

## The Native People of Fontainebleau

Research by Jackson Cantrell, 2019 Eagle Scout Project

### Map of Native Sites Surrounding Fontainebleau State Park

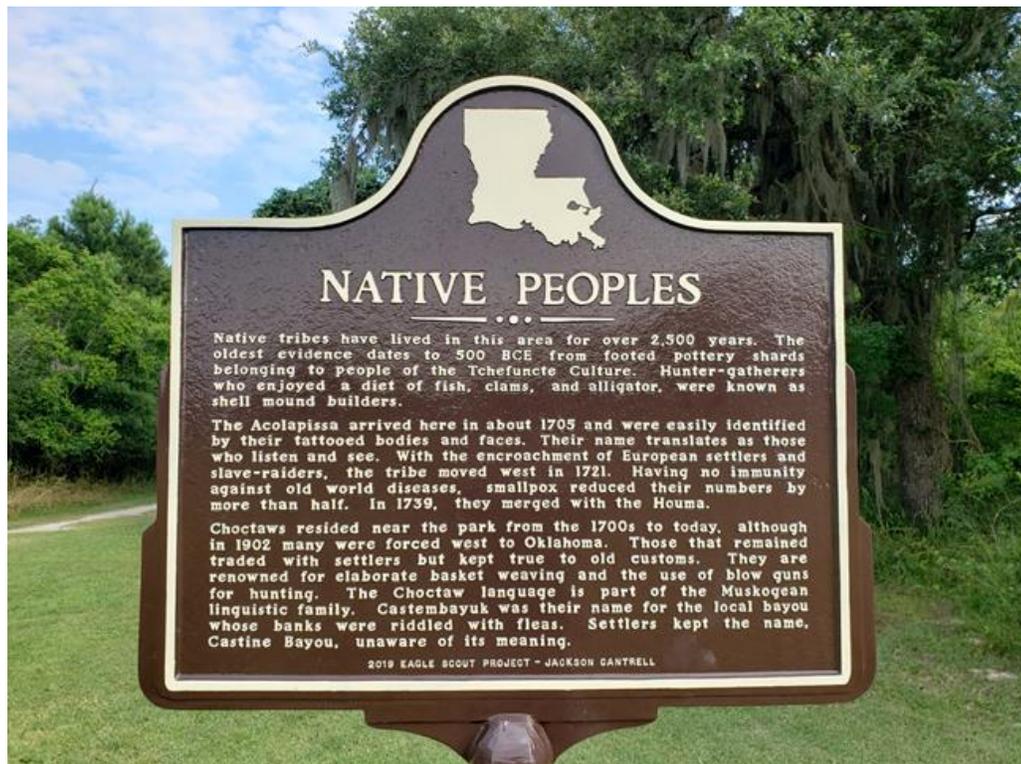


The following summary concerns people that played a pivotal role in our nation's and state's history, specifically, the Native cultures in the area of Fontainebleau State Park. The park is three miles east of Mandeville and covers 2800 acres of wooded lands and beaches bounded by Lake Pontchartrain, Cane Bayou, and Bayou Castine in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana.

Fontainebleau State Park is about 40 minutes' drive from New Orleans. The park was the former plantation started by Bernard de Marigny de Mandeville in 1829, and it is known for not

only the ruins of an old sugar mill but for an oak alley that once sheltered quarters for 40 enslaved families. They numbered 153 in 1840, including 57 children under the age of 10.

Of interest is that Marigny entrusted highly technical work to the enslaved workforce instead of hiring these jobs out to whites or free men of color. What was especially unique about this group of workers is that ten of them crewed a schooner that sailed back and forth across Lake Pontchartrain for more than 20 years. Two men – Ned Goelette and Valery Goelette – were the schooner’s pilots or captains. Both were enslaved and of African descent, but Valery was documented as being “griffe” meaning that he was half Native. Goelette was not the men’s last name, but just the translation of the French word for schooner. Their roles were so critical in getting Marigny’s products to market in New Orleans that they were identified this way on all legal documents. Before and after Valery, Native people had significant influence.



## **The Tchefuncte**

2,500 years ago, only a mile and a quarter east of the park's Visitor Center and famous oak alley, was a small village that laid on the banks of Cane Bayou. The people who inhabited this area were part of the Tchefuncte Culture. They were mound builders and hunter-gatherers whose encampments spanned from southeastern Texas all the way to western Mississippi. There is still much mystery surrounding the Tchefuncte culture, but the site at Fontainebleau is the most well documented in the nation.

