

CHEROKEE PLANTATION
Highway 494
Natchez
Natchitoches Parish
Louisiana

HABS No. LA-1318

HABS
LA-1318

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

ADDENDUM TO:
CHEROKEE PLANTATION
Cane River National Heritage Area Commission
Highway 494
Natchez vicinity
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REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

FIELD RECORDS

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

Addendum to CHEROKEE

HABS No. LA-1318

- Location:** Highway 494, near Natchez, in Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana.
- Historically, Cherokee, and neighboring Oaklawn, were said to be on Cote Joyeuse of the Cane River. Both houses are on the west bank of the Cane River about 8 miles southeast of Natchitoches and approximately 1 ½ miles northeast of Natchez. Cherokee sits within the boundaries of the Cane River National Heritage Area as well.
- Present Owner/Occupant:** Mr. and William C. Nolan, of El Dorado, Arkansas. Cherokee has been in Nolan's family since the late nineteenth century when her grandfather Robert C. Murphy purchased the property. Census records place the Murphy family in Natchitoches Parish, west of the Cane River, by 1900. Murphy was a farmer.¹
- Present Use:** Cherokee remains primarily a residence, just as it always has been, but now arrangements can be made for occasional, private tours of the house and grounds. The property falls within the Cane River National Heritage Area boundaries and appropriate sign-age alerts visitors to Natchitoches of its presence down river as well as that of its neighbors.
- For a brief period the stranger's room served as Marston's Post Office; however, this function is not reflected in the current furnishing plan.
- Significance:** Built by 1839, Cherokee is an important example of French creole architecture and retains remarkable integrity in both materials and plan.
- Description:** Hovering off the ground as creole houses are wont to do, Cherokee stands one and one-half stories tall (over the almost 6' raise) and is

¹Twelfth Census of the United States, Population Schedule, 26 June 1900; Tenth Census of the United States, Population Schedule, 17 June 1880; "Cherokee," Louisiana state register file, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. In 1880, the Murphys lived in Union, Louisiana, where Robert also farmed. His youngest son Emerson was born in November of 1888 according to the 1900 census; it was this child to whom Cherokee would pass in 1936. Emerson Murphy and his wife Leola Albritton Murphy (who died in 1966) left Cherokee to their oldest daughter, who then sold it in January of 1972 to Theodosia Nolan, also a grandchild of Robert Murphy.

covered by a hipped roof sheathed in wood shingles. Framing consists of cypress posts in-filled with bousillage; the foundations are brick masonry piers that lift the house a full-story off the ground. The hipped roof is cantilevered over the 12' deep galleries and hand-hewn cypress columns rise from the gallery floor to meet it. Part of the rear and side galleries was enclosed at an earlier date to accommodate modern sleeping, plumbing, and culinary needs. Bousillage walls are also found within the kitchen, although incongruent with the walls dating to the initial (1830s) construction period.

Besides the enclosure of the galleries to accommodate modern kitchen and bathrooms, the other notable interior change is the addition of a door connecting the stranger's room to the interior of the house proper. The floor plan, however, is typical of creole houses. While far larger, measuring about 55' x 65' overall, and more refined than most creole cottages, Cherokee's interior spaces follow a traditional asymmetrical, *salle-chamber* format and have multiple points of entry directly from the outside. Formal access to the house proper came by way of double doors leading into the two rooms opening onto the front gallery. A stranger's room also opens onto the front gallery. A ladder stair leads to the large attic space, whereas a trap door reveals a cellar. The present cellar originally served as a pantry. Folding or accordion doors allow the present dining room to meld into the front parlor for a larger, public entertaining space.

The house is heated by three interior chimneys; there are six fireplaces in all. The window glazing (nine-over-nine) is original, as are the floors, fireplace mantels, the punkah, and most hardware. The doors are painted to resemble wood grain, a technique known as "faux bois."

There are five outbuildings connected to the property. There is a small structure immediately behind the big house. It exhibits wire nails and circular sawn wood, so was most likely built around the turn of the twentieth century. Three are positioned southwest of the house and include a log crib with square-notched logs and a board and batten door with hand-forged nails; a center-passage barn with two pens, made of balloon framing; and a side-shed barn, or rather a single crib with two side sheds. The last, across Highway 494

from the house, is a tenant house that reputedly served as a slave cabin for the plantation. In 2005, the tenant house had new interior finishes and the rafters appeared to be butted together rather than secured by the older, mortice and tenon method.

