"Le Grand Dérangement"
THE ACADIAN EXILE IN MASSACHUSETTS 1755-1766

Massachusetts Archives/Commonwealth Museum
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Acadia was a region that, at times, encompassed present-day Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and parts of southern Quebec. Its name was derived from the name "Arcadia" assigned to lands on the eastern coast of North America by the Italian explorer Verrazzano.

Constant disputes arose as to its ownership, it having been claimed for the English by John Cabot and for the French by Jacques Cartier. Both nations had temporary settlements here in the early part of the seventeenth century, but it was the French who finally established a permanent settlement at Port Royal (now Annapolis Royal).

During the course of several wars involving France and England, hostilities erupted in the North American colonies. Following war between England and the Netherlands, the Treaty of Breda (1667) granted France possession of Acadia. During Queen Anne's War (1702-1713), the British, as they were now called, captured Port Royal in response to continual raids by French-inspired Native Americans on the New England borderlands. The war ended with the Treaties of Utrecht (1713), by which Britain was ceded possession of the majority of Acadia. Conflicts arose again during King George's War (1744-1748). Although British colonists captured the fortress at Louisbourg during that war, the Treaty of Aix-La-Chapelle (1748) returned it to the French.
Prelude to War
1750-1755

Although nominally in the hands of the British since 1713, Nova Scotia had mostly been populated by the French, those engaged in the fishing and fur trades, and those who had settled and established farms. Following King George’s War, the growing French population was seen as an increasing challenge to British interests.

Governor William Shirley of Massachusetts began to voice such an opinion as early as 1749, warning that French incursion into British colonial possessions threatened the fishing and whaling industries of New England and even the profitability of the sugar plantations in the Caribbean. He cautioned that allowing the French to establish a foothold in Nova Scotia imperiled the very safety of all the British colonies in North America.

When the French established Fort Beausejour across the Missiquash River in 1750, the British were quick to respond. In January of 1751, Governor Edward Cornwallis of Nova Scotia began seeking reinforcements from Massachusetts to repel French incursions in the Chignecto Peninsula. In that same year, Charles Lawrence had established the hastily erected Fort Lawrence south of the same river. Shirley had entered into negotiations with the French in Paris in 1750 over the boundaries of Acadia, but with little effect. In 1751, the Massachusetts General Court, under the direction of Lieutenant governor Spencer Phipps, petitioned the king for the removal of French inhabitants from Nova Scotia. Tensions mounted between the French and native tribes on one side and the British on the other.

Meanwhile the Acadians continued to farm, hunt, and fish for their maintenance, paying little attention to the growing unease and calmly answering British requests that they take the oath of allegiance with an alternative. They were happy to take an oath provided that it guaranteed their status as neutral and did not require them to bear arms in battle. Their stated fear was of reprisals from the native Mi-kMaq tribe. As a result of their attempt to maintain such a neutral status, they began to be referred to as the “French Neutrals” by the British authorities.

As a result of the ongoing unsuccessful negotiations in Paris, Governor Shirley returned to Massachusetts in 1753.

As plans were being made to organize troops for action against the French in the borderlands of New York and in the Ohio River valley, the governor made designs to enlist two thousand troops under his command. Major General John Winslow of Marshfield, having been chosen as his second in command for a joint offensive against the French in the Chignecto Peninsula of Nova Scotia, began recruitment. In February 1755, Shirley addressed the Council and House of Representatives in Massachusetts seeking financial support, although not requiring it, since the troops’ pay and provisions were to be provided by the British crown. He implored the General Court to maintain strict secrecy regarding the intended expedition. In May, the troops left Boston Harbor bound for Nova Scotia’s Bay of Fundy.

