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### French Place Names in Clark County, Arkansas

Joe Jeffers

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# Clark County Historical Journal -- 2019

## French Place Names in Clark County, Arkansas

Joe Jeffers

French place names are common in Arkansas, especially in south Arkansas, where after the French explorers left, French trappers and settlers from Canada moved in. Some of those names remain unchanged from the original French. General usage and English speaking settlers modified others. Clark County was one of five counties established in the Arkansas Territory. Its boundaries changed five times before reaching its present form in 1877. This article explores French place names in today's Clark County and in the original Clark County formed in 1818.

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French place names abound in Arkansas, particularly in south Arkansas. The indigenous people were Caddo, Osage, and Quapaw, among others. The first European explorers came in 1541, when Hernando de Soto led a Spanish expedition into Arkansas looking for gold. They found many tribal villages and large fields of maize, but no gold.<sup>1</sup> They killed many tribesmen and transmitted disease, but left no settlements. DeSoto died a year later, and the Spanish were gone within another year.

More than 100 years later, French explorers entered Arkansas -- Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet in 1673, and Robert La Salle and Henri de Tonti in 1681. They found only widely scattered tribal villages of mostly hunter-gatherer groups, not the more populous settlements encountered by the Spanish. Epidemics, especially smallpox, had decimated the populations of the more densely settled indigenous peoples. Tonti established Arkansas Post, the first European settlement in Arkansas, in 1684. Missionaries, traders, and trappers followed. These Frenchmen named many places, especially mountains and streams. Following the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, President Thomas Jefferson commissioned William Dunbar and George Hunter to make an expedition up the Mississippi River to the Ouachita River and up the Ouachita to where Hot Springs is now. In their 1804-1805 diaries, they recorded many of the French names in use at the time.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Key, "European Exploration and Settlement, 1541 through 1802," *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, accessed, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/european-exploration-and-settlement-1541-through-1802-2916/>.

<sup>2</sup> Trey Berry, Pam Beasley, and Jeanne Clements, eds., *The Forgotten Expedition, 1804-1805: The Louisiana Purchase Journals of Dunbar and Hunter* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 2006), xii-xiii.

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More French names are found in south Arkansas because north Arkansas had few navigable streams. There are exceptions. The Ozark Mountains resulted from Anglicization of **Aux Arcs**, the French abbreviation of Aux Arkansas. **Au** (singular) and **aux** (plural) mean at the, to the, or with the. Au in French is pronounced O; the terminal X adds a Z sound. Putting them together results in the sound Ozarc.<sup>3</sup> Arkansas derives from **Arkansa, the name Father Membré, a priest in La Salle's party, gave to the tribe of Indians they encountered on their trip down the Mississippi River.**<sup>4</sup> **Aux Arcs** was the shortened name the explorers used for the Arkansa. Petit Jean and Maumelle are well known names with French histories. While Arkansans pronounce Petit Jean **pet-it jean**, the French say **puh-tee jzawn**. The legend states that a young French girl, Adrienne Dumont, disguised herself as a boy to follow her fiancé to the New World. Because she was small, the sailors called "him" **Little John, Petit Jean**. She died and was buried on the mountain that bears her name.<sup>5</sup> Maumelle is a corruption of **mamelle**, French for breast, and used to describe mountains that had a breast-like form.<sup>6</sup> Maumelle was the original name for Pinnacle Mountain. Even Little Rock has a French origin. **La Petite Roche** was a small rock formation on the south bank of the Arkansas River. Early travelers used it as a navigational marker.<sup>7</sup>

Clark County was one of the first five counties of the Arkansas Territory, as shown in Figure 1 on the following page. The legal description is as follows:

All that portion of the county of Arkansas, bounded as follows, to wit: beginning at the west boundary of the **Quapaw claim, at a place where Michael Boon's road crosses** the same, then west on said road to the south fork of the Saline creek, then up said creek to its head, then due west to the Indian boundary line, then with said boundary south with said Indian boundary line, until a due east line will intersect the head of the north branch of Little Missouri, then down the Little Missouri to its mouth, then with the Ouachita River to the mouth of Saline creek, on the boundary of the Quapaw Indian claim, then with the Quapaw boundary line to the place of beginning, is hereby laid off and

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Dickinson, "Colonial Arkansas Place Names," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, XLVII (Summer 1989): 153.

