The Acadian Story
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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The story of the Acadians covers that period in history that begins with the death of Queen Elizabeth in England in 1603, and extends for practical purposes until the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775.

The territory and environment of Acadia had long been known to Europeans before the first settlements were planted there by the French. Cape Breton was visited by the English Cabots in 1497-1498. Between 1498 and 1604 many English, French and Portuguese navigators skirted its shores looking for a northwest passage to the Indies and likely places for settlement. During this period Norman, Basque and Breton fishermen had frequented its coasts. The first serious attempt at settlement, however, was made in 1541 by Roberval, whom Francis I had appointed Viceregal of New France, with Jacques Cartier as Captain of his fleet. This expedition was on a large scale but met failure because the ships did not start together and ended in the loss of the entire fleet together with the life of Roberval himself.

Thus it was after a lapse of 63 years that de Monts, a nobleman of Henry IV’s court, set out to take possession for France of all lands between the 40th and 46th parallels, explore them and plant a colony on the peninsula then known as la Cadie.

The founding of Port Royal by de Monts in 1604 marked the beginning of a period of suffering, hardships and struggles for those who settled there. With de Monts came clergymen, laborers and artisans. During the first winter nearly half of the party died of scurvy. In 1607 the monopoly of the fur trade was taken from de Monts and the colonists abandoned Acadia. In 1610 another party came out under the leadership of Poutrincourt and reoccupied Port Royal and planted settlements at St. Croix and elsewhere.

Meantime the English settlement at Jamestown
grew strong and, looking with disfavor on the French colony at Port Royal, sent a force under Samuel Argale in 1612 which destroyed Port Royal and scattered its inhabitants, who had been weakened by internal dissensions. The French continued in Canada however and built forts on the St. John River and at Cape Sable, from which they carried on the fur trade and fishing industry.

After the restoration of Acadia to France by the Treaty of St. Germain France inaugurated serious efforts to plant colonies in the peninsula. A company was formed headed by Isaac de Razilly, d'Aulnay and others which brought 300 colonists to Acadia. Between 1639 and 1649 this group brought many others, and in 1651 other settlers were brought by Charles Etienne de la Tour. These settlers came for the most part from Rochelle, Saintonge and Poitau, a limited marshy area on the west coast of France in what is known today as the department of Vendee. It was from the settlers of this period 1632 to 1651 that most of the Acadians were descended. Not all of them remained at Port Royal, but gradually as this post became the center of conflict some of the settlers established farms in other sections of the peninsula notably in a section called Minas which was a prairie like country ending in sea marsh subject to tidal overflow. It was in this section that grew that settlement, Grand Pre, which is so intimately connected with Acadian history.

The orderly growth of the colony, however, was retarded by several factors. One grew out of the practice of France in awarding seigneuries, or large tracts of lands, to members and friends of the governing body of the country, the Hundred Associates, who engaged to settle the country, protect the settlers and support the missions. Among these seigneurs in Acadia were LaTour who had his settlement at the mouth of the St. John River; the other was de'Aulnay-Charnisay who had a fortified trading post on the Penobscot. The rivalry between these two soon flared into open warfare which continued until 1645, when, during the absence of LaTour, d'Aulnay captured Fort LaTour. The defense was bravely conducted by Lady LaTour, but without avail against a superior force; and that lady was compelled to witness the execution of her loyal and courageous supporters. It is said she died of grief because of this cruel act. D'Aulnay died in 1650 and LaTour became governor and lieutenant for the King in Acadia; and besides he married the widow of his late rival.

In the midst of these internal dissensions there arose a dispute over the boundary between Acadia and New England. Oliver Cromwell, then in power in England, though England and France were at peace, conceived the idea of seizing Acadia. Accordingly an English expedition sent out from Boston and led by Major Sedgwick and assisted by an English fleet captured Port Royal and Fort LaTour in 1654, laying claim to all of Acadia. In 1667 by the treaty of Breda, Acadia however was returned to France; but it was 1670 before M. de Grandfontaine came to assume official possession. This country now became a part of New France and was governed directly from Paris.

