

History of the Natchitoches Tribe of Louisiana

Compiled by Chief Fred D. Simon

Who are the Natchitoches American Indians?

Today, the term "Caddo" is used by the U.S. government to refer to a group of people considered a single tribe. However, when Europeans first encountered them, the Caddo comprised approximately 25 distinct tribes organized into three or more confederated groups, each maintaining its own identity. The Hasinai, often called tejas, now called Texas, was the largest of these, they occupied northeast Texas. The Kadohadacho, where the name Caddo comes from, occupied the big bend of the Red River, now in the state of Arkansas. The Natchitoches lived in Natchitoches Parish, the Parish and town is named after them (1) *(Found in "Source Material on the History and Ethnology of the Caddo Indians, by J. R. Swanton", pg. 3 & 7).*

According to the Handbook of Texas Online; before the middle of the nineteenth century the term "Caddo" denoted only one of at least twenty-five distinct but closely affiliated groups centered around the Red River in Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma. The term derives from the French abbreviation of "Kadohadacho", a word meaning "real chief" or "real Caddo" in the Kadohadacho dialect. European chroniclers referred to the Caddo groups as the Hasinai, Kadohadacho, and Natchitoches confederacies. They developed long-distance trade networks in prehistoric times. Important items of trade were bison hides, salt, bois d'arc bows, and other finished items. They traded for turquoise from New Mexico, copper from the Great Lakes, and marine shell from the Gulf Coast (www.tshaonline.org/handbook.)

The label "Caddo" lacks specific meaning, as each group had its own political existence. Both the Spanish and French recognized this complexity. Their approach to Indian affairs has left us much better information than that of the Americans. The American policy increasingly obscured Tribal groups. leaving us with more accurate historical records than those produced by the Americans. For instance, in the Caddo Treaty of 1835, the U.S. government referred to all these tribes collectively as "Caddo," none of their Chiefs were identified by Tribe; (found on Found on Louisiana State website; www.crt.la.us/dataprojects/archaeology)

In a report from Indian Agent Dr. John Sibley included in President Thomas Jefferson's message to Congress on February 19, 1806, (Page 57, [found in message from the President of the United States communicating discoveries made in exploring the Missouri, Red River,](#)

[and Washita, by Captains Lewis and Clark, Doctor Sibley, and Mr. Dunbar; with a statistical account of the countries adjacent](#)), the Natchitoches are referred to as a nation living near a lake known to the French as Lac de Moiré (Black Lake) also called Lac Noir. It is well known and documented that Native Americans known as the “Natchitoches” hunted, fished, and farmed in the vicinity of the contemporary parish. Together with their larger federation of Caddoan Native Americans, including the Doustioni, Ouachita, and Yatasi, the Natchitoches and their allies controlled vast areas of territory in what is now northwest Central-Louisiana. (*Found in; Historic American Buildings Survey, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, HABS No. LA- 1319*).

John R. Swanton interviewed a Native American named Caddo Jake in 1912, who stated that the Natchitoches and Yatasi languages were the same, distinct from Caddo.

How large was the Natchitoches Nation?

Recent anthropological estimates suggest that before Columbus arrived, about 90 million people inhabited the Western Hemisphere, with 12.5 million in what is now the continental U.S. Over the first 130 years following Columbus’s arrival, 95% of these populations perished, primarily due to European diseases, as well as slavery and wars instigated by Europeans (Swanton, pp16-25). This is corroborated by research from the Cherokee scholar Russ Thornton in his book [American Indian Holocaust and Survival](#), and supported as well by the [Smithsonian](#).

In 1700, Bienville’s expedition reported around 200 men from the Natchitoches and 50 from the Doustioni. Assuming four individuals per family, this would suggest a population of about 1,000; extrapolating that this represents only 5% of the original population could indicate approximately 20,000 individuals in these two villages pre-Columbus (Swanton, pp. 1-7)

Dr. Sibley’s 1805 report to Thomas Jefferson indicates that the Natchitoches once numbered 600 men, suggesting a total tribe size of around 48,000 before European contact.

