

Lives of Quiet Desperation

The Ancestry of a Louisiana Frenchman

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THE RICHARDS OF ILE ST. JEAN

Acadians Move to Louisiana

In 1652, Michel Richard, a native of the province of Saintonge, France,⁵ arrived in Acadie as a soldier with an expedition sponsored by Emmanuel LeBorgne. LeBorgne was a speculator and a very rich merchant in France who had invested heavily in the Acadian business enterprises of Charles de Menou d'Aulnay (1604–1650). D'Aulnay had been involved in what has ingloriously been called the “Acadian Civil War.” It seems that King Louis XIV approved overlapping land grants to an entrepreneur named Charles de Saint-Étienne de la Tour and d'Aulnay. Their business differences were exacerbated by deep personal and religious hatred (de la Tour was Protestant and d'Aulnay was Catholic). The most vicious fighting took place from about 1640-45 and did not end until d'Aulnay successfully expelled la Tour from his claims. La Tour fled to Quebec. The matter got even more complicated in 1650 when d'Aulnay died by accidental drowning and LeBorgne laid formal claim to the estate. To protect his investments, he sent an expedition to Acadia to attempt a trade monopoly and secure debts owed to him. After La Tour married d'Aulnay's widow in 1653, twenty years of fighting, bickering, and LeBorgne's expedition came to naught. Among LeBorgne's and other French soldiers, Michel Richard was remarkable. At the time, nearly all soldiers stationed in Acadia chose to return to France after their tour ended; Michel Richard stayed and settled in Port Royal, a maritime center on the shore of the Bay of Fundy.

Michel Richard was born in the 1630s and was likely in his mid-20s when he married a very young girl named Madeline Blanchard in 1656 in Port Royal. Madeline was the daughter of Jean Blanchard and Radigarde Lambert and was only 12 or 13 years old at the time of her marriage. The Michel Richards were much like other Acadian families—large. They were to raise 10 children. He appears in the Port Royal census reports of 1671 and 1686 and is listed as a “*Laboureur*,” technically a term meaning “ploughman,” but it also applied to the highest rank of the seven recognized ranks of peasants. It was probably an indication of both his status in Acadie and a pre-existing feudal status in France. After Jean Blanchard's death, Michel married Jeanne Babin (Antoine and Marie Mercier) and fathered two more children.

Michel's son, Martin (1665-1748), married Marguerite Bourg (Francois and Marguerite Boudrot) of Beaubassin and fathered 9 children. Martin appears in the census reports of Port Royal for the years 1671, 1678, 1686, and 1693. In August 1695, he is enumerated in Port Royal as having taken an oath of allegiance to the British King, but perhaps he still found Port Royal to be too volatile and so about that time he moved to Beaubassin, a settlement located on the present-day border of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick on the northern shore of the Bay of Fundy. It no longer exists. In 1698 he first appears on a census report for Beaubassin and is counted there again in 1700 and 1714. Martin died on February 6, 1748.

Martin Richard's second son, Alexander, married Madeline Thibodeaux in 1721 and they raised 10 children. He appears in the Beaubassin census reports of 1698, 1700, and 1714. Sometime in the late 1740s, however, the Alexander Richards moved from Beaubassin to Malpeque, on the island of St. Jean (Prince Edward Island). This was likely to avoid English harassment along the coastal villages like Port Royal and Beaubassin. Alexander died in 1747 in or near Malpeque.

⁵ Saintonge was a province along the west central Atlantic coast of France. Today, that area is in the département of Charente-Maritime.

Alexander Richard and Madeline Thibodeaux's second son, Pierre, married Marguerite Dugas in 1752, just a few years before the onset of *Le Grand Dérangement*.

Le Grand Dérangement, or the expulsion of the Acadians from Nova Scotia by the British, must have been an insufferable experience for Pierre Richard and Marguerite Dugas. Their first son, Fabien, was born shortly after 1752, and was most likely the last Richard of this lineage born in Acadia. There is no record of the births of their next six children, suggesting that these events occurred during their refugee status or in remote areas not readily served by the Catholic clerics or civic administrators of the time.

Pierre Richard and his family were not typical of the Acadian deportees of *le Grande Dérangement*. Being residents of Ile St. Jean, they were not as easily located by the British as were residents of Port Royal, Beaubassin, and Grand Pre and were among the last of the Acadians to be deported. He and his family appear to have been held as prisoners of war on St. Georges Island in Halifax harbor as late as August 16, 1763. He was almost certainly one of many Acadians accompanying Joseph Broussard (1702–1765), also known as Beausoleil, when they were all released one year after the end of the Seven Years War. From Acadia, Beausoleil's group sailed to Santo Domingo and immediately saw that the island was completely unhealthy and unacceptable. From Santo Domingo he and about 200 other Acadians arrived in Louisiana on February 27, 1765.

