



Spring Renewal

Once considered lost to invasive hydrilla, Spring Bayou in Avoyelles Parish was restored by dedicated locals and is now a thriving Wildlife Management area

BY KEVIN RABALAIS

The letters on the faded life jacket spell HODAPP. “That’s not a [Cajun] name, no,” he says. Locals detect as much from Illinois-native Kenny E. Hodapp’s speech. He’s docked at the Boggy Bayou Landing, five miles outside of Marksville, watching the sky churn blue-gray.

Hodapp came to Louisiana in 1965 as a lineman working to restore power after Hurricane Betsy. Later, his company sent him to work along the Red

River. Stationed in Marksville, he developed a routine, dining each evening on the town square, site of the Solomon Northup trial. After two weeks, he noticed a new waitress.

“I met a pretty Cajun girl and never left,” he says.

Seated in his boat, Hodapp scans the overgrown bank. There’s a glimmer in his eye that, unlike the accent, reveals something that locals decipher with ease. With it comes a boyish glee, a lightness of step that conveys his joy in this adopted home. Thirty seconds from his back door, he can access a system of waterways that, in entirety, would take him all day to explore.

The Spring Bayou Complex covers nearly 13,000 acres, 12,506 of them within a Wildlife Management Area. Its rivers, lakes and cypress-thronged bayous include Lac aux Siene, Coulee Noir, Little River and Tee Lac. Hodapp’s neighbor from across Boggy Bayou, Abe Mattox, also met and married a Cajun woman. He was working as a welder in Corpus Christi at the time and she brought him home to Spring Bayou. Their relationship faltered, but in 1983, Mattox bought her father’s house.

“This is the [Cajun] Riviera,” Mattox says. “To get here, you cross a bridge. Then you on Spring Bayou Island. And when you here, you in paradise.” For more

(above) Kenny E. Hodapp and Abe Mattox, founding members of the Spring Bayou Restoration Team, say that the complex looked like a “yard” before the team began its work. (right) Ben Luke and his son Hynson kayak along Bay Sec.



(top) Kenny E. Hodapp and Ann McCain greet Abe Mattox at their home on Boggy Bayou. (bottom) Abe Mattox arrives at a cul-de-sac in Spring Bayou.



AT A GLANCE



LOCATION
Avoyelles Parish

FLORA
Bitter pecan, water primrose, verbena, and delta duck potato

FAUNA
Black bear, deer, ducks, alligators, largemouth bass, catfish

than a decade, though, Spring Bayou was anything but, an unnavigable landscape neither water nor land.

Mattox first noticed the problem in 1991. Opinions vary on how hydrilla — an invasive aquatic weed native to Asia — arrived in Spring Bayou, but Mattox places his bet on a boat trailer. Over the years, he and others watched, helpless, as the problem worsened.

“By 2005, you couldn’t get your boat out of the dock,” says Ann McCain, who lives with Hodapp. Eager to discuss the problem, they invited locals to a fish fry at their home. (“People often say they want to help,” Hodapp says, “but you have to bait them.”)

They learned that they weren’t alone in their desire to restore Spring Bayou. Soon, they had a petition with 4,500 names, along with a new organization. “If you were at the fish fry, you were one of the original board members of the Spring Bayou Restoration Team,” Hodapp says.

With help from the state, the SBRT introduced triploid carp — a large, sterile, grass-eating minnow species — into the complex. Then everyone waited. A year passed before they saw the first signs of progress. Fourteen years after that fish fry, you can’t go far in Spring Bayou without seeing someone fishing or paddling.

“Before the SBRT, all of this was finished,” Mattox says. “Everything out here looked like a yard.”



“Now, “it’s paradise and then some.” says Terri Flint, who lives with Mattox in the house he bought in 1983. “People told me that I had been robbed for paying \$13,000,” Mattox says. “But to use the 13,000 acres in my back yard, all I need is a hunting and fishing license. I think of it as paying \$1 per acre as a lease on the land. Use it like you want as long as you don’t abuse it.”

