

Frenchport, Arkansas

Adapted from an article by Gertrude Moore that appeared in the OCHS Quarterly, Vol. 22, No. 1, September 1990; updated July 2014. Mrs. Moore, a native of Frenchport, was a retired teacher and former president of the Ouachita County Historical Society.

When the explorers Hunter and Dunbar passed through this area in 1804, they noted a number of trappers, hunters and traders who had established friendly relations with the local Indians. Among the first permanent settlers were families of French ancestry such as the Fogles, Labeffs and Pevetos, who had migrated from Ouachita Parish, Louisiana. Between 1848 and 1851, they were joined by the Pedron family. It is said that the Pedrons left France for New Orleans where they arranged for tent-covered rafts, loaded their belongings and left for Camden, Arkansas. About seven miles below Camden they ran into a log jam and had to settle at Frenchport, hence the name. These families later acquired land to the north and west of the landing.

Steamboats from New Orleans stopped at Frenchport Landing to load cotton and unload staples of flour, coffee, sugar or anything else one cared to have shipped. There was a big warehouse there. Farmers from as far away as Mt. Holly in Union County brought their cotton to sell. They traveled in caravans, as many as twelve or fifteen wagons. They depended on each other to get up the almost impassable hills. It could take two or three teams of mules or horses to pull one wagonload of cotton. When they arrived at the port, they had an option of selling to buyers on the spot or taking their cotton to New Orleans where they could get a higher price. They got free passage if they accompanied their cotton themselves. In New Orleans the farmer could buy supplies and return on the next boat.

The Ouachita River provided various functions for various people. Baptismal services were held there. Swimming was very popular. For many years on July 4th there was a community picnic. The men would ignite an explosive and drive the fish to the top for a fish fry. Whitehall, a landing above Frenchport, was a favorite picnic and camping place. Families would go and spend several nights. The ferry there crossed over into Calhoun County. Many arrowheads were found around there.

The first post office was located in Section 28 of Township 14 South, Range 16 West. It operated from 1878 until it was merged with Louann in 1896. There was once a school at Frenchport that went through the eighth grade. The school terms lasted only three or four months because of farming interests. The school consolidated with Fairview in 1926.

J.T. McMahan, a Civil War veteran, donated the land for the McMahan Chapel, a Methodist church that stood at the intersection of the roads to Louann and Smackover. The church services were among the first to be integrated. In the 1920s J.M. Moore had a grocery store just behind McMahan's Chapel. Peter Fogle ran a store north of Moore's Grocery and N.H. Milner had a store about two miles from there. As the focus moved away from the river to the highways, this area became known as Frenchport rather than the old landing site on the banks of the river.