



CREDIT: LEES DAWSON

COMMUNITY PROFILE: Natchitoches, Louisiana

Locals like to say that this town 70 miles south of Shreveport is a place of surprises. First, there's the name, a native American word that's not pronounced as it appears but more like NACK-a-dish or NACK-a-tish, depending on who you're speaking with. (The name refers either to a tree, a tribe or to the color of the soil—again, depending upon your source.) Then, there's the Cane River, an idyllic scenic waterway that isn't a river at all but a lake that meanders through town and more than 30 miles south and east, forming the heart of a National Heritage Area celebrating Colonial, Antebellum and Creole history. And finally, there's Natchitoches itself, an exquisite historic gem (with a 33-block National Historic Landmark district) that was founded in 1714—four years before New Orleans—and is recognized today as the oldest permanent settlement in the Louisiana Purchase territory.

Natchitoches Main Street

- Organization Founded: **1993**
- City Population: **18,319**
- Public and Private Reinvestment: **\$39.7 million**
- Net Gain in Businesses: **87**
- Net Gain in Jobs: **408**
- Vacancy Rate: **1%**

"It's the number one story I hear from visitors," says Mayor Lee Posey who's served as the town's executive for more than six years. "They're blown away by our history, our economy, the quality and variety of our downtown buildings and the cultural opportunities we have to share. And they tell me this must-see place comes as a complete surprise."

Perhaps the biggest surprise is that historic Natchitoches survives at all—let alone thrives as a magnet for tourism and investment. "In the 1970s, it's said you could throw a quarter downtown and not hit anybody," according to Janna Jenkins, Main Street & Public Relations Manager for the city. "Our historic buildings—some more than a century old—were deteriorating. There was a vacancy rate of 60 percent. A lot of commercial enterprises had moved out and relocated." Yes, there was a sense of appreciation for the town's history and potential, especially among members of local preservation groups, but officials and residents could not agree on a vision or a strategy for the town's future. Revitalization seemed either unlikely or impossible.

Two things turned expectations upside down: Main Street and Hollywood.

In 1983, Natchitoches became a Main Street community, thanks in part to the audacity of Sharon Gahagan, a longtime resident and volunteer who now serves as head of the city's Historic District Commission. "We could see the potential here with our abundant historic and cultural resources, but we needed an injection of energy to promote progress and preserve our historic fabric," Gahagan says. When she learned that the town could apply to become a Main Street community and tap into a national network for resources, expertise and guidance, she approached then-mayor Joe Sampite. He enthusiastically endorsed her idea, but saw one problem: "'Sharon,' he told me. 'We don't have anyone to write the grant—and it's due tomorrow.' Well, I thought, I'll write it." Gahagan stayed up most of the night, wrote the grant and submitted it the next day.

Recognition from Main Street was a turning point, she says. "Becoming part of this group of communities educated this community." Residents suddenly saw the importance of preservation and began to consider historical assets, archaeological areas and economic goals together. "Main Street was our catalyst for collaboration."

THE NEWLY RESTORED RIVERFRONT IN DOWNTOWN NATCHITOCHES ATTRACTS HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE EACH YEAR.

And then Hollywood came calling, providing a boost that dramatically transformed the city's future. In 1988, playwright Robert Harling told producers that a screenplay about life in a Louisiana parish could only be shot in his hometown. To his surprise, they agreed. Months later, Julia Roberts, Sally Field, Dolly Parton and Olympia Dukakis arrived to film on location—in Natchitoches. When *Steel Magnolias* opened the following year, the town's fortunes skyrocketed.

"Prior to 1989 and the opening of the movie, we'd suffered the effects of the oil bust and the savings and loan crisis that hit so many small communities statewide," says Tony Davis, executive director of the Natchitoches Community Alliance. "The movie provided us with a major jolt in the most positive way. Suddenly we had tourists flocking to visit and various groups coming together with Main Street to focus on revitalizing downtown. Preservation groups had saved many historic buildings here and they'd saved the bricks of Front Street from being torn up or paved over, but now you had groups from every part of town coming together to do more."

Officials began promoting the town to national and local businesses, and cultural resources—from the town's signature wrought-iron balconies to its nearby French Creole plantations—became potent recruiting tools. Main Street then initiated an ambitious schedule of festivals and a seasonal farmers market to bring tourists and locals into downtown on a continual basis. The Christmas festival in particular became a magnet for tourism, many years attracting an estimated 50,000 visitors.

*In 2006, Natchitoches was honored with a **Great American Main Street Award.***

The growing sense of optimism and community pride encouraged landlords to reinvest in historic properties, refurbishing storefronts and creating residential units on the floors above. And Main Street actively encouraged and promoted new construction, including the Louisiana Sports Hall of Fame & Northwest Louisiana History Museum, inaugurated in 2013; and Chateau Saint Denis, an 87-room boutique hotel that opened in 2016.



"Today we have a vacancy rate of 1%," says Main Street's Janna Jenkins. "We are full to the brim. We have over 25 shops, 13 restaurants, B&Bs, lawyers' and insurance offices, realtors, churches, government buildings—all of them located within the historic district. This area has redefined itself as the region's economic hub. People want to experience the authenticity of downtown...and if the people are here then restaurants, businesses and investors want to relocate here, too."

In recognition of the importance of Natchitoches' historic core, town officials recently completed an effort to transform the adjacent riverfront by building a new and enlarged amphitheater, landscaping the town's promenades, and constructing an ADA-compliant ramp to ensure the area was accessible to everyone. The mayor says "I've been told that in one sweep we put the 'wow' factor back in downtown."

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After decades of uncertainty, historic Natchitoches is thriving once again. "Now we focus on preserving what we have and looking ahead to consider all that is possible," Sharon Gahagan says. "Main Street America was key to that effort. With the Main Street Approach we set our goals higher. And we're continuing to prosper."
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