

# *History*

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## *The Chitimacha*

The Chitimacha Indians (Sitimaxa - People of the many waters) were the original inhabitants of the area. Around 500 AD, the Chitimacha began settling the bayou region of Louisiana, where they lived in permanent villages in homes constructed of cane, wood and palmetto leaves. They raised corn for hominy and meal and were excellent hunters and fishermen. The plentiful shellfish of the area were also an important part of their diet. Of the traditional crafts practiced by the Chitimacha, they are most famed for their extraordinary skill at basketry. Chitimacha baskets were made from wild cane reed, dyed naturally and woven into geometric designs.

The Chitimacha in this area lived along the Bayou Teche (a Chitimacha word meaning "snake"). Their legend has it that the bayou was formed when Chitimacha warriors battled a huge venomous serpent that terrorized the region. The snake was miles in length and as it twisted and writhed in death, it deepened the mud where it lay, forming the sinuous course of the bayou.

Wars with the French and Spanish during the early 1700s left the Chitimacha on the brink of extinction. In the mid 1800s, the Chitimacha obtained a governmental decree establishing title to 1,062 acres of land, but by the early 1900s, there were only 260 acres remaining in tribal hands. In 1918, Sarah McIlhenny (of the Tabasco family) helped petition the Bureau of Indian Affairs for federal recognition of the tribe. Today, the Chitimacha Reservation encompasses 283 acres of land. Approximately 350 Tribal members live on the reservation and total Tribal membership is approximately 900.

## *Berwick*

The first white settler to trek through the wilderness in this area was Thomas Berwick, a surveyor from Pennsylvania who was working in Opelousas. He settled along the banks of the Atchafalaya River in the late 1700s. Today the town of Berwick is home to several seafood processing plants and numerous boat companies.

## *Patterson*

During the early 1800s, a group of Pennsylvanian Dutchmen boarded a sailing vessel in New Orleans and ventured into the Bayou Teche. One of them, Hans Knight, decided to settle his family in what is now Patterson. The community was originally called Dutch Settlement, Dutch Prairie and Dutch Town. In 1832, Captain John Patterson, a trader from Indiana, settled. He built a store and

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became a prominent citizen. The town was renamed Pattersonville after the captain successfully moved the post office to Dutch Settlement. Pattersonville was incorporated in 1907 as the Town of Patterson.

The town of Patterson was once home to the largest cypress sawmill in the world, owned by Frank B. Williams. Two of his sons became prominent citizens within the community. Kemper Williams was an extraordinary philanthropist, leaving behind foundations for the support of the Historic New Orleans Collection and the Kemper Williams Park and Campground in Patterson.

His brother Harry Williams was a wealthy playboy with a love of speed. He met Jimmie Wedell, a daredevil barnstormer, in 1927 when he purchased his first airplane. Harry learned that though Jimmie had very little formal education, he was a genius with engines and had some innovative ideas about increasing air speed. With Harry's money and Jimmie's know-how, they developed an extremely successful partnership. The aircraft they manufactured held the world's speed for land planes as well as transcontinental and international records for flights across the United States.

The Wedell-Williams Air Service was originally formed to provide charter trips to New Orleans. The business expanded to include sightseeing, student instruction, and airmail. Jimmie Wedell became famous for the construction of speed planes and his skill as a race pilot. He won the Bendix Trophy, the French Government award, Shell Trophy, Thompson Trophy, and many more. Jimmie Wedell died behind the controls of a plane on June 24, 1934 at the age of 34.

Harry Williams died in 1936. His widow was Broadway and silent-screen star Marguerite Clark. With the loss of both Jimmie and Harry as well as other vital members of the Wedell-Williams team, Marguerite could not keep the air service operational. She sold it to Eddie Rickenbacker, owner of Eastern Airlines, then moved to New York, where she died in 1940.

### *Franklin*

Founded in 1808 as Carlin's Settlement, Franklin (named for Benjamin Franklin) became the parish (county) seat in 1811 and the first incorporated town in 1820. Though early settlers included French, Acadian, German, Danish, and Irish, the town's culture and architecture is heavily influenced by the unusually large numbers of English that chose to settle there after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Numerous large sugar plantations arose in the area, and with the development of steamboating, Franklin became an interior sugar port. By the 1830s, Bayou Teche was the main street of Acadiana, with one plantation after another.

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The area's sugar cane planters were among the South's wealthiest agriculturists. This is reflected in the grand plantation homes and mansions they built in Franklin and the surrounding countryside. Most of these magnificent structures are still standing and well preserved, giving Franklin its unique architectural flavor. Franklin's Historic District is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and encompasses over 420 noteworthy structures. Many of the spectacular Greek Revival antebellum homes are along the live oak arcade on the East Main boulevard. East Main Street retains its distinctive turn-of-the-century iron street light standards, which have become a symbol of the picturesque town.

Though a small town, Franklin has produced more than its share of statesmen, including five governors of Louisiana, four United States senators, a Chief Justice, an Attorney General and a Lieutenant Governor. Franklin was also the boyhood home of Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy.

During the Civil War, the Battle of Irish Bend was fought near Franklin on April 14, 1863. Though eventually forced to retreat, the badly outnumbered Confederate forces cost the Union troops significant losses. Four hundred men were killed or wounded in the confrontation, which proved to be an important point in stopping the Union drive to invade Texas.

Today Franklin is a modern town with a population of about 9,000. The area produces oil, gas, carbon black, salt, seafood, and of course, sugar.

## *Morgan City*

Morgan City, formerly Brashear City, is the gateway to the Atchafalaya Basin. Morgan City was originally called Tiger Island by surveyors appointed by U.S. Secretary of War John Calhoun because of a particular type of wildcat seen in the area. It was later called Brashear City after Walter Brashear, a prominent Kentucky physician who purchased large tracts of land and acquired numerous sugar mills. During the Civil War, Brashear's strategic location at the mouth of the Atchafalaya made it one of focal points of the campaign in the region. In 1876, Brashear City was renamed Morgan City in honor of Charles Morgan, a steamship magnate who successfully dredged the Atchafalaya Bay. The dredging allowed the city to become a booming port, which set the pattern for future growth as a trade center.

The Atchafalaya River and the Gulf of Mexico have always been the economic lifeblood of Morgan City. Commercial fishing, particularly shrimping in the Gulf, has provided for generations of Morgan City natives. The natural resources of the Atchafalaya Basin have also been a major contributor to the local economy. The Atchafalaya Basin is over 800,000 acres. It covers 1/3 of the state

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of Louisiana and is the largest overflow swamp in the United States. The Basin is home to countless species of fish and wildlife. The natural beauty of the Atchafalaya Basin at Morgan City was chosen as the site for filming the first Tarzan movie in 1917, which starred Elmo Lincoln.

In the last fifty years, the offshore petroleum industry has become a major sector of the economy. In 1947, Morgan City gained national recognition when Kerr-McGee produced the first offshore oil well out of sight of land. Today, oil is still vital to the area's economy.