Flint stands smiling beside Mattox. With four of their nine dogs jumping around her, she says, “Not a day goes by he don’t say, ‘I love where I live!’.” ■



DID YOU KNOW?
Facts and Figures

• Since 2007, the Spring Bayou Restoration Team has released 62,000 triploid carp into the complex, 60 with transmitters so that the state can track them.

• The Spring Bayou Complex includes an early Mississippi River channel (4000-2500 BC). That area, Old River, contains burial mounds of the extinct Avoyel, or Avoyelles, Tribe.

• The SBRT invests all raised funds in the complex. Its projects include the installation of new floating docks and numbered duck boxes to help kayakers navigate via GPS.

(top) Hynson Luke prepares to swing from a rope in Bay Sec. (bottom) Ray Bordelon docks near the Boggy Bayou Landing on the morning of a Spring Bayou bass tournament.



Preserving and Protecting

At Avery Island fighting coastal erosion is as much of a daily activity as cultivating peppers

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KEVIN RABALAIS

(Top) Smooth cordgrass is an important tool in fighting shoreline erosion on Avery Island. (Middle) Heath Romero ferries workers to replant the perennial deciduous grass. (Bottom) Thousands of egrets return each year to Avery Island's "Bird City."



On either side of the boat stretches the vast wetlands of south Louisiana. Farther south, several miles beyond this ruler-flat landscape, lie Vermilion and West Cote Blanche bays — and beyond, the Gulf. Three hours of such uniformity, coupled with summer heat, inspires drowsiness. Then everything changes.

At the helm, Heath Romero steers us into a new passage, and in the distance rise, improbably, two hills. “Those are the salt domes of Weeks and Avery islands,” he says. They are, according to the U.S. Geological Survey, the highest elevated points along the Louisiana Gulf Coast, with one marker at Avery Island registering 165 feet above mean sea level.

The unlikely sight gives Charlotte Leavitt comfort. “When I see the domes,” she says, “I know I’m home.” Leavitt attends Clark University in Massachusetts



Besides providing home to six hundred varieties of plants, including a wide range of camellias and azaleas, and hundreds of species of resident and migratory birds, the Jungle Gardens on Avery Island offer a safe haven to white-tailed deer, alligators, nutria, racoons, bobcats, and other wildlife.



and has returned to “the island,” in local parlance, to work in the McIlhenny Summer Program. On another day, she might don personal protective equipment to handle the pepper mash that will age into Tabasco sauce, Louisiana’s iconic culinary export, but today, she and four others — Addison Duhon, Pipes Fitz-Hugh, Felix Osborn and Dreyke Thibodeaux — have set out with Romero to wade waist-deep in mud so they can plant smooth cordgrass to protect the island and its multi-million-dollar annual industry.

Romero, the land manager at Avery Island, oversees such planting several times each year. In the 1980s, he and his uncle began planting trees and grasses after oil companies dredged in the marsh. That initial planting has reclaimed as much as 80 yards, but such work never ends. “Every time there’s a storm,” he says, “you have to start all over again.”

With boots propped on the boat rail, Romero watches today’s group pull clumps of cordgrass — stalks resem-



AVERY ISLAND

Leave the Land
Stronger Than
You Found It

- Avery Island is a 2,200-acre salt dome surrounded by salt marsh, cypress swamp, and bayous. Its elevation (165 feet above mean sea level) supports habitats not found in surrounding marshes, swamps and prairies.

- Founded in 1868, the McIlhenny Company now employs more than 200 workers, many who live on the island. In 1905, after construction of a second Tabasco factory on Avery Island, a village was constructed to house workers. That village, which originally included a dancehall, has become known as the Tango.

- The 1929 Hollywood movie “Evangeline,” based on the poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and starring Dolores del Rio and Roland Drew, was filmed partially in the Jungle Gardens on Avery Island.

- On average, Avery Island’s Tabasco factory produces 750,000 of bottles of hot sauce each workday which are shipped to nearly 200 countries.

