British governors feared, distrusted ‘French Neutrals’

Almost from the beginning of their regime in 1713, the British governors of Acadie faced a dilemma. They feared and distrusted the Acadians, but had to keep them on the land. The Acadians outnumbered the British four-to-one.

But keeping the Acadians in Acadie wasn’t the first choice of the British. In fact, almost from the beginning, the British thought about expelling the Acadians.

In a letter sent to Queen Ann announcing the fall of Port Royal in 1710, the army commanders Francis Nicholson and Samuel Vetch said: “In order to bring the native Indians entirely under your Majesty’s subjection as well as convert them to the protestant [sic] religion it will be necessary to transport all French from the country save such as shall come over to the Protestant religion.”

They would make good on that recommendation in 1755 — 250 years ago this year.

Until then, the British decided, they had to live with the situation.

In 1718, Capt. Paul Mascarene, a British officer in Acadie, conducted a study of the situation. He reported that the Acadians did, in fact, have their British “overlords” over a barrel. If the Acadians were forced from their lands, the English garrison in Acadie would be isolated and without any regular source of food. On leaving, the Acadians could destroy the dikes they had built to protect their farms, damaging the land for years. The Indians would destroy what the Acadians didn’t and would become much more dangerous than before. Finally, if they Acadians moved to nearby territory that was still held by the French, they would add significant manpower to any military force there.

Mascarene reported his findings to Gov. Richard Phillips, who reported them to his superiors in London: ‘The Acadians cannot be let go now at least. ... We need them to erect fortifications and to provision our forts until the English are powerful enough to go on.”

They had to live with the situation, but did not like it.

Then, during the 1720s, there were two incidents that deepened the animosity between the Acadians and the British.

On March 24, 1724, the English attacked a village of Abernaki Indians, allies of the Acadians, on the coast of Maine and shot a French missionary priest, Sebastien Rasle, at the door of his church and left his body mutilated.

At about the same time, Micmac Indians, also French allies, attacked the English garrison at Annapolis Royal, killing two soldiers and wounding a dozen more.

The British claimed the Acadians and particularly their French priests had incited the Indians to attack. In retaliation, they burned a number of Acadian homes and sent the priests away.

The outbreak also caused the British to press even harder to make the Acadians promise allegiance to Great Britain — and caused the Acadians to resist the oath even more.