<sup>4</sup> John Branner, "Some Old French Place Names in the State of Arkansas," *Modern Language Notes* 14, no. 2 (February 1899): 34.

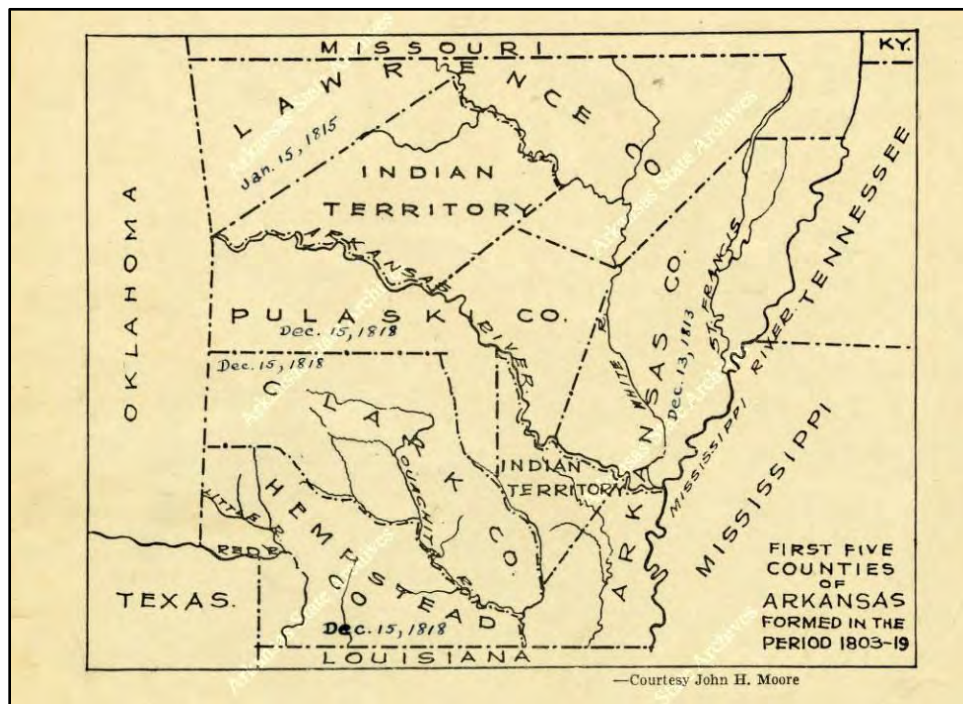
<sup>5</sup> Courtney Clements, "Legend of Petit Jean," *CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas*, accessed May 22, 2019, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/petit-jean-legend-3474/>.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Nuttall, *Journal of Travels into the Arkansa Territory during the Year 1819*, ed. Reuben Twaites, (Cleveland, OH: The Arthur Clark Company, 1905) 148.

<sup>7</sup> History of Little Rock, Arkansas, United States History, accessed May 22, 2019, <https://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h2085.html>.

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erected into separate county, which shall be called and known by the name of Clark county.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1: First Territorial Map of Arkansas.<sup>9</sup>**

The Indian boundary line at that time extended well into what is now Oklahoma, so the county was somewhat larger than is depicted in Figure 1. The overlay of 1818 Clark County on a current map of Arkansas is shown in Figure 2 on the following page.

French place names in what was Clark County persist today in several forms: the original French, original French corrupted through use, or either of these two Anglicized. In some of these cases, the original word was an Indian term written by the French. In others, the French name is a family name. Even where the original French name is still in use, local people often have an Anglicized name anyway. Not surprisingly, most of the names are associated with mountains or streams.

<sup>8</sup> *Missouri. Laws of a Public And General Nature, of the District of Louisiana, of the Territory of Louisiana, of the Territory of Missouri, And of the State of Missouri, Up to the Year 1824* [i. E. 1836] (Jefferson City, MO.: W. Lusk, 1842), 589, accessed May 22, 2019, <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/008595805>.

<sup>9</sup> First Five Counties of Arkansas Formed in the Period 1803-19, Historic Maps Collection, Map 059.2, Arkansas State Archives.

