Natchitoches Tribe of Louisiana

A Summary of the Natchitoches Tribe of Louisiana

“The city of Natchitoches, Louisiana, is named after the Natchitoches tribe and is noteworthy as the oldest permanent settlement in the Louisiana Purchase Territory.”

INDIAN ENTITY IDENTIFICATION

Louisiana history records the existence of the Natchitoches Indians as natives of its land upon the arrival of foreign explorers as early as the late 1600s. In 1690, Henri de Tonti is recorded to have reached the Natchitoches village still today located in the city of Natchitoches in Northwest Louisiana. This would be the earliest recorded written account of the Natchitoches tribe’s subsistence (Williams, 1964). Jean-Baptiste LeMoyne de Bienville and Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, French explorers, reached the Natchitoches Indian village in April, 1700, on their search for the legendary Spanish mines. (Pasquier, 2011) Before leaving the Red River Natchitoches village, Bienville, St. Denis and Chief Blanc, leader of the Natchitoches tribe, smoked a peace pipe and sealed a life-long treaty and friendship as allies (Burton, 2008).

The Natchitoches Indians stood in battle beside St. Denis throughout his service to the French king. On one such battle, revenge of the savage death of a French missionary by the Chitimacha in 1707 led the Natchitoches to joining St. Denis in his journey to Mobile to battle and defeat the Chitimacha Indians. (Shea, 1886) Again in 1731, St. Denis with the Natchitoches Indians fighting by his side they won a decisive battle against a large band of Natchez Indians. (Swanton, 1953)

Natchitoches Indian, Chief Campti, is the namesake for the community of Campti in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana. The Natchitoches Tribe was moved by St. Denis in 1758 from Fort St. Jean Baptiste to the Black Lake area outside of Campti. Descendants of the Natchitoches Indians still reside there today.

COMMUNITY

Dr. John Sibley, a New England doctor, was appointed by President Thomas Jefferson as surgeon’s mate for the troops stationed at Natchitoches, and later as Indian agent for Orleans Territory and the region south of Arkansas. Sibley is well known for his historical sketches of Louisiana and Texas Indian tribes. In 1807, Sibley published a manuscript, Report from Natchitoches. Sibley wrote, “I believe it is now ninety-eight years since the French first established themselves at Natchitoches; ever since, these Indians have been their steady and faithful friends.” (Swanton, 1953) Natchitoches Indians lived in peace, fought and died in battle with their French and American forces. Descendants of the Natchitoches
Indians served in United States American wars from the Battle of Independence to today's wars at home and on foreign soil.

In 1758 St. Denis requested that the Natchitoches Indians move across the Red River to the Campti/Black Lake area of Natchitoches in return for the Natchitoches Indians allowing the French to build a fort on the Natchitoches village land. The French fort built on Natchitoches village land was called Fort St. Jean the Baptiste. Evidence of the existence of the Natchitoches Indians still exist today in the form of mounds, artifacts and funerary objects throughout Natchitoches and surrounding parishes. Descendants of these Native Americans still reside and own property in the Black Lake community.

George Beyer, curator of the Tulane Museum (1893-1918), Tulane Professor and German zoologist, published his investigative findings of Campti mounds, specifically in the Black Lake area in 1897. He found burial grounds and skeletons. By each skull of each skeleton, one or two vessels were found. Beyer reported that within this area of a radius of ten to twelve miles there were forty to fifty mounds. (Beyer, 1897) He made several diagrams of his findings relating to the mounds in his March 19, 1897, presentation to the Louisiana Historical Society in New Orleans, Louisiana.

Today, many descendants of the Natchitoches Indians still reside in the Black Lake Community. These descendants suffered hardship and discrimination because of their heritage. Until the late 1960s, Native American children were segregated from the “white” children in the Campti schools. Oral history of segregated schools of three distinct cultures (white, black and red skinned people) was given to tribal members from their ancestors. These schools were managed by Catholic nuns who would travel from Campti to the Black Lake Community to teach each group separately.

Another connection to descendants of the Natchitoches Indians throughout hundreds of years is the kinship relationships. Although there is no way of getting an actual count, a great majority, at least 75% or greater, of descendants of the Natchitoches Indians are related through bloodline in several family lines. For example, in one line of many similar lines, a grandfather and grandmother are second and third cousins. Their grandmothers are sisters. Additionally, this person’s grandfather and great-grandfather married sisters. The line continues like that as far back as history is recorded. Family bloodlines intertwine throughout our tribal history. It is not unusual for one set of ancestral grandparents to appear three or four separate times on separate bloodlines. Familial relationships are a common occurrence within our Native American tribe.
ORAL HISTORY

In the early 1900s, the Black Lake Community outside of Campti in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana, was segregated from the white community in Campti because of racial biases against Native Americans and Blacks. It wasn’t until the Civil Rights Act in the late 1960s that the children of the Black Lake Community were allowed to enter the “white” schools.

