



# SOUTHERN Charm

Beauty, history and hospitality await in lovely Natchitoches, Louisiana, home of playwright Robert Harling's famous steel magnolias

BY WENDY LINDSAY

**S**haded by massive live oaks and bedecked with creamy magnolias and vivid pink myrtle, the town of Natchitoches (pronounced *nack-a-tish*) is situated just 113 kilometres from Shreveport Airport and 443 kilometres north of its flashy southern sister, New Orleans. It's a charming, historically rich town that you may be more familiar with than you realize and that owes its very existence to a French-Canadian.

You've probably seen the town of Natchitoches without realizing it — for it was the setting for the 1989 award-winning movie *Steel Magnolias*. In fact it's the town that inspired the story. New York playwright Robert Harling grew up there. In October of 1985 when he lost his sister, Susan, to complications of diabetes, he channelled his grief into

writing a stage play. It celebrated the legendary strength and friendship of Southern women that had sustained his mother and sister. A few years later he was also commissioned to write the screenplay for the movie. Fortunately, Harling was able to persuade the studio to film the movie on-site in Natchitoches, though the name was changed to "Chinquapin," just as it had been for the stage play, too.

It was a red-letter day when the stars of the movie — Julia Roberts, Sally Field, Dolly Parton, Olympia Dukakis, Shirley MacLaine and Daryl Hannah — moved into town for the weeks of filming, and the effect is felt to this day.

The 33-block Landmark Historic District of Natchitoches is a B&B lover's dream. Prior to the movie, there were only four or five B&Bs; today there are over two dozen in a profusion

of architectural styles, including Antebellum, Queen Anne, Creole, French and Spanish colonial, and Victorian. Many of these homes were originally built as the "town homes" of plantation owners in the era when cotton was king and remained private residences until the movie put quiet little Natchitoches on the tourist map.

Local guide Barbara Bailey — whose husband, Doyle, played the father of the groom in the movie — leads a tour of all the local film settings. She points out Steel Magnolia House, the grand red-brick B&B on Jefferson Street where the wedding reception was filmed, as well as the Bayou Amulet House B&B down Poet Street where some of the crew and minor cast stayed. Also on that street, amid vibrant pink myrtle and a trickling fountain, is a little park where another scene was shot. Although



Melrose Plantation. (Left) Steel Magnolia House B&B. (Right) Statue of French-Canadian explorer, Louis Antoine Juchereau de St. Denis, founder of Natchitoches.

the interior of Truvy's hair salon was shot on a set constructed in the university gym, a private home was the stand-in for the exterior shots. A small country church became the movie's wedding chapel, and Harling himself played the minister who conducted the wedding.

Across Louisiana, food is an integral part of life. In Natchitoches, it's all about the meat pies — variations on the traditional hand pies used in the plantation fields. Family-run Lasyone's Meat Pie Restaurant on Second Street is where you can sample the famous folded and fried pie filled with beef, pork or crawfish and spiced with secret family seasonings. They bake from 400 to 1,000 pies per day for regular customers and special events. In their dining room, you just may spot a group of ladies who remind you of the six close friends at the heart of *Steel Magnolias*, for it's the type of place where regulars have met for years.

Another popular, and photogenic, place where friends meet is Front Street, which faces the beautiful Cane River Lake, a 56-kilometre-long oxbow lake

