

L'Acadie Perdue; L'Acadie Retrouvée

Acadia Lost; Acadia Regained

In Longfellow's *Evangeline*, the two fictional lovers, *Evangeline* and *Gabriel*, go to Louisiana but fail to find each other there. But if you go to Louisiana, you can find them both, at least in spirit, in the charming little town of *St. Martinville* under the "Evangeline Oak," where *Evangeline* is said to have rested during her search for *Gabriel*, and in a cottage from the 1760's where *Gabriel* may have lived before heading West in search of better furs. You will also find plenty of "Cajuns," the descendants of the *Acadians* who migrated to Louisiana after their expulsion from the land they called *l'Acadie*, or *Acadia*, and we now know as *Nova Scotia*.

My paper seeks to tell the story of the old *Acadia* that they lost, and of the new *Acadia* in a new land that they regained.

The starting point is the *Treaty of Utrecht*, which brought the *War of Spanish Succession* to a close in 1713. Under the treaty, the defeated French ceded both *Newfoundland* and *Nova Scotia* to Britain, but *Île Royale* (now *Cape Breton Island*) and *Île St. Jean* (now *Prince Edward Island*) remained in French hands. Unfortunately for the future of the peace, the treaty did not describe the actual boundaries of Britain's new possessions. The French claimed that what is now *New Brunswick*, as well as the northern shore of *Nova Scotia* that borders the *Gulf of St. Laurence*, had not been ceded when they gave up *Acadia*. The dispute simmered for the next 50 years as the French did everything they could to keep open a vital land connection between *Canada* proper and the new fortified town they were building on *Île Royale*.

Île Royale, or *Cape Breton Island*, is located at the extreme northeastern end of the *Nova Scotia* peninsula, about 360 rugged land miles from the French *Acadian* settlements at the other end of the peninsula. These settlements were centered on *Port Royale* (which the British renamed *Annapolis Royal*), and continued along the shore of the *Bay of Fundy* to its eastern terminus at the *Bay of Minas*, where *Evangeline* and *Gabriel* lived at the village of *Grand-Pré*. There were additional and more distant settlements along *Chignecto Bay*, at the western terminus of the *Bay of Fundy*. In between was a void, with no European settlers and only a thin veneer of *Micmaq* Indians living in the nearly impenetrable forests of *Nova Scotia's* central highlands.

The *Acadians* were also separated by equally long land and water routes from the main French settlements in *Canada*. In their isolation, they developed a distinct culture which included significant intermarriage with the *Micmaqs*, whom they regarded as honored relations and with whom they mostly lived at peace. Their language was surely French, but it nonetheless began to diverge at an early period both from that of metropolitan France and from the French that was spoken in the rest of *Canada*. This tendency was increased by the fact that few French chose to immigrate to *Acadia* after the early years of its foundation, so that most of the population growth was through natural increase of the established settlers. This created a system of large extended families with strong kinship ties that was, and is even today, one of the most important features of *Acadian* culture.

At the time of the transfer of Nova Scotia to Britain, the Acadians had been living in their farming villages since the founding of Port Royale in 1605--longer than the French had been at Québec (founded in 1608) and longer than the English had been at Jamestown (1607) or Plymouth (1620). Their prosperous farms were located along the shore in tidal marshlands that they had reclaimed using a unique system of dykes that kept salt water out and allowed fresh water in. In addition to grains, the Acadians grew salt hay for their extensive herds of beef and milk cattle. This choice of location in the low lands contributed to peaceful relations with the Micmaqs, who lived in the upland forests and felt no threat to their own territory from the Acadians' occupation of the tidal flats.

Although the Acadians were intensely loyal to the Catholic religion, at least as they understood it, and to the language and culture of France, their geographic isolation created a sense of independence that led them to believe they could choose to remain neutral during more than 160 years of almost continuous warfare between France and Britain. This belief, based on a naïve notion that any government-- French or British--could tolerate neutrality, would prove to be their undoing. In the meantime, they lived their separate lives, self-sufficient on their farms, unused to governance from outside their communities, and generally oblivious to events in the outside world.

In the negotiations that ended the War of Spanish Succession, the defeated French knew they would have to give up Acadia, and even Newfoundland, but they stubbornly held out for Île Royale as a base for continued participation in the enormously valuable Newfoundland Bank fisheries. In the end, the British let them keep their island and the French moved swiftly to transfer their few settlers in Newfoundland to Île Royale. With this nucleus, they chose a site for a new city and called it Louisbourg after their sovereign, Louis XIV. The harbor was good, but the site was on marshy ground surrounded by low hills which made it difficult to fortify. However, the choice stuck, because English Harbor was the closest to the fishing grounds.

