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LOS ADAES AND THE BORDERLANDS ORIGINS OF EAST TEXAS

by James L. McCorkle, Jr.

The Spanish East Texas outpost of Los Adaes, through the impact of the Texas-Louisiana borderland frontier on its inhabitants, significantly influenced the origins of permanent settlement in East Texas in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The outlines of the settlement, abandonment, and subsequent re-settlement of this region are familiar. In the early eighteenth century, in order to block French intrusion into its territory northeast of the Rio Grande, Spain established several outposts in the region between the Neches and Red rivers. The Los Adaes settlement, comprising the presidio of Nuestra Senora del Pilar and the mission of San Miguel, was the most important of these. It directly confronted the French post of Natchitoches some fifteen miles to the east on the Red River. Protection for this outpost at the time of its founding in 1721 was originally furnished by a garrison of one hundred cavalry troops, and then, after 1729, this duty was entrusted to a reduced complement of sixty. Recognition by the Spanish authorities of the presidio's strategic value led to its designation as the capital of the Province of Texas from 1729 until 1773, when this function was transferred to San Antonio. With the closure of the presidio of Los Dolores de los Texas on the Angelina River in 1729, Los Adaes remained the only presidio in East Texas.

Abandonment in 1773 occurred as a result of two circumstances. Spain's acquisition of Louisiana from France in 1762 caused Spanish Texas to lose its borderland importance. But, whereas the French menace was removed, an Indian threat remained. Concern with hostile Indian tribes along New Spain's northern frontier led to the establishment of a protective cordon of presidios extending from the Gulf of California to the Gulf of Mexico. This line of posts did not include the East Texas settlements. These developments drastically altered the status of Los Adaes and the neighboring missions of Los Ais and Guadalupe. As a consequence, the inhabitants of this affected region were ordered removed to San Antonio, which was retained as a part of the defensive line. This course of events launched this small band of people, the bulk of whom were from Los Adaes, on a six-year odyssey which ended with a permanent settlement at Nacogdoches.

Herbert E. Bolton, in a study which appeared in 1905 in The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association, provided a thorough account of the abandonment of East Texas and the subsequent re-occupation. The following is a distillation of the story of these formative

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events described by the pioneer borderlands historian. During the summer, 1773, the people of Los Adaes grudgingly left their homes and began their trek to San Antonio. From the very outset, after their arrival, it was manifestly evident that the Adaesans had no intention of settling down at the prescribed location. Leadership for their subsequent departure from San Antonio and return to East Texas was provided by Antonio Gil Ybarbo, a native of Los Adaes and the proprietor of a large ranch, El Lobanillo, situated near the mission of Los Ais between the Sabine and Neches rivers. While this undertaking was in direct contravention of royal policy there was a mixed reaction from the authorities most directly concerned with affairs in Texas who allowed the move from San Antonio to occur. Aid and assistance was provided by the sympathetic provincial governor, the Baron de Ripperda, while opposition came from the military commander of the frontier, Don Hugo Oconor. Moreover, the viceroy was neither energetic nor decisive in the matter of keeping East Texas free of settlement. The Adaesans' first return settlement was Nuestra Senora del Pilar de Bucareli on the Trinity River where they resided from the late summer of 1774 until 1779. Prompted by Comanche raids, fire, and flood they made a final move during January and February 1779, to Nacogdoches at the site of the former mission of Guadalupe. Here permanent settlement took place. While the transfer to Bucareli was undertaken with the approval of the governor, the change of location to Nacogdoches received no official sanction until after it was a fait accompli.\(^6\) This chain of events acquired for Los Adaes an added importance, that of cradle of East Texas. This assertion is borne out by the fact that even after a span of thirteen years, in 1792, over a quarter of the population of Nacogdoches continued to be listed as natives of Los Adaes.\(^6\)

The most remarkable element in this episode was the assertiveness exhibited by the Adaesans in the face of Spanish policy under the leadership of Gil Ybarbo. Bolton suggested the exceptional nature of their accomplishment when he characterizes it as "a complete victory over the home government." He attributes the failure of the government's removal policy to three causes:

