The Louisiana parish that never was

BY CLARE D'ARTOIS LEEPER
Special to Magazine

In 1886 Representative J.C. Lyons of St. Landry introduced a bill for the creation and organization of the parish of Nicholls.

The effect of the bill would be to reduce the distances many St. Landrians had to travel in order to record legal transactions. Creating a new parish would provide another courthouse, a great benefit in an era of primitive travel conditions.

The Nicholls in whose honor the new parish was to be named was Francis Tilton Redding Nicholls (1834-1912). Nicholls was born at Donaldsonville Aug. 20, 1834, the youngest child of Thomas Clarke and Louisa H. Drake Nicholls. He is a descendent of John Nicholls of Cornwall, England, who was a soldier in the War of 1812, a member of the Louisiana legislature, judge of the district court and was appointed senior judge of the court of appeals in 1843.

Francis T. Nicholls was educated at Jefferson Academy, New Orleans until appointed a cadet to West Point, where he graduated in 1855. He served in the Seminole Wars in Florida. In 1856 he resigned his commission to study law. He began the practice of law at Natchezville in 1858. When the Civil War began he raised an infantry company. He lost his left arm in Stonewall Jackson's campaign and later lost his left foot. The story is told that when Nicholls was campaigning on Hayou Lafourche an old Confederate veteran in like condition told Nicholls, "General, all what's left of me is going to vote for all what's left of you."

Nicholls' first term as governor marked the end of Reconstruction. The election was disputed; his Radical Republican opponents throwing out many of the ballots cast for Nicholls. U.S. President Hayes agreed to recognize Nicholls as Governor if he would cast his electoral votes for Hayes. Nicholls agreed and served his first term. In 1888 he was elected to a second term as governor, and later served a Chief Justice of the Louisiana Supreme Court. He died on Jan. 4, 1912, in Thibodaux.

When this legislation to create Nicholls Parish was proposed Nicholls had completed one term as governor and was serving as a member of the Board of Visitors of West Point. The legislation to create the new parish passed as Act #39 with one change. For unspecified reasons a new name for the parish had been selected: Acadia.

The new legislation for Acadia Parish was passed and signed by Governor McEnery. On Oct. 6, 1886, the election was held to decide if St. Landry would be divided. The vote was 2,516 for and 1,521 against, and so the parish of Acadia was created by a vote of the people.

With a new parish created the next order of business would be the selection of a parish seat. In the election in March 1887, three places competed to become the parish seat. Crowley won with 606 votes, followed by Hayne with 560 votes and Prairie Hayes with 519.

Sources: Davis' Louisiana, A Guide to the Pelican State; Fertur's Encyclopedic Louisiana; the Acadia Parish Library site: http://www.acadia.lib.la.us; the Secretary of State's site: http://www.sec.state.la.us

The Advocate - Baton Rouge
Sunday, January 23, 2005
Page: 24 Columns: 1-5