Natchitoches was founded by a French Canadian, Louis Antoine Juchereau de St. Denis, in 1714 while he was en route to Mexico from Mobile, Alabama, on a trade mission. When he reached the village of the Natchitoches Indians on the Red River, he had two huts constructed within the village and left a small detachment there to guard the stores and trade with the inhabitants. This became the first permanent European settlement in the territory later known as the Louisiana Purchase.

In 1716, Sieur Charles Claude Dutisné was sent to Natchitoches with a small company of colonial troops to build and garrison an outpost that would prevent the Spanish forces in the province of Texas from advancing across the border of French Louisiane. This strategic outpost was named Fort St. Jean Baptiste des Natchitoches. Economically, Natchitoches evolved into a primary French trade center in the Lower Mississippi Valley. Native American tribes of the three Caddo Confederacies played a vital role in establishing trade and communication links among the French, the Spanish and the Native Americans of the region. The trade that developed with the Caddos forever changed the material culture of the tribes, and by the mid-18th century they were almost completely dependent upon French trade goods. The diplomatic success of the fort was assured when St. Denis was named commandant in 1722. His influence would thrive in the colony until his death in 1744.

A detailed drawing made in 1733 by the French Engineer-in-Chief Sieur Ignace Francois Broutin shows the improvements made to Fort St. Jean Baptiste. In August 1732, Broutin was sent by the Commissary General of Louisiane “to see what had to be done to the fort and to put this garrison in security,” which was then menaced by the Natchez Indians. Upon his arrival, he found St. Denis “had the stakes of the enclosure changed from top to bottom by the soldiers and inhabitants and redoubled inside by the other smaller ones.” This produced a palisade of double thickness, an unusual feature in colonial Vauban fortifications.

Broutin remained in Natchitoches until the end of the year, during which time he constructed a “crude barracks, a warehouse and a house for the warehouse keeper.” No sooner had the construction begun than the Spaniards of nearby Los Adaes protested that it was an invasion of Spanish territory, a protest that St. Denis politely acknowledged and ignored.
State Commemorative Area

Troupes de la Marine

Between 1716 and 1762 the fort was garrisoned by independent companies (Compagnies Franches de la Marine). Functioning under the Ministry of the Marine, they were charged with the administration and defense of the French royal colonies. Marines served dual duties as soldiers and policemen in the small frontier settlement. While most of the enlisted men of the companies were recruited in France, young aristocratic Canadians served as officers. Many settled in Natchitoches before or during their enlistment, or after their enlistment expired, as it was the Ministry’s intent that these Marines become part of the community they served. In addition to the average 40-man companies, the fort included an ordnance consisting of two four-pound naval guns and two one-pound wall-mounted swivel guns.

The French Withdrawal from Louisiana

The fort continued to serve as a military outpost and commercial trade center until 1762, when France’s defeat by England in the French and Indian War forced her to cede the Louisiana colony to Spain. Under Spanish authority, the fort served as a trade center and a link in Spain’s intracolonial communications network. But since its original purpose of protecting a territorial boundary no longer applied, the Spanish eventually abandoned the fort. The fort was in such ruins by the time the United States acquired the area in the Louisiana Purchase (1803) that the Americans could no longer use it, so they built Fort Claiborne nearby.

Full-Scale Replica

The site obtained for the replication of Fort St. Jean Baptiste is located on Cane River Lake (formerly the Red River) a few hundred yards from the original fort site. The fort replication was based upon Broutin’s plans and on extensive archival research in Louisiana, Canada and France. Construction began in 1979 under the direction of the late Samuel Wilson, Jr. and the Louisiana Office of State Parks. Building materials were obtained locally, and many 18th-century techniques were employed in the replication. Nearly 2,000 treated pine

Plan du Fort des Natchitoche

- A. The church, constructed of posts in the ground, enclosed with stakes, mudfilled (bouzillé) between the joints, and roofed with bark.
- B. House of the commandant, the frame filled in with earth.
- C. Powder magazine of the same construction.
- D. Warehouse built at the end of 1732 of the same construction as the church.
- E. Barracks of the same construction, constructed at the end of 1732.
- F. Guardhouse of the same construction.
- G. Lodging for the warehouse keeper of the same construction, 1732.
- H. Huts which served as kitchen and to lodge the servants.
- I. Oven for bread.
- J. Entrance
- K. Bastion
logs form the palisade and approximately 250,000 board feet of treated lumber went into the construction of the buildings. All of the hinges and latches were handmade at a nearby foundry. Further historical research is ongoing.

Living History Programs

With the completion of Fort St. Jean Baptiste State Commemorative Area, the Office of State Parks initiated an interpretive program that provides the visitor a unique opportunity to experience our early colonial history. Each year, the park hosts several 18th-century living history encampments and programs in which the multicultural heritage of the colony is interpreted for the visitor.

We hope that your visit to Fort St. Jean Baptiste State Commemorative Area will give you a better understanding and appreciation of the customs and culture of the early inhabitants of Louisiana.

Nearby Attractions:

North Toledo Bend State Park (9 miles southwest of Zwolle off LA 3229)—Located on Toledo Bend Reservoir, the park offers fishing, picnicking, boat launch, improved campsites, 10 vacation cabins, group camp facilities, an Olympic-sized swimming pool, pavilion, playgrounds, trails and a conference center.

Fort Jesup State Commemorative Area (6 miles east of Many off LA 6, formerly the “San Antonio Trace” —The site of a fort established in 1822 by Zachary Taylor to secure the western border of the U.S. frontier. It features the original field kitchen, a replica of officers’ quarters which serves as a museum and visitors center, and interpretive programs.

Mansfield State Commemorative Area (4 miles south of Mansfield on LA 175)—The site of the last major Confederate victory of the Civil War. Visitors may take daily tours, see interpretive programs, spend time in the museum with its comprehensive collection of Civil War artifacts, and walk the trail through the battlefield area.

Rebel State Commemorative Area (3 miles northwest of Marthaville on State Hwy. 1221, and 25 miles west of Natchitoches and I-49)—Features the gravesite of an unknown Confederate soldier and is home of the Louisiana Country Music Museum. An amphitheater offers concerts featuring gospel, country and folk music, as well as the Annual Fiddling Championship.

Los Adaes State Commemorative Area (1 mile northeast of Robeline on LA Hwy. 485)—The 14-acre site located on the “El Camino Real” near Natchitoches features the remains of a Spanish fort built in the 1700s to protect Texas from the French. It is a major archaeological site and offers interpretive programs.

Historic Town of Natchitoches (Off I-49 on Cane River Lake)—The oldest settlement in the Louisiana Purchase, it has a 33-block Historic Landmark District featuring Creole architecture, bed and breakfasts, restaurants, shops and historic homes.

Cane River Country (South of Natchitoches along LA 1) —Features some of the South’s oldest plantation homes situated along the 32-mile oxbow-shaped Cane River Lake. The countryside is dotted with pecan orchards, cotton farms, historic landmarks, plantations, and churches.
Fort St. Jean Baptiste State Commemorative Area (130 Moreau Street, Natchitoches, LA 71457-3154; 318-357-3101 or 1-888-677-7853) is located on the banks of the Cane River between downtown Natchitoches and Northwestern State University, minutes from I-49. Facilities include the fort replica with the addition of modern restrooms. Groups are requested to arrange a tour.