ACADIAN TRIBUTE

Family crests honor Acadian settlers

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Walk into the meditation garden of St. Martinville’s Acadian Memorial and you will find embedded in the concrete walkway eight distinct, colorful designs. They are the crests identifying eight of the Acadian families who were expelled by the British from their homes in Canada to settle in 18th century in the area that would eventually be known as Louisiana.

The crests, in the form of Italian tile mosaics executed by local artist Brett Baibineaux are the first of many museum officials anticipate having installed as a tribute to the hardy men, women and children who survived the hardships of deportation to thrive in their new home.

The memorial has a list of about 3,000 names of the Acadian settlers, said Brenda Comeaux Trahan, director of the Acadian Memorial. “There are about 3,000 Acadians, but they don’t have 3,000 different last names, but it will be at least 100 or better,” she said.

The project was funded in part by the Louisiana Division of the Arts, through the Acadian Arts Council. Trahan said, “The first eight who called got 50 percent funding. We did it like the radio stations.”

The balance of the cost of installing the crests was covered by the family associations, groups formed to research and preserve genealogies of Acadian families and to help organize participation in the biennial Congrès Mondial, reunions of Acadian families from Louisiana and Canada.

Trahan said she hopes to receive additional grants in the future to install more of the crests. Some of the families who missed out on the grant are anxious to get the family insignias installed and will cover the $1,000 cost through their family associations, Trahan said.

Their own design

Some of the designs for the crests come from records in Canada, Trahan said. “At St. Anne’s (St. Anne University) in Nova Scotia, there’s a file of these family crests. We got some of them from there. Many of the families didn’t have access to finding exactly what the crests looked like. Some are not exact, because of families wanting to change them, making them their own for Louisiana.”

One of the changes was in the color, Trahan said. The artist used muted, earth tones more appropriate for a meditation garden, instead of the bright heraldic colors originally used for family crests.

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The Brusseaud family found the design for its crest through a company that offered to do family research.

The Richard family designed its own crest, said Eddie Richard. "We did a great deal of research in Canada and France," he said. "There were a number of different crests. We came to the conclusion that the Richard clan, if you want to use that terminology, as they increased in numbers, the families got too big to have family reunions, so what happened is that they separated and the siblings of different parents had their own reunions and so they devised their own crests. If we found one in Canada, that wouldn't be the authentic one. If there is one, we did our own. The one in St. Martinville is copyrighted." Eddie Richard speaking of the Richard family crest

A professor of medieval history at Louisiana State University, "It was a kind of self-fashioned thing," Dietz said. "It started in the 13th century in France and Belgium. It was connected with the military and the need to be able to identify knights on the battlefield in full armor.

Over the years, the system of heraldry became well-defined and crests were used to identify knights competing in tournaments. "Only the nobles would use these symbols," Dietz said. "By the 15th century there were special officers connected to these tournaments under a major lord or king to figure out if people had a proper coat of arms and were qualified to enter the tournaments."

They were in the minority, Dietz said. "45 to 50 per cent of the people were nobles with family crests.

The costs of arms often evolved over time, Dietz said. "People think these are unchanging, but often there would be changes in them. In the 15th and 16th centuries, they began dividing coats of arms into four parts, so all branches of the families could be represented. Each of the four divisions bore a different family crest, she added.

That raises the question of how family crests became associated with the peasant farmers who made their way to the wilderness that was Canada in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Costs of arms were for royalty," Truhan said. "These families were tradespeople, farm-