

Lives of Quiet Desperation

The Ancestry of a Louisiana Frenchman

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Le Grand Dérangement

Acadians Settle Louisiana

"Acadia" or "Acadie" was an early term for the maritime provinces of eastern Canada and the northern coastal region of what is now the state of Maine in the United States. It was first established as a proprietary colony by Pierre Duguay, *Sieur de Monts*. One year earlier he had acquired a decade-long monopoly over the region's rich fur and fish assets. Initially, the colonization of the area was a near-disaster. In 1605, in a second attempt to colonize, de Monts transferred the colony to present-day Port Royal, Nova Scotia; it became the first permanent settlement in Acadie. By 1610 the colony consisted of only 25 men, but the foundations of a permanent settlement were laid. Presaging the Louisiana experience, stability came only when crops were harvested and land had been parceled out among the settlers. But as Carl Brasseux documents in his landmark *The Founding of New Acadia*, the French hold on Acadie was still tenuous at best.

The lack of a firm political and financial commitment to colonization characterized the French colonial experience in the New World. In 1613, Port Royal was demolished by an English privateer named Samuel Argall. In 1628 the French in Acadie had become so demoralized that they could not prevent the settling of Scottish Calvinists at Port Royal by Sir William Alexander, who had been granted proprietary rights by the King of England who named the area known in France as "Acadie" as "Nova Scotia." During this period, the French held onto their claims by continuing their fur-trading operations and engaging the New Englanders in mutually beneficial but illegal commerce. The restoration of French domination occurred with the signing of the Treaty of St. Germain-en-Laye in 1632, and through the Company of New France, the French renewed their efforts to securing Acadie as a stronghold. Vulnerable outposts were reinforced, the fur trade was expanded, and most importantly, immigration of families to Acadie was finally encouraged.

In July 1632 three hundred French settlers landed, and after being organized into military units, reoccupied Port Royal. These were the first families of Acadia. Like Quebec, Acadia's strategic importance was geographic: it was mid-way between New England and Canada (Quebec). Acadia suffered greatly from what surely was a French curse: internal dissension and outright warfare among internal economic rivals. In the 1650s, while France was preoccupied with a European war, the British seized Acadia and held it for 16 years; by the late 1660s the French regained control. As the British threat loomed, and Acadia became a battleground among imperialist nations, and through necessity, the Acadians began to close ranks. The insularity from other French influences and the necessity to guard against the ever-present British danger forged a French culture quite different from what was found in New Orleans, Quebec, or Continental France. Numerous attempts by the British to make Acadians loyal subjects were met with obstinacy and derision, not so much because of the loyalty of the Acadians to the French Crown, Quebec, or their Catholic faith, but because of generations of absolute and unrelenting isolation. As Brasseaux states:

The role of geographic isolation in creating, molding, and nurturing early Acadian society cannot be overemphasized. Chronic isolation enhanced the impact of the frontier on the transplanted Frenchmen for it dictated not only the need for economic self-sufficiency, but also for a clannish, self-contained society, able and willing to carve a new life far from other European outposts in North America. Such independence was absolutely essential in the Acadian settlements whose lines of communication with the outside world were often tenuous at best.

Over time the insular Acadians sought to alleviate tensions with the British by professing to be “French Neutrals” asking only that they not be required to fight against other Frenchmen. For a time the British agreed, again, for mutually beneficial commercial reasons. (The neutrality argument would be attempted again by French-speaking Cajuns two hundred years later in Confederate Louisiana during the

American Civil War as Union troops marched through Louisiana in 1863. That attempt was unsuccessful, as well.) This understanding, however, was short-lived as the British, especially the political leaders of Massachusetts, became alarmed at the birthrate of the Acadians. In 1737, the Acadian population stood at approximately 7,500; by 1749, it had zoomed to 18,000, mostly through procreation. The fact that Acadians created (by diking and reclaiming fertile bottoms) and occupied the best lands in Nova Scotia, and were thus preventing English colonists from moving there, exacerbated tensions with British authorities in Nova Scotia, Boston, and London.

Acadians had large, closely-knit families, who after five generations had developed their own culture. God, family, and land were important. No one was very rich—no one was very poor. There was little or no interest in formal educational institutions or literature; no premier educational institutions like Harvard were founded. Acadians produced nothing resembling political parties, and unlike most ethnic groups, no single prominent leader ever emerged amongst the ranks of the people. English authorities never dealt with a single (elected or otherwise) leader. When left alone, Acadian life was calm, gentle, and tolerant. In November 1975, during a lecture on Acadian life, Glenn Conrad of the University of Louisiana-Lafayette claimed that during a 42-year period there was not a single recorded crime in Acadia. Children married young and were provided for by neighbors. In many respects, Acadian life, characterized by an almost complete lack of social classes, resembled an often-sought proletarian utopia.