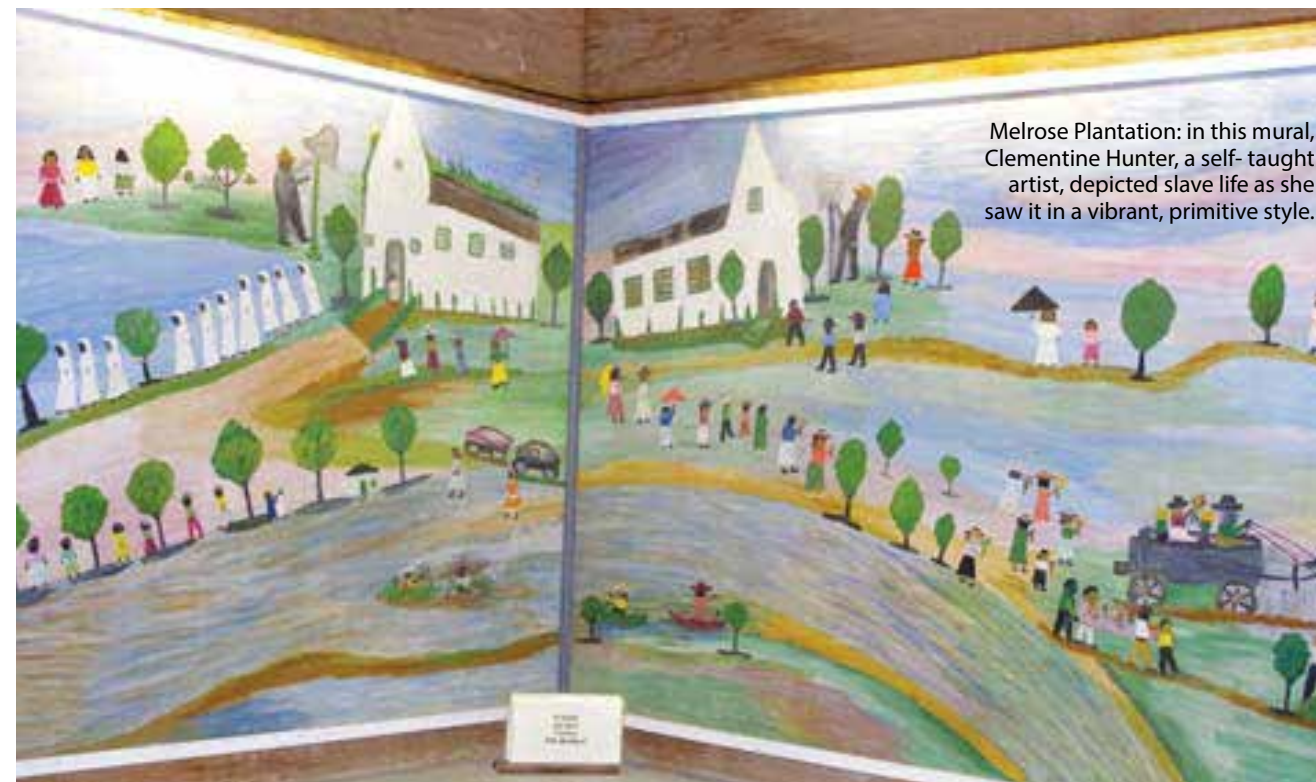
that was formed from a section of the Red River (*not* the same one that flows through Manitoba). The waterfront park is the community gathering place for summer farmers' markets, barbecue competitions and Easter egg hunts, and is the site of the famous Christmas light show that draws tourists from mid-November into the new year. That's when Natchitoches becomes known as the "City of Lights" — just as in the movie. With its black wrought iron balconies above the street-level stores and brick-paved road in front, parts of this street could double for New Orleans's French Quarter. Before 1832, these shops were warehouses for goods brought upriver by paddlewheel steamboats.

Farther down Front Street, the Canadian connection is revealed. Near the Tourist Information Center stands a bust in honour of explorer Louis Antoine Juchereau de St. Denis, founder and later commandant of colonial Natchitoches. Under a summary of his illustrious career, the tribute reads in part, "Lasting memorial to the historic bond between Quebec, Louisiana and Texas."

In 1714, three years before the founding of New Orleans, St. Denis, a native of Beauport, New France, was on his way to Mexico on a mission for the French king. He stopped by a Natchitoches Indian village on the banks of the Red River and built a couple of huts. He left behind a small detachment of men to guard the goods and trade with the locals. This became the first permanent European settlement in the territory that later became known as the Louisiana Purchase. Two years later, a small company of colonial troops was sent to expand their presence and build an outpost to prevent the Spanish forces in Texas from advancing into the French territory. This strategic outpost was named for a French patron saint and the local native tribe — Fort St. Jean Baptiste des Natchitoches. That original colony grew into the present-day city of Natchitoches.

After extensive archival research in Louisiana, France and Canada, Fort St. Jean Baptiste was reconstructed in recent years. Visitors today are sometimes saluted with a black-powder volley from an old flintlock gun as they approach the stockade that St. Denis first founded and later commanded. Within, costumed interpreters in 18th-

Photo, (top) Natchitoches CVB



Melrose Plantation: in this mural, Clementine Hunter, a self-taught artist, depicted slave life as she saw it in a vibrant, primitive style.

century French uniforms help bring history alive in the buildings that make up the mini-village. When you look at a North American map, it's amazing to see just how far from present-day Quebec this thriving outpost lay.

