Ragged bands of Acadians settle in Louisiana

After their exile from Nova Scotia, the Acadians found themselves scattered throughout the colonies of the New World. In the decade between 1755 and 1765, many of them found their way to the bayous and swamps of south Louisiana. As recorded in Bona Arsenault's History of the Acadians, their passage was marked by New World settlers, officials and poets of the era. In Part Four of our series, we find them arriving in small groups in the Attakapas region, what is now the St. Martinville area.

By Alice Ferguson
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The Acadians, exiled from Nova Scotia, begin their 10-year journey southward toward Louisiana. By 1764, a year after the Treaty of Paris was signed, their arrival was old news to Louisiana officials, but less of a concern to the colony's government:

"I am told that there are at least 4,000 who have picked Louisiana as their destiny after an erratic 10 years," wrote Louisiana military commander Charles Aubry. "This unexpected event put me...in the greatest of difficulty. Nothing was foreseen to settle so many people; and the circumstances we find ourselves in are, to say the least, critical. Never was the colony so short of food as it is today. To add to the problem, they brought smallpox with them which will afflict our colony with a new plague. However, under the circumstances, it is our duty not to abandon them."

Quite a different attitude from that of the English colonial governments, which couldn't move the Acadians along fast enough. Louisiana officials, it seemed, were determined to assist the refugees in whatever small way they could.

The refugees led southward by the brothers, Joseph and Alexandre Broussard dit Beausoleil, by way of the French West Indies, were among the first on record to receive such assistance, in the form of cattle donated to them by a retired French military captain. Joseph Broussard was also a member of the Acadian society.

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Judge Felix Voorhies

"commandant des Acadiens des Attakapas," Arsenault reported.

Tragically, he did not live to see the cattle-based prosperity that was to follow for his people. Arsenault reported that, after so long a journey and so many battles, Joseph Broussard finally fell victim to one of the many plagues that swept through the camps of the Acadian refugees. He died on October 20, 1765, and was buried at what is now the site of the Town of Broussard.

The Acadian families scattered throughout the Attakapas and Opelousas territories as well as along the Mississippi River.

Acadian families scattered throughout the Attakapas and Opelousas territories is estimated at more than 12,000 settlers, most of whom are Acadians. Nearly 200 years later, their descendants number close to one million souls in the area known as Acadia.

Fortunately for Arsenault and other researchers, the newly settled Acadians quickly developed their early grants of cattle, and used uniquely shaped brands to distinguish their herds. The brands were preserved in a register that Arsenault called "precious and unique record." Preserved in the archives of the University of Southwestern Louisiana, the registration included more than 28,000 different brands as well as the cattle owners' names, recorded between 1739 and 1888. In the registry's pages can be found scores of family names still flourishing in the area today.

In addition to livestock, the Acadians soon found sugar cane and sweet potatoes to be profitable cash crops, just as they are today. Even their architecture, as Arsenault noted, survived not only the trek from Acadia, but the generations between the settlement of Acadia and modern times.

The hardy determination of the refugees, who had finally found a permanent home, is apparent in the few wills and similar documents recorded in the mid to late 1760's. One such inventory of Pierre Arseñaule's estate, totaled a value of $5,350 -- a figure Arseñaule described as "in the currency of that time, an adequate value" to the modern value of U.S. currency.

Soon the Acadians spread out across the Attakapas region, northward into the Opelousas territory. They met and coexisted with other French settlers who came, both before and after the Acadians' arrival, directly from France. The area also drew many Spanish settlers, who often joined Acadian communities and adopted their lifestyle and customs.

As of Arseñaule's writing in 1876, some 600,000 souls in south Louisiana claimed the heritage of those first Acadian settlers -- that's nearly half of the two million descendants of Acadia throughout the world. And, as he notes in quoting Judge Felix Voorhies:

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Next Week: Part Five tracks the establishment of Acadian towns and parishes, noting their first families and earliest accomplishments.