

## LOUISIANA, THE FIRST 300 YEARS

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### THE LAND, THE INDIANS, THE EXPLORERS

*“Thames and all the rivers of the kings ran into  
the Mississippi and were drowned.”*

Stephen Vincent Benet

Until a million years ago, the Mississippi River did not exist. Nor did Louisiana, for its site was part of a huge body of water, an extension of the sea into the continent of North America. During the Ice Age, 25,000 years ago, sheets of ice covered the cap of the North American continent. When the ice melted, it wiped out a number of drainage systems in Midwestern America and rerouted drainage toward the Mississippi, enlarging it considerably. The flowing water began to meander slowly southward, taking its debris with it, thus extending the Mississippi to its delta and filling in its southern end.

As the delta filled, the sea retreated, leaving Lake Pontchartrain behind, separated from the Gulf about 5000 years ago. This new delta land was to become part of Colonial Louisiana in 1682; then, part of the Louisiana Purchase territory in 1803; and then, part of the state of Louisiana in 1812. The process of shaping and molding the land is not yet complete, even today. There are places in the delta where sugar cane fields, planted in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, are now under water. Yet there would have been no delta at all except for the Ice Age and its aftermath.

Over the centuries, the river has built up delta land by depositing material where it empties into the sea, forming sandbars, which in time became islands. The islands split the river into two or more distributary channels. This is still happening about 20 miles below Venice, Louisiana, where the river divides into three major distributaries: Pass L’Outre, South Pass, and Southwest Pass.

The river also makes delta land by abandoning its lower course for hundreds of miles and lunging out to sea by an altogether different route. It does this regularly every several hundred years, leaving behind great gashes across its delta. The Mississippi changed its course

the last time in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to follow a diversion near the site of New Orleans, instead of near the site of Donaldsonville, to which it had diverted in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

During flood time, the fast-moving waters of the river pick up heavy material and, spilling over their banks, deposit the material, systematically raising the banks (or natural levees) with the flood. Natural levees may be only 10 to 15 feet high but extend a mile or two wide, sloping downward from the river so gently that the decline would not be noticeable in a moving vehicle.

These natural levees end with the backswamp (lowland). They provide the only well-drained land in southeast Louisiana, which is the reason why most settlements, urban and rural, were located on the levees of the Mississippi or its distributaries. Settlements also needed the transportation the river provided and the place it offered to build roads and buildings that were fairly safe from floods.

The Mississippi River, beginning in Lake Itasca, Minnesota, and ending in the Gulf of Mexico, is 2340 miles long, the third largest river in the world. It drains 40% of the 48 continental states and has a basin covering 1¼ million square miles, including parts of 31 states and two Canadian provinces. With a river of such enormity, any big flood can cause the water to break through its natural levee and spill over into the backswamp. Such a breakthrough is called a crevasse, feared by early settlers not only because it could carry all the crops of a plantation into the swampland beyond but because once the river jumps its banks, there might be no way of getting it back.

### **The Louisiana Indians**

The Indians—so named by Columbus who thought he had reached the East Indies—were originally of the Mongolian Race. They are believed to have migrated to America by way of a land bridge, which is now the Bering Strait. Some may also have come across the Pacific on rafts or boats. These early migrants and their descendants spread throughout North and South America and developed diverse languages and cultures.

The first evidence of Indian settlers moving into the Mississippi River Valley dates back to 12,000 B.C. The first to come to the site of Louisiana arrived about 3,000 years ago. They settled along the Gulf Coast and the shores of inland rivers and streams. They lived in crude habitations made by covering teepee-like wooden frameworks with leaves, grass and skins. They burned out logs for boats; their tools were harpoons and spears; and they cooked by “stone-boiling,” a

process of dropping a hot stone into a bucket-like leather container supported by stakes.

### **The Poverty Point Indians**

The Indians at Poverty Point, Louisiana, built their village five miles northeast of the town of Epps in West Carroll Parish and 45 miles west of Vicksburg, Mississippi, between around 1750 B.C. and 1350 B.C. Until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, the existence of this ancient civilization was unknown. The first measurements of the mounds and ridges at Poverty Point were made in the 1840s, and reported by Dr. Samuel Lockhart in 1873, but it was not until 1912 that the site was mapped and legitimate archaeological research commenced. In the 1950s and 1960s, the most valuable discoveries at the site were made by the late Shreveport physician Dr. Clarence Webb and the late Mitchell Hillman.

