

French Influences at Los Adaes

by George Avery

Introduction

A presidio (or fort) and mission were established by the Spanish in 1721 near what is now Robeline, Louisiana, in reaction to the French attack on the Spanish mission for the Adaes Indians in 1719. The presidio was called Nuestra Señora del Pilar de los Adaes, and the mission was called Mision San Miguel de Cuellar de los Adaes, named after the Adaes Indians in the area. The fort and mission—collectively referred to as Los Adaes—were occupied until 1773. Even though the establishment of Los Adaes in 1721 was a reaction to French military aggression, the years that followed were characterized more by accommodation and mutual support than by conflict. The French influences at Los Adaes from 1721 to 1773 will be discussed drawing on both historical and archaeological research. The political, social, religious and economic influences of colonial Natchitoches on Los Adaes will be summarized, and French artifacts recovered from Los Adaes will be discussed.

Political Influences

The French and Spanish were well-defined political antagonists by the end of the 17th century and LaSalle's failed attempt to establish a series of French forts along the gulf coast of Texas is clear evidence of this. The situation became somewhat murky when King Charles II of Spain died in 1700 without a male heir and the French Bourbon

Phillip V was placed on the Spanish throne. The War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714) was fought to defend the choice of the Bourbons occupying the throne of Spain, and the French fought with the Spanish against the Holy Roman Empire, the British, the Dutch, and Portugal. The French and Spanish prevailed, and even though the Bourbons were French, this did not prevent Phillip V from waging war on the French and others some years later in the War of the Quadruple Alliance (1718-1720).

The French attack on Mision San Miguel de los Adaes in 1719 was part of the War of the Quadruple Alliance and has been referred to as the Chicken War because it was the Spanish chickens that fought most valiantly against the French intruders from Natchitoches. The French soldiers were collecting chickens during the attack, tying pairs of chickens together by their feet and draping them over the saddles of the horses. The leader of the French attack, Lieutenant Blondel, was thrown from his horse after his pair of chickens put up a vigorous defense.

The Chicken War prompted the Marqués de Aguayo to fund an expedition (1720-1722) to re-establish and strengthen the Spanish presence in Texas. Aguayo wished to protect his large land holdings in northern Mexico and his expedition re-established the six missions and Presidio Dolores in the piney woods area of Texas, and built two additional presidios, one being

at the site of LaSalle's fort near the gulf coast and the other at Los Adaes. By 1727 it was clear that the French had no intentions of attacking so the troop strength at Los Adaes was reduced from 100 to 60 soldiers, Presidio Dolores was shut down, and three of the six missions re-established by Aguayo in the piney woods area were moved to San Antonio. A clear indication of cooperative political relations between the French and Spanish came in 1731 when soldiers from Los Adaes, along with a group of Hasinai, helped defend Fort St. Jean Baptiste when the Natchez attacked.

Social Influences

The few documented marriages between the French and Spanish involved men from Natchitoches and women from Los Adaes. The daughter of Joseph Gonzales, officer at Los Adaes, married Jean Baptiste Derban of Natchitoches. Their son, Manuel, became a soldier at Los Adaes.

Religious Influences

It is probably safe to say that the Spanish at Los Adaes had more influence on the French at Natchitoches regarding religious affairs than the other way around. Both Spanish and French were Catholic, but there was no missionary effort by the French in the Natchitoches area, and initially there were no priests at Natchitoches. Priests from Los Adaes would say mass and perform other religious duties at Natchitoches during this time.

Economic Influences

Perhaps the greatest influences exerted by the French at Natchitoches on the Spanish at Los Adaes were economic in nature. Prior to 1700, the French approach to tapping into the wealth of New Spain was by attempting military conquest as indicated by LaSalle's failed attempt to establish a fort on the gulf coast of Texas. After 1700, instead of fighting, the French decided to trade in order to share in the riches of New Spain. When the initial French trading attempts were rebuffed at Vera Cruz in 1710, Louis Juchereau de St. Denis was sent to establish a trading post in 1713 among the Natchitoches Indians and also to find Father Hidalgo at Presidio San Juan Bautista on the Rio Grande. Hidalgo had sent two letters to the French governor of Louisiana offering connections with Spanish traders in exchange for supporting his return to the missions abandoned in East Texas in the 1690s.

It is not clear if St. Denis ever found Father Hidalgo, but St. Denis' presence inspired the Spanish in 1716 and 1717 to build six missions and a presidio in response to the trading post at Natchitoches. Interestingly enough, St. Denis served as guide for this expedition as he had married the step granddaughter of the commandant at Presidio San Juan Bautista. It is probably no coincidence that the French fort at Natchitoches came to be named Fort St. Jean Baptist after St Denis became commandant.

The Spanish and French had very different views relating to economic interaction. The French at Natchitoches were eager to trade with the Spanish at Los Adaes, but the Spanish were hesitant and initially

banned all trade with the French. When it became clear that Los Adaes could not feed itself, the Spanish allowed trade with the French for food, but not merchandise. In spite of prohibitions, there was trade in merchandise between Natchitoches and Los Adaes. This is suggested by the fact that three French traders remained at Los Adaes after it was closed in 1773, and also French influences are abundantly apparent from archaeological investigations at Los Adaes.

French Artifacts Recovered from Los Adaes

French pottery fragments are well represented at Los Adaes. It is interesting that most of the French pottery is tin-enameled rather than lead-glazed, the former being the more expensive. There have been roughly equal amounts of French and Spanish pottery fragments recovered at Los Adaes.

French gun parts are not very common at Los Adaes. The remains of a minimum of only two French weapons have been recovered—Spanish gun parts are much more numerous. French gunflints, however, are quite common, but it is not too surprising that the Spanish were using French gunflints. French gunflints were also used by the British during the 18th century, but the French gunflints found at Los Adaes most likely came from Natchitoches. Gunflints made of the high quality central Texas chert are most common at Spanish colonial archaeological sites around San Antonio—French gunflints are a rare occurrence there.

French folding knives and metal kettle fragments have been recovered at Los Adaes, but like the French gun parts, not in great numbers. The Spanish appear to have preferred their own knives, and there is evidence that the cupreous kettles were being cut up and re-purposed.

Lead cloth seals affixed to the ends of bolts of French cloth have been recovered at Los Adaes, but since French cloth could have come through legal means to Los Adaes, it cannot be stated that the lead cloth seals recovered from Los Adaes represent contraband trade.

It was reported in one inspection of Los Adaes that the soldiers would trade one horse for one bottle of French wine—the fragments of French bottles have been recovered from a widely scattered area at Los Adaes.

It is curious that no Spanish military buttons have been recovered from Los Adaes—the only military buttons recovered from Los Adaes have been French.

Only two coins have been recovered from Los Adaes—both low denomination cupreous coins, one from Spain and one from France. The French coin is perforated in the center, and may have been worn around the neck. This coin bears the date 1721 and was introduced to Canada at a value of 9 deniers. The French Canadians did not like the coin, and most were sent back to France. The coin was re-introduced to New France in Louisiana in 1731 at a value of 6 deniers (1 sous was 12 deniers).

Summary

French influences at Los Adaes were primarily economic and it is clear that Los Adaes could not have survived without trading for food with the French at Natchitoches. In spite of the Chicken War of 1719 and the subsequent Spanish military build-up in 1721, it became apparent by 1727 that the French were more interested in trading than fighting and the Natchitoches-Los Adaes relationship was characterized more by accommodation and mutual support than conflict. The archaeological investigations indicate that French pottery and wine were popular at Los Adaes, but other French merchandise such as knives and firearms were not as prevalent.

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