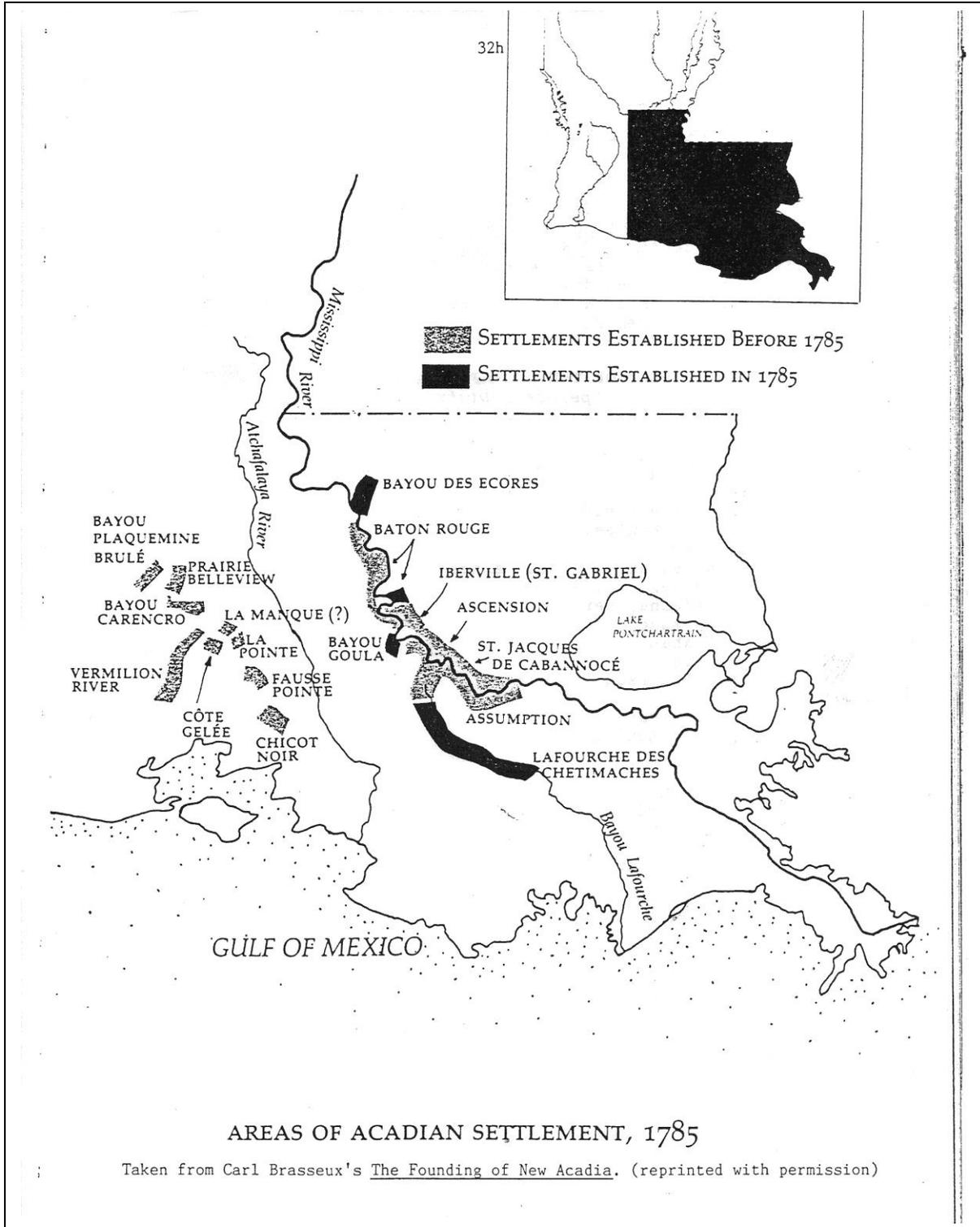
So, while Pierre Richard was among the last to leave Acadia, he was among the first to reach Louisiana. That he arrived with Joseph "Beausoleil" Broussard in 1765 is supported by his being in the Opelousas District in 1766. (He is enumerated in the 1766 Census.) On March 13, 1768, he was one of several Opelousas Acadians to petition Spanish Governor Antonio de Ulloa for government assistance in procuring oxen and plows after having demonstrated success in the cultivation of wheat. Many of the landowners of the area, known then and now as Bellevue, were Richards, including Pierre's brother Victor. They introduced cattle-raising and drives to New Orleans from the Opelousas District. This was in response to a high demand for beef in New Orleans, but it was also an enterprise the Richards likely perfected while still in Acadie. In 1774 the census shows Pierre having 50 cows; by 1788 that number nearly tripled to 140.



Perhaps a lifetime of stress and conflict changes a man and his people, and some traditions die. In Acadie from the 1600s through the end of the Seven Years War in 1763 the Acadians stood firm about not taking a loyalty oath to England and remaining neutral during times of war among the superpowers. On December 16, 1769, three years after settling in the Opelousas District, Pierre (and the other Acadians) swore an Oath of Allegiance to Spain.

Pierre's oldest son, Fabien Richard, married Françoise Thibodeaux (Pierre and Françoise Sonnier) on January 10, 1779. The event was recorded in the archives of the St. Martinville Catholic Church. By that time, the Richards were securely settled in Louisiana. The American Revolution saw another Acadian tradition die: neutrality during war. Fabien is listed as a *fusilier* in the Opelousas militia in 1776, 1777, and 1785. This militia (including a neighbor named Louis Lavergne) participated in the American Revolution as Spanish soldiers.

The tradition of large families continued. Fabien Richard and Francoise Thibodeaux would have 12 children. The tradition of insularity would continue as well; each of those children to marry would marry other Louisiana French.



The Richard experience is a good example of my theme of quiet desperation. Michel Richard arrived in the New World in the 1650s to an area considered strategic and invaluable to both British and the French imperial ambitions. Struggles and wars ensued. One hundred years later, Pierre Richard saw the British win that struggle. He was banished from his home and imprisoned only to be relocated, ultimately, in an area called Bellevue, in between Sunset and Church Point in Louisiana.

The Richard family now flourishes in Louisiana, as well as in other parts of North America. The clan was so large at the time of the Grand Dérangement that it was inevitable for them to have been scattered. North Dakota, for example, has several Richard families. There are Richards in Canada, near Montreal, and still others in France, whose ancestors were deported from Acadie during the Grand Dérangement. My guess is they are, like those before them, very hardy yet simple people.

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.