August 15, the Feast of the Assumption, is a special day to Acadians around the world. It was officially a National Acadian day since the first National Convention of the Acadians declared it so in 1881. But even before that it was commemorated as a special day in France and by Frenchmen wherever they were.

Five thousand Acadians attended that convention in what was then the largest gathering of the Acadians since the exile of 1755. And, as you might expect, whenever 5,000 Acadians gather, you can expect a spirited debate about which day to proclaim their own. Some wanted to celebrate on June 24, the feast of St. John the Baptist, which had been the national Day of French Canadians since 1834.

They argued Acadians needed to be united with other Canadian French-speakers if they were going to resist total assimilation by an English-speaking majority, and that August 15, fell in the middle of the harvest season, making it a day to give a day to celebrate on that day.

Proponents of August 15, argued by having their own special day, the Acadians could celebrate their own origins, and still celebrate with other French-speakers on June 24, and, perhaps more important, Acadians already celebrated Assumption Day to some extent, since Our Lady of the Assumption was their patroness.

At the time the first Acadians left France, King Louis XIII had just designated Assumption Day as the National Feast of the French people, and the Acadians brought that celebration with them to their new home.

Abbot Marcel-François Richard, who favored August 15, probably influenced the decision with the speech he gave at the convention.

“Indeed, it appears to me that a people who, during more than a century of hardship and persecutions, have managed to preserve their religion, their language, their customs and their autonomy, must have acquired enough importance to deserve that they take the means to solemnly assert their existence,” he argued. “The Acadians having chosen Saint John the Baptist as their patron, it seems to be that

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unless we want to merge our nationality in theirs, it is urgent for the Acadians to choose [another] day... it is well worth noting that we are not the descendants of Canadians, but of France, and... we must choose the day that reminds us of our origin.”

The Vatican ratified the choice of the Feast of the Assumption on January 19, 1938, when Pope Pius XI proclaimed, “The Holy Father gladly approves that all Acadians, wherever they might be, honor and venerate the Blessed Virgin Mary, in her Assumption into heaven, as their special Patroness, entrusting them all to the care and to the protection of such a Great Mother, so that they may preserve their faith, the Catholic faith, and show it in their way of life.”

That devotion to Mary also came to Louisiana with the Acadians and continued into modern times. At the time of his retirement in 1956, Bishop Maurice Schexnayder remarked upon the Acadians and their devotion to the church and to Mary.

“For two hundred years or more,” he said, “the banks of the bayous have resounded with the melody of Mary’s Aves, to the teachings of the faith for which their ancestors suffered. (The Acadians prayed) “Arise, Mother of God, Sine on us, dear Lady, with your bright countenance, like the sun in his strength, O Stella Matutina. O harbinger of peace, till our year is one perpetual May. From your sweet eyes, from your majestic brow, let ten thousands influence rain down, not to confound or overwhelm, but to persuade, to win over our enemies.”

You can contact Jim Bradshaw at jbradshaw@bellsouth.net or P.O. Box 1191, Washington LA 70899.