

Natchitoches historian, author Louis Raphael Nardini Sr. awarded LA Historical Society's highest honor

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Baton Rouge — The Louisiana Genealogical and Historical Society (LGHS) posthumously awards Louis Raphael “BeBe” Nardini Sr. with its highest honor, the Order of Cavalier Sieur de La Salle. The award is bestowed onto those whose actions have greatly preserved, advanced, and honored the history and culture of Louisiana. The award is named for famous explorer, Rene Robert Cavalier Sieur de La Salle, who explored and claimed the entire Mississippi River basin for France. La Salle named the colony “La Louisiane” in honor of King Louis XIV and Saint Louis. La Salle built forts, trading posts, and communities from Canada to Texas.

Nardini joins other notable Louisiana Creoles and Cajuns in the Order of Cavalier: William King Hunt (historian and founder of the LGHS), Hale Boggs (U.S. congressman and house majority leader), Edwin Edwards (governor of Louisiana and U.S. congressman), Nicholas Murray (writer, editor and historian), and Robert Brevelle (writer, entrepreneur, and historian). Like historic French medals, the ornate Cavalier medal is made of silver and gold. It features the seal of the State of Louisiana and a silk ribbon similar to those found on French and Native American medals.

Nardini was a Natchitoches native whose ancestors were among the original explorers and settlers of Louisiana to include the founders of Natchitoches. Nardini was a local business owner, philanthropist, journalist, archaeologist, historian, genealogist, museum curator, and author of several popular history books including *No Man’s Land: A History of the El Camino Real* and *My Historic Natchitoches, Louisiana and Its Environment*.

Over 300 years ago, Louisiana was explored and originally settled by a relatively small number of Europeans, mostly of French and Spanish origin. Of the six recipients (including Nardini) of the Order of Cavalier over the past 60 years, all are descendants of these founding families. All recipients are cousins with the exception of former House Majority Leader Hale Boggs, who is related by marriage.

“We are fortunate to count Nardini among the great sons of Louisiana,” said Robert Brevelle, Chairman of LGHS and member of the Order of Cavalier. “He was one of the first historians and genealogists to recognize the importance of the history of Natchitoches, the oldest settlement in Louisiana. He collected important artifacts, curated one of the first museums in the area, and published

numerous works in journals, newspapers, and books. He was a leader of several local community organizations always promoting the area's history and culture. He was an ambassador of Natchitoches and Louisiana to the world."

Nardini grew up in Natchitoches where he was a well known baseball and football star. He later founded the Natchitoches Parish Baseball League and served as its President. He was also an avid outdoorsman. The Natchitoches Enterprise, the oldest newspaper in the oldest settlement in Louisiana, recognized his skill in this area and regularly published photos of his fishing and hunting harvests. Nardini became a columnist for the paper penning "The Breamfisherman". His skills as a journalist and writer continued to expand. He later authored multiple history books, started a publishing company, and became editor of The Journal of Louisiana School Bus Operators Association.

Nardini was active in multiple civic and community organizations such as the Boy Scouts and Woodmen of the World, where he served as Council Commander. He served as Chairman of the Natchitoches Tourism Committee and was a member of the Louisiana Culture Commission and Natchitoches Chamber of Commerce. Nardini was a devout Catholic. He was an officer of the Louisiana State Office of the Knights of Columbus, Professor at St. Mary's Catholic High School, and sponsor of the Catholic Daughters of America.

As an archaeologist, genealogist, and historian, Nardini focused his work on the local area's history. He was passionate about Native American, Antebellum, and Civil War history and became the preeminent historian in Natchitoches. He was a regular speaker at local universities such as Centenary and organizations such as the Lions Club and Rotary Club. He co-founded the Plantation Museum in Natchez, one of the first museums in the area. Many of the hundreds of artifacts on display came from Nardini's archaeological work. His writings and maps were and continue to be used by the State of Louisiana Department of Education, City of Natchitoches, and historical societies.

Nardini's books have been quoted and cited in hundreds of newspaper articles, magazines, journals, academic papers, and books. Several Louisiana Native American tribes have cited his research and books in their official history and documentation with the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs and the State of Louisiana. Recognizing the historical importance of Nardini's work, the Adai Caddo Indian Nation purchased the original manuscripts from Nardini's estate. The Adai Caddo are the indigenous people of the region with villages to the north, south, and west of the original Natchitoches post and settlement including along the Red River, Bayou Pierre, Sabine River, and in present-day East Texas. Nardini wrote extensively of the Adai Caddo, due to their role in the establishment of Natchitoches, nearby Los Adaes (first capital of Texas), and the first two Catholic missions in Louisiana (Mission San Miguel de Linares de los Adaes and San Miguel de Cuellar de los Adaes). The capital and missions were named for the Adai Caddo. Nardini collected numerous Adai Caddo artifacts from nearby Indian mounds, and prior to his death, was working with the City of Natchitoches to build a museum modeled on their villages to include ceremonial grounds and hinta-saks (the traditional houses of the Adai Caddo).

"Nardini is a Natchitoches treasure," said John Mark Davis, Chief of the Adai Caddo Indian Nation. "During a time of racism and segregation, Nardini was researching, publishing, and promoting the true history of Natchitoches thereby recognizing the significant role of Native Americans and their extensive interactions with the French and Spanish. In his time, Native Americans and those of Spanish descent were oppressed and denied their rightful history in Natchitoches. We were treated as second class citizens and watched as our names, ancestors, warriors, and contributions to Natchitoches and Louisiana were systematically erased. Nardini was one of the first historians and genealogists to champion the true history of this region. My father, the late Chief Rufus Davis Jr. recognized the importance of Nardini's work and purchased the original manuscripts from his estate. We have shared these documents with other Native American tribes, and Nardini's work will continue to live on in generations of Native Americans."

Support for Nardini's induction came from members of the LGHS, Baton Rouge Genealogical and Historical Society, Adai Caddo Indian Nation, Sons of Confederate Veterans, Louisiana Native American Council, and local historians and genealogists.

Nardini's family stated, "We are overcome with pride and happiness that the Louisiana Genealogical and Historical Society has honored our family member. Thank you to everyone at the society and to all of those who wrote in and supported Louis Raphael Nardini. This year is the 50th anniversary since his passing. This recognition is truly a testament to his life's work...sharing the history of the home he loved, Natchitoches."

The LGHS was founded in 1953 to collect, preserve, and publish genealogical and historical materials for the state of Louisiana and its people. The society works closely with genealogy and ancestry libraries, historical societies, state agencies, research facilities, and universities. LGHS is headquartered in Baton Rouge and sponsors two seminars each year at the Louisiana State Archives building and at alternating location typically at a genealogical library or historic site. The society provides for a certification and renewal program for Louisiana genealogists and heraldists. Additionally, the society maintains the official state registries containing 7 registers: Indigenous Tribes of Louisiana, Founding Fathers of Louisiana, First Families of Louisiana, Creoles of Louisiana, Cajuns of Louisiana, Slaves of Louisiana, and Manilamen of Louisiana.

For over 70 years, the society has published The Louisiana Genealogical Register – an eclectic collection of Louisiana records as well as historical and genealogical articles. Over 100 libraries subscribe to this journal. Other publications include historical books such as Louisiana Soldiers in the War of 1812, Federal Census of 1810 for Territory of Orleans, A Guide to Printed Sources for Genealogical and Historical Research in the Louisiana Parishes, Be it Known and Remembered: Bible Records (Volumes 1-5), The Savages Creed: Chronicles of the Adai Caddo Warriors, and Early Louisiana Families.

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