By 1853 the United States Census lists the Natchitoches Tribe separate from the Caddo (Report on Indians Taxed and Not Taxed). Anthropologist, John R. Swanton interviewed an American Indian named Caddo Jake who stated the Natchitoches language was different from the Caddo, and in fact was the same as the Yatasi language (Swanton, Bureau of American Ethnology Caddo History and Ethnology, pp 14-16) . Thus what is referred to as the Caddo Nation today by the U.S. Government was a group of 4 Indian Nations in an alliance working together for protection and prosperity, similar to NATO. The fourth was the Bidai Nation. Each of these Nations was a combination of many smaller Tribes

First Contact with the French

In 1686 La Salle made contact with the Hasinai Nation when he was searching for the Mississippi River, a year later he tried again to find the Mississippi River, after they reached some of the Hasinai Nation, he was murdered by some of his men. His men continued on to the northeast, lead by Sieur Cavelier, they met the Kadohadacho, and then continued north to New France, now Canada (Swanton pp 38-44)

In 1689, Henri de Tonti went to find the murderers and bring them back to New France. He went down the Mississippi till he came to the Taensa Nation, he then went west to the Natchitoches, this was the first contact with the French, February 17, 1690. He then went on to the Hasinai Nation. (Swanton, pg. 38 to 44)

The next encounter was in 1700 when Le Moyne d'Iberville sent his brother Bienville and Louis Juchereau de St. Denis into the Caddo country. They traveled up the Mississippi River to the Taensa towns on Lake St. Joseph, then west to the Ouachita village at the Ouachita River, then they continued west to the Doustioni on the Red River, called Colorado by the Spanish, They then went north to the Kadohadacho before returning to Iberville's vessels on the Mississippi River. St. Denis was then sent back, with 25 men to watch for Spaniards, where he met the Natchitoches and then the Kadohadacho, they told him they had not seen a Spaniard in more than two years. St. Denis then returned to the French fort near the mouth of the Mississippi River. He retired in 1705 and began to trade with various tribes, including the Natchitoches and the Hasinai. (Swanton pp 50 & 51) In 1711 Friar Francois Hidalgo, of Spain, sent a letter to Lamothe Cadillac, Governor of Louisiana, asking for help in founding a mission among the Hasinai. Governor Cadillac saw this as an opportunity to push trade by the French into territory claimed by Spain, he selected St. Denis to carry this project through. (Swanton, p. 52) St. Denis left on August 23, 1714 with 24 Canadians and 30 men of the Natchitoches Nation that had been living with the Acolapissa tribe on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. When they arrived at the old village of the Natchitoches, they built two buildings to store some of the merchandise that he had brought and left 10 men to guard them, this was the start of Fort Jean Baptiste. The Natchitoches men stayed and rebuilt their village on the island now called the Island of Brevelle. St. Denis went on to the Hasinai Villages and made a profitable trade. He then returned to Governor Cadillac to report on his mission. (Swanton p. 53)

On St. Denis's next trading mission, he went to the Natchitoches village then to the Hasinai. At the Hasinai village he found that Friar Hidalgo had returned to the Spanish settlements on the Rio Grande. The Hasinai Chief, Bernadino, asked St. Denis to go to Coahuila, Mexico, to request Friar Hidalgo's return to the Hasinai Village. At the Presidio of San Juan Bautista, Captain Don Diego Ramon sent them on to Mexico City. At Mexico City the Spanish officials

decided to reestablish their old abandoned missions in northeastern Texas and they asked St. Denis to be second in command, Don Diego Ramon was appointed leader of the expedition. They left Mexico City on October 26, 1715, they stopped at San Juan Bautista, where St. Denis married Dona Maria Ramon, Granddaughter of Don Diego Ramon. They left there on April 27, 1716. They chose sites for the missions and St. Denis went on to Mobile, now in Alabama. (Swanton pp. 53 & 54)

