Month marks British avowal of removal

Attorney recalls royal response to letter on Acadians

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LAFAYETTE — What's the first step in extracting an apology from the British government for the exile of French-speaking Acadians more than two centuries ago from Nova Scotia?

"I simply prepared a short demand letter and had it hand delivered to Downing Street and Buckingham Palace," said Lafayette attorney Warren Perrin, recalling his gambit to the crown in 1990. This December marks the 10th anniversary of Britain's formal response, which came 13 years after Perrin's letter to then-British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Queen Elizabeth II.

It was not an apology, but nevertheless the crown issued a royal proclamation acknowledging its decision to deport the Acadian people, and the suffering and death of thousands of those exiles from disease and in shipwrecks and prison camps.

Perrin is a descendant of the Acadians, a large number of whom eventually found their way to south Louisiana after their forced removal from Nova Scotia in the mid-1700s. They came to be known here as Cajuns.

Perrin still finds it hard to believe that he helped start a campaign for a British apology that attracted international attention.

Perrin said the idea was prompted by a congressional act in 1988 that was a formal apology for the U.S. government's internment of U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry during World War II.

He knew only the basics of Acadian history at the time but soon began intense research on their deportation. He came to the conclusion that not only was it morally wrong, but that it was a violation of international law and

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Britain's own laws at the time.

He said Acadians, though of French ancestry, were considered British subjects at the time of the deportation, which came amid tense relations between Britain and France leading up to the Seven Years' War.

"How could you exile or deport a British subject from a British colony?" Perrin asked.

As an attorney, Perrin had experience in how to address legal wrongs — by filing a lawsuit.

Perrin said he considered different venues, including the International Criminal Court and The Hague in the Netherlands, the European Court of Human Rights in France or the federal court system in the U.S.

But the general practice before filing a lawsuit is to first send a letter outlining legal demands to give the opposing party an opportunity to meet them without litigation.

"I did not expect a response," Perrin said.

The demand letter set a 30-day deadline for the British government to contact him to discuss the issue.

"On the 28th day, I got a call from the British Embassy," Perrin said.

For the first few years, discussions were limited, but by the mid-1990s, the issue had begun to attract attention, especially after he submitted a paper on his petition for an apology to an international human rights conference in France in 1993.

"That got me on the world stage, and it got me some fantastic PR (public relations)," Perrin said.

The next year he was named president of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, a state agency that promotes French language and culture, and began forging relationships with French-speaking countries and regions across the globe.

His cause attracted media attention from across the U.S. and Canada, as well as in Britain with articles in the The Guardian newspaper, The Times of London and The Economist magazine.

The British even offered a deal at one point, sending a message through a Houston attorney that they would pay $1 million to fund an endowed professorship at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

But Perrin said the British government did not want it known that they were funding the professorship in an effort to make the petition for an apology go away.

"The problem was this had to be kept quiet," Perrin said.

His response: "No, thanks."

By the late 1990s, Canadian leaders initially reluctant to "rattle the cage" were taking more interest in the petition, Perrin said.

At this point, I wasn't going to file the lawsuit. I was getting much more than I ever thought I would ever get," Perrin said of the attention and momentum around the issue.

After a few more years of behind-the-scenes talks, the British crown's Canadian representative signed the royal proclamation in December 2003, a recognition that a wrong had been done and the designation of July 28 as "A Day of Commemoration of the Great Upheaval."

There wasn't much reaction among the general public at the time in south Louisiana, Perrin said, but the document has been recognized as a milestone in recognition of the struggles of the Acadian people.

It also serves as a perennial source of pride, he said.

"Every day I get a letter or an email about this — thanks for making my grandpa proud," Perrin said. "Once I learned about what those people went through, I was proud."