Natchez

Name
The name Natchez (pronounced NAH-chee, although some people say it NATCH-ez, and the French pronunciation was NOTCH-ay) may have come from the people’s main village, Naches, meaning “Great (or Grand) Village.” Other possible spellings of the name include Nvce, Nahchee, Natches, Naktche, and Natsches. One early writer listed the Natchez as the “Sunset Indians.” The Cherokee called them Ani’-Na’tsl. Some sources say the people called themselves Theloel or Thecoel, but the Natchez Nation gives its name as W’NvhX’Ce, which means “fast warrior.”

Location
The Mississippi culture, ancestors of the Natchez, stretched from what is now North Carolina to Eastern Oklahoma, and from Minnesota to the Gulf of Mexico. By the time the French arrived in the late 1600s, the Natchez had as many as nine villages along the Mississippi River around St. Catherine’s Creek, east and south of present-day Natchez, Mississippi. After the French massacre in the early 1700s, some Natchez joined the Cherokee (see entry) along the Hiwassee River in present-day North Carolina. They later moved to Oklahoma with the Cherokee, where they lived on the western edge of the reservation. Natchez who escaped to the Creek (see entry) also ended up in Oklahoma. Natchez also lived in Four Hole Springs in South Carolina, but some fled from the Catawba in 1744. As of the twenty-first century, most Natchez lived around Gore, Oklahoma, or Columbia and Ridgeville, South Carolina, although a few communities are scattered throughout the southeast, such as in Georgia and as far north as North Carolina.

Population
The Natchez tribe may have numbered about 6,000 people in 1682 at the time of their first contact with the French. Other estimates for the later 1600s were 3,500 to 4,500. Following their conflicts with the French and other tribes, the number of Natchez warriors dropped to 300 in 1731, but that count did not include their family members. The French deported many of the people as slaves, but 180 warriors avoided the attack and
joined the Chickasaw. Estimates place about 20 to 150 warriors with the Creek; no figures were recorded for those living among the Cherokee. One source suggests a total of 300 Natchez in 1836. Because they were living with other nations, the Natchez population was not counted separately from that time on.

Language family
Gulf.

Origins and group affiliations
The ancestors of the Natchez were the Mound Builders (see entry), specifically the final group of Mississippian culture. In later times, both the Tioux and Grigras were under Natchez protection, but neither were related to them. It is possible that the Taensa and Chitimacha were once united with the Natchez, but the Chitimacha speak a totally different language. During the late 1600s and early 1700s, the Natchez fought with neighboring groups as well as the French. In 1729, the Choctaw
and Quapaw (see entries) attacked the Natchez and almost brought about their destruction. The Natchez scattered and found homes with the Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw (see entries), and Catawba.

Descended from the Mississippian culture of mound builders, the Natchez were skilled artists, farmers, and traders who developed a unique culture. Unlike most neighboring tribes, which operated in a democratic manner, the Natchez had a strict class system and a theocratic leader who operated as both the political and religious authority. The upper class consisted of “Suns,” nobles, and esteemed people; the commoners, or michmichgupi, made up the labor force. Although many sources indicate that the French essentially destroyed the Natchez and sold most of the remaining people into slavery, some survivors sought refuge with other tribes. Several groups still exist that claim their heritage: the Natchez Nation (Gore, Oklahoma), Eastern Band Natchez (Columbia, South Carolina), and Edistos Natchez-Kusso (Ridgeville, South Carolina) along with a few small southeastern communities. The Natchez name also lives on in towns in Mississippi, Louisiana, Indiana, and Alabama, as well as a parkway and other sites.

**HISTORY**

**Early history**

Archaeological evidences shows that the Natchez culture may have begun as far back as 700 CE. In addition to their Mississippian ancestry, the people may have also been part of the powerful Quigualtam chiefdom that the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto (c. 1496–1542) encountered on his 1542 expedition. These Europeans left behind the first diseases to which the Native tribes had no immunity. Measles, smallpox, and bubonic plague drastically reduced the population in the lower Mississippi River Valley over the next century.

**Important Dates**

1682: Réne-Robert de La Salle’s expedition descends the Mississippi River into Natchez territory.

1713: The French establish a trading post among Natchez.

1716: Natchez have their first conflict with French.

1729: French governor Sieur d’Etchéparre demands Natchez land for a plantation; Natchez revolt begins.

1731: French capture 400 Natchez; some are killed, and others are sold into slavery in Santo Domingo.