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Figure 2: Clark County of 1818.<sup>10</sup>

## French Place Names in Current Clark County

Amity – From *amitie* (old French), means friendly relations.<sup>11</sup> Named by William F. Browning, who served as the Clark County surveyor from 1846 until his death in 1854.<sup>12</sup>

Antoine – Pronounced *awn-twan*. Named for a dead Frenchman, whose body was found on the riverbank.<sup>13</sup> River that forms the northwestern boundary of Clark County before it drains into the Little Missouri River near Okolona. Locals say *ann-toine*, rhyming with coin.

Caddo – From an Indian tribe the French called *les Caddeaux*, pronounced *lay cad-o*. LaSalle refers to them as Cadodaquio,<sup>14</sup> pronounced *cad-o-dak-keyo*. River that runs through Montgomery, Pike, and northern Clark Counties, entering the Ouachita River near Caddo Valley.

Casa Massa - Also known as Cache Masse and Cachamassa. These spellings are probably a corruption of *Cache a Macon*, pronounced *cash a my-cone*. Hunters often had a cache

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<sup>10</sup> Clark County in 1818 included all or parts of Bradley, Calhoun, Clark, Cleveland, Dallas, Garland, Grant, Hot Spring, Howard, Montgomery, Ouachita, Perry, Pike, Polk, Saline, Scott and Yell Counties. Maps of Arkansas, accessed May 22, 2019, <https://www.mapofus.org/arkansas/>. Modified with permission.

<sup>11</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed February 20, 2019, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/amity>.

<sup>12</sup> Amity (Clark County), accessed June 5, 2019, <https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/amity-clark-county-2583/>.

<sup>13</sup> Dickinson, "Colonial Arkansas Place Names," 138.

<sup>14</sup> Branner, "Old French Place Names," 36.



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or hiding place at the mouths of streams where they stored their pelts. This hunter was probably from the same French Macon family that established the *Post d'Ouachita*<sup>15</sup> at what is now Monroe, Louisiana. Creek drains into the Ouachita River near Dalark.



**Figure 3: Antoine River on AR Highway 26 at Clark County line.<sup>16</sup>**



<sup>15</sup> Dickinson, "Colonial Arkansas Place Names," 158.

<sup>16</sup> All photographs are by the author unless otherwise noted.

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## **Figure 4: A section of a Civil War map from the trans-Mississippi Topographical Bureau, showing Cache Masse Creek and the Cache Masso Post Office of that era.<sup>17</sup>**

Deceiper – Pronounced *deh-si-pee*. Locals say *dee-seeper*. From *Bayou de Cyper*<sup>18</sup> or *Bayou de Cypres*<sup>19</sup> or Cypress Bayou. The creek south of Arkadelphia and east of Curtis. Runs into the Ouachita River northwest of Sparkman. Hunter described large numbers of Cypress trees growing at the mouth of the creek. Dunbar and Hunter used the term bayou for the mouth of a creek flowing into the Ouachita River. In French *de* means of or from.

DeGray – From *de grès*, same pronunciation, meaning sandstone.<sup>20</sup> Creek and community near Arkadelphia from which DeGray Lake is named. Creek runs into Caddo River at DeGray Regulating Lake near Caddo Valley.

DeRoche – From *Bayou de Roches* (Rock Creek).<sup>21</sup> Pronounced *dee-roash* both in French and locally. Creek at the Clark-Hot Spring County line. Runs into Ouachita River just upstream from the mouth of the Caddo River.

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<sup>17</sup> Courtesy Nevada County Depot and Museum, Prescott, AR.

<sup>18</sup> Berry, *Forgotten Expedition*, 81.

<sup>19</sup> Dickinson, "Colonial Arkansas Place Names," 146.

<sup>20</sup> Ernie Dean, *Arkansas Place Names* (Branson, MO: Ozarks Mountaineer, 1986), 98.

<sup>21</sup> Berry, *Forgotten Expedition*, 90.



**Figure 5: DeRoche Missionary Baptist Church on AR Highway 128 in Hot Spring County.**

**L'Eau Frais** – From French for fresh water. Pronounced *low fray*. French uses an article with every word, *le* or *la* for singular forms. If the noun begins with a vowel, a contraction occurs, thus *la eau* becomes *l'eau*. Some locals often call it Low Freight. The Civil War map, a small portion of which is shown in Figure 4, has it as Lofreight. Some older maps have *L'Eau Froide*, pronounced *low fwah-duh*, or cold water.<sup>22</sup> Creek east of Arkadelphia runs into the Ouachita River near the junction of AR Highway 7 and Manchester Road.