After the coming of de Grandfontaine in 1670 the population increased very rapidly, reaching 800 by 1686. Due to overcrowding at Port Royal and the frequent attacks on the fort there the inhabitants began to disperse to other more peaceful places in the country. It was a rich inhabitant of Port Royal, Pierre Terriau, who led the first settlers to Minas, known to us as Grand Pre. Associated with him were Claude and Antoine Landry and Rene LeBlanc, names celebrated in Acadian history. As new settlers came here to
this rich section, in order to reclaim the fertile land, they built dykes to keep out the tides with the result that this section became one of the richest in Acadia. Dotted with modest homes surrounded with orchards, cornfields and wide green meadows and pastures on which grazed thousands of black cattle, it presented a scene of serene happiness and contentment. It was in the midst of this peaceful community that grew the village of Grand Pre with the Church beloved by its people. Short distances away soon sprang up other similar settlements such as Beaubassin, les Mines, Chipody, Cobequid, and others in different parts of Acadia.

This peaceful expansion, however, was not to last long. In 1689 France and England engaged in a war which was to last with little intermission until 1713. In America both sides made use of their Indian allies and their acts of savagery were indescribable. Most of Acadia surrendered to the English in 1690 and in 1710 a garrison of less than 300 men at Port Royal, after a gallant defense of nineteen days, surrendered to an English force under Nicholson. Acadia thus passed out of the hands of the French for the last time and its citizens became subject to Great Britain. The terms of the surrender applied only to Port Royal and the land and people within a radius of 3 miles. The inhabitants of this area were given two years to depart into French territory binding themselves to allegiance for that time if they remained.

The Treaty of Utrecht signed between England and France in 1713 gave all of Acadia, except Louisburg to England. The Acadians were to have the right to leave with their movable effects within a year and move to any place they chose. Those who wished might remain as subjects of Great Britain and should enjoy the free exercise of their religion as far as the laws of the country allowed. They also had the privilege of selling their estates in the country if they wished to leave.

The period from 1710 to 1755 was the most trying and critical in the entire history of the Acadians. They had determined to leave the country rather than have to take the oath of allegiance to the English King, which might at any time compel them to take up arms against their own countrymen and Indian allies. They were seconded in this determination by the French in Canada who never lost hope of regaining Acadia. So they began to look for lands in French territory where they might settle, but found none as desirable as their own. Meantime the English governors began to temporize on giving them authority to move, one claiming lack of authority and another delaying until he could get specific directions from the Queen. The result was that before anyone realized it the one year of time granted for departure had expired, though the right to leave was renewed, but without the privilege of taking their movables or selling their lands. The dilemma in which they found themselves was a hard one: should they take the oath of allegiance and remain in their homes in a land of plenty or refuse the oath and migrate to strange lands without possessions of any kind.

Up until 1730 every English governor demanded of the Acadians that they take an unrestricted oath of allegiance; and steadfastly they declined to do so, at the same time explaining in polite and respectful language why they could and would not. Yet no English governor was willing to impose the extreme penalty for their failure to take the oath. The reason for this was that the English Lords of Trade, in charge of Colonial affairs, and he foreign ministers were very anxious to keep the Acadians within their territories and were unwilling to risk public censure by any extreme treatment. They argued too that to
transfer this large population, which in 1737 numbered about 8000, to French settlements in Canada would boost the French population in Canada to such proportions that it would become a serious threat to the English settlements in New England. Moreover the English garrisons in Acadia needed the large surplus of corn, wheat, cattle and fish produced by the Acadians to supply their needs. This view had been accepted by most of the governors sent to Acadia until this time.

Conditions were at this stage when in 1729 General Phillips for the second time became governor. On several occasions prior to this the Acadians through their delegations had offered to take the oath with a clause exempting them from bearing arms against their own countrymen and Indian allies. Moreover, they had come to realize that, in view of the indifference of the French government which had failed to come to their rescue so often in the past when they had been attacked and plundered, they could expect no effective assistance from that quarter. Consequently the Acadians now renewed their offer to take a restricted oath, at the same time professing and promising loyalty to the English sovereign. There is every reason to believe that this promise of loyalty was made in good faith, as on several occasions thereafter they refused help to the French even though threatened with reprisals for failure to do so. On more than one occasion too they actually gave warning to the English of hostile French movements. At any rate the offer to take a restricted oath was accepted by Governor Phillips and in this form it was administered to them. From this date the Acadians were known as "French Neutrals" and for almost 20 years they lived in comparative peace, prospered and multiplied.