In an effort to fight coastal erosion, McIlhenny Summer Program workers Felix Osborn, Charlotte Leavitt, Dreyke Thibodeaux, Pipes Fitz-Hugh, and Addison Duhon transplant smooth cordgrass to protect Avery Island.

AT A GLANCE



LOCATION
Iberia Parish

FLORA
Comprised of 170 acres, the semitropical Jungle Gardens at Avery Island include timber bamboo, holly shrubs, and live oaks. It boasts the largest collection of camellias in the nation.

FAUNA
Black bears, alligators, otters, deer, bobcats, coyotes



bling six-foot tall spring onions — from the bank and transplant it 20 yards from the shore. Within a year, perhaps two, sediment will fill this gap, widening the shoreline and strengthening protection in a place that each year grows more precarious.

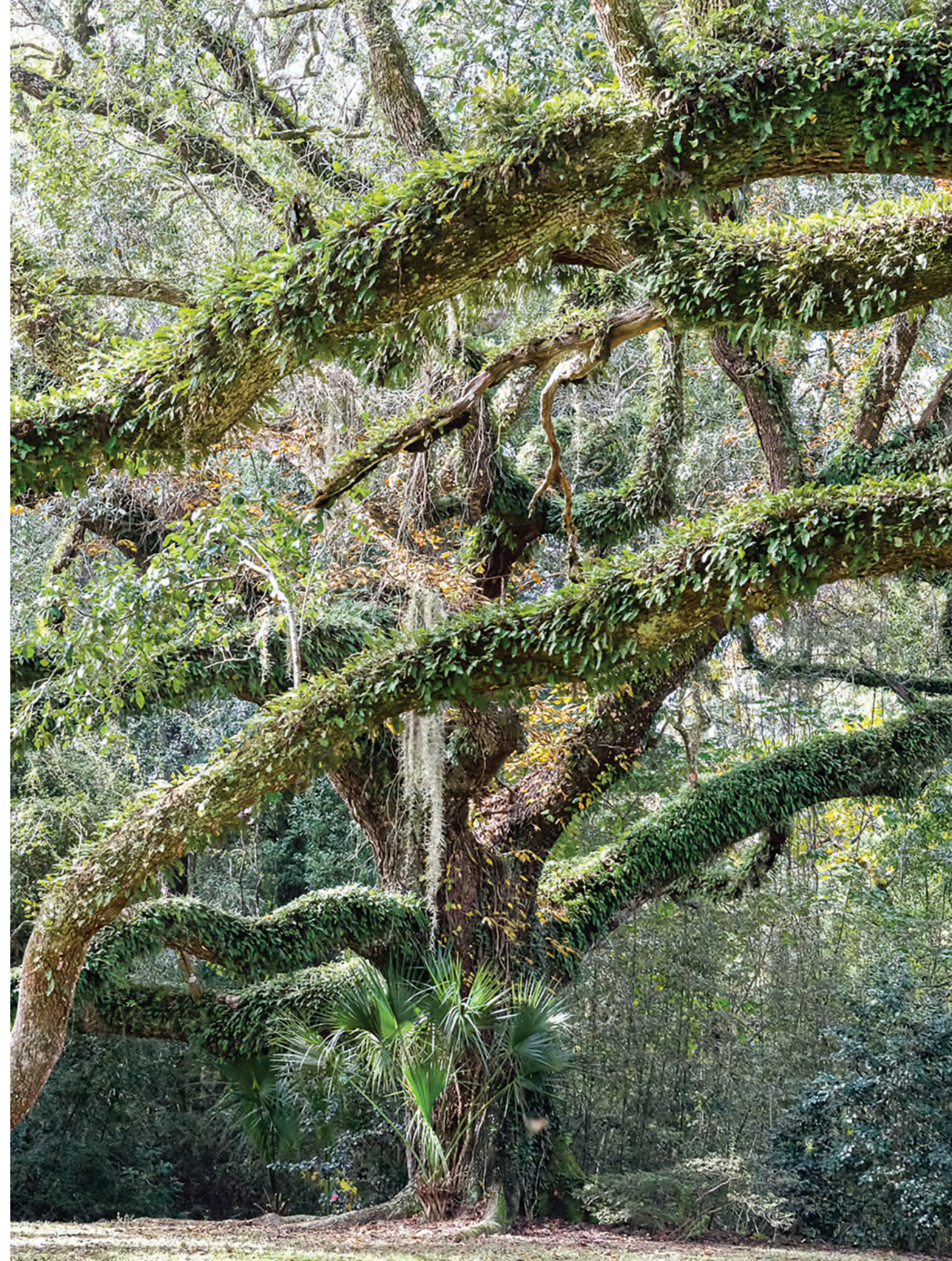
“I don’t ever remember it big like last season,” Romero says. “From St. Mary to Cameron [parishes], everything got ripped up. The storms pulled up the marsh like AstroTurf. I found rolls of it 20 feet high.” Those storms replaced marsh with open water — “lakes and ponds,” Romero says — further heightening the island’s vulnerability. Comparing planting grass to patching holes in a dam, he says that he’s tried fences, sinking Christmas trees and placing HESCO baskets on the shore. “Nothing works. Rocks work,” he says, but then notes that they’re prohibitively expensive. “For now, there’s nothing to break the waves. Once storm water gets into the marsh, there’s no way to slow it down.”