That this plan failed was due primarily to the attachment of some of the settlers of the district to their homes; to the desire of the provincial authorities to maintain an influence over the Indian tribes of East Texas, as a makeweight against the hostile Apache and Comanche Indians and against Spain's new neighbors, the English; and to the temporizing and double policy of the viceroy.\(^6\)

However, there was a fourth element acting in conjunction with these three delineated by Bolton. This was the frontier experience at Los
Adaes which nurtured an independent spirit evident in the refusal of the settlers to submit passively to the dictates of Spanish policy. Three factors in combination constituted this formative stimulus. They were remoteness from administrative and supply centers in New Spain, friendly relations with surrounding Indians, and close proximity to the neighboring French settlement at Natchitoches. None of these alone could have fostered the impulse which underlay the course of action followed by Gil Ybarbo and his neighbors. But interacting together they formed the catalyst which enabled an independent spirit to evolve on the East Texas frontier.

Los Adaes and the nearby missions constituted a pocket of isolated settlements connected with New Spain only by a slender cord of overland communication. Fortunately the inhabitants of this region enjoyed the friendship of the local Indians among whom they settled. Throughout its half-century of existence Los Adaes was free from the burden of Indian defense. In Texas the tribe which troubled the Spanish the most during the middle eighteenth century was the Lipan Apache. While this group was a constant source of danger to the establishments on the San Antonio River, their depredations never threatened Los Adaes and the other East Texas outposts. The friendly Adaes Indians among whom the Spanish at Los Adaes lived were, along with the neighboring Natchitoches Indians to the east, members of the Caddoan group. The remaining missions in East Texas were set among tribes of the related Hasinai group, who were also friendly toward the Spanish. These groups of allied Indians were enemies of the Apache. Thus, the inhabitants in this remote enclave enjoyed a security, furnished by a protective cordon of surrounding tribes, not enjoyed elsewhere on the exposed edges of the Spanish borderlands.

While the inhabitants of Los Adaes were free from the threat of Apache attack, their remote location caused their connection with New Spain to remain tenuous. Saltillo, a major source of supply for Los Adaes, was 800 miles away. The distance to San Antonio was over 300 miles and required six to seven days of travel. Moreover, the major trail between Los Adaes and San Antonio, the El Camino Real, was nothing more than a rough path. Both rivers and Indians interfered with its use. Numerous streams, all of which required fording, were repetitious and troublesome obstacles to travel. Heavy rains often made them impassable. A graphic illustration of the difficulties posed by flooding was furnished by a traveler in 1767 who observed that the Sabine River overflowed its banks to a distance of eight miles during the rainy season. Delays caused by high water were often excessive. In 1723 a convoy of cattle and flour from San Juan Bautista on the Rio Grande, destined for Los Adaes, was detained for seven months by heavy rains and flooding. Such extended delays had unfortunate
effects on the cargoes. Cattle were lost through drowning and shipments of flour spoiled.  

West of the friendly Hasinai territory travelers struggling with the irregular features of the El Camino Real suffered the added discomfort of exposure to attack from hostile natives. Indeed, the threat posed by the Apache caused a re-routing of the trail between San Antonio and Los Adaes from a direct upper route to a roundabout lower one. The constant menace of Indian attack encouraged the utilization of an overland convoy system. Protection for conveyes, which could include as many as one hundred persons in addition to supplies, was provided by military escort. For reasons of safety it was considered advisable for single travelers to join a convoy before proceeding on their journey. Small groups, however, sometimes set out on their own without benefit of the protection furnished by a convoy and its escort. In one case, in 1768, a priest was obliged because of urgent necessity to attach himself to an unescorted group including a few muleteers and a handful of other travelers. He acknowledged the imprudence of such an action: "To set out without a convoy was rash, I admit, but necessity and what I was suffering obliged me to do so."  

