



Exploring the Chitimacha
The Donaldsonville's Connection to the Chitimacha Sovereign Nation

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Executive Summary of the Chitimacha

The history of the Chitimacha tribe in south Louisiana is rich and complex, and their interactions with European colonizers significantly impacted their population and way of life. The French and Indian War (1754-1763) was a critical event that further shaped the fate of the Chitimacha people in the region.

Before the arrival of European explorers, the Chitimacha tribe had established themselves as a thriving community along the waterways and coastal areas of south Louisiana. They relied on fishing, hunting, and agriculture to sustain their communities and engaged in trade with neighboring tribes.

When the French arrived in the early 18th century, they established trading relationships with the Chitimacha tribe. The French fur trade brought new goods and technologies to the Chitimacha people, but it also exposed them to European diseases, which had devastating consequences for their population.

During the French and Indian War, which was a part of the larger global conflict known as the Seven Years' War, the Chitimacha tribe faced challenges from both the French and the British. The French sought alliances with various Native American tribes, including the Chitimacha, to bolster their territorial claims and protect their interests in the region.

However, this alliance with the French did not ensure the Chitimacha's survival. The Chitimacha tribe was caught in the crossfire of the conflict between the European powers, leading to raids and attacks on their villages by both French and British forces.

The war's consequences were devastating for the Chitimacha people. Many of their villages were destroyed, and their population suffered further decline due to warfare, disease, and displacement. The tribe's traditional way of life was severely disrupted, and they faced increasing pressure from European settlers encroaching on their land.

In the aftermath of the war, the Chitimacha tribe struggled to rebuild and maintain their cultural traditions. With their population reduced and their ancestral lands under increasing pressure, their existence as a distinct and thriving tribe in south Louisiana was threatened.

Despite these challenges, the Chitimacha people persisted in preserving their cultural heritage and traditions. In the 20th century, efforts were made to revitalize their language and promote their cultural practices, leading to the official recognition of the Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana by the federal government in 1971.

Today, the Chitimacha tribe continues to persevere, ensuring their identity and heritage endure in the face of historical challenges and contemporary issues affecting Indigenous communities across the United States.



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The Chitimacha tribe is a Native American group that has inhabited the region of south Louisiana for centuries. Their history dates back to prehistoric times, and they were one of the first tribes encountered by European explorers in the 16th century.

According to historical records, the Chitimacha people were a sedentary tribe, living in villages along the Atchafalaya River and the Gulf of Mexico coast. They were skilled fishermen and hunters, relying on the abundant natural resources of the area for sustenance and trade.

Early encounters with European explorers, such as Hernando de Soto in 1542, brought significant changes to the tribe's way of life. European diseases and conflicts took a toll on their population, leading to a decline in their numbers.

Over the centuries, the Chitimacha tribe faced numerous challenges, including territorial disputes with other tribes and European settlers, as well as the forced removal policies of the United States government in the 19th century.

In the 20th century, efforts were made to preserve the Chitimacha culture and language. In 1971, the Chitimacha Tribe of Louisiana was officially recognized by the federal government.

Today, the Chitimacha tribe continues to thrive, preserving their cultural heritage and engaging in modern economic activities, such as gaming and tourism.

History of the Chitimacha

The Chitimacha (chit-i-MAH-sha) are a federally recognized tribe of Native Americans who live in the U.S. state of Louisiana, mainly on their reservation in St. Mary Parish near Charenton on Bayou Teche. They are the only Indigenous people in the state who still control some of their original land, where they have long occupied areas of the Atchafalaya Basin, "one of the richest inland estuaries on the continent."^[3] In 2011 they numbered about 1100 people.^[3]

The people historically spoke the Chitimacha language, a language isolate. The last two native speakers died in the 1930s, but the tribe has been working to revitalize the language since the 1990s. They are using notes and recordings made by linguist Morris Swadesh around 1930. They have also started immersion classes for children and adults.^[4]^[5] In 2008 they partnered with Rosetta Stone in a two-year effort to develop software to support learning the language. Each tribal household was given a copy to support use of the language at home.^[6]^[7]^[8] The Chitimacha have used revenues from gambling to promote education and cultural preservation, founding a tribal museum and historic preservation office, and restoration of their language.

