Queen Elizabeth II offers apology for deporting Acadians

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LAFAYETTE — Nearly 250 years after ordering the deportation of about 15,000 Acadians from Canada, England has acknowledged that the act was wrong and set a day aside to commemorate the journey that separated thousands of families.

Queen Elizabeth II signed a written proclamation acknowledging that the expulsion was a tragedy and in violation of English law. The proclamation also set aside July 28, the day the deportation orders were signed, as a day to remember the Acadians' hardship.

For the past 13 years, Warren Perrin, a Lafayette attorney and president of the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, has fought for the queen to acknowledge the wrongs of the expulsion and the hardship it caused his ancestors.

"We view this as a very favorable... reconciliation with the crown," Perrin said Wednesday. "It's an agreement to reconcile and commemorate the wrongs that were inflicted upon the Acadians in the name of the crown," he said.

In the Canadian capital of Ottawa on Wednesday, about 200 spectators filled a parliamentary committee room to celebrate the proclamation, according to the The Associated Press.

"This proclamation today is about understanding and recognizing our history," Heritage Minister Sheila Copps said during an emotional ceremony that had some of her cabinet colleagues fighting back tears.

"We are turning the page on one of the darkest moments of our collective history," said Copps, herself a descendant of one of the founding families forced to leave the Acadian settlement at Grand Pre, Nova Scotia.

While the document is deemed a declaration by the Canadian Crown, Copps suggested the Queen may also be prepared to read out the proclamation when she pays a royal visit to Canada in 2005.

In his quest, Perrin said he was inspired by a line in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, Evangeline. The epic tells the tale of two lovers separated during the diaspora.

"It says the exile begins never to end as though we were a people in perpetual exile," Perrin said. "So there was never a closure and we'd like to think now it's a closure. We're never going to forget it but it's a closure."

The apology is timely, Perrin said. Next year, Acadian descendants from across the world will meet in Nova Scotia in August for the Congrès Mondial Acadien.

"I'm sure that played a role," Perrin said. He later added, "I think this is a really positive step to help the Congrès."

(Nick Pittman of the Times of Acadiana contributed to this story.)