But ultimately, the Acadians of Louisiana migrated because of a final and epic battle between the forces of British and French Imperialism for domination over the North American continent. It was called the Seven Years War (1756-1763) or the French and Indian War. The result was the British were successful in decisively defeating the French and its coalition of Indian allies. But even before the onset of the war the British feared a revolt in Acadia. They required the Acadians to swear an oath of allegiance to the British Crown, including the promise to bear arms in defense of England. The alternative for the Acadians was to leave the colony. And so began *Le Grand Dérangement*, or the forced diaspora of the Acadians from their home of five generations. They were allowed to take their furniture and money, but during the confusion many families were separated and sent to different destinations. Their land was taken and their homes burned so that they could not return. They were packed on ships and distributed to American colonies from Massachusetts to Georgia. The Acadians deemed most dangerous were sent to the colonies farthest away. Virginia, the home of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, George Mason, and Patrick Henry, all architects of American Civil Liberties, refused to accept the Acadian refugees because of a prevalent religious prejudice against Catholics. Some others were taken to England and then relocated to France after the war.

The result of the Seven Years War, the Treaty of Paris of 1763, gave the Acadians 18 months to leave the English Colonies. Where were they to go? The Acadians themselves wanted to return to Nova Scotia but the British quickly vetoed that idea; British settlers had already begun to occupy the rich and strategic lands the Acadians had left developed over generations. Incredibly, the French denied them relocation to Louisiana. (The secret Treaty of Fontainebleau giving Louisiana to Spain had not yet been made public.)

Once ejected from Nova Scotia, the Acadians were an unwanted people. An anti-papal movement throughout the American colonies brought derision upon the helpless Acadians; they were summarily despised everywhere they went. In some places, while still on ships, Acadian parents were offered the “opportunity” to surrender their children to American families. Occasionally, a compassionate individual like Henry Callister of Oxford in England petitioned British authorities in behalf of the Acadians, or even

donate substantial sums of money for clothes and other provisions. Unfortunately, this type of individual effort was rare and had little or no overall positive effect.

Unfortunately for the pathetic Acadians, schemers like Louis Elizabeth de la Vergne (no known relation to the author) and "every land shark and swindler" tried unsuccessfully to exploit the exiles. De la Vergne futilely proposed the settlement of 120 Acadian families on his barren, war ravaged estates in the province of Lorraine in France. Again, the Acadians stubbornly clung to their insular heritage, and bitterly resisted all efforts by others to turn them into serfs. Indeed, even after arriving in Louisiana, not the least of their problems were the attempts of other Frenchmen, *i.e.*, the established upper-class New Orleans Creoles, still of a monarchical mentality, to create a peasant class of the Acadians. It resulted in conflict between and among the Louisiana French and even more insularity and suspicion for the Acadians.

By 1764, other Acadians had flooded Santo Domingo only to find slavery, disease, and misery. In 1765, the first group of Acadians arrived in Louisiana at New Orleans. It was the *Spanish* who allowed their relocation along the Mississippi River (north of New Orleans), and in the prairies of the Attakapas District along Bayou Teche (St. Martinville) in April of 1765. In 1766 another flood of Acadians arrived from Santo Domingo and were forced to settle along the Mississippi River, the "Acadian Coast." Spanish Governor Don Antonio de Ulloa's idea was to create a buffer zone of Acadians between the English colonies to the north and New Orleans. He allowed no further settlements in Attakapas. By the 1770s the Opelousas District saw settlements, including many families of the Richard clan. Finally, in 1785, those Acadians who had been sent to England during the war and were relocated in Poitou in France, arrived and were settled along Bayou LaFourche.

Like other French colonial possessions, which focused on get-rich-quick schemes, Louisiana suffered from a lack of investment and infrastructure, a shortage of settlers, and an overall mercantilistic-driven neglect from its mother country. It was not until shortly after the Spanish took administrative control of the Louisiana colony, and the slow transition to an agrarian-based economy, that any significant population increase took place. Families replaced the *coureur des bois* as immigrants. In 1784, Spanish Governor Don Bernardo de Galvez ordered a census of the colony and it showed that from 1766-1784 Louisiana's population had doubled to 27,500; New Orleans had grown to a city of about 5,000. The largest ethnic group among the immigrants was the Acadian exiles. These families were hard-working farmers and fishermen. They came to Louisiana forged by chronic insularity, which also produced independence and a stubborn determination to question and resist authority. As a people, Acadians were very quick to challenge English, French, and Catholic political and moral rule. Anti-clericalism among Acadians is a consistent theme of Acadian colonial history. As Carl Brasseaux documents in *The Founding of New Acadia*, they came to view the Catholic church in much the same light as the colonial government; their view was that civil and religious authority should be limited to essential services without undo disruption of routine activities and without undue financial burden. For pastors or government officials to exert too much leadership beyond those parameters brought about spasms of protest. Consequently, the most harmonious ecclesiastical and civil parishes were those with docile leadership. Brasseaux continues:

For many if not most of the late seventeenth and eighteenth-century Acadians, Catholic missionaries were shadowy figures who provided the settlers minimal contact with the church hierarchy. Forced to fend for themselves, even to the point of conducting paraliturgical services, the immigrants ultimately came to divorce religion from the area's traditionally dominant religious institution. Priests consequently became little more than petty religious administrators, stripped of their cloak

of religious invincibility and vulnerable to personal criticism...It was with this mental framework that the Acadians faced exile... after the Grand Dérangement.