From archeology studies, it is known that this group was the first to create large amounts of pottery in Louisiana. Their clay work was decorated with carved patterns and did not feature the glazing that other cultures used. Glazing helped make pottery sturdier, but there was so much clay at the Tchefuncte site, creating new vessels would have been easy. The Tchefuncte rolled long strips of sandy clay between their hands, then coiled them to make their ceramics. Many of their cooking pots were footed, and footed cookware gave them better options in ways to prepare meals. They dined on deer, alligator, fish, game birds, oysters, and other small game. Their mounds were made of clam shells, but because this type shellfish did not have much protein, they may have only eaten them because they were so plentiful. Corn, squash, melons, berries, and nuts rounded out their diet. Although their shell mounds are now gone, archeologists discovered 50,000 shards of pottery and human remains of 43 buried individuals. When the park was first created in 1938, it was called Chefuncta State Park, named after the

Native people who lived there thousands of years before. In 2000, the park was listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a nationally significant prehistoric site,

Unfortunately, before the park understood what the large shell mounds or middens were, heavy equipment was brought in to gather the old clam shells for use in paving roads. At least half of one of the two middens was completely destroyed before they noted the pottery shards marking the Tchefuncte site. While paddling south on Cane Bayou from Louisiana Highway 190, a canoe or kayak can take the traveler to the former site of the mounds which have mostly subsided into the marsh over time. There is a small slough, or branch, coming from Cane Bayou and headed westward into the park. As the slough zigzags, two small clusters of trees can be seen above the marsh grasses. Those two high spots are all that remain of the site where the Tchefuncte once lived. Nature and time have erased the mounds, but we honor and remember the Native people who created them.

### **The Acolapissa**

The Acolapissa people had been living on the Pearl River in the 1500s, 20 miles east of today's Fontainebleau State Park. Their original numbers were estimated at about 3000 people divided into seven small villages. By 1699, the tribe had decreased by half through warfare and disease that had been passed among various tribes after contact with Spanish explorers in the 1520s.

The French explorer Bienville met the Acolapissa in 1699 at their settlement on the Pearl River and counted 300 or so warriors. He was being escorted to their site by a group of Bayougoula

people, and Bienville fully expected to be the first European that the Acolapissa had ever seen. Instead, they were very alarmed by the white men in his company and were ready for battle. The Bayougoula chief kept Bienville and his men back and went ahead to ask what the matter was. It turned out that only two days before, the Acolapissa had already met their first Europeans. They had been attacked by 200 Chickasaw under the leadership of British slave traders. Many of the Acolapissa got away, but they were not alone in being targeted by the British who paid the Chickasaw to capture other tribes. When failed crops and failed attempts at mining precious minerals put British settlers into economic crisis, they turned to slave trading to make their profits.

The British-Chickasaw raids began during the early 1690s and eventually carried thousands of Native people to the slave docks at Charleston, South Carolina. They were shipped to the British islands of St. Kitts, Barbados, and Jamaica to be sold as enslaved plantation workers. Slave traders had come to understand that putting Native people into bondage on their own territory was unwise. If they were able to break free, they knew where to find help from others and also understood how to survive on the familiar land and waters. By shipping them to islands where they did not know the language, the people, or the land, keeping them enslaved was easier.

To escape further attacks, the Acolapissa moved here in 1702 to Castine Bayou, just a mile north of the park's Visitor Center. Farming was supplemented by hunting and fishing, and in what may be surprising to hear, bison were a major source of meat.

The Acolapissa were an ingenious tribe, particularly in hunting methods and tattooing. When hunting, they wore tanned deer skins with the antlers attached to get close to their prey. When a buck would spot what it considered a competitor, it would charge. The surrounding hunters would then have an easy shot. Out of all other tribes, however, the Acolapissa people could be identified easily because they were covered head to toe in tattoos. Once a pattern was cut into the skin, ashes of willow bark would be placed in the pattern. As well as acting as an “ink”, the ash was possibly selected because of the natural aspirin found in willow.

The Acolapissa were willing to ally with the French for their protection against slave raiders and became friendly trade partners. The French learned cultivation techniques from Native people for corn, squash, potatoes, and other indigenous crops. During times of famine over the years, they relied on them for food, sometimes moving into their villages for a time. In 1705, the French brought to the Acolapissa a group of Natchitoches people whose lands and crops had been destroyed by flooding on the Red River. The Acolapissa also hosted the French.

From May of 1706 until February of 1707, Andre Penicaut and eleven of his men were sent by Bienville to live with the Acolopissa and Natchitoches because of a shortage of supplies. The following is a translation of Penicaut’s account by McWilliams in his 1988 book *“Fleur de Lis and Calumet.”* It describes the living conditions of the village.

