Acadians were not only exiles to find Louisiana

When the Acadians were exiled from their homeland 250 years ago this year, they became the first and most recognizable group of people to come to Louisiana after being forced from someplace else.

However, they were not the only group. In fact, there's a common thread of exile that runs through the whole fabric of South Louisiana. Most of these émigrés spoke some form of French, most of them were Catholic—but that wasn't always the case.

Africans, of course, were forcibly brought to Louisiana and sold into slavery, but they were not the only people of color to come here under duress.

Thousands of them came to Louisiana at the time of the Haitian revolution, many of them French-speaking free people of color who became the skilled technicians who ran sugar plantations or plied trades as skilled craftsmen. They were forced into exile by the bitter Caribbean war.

Many aristocrats were forced to flee for their lives at the time of the French Revolution, some of them finding their way to St. Martinville. Later, Napoleonic soldiers were forced from France when their leader was exiled. Many of them also ended up in South Louisiana at places like Ville Platte and, of course, Napoleonville.

French-speaking Jews fled anti-Semitism and found their way to Louisiana. French-speaking, Catholic people fled fighting in Lebanon.

Many of the Germans who came to the Roberts Cove area of Acadia Parish were fleeing the persecution of Catholics under the Bismarck regime in Germany. Others who came to the prairies of southwest Louisiana were forced from the American Midwest by a drought that had decimated their wheat farms.

Likewise, biting poverty forced many people to come to the United States from Italy and Ireland shortly after the Civil War. In many instances, they came under contracts of servitude that bound them to virtual slavery for many years.

Even the Coushatta Indians were forced off ancestral lands. They had been allies of the French during the colonial years. When France ceded to Great Britain all of its lands east of the Mississippi River in 1763, the Coushatta found themselves in a place controlled by enemies.

In more recent years, French-speaking, Catholic Vietnamese people fled to South Louisiana after the fall of Saigon.

That may well be one of the reasons that South Louisiana is known as such a congenial spot. Each of us recognizes his or her own story in that of our neighbors. We understand and empathize.

(Jim Bradshaw may be contacted at jbradshaw@theadvertiser.com.)