The Black Lake area was/is a historical tribal ground area for the Natchitoches people. Several Natchitoches Indian mounds are located in that area. Today, older members of the Natchitoches Tribe of Louisiana tell stories of their younger days. One of the stories concerned an Indian mound located on Clear Lake in this community. The members remember walking past a mound and deciding that they wanted to play there. Immediately, their grandparents would scold them and tell them not to play there. Grandparents said that it was a holy place and that ancient spirits dwelled there.

HISTORICAL ARTIFACTS AND MOUNDS

An interview was held by this genealogist with Dr. Pete Gregory, a highly respected professor at Northwestern University in Natchitoches, Louisiana, and anthropologist who specializes in Louisiana Archaeology with special interest in: Native American Ethnology in the Southeastern U.S. and Southern Plains Cultures (Caddo); Culture Change, Multi-ethnic Identity, and Community "Brokerage"; Creole and African-American Cultures in Louisiana; Louisiana Folk Culture; and Traditional Cultural Maintenance Systems. When asked about Natchitoches artifacts and burial grounds, Dr. Gregory said that several area mound locations have been found and excavated throughout the Natchitoches area:

1. **Campti Mound, Natchitoches Parish, LA**: George Beyer, Tulane Professor, traveled to Campti to investigate a report given to him by a Campti planter, Mr. J. C. Henry. Mr. Henry reported finding human bones beside the water-worn bank of the Red River near Campti. (Beyer, 1897.) Beyer reported his findings December 8, 1897, to the Louisiana Historical Society in New Orleans, Louisiana. He reported the findings of human remains, relics, and the existence of at least 40-50 mounds centered around Black Lake Community in Natchitoches Parish.

2. **Lawton Gin, Natchitoches Parish, LA**: In 1941, human remains representing three individuals were recovered by Dr. Clarence H. Webb. 52 associated funerary objects and 47 glass beads, 3 Natchitoches Tribe engraved bowls, 1 Keno trailed bottle and 1 emory incised-punctuated bowl were found here as well. (Department of Interior, 2001)

3. **Natchitoches Fish Hatchery, Natchitoches Parish, LA**: Within the city limits, mounds are located at the fish hatchery where in August of 2004 the Caddo
Nation brought remains for reburial of Natchitoches tribal members who followed other Indians to Oklahoma during the Indian Removal in the 1830s. It is reported here that the Natchitoches Village encountered by the Europeans in 1690, extended along both sides of Red/Cane River for 10 miles on both sides. (Department of Interior, 2001)

4. Southern Oil Mill/Cotton Gin, Natchitoches Parish, LA: In 1940s, human remains representing four individuals were recovered from this site. Additional items: 45 associated funerary objects are 40 glass beads, 1 emory punctuated incised bowl, 1 plain (shell-tempered) bowl, 1 brass bracelet, 1 fragmentary iron and bead bracelet, and 1 iron bracelet. (Department of Interior, 2001)

5. Big Lick (Salt Lick), Goldonna, Natchitoches Parish, LA: The latest excavation has just been completed near Goldonna at the salt lick called Big Lick. The dissertation by the man who recorded the finds at this site has yet to be published.

6. Marston Site, Red River Parish: In the 1950s, identified as a Natchitoches (Caddo I-II) site, human remains representing one individual were donated to the Louisiana Division of Archaeology and housed at the Williamson Museum, Northwestern State University. (Department of Interior, 2001)

Natchitoches trade goods and human remains have been found at all of these sites. The Lawton Gin site and the Southern Oil Mill and Compress site are post-contact sites, dating to the 1700s. During consultations, the representatives of the Caddo Tribe identified these remains as Caddo and agreed that these sites represent the historic Natchitoches Tribe. The archeological evidence from these and contemporaneous sites was used to define the Lawton Phase (AD 1714-1800), which has been culturally identified to the Natchitoches confederacy of the Caddo. (Department of Interior, 2001)

These artifacts are housed at the Williamson Museum at Northwestern State University in Natchitoches, Louisiana. A state and federal repository for archaeological collections, the museum also curates collections for the Natchitoches Tribe presented by the Caddo Nation of Oklahoma and for the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe in Louisiana. The ethnographic collections now represent some 49 tribal entities from the southeast and Gulf Coast. “The Southeastern Indian Basketry Database: The Williamson Museum.”

https://folklife.nsula.edu/Basketry...

**NATCHITOCHES LAND & TERRITORY**

In May 1805, John Sibley, appointed Orleans Territory Indian Agent by President Thomas Jefferson, was directed by his superiors to “use all means at his disposal to gain the esteem and friendship of the Indians.” His major job was to do a governmental survey of Indian lands. Sibley was to assure Indians that their
tracts of land would be, “... held sacred; and no person or persons whatsoever would be allowed to molest them, or take from them, one acre of their lands, in any way, except by their consent....” (Swanton, 1953.)