1735: Village of Nanne Hamgeh built.

1744: Natchez leave the Catawba who are living in South Carolina.

1965: Last fluent speaker of Natchez language dies.
At the end of the seventeenth century, the Natchez had settled in several autonomous (self-governing) communities that encompassed some Tunican-speaking refugees. Many people banded together for protection from the British, who came to the area seeking slaves. The hereditary chief of the Natchez, the Great Sun, was the ceremonial leader, but the outlying groups also had chiefs. By the time the French arrived, the Natchez had about nine towns in addition to their main one.

**Europeans move into Natchez territory**

René-Robert Cavelier de La Salle’s (1643–1687) expedition in 1682 was the next Natchez encounter with Europeans. Soon after the La Salle expedition descended the Mississippi, French and English explorers, fur traders, military units, and missionaries visited the area.

The French opened their first trading post in 1713, thus beginning their colonization of the land. The priests who arrived had no success in gaining converts among the Natchez, whose religious beliefs were strongly integrated into their social system. The British fared better at making allies of the Natchez, particularly by befriending Bearded Chief, who was in charge of three of the villages. The Natchez villages, however, were divided in their allegiance. Hickory, White Apple, and the immigrant centers of Tiou and Grigra were anti-French, whereas Great Village and Flour Village supported the Europeans.

**Conflicts with the French**

After the British and the Natchez (under Bearded Chief) raided their trading post, the French set up military control. To restore peace, the Natchez executed six of their own war chiefs and three other people and sent their heads to the French governor. The Great Sun even sent laborers to help build Fort Rosalie. For the next few years, relations remained friendly. The Great Sun’s brother, Tattooed Serpent (d. 1725), and his mother, Tattooed Arm, encouraged an alliance with the French.

When a French sergeant shot a Natchez warrior, however, the men of White Apple Village retaliated, wounding a plantation director. Tattooed Serpent negotiated peace, but the anti-French faction continued their raids. After Tattooed Serpent died in 1725, the Great Sun supported them against France. Three years later, the Great Sun died, and his young successor was no match for the growing power of the White Apple chief. That left Tattooed Arm as France’s main ally.
Demands for Natchez land

The situation between the Natchez and French worsened in 1729 when Sieur d’Etchéparre (sometimes spelled Chepart, Chépart, de Chapeare, Chopart), the new commandant at Fort Rosalie, ordered the Natchez to move from Great Village so he could have the land for a plantation. Although the Great Sun had no intention of complying, he requested two moons to build a new village elsewhere. Chépart agreed but demanded rent—birds, corn, pelts, and bear oil—for whatever time the Natchez remained. The commandant threatened to imprison the Great Sun if he did not comply.

The Natchez used that time to plot against the French, and at the first frost, they attacked Fort Rosalie and other forts along the river, killing more than 200 French. The Yazoo (Yazou), an upriver tribe the Natchez had enlisted to help them, murdered more. The Natchez captured several hundred woman, children, and slaves as well as Chépart. The warriors refused to touch him with their weapons, so they had a member of the lower class, whom the French called Stinkards, club him to death.

Destruction of the Natchez

After gathering their allies, including the Choctaw and Quapaw, the French attacked the Natchez, who released the prisoners and escaped across the river to Louisiana, where they built a fort on Sicily Island. By the following year the French had forced the Natchez to surrender. The French burned some of their prisoners to death, but the majority of the
Massacre and Destruction of Natchez

Some early sources indicate that the Choctaw (see entry) planned to join the Natchez in the attack against the French. The date was set for December 1, 1729, and the Choctaw and Natchez each had an equal number of fagots (bundles of twigs bound together to be used as fuel) that they used to time the attack. One fagot was to be thrown into the fire daily so that they could count down the days. Several stories have been told about why the Natchez attacked several days early rather than on the appointed day in concerted effort with the other neighboring tribes.

One account blames the premature attack on the Great Sun’s mother, who remained loyal to the French. She tried several times to warn the French military of the impending attack, but her messages were ignored. She believed that the attack would be less deadly if the Natchez raided alone, and the French could then prepare for the other tribes. It is said she took some of the fagots to hasten the day of the invasion. Another story, given by Dumont de Montigny, a soldier at Fort Rosalie, blames the chief’s son.