From the boat, Romero watches Osborn splash backwards toward the bank to unearth more cordgrass. “You move like a crawfish,” Romero says. For several

(Top) McIlhenny workers harvest tabasco peppers and then turn them into mash, which ages for three years in white oak barrels that are sealed with salt excavated from the island. (Right) Southern live oaks remain the most prominent trees in the Jungle Gardens.

minutes, he’s also been monitoring an eight-foot alligator. Now it’s time to decide. “Y’all get back in the boat,” he says. Starting the engine, he puts the boat in gear and chases the alligator away. Minutes later, work resumes. Before long, another alligator surfaces near the shoreline. Thibodeaux and Duhon throw golf ball-size clumps of mud at it. One spatters near its eyes, but the alligator fails to stir, so they keep planting.

After another hour, the group breaks for lunch at the McIlhenny Company Camp. Romero unpacks his ham sandwich and requests a bottle of Tabasco sauce. Osborn’s muddy arm reaches for one of seven varieties. “It makes everything taste better,” Romero says, and they all laugh on cue. Seated in a rocking chair, boots on the porch rail, he points to a partially submerged sailboat that a recent storm — there were too many, last season, for him to remember which — has hurled into the marsh from Cypremort, nine miles away. “It’s fragile,” he says. “You try and pass the land on, leave it a bit better, stronger than when you found it. You kick the can down the road. There’s always more work.” ■



Cultural Preservation

Telling the complete story of the people and plantations on the Cane River National Heritage trail

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KEVIN RABALAIS

(Below) Since 2018, access to the Cane River National Heritage Trail has been blocked due to an embankment failure on Hwy 119.



Twenty miles south of Natchitoches, the future — and past — threatens to slide into the river that has sustained this region for centuries. Magnolia Plantation, southern entry to the Cane River National Heritage Trail, looms above an embankment failure 65 feet below the surface of LA Hwy 119. The National Park Service (NPS) maintains the plantation. The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (LaDOTD) manages the road. The riverside land belongs to descendants of Magnolia's original owners.

A \$4.7 million estimate to fix the location has forced a standstill. The LaDOTD closed the road with temporary fencing in 2018 and, out of continuing safety concerns, erected a permanent barrier the following year. The NPS won its petition to have that barrier established

on Magnolia's north side, thereby allowing entry to the plantation from the south. Type in GPS coordinates for Magnolia from anywhere today, however, and you will likely receive the following message: "Directions are not available at this time because of current road conditions."

When Ron Bolton began working for the NPS in 1998, he could run a 15-foot bush hog on the bank across from Magnolia. Over the years, the land contracted. Then came the 2016 Cane River flood. Uprooted trees slid down the bank. Now, Bolton says, "There are parts that you stand on and feel like you will slide into the river."

