

# Report from the Field:

## The Whole is So Much Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts

### Introduction

An evolution occurs in any relationship as the parties to that relationship precipitate events, experience other events, react to them, and react to each other. This process of movement and interaction is critical to any partnership. A study of this partnership process in northwestern Louisiana yields elements that have led to the successful interactions between a park and a heritage area, the preservation of nationally significant resources, and the deep involvement of the community in the process.

In 1994 Congress passed legislation enabling the creation of Cane River Creole National Historical Park and Cane River National Heritage Area, following the 1993 completion of a *Special Resource Study/Environmental Assessment* at the behest of the community and under the direction of Congress. As a result of that study, Congress concluded that the best approach for the preservation of the resources in the Cane River region was a combined program of national park and national heritage area, and wrote the legislation accordingly.

The Cane River region is in northwestern Louisiana midway between Dallas and New Orleans, and its history is culturally complex. In 1714 the French became the first Europeans to establish a permanent settlement at Natchitoches on the Cane River, formerly the main channel of Red River. Their intents were to revitalize trade with the Indians and more fully exploit the agricultural and commercial potential of the region. Under the

direction of Louis Juchereau de Saint Denis, the French gradually built up business interests in the area, much to the consternation of the Spanish who, concerned about French incursion into the interior of the North American continent, established their mission post of Los Adaes just a few miles to the west in 1717.

The formal transfer of the former French colony of Louisiana to Spain occurred in 1767, but despite Spanish rule French Colonial culture flourished for several reasons. The Spanish regime caused little change in daily life around Natchitoches, and the Spanish retained the services of French Commandant Athanase de Mezieres to maintain authority. Under his influence the Spanish adopted the French manner of dealing with the tribes through trade rather than through missionary control. French remained the primary language.

By the late 18th century commercial agriculture in the Cane River area replaced the trade in animal skins and

products as the primary economic base. French and Spanish land-grant farms produced indigo and tobacco, and farmers adopted the plantation system to work these large pieces of land with slave labor. Natchitoches, which had been a trade center prehistorically, remained an important crossroads of overland routes to the east, northeast and southwest, and a water route to New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. The area was a cultural nexus of French, Spanish, Indian, and African traditions, and out of this developed the anthropological definition of the term “Creole”: adaptations of French, Spanish, Indian, and African peoples to the New World and to each other (Figure 1).

French and Spanish legal traditions allowed, at least nominally, for various sorts of manumission. In the Cane River area the most famous instance was that of Marie-Therese Coin-Coin,

who began life as a slave and by the end of her life owned about 5,000 acres of land and held 99 slaves. Her 25-year liaison with an officer at the fort in Natchitoches resulted in 10 children, whose freedom she acquired. Considered the matriarch of the Cane River *gens de couleur libre* (free people of color), she founded a family that at one point in the 19th century owned 19,000 acres land, 16,000 of which remains in descendants’ hands today.

During the 19th century, cotton became the principal crop for the agricultural lands, and the plantations imported additional slaves from the southeastern United States. Although the 1803 Louisiana Purchase quickly brought about governmental changes, cultural changes lagged behind. French remained the primary language, and most people felt a cultural affinity to the French. The Red River



Figure 1. Creole women at the Badin-Roque House, Isle Brevelle, Louisiana. Photo courtesy of the Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Northwestern State University.

Campaign during the Civil War wreaked havoc on Cane River, and the area received heavy losses. Natural and human-caused changes on the Red River caused it to change its course, and as a result Cane River became a virtual oxbow, cutting it off from lucrative river trade. In addition, the development of Shreveport as a successful river port rang a death knell for the economic progress of Natchitoches and the Cane River region. The area and its peoples were left in relative isolation, and this lack of in-depth interaction with the outside world and lack of economic progress resulted in preservation of landscapes and buildings, but more importantly conservation of cultures. Descendants of the early peoples of the Cane River area—French, African, Spanish, and Indian peoples—were from families who had interacted with each other for more than 200 years, in some cases. Plantation owner, enslaved, free person of color, sharecropper, tenant farmer—all were related either through familial or geographic ties. Isolation had been an ally of preservation and cultural conservation.

### **Phase I: The Park as Catalyst**

When the National Park Service (NPS) undertook the *Special History Study* in the early 1990s, Natchitoches and Cane River had decades of experience with historic preservation projects, and the people connected with those efforts were the primary forces behind the legislation. Public Law 103-449 (16 U.S. Code 410) was enacted, creating the national park and the heritage area. The park included two former cotton plantations, both of

which had been in the ownership of the same families since the time of Spanish land grants, and both of which contained nationally significant architectural and landscape resources. The heritage area included 116,000 acres of land that made up the heart of Cane River's historic and scenic places, the national park, three state historic sites all tied to the historic roots of the area, and properties in the downtown National Historic Landmark district that would be subject to cooperative agreements. Within the heritage area was the homeland of the Cane River Creoles, descended from Marie-Therese Coin-Coin. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the heritage area was the continued use of the land in this small geographic area by the historic peoples who used it, combined with the highly visible, identifiable cultural landscape that gave this area an overwhelming sense of place.