Beginning in 1717 and continuing until 1745, the French spent an estimated 4 million livres on the fortification of Louisbourg. That the construction took so long is no surprise, since a typical year at these latitudes included only 93 working days, what with seven months of winter and 22 Sundays, 18 church holidays and an average of 20 storm days in the remaining five months. But the final product was certainly impressive: the town's ramparts were 3 miles in circumference, protected by stone walls 30 to 36 feet high and an 80 foot wide moat. There were six bastions and eight batteries, with space for 100 cannon and 8 mortars, plus two outside batteries that overlooked the harbor.

With the much touted "Gibraltar of the North" firmly established at Île Royale, we may now return to the Acadians on the Bay of Fundy. There were perhaps 10,000 French speakers in Nova Scotia when the British took over in 1713. Under the terms of the treaty, the inhabitants had one year to swear allegiance to the British Crown or leave the country. Those who chose to stay were guaranteed the practice of the Catholic religion; those who choose to leave could sell their farms and take their movables with them. This was confirmed by a warrant from Queen Anne, which contributed to later misunderstandings by omitting to mention the one year deadline.

The French government did what it could to encourage the Acadians to remove to Île Royale, but the thin soil of the island was not attractive to them. What is more, the British did not really want them to go. In fact, Francis Nicholson, the first British governor, denied a group of Acadians permission to leave for Île Royale on the perfectly sensible ground that this would strengthen the new French outpost. Moreover, the British garrison needed provisions, and only the Acadian farmers could provide them. Since there were no immediate plans to colonize Nova Scotia with Englishmen, which would have cost somebody money, Nicholson decided the Acadians would have to stay.

The major obstacle for both sides was the oath of allegiance, which the Acadians steadfastly refused to take. Instead, they offered Nicholson a pledge of neutrality in case of war between France and England. Nicholson refused the offer, but he could not persuade the Acadians to take an unconditional oath and he lacked the resources to force the issue, so he let the matter drop.

The next governor, Richard Phillips, issued ultimata in 1717, and again in 1720, ordering the Acadians to take the oath, but they again declined to do so. Not daring to force their departure to Île Royale or Île St. John, Phillips sought permission from the Board of Trade in London to administer a qualified oath. This was refused, with the observation that the recalcitrants ought to be removed as soon as it was convenient to do so. It took 35 years for the removal to become “convenient,” or at least possible, but it is clear that deportation was a government policy option from the 1720’s onward.

Phillips’ successor, Lawrence Armstrong, did no better. When the Acadians refused to give any promise that would require them to bear arms against France, Armstrong inserted the desired qualification in the French text but left it out of the official English text that was sent to London. The Board of Trade was not amused when it learned of the trickery, and it ordered the reappointed Phillips to administer the unqualified oath upon his resumption of office in 1728. Phillips reported that he had done so, which was true so far as the text of the oath was concerned, but he did not report that he had orally exempted the oath takers from the duty to bear arms against France, or that he had confirmed this in a notarized memorandum that their leaders had carefully preserved. What we might call the “Acadian Question” remained dormant for the next 20 years, until the advent of serious British efforts to colonize Nova Scotia.

From 1713 to 1749, the British ruled Nova Scotia from two forts, Annapolis Royal on the Bay of Fundy and the fishing port of Canso just across from Île Royale. The French and Indian populations were sullen at best, and a constant source of potential trouble. Because the treaty guaranteed the Acadians freedom to remain Catholic, the French were able to send priests from Canada who acted both as religious advisers and as spies. The missionaries were under instructions from Canada to keep the Indians in a state of hostility to the British, and they were very successful in doing so. All the hapless British could do was exert local control at Annapolis, while dealing with the Acadian population through a council of community representatives.

The situation changed with the outbreak of hostilities between England and France during the War of Austrian Succession. The news that France had declared war on England

reached Louisbourg on May 3, 1744, two months before it was received at Boston. The Louisbourg garrison surprised and captured the British fort at Canso, which did not yet know there was a war, and then sent an expedition to invest Annapolis. However, the expedition had to return to Louisbourg after reinforcements arrived from New England, and the stalemated parties settled down to a series of skirmishes between French and New England privateers that accomplished little.