The Chitimacha are one of four federally recognized tribes in the state. The State of Louisiana does recognize several other tribes who do not have federal recognition. In the late 20th century, Louisiana had the "third-largest Native American population in the eastern United States."^[9]



History[edit]

The Chitimacha's Ancestral Territory

The Chitimacha Indians and their ancestors inhabited the Mississippi River Delta area of south central Louisiana for thousands of years before European encounter. Tradition asserts that the boundary of the territory of the Chitimacha was marked by four prominent trees. Archaeological finds suggest that the Chitimacha and their indigenous ancestors have been living in Louisiana for perhaps 6,000 years. Prior to that they migrated into the area from west of the Mississippi River. According to the Chitimacha, their name comes from the term Pantch Pinankanc, meaning "men altogether red," also meaning warrior.

The Chitimacha were divided into four sub tribes: the Chawasha, Chitimacha, Washa, and Yagenachito; these terms were what the Choctaw people called sub tribes based on the character of their geographic territories. The name Chawasha is a Choctaw term for "Raccoon Place." Washa is also Choctaw and means "Hunting Pace." Yaganechito means "Big Country."

The Chitimacha established their villages in the midst of the numerous swamps, bayous, and rivers of the Atchafalaya Basin, "one of the richest inland estuaries on the continent." [3] They knew this area intimately. The site conditions provided them with a natural defense to enemy attack and made these villages almost impregnable. As a result, they did not fortify them. The villages were rather large, with an average of about 500 inhabitants. Dwellings were constructed from available resources. Typically the people built walls from a framework of poles and plastered them with mud or palmetto leaves. The roofs were thatched. [10]

The Chitimacha raised a variety of crops, and agricultural produce provided the mainstay of their diet. The women tended cultivation and the crops. They were skilled horticulturalists, raising numerous, distinct varieties of corn, beans and squash. Corn was the main crop, supplemented by beans, squash and melons. The women also gathered wild foods and nuts. The men hunted for such game as deer, turkey and alligator. They also caught fish. The people stored grain crops in an elevated winter granary to supplement hunting and fishing. [10]

Living by the waters, the Chitimacha made dugout canoes for transport. These vessels were constructed by carving out cypress logs. The largest could hold as many as forty people. To gain the stones they needed for fashioning arrowheads and tools, the people traded crops for stone with tribes to the north. They also developed such weapons as the blow gun and cane dart. They adapted fish bones to use as arrowheads. [10]

The Chitimacha were distinctive in their custom of flattening the foreheads of their male babies. They would bind them as infants to shape their skulls. Adult men would typically wear their hair long and loose. They were skilled practitioners of the art of tattooing, often covering their face, body, arms and legs with tattooed designs. Because of the hot and humid climate, the men generally wore only a breechcloth, and the women a short skirt. [10]



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Like many Native American peoples, the Chitimacha had a matrilineal kinship system, in which property and descent passed through the female lines. The hereditary male chiefs, who governed until early in the 20th century, came from the maternal lines and were approved by female elders. Children were considered to belong to their mother's family and clan and took their status from her. Like other Native American tribes, the Chitimacha at times absorbed and acculturated other peoples. In addition, as Chitimacha women had relationships with European traders in the decades of more interaction, their mixed-race children were considered to belong to the mother's family and were acculturated as Chitimacha.

The Chitimacha were divided into a strict class system of nobles and commoners. They had such a distinction that the two classes spoke different dialects. Intermarriage between the classes was forbidden.[10]

Colonial Period to 20th Century

"Two Chitimacha Indians", painting by François Bernard, 1870

At the time of Columbus' arrival in America, historians estimate the combined strength of the four Chitimacha groups was about 20,000. Although the Chitimacha had virtually no direct contact with Europeans for two more centuries, they suffered Eurasian infectious diseases contracted from other natives who had traded with them, such as measles, smallpox, and typhoid fever. Like other Native Americans, the Chitimacha had no immunity to these new diseases and suffered high fatalities in epidemics.

By 1700, when the French began to colonize the Mississippi River Valley, the number of Chitimacha had been dramatically reduced. Estimates for that time are: the Chawasha had about 700 people, the Washa about 1,400; the Chitimacha some 4,000; and the Yagenichito about 3,000. (Kniffen et al. said 4,000 people in total in 1700; they may have known only about those classified only as Chitimacha.)[9]

The sub-tribes of the Chitimacha confederation occupied a total of about 15 villages at the time of encounter with French explorers and colonists in the early 1700s. The French described the villages as self-governing groups. The Grand Chief represented the central governing authority of all the sub tribes, but they operated in a highly decentralized manner.