The Adaesans themselves, in their life at the settlement, experienced varying degrees of difficulty. The worst time for the outpost came in the mid-1730s. A number of circumstances, all aggravated by the remoteness of the mission and presidio from Spanish centers, combined to create a desperate state of affairs. Shortages of beans and corn, staples in the diet of the Adaesans, occurred in the winter of 1734-1735 as a result of short crops. There was also a scarcity of meat, which game hunting attempts failed to relieve. Moreover, the trade connection with the French at nearby Natchitoches, a development which will be explained later, failed to furnish assistance. The French, themselves, lost a portion of their food supplies through spoilage as a consequence of abnormally heavy rains. Although there was crop relief in 1736, the food situation continued to remain unsatisfactory for some time. Not only was food scarce, but other necessities were also lacking as well. The clothing situation among the inhabitants was pitiable. Their attire for the most part consisted of rags, blankets, and buffalo skins. Supply convoys, because of the delays and losses encountered on the trail to Los Adaes, could not be relied upon as adequate means of supply, especially during a period of acute shortages such as that experienced in the 1730s. Those convoys which arrived were infrequent and the provisions which they brought were inadequate to alleviate either the food or clothing shortages. A supply convoy which reached the settlement in the fall of 1735 did little to ease the suffering. Indeed, the cargo of flour which it brought was so spoiled that only half of it was usable. Weather conditions provided an added
source of misery. In addition to the heavy rains which plagued the area, a severe storm, probably a tornado, struck Los Adaes in late January 1735, destroying many structures. Although the Adaesans would not experience such acute deprivations again, life at the post would continue to be hard and demanding.\(^{16}\)

The acquisition of sufficient provisions from Spanish sources remained beyond the capability of this frontier community to achieve. In addition to the inadequacies of overland supply, local efforts also fell short. Although holdings in cattle appear to have been satisfactory, except for the period of the mid-1730s, there was a perpetual deficiency in agricultural production.\(^{17}\) The hilly country in which Los Adaes was situated was only marginally productive, a fact borne out by the inability of the presidial farm, even in a good year, to provide enough food to meet local demands.\(^{18}\) This condition was alluded to by a governor serving at the presidio in the early 1740s, Tomas Felipe Winthuisen. He noted that:

> The earth is fertile, although hilly and only fertile in strips. There are some prairies on which one makes a harvest or crop of corn and this at times. There is no place where one can... [grow] wheat because only a few springs of water are sufficient enough for the people of the presidio and its neighbors.\(^{19}\)

The capriciousness of the weather also hampered the successful cultivation of crops. Often the amount of rainfall was either too great or too small. Moreover, on at least one occasion, the soldiers who provided the labor supply for the presidial farm, perhaps venting their resentment at presidial authority, refused to perform their agricultural duties. Failure to achieve the necessary level of food production at Los Adaes prompted the viceroy in Mexico City to consider moving the outpost to a more suitable location for raising crops. The governor, Juan Bustillo Zevallos, who was charged with carrying out this design, reported after a reconnaissance in the summer of 1731 that there was no better site within the surrounding region than Los Adaes.\(^{19}\) Consequently agricultural self-sufficiency remained an unfulfilled goal.

Out of dire necessity the Spanish at Los Adaes turned to the French at Natchitoches for assistance. It is ironic, but revealing, that Los Adaes, which was established to protect East Texas from French encroachment, relied extensively for its survival upon the very outpost which it had been established to confront. The French, for their part, welcomed the opportunity for commercial penetration into Spanish Texas afforded to them by the needs of their neighbors to the west. Thus, it was through the development of trade with the nearby French that the continual problem of food supply was alleviated. Corn, beans, and wheat were obtained from the French in significant quantities in
exchange for Spanish silver. That the vital nature of this commerce was recognized by Spanish authorities is evident from the fact that Spanish trade restrictions were modified to permit the acquisition of foreign foodstuffs. The trade which evolved between Los Adaes and Natchitoches was not, however, limited to food. Commerce in less essential goods took place despite the refusal of Spanish authorities to countenance trade in other than vital provisions. A very active illicit traffic developed across the frontier which neither regulations nor repeated investigations could halt. Los Adaes was simply too close to Natchitoches and too far away from the centers of authority and supply in New Spain. Among the items included in the forbidden commerce were wine, brandy, horses, and Indian trade goods. At least two governors, Angel Martos y Navarette and Jacinto de Barrios y Jaurequi, participated in a brisk and profitable traffic with the French. Official efforts to restrict commercial activity between the two settlements following the transfer of Louisiana to Spain also failed.