History:

On 30 November 1837 Charles Emile Sompayrac, married Marie Clarisse Prudhomme, the minor child of Narcisse Prudhomme and M.T. Elisabeth Metoyer. The marriage register noted that Sompayrac had obtained his majority and was the legitimate son of Ambroise Sompayrac and Josephine Desiree Briant (Bryant). Witnesses to the wedding ceremony, which took place at St. Francois, included various family members in addition to a neighbor, Jean Joseph Alexander Plaucher.² Less than two years later, in May of 1839, Narcisse Prudhomme transferred property - 1339 arpents of land and several slaves - to his son-in-law in a transaction valued at just over \$45,000.³ It is thought that the house, called Cherokee after the roses growing there, had been built by 1839. It is likely that Emile Sompayrac added onto the structure, enclosing various galleries, around 1850.⁴

Also in 1839, the Bossier-Gaiennie duel was fought at the rear of the plantation; Gaiennie died as a result of his wound and Bossier,

²*Natchitoches Church Marriages, 1818-1850*, p. 97.

³Natchitoches Parish Conveyance Records, Book 25, folio 387-88. The property was described as "all that certain tract or parcel of land [...] 1193 arpents and 4/100th on the right bank of the Red River and 146 95/100th on the left bank"; it was bounded above by the vendors (the Prudhommes) and to the sides and below by that of John Joseph Alexander Plaucher. The land and "all the improvements" thereon were assessed at \$33,210; the difference (up to the sale price of \$45,015) in value was for the slaves and farming equipment, including seven mules, two horses, two yoke, an ox cart, one lot of plows and harnesses, one lot [illegible] for cotton, scaffolds, and one cistern at \$750. The names of the slaves, as best as I can transcribe, are as follows: Francois, male, age 32, \$1000; Jackson, male, age 33, \$1000; Terence, male, age 2, \$1000; Anna, female, age 28, \$750; Jenny, age 32, and child Catherine, age 3, \$850; Gustine, age 28, and child Mavil, age 18 months, \$825; Madiste, Negress, age 18, \$700; Valsin, Mulatto, age 20, \$1000; Sidney, age 18, \$900; Bandieu, age 30, \$400; Rivhard, age 16, \$400; Mary Anglaise, age 27, \$700; Chalotte Plunckett, age 45, \$350; Linda, female, age 35, \$500; and a Mulatto girl, Clavis, age 10, \$450. The parcels that became Cherokee plantation were patented in 1795 by Philip Frederique (section 76) and Jacque Faure (section 78).

⁴"Cherokee," state register file. Baton Rouge, Louisiana; "Cherokee Plantation," Nomination 14 August 1973, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service.

who was elected to Congress in 1842, later committed suicide (1844).⁵

Records of the 1870 federal census reveal something of the composition of the Sompayrac household, naming Emile Sompayrac as a farmer with \$14,000 in real estate and identifying his wife, Clarisse. Pamela, age fourteen, and Ernest, age nineteen, were part of the household as was a "black" woman, Quiller [sic] Jane, from Maryland. She was a cook. Also, the census noted the presence of Henry, a young "black" child of twelve years of age.

In March of 1878 an obituary notice for C. Emile Sompayrac was posted; the newspaper noted he died at 2:30 in the morning on Friday, March 8th, at sixty-four years of age. The funeral procession, the newspaper observed, would begin at Mr. A. Lecomte's house the following day.⁶ More revealing was that submitted by "a son and a daughter" remembering Sompayrac's "excellent business tact, [that he was] a first-class planter, punctual, faithful, exact in the fulfillment of every business engagement." According to this account, Sompayrac was an "old and honored citizen of the parish" who had endured "years of intense suffering" and "ended his mortal career in the midst of dutiful nurses of Cote Joyeuse and Brevelle Island."⁷

In May of 1879, a sale notice was posted; it was to be held at the residence of the deceased on the Cane River about ten miles from town. The sale was scheduled for July 1st. Clarisse Sompayrac paid \$4250 for her husband's undivided half-interest in the two tracts, "together forming the plantation on which the deceased last resided."⁸ She also bought the parcel in town, near St. Denis Fort,

⁵*Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Northwest Louisiana comprising a large fund of biography of actual residents, and an interesting historical sketch of thirteen counties.* Southern Publishing Company, 1890.