Between the years 1706 and 1718, the Chitimacha engaged in a long, bitter war with the French. With their superior firepower, the French nearly destroyed the eastern Chitimacha. Those who survived were resettled by the French authorities, away from the Gulf of Mexico and farther north along the Mississippi River, to the area where they live today. Disease caused more deaths than did warfare and ultimately resulted in dramatic social disruption and defeat of the people. The use of alcohol also took its toll, as they were highly vulnerable to it. By 1784, the combined numbers of the tribes had fallen to 180. In the early 1800s, a small group was absorbed by the Houma of Louisiana.

In the late 18th century, the British deported the Acadians (French colonists in Acadia) from eastern Canada after defeating France in the Seven Years' War and taking over their territories in North America east of the Mississippi River. Some Acadian refugees were resettled in Louisiana along the Mississippi River; their descendants became known as Cajuns.[11] They also put pressure on the Chitimacha population because they took over their land.



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Eventually some Chitimacha married Acadians and gradually became acculturated to their community, including converting to Catholicism.[11] Others absorbed Europeans into Chitimacha society. Mixed-race children born to Chitimacha women were considered to belong to their mother's families and generally were raised within the Indigenous culture.

The Chitimacha in the mid-19th century sued the United States for confirmation of title to their tribal land. The federal government issued a decree establishing an area of 1,062 acres in St. Mary Parish as Chitimacha land.[11]

Among their arts, Chitimacha women weave highly refined baskets from rivercane. They maintained a strict practice of using three colors: yellow, red, and black. They made baskets for sale throughout the centuries to today, as an important part of their economy.[12] An basket maker who excelled at the double-weave technique, Ada Thomas was honored as a National Heritage Fellow by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1983.[13]

20th Century to Present

The 1900 federal census recorded six Chitimacha families with a total of 55 people, three of whom were classified as full-bloods. In 1910 there were 69 Chitimacha recorded; 19 of their children were students at the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania, where they boarded full time along with other Native American students from a wide variety of tribes.[10] The Indian boarding schools were considered a means to assimilate the children into mainstream United States culture. They disrupted transmission of native languages by forcing the children to use English at school and taking them away from their families for lengthy periods of time.

The tribe was under economic pressure in the early 20th century, and sometimes members were forced to sell land because they could not afford taxes. Sarah Avery McIlhenney, a local benefactor whose family owned and operated the factory to manufacture Tabasco,[11] responded to a call for aid by Chitimacha women. She purchased their last 260 acres of land at a sheriff's sale in 1915; then transferred it to the tribe. They ceded the land to the federal government (Department of Interior) to be held in trust as a reservation for the tribe. McIlhenney also encouraged Federal recognition of the Chitimacha as a tribe,[11] which the Department of Interior granted in 1917.

Location of the Chitimacha Reservation in Louisiana

The Chitimacha were the first tribe of indigenous people still living in Louisiana to gain federal recognition. Most Native Americans of the Southeast had been forcibly removed to Indian Territory west of the Mississippi River during the 1830s.[10] The tribe received some annuities and financial benefits as a result of formal recognition. But the population continued its decline and by 1930, the Chitimacha had a recorded total of 51 people.



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General Douglas MacArthur meeting with Native American troops in 1943, including S/Sgt. Alvin J. Vilcan of Charenton, Louisiana, one of perhaps 70 then-surviving Chitimacha. Since that early 20th-century low, the population has increased as the people have recovered. Men began to gain better employment by working in the Louisiana oil fields as drillers and foremen. In the early 21st century, the tribe reported it has more than 900 enrolled members. The 2000 census reported a resident population of 409 persons living on the Chitimacha Indian Reservation. Of these, 285 identified as solely of Native American ancestry.

The reservation is located at in the northern part of the community of Charenton, in St. Mary Parish on Bayou Teche. This is in the Atchafalaya Basin, a rich estuary. The Chitimacha are the only indigenous people in the state who still control some of their traditional lands.[14] As with many Native American tribes, the Chitimacha took over their children's education and have established the Chitimacha Tribal School on the reservation; it is sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The Tribal Council is involved in ongoing negotiations with the United States to obtain compensation for the land expropriations of the past. With revenues derived from its gaming casino, the Chitimacha have purchased additional land to be held in trust for its reservation, and now control 1000 acres. It has established a casino, school, fish processing plant, and tribal museum on its reservation.[10] Language.