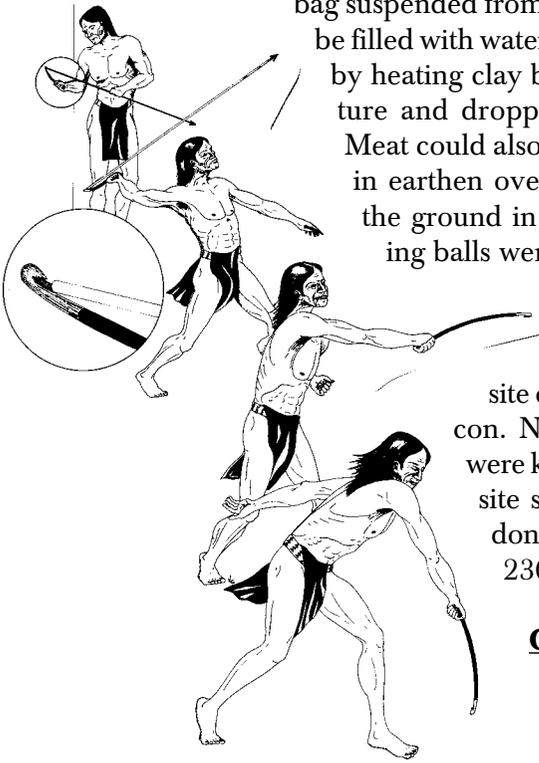
Inspection of an aerial photograph led Dr. James A. Ford of the American Museum of Natural History to the discovery that Poverty Point was an earthen enclosure, built on such a large scale that it defied recognition from ground level. Carbon dating techniques determined the age of the village. Excavation conducted by Dr. Ford and Stuart Neitzel revealed the nature of the Poverty Point civilization

For almost 1000 years, the civilization flourished. It was a highly advanced civilization, though not a literate one. Artifacts found there indicate communication with distant points extending as far north as Michigan and as far east as Alabama. Clay balls, beads, figurines, arrowheads and other items were found, indicating that it may have been a place visited for religious reasons.

Atop the largest mound, the Poverty Point Indians constructed a gigantic bird effigy, visible only from the air. The original structure was 11.2 miles long and 80 feet thick, with each ridge six feet high. The ridges are divided by five cross-cutting aisles, which have been identified as astronomical sighting lines and boundary lines between social zones.

The village, measuring one square mile, had as its focal point a burial mound which was the second highest in North America. The dirt used for the construction of three such mounds in the village totaled a half million tons and had to be carried in baskets, a feat almost equal to that of the Pyramid of Cheops in Egypt.

Villagers hunted game using a spear-throwing stick known as an *atlatl*. There is no evidence of agriculture, only of hunting. The Indians prepared food by boiling or baking. They placed meat in a leather



*Poverty Point Indian throwing a javelin with an atlatl; close-up shows atlatl hook attached to end of spear. Drawing by Jon Gibson. Courtesy Louisiana Archaeological Survey and Antiquities Commission.*

bag suspended from a framework. This would be filled with water that was brought to a boil by heating clay balls to a red hot temperature and dropping them into the water. Meat could also be prepared by placing it in earthen ovens consisting of a hole in the ground in which glowing hot cooking balls were placed with the meat

We may never know why the Poverty Point Indians suddenly abandoned the site on the banks of Bayou Macon. Nothing suggests that they were killed or conquered, but the site seems to have been abandoned quite suddenly around 2300 years ago.

