Ceremony recalls Acadian arrival

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NEW ORLEANS — When a shipload of 154 Acadians docked here 260 years ago — ending a search for a home that spanned three decades — there was no fanfare, no grand ceremony.

Officials plan to make up for that on Sunday. The governor, representatives of France and Spain, even the Catholic Church want to make that arrival of the last group of settled Acadians to Louisiana an event to remember.

Just before noon, descendants of 35 Acadian families will sail up the Mississippi River as their ancestors did — in a replica of the first ship to arrive in Louisiana.

Its arrival in 1735 marked the beginning of the end of what has become known as the Acadian Odyssey, the exodus of French refugees from locations around the world to Louisiana beginning in the 1760s.

For a lot of pomp, Gov. Edwin Edwards and the consuls of France and Spain will preside over a ceremony in Jackson Square, the parade grounds built for Spanish troops in 1724.

A special service, much of it in French, will be led by Archbishop Philip Hannan in the St. Louis Cathedral overlooking the square.

Quite a different picture from that on June 29, 1765, when only a representative appointed by the Spanish governor of Louisiana greeted the passengers of Le Bon Papa on their arrival.

Nonetheless, they were relieved to be in a land that welcomed them.

"They finally were reunited," said Al Hebert of Louisiana, a New Orleans historian. "The Acadian people, who had been separated for so long, were finally together again."

It is believed they dropped to their knees in St. Louis Cathedral to thank God for a safe voyage, Hebert said.

The passengers of Le Bon Papa weren't the first Acadians to settle in Louisiana, but they were the biggest group and the last, said Paul Martin, an Acadian specialist with the Louisiana Council for the Development of French in Louisiana. Historians mark their journey as the largest organized trans-Atlantic migration to North America.

The history of the Acadians dates back to the early 1600s, when a group of French colonists settled in French-controlled Canada. The word "Acadian" came from the word "Acadia" — the name that was given to present-day Nova Scotia.

The Acadians were loyal French citizens and, because of that, were expelled from Canada in 1755, when England gained control of the country.

"The people were torn," Hebert said. "They were willing to be loyal to the English, but refused to be loyal to the French."

Bill Cox works to get his ship ready to sail up the Mississippi River as part of celebrations for the 260th anniversary of the arrival of Acadian families in southern Louisiana.