*“A week later we reached the Colapissas and the Nassitoches. That day we brought a great deal of game in our boats, having killed it the same day near the spot*

*where we had spent the night. As we had no more than two leagues to travel between our last stop and the Colapissas, we had hunted from morning till four in the afternoon, with the intention of carrying game to our hosts as an arriving present. And so in our boats there were six deer, eight turkeys, and as many bustards, killed that same day. When we got to their village with all this, they embraced us, the men as well as the women and girls, all being delighted to see us come to stay with them. Then they started cooking the meats that we had brought.*

*And after supper the entire village began to dance, and danced far into the night. We had in our group a companion named Picard, who had brought a violin with him. He could play it well enough to have these savages do some figure dancing in step. They had us nearly dying of laughter, for the musical instrument had the whole village drawn up around Picard; it was the most comical sight in the world to see them open their eyes in amazement and every now and then cut the most comical capers ever seen. But it was quite another matter when they saw us dance a minuet - two boys dancing together. They would gladly have spent the whole night watching us and listening to the violin, had not the Chief of the Colapissas, fearing we were tired out, come to tell us that lodgings were assigned to us.*

*All of them wanted to have us in their homes: the Chief of the Colapissas reserved the violin player to lodge with him; the most important men gave lodging to the others. For my part, I was lodged with the Chief of the Nassitoches. On my arrival, he had invited me to stay with him, and he led me away.*

*I was the person that, acting for M. de St. Denis, had conducted this chief among*

*the Colapissas the year before to live there with them. I knew him as one of the most honorable men among the savages of the region. Since that time, he had been indebted to me for saving his life, as I shall show later on. I was not sorry that I was lodged with him, for in his house I received every possible favor. He had two daughters that were the most beautiful of all the savage girls in this district. The older one was twenty; she was called Oulchogonime, which in their language means the good daughter. The second was only eighteen but was taller than her older sister. She was named Ouilchil, which means the pretty spinner.*

*I got up a bit late next morning because we had tired ourselves by dancing the greater part of the night. On getting up, I was surprised to see my host bring in a great platter of fish fricasseed in bear fat and cooked very well. There was also some sagamite, which is a kind of bread that they make from cornmeal mixed with flour of little beans that are similar to our haricots in France. Just the two of us were to eat together, and I was surprised at not seeing his wife or his daughters; but half an hour later they came back together, bringing a big platter of strawberries, for as early as the first of May strawberries abound in the woods.*

*That day they put on their fine braguets of very white nettle-linen. I gave each of them a present of half an ell of brocade of white background woven with little flowers colored pink and green, out of which each could make a braguets; but their father did not approve and begged me to keep this material for the daughter of the Grand Chief of the Colapissas because that chief outranked all others in their settlement. He was absolutely determined that the younger daughter should give her piece of brocade*

*back to me; but when I showed him another piece I was saving for that purpose, he thanked me at great length and was beside himself with politeness, and the mother was, too.*

*At this time two of my comrades came in to see me, one of them being Picard, the violin player. As soon as my host's elder daughter saw him, she kissed him. I was not so sorry about this as I would have been if it had been the younger daughter kissing him. Picard ate a bit of fish with us; and, when my other comrades arrived unexpectedly, we all went together to the house of the Grand Chief of the Colapissas.*

*When we got there, I embraced his daughter and also gave her a present of half an ell of the same material that I had given the daughters of the Chief of the Nassitoches at whose house I was staying. I think the father and mother would gladly have given me all their possessions, they were so delighted with the present I had given their daughter. We then went into all the huts of the savages, one after the other, they vying with one another in entertaining us.*

*Afterwards, during the after-dinner hour, we went to see their methods of fishing. They pulled up their nets from the lake filled with fish of all sizes. These nets, actually, are no more than fishing lines about six fathoms long. All along these lines, numerous other little lines are tied a foot apart. At the end of each line is a fishhook on which they put a bit of sagamite dough or a small piece of meat. With this method they do not fail to catch fish weighing more than fifteen or twenty pounds. The end of the line is tied to their boats. They pull the lines up two or three times a day, and they always catch many fish when they do. Such fishing as this does not keep them from*

*working in their field, for it can be attended to in less than half an hour. When they have pulled in all their fish, each person takes some fish home, and after it is cooked and seasoned with bear fat, as I have already said, they begin to eat it, each in front of his door in the shade of peach trees.*