### **On the Historical Timeline**

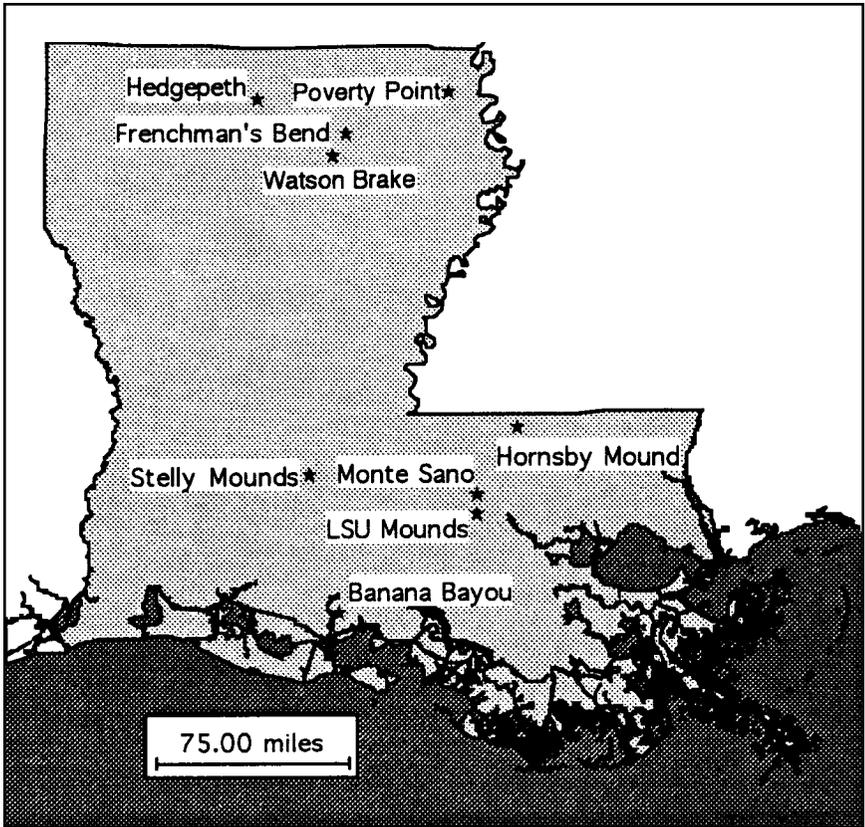
In the heyday of the Poverty Point Indians, 3350 years ago, the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty was ruling Egypt, the culture of Ancient Greece was still 1000

years in the future, and the Roman Empire would not rise for another 1500 years.

The Poverty Point people predate the Mayans and the Aztecs by several centuries and were contemporaneous with the Olmec and Izapa civilizations in Mexico. They represent the oldest evidence of civilization in the Americas.

### **The Watson Brake Indians**

South of Monroe, Louisiana, and not far from Poverty Point, evidence of an even earlier culture of mound builders dating back as far as 6000 years ago has been found. The earliest known evidence of settlement in the New World, predating both Stonehenge and the Great Pyramids, these people were the forebears of the Poverty Point Indians, and they also vanished. Only in recent years has the 400-acre site been excavated and studied.



*Early Indian Mounds of Louisiana, Map Courtesy of Louisiana Division of Historic Preservation*

### **The Marksville Period Indians**

A dig by archaeology students of the University of New Orleans in 1981 revealed that a group of Indians called the Marksville period Indians inhabited the Barataria Basin in southeast Louisiana from the years 0 to 300 A.D. This dig took place at the confluence of Bayou Coquille and Bayou Familles at the entrance to Lafitte Park, along Highway 45 between Barataria Boulevard and Crown Point in Jefferson, Louisiana.

These Marksville period Indians were farmers, hunter-gatherers and mound builders, the mounds being complex tombs filled with pottery and hunting tools. Archaeologists suggest that this mortuary practice may be based on religion and a belief in the afterlife. A motif of bisected circles found on the pottery was also used by the Florida Indians, indicating communications between the two groups.

The next group of Indians came around 1000 A.D. It was a newer breed who used pottery and bows and arrows. Later still, Indians came to Louisiana from Mexico. In the thousand years before the Europeans came, the Louisiana Indians built more permanent houses grouped in villages surrounded by walls and ditches for protection. They produced a greater variety of grains and vegetables. They built larger boats for longer voyages. They traded horses with the Texas and Arkansas Indians.

### **Indians in Louisiana when Europeans Came**

By 1700 A.D., there were 20,000 Indians living along or near the Mississippi River Region. The Tunica lived near the Tunica Bend, the Opelousas near Opelousas, the Natchez on the high bluffs near the town named for them, and the Tchoupitoulas in what is today Metairie, Louisiana. The Attakapas lived in stockaded villages in the Evangeline Country. A religious tribe, they built temples. They also made pottery and wove baskets. The Choctaw, 15,000 strong, lived in what is now northern Mississippi. They warred incessantly with the Chickasaw who lived farther north.