Near the permanent closure, wearing hiking boots and his NPS uniform, Dustin Fuqua balances on a thin precipice. "You can't get along the historic trail from here," he says. "This is a matter of tourism and history, sure, but people live on this road." Fuqua is chief of

(Right) Dustin Fuqua stands in front of the workers' quarters at Magnolia Plantation. "It's a testament to their families," he says of the park's work to preserve the culture and memory of those who lived and worked on the plantation.





resource management at the Cane River Creole National Historical Park (CRCNHP), a role in which his duties shift — hourly, it seems — from archaeologist to archivist, botanist, conservationist and historian. He speaks with the ease and authority of someone with advanced degrees in each. Growing up in Avoyelles Parish, Fuqua would ride his bicycle to explore the Marksville Prehistoric Indian Site and take his findings — arrowheads, pottery, and glass — to the museum workers to learn about what he had discovered.

“That fostered all of this,” he says of his work to preserve the material culture of Magnolia and Oakland, the two plantations that comprise the CRCNHP. Fuqua now has the opportunity to see kids search for their own artifacts. “There’s a spirit,” he says. “You see their excitement.”

You witness his own, too. Walking along the former fence line of the workers’ quarters at Magnolia, Fuqua

(Left) This brick water cistern, handmade at Magnolia Plantation, dates from the late 19th century. (Above) Elvin L. Shields walks near his alma mater, the now-abandoned Saint Matthew High School, built in 1954 to educate African American and Creole students. (Right) In order to tell the full story of the plantation, the CRCNHP coordinates entry near the workers’ quarters rather than the big house.

grows animated at the sight of a lone rain lily. “Enslaved people planted these to mark the boundaries,” he says, bending for a closer inspection. “They planted it, and it’s still here. You can touch it. It gives you a frisson factor.”

Elvin L. Shields knows that factor well. He spent his childhood in a sharecropper’s cabin at Oakland Plantation, 10 miles north of Magnolia. History, for Shields, throbs in the present. He embodies the memories of his immediate ancestors, all of whom were born on plantations within a 10-mile radius of Oakland. “People visit plantations, and they want to see the big house. I call that the ‘Gone with the Wind’ version of the South,” he says. Along with the road closure and increased storm frequency and intensity, CRCNHP Superintendent Carrie Mardorf deems this another of the park’s problems: “Making sure we are telling the complete story of all people of Cane River.”

To do so, Shields and Fuqua visited antique and junk shops throughout the region to furnish one of Oakland’s two remaining sharecroppers’ cabins. “Momma had a chair just like that,” Shields would say, or, “There was a table like that in the entrance,” and Fuqua loaded the item into his truck.

Shields’s mission to preserve the memory and character of Oakland includes wanting to establish a historic district with uniform Creole-style architecture to combat another of the park’s challenges: uncontrolled urban development. Gazing at the large brick houses that line Cane River where workers’ cabins once stood, he says, “People can’t imagine how many Black people lived on Cane River. Now there’s no evidence that we were ever here because we didn’t own any land. But this place is my home.” ■



DID YOU KNOW?

Facts and Figures

- Constructed in the 1830s, burned by the Union Army in 1864, and rebuilt in the 1890s, Magnolia includes the largest plantation house on the Cane River National Heritage Trail.

- Oakland Plantation owner Jean Pierre Emmanuel Prud’homme (1762-1845) became the first person to grow cotton on a large-scale west of the Mississippi River.

- The Cane River National Heritage Area includes Melrose, a plantation established in 1796 by free people of color and later home to the nationally celebrated folk artist Clementine Hunter (1887-1988).

AT A GLANCE



LOCATION
Natchitoches Parish

FLORA
American pinesap, Narrow-leaved puccoon, Perfoliate tinker’s-weed, Rough-stemmed aster

FAUNA
Foxes, Voles, Coyotes, Barred Owls, Bald Eagles, Cedar Waxwings