In early 1745, the governor of Massachusetts, William Shirley, took charge of an ambitious project to capture Louisbourg. With the support of Connecticut, New Hampshire and Rhode Island, he put together a fleet of 100 small ships and a force of 4,400 colonial troops led by William Pepperell, a wealthy Maine merchant with no previous military experience. These troops were supported by the British squadron from the Caribbean station, which added another 4,000 marines and sailors.

The Anglo-colonial force arrived at Île Royale on May 11, defeated a small French force sent to oppose the landing, and took charge of the fort's Royal Battery on the north shore of English Harbor. An inconclusive bombardment continued until Pepperell deduced that the Island Battery, which guarded the entrance to the harbor, was the key to victory. Moving to Lighthouse Point in early June, he set up new batteries that destroyed the Island Battery after a fierce exchange of fire. The warships were then brought up for a joint bombardment of the fortress and town. On June 17, seven weeks after the beginning of the siege, the French finally surrendered and a motley crew of New Englanders took over the town.

New England's elation at its victory was short lived, because this time the French won in Europe and the peace treaty of Aix-La-Chapelle returned Louisbourg to France. To counter the threat of the rebuilt and re-garrisoned fortress at Louisbourg, the Board of Trade decided in 1749 to protect Nova Scotia with a fortress of its own. The new governor, Edward Cornwallis, was given funds to build a fortified city, named Halifax after the president of the Board of Trade. (In case you're wondering, this Cornwallis was not the general who surrendered to Washington at Yorktown, but his uncle.)

The foundation of Halifax effectively separated the Acadians at the Bay of Fundy from the French forces at Louisbourg. This, in turn, made it possible once again to revive the dormant "Acadian Question." Thus it was that, immediately upon his arrival in the colony, Cornwallis issued a stern proclamation demanding an unqualified oath. He was refused as usual on the grounds that Phillips had granted the Acadians the privilege of a qualified oath in 1728. After consulting London, Cornwallis backed off, but it was clear this time that the British intended to revive the issue as soon as they had the forces necessary to compel compliance.

The Canadian reaction to the new threat at Halifax was to fortify the Chignecto Isthmus that separates present-day New Brunswick from Nova Scotia. There they built two small forts at Baie Verte and Beauséjour, and tried to persuade the Acadians to immigrate to a new Acadia on the other side of the Bay of Fundy. At the same time, the French missionaries stirred up the Indians against the British Protestant colonists at Halifax, and a series of hot and cold wars raged along the line of forts that separated the two Acadias. The Nova Scotia Acadians tried to stay neutral in this conflict, since overt assistance to the Canadians would be treason justifying

forfeiture of the lands or worse. However, it was clear where their sympathies lay, and the authorities at Halifax cannot be blamed for doubting that these so-called “French Neutrals” were truly neutral.

In 1753, the British government lost patience with its inability to negotiate the final North American boundaries that had been promised by the Treaty of Aix-La-Chapelle, and determined to settle the issue by force. Parliament voted £1 million for North American operations, and a fleet under Admiral Boscawen was sent to Halifax to prevent French reinforcements from reaching Louisbourg or Québec. In 1755, the government sent General Braddock to clear the Ohio valley of the French, after which he was ordered to attack the Canadians at Chignecto. Charles Lawrence, who had built the opposing border forts and now was the acting governor of Nova Scotia, did not want to wait. He proposed a joint operation to Governor Shirley of Massachusetts, who promptly sent a fleet with 2,000 Massachusetts militia to join Lawrence’s 500 regulars at Beauséjour, which they took with little trouble in July of that year. Had they waited for Braddock, the wait would have been in vain, for he was killed when the French and Indians defeated his army at Fort Duquesne near modern-day Pittsburgh.

The fall of Beauséjour and the smaller fort at Baie Verte left Lawrence in full command of Chignecto with 2,000 militia whose enlistments still had three months left to run. This was the first time in 40 years that a British governor possessed the power to force the Acadians to comply with his wishes. Although the Board of Trade had not authorized deportation, saying the matter needed to be submitted to the King for instructions, Lawrence decided to move forward on his own.

Implementing the decision required careful planning, lest the Acadians escape to the woods or, worse, resist. In the preceding year, Charles Morris, the provincial surveyor-general, had at Lawrence’s request prepared a detailed plan showing the locations of all the Acadian settlements and outlining the steps that should be taken in removing the “French Neutrals.” Secrecy would be essential, he wrote, to prevent flight, and deceit would be needed to secure voluntary submission. The best strategy would be to call the men to a meeting without telling them its purpose, and hold them there until the wives and children came in to join their husbands. On no account could the population be sent to French territory, since they would then try to come back through force. They must instead be parceled into small groups and sent to other British colonies, so that they could never reassemble again. To further discourage any attempts at return, their farms should be destroyed and their livestock seized for the use of the province.