The Indians of Louisiana have been divided into three linguistic groups—Tunican, Caddoan, and Muskogean. The Tunicans included the Chitimacha, who lived in the northeast corner of present day Louisiana. Their culture was advanced. They were proficient in basketry and metal work.

The Attakapa and Opelousas Indians were related. The Attakapa have borne the brunt of historical misconceptions regarding their cultural development, supposed cannibalism, and living habits. Studies in 1985 and the 1990s show their language correlates to classic Greek and Roman by their conjugation of verbs. They practiced religion, mastered herbal remedies, horticulture, and agriculture. The term cannibal was applied to them only as an insult by the Choctaws. But European settlers took it seriously.

The Caddoan tribes were located in the northwest corner of the state, north of modern Alexandria. After the Europeans came, they were in a no-man's land between rival French and Spanish empires.

The Muskogean family was made up of the Muskogean family proper, who inhabited the southeastern part of Louisiana, and the related Natcheans who lived in the east central area of the state. One of the Muskogean tribes of Louisiana is the Choctaw tribe who lived north of Lake Pontchartrain. They formed an alliance with the French and aided them in fighting the Natchez. Some of the Choctaw built



*Drawings of how Indians in Louisiana may have looked in the early 1700s, based on reports of European travelers. Courtesy Division of Archaeology, Preservation Resource Center*

settlements on or around present-day New Orleans before the French arrived. They were a tribe of farmers who grew, among other things, sassafras, which was ground into file powder and sold to the early French colonists in the Indian Market (today's French Market in New Orleans). File is the most important ingredient in file gumbo, which came to be a favorite thick soup of the French.

In Louisiana, the Houmas lived in simple huts on the Esplanade Ridge near today's St. Louis Cemetery #3 in New Orleans. The Colapissa lived near City Park in New Orleans. When they left to

escape the warring Chickasaw, the Biloxi Indians occupied their abandoned huts. Later, after the flooding of the first French settlement, white colonists moved into that area, which was high land. The Acolapissa lived on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain, and it was with these Indians that Penicaut, Bienville's young friend, lived for a year and recorded his experiences. Penicaut dined sumptuously with the Acolapissa on wild life of the area and dishes prepared with corn. He repaid the Chief by giving his daughter French lessons.

### **The European Explorers**

The first explorer who might have seen what is now Louisiana was a Spaniard, Alvarez de Pineda, who reported in 1519 seeing a large river flowing into the Gulf of Mexico. Historians now believe the river he saw was the Mobile River, but it was possible he passed the mouth of the Mississippi. It is also possible that a party of Spanish sailors under Panfilo de Narvaez came upon the mouth of the Mississippi in 1528.

### **Hernando DeSoto**

In any event, the white discoverers of Louisiana were Spanish. Hernando DeSoto and his party were the first to set foot on Louisiana soil and record the event. DeSoto had been with Pizarro in the conquest of Peru. He was eager to rival the exploits of Hernando Cortes and Pizarro. In 1537, he obtained a grant to the province from Florida to the Rio de las Palmas. He was required to conquer and occupy Florida within a year, build fortresses, and bring 500 settlers to hold the area. He set sail from Spain in 1538 and in 1539 landed at what is now Tampa Bay. With 629 men, he set out to explore Florida, which had been described to him as a "land of gold." He traversed great portions of Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana. He traveled and fought Indians for two years, and in his third year of wandering, reached his destination, the Mississippi River, on April 17, 1542 in the vicinity of Arkansas City, a few miles south of the Arkansas River. He crossed the river into Arkansas, but returned to Mississippi. There he died of fever on May 21, 1542.

After his death, his men, under the leadership of Luis de Moscoso, built crude boats and continued down the Mississippi. Fighting Indians all the way, they continued on their miserable journey until they found refuge in Tampico, Mexico, which was then a Spanish settlement. They were the first white men to visit the site of today's New Orleans.

### **Marquette and Joliet**

Over a century later, in 1673, Louis Joliet, a French Canadian fur trader, and Father Jacques Marquette, a Jesuit missionary priest, came down the Mississippi River toward the Gulf of Mexico. Governor Louis Frontenac of Canada had ordered them to take an expeditionary party in search of a route to the Pacific Ocean. They left Lake Michigan, paddling canoes up the Fox River to the present site of Portage, Wisconsin. They carried their canoes across land to the Wisconsin River which emptied into the Mississippi. Traveling southward, they stopped for a peaceful meeting with the Illinois Indians who gave them a calumet, a peace pipe. Then, going as far south as the Arkansas, they met Indians with guns. Only the calumet convinced these Indians that they were on a peaceful mission. The Indians told Joliet that some other white men, ten days ahead of them, had given them the guns. Convinced that these men were Spaniards, they turned around and went back to Canada.