Each day from that of the plot, the chiefs of the two nations had each burned one of the fatal fagots; but it happened one day, that the great chief of the Natchez having gone to the temple, after having thrown into the first one of the fagots, according to custom, had turned round to speak to the guardian of the temple, a young lad, his son, who had come with him, felt an irresistible inclination to imitate what his father had done. He took two of the fagots, therefore, and threw them into the fire, which was the real cause why the Natchez advanced the massacre two days, attacking the French on the 29th of November.

The Choctaw, who were responsible for raiding New Orleans, did not arrive until two days later. They did not gain entry to the capital and returned to their village disappointed. When the Choctaw went to the Natchez villages and were only given a small portion of the goods the Natchez had taken from the French, the Choctaw called the Natchez dogs and accused them of attacking early so they could take all the spoils for themselves. Perhaps this was why the Choctaw joined the French in destroying the Natchez a short while later.

shelter with the Chickasaw. In 1735, they built a separate village, Nanne Hamgeh. About fifty Natchez gunmen ended up around Tallahassee Creek, where they occupied a town called Natchez and part of a settlement called Abikudshi. A large number joined the Creek in Alabama; others went to the Cherokee, who were removed to Indian Territory in 1832. Many Natchez ended up near Tahlequah and Muskogee in eastern Oklahoma. Some people moved to South Carolina with the Catawba, but left in 1744 to avoid revenge from their adopted tribe over several murders.

Natchez in twenty-first century
Most accounts of the Natchez end in the early 1700s, but the people did not forget their identity and heritage despite living in far-flung places. Although they lived with other tribes, they kept themselves apart and retained their distinct culture. For example, when they were removed with the Cherokee to Oklahoma, the Natchez maintained their own portion of the reservation.

In the 2000s, the Natchez live in the southern part of the Muscogee (Creek) and Cherokee reservations. Some also make their homes with the other “Five Civilized Tribes,” as the Americans in the 1800s called the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole (see entries). Other small Natchez communities exist across the Southeast. The state of South Carolina has recognized two of these bands, the Eastern Band Natchez (at one time called the Natchez-PeeDee) and the Edisto Natchez-Kusso. The Natchez living with the Muscogee in Oklahoma operate independently as the Natchez Nation.

RELIGION

Creation story
The Natchez creation story said that the Infinite Spirit created all good things. Some of the little spirits, his helpers, also assisted by making some of the beautiful things in the universe. These spirits were free, but they were as respectful as slaves. The Infinite Spirit tied up the leader of the evil spirits who might do harm in the world. Yet some of the evil one’s spirit-helpers still caused trouble. Prayer could prevent them from doing harm. To invoke the good spirits, the people fasted and prayed.

The Infinite Spirit also formed man from clay and breathed life into him. When people went wrong, he sent a man and woman to Earth to teach humans how to live. The man was the sun’s younger brother. He
instructed the people keep a sacred fire constantly burning in the temple, because fire was a piece of the sun. He also gave the people a code of conduct for daily living. The main rules were to kill only in self-defense, never to commit adultery, not to steal, not to lie or get drunk, and not to be greedy but to give freely and share with those in need.

Religious rituals
The Great Sun was regarded as part god. One of his daily duties was to ensure that the sacred fire stayed burning in the temple. His daily ritual began with greeting his elder brother, the sun, with song and prayer, wailing three times, and blowing smoke from a calumet (pipe) in each of the four directions (east, west, north, south). Then he checked on the fire.

People could not enter the temple, but they left food offerings there for the Great Sun. Two men tended the fire, which was never allowed to go out. The priest, or master of ceremonies, wore a half-crown of feathers and carried a stick with red or white feathers. Every month, the entire tribe went to the temple and paid tribute to the Great Sun. He generally appeared before them wearing a feathered crown and sitting in an ornate chair carried by eight throne bearers.

The Great Sun dressed in rich clothes and was carried from place to place so his feet would never touch the ground. Only certain people were permitted into his presence, and they had to follow strict rules when approaching him (see the Mound Builders entry, “Religion”).

Carrying on the traditions
In the 1870s, a Natchez named Creek Sam worked to reorganize the Keetoowah and Four Mothers (see “Government”) societies. He formed them around a sacred fire his ancestors had carried from the east. These groups tried to resist the changes that more liberal tribal members wanted to institute. At this time, Creek and his son Watt were two of the five people who still spoke the Natchez language (see “Language”).

