

MY JOURNEY TO DESOTO PARISH, LOUISIANA

by Rev. Bob Uzzel

On Monday March 11, I traveled Highway 84 from Fairfield, Freestone County, Texas to Mansfield, DeSoto Parish, Louisiana. According to the book *Images of America: DeSoto Parish* by Dr. Emilia Gay Griffith Means (with whom I have talked by telephone and exchanged a number of e-mails) and Liz Chrysler, the State of Louisiana carved out DeSoto Parish from portions of Natchitoches and Caddo Parishes through Act 88 of the 16th Legislature of Louisiana in 1843. The parish was named for Marcel DeSoto, who brought the first settlers to the area; while the parish seat was named for English Lord Chief Justice Mansfield. Means and Chrysler also reported that “Oftentimes spurred by letters from family and friends that celebrated the fertile soil and salubrious climate of northern Louisiana, South Carolina slaveholders transplanted their way of life to northern DeSoto Parish.” Among these South Carolina slaveholders were Molsie Eliza Durham, the widow of Robert Winfield Durham; and three of her sons, Capt. Osman L. Durham, Dr. Charlton Hightower Durham, and Lt. John Franklin Durham. They came from Fairfield County, South Carolina (where I conducted research in August 2012) to DeSoto Parish, Louisiana and brought their slaves with them. Many of the descendants of these slaves settled near Fairfield, Texas after the Civil War. The Durham family of Avalon, Ellis County, Texas are among the later descendants and are distant cousins to my wife Debra, who is a native of Fairfield.

From the early 1850s until 1930, DeSoto Parish was the home of Mansfield Female College, which was reportedly the oldest female college west of the Mississippi

River. In April 1864, at the time of the battles of Mansfield and Pleasant Hill—where Rebel victories stopped the Yankees from invading Texas—the school's buildings served as a military hospital. The Val Verde Cannon that was used at the Battle of Mansfield found a permanent place in front of the Freestone County Courthouse in Fairfield. Many Freestone County men fought at Mansfield. After the school closed in 1930 as a victim of the Great Depression, the property was purchased by the Riemer Calhoun Family. In 2002, this family's heirs donated the building and grounds to the State of Louisiana for use as a museum. On March 11, I was given a tour of the Mansfield Female College Museum by Director Raymond Powell. I did research at the museum, the DeSoto Parish Library, and the DeSoto Parish Courthouse.

While in Louisiana, I talked by phone with Shreveport resident Thomas Whittington Durham and was saddened to learn of the deaths of his three brothers—James Michael Durham in 2003, Donald Smith Durham in 2006, and Robert Scott Durham in 2013. These four brothers are great-great-grandsons of Lt. John Franklin Durham, one of the slaveholders mentioned above. I have had a number of telephone conversations with each and appreciate their sharing with me the fruits of their genealogical research. When I first talked with Don in 1983, he expressed the belief that his ancestors were, indeed, the owners of my wife's ancestors. He once talked by telephone with Bascom Durham, another of Debra's distant cousins who lives in Poughkeepsie, New York. In 1983, Don was employed at the Pentagon. Thus, I thought about him when I heard about the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the Pentagon. By then, he was retired and living in Shawnee, Kansas. Bascom finished his

tour of duty at the Pentagon on September 30, 2000—less than a year before the attacks. He later was involved in the cleanup at Ground Zero. I was amazed to find two Durhams—one white and one black—who had so much in common. It is sad that they never met in person.

There are two black-owned funeral homes in Mansfield. I talked with both and neither has records of burying any Durham. A black woman named Fannie Durham was listed in Mansfield in the 1940 U. S. Census—the most recent available to the public. From all indications, there have been no black Durhams in DeSoto Parish in decades.

Plans are currently being made for events to mark the Sesquicentennial of the Battles of Mansfield and Pleasant Hill in April 2014. I hope that the Val Verde Cannon will be used in the 2014 re-enactment, as it was during the Centennial re-enactment in April 1964. I am determined to complete my book *The Durhams of Fairfield: An African American Genealogy* and find a publisher this year. I hope that my book will be published and copies available for sale at the April 2014 commemorations.