Filling gaps in Acadian history

Early settlers researched

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LAFAYETTE — Joseph "Beau-soleil" Broussard is a central figure in Cajun history, a folk hero who fought the British in their expulsion of French Acadians from what is now Nova Scotia and who then led an early group of exiles to their new home in Louisiana.

So it might be surprising that very little is known about where or how he and his compatriots lived when they first arrived in 1765, or even where many of them are buried, including Beau-soleil.

"The fact that we don't know where these areas are is a black hole, culturally," said Mark Rees, University of Louisiana at Lafayette archaeologist and anthropologist.

Rees is working with a group of Beau-soleil descendants and others who want to bridge that gap in the historical record through what's being called "The New Acadia Project," an effort to locate and explore the sites where the early Acadians lived and the graves where they now rest.

Attention is focused along Bayou Teche in Iberia Parish where Beau-soleil led a group of Acadians on the promise of cattle and land.

The scenic banks along the bayou in that area are facing increasing residential and commercial development that could threaten any historical sites, Warren Perrin said.

Perrin is a lawyer, Acadian historian and well-known cultural activist who is a descendant of Beau-soleil and author of a recent book on his life: "Acadian Redemption: From Beau-soleil Broussard to the Queen's Royal Proclamation."

"If we are ever going to do it, we need to do it now," Perrin said.

There has long been interest in finding the early Acadia settlements and grave sites, he said, but discussions at a Broussard reunion earlier this year gave the project new life.

Beau-soleil's group of 193 Acadians first settled in an area thought to be near the present-day village of Loreauville, Rees said.

But more than 30 of the Acadians, including Beau-soleil, died within the first few months of their arrival, possibly of yellow fever, Rees said.

"We don't know what their lives were like," he said.

Trying to piece together that story could be a years-long process.

Rees said the first and perhaps most difficult step is identifying possible settlement sites for archaeological excavation.

Rees has already dabbled in archaeological work in the area.

He and a team of students excavated the home site of Amand Broussard, one of Beau-soleil's sons, about 10 years ago, unearthing old bottles, cookware, a pipe stem, building materials and other objects dating from the late 1700s and early 1800s.

The site was near Loreauville, and Rees said he believes that the first generation of Broussard's were in the same general area, probably choosing the high ground along the Bayou Teche.

But that still leaves several miles of bayou frontage to cover.

University of Louisiana at Lafayette archaeologist and anthropologist Mark Rees talks about archaeological digs near Loreauville on Friday at Mouton Hall in Lafayette.

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er between St. Martinville and New Iberia.

"The first year is really exploratory," Rees said. "A lot of it is going to be walking over the ground and talking to people."

He said one of the best chances of finding a promising site for excavation is to seek out residents who might have already found something, perhaps old gun flints or pieces of old ceramic plates tucked away in a shoebox in someone's closet.

Researchers would also carefully inspect agricultural fields where plows might have unearthed an old artifact, Rees said.

Those early clues could in turn lead researchers to a site worthy of more extensive archaeological work.

For Perrin, there is a keen interest in not just locating the early settlements but in identifying the actual grave sites of Beausoleil and other early Acadians.

Their burials are listed in church records that indicate "camps," but there is scant information indicating precisely where those camps were.

"If we locate the camp sites, we think the grave sites will be nearby," he said.

What happens if those remains are ever discovered has not been determined, but Rees said grave sites could be commemorated with a monument and offer a chance for locals and tourists to reconnect with the Acadian heritage that is a big driver of tourism in southern Louisiana.

"There is a huge opportunity for cultural tourism," he said.

Loreauville Mayor Al Broussard, a Beausoleil descendant, is hopeful that a discovery of the early Acadian settlements could become an attraction for the city.

"We don't have any festivals or any name recognition," he said. "Maybe it would put Loreauville on the map."

The mayor also appreciates the historical significance.

"I think the public needs to know there is a gap in our history," he said.

Perrin said that supporters of the project are trying to raise an initial $25,000 to fund research, and a fundraiser is being planned for later this year.

Rees said the work depends largely on private funding and the cooperation of landowners, because any potential sites are most certainly on private property.

He said he hopes to start early research on the project this winter, but he is not expecting quick results.

"It's going to take years of surveys and talking to people and excavations," Rees said.

> ON THE INTERNET:

For more information on the New Acadia Project, visit www.ucs.louisiana.edu/~mar4160/nap.html