LANGUAGE

Ancient dialects
The people had two distinct forms of their dialects. One was spoken by the nobles, the other by commoners. Suns and nobles were spoken to in a more formal manner. For example, a Sun visitor to a home would be greeted
with the words, “I’m pleased to see you.” A commoner would be told to “sit down.” Women used slightly different inflections than men.

In addition to these two dialects, the Natchez spoke a common language that was understood by many of the tribes in the area. This common language was useful for trade and planning with other tribal leaders.

**Natchez language preservation**

The Natchez spoke a unique language that has few ties with other families. At times, it has been considered a dialect of Muskogean. Other linguists labeled it part of the Algonquian family. More recently, it has been called a Gulf language, which places it in a category with Atakapa, Chitimacha, and Tunica. All experts agree that it is not closely related to any other languages, and some have given the dialect its own classification, Natchesan.

Although the Natchez were absorbed into other tribes, they retained their dialect until about 1800. By 1907, only five people who lived with the Cherokee still spoke their language. By 1931, Creek Sam and his son Watt Sam were two of the five people who still used the Natchez language (see “Language”). An anthropologist made wax cylinder recordings of Watt Sam speaking Natchez, and a linguist recorded word lists and stories that he told her a few years later. When he died in 1965, Watt Sam was the last known fluent speaker of the Natchez language.

Nevertheless, some tribal members now use their language on a daily basis. Many people also speak another language in addition to English. Most speak Cherokee or Muscogee because those are the nations where they live. The Natchez language has been preserved on tape, and data can be found as part of the University of Oklahoma’s Western History Collections. Some language materials are available online.

**GOVERNMENT**

**Traditional leadership**

The Natchez government was intricately tied to the religion. The Great Sun was both the king and the religious leader. He made the decisions for the people, and they followed them slavishly. He did, however, have
a council composed of priests, warriors, and other important people to advise him. The Great Sun was responsible for appointing the chiefs, temple guardians, and ceremonial officers, called “Little Suns.” Usually he selected his brothers or uncles to serve in these positions. The principal woman Sun, either the Great Sun’s mother or sister, chose his successor from among her sons or brothers.

Maintaining traditions
The Natchez Nation considers itself to have one of “the oldest continually functioning governments” in the world. As in the past, four clan mothers, called Law Keepers, are in charge of judicial affairs and tribal life. If tribal members have any business they want to discuss at council meetings, they let their clan mothers know. Tribal leaders are the principal peace chief (Great Sun) and the principal war chief, called first warrior or second chief. They are expected to work together harmoniously, and like clan mothers, they are chosen for their expertise and virtues. The peace chief oversees internal affairs and calls councils of Suns, which make the final decisions. Leaders from other tribes are included in the council. All council decisions are made by consensus, which means everyone must agree.

In the 2000s, the Natchez Nation are a treaty tribe of the Muscogee Nation, and they have maintained their sovereign traditional tribal government. The Natchez-Kusso Indian Tribe of South Carolina has an eleven-member council with a chief, vice chief, and chairman/treasurer. The state recognized the tribe in 2010.

ECONOMY
The Natchez, who subsisted mainly on farming, developed an elaborate social class system. At the top was the Great Sun. People could not get near him, and his feet did not touch the ground. He was carried everywhere in a litter, and others spoke to him only from a distance. Women Suns, his relatives, were more powerful than any other people. Nobles, who were below the Suns, inherited their positions. They held places of honor at village events and war parties. The next level down contained Honored Men and Women. People could earn these designations by doing brave deeds or being pious in their religion. All of these rankings were considered part of the upper class.

On the lowest level were commoners, whom the French called puants or “stinkards.” The Natchez called them michmichgupi. Michmichgupi
could improve their status by showing extreme courage during wartime or being very devoted to their religion. Other than that, they remained in their social class all their lives. Michmichgupi did all the work in the village and served the upper classes.

DAILY LIFE

Families

In general, men had higher social ranks than women. They held the leadership positions and took charge of their households. Men also ate first. Women Suns, however, had a greater position than others, and their husbands, who were michmichgupi, were of lesser rank. Women Suns were also responsible for choosing the next Great Sun, so they had great power and political influence (see “Economy” and “Government”).

Children belonged to the father, and they lived with him, his wives, and all his other children in the same home. The old man, who was the oldest male in the family, often a great-grandfather, had the greatest authority.