Armed with this chilling plan—the first instance in North American history of state-sponsored ethnic cleansing—Lawrence proceeded to execute it without mercy. As any member of the NRA would predict, his first action was to send out troops to search for firearms, followed by a proclamation requiring the “French Neutrals” to surrender any arms not previously seized. They complied voluntarily, not suspecting what would happen next. He also summoned their leaders to Halifax and put them in jail when they refused as usual to take the unqualified oath. At the same time, he secretly chartered vessels from New England to be used as transports, and sent confidential letters to the governors of the neighboring colonies informing them that the exiles would soon be arriving. When all was ready, Lawrence ordered

the fort commanders to assemble the inhabitants and get them aboard ship “by force or by ruse.”

What happened at Beau Pré was typical. On August 19, 1755, a force of 300 Massachusetts militia commanded by Colonel John Winslow arrived by ship and set up camp at the village church, telling no one why he was there. He sent out orders to complete the harvest for the ostensible purpose of provisioning the troops, without disclosing that the provisions were actually intended as supplies to the transports that would soon arrive. As empty vessels began to come into the harbor, Winslow ordered all males of the district, including boys 10 years and older, “to attend at the church at Grand Pré on Friday the 5th instant at Three of the Clock in the afternoon, that we may impart ... what we are ordered to communicate.”

Although a few families took to the woods on receipt of this ominous communication, 418 men and boys reported to the church. When all were inside, the doors and windows were barred and the building was surrounded by soldiers. Winslow read a proclamation informing them that their lands and goods were forfeited, and that they and their families would be removed. He did not tell them where they were to be sent, allowing them to assume they would be transported to French territory. The men and boys were then held in the church pending the arrival of the transports. Twenty in rotation were let out each day, on condition that they return in the evening, so they could inform the women of their fate. This was necessary for another reason: the women were required to feed them during their long weeks of captivity.

On September 10, a small group of prisoners tried unsuccessfully to break out of the church, and Winslow decided it would be necessary for security purposes to embark the younger men on the few transports he then had available in the harbor. The selected prisoners were assembled and ordered to walk down the mile and a half-long path from the church to the landing. One of them shouted “non,” and others joined in saying they would not leave their fathers behind, but the ringleader was quickly subdued and the doleful procession proceeded toward the landing between two rows of militia with bayonets fixed. The women and younger children followed, wailing and singing hymns. Winslow, a kind man but a stern soldier, was much affected, writing in his diary that “it was a scene of woe & Distress.”

On October 8, the last of the transports arrived, and Winslow sent his men out to collect the women and children. When they arrived at the landing, all was chaos. Although Winslow had promised to embark families together, this was a complicated task with some men in the church and others on the ships. As a result, many families were separated in the confusion. By October 11, the last of the 2,743 men, women and children who had been assembled at Grand Pré were placed aboard the transports, and the melancholy flotilla left the harbor. The Acadians’ last sight of their homeland was one of destruction and desolation, as the carts used to transport their goods lay abandoned at the landing and smoke arose from their burning farms. Winslow’s meticulous diary shows his soldiers had burned 255 homes, 276 barns, 11 mills and one “mass house,” which is what he called the church.

Between 1755 and 1763, 11,000 Acadians out of an estimated total of 15,500 men, women and children were expelled from their homes in Nova Scotia. The first wave of

deportees were distributed among the English colonies along the Atlantic coast, where they were unwelcome as Frenchmen, Catholics and paupers. Many were in no condition to work when they arrived, and others refused to do so on the representation that they were prisoners of war who were entitled to maintenance until they could be repatriated to French territory. A typical reaction by the authorities in Massachusetts, New York and Pennsylvania was to bind out the recalcitrants and their children as indentured servants, which caused untold anguish by separating husbands from their wives and parents from their children.

Further south, the treatment was harsher. Virginia and the Carolinas would not even allow the Acadians to land, forcing them to stay aboard ship for months in crowded and unhealthy conditions. Eventually, these unfortunates were shipped off to England, where they languished in prison until they were finally repatriated to France at the end of the war. Georgia solved its refugee problem by giving its small allotment of deportees permission to buy boats and go elsewhere, so long as it was not Georgia. These refugees headed North in leaky boats, but were arrested in Massachusetts and forced to go ashore.

