

Cane River Creole

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

National Historical Park
Louisiana





(Far Left) Narrow lots gave each planter river access, cropland, and woods. (Left) Enslaved blacksmith Solomon Williams brought African ironworking tradition to his finely-wrought cross. Wine was among the tokens of French culture imported by colonials.

MAP: NORTHWESTERN STATE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISIANA, CAMMIE G. HENRY RESEARCH CENTER

Colonial Roots

Genesis of a Culture

A vital branch of the New World culture we know as Creole took root in the rich soil along Cane River in 18th-century Louisiana. It was a culture nurtured by French and Spanish colonial ways, steeped in Africanisms, and enriched by American Indian contact. Its survival for nearly three centuries, depicted in the stories of the LeComtes, Hertzogs, Prud'hommes, and other families, testifies to a resilient community founded on deep attachments to Catholicism, family, and the land.

In 1725 Catherine Picard, daughter of a New Orleans trader, married Jean Pierre Philippe Prud'homme, a former marine and trader from Natchitoches. The French-born couple returned to the rough-hewn military and trading post—an open crossroads world where cultural exchanges and marital unions among French, Spanish, French Canadian, African, and American Indian cultures were producing a dynamic frontier society with a distinctive French accent. Ex-soldiers like Prud'homme moved out from the post to make a living as traders, hunters, and farmers along the Red River, known in this area as Cane River. As

indigo and tobacco farming supplanted other livelihoods, colonists relied more heavily on the enslaved African workers who had helped build the colony.

Among the tobacco farmers was Jean Baptiste LeComte, who in 1753 obtained a land grant on Cane River. From this seed grew Magnolia plantation. In 1789 Prud'homme's grandson Jean Pierre Emmanuel also received a land grant on the Cane, the core of Bermuda—later renamed Oakland—plantation. After the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, he and LeComte's son Ambroise turned to the crop that forever defined the region.



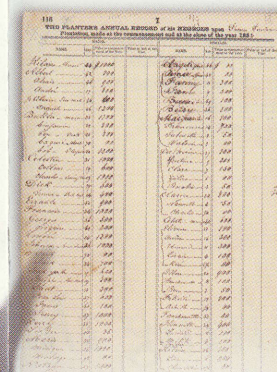
(Left) Ambroise LeComte (1760–1834) oversaw his family's shift from tobacco to cotton. (Above) Stencil used to mark Prud'homme cotton. (Right) Drill forged at Bermuda plantation by an enslaved worker.

King Cotton

The Prosperous Years

In the decades after the United States took possession of Louisiana in 1803, the cotton culture reached its zenith. Built on slavery, it was underpinned by an agrarian ethic of self sufficiency and land stewardship exemplified by Emmanuel Prud'homme. In 1821 his enslaved workers built his house on land he named Bermuda. Creole families like the Prud'hommes and LeComtes solidified their positions by expanding their holdings and marrying into each other's families. In 1852 Ambroise LeComte II's daughter Atala married Matthew Hertzog—whose mother was a Prud'homme—and Magnolia plantation passed to the couple and their descendants.

This Creole society combined hard practicality demanded by frontier life with Old World *joie de vivre* and spirited celebration of the rituals of daily life and Catholicism. The French-speaking enslaved workers had created their own rich culture centered around the church, family ties, and preserved African traditions. Yet even as the Creole culture evolved, it underwent a gradual but profound change. Anglo-Americans poured into the region, bringing their English



(Left) 1852 Bermuda ledger reflects the reality of slavery: humans treated as farm assets. (Top Right) Tobacco plug cutter from the Oakland plantation store. (Right) Split oak basket woven by an enslaved worker at Oakland.

LEDGER: UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

Civil War

Ruin and Rebirth

The fires of civil war transformed life on Cane River. As the Union blockade of New Orleans cut off cotton markets, the Confederate army commandeered slaves and grain. In the Red River campaign southern troops burned the planters' cotton before the North could seize it. Retreating Union troops left burning plantations in their wake, including Magnolia's main house and the gin barn at Bermuda. At war's end Phanor Prud'homme's sons Alphonse and Emmanuel II, who had both fought for the Confederacy, inherited Bermuda and divided it, Alphonse naming his part Oakland. Well-run plantations like Magnolia and Oakland survived the war, but low prices and boll weevils brought mostly lean times until World War I.