*When the sun had sunk low and all had eaten supper, we danced, as on the evening before, quite far into the night. Their dances, like the ones I spoke of in the article on the Natchez, are conducted to the sound of a little drum. Our musician endeavored to keep time with the drum and the singers' voices. Although he made a most painful attempt that drew upon all his skill and caused us all to laugh out loud, he never was able to approximate their rhythm; and, as a matter of fact, their singing is more savage than the savages themselves. Although it is an incessant repetition, Picard could not get their pitch; but he made amends by teaching many of the girls in the village to dance the minuet and la bourree.*

*Every day after dinner, which these savages usually have at eight o'clock in the morning, we would get together and then go hunting, and every day we would bring game back to the village, so that the savages were delighted to have us with them. The Nassitoches are handsomer and have better figures than the Colapissas, because the Colapissas' bodies, men's and women's, are all tattooed. They prick almost their entire bodies with needles and rub the pricks with willow ash crushed quite fine, which causes no inflammation of the punctures. The arms and faces of the Colapissas women and girls are tattooed in this way, which disfigures them hideously; but the Nassitoches,*

*men as well as women and girls, make no use of such punctures, which they loathe. That is why they are so much better looking; besides, they are naturally whiter.*

*As for their religion, they have a round temple before which they appear morning and evening rubbing their bodies with white mud and lifting their arms on high; they mutter some words very low for a quarter of an hour. At the portal of the temple there are some wooden likenesses of birds; within the temple are numerous little idols, of both wood and stone, representing dragons, snakes, and some toadlike creatures, which they keep locked up in three chests inside the temple, the key being held by the Grand Chief. When a savage dies, a kind of grave is prepared, or, rather, a platform raised two feet above ground, on top of which the dead man is placed. He is covered completely with mud, and, further, bark is put on top of that, for fear of animals or birds of prey; and down below is put a little jug filled with water together with a platter full of meal. Every morning and every evening fire is lighted beside the platform, and here they come and weep. The richest people hire women to weep beside the platform. After six moons, the body is uncovered; if the flesh is consumed, the bones are put in a little basket and carried to their temple; if it is not yet consumed, the bones are taken from the flesh, and the flesh is burned.*

*They are rather cleanly with their food: they have an individual pot for each thing that they cook - that is, the meat pot is never used for fish. They cook all their food with bear fat, which is white in winter, when it is congealed, like lard, and is like olive oil in summer. It does not have a bad taste. They eat it with salad, use it in making pastry, in frying, and usually in everything they cook. As for fruits, they happen to be few. They*

*have, however, peaches in season that are even bigger than those in France, and sweeter; strawberries; plums; and a grape that is a bit sour and not so big as the grapes of France. There are also nuts which they pound into flour, using it with water to make pap for their children and mixing it with corn meal to make sagamite, or bread.*

*These savages have no hair on them whatever except the hair on their heads. The men as well as the women and girls remove the hair from their faces as well as from other parts of the body; they remove hair with shell ash and hot water as one would remove the hair from a suckling pig.*

*They have an unusual way to light a fire. They take a small piece of cedar wood, the size of one's finger, and another small piece of mulberry wood, which is very hard. They put them side by side between their hands and by spinning them together, like making chocolate froth, they make a little piece of fuzz come out of the cedar wood and catch fire. This can be done instantly.*

*When they go hunting, they go dressed in deer skins with the antlers attached. They make the same motions that a deer makes; and when the deer notices this, he charges them; and when he gets in good musket range, they shoot at him and kill him. With this method they kill a great many deer; and it should be acknowledged that in hunting buffalo as well as bear and deer they are more skillful than the French.*

*When winter came, we went out to the channel and into the woods to kill bustards, ducks, and wild geese that are much bigger than the geese in France. During that season unbelievable numbers of them are attracted to Lake Pontchartrain, and*

*there they stay along the lake shore. Every day we brought back some of them, which we roasted inside the huts, where good fires were kept burning on account of the cold. The cold is not, however, so long or so severe as in the Upper Missisipy. In this way we spent the greater part of the winter. As far as I was personally concerned, I was just as happy there in winter as in summer, for, to keep myself busy whenever I returned from hunting, I would sit close by the fire and teach my host's daughters to speak French. They made me die of laughing, with their savage pronunciation, which comes entirely from the throat, whereas French is spoken solely from the tongue, without being guttural."*

Although the Acolapissa hosted the French and were allied with them, increasing contact with Europeans exposed them to diseases like smallpox which would go on to eventually kill most of them. In 1739, they were taken in by the Houma. The Houma are indigenous Louisianans that originally lived along the Amite and Red Rivers. The Acolapissa and Houma people both spoke a form of the Muskogean language which made acceptance by the Houma easier.

