

75 years

THE HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

## AN ISLAND IN TIME

by Brian Joyner

**IN THE NEVER-ENDING DRIVE TOWARD CULTURAL UBIQUITY—WITH A COFFEE franchise on every corner and a numbing sameness to our built environment—places such as Natchitoches, Louisiana are rare. A transportation hub of what until the mid-19th century was the American Southwest, it is a reminder of what traveling around the nation once meant: distinctive cuisine, traditions, accents, and landscapes freighted with their own cultural history. In the modern context, Natchitoches is, in short, a funky little place. Today it anchors the north end of the 35-mile Cane River National Heritage Area, created by Congress in 1994 to preserve a broad stretch of the Deep South that has changed little over the centuries. It is rich with traditions that carry a visitor all the way back to the French colonial era. Its wealth of historic sites—including seven national historic landmarks and a national park—tells the story of the early European presence, slavery, plantation life, the cotton economy, and the changes wrought by 20th century mechanization. Its importance, as expressed in the literature published by the national heritage area, is in its “unique contribution to the American experience.”**

***Right: Plantation outbuilding in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana. Known as “Piece-Sur-Piece” from a French construction technique, these structures are now rare in the region. “This is a remarkable survivor,” says Paul Dolinsky, who managed the HABS documentation reported in this article and is now chief of the National Park Service Historic American Landscapes Survey. Piece-sur-Piece buildings were purpose-built structures disassembled and moved as need arose.***



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The national heritage area concept is relatively recent, a way to gather historic and cultural sites into a loose confederation to promote preservation and heritage tourism. Typically, the areas are characterized by a geographical feature that defines the warp of history in the place, with the National Park Service lending its imprimatur and providing assistance.

About the time the area was designated, the Historic American Buildings Survey of the National Park Service arrived to document the rare and irreplaceable architecture. Through a combination of factors—one of them that nature had separated the Cane River from the Red River, effectively ending the life of Natchitoches as a port—much of the landscape has remained unaltered. And yet it is completely adapted to the needs of its occupants. The project was an opportunity to document perhaps the most compelling cultural landscape in the survey's 75-year history. All this interest stirred a certain amount of discomfort along the river, whose little communities had been moving along at their own pace, relatively unbothered by the rest of the world.

### *Splendid Isolation*

The drive from Shreveport to Natchitoches takes you south along the Red River on Interstate 49, then due east on Route 6. It's 70 miles at most. That's the drive—the trip is a whole other matter. This is not the stereotypical South. The alluvial soil makes for lush, dense vegetation. Hardwood trees flourish. Armadillos wander across the interstate. Waterfowl swoop down into swamps and bogs. Trees stand out of the water on their roots, giving a primordial feel. Wetlands once divided much of the area, creating individual islands. While much has filled in, the geographical separation still exists.

In many ways, Natchitoches Parish very much *is* an island. A French-Catholic enclave amidst Anglo-Protestant northern Louisiana, it is more connected to the French heritage that dominates the southeastern portions of the state. Established in 1714 by Louis Juchereau de St. Denis as a military fort, it is the oldest permanent settlement in the Louisiana Purchase territory. Because of its access to the Mississippi and its tributaries, Natchitoches became a hub for trade with the indigenous peoples of the region (the Caddo), as well as the Spanish colonies in Texas. The town hugs the Cane River, which made it a natural port.

*Left: The porch, or "galerie," a characteristic detail in the Cane River region. Suited to the climate of the South, it served as a distinct social space, a transition between indoors and out. Right: Front Street in downtown Natchitoches, the commercial center from the Antebellum era to the turn of the century. Fronting the Cane River, it is part of the national historic landmark district that anchors the heritage area.*

As part of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, which ended the Seven Years' War (called the French and Indian War in the United States), France ceded Louisiana to Spain. It was during this period that the importation of African slaves transformed the region from a frontier trade economy to a plantation system. The state briefly returned to French hands in 1801, until the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 turned the whole of French colonial America over to the United States.



## THE PROJECT WAS AN OPPORTUNITY TO DOCUMENT PERHAPS THE MOST COMPELLING CULTURAL LANDSCAPE IN THE SURVEY'S

By the time of the Louisiana Purchase, a distinct group of African, French, and Spanish peoples known as Creoles had become prevalent in Natchitoches and throughout the region. The term “Creole” has different meanings depending on where you are, but the term (as well as the Spanish *criollo*) inferred people of full French or Spanish blood born in the New World. In Natchitoches, it referred to those who claimed French ancestry and cultural affiliation. This meant whites and people of color both called themselves Creole.

