in Louisiana before becoming president. Citing another instance, U. S. Grant as a young Army officer was stationed in the Pelican State and later as a general returned to fight the Confederates.

The welcome that this first president to so honor Louisiana received was tremendous, but memory must have been short for no lasting memorial came out of his visit. No parish was named in his honor. No growing community was given his name.

Uprover from the Crescent City where the President was so lavishly entertained, a small city of 4,105 population was among those who recalled this man in whose term of office the Spanish-American War was fought.

STREET NAMED

This city, Donaldsonville, named one of its streets McKinley in honor of the President’s visit. Officials of Donaldsonville and of its parent, Ascension Parish, had traveled to New Orleans for the festivities.

The president was received and welcomed to New Orleans by Mayor Paul Capdeville, a year older than McKinley and who, like him, had fought in the War Between the States.

Capdeville’s service for the Confederacy took him to Port Hudson and capture there on July 9, 1863. McKinley saw battle at Lexington, Winchester, Cedar Creek and elsewhere in the cause of the Union.

Now they were united and the mayor was the President’s escort, accompanied by a large delegation of distinguished citizens and the Louisiana National Guard Cavalry, as the party moved to the Cabildo where Louisiana Gov. William Wright Heard waited with his staff to receive the state’s first official presidential visit.

Gov. Heard was 10 years younger than the President, and the Civil War had come to his home state when he was eight years old. Born in 1853, in Union Parish, he had grown up in a rural atmosphere, entering politics in his native parish in 1876, at the age of 23.

The mayor who was escorting the President was a native of New Orleans who had studied law after the war, receiving his degree from Tulane University in 1868.

Gov. Francis T. Nicholls had named him to the state school board in 1877, and later he was appointed to the Levee Board of Orleans Parish.

PLANNED DRAINAGE

Elected mayor in 1899, he planned drainage, sewerage and water systems for his city and broke the ground for New Orleans’ first drainage and sewerage system. Honors were heaped upon him by the French government which gave him the Cross of the Legion of Honor, by the king of Norway and Sweden who presented him with the rare Cross of Commander of the Order of Saint Olaf, by the Cross of Honor from the United Daughters of the Confederacy, by a Doctor of Laws degree from St. Louis University.

The governor who received the President was, like McKinley, of Irish descent. He had served as clerk of court in Union Parish, had been in the state Legislature as a Representative and as a Senator, and had been for eight years State Auditor of Public Accounts. He had been elected governor by an overwhelming vote.

At that particular moment in history Christian Kline was the mayor of Donaldsonville. Francis T. Nicholls who had served his state as governor and who was a native of Donaldsonville was on the Louisiana Supreme Court bench.

S. H. St. Martin was the sheriff of Ascension Parish. Its assessor was Joseph St. Amand and James S. Barman was clerk of court. State representatives from the parish were O. A. Bullion and Henry C. Braud.

Paul M. Lambremont from St. James Parish was state senator for the district.

District judge was Paul Leche; district attorney, Gustavus A. Gondron, coroner, Dr. E. Kittredge Sims, all of Donaldsonville.

When William McKinley, twice elected President over William Jennings Bryan, was fatally wounded at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, Louisiana mourned, and Donaldsonville in her small way memorialized him.