French goods were essential elements in the Indian trade carried on by the Spanish at Los Adaes. This was clearly illustrated by the activities of one of the provincial governors, Barrios, who, in the 1750s, was involved in an illicit commerce with the Bidai and Orcoquiza Indians near the Trinity River. Barrios, who apparently enjoyed a monopoly, utilized soldiers from the Los Adaes garrison in his enterprise. He obtained the necessary articles for exchange from Natchitoches. These included French knives, scissors, tobacco, combs, beads, and firearms. The governor furnished these items to the Indians in exchange for corn, buckskins, buffalo hides, and horses. He then sold the corn and horses at Los Adaes and traded the skins and hides at Natchitoches for new supplies.

The commercial intercourse between Natchitoches and Los Adaes, in its turn, exerted a significant influence on the French. Although the exclusiveness of the Spanish trade policies prevented a flourishing exchange beyond East Texas, there was nevertheless enough commerce to warrant the development of Natchitoches as a frontier trade center. The one-sided nature of the trade, in favor of the French, was suggested by the frequent extension of credit to Spanish customers. This practice created problems. In 1770, for example, the settlers at Los Adaes temporarily lost their credit with the merchants and traders at Natchitoches because of their failure, for a period of five years, to make payment on a large aggregate debt which had accumulated. Despite such difficulties, however, as long as the Spanish post endured, trade across the frontier continued. The importance of this relationship was demonstrated when Natchitoches experienced an economic decline following the removal of Los Adaes in 1773.
There were inevitable frictions which placed strains on the relationship between these borderland neighbors. Competition for dominance over the surrounding Indians as well as boundary differences contributed to local tensions. Although the East Texas natives were friendly, as has been noted, the Spanish failed to gain sway over them. French influence based on their energetic and successful Indian trade practices was a major determinant. At least one Spanish official maintained that French superiority among the borderland tribes was so prevalent that it posed a serious threat to the security of the Spanish settlements. Governor Barrios, in a report to his superiors written in the spring of 1753, warned with some exaggeration that "any time a break might occur between the two crowns, France and Spain, your excellency may be assured that we will be sacrificed by the Indians at only a word from the French." Moreover, the relocation by the French of their fort at Natchitoches to the west bank of the Red River in 1735 caused a local tempest. This maneuver evoked an indignant response from the Texas authorities who claimed the west bank of the stream as Spanish territory. Their protestations proved of little effect, however, and the French fortification remained undisturbed at its new location. A later investigation carried out by order of the viceroy revealed the traditional boundary not to be the river but, instead, La Grande Montana and the Arroyo Hondo, natural features situated to the west of the Red River and midway between the two posts. This affair, in which the local Spanish chose to disregard the time-honored limits, revealed in the Adaesans' character a pronounced territorial sensitivity.

Despite frictions, relations between the Spanish at Los Adaes and the French at Natchitoches were, on the whole, amicable. As has already been noted, there was considerable commercial intercourse between the two settlements. In addition family ties and associations were established. One marital episode in 1736 involved the daughter of the acting-commander of the presidio, Joseph Gonzalez. In this minor drama fifteen year old Victoria Gonzalez, to the dismay and consternation of her father, ran away to marry one of the young French soldiers at Natchitoches. This event suggests the degree to which even barriers of nationality succumbed to the potency of frontier romance. Moreover, Adaesans frequently served as godparents of the children of Franch friends. Common religious needs also provided a bond. The Franciscan fathers who served at Los Adaes also served at Natchitoches, which for long periods was without resident priests. Indeed, most of the marriages and baptisms of the children and grandchildren of the French commander, Louis Juchereau de St. Denis, were performed by Spanish priests. An illustration of the potential for cooperation which existed between the two groups was provided by the assistance which the Spanish governor, Bustillo, furnished to the French in 1731, when
Natchez Indians attacked Natchitoches. The Spaniard sent eleven of the presidio's sixty troops to aid the French, one of whom was killed during the campaign. The frontier life which was shared on this borderland, depicted by the foregoing occasions, was of far greater significance as a determinant of local attitudes on both sides of the Arroyo Hondo than patriotic sentiment.