Marie Thérèse Coincoin—emancipated in 1778 by French merchant Jean Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer, with whom she had 10 children—is considered the matriarch of the Cane River Creoles. A successful businesswoman, she owned a sizable amount of property. Her son, Augustin Metoyer, established the home church for the Cane River Creoles of color, St. Augustine Catholic Church, which remains a cultural centerpiece for the community today. Another son, Louis Metoyer, owned Melrose Plantation. Cotton was king in

the plantation economy. The soil was ideal for growing, the area filled with people looking to capitalize on relatively uninhabited lands throughout the parish. Farms large and small, with associated housing and machinery, dotted the landscape. From 1804 until the end of the Civil War, the cotton economy grew, bringing wealth and prestige to Natchitoches. Rail service

replaced the river as the prime source of transport, allowing the city to continue as a commercial hub through the first part of the 20th century. But the railroad also led locals—particularly formerly enslaved African Americans and their descendants—out of the fields south to Alexandria and New Orleans for opportunities in factories and other industries. The advent of the automobile did not slow the exodus, and the eventual demise of rail travel took the vitality out of Natchitoches. With the decline of cotton, it stagnated.

### Vibrant Heritage

Despite the changes in its socioeconomic landscape, Natchitoches is not without its charms. The Natchitoches National Historic Landmark District is filled with two-story homes with multiple porches, or galleries, as they are known here. The Ducournau Building, a former hotel in downtown renovated for office and retail space, still displays its wrought iron railings on the second-level galerie, now used as seating for a restaurant looking out onto the river. Down the brick-lined

*Above: Carnahan's Store in Cloutierville. Until it burned down in 2004, Carnahan's was a rare surviving example of a country store in the Cane River area. Says Dolinsky, "The HABS documentation is the only permanent archive of that building's story." Right: Structure housing a defunct cotton gin, remnant of what was once the most prominent industry.*

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street is Kaffie-Frederick General Mercantile, the oldest general store in the state. There is a leisurely, southern feel. Most stores close by 5 and everyone knows their neighbors. It could be the setting for a story of manners and friendship. *Steel Magnolias* was filmed here, based on the screenplay by Robert Harling, Jr., a native and owner of Oaklawn, an 1830 French Creole plantation house in the National Register of Historic Places.

West of the historic district, the gentility gives way to a landscape of smaller single-level dwellings and industrial remnants. The neighborhood is primarily African American, spreading southwest to where Northwestern State University abuts College Avenue and the regional

to the river. In a contemporary GIS map drawn by the National Park Service from original plat books, one sees the arpents, as the plots are called, coming off of the river like long, thin spokes. The *allées* of trees that divide the properties, still maintained, are a signature part of the landscape. A quick stop at Cherokee Plantation allows for a look at the big house. With its well-preserved exterior, it is an excellent example of a French Louisiana plantation house with Creole-influenced construction techniques. Photographs do not do it justice. It is magnificent. Privately owned, it is open for tours by appointment.

The “big houses”—places like Oaklawn and Cherokee, where the plantation owners lived and raised their families—are the main



freight rail tracks. The Texas and Pacific Railway Depot, a building with Italianate design and Spanish Revival touches, awaits revitalization. Built in 1927, it was a place to work for the adults and a place to play for children, when trains were not passing through. A cultural center is slated to occupy the building, which will include interpretation of the African American story in Natchitoches.

Due east are the farms and plantations that provided the wealth. During its heyday, Natchitoches Parish was also known for quarter horses; today, corn, wheat, and soybeans are the staples. On the ride down river, one is continually struck by the dense lushness. The idea of clearing land must have been daunting.

### A Complicated History

As Laura Gates, superintendent of Cane River Creole National Historical Park, drives along the river, some of the recently harvested winter wheat fields are being burned to ready the soil for the next crop. There are clouds of smoke and the air smells of burnt wood and dried straw. Gates points out that the plots were divided so each had access



attractions for most visitors who venture down river, the area lined with such remnants of the old South. Cane River Creole National Historical Park, created at the same time as the heritage area, is comprised of two plantations, Oakland and Magnolia, 12 miles down river from each other. Associated buildings, barns, storage, kitchens, and quarters dot the rest of the landscape.

The quarters—initially for enslaved people and later used by sharecroppers and tenant farmers—are usually the places whose stories go unspoken. Gates and her interpretive staff use them to tell Cane River’s convoluted story of slavery, which does not follow the traditional narrative to which the public has grown accustomed. Slavery, the plantation system, and Louisiana’s *mélange* of cultures engendered a very complicated social environment. People of color owned

*Left: A screw press for cotton at the complex pictured on the previous spread. Above left: Southwest view of the complex. Above right: Cotton brushes inside.*

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other people of color. The famous Marie Thérèse Coincoin held as many as 16 slaves.