### **Robert Cavalier de LaSalle**

The real story of Louisiana begins in 1682 with the expedition down the Mississippi River of Robert Cavalier de LaSalle. Born of a wealthy family in Rouen, France, he came to Canada in 1666 at the age of 23. He bought land, started a trading post, and learned the language of the Indians. They told him of a river called the Ohio that flowed southward to the sea. Thinking this to be the Pacific Ocean, he sold his land and set out to explore the Ohio.

In 1674, on the recommendation of the governor of Canada, he was called to the French court to receive honors. Using this opportunity, he asked the permission of Louis XIV to explore the Illinois country and whatever it would lead to. Permission was gladly granted, for colonies would add to the prestige of France as a world power. But the French treasury was depleted from war with England, and LaSalle had to pay to have his own ship built.

In 1682, LaSalle led an expedition of 56 persons entering the Mississippi River from the Illinois River and sailing to the Gulf of Mexico. On April 9, 1682, he disembarked, erected a cross on shore and a column inscribed with the name and the coat of arms of the king. He then claimed all the land drained by the Mississippi for France and named the region Louisiana in honor of King Louis XIV.

He returned to France for supplies and settlers for a colony at the mouth of the river. In his company was Henri de Tonti (or Tonty) who shared his dream of an empire stretching from Canada to the Gulf of



*Discovery of the Mississippi River by Louis Joliet, a French Canadian fur trader, and Father Jacques Marquette, a Jesuit missionary priest, 1673. Courtesy the National Archives of Canada*



*Robert Cavelier de LaSalle claims all the lands drained by the Mississippi for France, 1682. Courtesy the National Archives of Canada*

Mexico. Tonti was the principal historian on the expedition. LaSalle and Tonti foresaw the development of a land area larger than the country of France, and dreamed of controlling it on the only highway through the continent, the river itself.

LaSalle left France July 4, 1684 for the Gulf of Mexico with four ships, 100 soldiers, and 250 settlers including women and children, all ready to settle in Louisiana. Why he did not return to the Mississippi River by his original route is not recorded. Perhaps he thought the route shorter by the Gulf of Mexico. He surely expected to have no problem finding the mouth of such a large river. What he didn't know was that several mouths of the river looked alike, and they looked little different from the bayous that led inland and then faded away. Few maps charted these estuaries, so the possibility of error was great.

LaSalle had never viewed the river from the South, so he had no points of reference. He made a few trial runs and finally landed in Matagorda Bay on the coast of Texas in February, 1685. The bay was situated at the mouth of a large river, but LaSalle knew by the curve of the coastline that it was not the Mississippi. He built Fort St. Louis at Matagorda Bay, completing it in 1685.

Beaujeu, the ship's captain, departed to return to France, leaving LaSalle the brig *La Belle*. In this ship, LaSalle hoped to continue his search. But the brig was wrecked in a storm. He had left Europe with four ships, and now he had none. One had been captured by the Spanish in the Gulf of Mexico. Another had been lost when entering Matagorda Bay. Beaujeu had left in the third, and now the last was destroyed.

Some of his party stayed in the fort, but LaSalle left to journey on foot to Canada, determined to get help for his colony. With him were his brother, his nephew, a few companions, and a man named Henri Joutel who survived to tell the story. In 1687, the heroic LaSalle was murdered by his own men and buried in alien soil.

We can only guess the motive of the murderers. They had to be exhausted and despondent after their unsuccessful adventure. The many months had taken their toll. Ships and lives had been lost. They were without supplies, unsure of their position, and in fear for their lives. It is understandable that violence would erupt. The survivors continued on to Canada, where they told the story of "LaSalle's Folly." Even the colony that had been established in Texas was later destroyed by Indians.