The legislation for the park and the heritage area mandated the relationship between the two entities, and it specified the creation of a 19-member volunteer commission representing various community stakeholders. One purpose of the commission was to ensure that a "culturally sensitive approach" was used in the development of both the park and heritage area.

Funding came first to the park, which allowed us gradually to begin planning and preservation work (Figure 2), and to start park operations amid the on-going construction. For four years, however, funding never came through the appropriations process to the heritage area. Heritage area resources were in dire need of



Figure 2. Oakland Store, Oakland Plantation Unit, Cane River Creole National Historical Park. Courtesy of Jack Boucher, National Park Service.

funding, and this lack of financial backing for preservation of heritage area resources and programs created very high levels of frustration in the community. The heritage area had no funding, no staff, and a volunteer commission. Their hands were tied.

NPS began sponsoring or conducting ethnographic, archeological, and historical studies in the heritage area soon after the legislation passed. The law specifically mandated that the park would coordinate a comprehensive research program on cultural resource and genealogical topics, and this, along with a need to understand the cultural communities, provided the justification for studies completed for the park's general management plan. The research all included exten-

sive community involvement; often the team on a project included community members representing their own cultures. This project inclusion was a key factor in mobilizing some of the cultural groups in the heritage area.

The execution of a cooperative agreement between the park and the heritage area in 1998, and the subsequent transfer of funds from the initial appropriations, provided a jump-start to the heritage area, and its funding has remained in the president's budget since that time.

### **Phase II: Action and Reaction**

The second phase of development for the park and the heritage area occurred between 1998 and 2002, after the execution of the cooperative

agreement and the initial funds transfer. During this period, the heritage area commission was able to build on the groundwork laid by NPS through Cane River Creole National Historical Park.

Two important tasks characterized management of the park and the heritage area during this phase: building an identity in a region where many long-standing public and nonprofit organizations had prospered for decades, and expanding partnership relationships with those existing organizations. Both entities set out to accomplish these tasks in a number of different ways. The park continued to carry out its research mandate in conjunction with subject-matter experts and the community, and advanced the preservation and development of park resources. Importantly, the park also provided invaluable technical assistance to the community on a wide variety of projects. The heritage area commission began developing a stronger identity through the creation of a map brochure, moving the concept of the heritage area from an idea to a tangible article that could be distributed widely to both tourists and residents for the first time. Also, the commission received a Save America's Treasures matching grant through NPS to assist two local organizations in restoring two National Historic Landmark properties in the region. The park provided a historical architect to assist with both projects. The Save America's Treasures grant allowed the commission and the park to cement community partnerships in the process of preserving nationally significant resources.

In addition, the heritage area commission established a competitive grants program in which individuals, organizations, and businesses could receive grants to carry out projects in the categories of historic preservation, research, and development. Through this program, a committee composed of heritage area commissioners and community partners reviews grants annually, targeting projects that align with the park and heritage area missions as outlined in the enabling legislation. Begun in 1998, the grants program facilitates the process of moving federal seed money into the community to accomplish projects chosen by community. Furthermore, the grants program builds partnerships between the commission, the park (which provides technical assistance to grantees), and grant recipients. In some instances, heritage area grants serve as a catalyst for extensive partnership-building. The American Cemetery Association's preservation and restoration project provides an example in which a heritage area grant to a local non-profit organization initiated a project that today involves city government, a landmark district development organization, Cane River Creole National Historical Park, and the National Center for Preservation Technology and Training.

The Save America's Treasures award and the Cane River National Heritage Area grants program proved critical in raising awareness about the park's and the heritage area's existence and objectives, while at the same time accomplishing projects central to the missions of both entities. This progress was complemented by staff



development at both the park and the heritage area. With staff came the stability that is critical for long-term success in any organization.

### **Phase III: Symbiosis**

At present, the park and the heritage area are entering a new phase of development, one characterized by true joint effort. In 2003, both entities are moving into an operational phase, growing into the enabling legislation that set their paths in 1994. New visitor facilities are coming on-line in the park, and attendance has increased significantly from early days. Similarly, the heritage area commission is orchestrating a shift from smaller, identity-building projects to larger projects that contribute to infrastructural development of the region. Several projects in the development planning concept stage and a comprehensive signage initiative mark the transition to this third phase. Importantly, funding for the park, the heritage area, and other local partners is relatively consistent at this juncture. These factors allow both park and heritage area to build a solid foundation for joint management now and in the future.