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<sup>22</sup> Dickinson, "Colonial Arkansas Place Names," 150.





**Figure 6: Manchester Community Leau Frais 4-H sign on Manchester Road at AR Highway 7 near Arkadelphia.**

Ouachita – French say *wash-she-ta*. Pronounced *wash-uh-taw* in Arkansas. It is often written on old maps as Washita. It was the name of a small tribe of Indians that became extinct or, more likely, became assimilated into other tribes about the time of the first French explorers. It is thought to mean Cow River People. In this case, cows refer to buffalo.<sup>23</sup> River runs 605 miles from Rich Mountain in Polk County to near Jonesville, Louisiana, where it joins the Tensas River to become the Black River. It is also a mountain range in Arkansas and Oklahoma.

Terre Noire – Pronounced *tere* as rhymes with where and *nwah*, which rhymes with rah, meaning black earth. Local pronunciations are *turn war* and *turn wall*. Creek runs through black soil,<sup>24</sup> entering the Little Missouri River southwest of Sparkman.

Terre Rouge – Pronounced *tere roozh*, meaning red earth. Creek, running through red soil,<sup>25</sup> begins in Hempstead County, crosses Nevada County, and runs into the Little Missouri River in Clark County near Whelen Springs.

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

<sup>24</sup> Branner, “Old French Place Names,” 40.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 7: Ouachita River on AR Highway 7 at Arkadelphia.**



**Figure 8: Terre Noire Natural Area on AR Highway 51 at Shiloh Road near Arkadelphia.**



**Figure 9: Terre Rouge Creek on US Highway 67 near Emmet.**

### **Other French Place Names in 1818 Clark County**

Champagnolle – Pronounced *sham-pan-yol*, a name or nickname probably deriving from Champagne.<sup>26</sup> Locals say *sham-pan-ol*. Creek in Calhoun County near Hampton. Runs into the Ouachita River near Calion.

Charivari – Pronounced *sherry-vary* both in French and by locals. A mock serenade from France where friends of newlyweds gave them until 10:00 p.m. and then beat pans, blew horns, and rang cow bells until the couple got out of bed and invited friends in for refreshments. This custom continued in rural Arkansas until World War II.<sup>27</sup> Creek in Bradley County near Moro Bay. Runs into Tulip Creek, which runs into a series of lakes that feed into the Ouachita River.

Cossatot – From French *casse tête*, pronounced *cass tet*, meaning brain teaser. In colonial times it referred to a tomahawk<sup>28</sup>, maybe because a tomahawk was used as a “**brain teaser.**” River in Polk and Howard Counties. Runs into Little River just upstream from Millwood Lake.

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 36

<sup>27</sup> Dickinson, “Colonial Arkansas Place Names,” 158.

<sup>28</sup> Dean, *Arkansas Place Names*, 97.



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Fourche a Loupe – Pronounced *foosh a loop* in French, meaning magnifying fork. Earlier map spelling was Fourche a Loup, meaning wolf fork.<sup>29</sup> *Fourche* was commonly used where a stream forked from another. Locals say *foush loop* or *foush ah loo-pay* or Wolf Creek. Locals in Lake Hamilton omit the *a*, probably because a long-standing church used the name Fourche Loupe. Only the cemetery remains. Creek in Garland and Hot Spring Counties. Runs into Lake Hamilton.



**Figures 10 and 11: (left) Champagnolle Creek on US Highway 278 near Hampton and (right) Charivari Creek on US Highway 63 near Moro Bay.**



**Figure 12: Fourche Loupe Cemetery on AR Highway 209 near Lake Hamilton.**

Francois – Pronounced *fran-swah* in French. Locals use same pronunciation or *fran-sway*. Some early Caddo settlements were on Francois Creek. Francois was often used to designate Frenchman. There were two French kings in the 1500s with that name. It can

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 103.

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be used as a first name or a surname. Creek in Grant County near Poyen. Runs into Saline River near Prattsville.