But another part of the story remains to be told. Tonti, LaSalle's friend, had come down the Mississippi from the Illinois country, plan-

ning to meet LaSalle coming northward from the Gulf of Mexico at the camp of the Bayougoula Indians (between New Orleans and Baton Rouge). Tonti waited as long as possible, then left a letter with an Indian chieftain, a letter that would not be delivered until 1699, and then, not to LaSalle, but to Bienville and Iberville, the next French explorers in our story.

### **Where are the Louisiana Indians Today?**

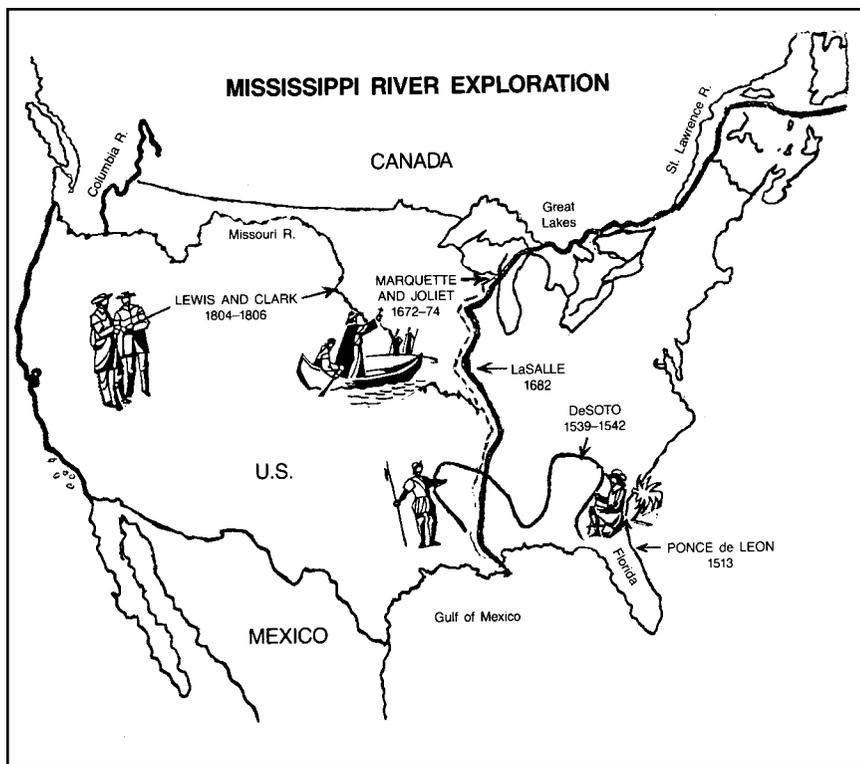
The **Choctaw Indians** were seen until the turn of the 20th century in St. Tammany towns and in the French Market in New Orleans where they made baskets and sold herbs much favored for Creole cooking. Then in 1902, the federal government resettled most of the full-blooded Choctaws in the parish to Indian territory in the state of Oklahoma. While most Choctaws live in what is now the state of Mississippi, many live in Louisiana.

A man named Leon Laurant, part Choctaw, 92 years old when he was interviewed in 1981, said that his paternal grandfather was a Parisian who married a Choctaw woman in St. Tammany Parish in the second half of the 19th century. They raised six sons, one of whom was his father, on a 160-acre homestead near a Choctaw settlement on the West Pearl River. Later the family moved to Bayou Lacombe and still later, he moved his own family to Mandeville.

The West Pearl River Choctaw village, he said, had about 200 inhabitants in the late 19th century. They lived in cane and palmetto-thatched huts built on earthen mounds. The huts had dirt floors and few furnishings. They slept on long dry grass, and did most of their cooking outdoors. He remembered that the men hunted with bows and arrows and blowguns, and the women wove baskets to sell or exchange for food in Covington, Slidell, and New Orleans.

The descendants of the **Chitimacha** still live on the Chitimacha reservation in St. Mary Parish, Louisiana. Their descendants represent the Indian aristocracy of Louisiana. Some descendants of the **Attakappa** now dwell in southwest Louisiana. The **Caddoan** tribes, living between rival French and Spanish empires in the northwest corner of Louisiana, fled in 1859 to Oklahoma, where some of their descendants still live.

The 1980 census reported that 12,065 American Indians, Eskimos, and Aleutians lived in Louisiana. See 2000 Census updates on these groups at the end of the book. (p. 265)



Early explorers on the Mississippi. Map by Joan B. Garvey