The influence of St. Denis was considerable and extended well beyond the fort. According to the historical research, "Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, Commandant of the Post of Natchitoches, was an entrepreneur of the first rank. Few men in the colony were as adept at legal commercial ac-

tivities or the fine art of smuggling as this Canadian-born Frenchman, and an appreciative French Government had bestowed upon him knighthood and named him a Chevalier of the Royal and Military Order of St. Louis. For three dozen years the ingenious St. Denis had been valued by his French superiors, and both respected and feared by the Spanish and the Indian nations for his abilities to achieve that which could not be achieved and to procure that which could not be procured."

One of his most notable "procure-

ments" lay the groundwork for a legend. During a period when a source of slaves was legally non-existent, St. Denis obtained a black slave who fathered 11 children, including Marie Therese Coincoin, who became a legend in her lifetime. With the help of St. Denis's married daughter, Coincoin was later able to thwart the social and church rules of the day to live with the man she loved, although he was a white Frenchman. He eventually bought her freedom and she operated one of the largest plantations in the area, breaking through the barriers of race and sex. She went on to purchase the freedom of all 10 of their Franco-African children, whom some consider to be one of the founding Creole lineages in Louisiana. Their domain covered 13,000 acres and stretched 48 kilometres.

Melrose Plantation, now open to the public, was but one small part of that domain. Approaching the great house, you pass under massive live oak trees over 300 years old. Like a set from *Gone with the Wind*, the historic white buildings are framed by stately magnolia trees laden with saucer-like white or pink blossoms. This hub of an agricultural empire became a haven for Louisiana culture, attracting painters, poets



Melrose Plantation: massive, 300-year-old live-oak tree.

## [LOUISIANA]

and writers, when Cammie G. Henry bought it in 1884. Today the salon bookcases are filled with first editions from authors who worked there and original art hangs on the walls.

Outside, the change from cotton to culture also transformed the large plantation vegetable gardens into flower beds. On the upper floor of the African house, the work of black folk artist Clementine Hunter fills a gallery with

its vibrant colours. Hunter depicted life as she saw it in a rare and simple documentation of slave life. The African house itself is a unique structure with a large over-hanging roof and 35-centimetre-thick walls. Its African-based construction is so efficient, internal temperatures never rise above 28°C, even in the midsummer heat.

A few kilometres away, Oakland Plantation was originally owned and worked

by eight generations of Prud'hommes, a French Creole family. After the invention of the cotton gin in 1793, cotton replaced tobacco and indigo as the main cash crop, and Oakland Plantation was the first large-scale cotton producer west of the Mississippi. Today, Oakland Plantation's great house and numerous out-buildings — including a general store, livestock and storage barns, slave quarters, an overseer's house and a doctor's house — give a glimpse of how a large plantation resembled a small village. An avenue of immense live oak trees planted in 1825 still shades the great house and drafts breezes from the river, where barges would have carried produce to market and brought in supplies.

As in Canada, the rivers were Louisiana's first highways and the key to commerce, trade and defence. But the shifting of a section of the Red River's channel and the subsequent formation of Cane River Lake would change the course of history. Left on the shores of the lake, but separated from the Red River, Natchitoches was deprived forever of the chance to become a major port and a big city. It dozed in the southern sun as a quiet residential retreat until awakened to its tourism potential by the movie industry. And now, looking forward, it would appear that as more and more people discover its special charms, Natchitoches sits poised to come into its own as a thriving adult-lifestyle community. ■

### TRIP PLANNING

Natchitoches Convention  
and Visitor's Bureau  
[natchitoches.net](http://natchitoches.net)

Explore Louisiana North  
[explorelouisiananorth.org](http://explorelouisiananorth.org)

Louisiana's Other Side  
[shreveport-bossier.org](http://shreveport-bossier.org)

Cane River National Heritage Area  
[caneriverheritage.org](http://caneriverheritage.org)

Louisiana Culinary Trails  
(see Red River Riches)  
[louisianaculinarytrails.com](http://louisianaculinarytrails.com)