Children who misbehaved by being stubborn or hurting others were threatened with punishment from the old man. Though they were rarely punished, they learned to respect and fear the old man. Families looked to him as a judge, and his word was law. Everyone called him “Father,” including nephews. Observers said they never saw the children fight, perhaps because they were told they would be banished if they did. They were taught not to strike back if someone hit them, and they did not even wrestle for fun, so older children and adults did not engage in physical fights. Because of this, the Natchez had no need for courts or judges.

Buildings

At one time, the Natchez had as many as nine villages, each with a temple on top of a mound. The main mound was Emerald Mound. Grand Village had three mounds—the Great Sun’s Mound, the Temple Mound, and the Abandoned Mound (so named by archaeologists, because it was not excavated like the other mounds). The mounds stood 8 feet (2 to 3 meters) high, but rose in several stages, revealing that previous structures had been knocked down and replaced. A religious structure, housing bones of past Great Suns and a perpetually burning fire, stood facing the rising sun on the Temple Mound, which was farthest south. This
temple had carved birds decorating the roof. The chief’s mound was near the center of the village. The Great Sun’s home, which measured 45 by 25 feet (14 by 7.5 meters) and 20 feet (6 meters) high, was placed at one end of the mound.

Villages had huts of many different shapes—rectangular, square, or round—but all had high, pointy roofs and rectangular doors. Homes were built of poles that were then covered with a mixture of clay or mud and Spanish moss. The high, 15-foot (5-meter) walls had no windows, and they were covered with split cane mats. The round, arched roof came to a conical point and was covered with thatch.

Inside, platforms for sleeping lined the walls. Covered with woven mats, the platforms had wooden pillows and blankets made of skins. Shelves held mats for sitting around the fire, which was built in the center of the house. Because the huts had no hole in the roof, the smoke either exited through the door or drifted through the thatched roof, killing mosquitoes and other insects as it rose.

**Clothing and adornment**

Children did not wear clothes until they reached puberty. Then girls donned short, fringed skirts made of mulberry. Their mothers wore knee-length deerskin or fiber skirts. Men dressed in loincloths (flaps of material that covered the back and front and were suspended from the waist). Chiefs and nobles had black loincloths; others wore white. No one wore shirts in warm weather, but when it grew cold, both men and women put on poncho-like tunics that fell below their knees, and men wore leather leggings. Nobles could be distinguished by their feathered capes. Homosexual men wore skirts and braided their hair like the women.

The Great Sun’s headdress was made of net covered with black feathers, with an edging of red with white seeds. Long white feathers protruded from the front, and shorter ones were attached behind. Other sources say his crown was made of red-tasseled swan feathers. He wore a feathered mantle.

Men wore their hair in different styles. Some shaved half their heads. Others plucked all their hair except for a scalplock (a small piece that hung down in back). A few wore tonsures like the priests; they removed all the hair except for a strip around the sides and back. Warriors tattooed their whole bodies with serpents, suns, and other designs. A man who had killed an enemy tattooed a war club and a symbol of the enemy’s tribe on his shoulder.
Women eventually began covering their bodies with ankle-length white dresses woven from mulberry bark and nettles. Men added deer-skin leather jackets to their outfits.

**Food**

As a farming people, the Natchez depended on the crops they raised as their main diet. They grew corn, beans, pumpkins, watermelons, and squash that they used in dishes such as cornbread, hominy, and soups. Women had more than forty different recipes for corn, and they made bread from walnuts, chestnuts, and acorns. They also gathered wild grass, nuts, roots, grapes, and berries. Each of their thirteen calendar months, or moons, was based on a certain food (see “Our Calendar Has 13 Months”).

Men hunted for small game, turkey, bison, and deer. Fish and birds were also a part of Natchez meals. Hunters smoked bears out of holes in trees and saved the bear fat for oil. To catch deer, large groups of men chased one until it was exhausted. Then they brought it to the Great Sun (see “Economy”), who killed it and divided the meat among them. Individual hunters dressed in deer costumes and made deer calls to attract the animals.

**Education**

Children were given adult tasks as soon as they could handle them. Females had more responsibilities than males. Girls learned to plant and weed, pound the corn into flour, care for the children, carry wood and feed the fire, and make pottery, mats, clothes, and tools. They were warned that if they were lazy, they would not attract a good husband. Boys learned to hunt, fish, and cut wood. As they grew older, they worked to prepare the fields, dressed skins, and built houses.