Members of the United Houma Nation were present for the dedication ceremony of the historical marker on June 7, 2019 and closed the ceremony with prayer and drum song. It is possible that some of their ancestors may be the Acolapissa who once lived at this spot.

### **The Choctaw**

In the mid-1700s, another group who spoke a similar language moved into the area. The

Choctaw people were originally from Mississippi, Alabama, and northern Florida. As British and American settlers continued to claim lands, the Choctaw moved to Louisiana and formed alliances with the French. When the Indian Removal Act was signed into law, the Choctaw were the first tribe forced onto the “The Trail of Tears.” For those who managed to remain on the north shore, they were largely concentrated in Lacombe where Father Adrien Roquette established a large chapel he called “The Nook.” He also built three smaller cabin-chapels. One was on Cane Bayou, then called Ravine aux Cannes by the Creoles, 1.5 miles northeast of the Visitor Center and near the edge of what is now the park. The Choctaw called Cane Bayou “Chela’Ha” which translates as “noisy” because of the sound of the wind rattling the cane grasses along the waterway. The chapel was just one mile upstream of where the Tchefuncte once lived.

Daniel Usner’s book, ***American Indians in Nineteenth-Century New Orleans*** describes events at the Cane Bayou or Ravine aux Cannes Chapel this way.

*“Burial customs had long been prominent features of Choctaw ritual, and throughout the nineteenth century the communities near New Orleans bound themselves together in a death feast held at least once a year. Their version of the ceremony, as described by Rouquette brought Choctaw from Biloxi, Pearl River, and Amite River to Ravine aux Cannes.*

*They dressed “in a peculiar costume made up of calico of the most showy colors, such as red, blue, and yellow, these being the favorite tints.” The ceremony began with all-night dancing. Then participants wept dolefully while facing the rising sun and completed*

*the ritual with a bountiful feast. When they were gathered “in great number at these festivals,” Father Rouquette used the occasion to address the Choctaws “in instructive and touching words.”*

Choctaws were originally nomadic hunters who were and are famous for their cane baskets. Women from north shore Choctaw communities sold their elaborate baskets, sassafras, laurel leaves, and gumbo file’ at the French Market and other spots in New Orleans. They used steamboats from Mandeville to cross the lake as many as three times a week. Men found less time to hunt and fish in the 1800s as they became workers for railroads and other construction projects.

Across Bayou Castine, just outside the park’s western boundary, there is a spot in Old Mandeville called Pottery Hill. It is a bank of high ground where the Coles Creek and Plaquemines people lived from the 8<sup>th</sup> century through the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was their broken pieces of pottery found in the soil that likely gave the spot its nickname. The Choctaw used that high ground to sell their intricate cane baskets, herbs, and other goods to Creole families. The name Castine Bayou comes from the Native Muskogean term “Castem Bayouk.” It translates as “Bayou of Fleas” because of the biting insects infesting the banks at the waterway’s mouth. Creoles accepted the name Castine Bayou, unaware of its derogatory meaning.

Although the Choctaw accepted the teachings of Father Rouquette in the 1800s, their viewpoint can best be summarized by this account. Rouquette told of a conversation between his Uncle

Talence and a Choctaw named Vincent. Talence asked Vincent if he would like to go to heaven “where there is much happiness.” The Choctaw thought for a moment and asked whether there were “Americans up there. When Talence answered, “Doubtless,” Vincent decided. “Well, I do not want to go there.”

### **Remembering the Native Peoples of Fontainebleau**

With encampments, villages, chapels, and trading posts on the two bayous that mark the park’s edges, Native people aided the Creoles in learning to survive and thrive throughout Southern Louisiana. Unfortunately, they were not given the same favors in return. The historical marker commemorating indigenous cultures is located at the park’s trailhead leading to the marsh boardwalk. May it honor them always.

*“Fontainebleau has a truly unique history, and its story needed to be told. History, in fact, is exactly that, a story. Throughout time, there has been heartbreak and loss, happiness and sadness, destruction and reconstruction. It is through history that we learn the mistakes and successes of those that have come before us; and the learning of our nation’s, state’s, and world’s history is pivotal in determining our future.*

*It is through the education of young people that can truly change the world. All history must be remembered. From the most abstract conversation in a village at the dawn of mankind, to today’s debates in the U.N., we must protect our story. History chronicles the journey of mankind throughout the ages, and without it, we-have-nothing.”*

*-Jackson Cantrell, 2019 Eagle Scout*