Expelled from Nova Scotia, Acadians head southward

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Editors note: Descendants of the New World's first French settlers - the Acadians - have built four centuries of history in North America. In Part Two of a series chronicling that adventure, we find the Acadians making their way southward towards the bayou country of Louisiana.

In the fall of 1755, the course of history in the New World was forever changed by the deportation of more than 5,000 French Acadians from Nova Scotia. Almost overnight, these Acadians found themselves homeless, stripped of their possessions, torn from their families, and forced to sail southward on overcrowded, under-supplied ships.

In his book, History of the Acadians, Bona Arsenault wrote of the events leading up to the fateful October day when the ships and their destitute passengers left Canada's Bay of Fundy. He quotes John Winslow, an English army officer who was stationed at Beausejour, Nova Scotia during the upheaval:

"We are now hatching the noble and great project of banishing the French Neutrals (Acadians) from this province...If we can accomplish this expulsion, it will have been one of the greatest deeds the English in America have ever achieved; for, among other considerations, the part of the country which they occupy is one of the best soils in the world..."

Historical documents, journals and letters are Arsenault's primary sources for his description of the events which began in September of 1755. With systematic determination, English troops occupied the French Acadians' villages, burned their homesteads and arrested anyone who resisted. All of the area's Catholic priests were arrested as well, and their churches converted to barracks.

In some places, the execution of these orders led to bloody fighting between English soldiers and Acadians. At Fort Cumberland, many were taken prisoner and deported almost immediately, forced to leave wives, children and homesteads behind.

"One hundred and forty women," wrote a Catholic priest, "threw themselves hopelessly and blindly onto the English ships to rejoin their husbands," Arsenault reported.

In other areas, he discovered, the fighting gave some Acadian families a chance to escape together and avoid the fate of so many who were separated from their loved ones. Fighting at Miramichi allowed some 200 families to escape into the forests, where they spent a hungry, desperate winter.

Arsenault reported that it isn't clear exactly what took place during English deportation efforts at Port Royal, the Acadians' oldest settlement. All that is known is that about half its population of 3,000 managed to escape, and that many British soldiers and Acadians were killed.

On September 2, 1755, Winslow issued orders for the arrest of the Acadians at Grand-Pre, as quoted by Arsenault:

"His Majesty's commandments are that your lands and tenements and cattle and livestock of all kinds are all forfeited to the Crown,... and that you yourselves are to be removed from this province... and I hope that in whatever part of the world you fall, you may be faithful subjects, and a peaceable and happy people."

On September 10, Winslow ordered the first group of Acadians - 230 young men and boys - to board the waiting English ships:

"I ordered ye prisoners to march. They all answered they would not go without their fathers. I took hold of (a prisoner) and bid march. He obeyed and the rest followed, though slowly, and went off praying, singing and crying, being met by the women and children all the way, which is 11/2 mile, with great lamentations, upon their knees... Thus ended this painful task of so many heart-breaking scenes."

Those prisoners filled the waiting ships and remained aboard them, separated from their families, until more ships arrived on October 8. Acadian women and children, and the elderly and sick, were forced aboard hurriedly and without organization. Hundreds were separated from their relatives at the very point of embarkation, Arsenault reported.

"The inhabitants," Winslow wrote in his journal, "with great sorrow, abandoned their homes... It was a scene of confusion, despair and desolation... Husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, parents and children, fiancées and friends, believing they were merely separating for a few days, were never to meet again on earth, the ships having far distant destinations."

The various destinations had been assigned by the English so that the Acadians could not easily regroup and return to Nova Scotia. However, no one had told the Acadians about that aspect of the plan.

On October 17, the ships finally left the Bay of Fundy carrying some 5,000 Acadian exiles. Arsenault's account states that 2,000 were bound for Massachusetts; 700 for Connecticut; 300 for New York; 500 for Pennsylvania; 1,000 for Maryland; 2,000 for Virginia; 500 each for North and South Carolina; and 400 for Georgia.

"In this way," Arsenault wrote, "the Acadians were cruelly banished from their country and plunged overnight into abject poverty... These thousands of victims were one of the most sorrowful upheavals in history, left behind all the possessions they had accumulated in four, five, six generations."

The exiles found few friendly faces in the English colonies. Only Maryland, with its large Irish Catholic population, reached out to the Acadians. In most other places, Arsenault wrote, the English "viewed the Indians and the French with equal horror."

Most of the colonies didn't even know the Acadian refugees were on their way, since the English government didn't bother to inform them in advance. None of the colonial governments had the resources to feed, house or clothe the destitute refugees, who were encouraged to move on as quickly as possible.

With great difficulty, they did just that, Arsenault reported. Some managed to find their way back to the Beaubassin area of Nova Scotia or to other points in Canada. A few returned to France. Many of the recently orphaned children were placed with English families in the colonies, and absorbed by a foreign culture.

Most of them, over the next decade, trekked southward over land, by river, or along the Atlantic coastline to the swamps and bayous of Louisiana. There, for the second time in as many centuries, they set out to conquer the wilderness of the New World.

Next week: The story of Joseph Broussard dit Beausoleil and his kinsmen, founders of Broussard, La. Early records indicate they were among the first Acadians to reach Louisiana.