This period of tranquility lasted until 1747 when France and England engaged in the Seven Years War, known in America as the French and Indian War. This was bitterly fought in America, in India and on the high seas. It was to end in 1763 with the loss by France of practically all her possessions in America. Grand Pre was captured by the French and then retaken by the English. It was during this struggle that the English governor Lawrence, panicked by the defeat of General Braddock at Fort Duquesne, and the efforts of the French to force the Acadians to fight on their side, decided to circumvent the Lords of Trade and the English ministry and visit his own personal vengeance on the Acadians by ordering their deportation in 1755. This nefarious act was engineered by Governor Lawrence alone in a most cunning and secret manner in direct contravention of the declared policy of the English government in London, which was kept in complete ignorance of it until its execution was almost entirely accomplished.

Governor Lawrence backed by his handpicked council apparently reached his decision to deport the Acadians in 1752. About this time a census revealed the Acadians to be the possessors of large numbers of horses, cattle and hogs. There is reason to believe that Lawrence coveted this wealth for his own enrichment. His plans for the deportation were prepared with the greatest secrecy to take effect after the Acadians had harvested their abundant crops. After he had laid careful plans to prevent their escape he first summoned delegations from the various settlements to his headquarters in Halifax which had been the seat of the provincial government since its founding by the English in 1749, where, upon their refusal to take the oath, he threw them in prison. Next he required them to deliver up their arms. He then sent his aids Monckton, Winslow, Murray and Handfield to Grand Pre and other centers to assemble in the churches on a given
date all males from ten years up. At the same time he sent squads of soldiers to the chief centers to corral the citizens and block all avenues of escape. Meantime he had ordered ships from Boston and other parts to assemble in the nearby harbors to carry the victims to selected destinations. His final act was to furnish each of his aids with a copy of his decree of expulsion, which was to be read to the assembled Acadians. During this period the Acadians were kept in complete ignorance of the fate that awaited them. Naturally there was great apprehension among them as they saw these mysterious preparations going on.

The blow first fell on the inhabitants of Grand Pre whose men had been summoned to assemble in the village church on September 5, 1755. There surrounded by his aids, many of them from New England, Winslow read to them their fate in these words: “That your Lands and Tenements, cattle of all kinds and Live Stock of all Sorts are Forfeited to the Crown with all other your Effects, Saving your money and Household Goods; and yourselves to be removed from this his province.”

Four hundred and eighteen men of Grand Pre and vicinity were assembled in the little church at Grand Pre to hear this decree. Winslow then declared them prisoners of the King, commanded them not to depart as he had soldiers there to enforce his order.

The decree fell on the Acadians as a bolt of lightning. While they had heard in previous years of proposals that they emigrate or possibly be deported, they had somehow come to hope and possibly believe that they would be permitted to remain in their beloved Acadia. Now that deportation actually faced them they were seized with consternation. Their petitions pledging loyalty and requesting that they be sent among their kinsmen and coreligionists were completely ignored. No wonder that fear and panic spread among them. The thought of leaving their homes, well stocked farms, their newly gathered harvest and especially their beloved church was almost more than they could bear.

By the seventh of September there were only five transports in the basin that served Grand Pre. On September 10 Winslow noticed that the young men among the prisoners under guard were getting restless and ordered that 50 of them be placed immediately on board of each of the five transports. Here we get a good idea of the heart-breaking scenes that were repeated all over Acadia as the victims were torn from their families to be transported to strange lands among alien peoples. As the two hundred fifty young men were lined up between files of soldiers with fixed bayonets the scene that followed is almost indescribable. Every evidence of grief and excitement became manifest—cries of anger, tears and pleading for mercy, stubborn refusal to march, calling of father to son and son to father, of brother to brother. Words are inadequate to describe such a scene. A great many people from the villages lined the road to the landing place a distance of a mile and a half away, and as the young men moved down the road between files of soldiers, praying, singing, and crying, many of the assembled people fell on their knees and prayed or followed with wailing and lamentation.

