Faces of home

Mural in France marks departure of Cajun ancestors for Louisiana

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NANTES, France—The faces in the mural are familiar to the Cajun visitors, not just because they depict their ancestors about to depart from France on a voyage to Louisiana.

Staring back are the actual faces of Acadiana residents who posed for Lafayette native and artist Robert Dafford when he painted the mural in Nantes, France and a sister mural in St. Martinville.

“MY guy is in the middle with the beard,” Karen Pitre Gaudet of Baton Rouge said, after viewing the Nantes mural.

She described the feeling of joy emanating from the mural as the displaced Acadiens wait to board the ships in hopes of reuniting with relatives they had not seen since the Grand Derangement, when they were thrown out of Nova Scotia.

“It was touching because I know some of the people in the mural,” said Irving Thibodeaux of Morse in Acadia Parish, after seeing the Nantes mural. The late J.P. Thibodeaux and Shirley LeBlanc were among those who

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Gerard Mark Breaux of France, an author and expert on the Acadiens, discusses the Robert Dafford mural on Rue des Acadiens commemorating the deported Acadiens who lived in Nantes, France, before sailing to Louisiana.
CLAIRE TAYLOR, THE ADVERTISER
Residents of Louisiana, Texas, Georgia, the East Coast and Canada who are descendants of Acadiens, pose Thursday before a mural marking the arrival of the deported Acadiens in Nantes, France, in 1775.

Mural

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posed for the mural, he said.

The visitors were among a group of 50 Ca-
juns from Louisiana, else-
where in the U.S. and Can-
ada who are on a 17-day
tour of France, tracing
their roots and traveling
the paths their ancestors
walked while they lived
exiled in France. They
have found homes built by
their ancestors, discov-
ered documents and other
evidence of their forefa-
ters' time in France, and
met long-distance relatives.

The mural, titled "Port
of Nantes in 1785," is paint-
ed on the side of a building
along a narrow stone
street called Rue des Aca-
diens in Nantes. It's a twin
of the mural at the Acadi-
enan Memorial Museum in
St. Martinville depicting
the Acadiens' arrival in
Louisiana. Both are 12 feet
deep and 30 feet wide. Daf-
ford often used descend-
ants of the Acadiens as
models for the murals.

Brenda Trahan, who
helped organize the trip
for Philippe Gustin of La
Centre International de
Sainte-Foy, said she spoke
with Dafford but
was unable to join the group at
the mural. He plans to be
in Nantes for the 20th an-
niversary of the mural,
she said.

The group visited
Nantes on Thursday with
Gerard Mark Breaux of
France, an author and ex-
pert on Acadiens.

He told the group that
the Acadiens who entered
France at Nantes after
their expulsion lived in the
L'Hermitage neigh-
brood where the mural is
located today. The neigh-
borhood was built on a hill
so they could see ships going
in and out of the port with
the hope that they might
board one of those ships
and return to Acadie or
somewhere else where
they could use their skills
to earn a living.

In 1775, 2,000 Acadiens
were living in Nantes.

They began to hear from
brothers and sisters and
other kin who had made
their way to Louisiana,
saying it was a place
where they could be free,
own land and thrive.

Meanwhile the Spanish
government was looking
for immigrants to settle
Louisiana. Olivier Thé-
riot, a dispelled Acadien
who worked in Nantes as a
shoemaker, spread the
word and took note of
those interested in Spain's
offer in order to justify
contracting the seven
ships, Breaux said.

With offers of land, sup-
plies and free passage,
hundreds of the displaced
Acadiens boarded seven
ships in 1785 headed for
New Orleans. Six of the
ships sailed from Nantes,
the other from St. Malo.

Dafford used a photo-
graph of one of Olivier
Theriot's descendants to
paint him into the mural,
Breaux said.

It was a long journey to
Louisiana.

The French, in the
1600s, had sent people to
settle the northeastern
section of Canada now
known as the Maritime
Provinces, including New
Brunswick, Nova Scotia
and Prince Edward Island.
The territory changed
hands several times be-
tween France and Britain,
and by the late 1700s, Eng-
land had claimed the area.

When the Acadiens re-
fused to swear allegiance
to the British crown, they
were rounded up, their
houses and farms were
burned, and they were
sent to various places
along the U.S. East Coast,
England and France.

Some 3,200 Acadiens
arrived through three
French ports. The first
group arrived on the
coasts of Normandy and
Brittany. Others entered
through the ports at
Nantes and St. Malo. Many
had no land or jobs, de-
s pending for many years on
government handouts
that often were not enough
to sustain them and their
families.