

Louisiana tribe celebrates 'rematriation' of 600 acres, returned by New Orleans church

by [David Paulsen](#)

December 9, 2024



The coastal patch of land known as Lemon Tree Mound is considered sacred by the Atakapa-Ishak/Chawasha tribal members. (Coalition to Restore Costal Louisiana via Facebook)

St. Paul's Episcopal Church in New Orleans, Louisiana, is nowhere near Lemon Tree Mound. So, it was something of a surprise a few years ago when the congregation learned that the church owned a 600-acre coastal parcel about an hour southeast of the city.

Lemon Tree Mound, included in those 600 acres, is a small, grassy patch of land in Adams Bay. It is part of the patchwork of Louisiana coastline that is under continuing threat of erosion and rising water levels from hurricanes and climate change. The mound also is a sacred site of the Atakapa-Ishak/Chawasha, and it is visited regularly by residents of the nearby [Grand Bayou Indian Village](#), who travel from place to place almost entirely by boat.

Tribal members had long dreamed of getting back Lemon Tree Mound, which had been in White property owners' hands since sometime far into the forgotten past. That dream finally became a reality this year, when Marian Fortner, interim rector at St. Paul's, and Rosina Philippe, a tribal elder, met to sign the legal documents finalizing a transfer of the land in September.

The mound was historically key to the tribe's survival. Built of shells and discarded shards of pottery, it rose high enough to serve as a reliable sanctuary of dry ground surrounded by unpredictable water level fluctuations until levees and berms reduced the frequency of devastating floods.

Eventually, the rising water of the Gulf of Mexico could fully submerge Lemon Tree Mound, but for now, it has been protected from erosion by an oyster reef built in 2022 by the nonprofit [Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana](#). The coalition also helped St. Paul's initiate the talks that led to the land transfer.

St. Paul's is located in New Orleans's Lakeview neighborhood less than two miles south of Lake Pontchartrain. In August 2005, during Hurricane Katrina, [lake water from the 17th Street Canal breached a levee](#) and flooded Lakeview, including St. Paul's, which was under nine feet of water.

"Tons and tons of records were lost," said Rob Courtney, who served as the church's rector for 12 years.

Courtney, who resigned this year to become the Episcopal Diocese of West Tennessee's canon to the ordinary, said St. Paul's members had heard stories that some coastal land in Plaquemines Parish might be owned by the church, but they had few details and no records of such a property.

"It wasn't high on our priority list," Courtney said, so the congregation didn't investigate further.

That changed in 2019 when Courtney got a phone call from the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana. The nonprofit wanted to build one of its protective reefs around Lemon Tree Mound. It had uncovered records showing that the mound was owned by St. Paul's.

Additional research revealed that the deed to those 600 acres had been left to the church decades ago as part of a large bequest. It wasn't clear how the previous owner had come into possession of the land or why it had been given to the church. Courtney and a church warden met with representatives of the nonprofit as well as tribal elders, and in January 2020 they signed an agreement granting access for construction of the reef.

At the time, Courtney said he was troubled by a fundamental question about the church's surprise landholding: "Why do we even have this?"

That led him to pose a follow-up question: "What would it mean for us to give this back?"

Progress in talks with the tribe toward a land transfer were stalled by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and again by [Hurricane Ida](#), which struck the region in August 2021 and caused about \$6.5 million in damage to St. Paul's.

Even so, Courtney and other church leaders were determined to work out the legal logistics of a land transfer, and Courtney said he was pleased that the congregation was able to complete that process after he left.

Rather than a "repatriation" of the land, the tribe prefers to describe the September transfer as a "rematriation," in recognition of the central role of mothers in their culture. With Lemon Tree Mound officially back in tribal possession, tribal elders have expressed hope that this will inspire other land rematriations.

"There are so many tribes up along the coast that would love to lay claim to some of their sacred places," Philippe said after signing the land transfer, according to local media.

As for her own tribe, "I think the ancestors are dancing," she said. "I know that I'm dancing in my heart. And I can't wait to move forward from this point." —Episcopal News Service