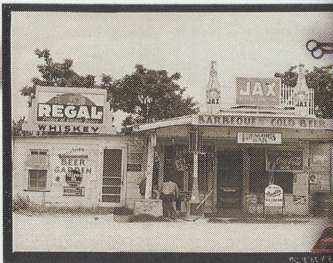
For the plantation workers freedom brought new trials, such as Freedmen's Bureau labor contracts whose conditions differed from slavery mainly in that they required the worker's consent. Artisans like Bermuda's blacksmith Solomon Williams could negotiate their own contracts for pay and hours. For those without specialized skills the

only alternative to the Freedmen's contracts was to accept sharecropping arrangements. These ranged from a relatively benign feudalism to virtual bondage, with the chains of slavery replaced by endless debt to the plantation store.

Many workers left the region, but others stayed and eventually rebuilt a strong community around church and family, often within the same quarters that had housed their enslaved ancestors. The region grew less isolated, but some older planters and workers spoke French into the 20th century.



The scions of French and Spanish colonists . . . Creoles of French, Spanish, African, and Indian ancestry . . . and generations of African Americans: these are



Workers found respite from cotton fields in juke joints (at left in picture, ca. 1940) where music and cold drinks flowed freely. (Left) For workers and planters, telephones, radios, and phonographs provided entertainment and links to the larger world.

Old Ways Pass

Migration and Modernization

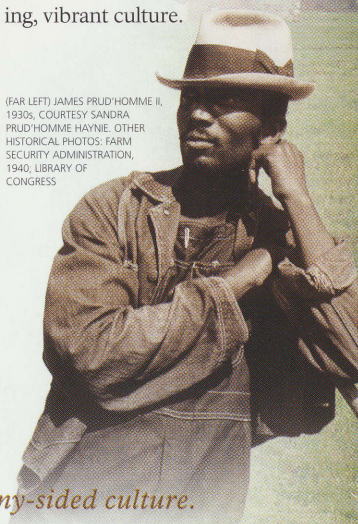
Oakland and Magnolia enjoyed a brief revival in 1914 as World War I increased cotton demand, but prices fell again and hard times returned. The Great Migration of African Americans began in 1916 as workers displaced from failing plantations moved north for war-related jobs. Then a downward spiral of overproduction and falling prices brought depression to the region a decade earlier than the rest of the country. As they had during the Civil War, Oakland and Magnolia became self-sufficient, and they survived. In the words of Matthew Hertzog II in 1937: "We're not making the money the old folks used to make, but we're making a little, and we're still here."

Modernization came fitfully to Cane River. Phanor Prud'homme II bought the family's first car in 1910, while most people in the area still traveled by mule-drawn wagon. At Magnolia in the 1930s workers began driving tractors in the fields—in many cases fields where their enslaved ancestors had labored. By the 1940s machines were doing more of the tasks long performed by mules and human workers, and many of the remain-

ing workers left the plantations for employment in war industries.

The old plantation world was fading. At harvest time ranks of workers in the cotton fields of Magnolia and Oakland were replaced in the 1960s by mechanical pickers. Yet many of the old ways persisted. At Magnolia workers and planters still enjoyed baseball games and horse races. Oakland's store was the place to go for news and mail. The Creole tradition that had sustained planter and worker for nearly three centuries endured, and today remains an evolving, vibrant culture.

(FAR LEFT) JAMES PRUD'HOMME II, 1930s, COURTESY SANDRA PRUD'HOMME HAYNE. OTHER HISTORICAL PHOTOS: FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION, 1940; LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



What Does it Mean to be Creole?

Creole In colonial Louisiana the term "Creole" was used to indicate New World products derived from Old World stock, and could apply to people, architecture, or livestock. Regarding people, Creole historically referred to those born in Louisiana during the French and Spanish periods, regardless of their ethnicity. Today, as in the past, Creole transcends racial boundaries. It connects people to their colonial roots, be they descendants of European settlers, enslaved Africans, or those of mixed heritage, which may include African, French, Spanish, and American Indian influences.