At Mobile St. Denis organized another trading company to return to Mexico with a large quantity of merchandise, they left in October 1716. They went through the Natchitoches village then the Hasinai village, when they got to San Juan Bautista all the merchandise was seized, St. Denis went on to Mexico City to secure its release, the Spanish imprisoned him. He escaped September of 1718, and was at Dauphin Island on March 24, 1719, located south of Mobile. (Swanton, pp. 54 & 55)

On December 17, 1718 Bernard de la Harpe was sent to establish a fort in the country of the Kadohadacho and to explore the lands of that area. (See 1, pg. 56) On July 1, 1720, St. Denis was appointed Commandant of the Natchitoches Post. (Swanton p. 59) In a newspaper article dated August 20, 1915 of the Natchitoches Times there is the following entry: "Deed of Donation of Land to Natchitoches Indians, signed by Baron de Carondelet, Lieutenant of LaSalle, 1758 - Land Office. (Land Office is no longer in Natchitoches)." With the 7-Years War raging (now known as the French and Indian War by Americans, 1756 - 1763) the French may have felt that Natchitoches Indians living in town among the French was more of a liability than an asset.

Records shows our Ancestors living around Black Lake with the largest group living at the Black Lake Community. This was considered marginal land by the French and the English as it was mostly swamp and hills, the type of land that was always set aside for American Indians. I have also located three other communities that survived through the years also located in our Ancestral lands. The Indian settlements were in the swamps, pine woods, and marshes and their closest non-Indian neighbors most often were white yeoman farmers. (9) (*The Historic Indians Tribes of Louisiana, co-authored by H. F. Gregory, pg. 93 and ecological niches pg. 96 and 211*)

The "coureurs de bois", the first Indian traders from Canada, many of whom were Métis with Canadian Indian blood lines, had an affinity for living with Indians and had Indian wives or concubines. Their children usually spoke only Indian languages. (Gregory, p. 128) Research shows that many of the farmers living near the Natchitoches were "metis" (this term was used by Europeans to describe people that had American Indian blood mixed with white or black or both) most of these farmers had Natchitoches blood lines and were kin.

At the end of this war France gave control of the lands east of the Mississippi river and north of Spanish controlled Florida to Britain. Just before this war ended France had given control of the other lands west of the Mississippi and south of the Great Lakes to Spain, this was later known as the Louisiana Purchase. The end of “French and Indian War” was the beginning of the Spanish era. Many smaller Tribes were driven from their homelands east of the Mississippi River not only by the English but also by the larger Tribes that became slavers (those that enslave others) and moved to or through what is now the State of Louisiana, many of these people stayed (Gregory pp 83-121)

This is also when many American Indians began isolating themselves, particularly in Louisiana and the south eastern United States (Gregory, pp. 83 to 121) Spanish laws had treated the Indians generously, a circumstance they found fortunate as empires changed. “Las Recopilaciones de los Indios” had given Indians the right to settle the king’s lands and had guaranteed them a square league around their villages for tribal use. (9: pg. 88) Spanish Governor Carondelet freed all Louisiana Indians that were slaves in 1794, except the Natchez because of their war. But not all were set free, rich land owners did not wish to lose their free labor and called their Indian slaves Black or Mulatto and made them buy their freedom (Gregory, pg. 94)

The American Revolutionary War, 1775-1783.

In June 1779, Spain formally declared War on Great Britain. [Bernardo de Galvez](#) the then governor of Spanish Louisiana learned of an impending invasion of the Mississippi River by the British to enable them to attack the “Americans” from the west. He swiftly and secretly organized Louisiana and New Orleans for war. Many Spanish, French and American Indians joined his forces. He defeated the British at Fort Bute, Baton Rouge and Natchez in 1779. The Battle of Baton Rouge, on Sept. 1779, freed the lower Mississippi Valley of British forces and relieved the threat to the capital of Louisiana, New Orleans

Members of the militia at Natchitoches, over 150, are recognized as Patriots of the American Revolution. A sampling of the names of the heroes of the American Revolution from Natchitoches, printed in the Natchitoches Genealogist dated April 2008 and published by The Natchitoches Genealogical & Historical Association, include many of * “metis” ancestors of the Natchitoches Tribe of Louisiana. *A mixture of European and American Indian.