The Quebecois and Acadians were forced to adapt to more than just new political and social surroundings. Indeed, in a matter of a few months (from Quebec in the 1720s), and separately, in a few years (from Acadia from 1755-1765), Louisiana Frenchmen had been relocated from frigid Canadian provinces to an insufferably hot and humid climate closely resembling a tropical rain forest. They built homes in a place where seemingly endless precipitation is outdone only by the dangers of floods and hurricanes. Louisiana rains are legendary. Examples include:

- the greatest precipitation in one year was 106 inches in Amite
- Opelousas holds the record for rainfall in one month at 30 inches
- it once rained 22 inches in one day at the Sabine Refuge
- in a twelve-hour period, it rained 12 inches in Baton Rouge, and
- one full inch of rain once fell in New Orleans in five minutes.

Choosing homesteads were often difficult exercises in anticipating where flood plains began and ended. The tortuous heat and humidity must have tested the vitality and persistence of the Acadians who were more familiar with a frigid, almost Arctic climate.

Le Nouveau Dérangement (The New Dérangement)

There are still vestiges of insularity among Acadian descendants. Traces of the Acadian language, music, food (although heavily influenced by the Spanish and Africans), and accented English can be readily recognized in what is now called "Acadiana." The attitude that government and church were established to provide essential services without undo disruption to routine activities and without undo financial burdens prevail. And yet, the forces of education, industrialization, commerce, and technology brought competing influences and cultures to the "Land of Evangeline." The construction of Interstate Highway 10 in the 1960s made once intensely rural Acadian communities accessible. The highpoint of the oil and gas industries during the 1960s and 1970s and its tangential economic boom created a plethora of skilled positions that few Cajuns could fill. Consequently, there occurred an influx of skilled labor to Southwest Louisiana, bringing with them other influences and traditions. The founding of a major university in Lafayette at the beginning of the 20th Century and the concurrent age of mass communications brought the world to the doorsteps of the descendants of the once decidedly insular Acadians. Concern over the demise of the Cajun culture resulted in the creation, by act of the Louisiana Legislature, of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL).



By the end of the 20th Century Cajuns faced a new diaspora, of sorts. My personal experience was that (taken to an extreme, of course) there was a basic incompatibility between traditional Cajun values and the realities of modern American life. The explosion of information, knowledge, technology, mass communications, mobility, and competition are an anathema to *laissez le bon temps roulez*. The historic Acadian neglect for education has resulted in a people who know very little of their own history and are too often ill prepared for jobs of the real world of work. The dependence on an oil, natural gas, fishing,

and an agriculturally based economy devastated Louisiana during the 1980s when all of those industries went bust simultaneously. The axiom that a government job, while it paid little, was secure, was no longer true in Louisiana where hundreds of state government jobs and services were eliminated due to a depleted tax base and no political or public support for revenue enhancements. Consequently, many Acadian descendants like me were forced to look elsewhere for meaningful employment and job security.

For much of my life there has been a New Dérangement taking place in Louisiana. I moved to Austin, Texas in 1989 while the 1990 Census was being conducted. As a result of that count, Louisiana was one of only four states of the United States who had fewer Congressional Districts. Evidence of the New Dérangement occurred to me not long after we settled in Austin in the fall of 1989. After receiving a call from another Austinite and former Church Point native, I was told of a meeting of the "CIA," which were initials for "Cajuns in Austin." Thinking that the group consisted of a few close friends, I arrived to find that at times there could be as many as 200 people in attendance. At the time Austin was only a mid-sized city and about 400-500 hundred miles from most Cajun communities. A "CIA-like" group in Dallas or Houston could easily outnumber the populations of many small towns along Louisiana's Old Spanish Trail.

For over thirty years I have had a good life in Texas. For work and pleasure I have been fortunate enough to have traveled the United States and the world. Very often, people notice my accent and ask me where I am from. I always respond, "I live in Texas, but I am from Louisiana."

About the Author



Gary M. Lavergne is a retired Director of Admissions Research and Policy Analysis for The University of Texas at Austin. He has authored four books and is the winner of the Writers' League of Texas Award for Best Book of Non-fiction, the Carr P. Collins Award for Best Work of Non-fiction by the Texas Institute of Letters, and the Coral Horton Tullis Memorial Prize for Best Book on Texas History by the Texas State Historical Association. He has also written for the New York Times, CNN, and numerous magazines and scholarly journals. He is an elected member of the Texas Institute of Letters and has appeared on DATELINE NBC, the Today Show, Good Morning America, the History Channel, Biography, American Justice, The Discovery Channel and many other network and cable news shows.