Above: The slave-built workers' quarters at Magnolia plantation are solid structures with unusual brickwork at the corners and gables. Cover: The main house at Oakland plantation, built in 1821.

COVER: © FRED HIRSCHMANN, ABOVE PHOTO AND ALL ARTIFACTS: NPS

are the faces of Cane River's many-sided culture.



The region's flat landscape allowed the Red River's main channel to twice shift eastward in the 18th and 19th centuries. The land between the earlier channels—now the Cane and Old rivers—was called Isle Brevelle. Embraced and sustained by the rivers, it became the center of Cane River Creole culture.

UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

The Cotton Year

An Endless Cycle of Work

A worker gives her children a drink as she pauses from her labors in the field.

FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION PHOTO, 1940; LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Life on Oakland and Magnolia plantations revolved around the demands of the crop, with the labor cycle encompassing virtually the entire year. In his 1858 book *Fifty Years in Chains; or, the Life of an American Slave*, Charles Ball, who had worked on both tobacco and cotton plantations, wrote: "The tasks [for tobacco] are not so excessive as in the cotton region, nor is the press of labour so incessant throughout the year." In the 20th century powered machines made the tasks easier, with picking the last to be mechanized.

The cotton year began in late March and early April as workers plowed fields and planted seed. After two or three weeks they used hoes to "chop" the seedlings—thin them out—and remove weeds. This typically happened four times during the summer.

When picking began in August, every available worker was put to the task. Each picker was issued a cotton sack and a basket for the grueling work, which lasted from first light until it was



Children joined their parents in the cotton fields when they were old enough to haul a cotton sack.

FARM SECURITY ADMINISTRATION PHOTO, 1940; LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Visiting the

Living Traditions on the

too dark to see. (A full moon could extend the labor well into the night.) Workers had to repeatedly bend over to pick low cotton, and the hard, sharp bolls holding the cotton could cut deeply. Drivers, themselves enslaved workers, made sure the pace didn't slacken. The pickers emptied their sacks into the baskets, which they carried to the gin house for weighing. The overseer expected adults to pick at least 200 pounds a day. Other workers ginned the cotton (removed the seeds by machine) and pressed it into bales.

The cotton had to be picked three or four times as the bolls continually opened, and the job was usually not finished until after the new year. In January and February some workers pulled and burned the harvested plants, while others mended fences and machinery and harvested cypress from the plantation's timberlands. Then in March they began the cycle again as they hitched mules to the plows to ready the fields for planting.

The historic landscapes and dozens of structures preserved at Oakland and Magnolia plantations are the setting for the stories of workers and families who farmed the same land for over two centuries, adapting to historical, economic, social, and agricultural change. Today their descendants carry on many of their traditions.

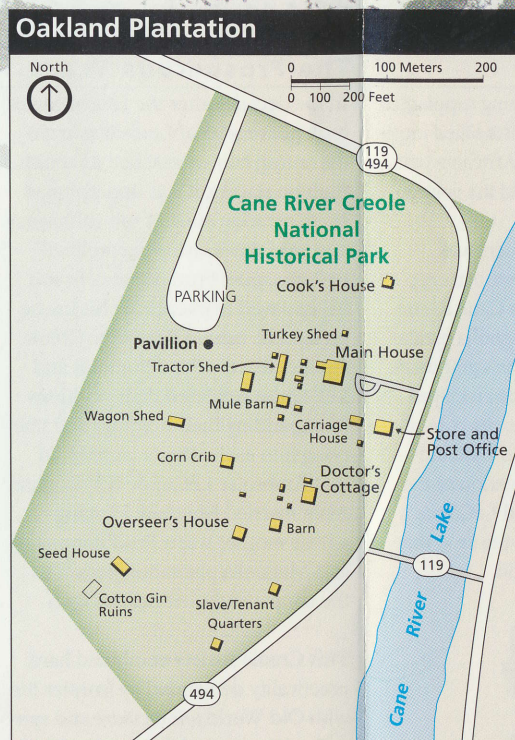
The Prud'hommes and LeComtes had their homes built atop the natural levees along the Cane River. On the rich floodplain sloping down to the cypress swamps they grew their crops. Much of this land remains in production today. The visitor first encounters Oakland through the working part of the plantation, "back of the big house." Sheds, shops, and storehouses recall the ceaseless round of tasks—from carpentry to the tending of livestock—that supported plantation life. In the house, fine interior details and artifacts evoke the French colonial culture these people maintained for generations.