⁶Robert DeBlieux Collection, folder 271.

⁷Fontenot Collection, folder 2.

⁸Natchitoches Parish Conveyance Records, Book 74, folio 276-77. The first was "a certain tract of land containing eleven hundred and ninety-three, 47/100th arpents on the right bank of Red River and 146 95/100th arpents on the left bank of Red River, bounded above by lands of Achille Prudhomme, decd and below by lands herein after described together with all the buildings and improvements thereon, acquired by decd from Narcisse Prudhomme and wife by act of date Dec 19th 1839 of record in the Recorders Office of this Parish, also a tract of

and another "lot of ground" measuring 102' x180' on the east side of Jefferson Street, as well as the property jointly owned by Achille Prudhomme and Emile Sompayrac known as Cha[...] Springs Place. Portable property auctioned off that day to Clarisse Sompayrac included eight mules, four horses, three mules (mares?), five colts, fifteen cows and calves, eighty head sheep, two old wagons, one old horse cart, six plows, six hoes, four bull(?) tongues, four sweeps, and six prs. gears, plus one old carriage, one old buggy, six chairs, two rocking chairs, one sofa, one marble top table, one card table, one carpet cloth, two beds and bedding, two armoires, one side board, one toilet table, [...], three [illegible] presses, six [illegible] tables, two beds."⁹

In October of 1886, Clarisse Sompayrac sold Cherokee, the same land she bought at the July of 1879 sale prompted by the succession of her husband Emile Sompayrac's estate and the same property transferred to him from Narcisse Prudhomme, to William H. Jack.¹⁰ Jack was her lawyer; he later flipped the estate to Thomas Creighton and it was Creighton who sold the house and 356 acres to Robert Murphy in 1891. Cherokee has remained in the Murphy family, and a restoration of the house was undertaken in the 1970s.¹¹

Sources:

"Cherokee Plantation." Cultural Resource Survey, 1976, Art, Historical, and Cultural Preservation Agency, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

"Cherokee Plantation." Nomination, 14 August 1973, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service. (Also, "Cherokee," state register file).

land adjoining the above bounded by said above described tract of land and below by lands of Widow Plaucher containing 566 50/100th acres both of said two tracts forming the plantation C.E. Sompayrac and being the same on which the decd last resided when after crying the same a reasonable and proper length of time, Mrs. Clarisse Sompayrac being the last and highest bidder became the purchaser thereof [...]."

⁹Natchitoches Parish Conveyance Records, Book 74, folio 277-78. It is possible that the six presses and six tables are made of cypress and the "Cy" (I think) shorthand for the material, but the notation difficult to decipher.

¹⁰Natchitoches Parish Conveyance Records, Book 83, folio 512-14.

¹¹The 1973 NRHP nomination covers the house, dependencies, and 88 acres of land.

Fontenot Collection. Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Watson Memorial Library, Northwestern State University, Natchitoches.

Hardin, J. Fair. *Northwestern Louisiana*. Shreveport: Historical Record Association, 1939.

Melrose Scrapbook No. 68. Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Watson Memorial Library, Northwestern State University, Natchitoches.

Menn, Joseph. *The Large Slave Holders of 1860 of Louisiana*. New Orleans: Pelican Publishing Company, 1964.

Mills, Elizabeth and Gary Mills. "Sidelights on a Duel," *Natchitoches Times* (June 1976).

Natchitoches Church Marriages 1818-50. Tuscaloosa: Mills Historical Press, 1985. [transcription abstracts of the register from St. Francois des Natchitoches, Louisiana] Cammie G. Henry Research Center, Watson Memorial Library, Northwestern State University, Natchitoches.

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Saxon, Lyle. *Old Louisiana*. NY: The Century Company, 1929.

Sites 475-80, Historic Standing Structure Survey, 1986, Division of Historic Preservation, Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

U.S. Census Records.

Historian:

Virginia B. Price, 2006.