Some of the Georgia contingent later managed to make it back to New Brunswick and start life anew in a different part of the old Acadia. Other deportees walked back to Canada, and a very few ventured over the Alleghenies and down the Mississippi River to Louisiana. Later, some of the Acadians who had been returned to France, or had managed to escape to Santo Domingo, also went to Louisiana. In all of these wanderings, separated families filled the newspapers with advertisements seeking contact with their missing kinsmen. It is estimated that as many as half of the deportees died of disease or hardship between 1755 and 1763, but the anguish shown in the advertisements suggests that loss of their extended families was perhaps the greatest cruelty the Acadians had to endure during what the survivors called "le grand dérangement," or the "Great Upheaval."

In 1758, while the expulsion of the Acadians was still in progress, the events of the first siege of Louisbourg were repeated with larger forces, but with the same results, as the British began their long-anticipated assault on Canada. Wolfe, the commanding general at Louisbourg, went on in the next year to die victorious at Québec and, with the fall of Montréal in 1760, all of French Canada was in British hands. All, that is, except the tiny islands of Miquelon and St-Pierre, which, under the 1763 treaty that ended the war, are French to this day because not even total defeat could induce France to give up this one last pile of rocks as a place where it could continue to participate in the Atlantic fisheries.

Thus ends the tragic story of l'Acadie perdue, but what of l'Acadie retrouvée?

When the deportation frenzy wore down, a remnant of about 2,000 Acadians were allowed to remain in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, where their descendants and the descendants of a few others who later returned from the American colonies can be seen today. But their once-prosperous farms had been resettled by British Protestants, and the returning Acadians were reduced to day laborers, some of them working the very properties they once

had owned. Ironically, the new settlers did not know how to maintain the salt marsh dykes, and had to rely on the previously-expelled Acadians to keep them up.

The largest group of ethnic Acadians who live in present day Canada are to be found in New Brunswick. Many settled there in the area surrounding modern Fredericton as they returned in small groups from the American colonies. After 1775, they were displaced a second time by a nephew of the same Charles Wilson who had expelled them from Minas, when their lands were granted to Loyalists fleeing the American Revolution. The survivors moved further inland, and may be found today on both sides of the border with Maine on the upper reaches of the St. John River. Over the next century, Catholic emancipation and eligibility for new land grants along the northern shore of New Brunswick gradually brought the Acadians into the main stream of provincial life. With official bilingualism and a francophone university at Moncton, the Acadians of New Brunswick now live in what can rightly be called the “nouvelle Acadie” of the North.

The happy outcome in Canada is more than matched by the “nouvelle Acadie” that grew up far to the South. When the first Acadian refugees arrived in Louisiana around 1756, they headed west for the vast grasslands that began at Attakapas Station (now St. Martinville), where they began raising cattle as their fathers had done in the old Acadia. The grasslands have mostly yielded to the cultivation of rice, but some of these “Cajun cowboys” are still there working their “vacheries,” or ranches, or, more likely, are holding down good jobs in the oil industry.

Another early group settled on the Mississippi river south of Baton Rouge in an area the locals still call the Côte des Acadiens. Some became wealthy sugar planters and lost their Acadian identity through assimilation into the broader francophone culture; the rest stayed “Cajun,” and turned to trapping and fishing in the adjacent low lands. A third group settled along Bayou Teche as small farmers; their distinctive farms are organized in long strips with narrow frontages to preserve access to the bayou that once served as their only highway. The last group of immigrants came from France in 1785, at the invitation of the Spanish government. They found homes with relatives in the established settlements, or moved on into the newly opened country around Bayou Lafourche.

By the end of the 18th Century, there were some four thousand Acadian settlers occupying this “nouvelle Acadie” of the South. Their numbers continued to increase over the next two centuries, so that today there are around 900,000 residents of Louisiana and southeast Texas who claim Acadian descent. Culturally, the Acadians still dominate the south central part of Louisiana in an area that the state’s Tourist Board has euphoniously named “Acadiana.” The region is centered on the booming town of Lafayette, home of the University of Louisiana-Lafayette and its “Ragin’ Cajuns” football team. The use of French is fading in most of Acadiana, but the region’s unique version of the ancestral tongue can still be heard in such villages as Breaux Bridge and New Iberia, and the music, dancing, food, and general joie de vivre of the Cajun ethos remains as strong as ever.

For the desperate refugees who were driven from their farms during the Great Upheaval of 1755-1763, L'Acadie perdue has become l'Acadie retrouvée. Acadia Lost is now Acadia Regained.

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