A strong framework built of three primary elements characterizes this phase. First, both the heritage area and the park have succeeded in developing effective programs. This proven track record provides a solid base for future projects, programming, and partnerships for both entities. Furthermore, by now all partners have built strong relationships in which the way everyone interacts is defined, yet flexible. Clear roles exist for the park, the heritage area commission, and their many

partners. Such definition makes partnerships more effective without putting limitations on future innovation. Finally, a foundation for continued communication, built on openness, honesty, trust, and mutual respect, exists amongst the park, the heritage area commission, and their partners. This foundation of trust and mutual respect is critical to the past success of the partnership region; maintaining it is essential to all future success.

### **Cautionary Visions from the Crystal Ball**

Looking toward the future in Cane River and in other regions with heritage initiatives—existing national heritage areas and those that will come on-line in the future—there are some potential obstacles on the horizon. First, the National Park Service may be facing significant budgetary issues. Today, even flat funding for NPS represents operational and program decline due to the rising cost of doing business. In these uncertain budgetary times, the future may hold internal battles over available funding. In light of this knowledge, it is vital to maximize our partnerships and build support internally and externally for national heritage area programs.

More than most traditional park units, heritage areas often are very tied into local, state, and federal politics. Although politicization has some advantages regarding obtaining funding and bringing attention to important issues, politics can become overbearing. Managers must work to ensure that the resources remain the highest priority of heritage initiatives, and that politics remain supportive,

not directive.

Heritage development is at an important juncture in 2003. The concept of national heritage areas is growing rapidly in popularity, and interest in establishing general legislation for heritage areas is on the rise in Congress and in heritage regions across the United States. Heritage region managers, NPS, and all of our partners should not squander this opportunity to establish general standards for designation and criteria for best practices. Such standards and criteria will help to ensure that the designation and development of national heritage areas remains a productive strategy to protect important pieces of America's landscape.

### **The Secrets of Our Success**

In the Cane River region, both the park and the heritage area commission are on track to heed these cautionary visions and continue our successful partnership. Our success is built of many components. First, we have a clear understanding of the mission of all partners and the way we interrelate. This understanding derives from the structure and concepts set forth in our enabling legislation, the guiding force in our development. Also, all partners share trust and mutual respect. The park and the heritage area commission work hard to ensure the fair treatment of all partners and the inclusion of all voices. As organizations that are new to the region, the park and the commission are in a unique position to build bridges between diverse local organizations where none have existed before.

The status of the park and heritage

area as "outsiders" or "newcomers" however, is only effective when we recognize the value of local community knowledge. Over 200 years of wisdom and existing understanding of the sense of place in the region can guide park and heritage area efforts and contribute to a solid foundation for the future. In conjunction with local knowledge, it is important to involve subject-matter experts early and often. Whether dealing with historic preservation, history, interpretation, archeology, or any number of disciplines, subject-matter experts can help advance critical dialogue in heritage areas.

Finally, nonfederal national heritage area management entities and other partners have the opportunity and flexibility to communicate needs of the region to legislators, benefiting both federal and nonfederal partners in our endeavors to conserve living American landscapes.

### **Conclusions**

From the park's standpoint, our partnerships raise awareness. They help us preserve our geographic buffers. Preserving geographic buffers helps, in turn, to preserve the "scenery and wildlife therein" that lie inside park boundaries. Partnerships help us preserve the natural and cultural context. Partnerships increase staff understanding of the resources and their inherent meaning. Partnerships increase our stewardship capabilities.

From the standpoint of the heritage area, it preserves lands and resources that may not meet national park criteria but that do contain critical pieces of the American landscape. These are pieces that help us define our national

character.

For all partners involved in this venture—for management, communities, and visitors—we all share a deeper understanding of the cultures, places, and stories that make this region significant.

At the first national heritage area commission meeting in Natchitoches, National Park Service Deputy Director Denis Galvin read a quote from artist and conservationist Alan Gusow's 1972 book *A Sense of Place: The Artist and the American Land*:

A place is a piece of the whole environment that has been claimed by feel-

ings. Viewed simply as a life support system, the earth is an environment. Viewed as a resource that sustains our humanity, the earth is a collection of places. It is always places we have known and recall. We are homesick for places. We are reminded of places. It is the sounds and the smells and the sights of places which haunt us, and against which we often measure our present.

The business of parks and heritage areas is the business of places. It is our business to ensure that each national heritage area remains that kind of place, by combining the best of resources and partners.

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