In 1705 Louis Juchereau de St. Denis led an expedition (war) against the Chitimacha Nation, the Natchitoches warriors were with him. (Swanton, pg. 51)

In 1730 the Natchez Nation revolted against the French Government; they went up the Red River killing any French people they found. When they came to the town of Natchitoches, St.

Denis with the help of the natives of the Natchitoches, Assinai (Hasinai), and Attacapas Tribes, and some Spaniards defeated the Natchez Tribe. (Swanton, p. 66)

It is only reasonable that the Natchitoches warriors would be fighting along-side their kin with Governor Galvez against the British. Athanase de Mezieres was appointed lieutenant governor of the Natchitoches district in 1770. He met with the Kadohadacho and other Tribes to the west of their territory to acquire their alliance to Spain. In 1772 he met with the Hasinai, Tonkawa and Wichita Indians for the same reason. In this same entry a Chief of the Natchitoches is named as “Suato” (Swanton, p 70)

Louisiana Purchase and Removal Policies

In 1803 the French Government sold their claim on the Louisiana Territory to the United States of America. In 1830 President Andrew Jackson passed the Indian Removal Act, the US Army then started removing the remaining Tribes that were east of the Mississippi River to the west side of it. In 1835 the Kadohadaho Nation were forced to sign a treaty, by threat of war, with the USA Government and forced to leave Louisiana. These were challenging times, Some family members followed in the removal, while others chose to remain on their ancestral lands and did not agree with signing away their rights. Following the 1830s Indian Removal, a second removal occurred in 1890 with the express intent of eliminating any vestiges of Indigenous peoples in Natchitoches parish. Again, Indian communities throughout Louisiana resisted and many sought isolation or created their own community, culture, and norms separate from dominant society. The Natchitoches Tribe today, are the descendants of those Indian families who held on to their kinship and ancestral ties to their homelands. These were difficult times, and many were forced to live their lives under the threat of violence and death. As historical scholar Van Rhee (1987) states “The difficulty of establishing a safe or acceptable identity created a problem for those individuals who managed to escape the Indian removals of the nineteenth century.” Yet and still, community members continued to stay in the historical communities of Campti and Black Lake, communities which existed prior to the formation of the United States. Other families moved to neighboring parishes, such as Rapides, Ouachita, and Avoyelles, where they continue to live today and play an active part in the Natchitoches Tribe. As a community, we have always focused on maintaining connections and family ties. During the time of segregation, families sought ways to build a meaningful life despite being cast as “colored.” Community schools were formed by some families, while others went to the local boarding school set up by the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions, and a few continued to travel back and forth between Oklahoma and Louisiana for school, work, or family connection. After the end of World War II, Indian children were allowed to attend public schools. Greater changes would follow in

the late 1960s, where for the first time the state of Louisiana would begin to openly acknowledge many of its historical Indigenous communities.

In an article coauthored by Dr. H. F. Gregory about Natchitoches Parish history, there is a study of Indian communities in the area. It details the various American Indian communities, the number removed during the Second Removal in 1890, and the ways some attempted to live alongside or isolate themselves from the dominant culture. Due to Jim Crow laws, racial hygiene policies, anti-French prejudice, and other forms of legally and physically enforced violence, many Native families in Natchitoches Parish engaged in collective silence and distanced themselves from others. This article was printed by the Natchitoches Parish Planning Commission in June 1979, and copies are available at the Natchitoches Genealogical & Historical Association, the old courthouse, and Watson Memorial Library at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, LA. Despite their thorough research, the authors were unable to gather any information from the Black Lake Community or the other three Natchitoches tribal villages. The long history of racial violence, removal, and discriminatory legislation against Native peoples has fostered a deep-seated distrust of researchers.

At present, the Natchitoches Tribe of Louisiana has grown to over 1,600 members with a Council of 20 members. We are in the process of requesting official acknowledgment by the Government of the United States of American.

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