Problems Hit Donaldsonville Through Many Generations

Post Office, Streets Among Early Headaches

By CLAIRE PUNKEY

DONALDSONVILLE, La. — Modern cities and their environs are beset with problems, among them transportation, beautification, finance, communications, street and road repair and construction, community services. But none of these things are really new. Donaldsonville and Ascension Parish, for instance, have had their share of them through many generations.

When William Donaldson in 1806 laid out this city in a fashion that would do justice to a present day subdivision, its neatly outlined streets gave an appearance of a place without problems. He named his streets for the counties of the Territory of Orleans.

In time, residents decided other names would be better, and today only three of the 12 counties are remembered by street names here. They are Lafourche, Iberville and Opelousas. Even the name he gave to the town, his own, created a problem when it became the first Post Office site in Ascension Parish established by the American Government in 1808. Although the town was originally Donaldsonville, the post office was designated as Donaldstowm, and a year later it was changed to La Fourche because it was considered a more appropriate name for the village at the head of the LaFourche valley.

In 1813 when the town was incorporated as Donaldsonville the Post Office remained LaFourche until 1822 when it became Donaldsonville.

Mail, on a daily schedule, appeared to have a tardiness about it in the 1870s, as illustrated in an 1871 news account that reported that mail transported by the Steamer Katie was “often behind schedule.”

In 1872 a news account said daily mail did not always arrive daily, for “The mail steam- er W. S. Pike, which was due from New Orleans last night did not arrive. She will probably be up tonight.”

Finances in the parish appeared strained in 1855 when it was decided schools would be opened only one month “in order to have some schooling throughout the parish.”

Things got a bit mixed up over a ferry franchise in 1870 when Raphael Mousse purchased a franchise to operate a ferry on Bayou Lafourche here for $2,000, on Feb. 12. The city council on March 1 reported that state Reps. Milton Morris and Max Schonberg were to be granted a gratuitous franchise for ferries on both the bayou and the Mississippi River. This came about by legislative Act 16 approved March 16.

A court battle ensued and Schonberg was victorious in his claim.

The coming of the railroad brought its own problems with it in 1871. One of these was the condition of the street leading to it. A local editor wrote that steps should be taken “to make a passable thoroughfare of Cabahonosse st. We’d rather stick a nail in our foot than walk to the railroad after a rain.”

A plank sidewalk was the result and citizens then were able to reach the depot without being mired in mud.

Then came an attack upon the name of the street, an Indian name which translated into English means “sleeping place of ducks.” It was called a beautiful thoroughfare which needed a more sensible name than it possessed. In 1873 it became Railroad avenue.

Several years ago there was a movement afoot to change the name of the street back to the original Cabahonosse, but it failed.

Another Indian street name bit the dust in June, 1888, when Attakapas became Nicholls avenue, after native son Francis T. Nicholls, Louisiana governor, supreme court justice and Confederate general, whose natal home had fronted the street.

Fire-fighting had its problems back in 1846 when every cart owner licensed to carry water was compelled under heavy penalty to rush to every fire, and every man had to keep a leather bucket handy and report without delay when it was sent up.

Beautification was a major local item back in 1846 when an ordinance was passed requiring every lot owner “to plant trees in front of his property.”

By 1886, the city council was offering owners of lots in the city 25 cents for each tree planted, and Mayor Edward Nicholls Pugh was conducting tree planting in Louisiana Square and Crescent Place.

Mayor Walter Lemann had an extensive tree-planting program. So did Mayor Sidney A. Marchand Sr., who, in a two-month period in early 1930 planted more than 1,500 oaks, camphores, elsms and maples.

Then along came two tremendous hurricanes; Hilda and Betsy, and practically denuded Donaldsonville of her foliage.