The Chitimacha language became extinct after the last two native speakers, Benjamin Paul and Delphine Ducloux, died in the 1930s. But young linguist Morris Swadesh had worked with Paul and Ducloux from 1930 to record their language and stories.[6] He made extensive notes in an effort to save the language and its traditional accounts. Most contemporary Chitimacha speak Cajun French and English.

With revenues from gaming, the tribe has established cultural revitalization activities: a tribal historic preservation office, language immersion classes, a tribal museum, and a project to promote river cane regrowth on tribal lands to support weaving traditional baskets.[14] In the early 1990s, the tribe was contacted by the American Philosophical Society Library, which said it held Swadesh's papers and had found extensive notes on the Chitimacha language, including a draft grammar manual and dictionary. A small team was recruited to try to learn the language quickly and begin to prepare materials to transmit it, such as a storybook. Language immersion classes were started in the school for children.[6] In 2008 the tribe partnered with Rosetta Stone to develop software to document the language and provide teaching materials. Each tribal household was given a copy of the software, to support families learning the language and encouraging children to speak it at home. The collaborative project is also producing a complete dictionary and learner's reference grammar for the language.[6]

Government

The Chitimacha re-established their government under the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, considered President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Native American New Deal. The tribe successfully resisted efforts in the 1950s to terminate them as a tribe under federal policy of the time, a move which would have ended their relationship with the federal government.



In 1971 they adopted a new written constitution.[10] They have an elected representative government, with two-year terms for the five members of the Tribal Council. Three are elected from single-member districts and two members are elected at-large.[15]

Membership

Like all federally recognized tribes, the Chitimacha, through passage of their constitution, have established their own rules for tribal membership. According to the constitution, they require that members have a certain blood quantum and be able to document direct descent from a member listed on one of two official rolls:

Annuity Pay Roll of 1926, recorded by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, or Revised census roll of June 1959, of record at the Choctaw Indian Agency, Philadelphia, Mississippi. In addition, a prospective member must be able to document having at least one-sixteenth (1/16) degree Chitimacha Indian ancestry (equivalent to one great-great-grandparent).[15] Children of one-sixteenth (1/16) degree or more Chitimacha Indian blood born to any enrolled member since 1971 (when the tribe adopted their Constitution) are entitled to membership.[15]

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Donaldsonville, Louisiana's Chitimacha Connection

Thirty-four years before William Donaldson founded the city of Donaldsonville, Father Angelus Revillogodos a Franciscan Capuchin Missionary priest, dedicated the church parish to the Ascension of Our Lord on August 15, 1772. It was officially named La Iglesia de la Ascension de Nostro Senor JesuCristo da Laforche de los Chetimaches. The reference therein is to the Chetimaches Indian tribe found in 1704 by early French explorers at the junction of the Mississippi River and Bayou Lafourche at Donaldsonville. The territory that comprised the original boundaries of the church parish included more than the present geographical area of Ascension civil parish. The church's name, which refers to the Chitimacha Indian tribe, dwelled at the junction of the Mississippi River and Bayou Laforche at Donaldsonville.

According to the director of the Chitimaches Museum, Chitimacha has been spelled 83 different ways. The Rosetta Stone Course Content spells the sovereign Nation of the Chitimacha as "Sitimaxa." The people historically spoke the Chitimacha language, a language isolate. The last two native speakers died in the 1930s, but the tribe has been working to revitalize the language since the 1990s. They are using notes and recordings made by linguist Morris Swadesh around 1930.

At one time there were twelve to fifteen separate Chitimacha villages in the Atchafalaya Basin and surrounding area. They stretched from Charenton to Donaldsonville and up north to just east of Baton Rouge. Indian mounds are found as far south as Patterson and as far north and east as Baton Rouge. Donaldsonville's (Lafourche Country) recorded connection begins in March 2018 when local land excavator discovered a 1500-year-old Chitimacha canoe. Land excavator Jamie Ponville was working on a job site when he noticed a triangular shape and notified state archaeologists.

By 1700, when the French began to colonize the Mississippi River Valley, the number of Chitimacha had been dramatically reduced. Estimates for that time are: the Chawasha had about 700 people, the Washa about 1,400; the Chitimacha some 4,000; and the Yagenichito about 3,000. (Kniffen et al. said 4,000 people in total in 1700; they may have known only about those classified only as Chitimacha.)