Sibley’s assistant was Francois Grappe. Grappe, himself, was one-fourth Chitimacha Indian. Sibley and Grappe’s land surveys shed a little light on the land occupied by the Natchitoches. Documents indicate that at least four sites were occupied by the Natchitoches between 1690 and 1803: White Chief’s village, Captain’s village (Pintado Papers), La Piniere village (Bridges and Deville 1967:239), and Lac des Muire village (Sibley 1832, 1922). There are a larger number of archaeological sites which have yielded Natchitoches Engraved, Keno Trailed, or Emory Incised ceramic vessels or sherds, catlinite pipes, glass trade beads, copper or brass objects, knives, and gun parts. These include the U.S. Fish Hatchery (Walker 1935), the Lawton (Webb 1945), the Southern Compress (Gregory and Webb 1965), Natchitoches Country Club, Chamard House, American Cemetery, Settle’s Camp, and Kenny Place sites (Gregory 1974).

Natchitoches land was gradually surrounded by Anglo-Americans. By the time of the Caddo Treaty of which lands did “not” include the lands of the Natchitoches, Natchitoches (town) was a thriving community. The tribe lived north of the town, near the land of Francois Grappe who was the acting cultural broker for the Natchitoches with the whites. It should be noted here that there is no evidence that Francois Grappe, acting as cultural broker with the whites, had the consent of the Natchitoches in his dealings with the whites. He was not Natchitoches Indian. He was Chitimacha. The suspicious nature of Grappe’s handling of the affairs of the Natchitoches combined with Sibley and Grappe’s joint survey of the land leaves the Natchitoches descendants doubtful that the welfare of the Natchitoches tribe was a concern of Sibley or Grappe’s actions. Also, it should be noted that Grappe and his family benefited greatly from the sale of the Natchitoches Indian land.

**POLITICAL INFLUENCE AND AUTHORITY**

For hundreds of years, beyond the history of the Americas, the Natchitoches Tribe was an autonomous entity. History has named several Natchitoches chiefs. Chief Blanc smoked the peace pipe with Bienville and St. Denis in the early 1700s. History records the first Louisiana settlement of Natchitoches was built on the site of the Village of White Chief of the Natchitoches. St. Denis, himself, was called White Chief of the Natchitoches. Additionally, another Natchitoches Chief was named in a claim filed with American State Papers (Public Lands, 1834, vol.3, No. 6) by Louis C. Deblanc, Commandant of the post of Natchitoches, states: “In consequence of the death of Tomoc, chief of the Natchitoches nation of Indians, and finding that the said Indians are now inhabiting land not belonging to them, in the settled parts of this post, I grant to them, subject to the will of the
Governor, Don Estevan Miro, Twenty arpents of land on each side of Red River, at a place called Lac de Meures, about ten leagues above the post of Natchitoches.”

Previous to the Indian Removal Act of 1835, area church documents record the births, baptisms, marriages and/or deaths of Natchitoches (sometimes mislabeled as Caddo) in the Natchitoches regions. Tribal documentation includes proof of bloodline of these Indians to their descendents today. Following the Indian Removal Act of 1835, the Natchitoches Indians went into hiding in “plain sight.” So much so that, history records the tribe as being extinct or as having mixed with the Caddo tribe that was moved to Oklahoma. Rolls of the Natchitoches are nonexistent due to the fear of being found-out as Native American. Natchitoches Indians were attempting to hide their identity from outside sources out of fear they would be discriminated against, or worse. They would have been crazy not to.

One dark, damp night in July of 1905, Ozan Desadier, a Natchitoches Indian in hiding who lived in the Campti/Black Lake area of Natchitoches Parish was awaken by a cry for help outside of his home. As the story was reported in the San Antonio newspaper, Desadier went to his door and walked out to his porch where a man standing in the dark asked for help and requested that Desadier bring a torch with him to help light the way down the road. Desadier went into his home to light the torch at his fire place. When he stepped out on his porch holding the torch to make him more visable, gun shots rang out and Desadier was murdered on his front door steps. What the paper did not report, but was known by those in hiding, Desadier would not sale his land. Following this event, numerous families in hiding left the land of the Natchitoches in fear of their lives and the lives of their families. Tribal members still living in the area today have many tales of discrimination and humiliation placed on them due to their ethnicity.

Today, the Natchitoches Indians, in honor of our ancestors, have come out of hiding and have re-established their tribe openly. A Constitution and Bylaws are in place and a tribal council has been appointed. The Natchitoches Tribe of Louisiana as a sovereign nation will proudly educate the descendents of ancient ancestors in the ways of their forefathers and return to them the honor and dignity that our forefathers stood for so many years ago.

DESCENT

No tribal roll of the Natchitoches was ever directed by the government of the United States. At the time of the Indian Removal Act of 1835, the government was under the impression that the Natchitoches joined with the Caddo tribe in the forced move to Oklahoma. What the government was not aware of was that many of the Natchitoches Indians of Louisiana went into hiding to avoid being stripped from their homeland, dignity and/or eminent death.
Fortunately for the Natchitoches, the French and Spanish kings ordered their
government officials and priests who were sent to the Americas to document all
activities which included births, baptisms, marriages and deaths of the savages.
The Natchitoches Tribe of Louisiana has full documentation of bloodlines of all
tribal members, as well as hundreds of documented sources regarding the
activities of the Natchitoches.

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