Acadians prosper in la nouvelle Acadie

Acadians find a permanent home

When the author Nathaniel Hawthorne first heard the romantic story of Evangeline and her lost lover Gabriel, he thought—unlike Longfellow—what a wealth of stories was passed up when he dismissed these early accounts of the Acadians long journeys. Part Five of our series on the Acadians tells the early history of St. Martinville, their first Louisiana settlement.

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If history means anything at all, then it was probably an Acadian who made up the saying, “From rags to riches.” Or maybe we should credit them with “If at first you don’t succeed...”

It seems those creeds encapsulate the hardy Acadians’ history in the New World. First they faced the wilderness of Nova Scotia and transformed themselves into the wealthy, landed subjects of so much English envy.

Then they did it again in Louisiana, beginning with Poste des Attakapas, what is now St. Martinville. Acadian refugees arrived there with virtually nothing but were soon throwing lavish balls and relishing in performances of the French opera companies that toured there from New Orleans.

Louisiana: A Guide to the State credits Gabriel Pudelier de la Claire with being the area’s first settler, having purchased land from Attakapas chief Riseno in 1760. Soon afterwards an indigo plantation was established by the Marquis de Vaugine, and was said to afford him a grand lifestyle. His simple home, located in the heart of the allegedly cannibalistic Attakapas territory, was filled with silver, crystal and other finery. The Spanish officially named the area Poste des Attakapas in 1765.

The area was not fully settled, though, until the arrival of a ragged band of Acadian refugees led by Alexandre and Stricte Broussard dit Beausoleil. Joseph, who was made “captain commandant des Acadiens des Attakapas,” died soon after; but he gave his followers a starting point. An untamed wilderness, and a small herd of cattle granted to him upon his arrival at Poste des Attakapas.

Over the next decade, many more Acadian refugees made their way to the Bayou Teche country, seeking relatives who had been lost in the Grand Derangement from Nova Scotia. Probably most famous among them were Emeline Labiche and Louis Arceneaux, the true-life inspiration for Longfellow’s famous poem about Evangeline and Gabriel. Like so many couples, they were forced onto different ships during the English deportation of Acadians from Nova Scotia.

In real life, Emeline spent three years searching for her lover—carrying her wedding dress all the way to Louisiana. Labiche, who was still alive in 1783, returned to the Bayou Teche area in 1782, and remarried someone else. Emeline took refuge with the Widow Beausoleil, and apparently died of grief a few months later. Only in Longfellow’s story are the couple united, as Gabriel lies on his deathbed:

“...but the Acadians weren’t the only ones arriving in the Attakapas region. Creole and French families from New Orleans and the West Indies also made their way there, perhaps hired by the profits to be made from indigo, flax, hemp and cattle ranching. The lure was indeed strong, given the era. Typical settlement grants, according to A Guide to the State, included 200 acres of land, 50 additional acres for each newborn child, and 20 extra acres for each slave the grantee owned.

Those who administered the grants were, however, somewhat particular as to whom they welcomed to the community, the Guide notes:

“A bachelor colonist must prove he was successful in the tillage of land for four years before he could secure title to homesteaded grants. If recommended by some ‘honorable planter’ whose daughter would be given in marriage to the newcomer, the land could be secured sooner. Catholics were preferred as settlers but others of ‘great personalty’ were occasionally accepted.” Protestant ministers, however, were not—despite their ‘great personality’—accepted.

And all of them were waiting for the day when the French Revolution would be quashed so they could return home to their native land.

Those hopes were not to be realized. Acadians find a permanent home.

At about the same time in history, many members of the French aristocracy arrived at Poste des Attakapas in flight from the bloody French Revolution. Determined to maintain their lifestyle, they brought with them jewels, silver, expensive furnishings, and all the lavish trappings of the French Court.

In keeping with their rocky history, a wave of bad luck hit the Acadians at Poste des Attakapas in the 1850’s, when yellow fever, a fire, and a hurricane devastated much of St. Martinville and claimed many inhabitants’ lives. But after all the Acadians had been through during their centuries in the New World, these catastrophes seemed only new challenges to be met “with alacrity. The Acadians had established la nouvelle Acade.