Around the age of ten or twelve, children were expected to carry small loads to help their families. About this time, boys received a small bow and arrows. They were trained to shoot by using grass targets attached to a pole. The old man (the oldest man in a family; see “Families”) watched and praised them for trying hard rather than for their accuracy.

Although the boys sometimes raced with each other, the old man stopped them before they got overheated. The children bathed daily in the water, and all year round, one of the old men called all the children to swim. Mothers started teaching their youngsters how to swim when they were about three. Children were taught to make loud noises to scare away the alligators and to keep themselves warm when it was cold.
Only certain children were chosen to learn the oral traditions, ancient history, and stories. The Natchez viewed these oral accounts as treasures and entrusted them to those they believed could memorize them and would use them wisely.

Healing practices

To become a healer, a person isolated himself or herself for nine days and ate nothing until after receiving a vision. Shamans (pronounced SHAH-munz or SHAY-munz), or healers, used owl heads and small stones in the course of their work. They sucked out objects (a piece of wood, straw, or leather) from an incision. In addition to curing illness, some were able to change the weather.

ARTS

Known for their skill in pottery-making, the Natchez incised designs into clay. Swirls and organic shapes, often in sets of parallel lines, showed white or gray against a terracotta background. The ancestors of the Natchez developed the technique of shell tempering, which involved adding small bits of shell to strengthen (temper) the clay. The women were experts at shaping bottles, pots, jars, and plates. The Natchez were also skilled at basketry and woodcarving.

CUSTOMS

Birth and naming

Natchez mothers washed their babies right after they were born and then put them on a prepared cradleboard, which was about 2.5 feet (0.8 meters) long and about 9 inches (23 centimeters) wide. The end piece refolded to make a footboard. Inside the cradle the baby was laid on Spanish moss and a hide pillow stuffed with moss. Two bands of deerskin across the forehead kept the head on the pillow and also made it flat. The Natchez practiced head flattening. The child was tied onto the cradleboard with bindings around its shoulders, arms, legs, and hips. This cradleboard stayed beside the mother in bed or was placed on two pieces of cane so it could be rocked back and forth. Children were rubbed with bear oil to keep their muscles flexible and prevent bugs from biting them.
The Panther and the Crane

Storytelling was important to the Natchez, who had many traditional tales. One of the most important is about the origin of the sacred fire. Other characters that often appear in their folklore are Rabbit, a trickster; Olobit (Olobis, Olo’bit, Olo-Bit), sometimes called the sharp-breasted snake; Tlanuwa, a bird with metal feathers; and Tie-snakes, water spirits shaped like snakes who drag people under the water to drown them. Another common group of stories centers on Lodge-Boy and Thrown-Away (or Wild Boy). These two twins, born after their mother was killed by a monster, cause trouble as they try to slay monsters. Some tales, such as this one, are about animals who behave like people.

Panther and Crane laid a wager. Panther said to Crane, “Let us see who can throw the farthest.” “All right,” Crane answered. They said, “Let us throw a hammer across a stream.” Panther threw first, and he got it across, but when Crane stood ready to throw, he thought, “I can’t get it across.” The two had agreed that whichever did not succeed in getting the hammer across should be killed. “If I do not get it across, he will kill me,” thought Crane, and, as he stood there, he whistled. “Why are you whistling?” said Panther. “My elder brother lives way up there where the hammer is going to fall. I am whistling because when I throw this hammer I want him to see it. He is a blacksmith and I think it will be useful to him. That is why I am making a noise.” “If that is so, don’t throw it. I have some use for it myself. I can’t spare it. Let us try something different. Let us see who can eat most of equal quantities of food.” They did so. But the Crane had a bag hung about his person and he sat eating a little and putting more into the bag. Panther, however, did not find it out and ate all, and when all was devoured they brought more in. After they had eaten for a while longer Panther got more than enough and fell down dead. So Crane beat Panther.


Courtship

Once they reached puberty, teens spent much time together. Women and men in Natchez society could pursue a person who interested them. One French writer expressed surprise that the young, unmarried women were aggressive in courtship. Women Suns could have as many lovers as they desired. Some Natchez women intermarried with the French.
Couples did not need parental approval; they chose their own spouses. Once they decided to marry, the boy had an interview with the old men of the families. They checked to be sure that the bride and groom were not too closely related, and if either of the old men had any objections, the marriage could not take place. The old men set the wedding date. Young men rarely married before age twenty-five.

