New Acadia Project seeks to discover true Cajun roots

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The New Acadia Project is a research effort to better establish Acadian history by investigating and locating the lost settlement known as Nouvelle Acadie, or New Acadia.

Headed by University of Louisiana at Lafayette professor and anthropology department head Mark Rees, the project marks the first time any attempt by archeologists has been made to uncover the homes and grave sites of this group of Acadians and their leader, Joe “Beausoleil” Broussard.

“We want to provide some measured facts and places of interest that speak to people in terms of their identity, who they are,” Rees told The Advertiser in June. The ongoing project encompasses many different fields to focus on the many different aspects of Acadian history, including history (public and oral), public archeology, anthropology and cultural resource management planning.

Broussard led a group of 193 Acadians to New Orleans following their exile from Nova Scotia. As a response, the colonial Louisiana government set them up with provisions and told the Acadians to settle around the Attakapas district near the Bayou Teche. Months after their settlement, however, an epidemic spread and wiped out 34 Acadians, including Broussard.

Surrounding these events is also the story of Evangeline, a woman in perpetual search for her love, Gabriel. Written by Henry Wordsworth Longfellow, the story is of the woman searching the entire Attakapas district near Loreauville and later the entire American Frontier.

The story has captured the hearts of many; however, the setting behind it remains elusive.

“The Evangeline myth is dearly held by others, but it’s not based on fact. It’s amazing to me that we don’t know the locations of the burials of the original settlers of what is today Acadiana,” said Rees in an article for KATC.

The movement for archeological discovery began when Rees and his students began the Amand Broussard Project near Loreauville in 2003 when late-eighteenth century Acadian artifacts were unearthed.

Field work around Loreauville began in late May/early June after heavy rain and flooding delayed the project for several days. Their work on that day primarily involved scoping out places to survey as well as collecting geographical data.

The overgrowth surrounding the burial site was cut through with a bow rake and machete, according to The Advertiser. The project will be open to volunteers once there is more work to be done. They have so far identified two historic cemeteries, where the descendants of Broussard have reportedly been buried as well as other artifacts. According to The Advocate, the researchers plan to dig shallow holes in certain sites for bits of artifacts from the 1700’s.

“The most difficult task faced was to keep the number (of volunteers) at a manageable amount. We had so many people who volunteered to serve. Everyone wanted to be part of this project, so we had to limit the number of people,” said Warren Perrin, a member of the NAP Steering Committee.

Helping fund the NAP is the NAP Steering Committee, a group of people who aid in fundraising and planning the project itself.

“As a steering committee, we have the obligation to fulfill the commitment we made to the project, whether it’s the field work to the proper documentation (written or film). And after that’s done, it’s our job to erect the appropriate memorial or museum and spread the information to the world,” said Perrin.

The NAP suffered a setback when the Louisiana Board of Regents did not recommend the grant request they placed earlier in the year. Funds primarily came from Iberia Parish and the Mcllhenny Family Foundation.

According to The Advocate, funds for the NAP added up to $90,000.

While the funds were enough to initiate the project, they will not be enough to maintain research. The team involved, however, is determined to see the project to the end.

“We will only be limited by how long it takes to uncover the sites,” said Perrin.