Cajun descendants arrive sans ship

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — Amid waving Acadian flags and cries of "vive la France, vive les Acadiens," 35 Acadian descendants got a robust welcome to the New World — the kind of greeting absent when their ancestors landed here two centuries ago.

The re-enactment of the Acadian arrival unfurled smoothly Sunday except that the "settlers" rode into a French Quarter port on a tugboat rather than on a replica of the sailing ship used by their ancestors.

A 72-foot schooner renamed Le Bon Papa for the occasion had been scheduled to ferry the group across the Mississippi River for the ceremony.

But the ship was delayed, and the band of women in bonnets and long skirts and men in tight pantaloons and buckled shoes made the trip in the fireboat Deluge.

The 35 descendants had to hop from the Deluge to a tugboat to ford the shallow water to shore.

The tug was greeted by a cannon salute from the French frigate La Garrone — a three-masted sailing ship like the original Le Bon Papa.

Once ashore, the "settlers" knelt in prayer, as their ancestors had done when they arrived July 29, 1785, near what was then the Catholic parish church of St. Louis, now St. Louis Cathedral.

Msgr. Elmo Romagosa, playing the part of Pere Antoine de Sedilla, the parish priest in 1785, greeted the group "as you come ashore after your perilous journey of 81 days aboard Le Bon Papa."

That welcome was the only pomp to the original landing by 156 weary refugees, exiles from Canada who came to Louisiana — then a Spanish colony — after they found themselves unwanted in their native France.

About 700 people, including Mayor Dutch Morial, were on hand for the ceremonies in nearby Jackson Square. The program also included speeches by the consuls general of France and of Spain. Gov. Edwin W. Edwards, scheduled to attend, didn't show. The governor was reported unavailable for comment at the governor's mansion late last night.

"This is a time to renew and examine the contributions of the Acadians," Morial said. "It also points out the ability of people of different cultures and backgrounds to work together to make a great city."

Rain cut the speechmaking short, and the crowd moved across the square into St. Louis Cathedral for a Mass, much of it in French.

"I feel very proud of my ancestors. I feel this is a proper tribute to the culture they gave to the state," said Paul Newfield III of Metairie.

"It has certainly given me better insight into the history of my family," said Shirley Torrio of Reserve. "I think it's great that people are now hearing the real story of the Acadians."