Area

e Cane River

At Magnolia it is easy to imagine workers at their tasks serving King Cotton. In the gin barn they handled tons of the fiber every day, feeding the steam-powered gin and producing bales in the mule-powered, and later steam-powered, presses. At day's end they walked to their quarters, eight of which still stand in neat brick rows. After emancipation the quarters housed plantation laborers, many of them descendants of the enslaved workers. The larger overseer's quarters nearby provides tangible evidence of the plantation hierarchy.

Magnolia and Oakland are part of Cane River National Heritage Area. Homes, military posts, churches, and the still-agricultural landscape support a broad understanding of the area's history and culture. The heritage area includes Magnolia's big house, which is outside the park boundary. Burned during the Civil War, it was rebuilt in 1896 by the Hertzog family.

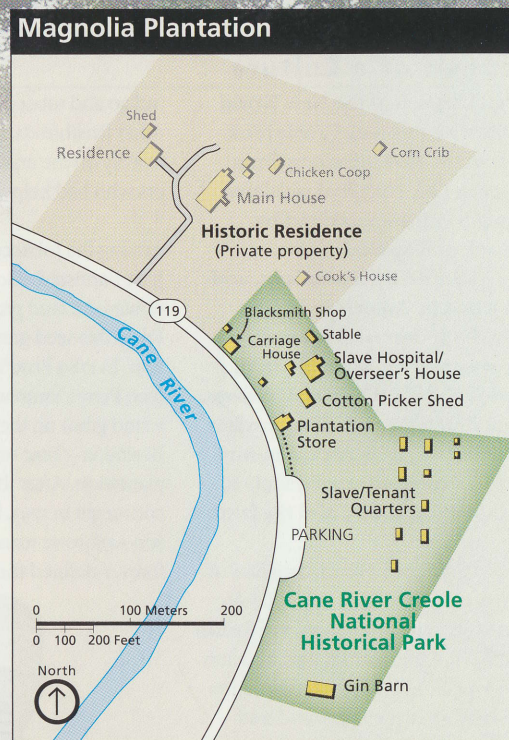


Visitor Information

Oakland and Magnolia are open daily except Thanksgiving, December 25, and January 1. Visitors can take self-guiding tours of both sites from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Call for information on wheelchair accessibility and programs in sign language.

Directions

The park visitor contact station is 10 miles south of Natchitoches at Oakland Plantation in Bermuda, La. From I-49 take Exit 127, Flora/Cypress. Head east on La. Hwy. 120. Cross over La. Hwy. 1 onto La. Hwy. 494. Oakland is on Hwy. 494 four miles east of Hwy. 1 on the left. Magnolia Plantation is 20 miles south of Natchitoches. From I-49 take exit 119, Derry, and cross



Hwy. 1. Magnolia is on La. Hwy. 119 two miles east of Hwy. 1 on the right.

Safety

Preservation and restoration of historic structures is a continuing project. This work and the plantations' uneven terrain can make touring the park hazardous. Also be aware of snakes, bees, and fire ants. Temperatures can



be very high during summer. Visitors should wear walking shoes and bring water, sunblock, and insect repellent.

For More Information

Cane River Creole National Historical Park
400 Rapides Drive
Natchitoches, LA 71457
318-356-8441
www.nps.gov/cari

Cane River Creole National Historical Park is one of over 380 parks in the National Park System. The National Park Service cares for these special places saved by the American people so that all may experience our heritage. Visit www.nps.gov to learn more about parks and National Park Service programs.

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