



### The Role of Slavery in Plantation Life Cane River Creole National Historical Park

**With an emphasis on scholarship and telling stories from many points of view, Cane River Creole NHP addresses the role of slavery in plantation life head on.**

This is the story of civic engagement at Cane River Creole National Historical Park. In 1994, Congress passed legislation creating both the park and the Cane River National Heritage Area. The legislation authorized the park to “serve as the focus of interpretive and education programs on the history of the Cane River area and to assist in the preservation of certain historic sites along the river,” to preserve Oakland Plantation and the outbuildings of Magnolia Plantation, and to use a culturally sensitive approach in the partnerships needed for addressing the preservation and education needs of the Cane River area. The legislation also called for the National Park Service to coordinate a comprehensive research program on the complex history of the Cane River region.

For Cane River we were fortunate to have considerable interdisciplinary background research on history, ethnography, architecture, and archeology in formulating the vision for the park. That, combined with the public involvement and the strong community commitment, gave the direction the park should take. Although both the Oakland and Magnolia Plantation units had historic structures and a very significant cultural landscape, changes to them over time and lack of information on their exact configuration in earlier periods resulted in only one appropriate action: Both properties were to look much as they did circa 1960 when the last of the tenant farmers and sharecroppers — most of whom were descended from former slaves—left the two plantations. That was the time when mechanization replaced mules and hands, and when the large cotton picker shed (large enough to hold a machine the size of a combine) replaced the long, low tractor shed. It was the end of an era, and an appropriate end date that offered tremendous opportunities for interpretation, for we were not limited by a set moment in time. We had continuum. Most visitors to southern plantations have little interest in anything other than the “Big House,” and so much of that is something that we as a nation have brought upon ourselves.

The beauty of Oakland and Magnolia Plantations, and a large aspect of their significance, is the number of outbuildings that remain. Quarters occupied by enslaved people and then tenant farmers and sharecroppers, a blacksmith shop, a gin barn and a mule barn, a carpenter’s shop, plantation stores, cisterns, and remnant landscapes are all manifestations of the lives of people whose families lived and worked the plantations for 200 years. Sixty-two historic structures at the park’s two units not only allow but also encourage or even force visitors to understand that a plantation was more than a Big House. At Oakland Plantation the design for our visitor parking, for a number of reasons, is in a field at the back of the property. Visitors will park there, enter through an entrance pavilion, and then walk to the historic portion of the unit from “back of the Big House.” In our interpretive programs we tell the story Solomon Williams, the enslaved blacksmith from Bermuda (later Oakland) Plantation who took outside contracts during his period of enslavement and who stayed at Oakland following the Civil War. When his descendents came looking for him they told us that they would have found him sooner but all family records indicated that he came from Bermuda, and they thought it meant the island in the Atlantic instead of this small plantation community of Louisiana. We also discuss the Prud’homme family, who held the plantation for more than 200 years and who remain deeply committed to the property’s preservation. We have similar approaches at Magnolia Plantation that assist us with more inclusive approaches to history and interpretation.

It is the responsibility of NPS to discuss slavery and Reconstruction. When two plantations included among their property lists 175 and 275 enslaved people, respectively, it would be ludicrous to think that our interpretive programs would not discuss this issue. In an area just up the road and across the river, it is our responsibility to discuss the Colfax massacre that changed the way civil rights were administered in the United States. We also make a point of referring to "enslaved people" rather than "slaves," thus putting the emphasis on the concept of the enslaved as people rather than property.

Explaining the complexities of race and culture in that area of northwestern Louisiana is not an easy task. It involves obtaining a grasp of French and Spanish colonialism and their legal systems. It involves comprehending the ways that those cultures adapted to the New World. It includes understanding how earlier cultures rationalized slavery and the oppression of people of color. But it also includes bringing those discussions out into the sunshine. And we have found that we have to explain these complexities to Park Service professionals from a variety of disciplines, to travel writers for newspapers and magazines, to visitors who come to the park and the heritage area, and to ourselves on the park staff. The process is an iterative one of constant refinement as the results of new research come to light. Through the use of interdisciplinary research, some done locally and some completed by outsiders, the park has aimed to contribute to that body of knowledge of all of the resources of Cane River, and in doing so has tried to keep in the forefront a dialogue of social conscience. One cannot tell the history of two cotton plantations without discussing enslaved labor.

And, one cannot understand Cane River without having broad discussions on historical and cultural perspectives.