On June 16th, the troops under the command of General Winslow took control of the French Fort Beausejour across the Missiquash River from Fort Lawrence. By August, General Winslow had received notice from Charles Lawrence, now governor of Nova Scotia, that the French Neutrals of the province were to be removed and shipped to other North American British colonies. Their presence had been deemed too great a threat because of their reluctance to swear an unqualified oath of allegiance and the likelihood that they might assist the French forces at the first opportunity. Lawrence’s instructions directed Winslow to gather the male inhabitants and place them aboard ships bound for the British colonies on the mainland. Their families were to follow. He was to present each ship’s captain with a letter to the governor of the colony explaining the arrival of the ship and a certificate to be signed by the respective governor to demonstrate that his cargo had been delivered.
ON SEPTEMBER 5TH, 1755, JOHN WINSLOW READ THE ORDER FOR DEPORTATION TO 418 MEN AT THE CHURCH AT GRAND PRÉ.

He announced, much to his own distaste, that their homes, lands, and livestock had become forfeit to the Crown of Great Britain and that they and those household goods that they could carry were to be removed from the province. The men were detained to prevent their escape, although a few representatives were allowed to inform the family members of the detainees to provide for them during their detention and to prepare their belongings for transport. They were warned not to attempt flight and, pursuant to Governor Lawrence’s orders, the homes and farms of several escapees were burned as an example to the rest. Those that did escape were not allowed to return to their former lives. Eventually, most of the Acadian homes and farms were razed.

Ships for the transport of the Acadians were repeatedly delayed while they waited on shore with few provisions. Winslow made several queries to Governor Lawrence, complaining of the wait and stating that the inhabitants were in danger of starving if the ships and provisions did not arrive soon. Finally, in October, several of the provisioned ships arrived. By late October ships began departing for Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina with Acadians on board. They were soon to be followed by additional transports bound for Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, and Georgia.

Exiles in Massachusetts
1755-1766

The initial conveyances of Acadians that arrived in Boston harbor in November 1755 were bound for colonies to the south, yet conditions on board prompted the Massachusetts legislature to delay them and appoint a committee to investigate.

Evidence of overcrowding and lack of sufficient food and water led the committee to advise that a number of the passengers be allowed to land to relieve overcrowding. These became the first Acadians interned in Massachusetts, although they were soon to be followed by nearly two thousand of their countrymen who would be distributed among many of the towns of the province.

Unclear as to what to do with these new visitors, the Massachusetts legislature directed that they were to be cared for by the various towns where they were residing, at the expense of the province, until advice was received from Governor Charles Lawrence of Nova Scotia or Governor Shirley of Massachusetts. They were to be provided with housing, tools, and employment if they were fit to work. (Often children and adults were indentured as servants to farm owners and less often to ship owners, to provide for their own support.) If they

Massachusetts General Court Acts 1755-1756, Chapter 35
(couunoed on page 8)
were unable to work because of illness or infirmity, they were to be provided for at the expense of the province. Such provisions included not only sustenance, but wood for heating and cooking, medical care, and, if the worst happened, a permanent resting-place beneath the ground. It was assumed that Nova Scotia would pay the charge of supporting the exiles given the fact that they had been inhabitants there and had only been removed for the security of the British there. Yet what Massachusetts received were vague promises of payment and assurances of the necessity of the Acadians being kept in the province.

The Acadians were not especially welcome in their new setting. They were both French and Roman Catholic, neither attribute being a particular favorite of the inhabitants of Massachusetts, who hailed from strong Puritan stock. Additionally, there was the problem of the cost of their support. They had been stripped of most property of any value and arrived in Massachusetts destitute and requiring aid. While the General Court had stated that their support would be at the cost of the province, the individual towns still had to provide services directly to Acadians assigned to their towns and then obtain reimbursement. Many towns sought relief from the General Court, complaining that they had a surplus of Acadians to care for and requesting that some be moved to other towns to lessen the financial burden. Some inhabitants bewailed the relative freedom given the Acadians, particularly in Boston. It was feared that under cover of darkness they might leave the province by stolen ship, or worse, set fire to the town or the powder house, being “heated with Passion and Popish Zeal.”

Although there was resistance to the presence of the Acadians by many, others aided the newly arrived French, taking pity on them in their impoverished condition. They attempted to provide adequate shelter and medical care. Some even made efforts to keep families from being separated and aided them in the legal process, sometimes serving as witnesses and submitting petitions and depositions to the courts, when the Acadians sought a redress of grievances.