The region was truly a world unto itself. At the former Melrose Plantation, one of the most-visited attractions, is a distinct structure known as Africa House. Built around 1800, it was likely used for storage. With an oversized hipped roof and large overhangs, some think it resembles a structure one might find in an African village. Others say it looks like something from rural France of the early 19th century. On the walls inside are the murals of self-taught artist Clementine Hunter, a long-time resident, whose brightly colored renditions of life here have won international acclaim, depicting a world where people depended as much on each other as they did on the river.

### *Capturing a Mythical South*

The creation of the national heritage area and park brought the HABS recording teams to Natchitoches, but it wasn't the first time. During the Depression, when HABS was formed as a New Deal proj-



ect to employ out-of-work architects and draftsmen to document the nation's built heritage, this region was on the list. One architect's infatuation with the Lemeé House at 310 Jefferson Street led to the creation of the Association for the Preservation of Historic Natchitoches. The organization, recognizing that its town's heritage was in jeopardy, purchased the property. The APHN, which became a prominent force, now owns Melrose Plantation and the Kate Chopin House, home of the renowned author down the road in Cloutierville. While indirectly spurring the preservation ethos prevalent here today, HABS then was viewed with the skepticism reserved for those outside of the community. Some 60 years later, the survey returned. Over five years, HABS made repeated visits to draw, measure, photograph, and research. Its sister groups, the Historic

*Above: Melrose Plantation, built in 1833. Raised off the ground in the Louisiana French Colonial style, the big house was the center of one of Cane River's largest agricultural operations. Right: Oakland Plantation, built in 1821.*



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American Engineering Record and the Historic American Landscapes Survey, were part of the effort, as was the Cultural Resources Geographic Information Systems Unit of the National Park Service, which brought the latest technology to bear.

Creole architecture is a mix of types from European, African, and Native American traditions. Raised floors on posts, high-pitched roofs, and the use of bousillage, a mud-like material used for walls, are some of its characteristics. Natchitoches and New Orleans have some of the best examples, but the form can be found throughout what was once New France. This is what the HABS teams came to capture, along with remnants of the cotton industry (documented by HAER) and the distinctive system of arpents and *allées* (which HALS recorded as elements of the cultural landscape).

Nancy Morgan, former director of the national heritage area, was key in negotiating the balance between citizen apprehension and the goals of the documentation, says Paul Dolinsky, then-head of HABS and now chief of HALS. The teams produced drawings, large format photographs, and written histories of the most significant pieces of the region’s built environment, including comprehensive documentation of the Magnolia Cotton Gin Mill and the Badin-Roque House, one of only four remaining *poteaux en terre* (post in ground) structures left in the nation. A host of other places were recorded too, and the GIS unit produced a comprehensive, multi-layered map. In many ways, the work is one of the jewels in the HABS collection. The people got a rich document that tells their story, while the survey gained a relationship with a region. An exhibit of the photographs taken—

shown at the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training, a National Park Service program housed at Northwestern State University—engendered good will among the citizens, who saw in them their individual and collective stories. The diverse residents—country farmers, Creoles, people simply interested in preservation—found confluence in recognizing how special the place is. Thomas Whitehead, a retired professor of journalism at Northwestern State, said that the exhibit amounted to a social bonding. Morgan said that “it’s much easier to tell the story if you have the artifacts to connect to.”

The effort had a contagious effect. Now individual communities want to document their pasts and tell their stories. Katherine Johnson, assistant director of the national heritage area and a native of Natchitoches, sees in the growth of preservation the relinquishing of a mindset. Johnson’s role as head of a grants program puts her in touch with multiple factions, who have come to realize that the park, the heritage area, and the recurring visits of the people from the National Park Service give them a chance to get their stories told.

Dolinsky thinks that the signature *Piece-Sur-Piece* structure serves as a metaphor. Made of timbers and held together with mortise and tenon construction—with a dowel at the corners to pin them in place—the building could be disassembled and moved as need arose, either in its original function or for some other purpose entirely. It was ingenious yet simple, practical yet suggestive of a deep rural wisdom, changeable yet unchanging.



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*Left: Artifacts of the mechanized age in the agricultural landscape. Above left: French influence in practical form: the once-pervasive Piece-Sur-Piece building. Above right: St. Augustine Catholic Church, a centerpiece of Creole culture, built in 1916. Its congregation has been a vital part of the Isle Breville community for two centuries.*

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