**Marriage**

**Wedding ceremony** The men of the family hunted, while the women cooked corn and furnished the young man’s cabin. When all was ready, the old man conducted the bride to the cabin, and the rest of the family followed. The young man’s relatives greeted them and allowed the old men to rest on the beds for a while.

The young man wore a tuft on his head hanging over his left ear that symbolized that he was to be the master. A sprig of oak leaves was attached to it, meaning that he would not fear entering the woods to hunt. In his left hand, he carried a bow and arrows to show that he would defend his wife and children. The young woman held a laurel branch to signify that she would be pure and an ear of maize indicating that she would prepare the meals.

The old men brought the couple together and questioned them about their intentions to live together in peace. If they did not get along, they were warned that their families would reject them. The groom then asked the young woman if she wanted to marry him, and she assented and said she was happy. Her husband then gave a present to her father. After the groom grasped the hands of everyone in the bride’s family, she did the same with his. A feast and dance followed the ceremony.

**Rules governing marriages** The Great Sun could only marry partners from the lowest class of the society, the michmichgupi (see “Economy”). The Great Sun’s brothers (the Lesser Suns) and his sisters (the Women Suns) also could only marry commoners. The children of the Great Sun and the Lesser Suns did not retain their parents’ high rank. The children of the Women Suns, however, kept their mother’s social rank, and one of them would usually become the next Great Sun when his uncle died.
Pallbearers carry the body of Chief Tattooed Serpent at his funeral procession in Louisiana in 1725. © MPI/GETTY IMAGES.
Michmichgupi who married into the top social class remained commoners all their lives. They could not eat with their spouses and had to stand in their presence. They also praised all their spouses’ remarks. If they offended their high-ranking spouses in any way, they could be killed and replaced.

Once they were married, spouses were expected to be faithful. They were told that their hearts were not their own, but belonged to the other. Divorce was rare, but men could separate from their wives. When that happened the children went with the parent of the same sex.

**Funerals**

The Natchez conducted elaborate funeral ceremonies for their elite. Everyone gathered at the mound plaza for rituals that included sacrifice. When a Sun died, the spouse and several relatives and friends willingly gave up their lives. Servants, too, were sacrificed to give the Sun assistance in the afterlife, and parents offered their children as sacrifices, particularly in honor of the Great Sun. These volunteers would be strangled, and they considered it a privilege to cross into the spirit world with a Sun.

When Chief Tattooed Serpent (see “History”) died in 1725, the French prevented his brother, the Great Sun, from giving up his life, but Tattooed Serpent’s wife only laughed at their objections. She insisted that it was a joy for her to die with her husband.

Bodies were placed on raised platforms near the village. The Natchez smeared mud on a mat and covered the corpse with it, but they left the head uncovered. They left food next to the body. An arbor placed over the body was plastered to keep the corpse dry until the flesh decayed. The dried bones were then put into a cane basket and carried to the temple. When the Temple Mound of Great Village was excavated in the late 1900s, archaeologists found piles of these bones in the temple area.

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**Our Calendar Has 13 Months**

The Natchez calendar has thirteen months (or moons). Each month is named for the food eaten the month before. The year begins in the spring with Deer Moon, which falls around March.

- Chv “Deer”
- Oruh “Strawberry”
- Ha’kuyv “Little Corn”
- Cekestanu
- Yewes Kvyap “Watermelon/Squash”
- Vpesur/Henn “Peach/Fish”
- Yeweskvyp “Mulberry”
- Ha’kuyv Sel (Pookup) “Great Corn/Green Corn”
- Sorkorser “Turkey”
- Wastanem “Bison”
- Tsokohp “Bear”
- Hakwi “Cold Meal”
- Puilusi “Chestnut”
- Puhelush “Walnut (and all other nuts)”

Feasts and games

The ceremonies and feasts of the Natchez were both religious and political in nature. They were used to thank the Infinite Spirit for his blessings, and they allowed people to pay tribute to the Great Sun. Most of these feasts were connected to the thirteen moons (see “Our Calendar Has 13 Months”).

Deer Moon Festival  
The year began in March at the time of the Deer Moon. A special enactment of a past event was part of this monthly festival. Long ago, a Great Sun had been ambushed by enemies, but he was rescued by his warriors. In memory of this incident, the warriors divided into two groups with different colored plumes. One group pretended to be the enemy and advanced toward the Great Sun’s home. The Great Sun, dressed in finery, emerged, rubbing his eyes to show he had just awakened. The enemy group captured him, but the other warriors came to rescue him. The enemies issued cries of terror and sang death songs. Then the Great Sun, using an ancient war club, made the motion of a blow, and the enemies toppled to the ground. After many enemies fell before the Natchez warriors, the defeated fighters got up and fled to the woods, pursued by the victors. All the people gave cries of joy.