A Case Study: Marshfield and the Acadians

Two families of Acadians residing in Massachusetts, the Meuses and the Michels, serve as examples.

In February 1757, Charles Meuse and his son-in-law Paul Clement, and the rest of the Meuse family, unsatisfied with living on public support, had entered into an indenture with Nathaniel Ray Thomas, a wealthy inhabitant of Marshfield. The Meuses agreed, for the duration of one year, to work on the Thomas farm in exchange for the traditional benefits of an indenture, such as food, clothing, and lodging. This arrangement necessitated them to again petition the General Court, requesting permission to remain in Marshfield instead of moving to Wareham. Permission being granted, Thomas was required to post bond to ensure that the family did not become a charge to the province, and the family continued their labors in Marshfield. They quickly grew uneasy with Nathaniel Ray Thomas as their master, complaining in July 1757 that he had kept from them their copy of the contract. After
The selectmen were ordered to provide 10 count to the General Court. Once in unable to support the family on his own. explaining that his sons had left lack of supplies that he and his family the General Court, complaining of the continual requests that he provide them their copy and his constant refusals and threats to have them put in jail, they requested from the Council (the General Court's upper chamber) that they either be provided security for their indenture or that they be released from the contract. Although the Council directed that Thomas be notified of the complaint, no action appears to have followed.

The family again complained of its treatment by Nathaniel Ray Thomas both to the General Court and to Governor Pownall, stating that Thomas did not live up to the terms of the contract, and that "the women are almost naked as also some of the men." They requested that the General Court take action in the case. Although Thomas had sent a letter to the governor claiming that the charges were unfounded and requesting that the petition be dismissed, the legislature appointed a joint committee to look into the matter. Thomas, having considered the difficulties posed by the Meuses and their unwillingness to continue with their indenture, himself petitioned to the General Court to be released from the contract. The committee, after having heard evidence from the selectmen of Marshfield, who described the Acadians as "unreasonable and insulting" even though they were well-provided for, advised that the contract be cancelled and the Meuse family be moved to the town of Easton.

Thomas himself paid for their relocation, later submitting an expense account to the General Court. Once in Easton the family fared little better. In 1758, Charles Meuse again petitioned the General Court, complaining of the lack of supplies that he and his family were receiving from the town selectmen, explaining that his sons had left to seek work and that he, at sixty years old, was unable to support the family on his own. The selectmen were ordered to provide

for the Meuses as directed by law. It appears that they remained in Easton, at least for a while.

The family of Joseph Michel, consisting of seven people, encountered somewhat different problems. Originally farmers from the area of Annapolis Royal, they claimed friendship with the British in Nova Scotia, stating that they had often provided wood and provisions to the nearby garrison. They had been sent to Massachusetts along with the initial wave of Acadians and arrived in Marshfield in the fall of 1755.

In March 1756, Joseph Michel petitioned the General Court regarding the indenture of his two sons, Francis and Paul. His eldest son Francis, having already been hired to work for neighbor Caleb Tilden, was removed from the family's residence at the local schoolhouse and indentured to Anthony Winslow. The second eldest son, Paul, was sent to sea with mariner Nathaniel Clift. Michel complained that both sons had been indentured against their will by two of the selectmen of Marshfield. He requested that since the indentures were entered into involuntarily, one son had already obtained work, and the other was offered work to forestall the indenture, that the contract be considered null and void.

The General Court responded by appointing a joint committee to deal with the matter. Unable to investigate the situation before the end of the court session, the committee issued a report stating that forced indenture of Acadians when they or their families were willing to work for their support, and such indentures were against the will of the children and parents, was contrary to the intention of the law. Following the acceptance of the committee report by the Governor and General Court, all selectmen were directed to proceed accordingly. It is assumed, given the response of the General Court, that the indenture of the Michel sons was nullified, although no documentation of this effect survives. General Court records indicate that both Francis and Paul Michel were reassigned to Scituate in 1761. It is unclear whether they ever returned to Marshfield.