**Figure 13: Francois Creek on US Highway 270 near Poyen.**

Glazypeau – Pronounced *glay-z-poe*. From *Glaise á Paul*, pronounced *glaz-aye a paul-le*, or **Paul’s clay pit**.<sup>30</sup> Glaise is pottery clay in French. Creek in Garland County. Runs into the Ouachita River near Mountain Pine.

**L’Aigle** – Pronounced *laig-la* in French, meaning the eagle. Because the creek has so many branches, locals say *the LAY-gulls*. **May have been named for D’Aigle family from Arkansas Post**.<sup>31</sup> Creek in Bradley County. Runs into a series of lakes that feed into the Ouachita River.

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<sup>30</sup> Branner, “Old French Place Names,” 38.

<sup>31</sup> Dickinson, “Colonial Arkansas Place Names,” 150.





**Figure 14: L'Aigle Creek on US Highway 63 near Hermitage.**

Mazarn – A corruption of Mt. Cerne, pronounced *munt ser-na*, a round mountain.<sup>32</sup> Mountain in Montgomery County and creek in Montgomery and Garland Counties. Creek runs into the Ouachita River just upstream from Lake Hamilton.

Moro - From Moreau, probably a family name.<sup>33</sup> Creek in Dallas County, then western boundary of Cleveland and Bradley Counties. Wide area or bay in Ouachita River in Bradley County.



**Figure 15: Moro Bay State Park in Bradley County.**

Pereogeethe – Pronounced *peer-row-ghet* in French. Locals say *pere-o-geeth* or pair o' geese<sup>34</sup>. Oxbow lake of Ouachita River in Bradley County.

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>33</sup> Branner, "Old French Place Names," 39.

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**Figure 16: Pereogeeth Lake in south Bradley County.**

Tigre Creek – Pronounced *tee-gra* in French. From Dunbar and Hunter’s journals, it is *Fourche a Tigre*. In lower Mississippi colonial French, *tigre* is puma or panther.<sup>35</sup> Locals say *tigger* rhyming with chigger. Creek and bay of Ouachita River in Hot Spring County. Tigre Bay is part of Lake Catherine.

While most French place names are associated with streams, regions in the vicinity of those streams often appropriate the names, as shown in Figures 5, 6, 8, and 12 . In addition to the Cache Masso Post Office (1849-1867), shown in Figure 4, Terre Noire Post Office was near Okolona from 1845-1865. The variations in spelling are probably due to the names being said by one person and recorded by another, as during a census, interview, or marriage.

The following place names retain their original French spelling: Antoine, De Roche, L’Eau Frais, Ouachita, Terre Noire, Terre Rouge, Champagnolle, Charivari, Francois, Fourche a Loupe, L’Aigle, Pereogeethe, and Tigre. These place names retain the French pronunciation as an English speaker would say them: Caddo, De Roche, L’Eau Frais, Ouachita, Terre Rouge, Champagnolle, Charivari, Francois, Moro, and Pereogeethe.

French place names and other colonial place names add richness to local history and culture. It is fortunate that signage preserves many of these names. Sadly, all such creeks are not signposted.

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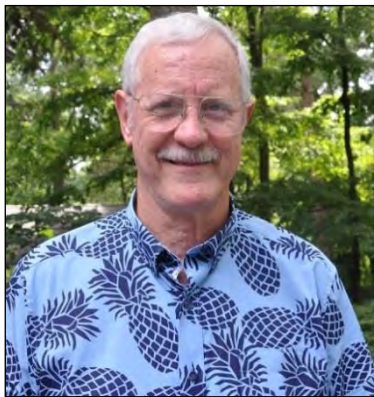
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<sup>34</sup> Dean, *Arkansas Place Names*, 117.

<sup>35</sup> Dickinson, “Colonial Arkansas Place Names,” 155.

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Joe Jeffers, Professor Emeritus of Chemistry at Ouachita Baptist University, holds a Ph.D. in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology from Purdue University. He retired from his role as the Charles S. and Elma Grey Goodwin Holt Professor of Chemistry and Pre-Medical Studies in 2017. He began his career at Ouachita in 1972. He was thrice named Professor of the Year by the Central Arkansas Section of The American Chemical Society.