

# Cane River Creole

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Historical Park  
Louisiana

## The Natchitoches



A Caddo dwelling  
(Image from Louisiana  
State Museum Collection)

The present-day City of Natchitoches was named for the Natchitoches Indians, a tribe of the Caddo Federation. The meaning of the word “Natchitoches” was once disputed. Some contend it was derived from the native word “nashitosh” which means “chinquapin eaters” (a type of chestnut). An early Spanish explorer claimed “Natchitoches” derived from a native word “nacicit” meaning “a place where the soil is the color of red ochre.” Today “Natchitoches” is generally translated as the “Place of the Paw Paw” or the “Paw Paw People” by scholars and the Caddo Nation alike. Regardless of the meaning, over the years, there have been numerous variations in the spelling and pronunciation of “Natchitoches.”

The Natchitoches were the southernmost Caddoan peoples. The Caddo homeland comprised the Red River Valley of east Texas, northern Louisiana, southern Arkansas and eastern Oklahoma. The Natchitoches’ nearest relatives were the Kadohadacho and Hasinai. The Spanish established a presidio and settled among the Adai, another Caddoan tribe, west of Cane River. The Natchitoches were farmers and lived in a series of hamlets along what the French called “Le Riviere Aux Cannes” or Cane River, referring to river cane brakes that once covered the islands comprising Natchitoches. Each hamlet had its own temple and cornfields. Caddo dwellings were conical, thatch-roofed structures, constructed of wattle and daub. Their settlement area stretched from the vicinity of southern Cane River to the modern-day City of Natchitoches.

### European Contact



St. Denis and the Natchitoches  
Indians, 1714. (Mural in  
Louisiana State Exhibit  
Museum, Shreveport)

While there is some speculation that the Natchitoches were first encountered by the Spanish explorer Mescoso in the 1540s, the first documented European contact was by the French explorer Henri de Tonti in 1690. This was followed by Bienville’s expedition of 1700. At that time, Bienville estimated the population of the Natchitoches to be 400–450 warriors.

Permanent European settlement on Natchitoches land first occurred in 1714, when the French explorer Louis Juchereau de St. Denis traveled up the Red River and arrived in the area to establish a French outpost. This outpost was to serve as a counter to the Spanish presence in east Texas. According to Louis Raphael Nardini, Sr., in his book *My Historic Natchitoches, Louisiana and Its Environment*:

St. Denis’ expedition had 10,000 livres of trade goods consisting of bolts of cloth, beads, spirituous liquors, small iron pots, kettles, knives, hatchets, needles and thread, fish hooks, loin cloths, ribbons, plain and silk stockings, gun powder and shot.

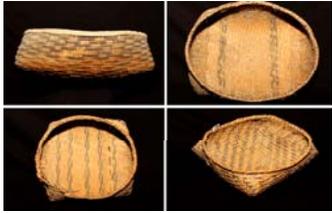
After establishing the outpost known as Fort St. Jean Baptiste, St. Denis used his influence with the Caddo tribes to enhance French control of

the territory, trading and befriending the Natchitoches people. He acquired horses from them to use on an expedition further westward. In his travels, he was guided by a Native American woman named Angelica who spoke fluent Spanish and served as his translator.

In 1731, St. Denis’ friendly relationship with the Natchitoches paid off, when a combined force of French, Spanish and Natchitoches defeated an invading force of Natchez Indians. This was the only decisive French victory of the Natchez War.

Contact with the Europeans changed the Natchitoches forever and led directly to their decline. Like many other tribes, their life of subsistence farming gradually gave way to a dependence on European trade goods. The Natchitoches soon found themselves at the hub of a trade network spreading to the north and west. European diseases decimated the population and by the early 1800s, the total population of the Natchitoches was around 150.

## The Bermuda Connection



American Indian Baskets constructed of River Cane (Oakland Plantation Collection CARI-35)

Both the French and Spanish governments made large land grants downstream from the fort on what was originally land belonging to the Natchitoches. Despite the loss of their lands, relationship between the Natchitoches and both the French and Spanish remained friendly.

Among the early land grants along the Cane River was that of the Prud'homme family. Starting with a Spanish land grant in 1785, Jean Pierre Emmanuel Prud'homme established a plantation originally known as Bermuda, now known as Oakland. Emmanuel Prud'homme was the grandson of Jean Pierre Philippe' Prud'homme, a French soldier stationed at Fort St. Jean Baptiste.

By 1803, Emmanuel Prud'homme had begun to cultivate cotton. By some accounts, he was the first successful cotton farmer west of the Mississippi River.

According to family history, by the early 1800s Emmanuel was suffering from a painful affliction that may have been arthritis. He was told by friendly Natchitoches Indians of a place of "healing waters" and the natives offered to guide him there.

Emmanuel and his native guides made a long journey to the hot mineral springs located at Hot Springs, Arkansas. Enjoying the hot mineral waters granted relief to his malady, and Emmanuel built a small wooden cabin in the area. He reportedly made repeated journeys to the area over the next few years to enjoy the "healing waters."

## The Magnolia Connection

1720 Map Excerpt  
Depicting Tribes of the  
Red & Mississippi River  
Valleys (Image courtesy  
of "Archives Nationales  
d'Outre-Mer" of France)



Located near the natural abundance of the Kisatchie Hills, the residents of Magnolia Plantation had many opportunities to trade with the Natchitoches and other tribes. Trade goods and manufactured items would be exchanged for meat, skins, native crafts and other natural products. This trade lasted from the Louisiana Colonial Era into the end of the Plantation Era.

According to oral history, among the items traded by the Natchitoches and other tribes to the LeComte/Hertzog family were split river cane and native-made white oak baskets, both of which were used on the cotton plantation.

## The Fate of the Natchitoches



American Indian Ceramic Sherd Recovered at Oakland Plantation (CARI-148 Collection)

European diseases, colonialism, and subsequent "Removal" policies of the US Government caused the numbers of the Natchitoches to diminish. By 1800, most of their lands had been ceded to the Spanish and French Creoles or were otherwise lost.

Some Natchitoches moved away from their ancestral home and went to live with their Kadohadacho and Hasinai relatives. Others remained and intermarried with the Louisiana Creole residents, eventually becoming assimilated.

In 1835 the remaining Natchitoches gathered together with other Louisiana Caddo people and sold their land to the United States government. They then moved out of Louisiana on to Texas and eventually to present-day Oklahoma.

By 1843 the Natchitoches were living near the Kadohadacho on the Trinity River, located in east Texas.

In the 1960s, modern Caddo people living in Oklahoma could still sing Natchitoches songs, some of which were even recorded. The Caddo continue to recall Natchitoches words as well as the meaning of the tribal name. As a distinct people, however, the Natchitoches had vanished, absorbed by the Kadohadacho and Hasinai people and assimilated into the Creole population. Yet the legacy of the region's native heritage remains in the form of place names like Natchitoches, Louisiana.