Near the end of the war in 1763, Joseph Michel died. The rest of the family continued in the care of the town, being moved from time to time and placed with various town inhabitants. Among them were both John Winslow, who had taken part in the Acadians' removal from Nova Scotia, and Nathaniel Ray Thomas, who had previously indentured the Meuse family. By 1774 it appears that the majority of the family had become self-supporting, the selectmen only appropriating funds for the support of the Widow Michel. In 1778, the selectmen appointed Asa Waterman to speak with the Michel sons, requesting that they care for their mother at their own expense in exchange for an exemption from town taxes. While the town did vote funds for the support of the Widow Michel the following year, it is assumed that in the following year her sons took responsibility for her, the only subsequent funds voted for her use being for medical care in 1784.

Attempts at Relocation 1763-1766

BY THE END OF THE WAR, MANY ACADIANS IN MASSACHUSETTS Sought TO RETURN HOME TO NOVA SCOTIA.

Although those that did found that much of their land had been settled by the British in their absence, they took instead the less fertile land ignored by the British. Others sought to immigrate to France, although never having lived there, it being attractive as the source of their language and religion. (continued on page 12)
A large number petitioned the General Court for permission to settle in the French colony of St. Domingue (present-day Haiti), having received word that they would be welcome. Although some may have succeeded in reaching there, Massachusetts governor Francis Bernard quickly issued a proclamation prohibiting such emigration, considering these Acadians potentially valuable British subjects. Many of these same Acadians later petitioned for permission to resettle in Quebec, its governor James Murray having offered them land and freedom to practice their religion. But since the General Court refused them financial assistance, it appeared that relocation in large numbers was impossible. Although apparently many made their way to Quebec in any case, details of this migration remain unclear. Some few decided to remain in the Massachusetts towns where they had been interned during the war.

In 1763, the six remaining members of the Meuse family began to petition the General Court for permission to leave the province. Their names appear on a petition among those who sought to remove to France immediately following the war. Again, in 1766, they sought permission to go to Quebec. It is unclear where the family ultimately settled. It is likely, given their apparent desire to quit Massachusetts, that they eventually made their way to Quebec or France. It is equally likely, however, that they came to reside in Louisiana or Nova Scotia, where many French neutral families eventually relocated.

The Michel family appears to have been among those who had grown accustomed to life in Massachusetts. Although the family remained under the support of the province and subsequently the town of Marshfield until some time in 1774, apparently most family members became self-sufficient after this. Unlike the Meuses and many other Acadians, the Michels do not appear on extant petitions of those wishing to relocate outside of the American colonies, although their names are occasionally found in the records of the town of Marshfield over the next decade or so. It can be assumed with equal plausibility either that the family simply integrated themselves into the life of the town of Marshfield, or joined some later migration of Acadians. Either supposition is, at best, uncertain. The episode has become known by those of Acadian descent as Le Grand Dérangement, or the Great Disturbance. It is one of a handful of moments in modern history in which an entire population has been displaced from its home and scattered. During the deportation of the Acadians from Nova Scotia, they were interned in the American colonies and Great Britain. Following the war, the Acadians became even more widely dispersed, groups of them inhabiting France, Louisiana, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Haiti, and Guyana, while some few remained where they had been placed at the beginning of the French and Indian War.

Intrigued by the tale, he went on to read Thomas Chandler Haliburton's History of Nova Scotia. In 1847, he published his poem Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie, a tale of Evangeline and Gabriel as the separated lovers.

Although fictional and historically inaccurate in many respects, it has served as the only glimpse of the event for several generations of readers. The character Evangeline herself has become representative of the Acadian removal and subsequent dispersal. Several sites have been dedicated to the story of Evangeline, most notably in Nova Scotia and Louisiana, while the tale became the basis of two early motion pictures. The popularity of the historic sites indicates a persistent Acadian presence in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Quebec, and in Louisiana, where Acadian descendants have become known as Cajuns. Despite their diaspora, Acadians have managed to maintain their culture and history, albeit altered by their experience.
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