

Cane River Creole

National Park Service
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National Historical Park
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Agricultural Changes

The Land and its People

When Cane River Creole National Historical Park was established, eight primary interpretive themes were created to help guide the interpretive direction of the park. One of these themes reads, "Agriculture is an integral part of the lives of the people who have lived on Cane River." Not only was agriculture integral to their lives, but for most of the residents along Cane River, agriculture was the driving force behind their daily existence.

Over the last two centuries, the occupations that helped define the identities of the Cane River population have been rooted in agrarianism, and have included; planter, overseer, driver, tenant farmer and sharecropper. Other members of the community may have been blacksmiths, carpenters, cooks, and laundresses, but even these folks were part of, and helped support, the large farms and plantations along Cane River.

To live and work on a farm is to be at the mercy of several factors beyond one's control. The farms along Cane River, and the people associated with them, have seen their lives turned upside down by Mother Nature, the boll weevil, world markets, mechanization, and even civil war. Many farms succumbed to the challenges presented by these obstacles, but others were able to endure. Cane River Creole National Historical Park's Oakland and Magnolia plantations are two examples of farms that were able to sustain themselves much longer than others. This document highlights a few examples of how these farms overcame the challenges that ruined many others.

Early Years

When Jean Pierre Emmanuel Prud'homme founded Oakland plantation in 1785, it was not with the intent of growing cotton. Rather, Prud'homme grew tobacco and indigo, both of which were important cash crops in colonial Louisiana.

both tobacco and indigo due to pests and environmental factors. The Prud'hommes of Oakland successfully made the transition to cotton as their cash crop and reaped the financial rewards accordingly.

By mechanically cleaning the crop, Eli Whitney's cotton gin of 1793 dramatically increased the profitability of cotton as a cash crop. Coincidentally with the invention of the cotton gin was a decline in the cultivation of

Within a generation, cotton was referred to as "King Cotton" and its production drove the economy of the Cane River area. By the time of the Civil War (1861), prosperous cotton plantations such as Oakland and Magnolia lined the banks of Cane River.

Reconstruction

The time period immediately after the Civil War was possibly the most important transition period for the plantations along Cane River. Many of these farms had to start from scratch and all of them had to make the change from enslaved labor to free labor. Jacque Alphonse Prud'homme I, the owner of Oakland, was successfully able to make that transition.

In 1867, two years after the end of the war Jacque Alphonse was preparing to have his work force sign a one-year contract. Many of the former slaves-turned-tenant-farmers refused to sign on for another year, unless Jacque Alphonse gave them Saturdays off. "I will not agree to that," was his initial response written in a journal.

After consulting other family members, Jacque Alphonse agreed to let his hands work a half day on Saturday. This compromise was suitable to both parties and allowed the farm to carry on.

We can't be sure why Alphonse changed his mind; perhaps he realized that those workers

were no longer bound to his farm, and if they did not like conditions there, they could look for work elsewhere. Regardless of how he came to his decision, the fact that he and the tenant farmers were able to reach a compromise allowed cotton production at Oakland to continue.

Depression

The Great Depression during the 1930s was a difficult time for all Americans, maybe more so for cotton farmers. By 1932, the price of cotton had dropped below the cost of production. Plantation owners and their workforce had to look for alternative ways to support themselves and their families.

The Prud'hommes of Oakland continued to grow cotton during the depression, but they also began devoting more time to the raising of cattle and other livestock including sheep and goats.

They began to rely more on the income brought in from the plantation store, where they were able to profit from the increasing use of Cane River as a destination for recreational fishermen.

The Prud'hommes moved buildings that were no longer in use to the north end of their property and converted them into fishing cabins. They also provided boat rentals, and sold bait. These other business ventures proved profitable enough to allow the family to make it through the depression with their farm intact.

Mother Nature

Perhaps the most unpredictable obstacles faced by farmers have been put forth by Mother Nature. Flooding, drought, tornados, and the boll weevil are just a few examples of the conditions endured by the Cane River agricultural community.

The boll weevil is an insect that feeds on cotton buds and flowers. An infestation of this insect can cause the downfall of a cotton plantation. During the 1920s, when the national economy was thriving, the boll weevil was causing havoc on Cane River Plantations.

Matthew Hertzog was the owner of Magnolia during this trying time. Hertzog would see his production drop along with prices, which in turn caused many of the tenants and sharecroppers to seek better jobs in the north. Then, in 1939, a tornado ripped through Magnolia, damaging many of the farm buildings.

Even though presented with weevils, the Depression and a natural disaster—events that individually would have devastated many other plantations—Hertzog and his workforce managed to persevere until cotton prices increased after World War II.

Mechanization

As the twentieth century progressed, many of the sharecroppers and tenants were being "tractored out," their jobs were now being done by machines. This led to a mass migration of former tenant farmers and sharecroppers to the factories in the north. A few these folks like Felix Helaire of Oakland were able keep up with technology; he purchased an Avery Queen Cultivator in 1929 for \$62.00. But for many, mechanization meant the end of an old way of life.

Plantation owners had to keep up with technology or else lose their family farms to large corporations. In 1929, the Prud'hommes purchased a Dixie Corn and Cotton Planter for \$23.99, and an Avery Queen Cultivator for

\$51.00. In 1951 Alphonse II purchased the families' first tractor, and just four years later, day labor had replaced sharecropping.

Matthew Hertzog II of Magnolia was able to hang on as well. In 1937, he was interviewed for an article in *Progress Magazine*. At the time the article was written tractors, trucks and electricity were being introduced at Magnolia, and Hertzog had this to say about the current situation:

"We're not making the money the old folks used to make, but we're making a little and we're still here. We raise the same crops in a quicker, better manner and the land is as rich now as it was then."