Father Jean-Francois Buisson de St-Cosme was brutally murdered by Tchitimacha tribe in the early 1700s causing the Tchitimacha War which resulted in the tribe's removal from the area. St. Cosme sought to spread Christianity amongst the native tribes. There is a historical marker located in Point Houmas (Donaldsonville) that reads: "FIRST MISSIONARY MARTYR – Jean Francois Buisson De St Cosme of Quebec Seminary, Canada. First American-born priest killed in this country and in Louisiana near this site by Indians (Chitimatcha) 1706" There have been many articles published on this event. The director of the museum stated the Chitimatcha were defending their tribe from the women and children being taken as slaves by Father Cosme. Another incorrect story is that Father Cosme was scalped. This marker is located in District 61, Highway 61, Ascension Parish.



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Father St. Cosme entered the Minor Seminary of Quebec at the age of eight. In 1690 Jean Francois was ordained to the priesthood as service to the Church was common in his family. Saint-Cosme left Quebec and started his Catholic Missionary to travel through North America convert savages to Christ. Saint-Cosme's mission met with little success. His poor facility for learning their languages and the low density of population were formidable obstacles. It may also be that, by this time, he had formed a low opinion of his charges. In letters he called for servants "capable of standing up to the most wicked Indian" and observed that "it is awkward for a missionary to have to punch an Indian." St. Cosme's mission ended during a trip down the Mississippi toward Mobile in late 1716. In the vicinity of what is now Donaldsonville, Louisiana, St. Cosme and his three companions were shot to death by arrows for the Chitimacha Indians. Father St. Cosme thus became the first North American native priest to be killed in the mission fields.

An assessment of the career of Jean Francois St. Cosme requires a balancing of heroic effort versus meager achievement. Through eight years of toil among dispersed and devastated tribes amid sparse French settlement, baptisms were few and his inability to establish himself at a thriving mission had to have been a disappointment. The martyr's crown won in a barrage of arrows seemed to be an ignominious conclusion to a lackluster career.

The earliest Chitimacha Map located is the 1772 "La Furche de Chitimaches" (Bayou Lafourche) which shows the tribe was located in Donaldsonville. Bayou Lafourche, originally called Chetimachas River or La Fourche des Chetimaches, (the fork of the Chitimacha), is a 106-mile-long (171 km) bayou in southeaster Louisiana, United States, that flows into the Gulf of Mexico. The bayou is flanked by Louisiana Highway 1 on the west and Louisiana Highway 308 on the east, and is known as "the longest Main Street in the world." It flows through parts of Ascension, Assumption, and Lafourche parishes. Today, approximately 300,000 Louisiana residents drink water drawn from the bayou.

Local artist Ben Earl Looney (1904-1981) is known for landscape-rural, plantations, murals. His early sketch entitled "Indians of Donaldsonville" includes the following sketch history: "The last members of a once mighty Indian tribe, forty-five families in all, now live out the end of their story on the banks of the Teche at Charenton on a 283-acre reservation. A few others who have left to find jobs return for an occasional visit. Most members of the tribe are being absorbed into the twentieth-century American way of life, and little attempt has been made to revive the old Indian customs. The Chetimachas were once noted for the beautiful baskets they wove from cane growing along the bayou, dyed with native barks and herbs. This craft, as well as beading, is being revived today. The language of the tribe, however, has been lost, and the government has forbidden them from using the cures of the medicine man. Once a warlike tribe, the Chetimachas have now been pushed back, exploited, and despoiled by the white man until they are now represented by only a handful of shy people."

Another Donaldsonville-Chitimacha connection is the early black and white photo labeled "Chitimacha Indian" taken by Donaldsonville photographer J. D. Hoggarth.



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The Sovereign Nation of the Chitimacha Reservation includes the museum, the tribal police, health clinic, casino, and school located in Charenton, Louisiana. On the reservation long ago, life was different. Both then and now the reservation had beautiful trees. Long ago they lived in round or rectangular houses. Louisiana Indians did not live in teepees. Today, the Chitimacha Tribes live in regular houses. Today Donaldsonville's map misspells the tribe's name. The street is listed as Chetimatches.

Further reading is the Country Roads Magazine's article "Woven Into Being – Between Melissa Darden's Hands, A thousand-year-old Chitimacha Tradition Continues On" by Catherine Comeaux, and the Penn Museum's "Basketry of the Chitimacha Indians". The Chitimacha are a federally recognized tribe of Native Americans who live in the U.S. state of Louisiana, mainly on their reservation in St. Mary Parish near Charenton on Bayou Teche. They are the only Indigenous people in the state who still control some of their original land.

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