The effort to depict a subtle nuance of the spirit is, at best, difficult. Nevertheless, the historical juxtaposition of the frontier conditions experienced at Los Adaes and the return of the Adaesans to East Texas strongly suggests the presence of a significant independent spirit. The half-century of borderland life at Los Adaes loosened the ties with New Spain and created a localism nurtured by the insular nature of this isolated pocket of settlement. This development was best characterized by the intimate sharing of a common frontier with French neighbors at Natchitoches, despite Spanish restrictions, despite local frictions, and despite national differences. From this localism emerged the independent spirit manifest in the assertiveness demonstrated by the Adaesans in their refusal to be bound by the dictates of royal policy. The gestation of a permanently established East Texas was thus dependent upon the unique combination of frontier conditions present at this far away, and often forgotten, borderland outpost.

NOTES

1The site of Los Adaes is located in the west central region of Louisiana near the town of Robeline and is eighty-five miles east of Nacogdoches, Texas. Research for this study was funded by a grant from the Louisiana State Parks Department.


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1Bolton, "The Spanish Abandonment," 82-137.
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\*Census of Nacogdoches compiled by Antonio Gil Ybarbo, December 31, 1792, Bexar Archives, University of Texas Archives, Austin, Texas.


\*Castaneda, Our Catholic Heritage, III, 80-81; Carlos E. Castaneda, Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1936, II (Austin, 1936), 175, cited hereafter as Castaneda, Our Catholic Heritage, II; Kinnaird, Frontiers, 167.


\*Forrestal, Solis Diary, 35.

\*Castaneda, Our Catholic Heritage, II, 78, 81.

\*Oakah L. Jones, Jr., Los Paisanos: Spanish Settlers on the Northern Frontier of New Spain (Norman, 1979), 61.

\*Castaneda, Our Catholic Heritage, III, 78-79, 81-82.

\*Bolton, “The Spanish Abandonment,” 84, 86; Bolton, Texas, 9; Morfi, History, 91; Spanish Government vs. Andres Chirinos, Exp. May 6, 1755, Robert Bruce Blake Collection, Supplement Number 1, Bexar Archives, Translation, October 1, 1745-December 17, 1779, Special Collection, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas.

\*Castaneda, Our Catholic Heritage, III, 84.

\*Tomas Felipe Winthuisen to Viceroy, August 19, 1744, trans. by Hiram F. Gregory, Bexar Archives, Louisiana Collection, Northwestern State University, Natchitoches, Louisiana.

\*Bolton, Athanase de Mezieres, 159; Bolton, Texas, 38-39; Eleanor Claire Buckley, “The Aguayo Expedition into Texas and Louisiana, 1719-1722,” The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association, XV (July, 1911), 13-14; Castaneda, Our Catholic Heritage, II, 175, 178; Castaneda, Our Catholic Heritage, III, 75-77.

\*Castaneda, Our Catholic Heritage, II, 144, 178, 265-266; Castaneda, Our

19Castaneda, Our Catholic Heritage, II, 178; Castaneda, Our Catholic Heritage, III, 85; Castaneda, Our Catholic Heritage, IV, 1, 238, 239; Surrey, Commerce, 414; Bolton, Athanase de Mezieres, 252; Bolton, Texas, 9, 38-39; Forrestal, Solis Diary, 32, Phares, Cavalier, 249-251.


19Bolton, Athanase de Mezieres, 159, 252; Clark, New Orleans, 185.

19Charles W. Hackett, ed., Picardo’s Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas, IV (Austin, 1946), 64.

19Bolton, Texas, 33-34; West, “Compendium,” 43; Charles W. Hackett, Picardo’s Treatise on the Limits of Louisiana and Texas, III (Austin, 1941), 543-553.