The Great Sun then rested for a while and later reemerged without his crown. He went to the temple, bowed, threw some earth into the air so that it rained down on his head, then he tossed a bit in each of the four direction. Next he spent a half hour with arms outstretched like a cross. The Grand Master of Ceremonies then took his place, and after him came the Great War Chief; both of them stood still in that position. The people stayed silent during these prayers. Finally, the Great Sun came out dressed in his feather crown, with a necklace of pearls and feathers. He sat on his throne, and the warriors put a bison robe around him and pelts over his feet. Women shouted with joy as they gave him presents. After this, the people feasted and danced.

Strawberry and Maize Moons  
The second moon feast was for strawberries. The women and children gathered many, and the warriors brought skewered ducks that they caught on a special hunting trip. The most solemn feast was that of maize in the seventh moon. Then the people ate new corn in a religious manner. To grow this corn, warriors prepared cornfields by cutting out the brush, peeling back the bark on the lower halves of the trees, and waiting two weeks for all the plant matter to dry. After that they lit a fire that burned out all the trees, roots, and underbrush. They planted and weeded this field. When harvest time...
neared, they created a sacred granary of cane lined with cane mats. The large cane they used on the outside had a natural varnish that prevented rats from climbing the sides or chewing holes through it.

Cabins were built near the granary for the Great Sun and the Great War Chief. Warriors also built homes from grass and leaves for their own families. On feast day, everyone rose at sunrise. The Great Sun was transported to his temporary cabin on a red litter; this special chair, carried on the shoulders of warriors, was decorated for the occasion with leaves and flowers. The chief saluted the corn, and the people repeated the salute. The warriors distributed corn first to the Women Suns, then to the other women, who prepared it by hulling and crushing it. They threw it into boiling water while the warriors sang war songs, beating on a pot as a drum.

When the corn was cooked, the Great Sun received two plates, one of each kind of corn that they grew. After he offered it to the four directions, he sent it to the Great War Chief and said, “Pachcou (Eat).” Everyone then began to eat; the men first, then the boys, after which the women and children had their portion. Singing and speeches followed. At nightfall, they surrounded the area with huge torches made of cane and danced until daybreak.

The next morning, two teams of warriors with different colored plumes on their heads played *pelotte*, a game using a fist-sized ball of deer-skin stuffed with moss. The object of the game was to touch the cabin of the Great Sun or the Great War Chief without carrying the ball or letting it touch the ground. Each team tried to prevent the other from reaching their goal. The people continued to feast in this manner until all the corn was gone. If some people had corn and others did not, the ones with extra corn had a tassel hung in their doorway so others could share it. To end the feast, the Great Sun was carried back to his home on the litter.

**CURRENT TRIBAL ISSUES**

Once a strong and vibrant nation, the Natchez were scattered in the 1700s following a French attack (see “History”). Most joined other tribes but they tried to maintain their customs and identity. Today, some have been absorbed by these other, larger nations, but they still pass along their heritage to their children. Many are members of two nations—the Natchez and one of the other tribes with which they are affiliated. Several of the groups have gained federal or state recognition, and they work hard to combat the common belief that they were exterminated centuries ago.
NOTABLE PEOPLE

Tattooed Arm, mother of the Great Sun who ruled during the French massacre in 1731, favored the French. When her people plotted to attack several French communities, she tried to alert the commandant and other soldiers, but they ignored her warning. It is even said that she removed bundles of sticks, called fagots, from the Natchez store. Several tribes were using those to count the days up to the joint attack against the French (see “Massacre and Destruction of Natchez” sidebar). This meant the Natchez attacked the French alone. In spite of her loyalty, the French imprisoned her in 1731. Tattooed Arm's son, Olabalkebiche (d. 1725), or Tattooed Serpent, was the brother of the Great Sun. He, like his mother, supported the French until the commandant's ultimatum (see “History”). Some sources indicate that the name Tattooed Serpent may have been given to any Natchez war chief, just as the name Great Sun referred to any head chief.

BOOKS


PERIODICALS


WEB SITES


