While much has been said, sung and written about the Cajuns, very little serious historical work has been done on who they really are, how they came to Louisiana, and how they developed into one of America's best known ethnic groups.

Carl Brasseaux's new book, The Founding of New Acadia, presents a trove of hitherto unpublished information about these exiles from Nova Scotia who settled south Louisiana.

Brasseaux is a direct descendant of an Acadian exiled from Grand Pre, Nova Scotia, to Maryland in 1755. As curator of the Colonial Records Collection at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, he discovered a wealth of information on the Acadian migrations to Louisiana.

USL has copies of Louisiana records from the huge Spanish Archive of the Indies, as well as from the French National Archives. To compile his book Brasseaux also researched the original acts of the Louisiana parishes that the Acadian immigrants initially settled: St. Martin, St. James and Ascension.

His findings challenge many popular assumptions about the Cajuns.

"Many think that the Cajuns settled chiefly in St. Martinville," Brasseaux says. "In fact, only the first large group of Acadian immigrants — those who arrived in February 1765 — settled along Bayou Teche. Most settled along Bayou Lafourche or the Mississippi.

"Ville Platte and Mamou are thought to be old Acadian communities, but in fact only one Acadian family, the Pitres, settled in Evangeline Parish during the colonial era."

While some have said and written that 6,000 to 10,000 Acadian immigrants came to Louisiana, in fact only 2,500 to 3,000 settled here, Brasseaux says.

"They came to Louisiana by sea, not overland via the Ohio or Tennessee Rivers. And when they arrived, they were poorly treated by the Creoles who had already settled parts of Louisiana. In fact, the Acadians fought almost constantly with the Creoles, as they did with their Indian and African neighbors."

Many south Louisiana with French names assume that their ancestry came from Canada, but in fact the majority of Louisianians of French ancestry are descended from immigrants who came directly from France, Brasseaux says.

He begins The Founding of New Acadia by describing the Acadians before the Grand Derangement, their expulsion from Nova Scotia in 1755. "By 1671, the Acadians had become a distinctive people, a frontier nation," Brasseaux writes. Like other New World colonists from France and England, they were overwhelmed by their frontier environment, and adapted to meet its challenges.

The Acadians differed from other colonists in having a greater degree of both social equality and isolation from the rest of the world, according to Brasseaux. They also had a distinctive language and speech pattern, and tended to keep to themselves.

France gave Nova Scotia to the British in 1713, but the Acadians remained fairly independent and unmolested under British rule for the next 40 years. But the British felt increasingly threatened by the Acadian presence and in 1755 expelled 5,400 individuals by putting them on ships.

Contrary to Longfellow's Evangeline, the British seldom broke up families in expelling the Acadians. But the decades between the Grand Derangement and their resettlement in Louisiana were miserable for the Acadians.

These early "boat people" were sent either to England or to the British colonies along the Atlantic. There they were poorly treated, and they refused to be assimilated into the English-speaking societies of Pennsylvania and Maryland.

Some 3,000 returned to France, where they lived in abject poverty for more than a generation. They became wards of the state, and from time to time were the victims of poorly thought-out relocation schemes to such unlikely spots as French Guiana, Corsica, the Falkland Islands, and the barren French islands off the coast of Brittany.

Ironically, when the subject of immigration to Louisiana was put to the Acadian exiles in France in 1784, the future Cajuns were so suspicious of French government resettlement schemes that several almost killed Oliver Terrio (Theriot), the Acadian who attempted to organize the move to Louisiana.

Spain, not France, then controlled Louisiana. The Spanish showed the Acadians great generosity, paying their transportation costs and providing them with food, implements and arable land on their arrival in Louisiana.

Those who arrived among the first wave of immigrants in 1766 received 160 to 240 arpents of land, six hens, one rooster, one cow either pregnant or with calf, corn, gunpowder, bullets and a musket, Brasseaux writes.

In his correspondence, Spanish Governor Ulloa praised the Acadians, saying that two slaves could not "accomplish in a year what one of these indefatigable men can do, so much, in fact, that some (Acadians) have died of exhaustion."

Ulloa soon clashed with the Acadians over where they could settle. The Spanish wanted to use the Acadians as a strategic buffer along the edge of the colony, while the immigrants wanted to settle with their uncles and cousins.

The Acadians eventually ousted Ulloa in 1768 by force of arms. His successor Alejandro O'Reilly gave in to their demands and allowed the Acadians, particularly those settled north of Natchez, to rejoin their relatives near St. Gabriel.

Brasseaux provides information on where the Acadians first settled. The oldest Acadian community was actually established in June 1765 near present-day Loreauville. Other early sites included Cote Gelee near Broussard, Prairie des Coteaux near Opelousas, La Manque and La Pointe near Breaux Bridge and Parks, Bayou des Ecores near St. Francisville, and along the Mississippi River and Bayou Lafourche.

Brasseaux traces the early roots of Cajun agriculture, cooking, architecture, and such customs as horse racing. He devotes one chapter to "Acadian Anticlericalism," and discusses the failure of the Church to instill morality among the rambunctious early colonists.

In a chapter titled "Redmen and Refugees," Brasseaux describes the considerable friction between the Acadians and Indians along the Mississippi and Bayou Lafourche. But while the Houma and Choctaw Indians clashed with the Acadians east of the Atchafalaya, Indians to the west coexisted peacefully.

The Founding of New Acadia is published by the LSU Press.