The scene which I have just described was repeated many times in 1755 and for several years afterward. The population of Nova Scotia in 1755 was well over 10,000. Of these about 6,000 were deported in that year. Some 3,000 had made their way into the country to the north, and many escaped to the woods. Since good land had become scarce family estates had been subdivided among older sons until the farms had grown smaller and smaller. As a consequence of this
condition many sons of Acadian families had left their homelands and settled along the north and east shores of the Bay of Fundy. As a result of this migration there were in 1755 probably another 10,000 Acadians living in neighboring provinces. After this first deportation it became the policy of subsequent governors to deport these unfortunate people until it is estimated that as many as 18,000 had been uprooted from their homes.

Since our interest centers in those deported from Grand Pre by Governor Lawrence let us look briefly at what fate awaited them. In the first place no sooner had they vacated their farms and homes than Winslow ordered the buildings to be burned, often in the presence of their owners. Winslow's own journal records the burning in one section of 255 houses, 276 barns, 155 outhouses, 11 mills and one church. Many others were burned later, so that the countryside presented a scene of utter desolation and destruction.

Having been snatched from their homes, the Acadians were crowded on ships in such fashion that they had to leave behind much of the household goods they had been told to bring with them. As we know many families were separated. The destinations of these ships were the ports of New Haven, Boston, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Charleston and Savannah. In only one instance had governors of these places been notified to prepare for their reception. Thus were they dumped among populations whose fear and hatred of everything French had been inflamed by the savagery that had been engendered by the French and Indian wars.

A few examples will give us a good idea of the tribulations that lay in store for these victims of hate, greed and intolerance. On November 19, 1755 three ships arrived at Philadelphia with 300 French Neutrals, all that survived of the 450 on board at the time of departure. Governor Morris in great alarm at first refused permission to disembark them. After many interviews, protests, and delays their landing was finally authorized. They had been on board the vessels for three months and were in a sad state. This group was never able to make satisfactory arrangements with the authorities for a settlement whereby the families might remain together, so they continued there a neglected group until death. One, however, named Charles LeBlanc, an old bachelor, acquired considerable property. At his death in 1828, his sister who resided elsewhere, tried to claim his property but failed because the Acadian record of her relationship had been destroyed. It was held for many years by the City of Philadelphia and was said to be of great value.

As soon as the group assigned to Georgia arrived, Governor Reynolds decreed their banishment. With his authorization they constructed roughly made boats, hoping to return to their native land by sea. With incredible courage and perseverance some reached New York and Massachusetts, but were stopped by an order of the pitiless Lawrence, their boats confiscated and they themselves again thrown into captivity. In 1756 another group of 76 from South Carolina tried the same thing but met with the same fate. Virginia positively refused to permit the landing of 1500 Acadians whom Lawrence sent to the shores of that province, and the captains were ordered to take them to England. From there many of them went to France where some of them remained and whence others were sent to French and Spanish colonies.

Of the twenty and odd ships consigned to New England ports four never reached their destination. Of those destined for Philadelphia, one perished at sea with its cargo of captives, two
others were driven by winds to San Domingo where the prisoners were left. Another ship containing 226 Acadians from Port Royal, among whom were found persons with the names of Boudreau, Dugas, Richard, Doucet and Landry, was captured by the exiles which it bore, who sailed into the St. John River on the shores of which they found refuge with a band of fugitives who had escaped deportation.

The Acadians whom we know most about and claim our greatest interest and admiration, are those who found a haven amongst their kinsmen in Louisiana. Just when the first Acadians reached Louisiana is not definitely known. There is a tradition in the Mouton family that Salvador Mouton reached St. James Parish in 1756 and settled there. It is probable that some of the refugees who were sent to Georgia and the Carolinas traversed the wilderness to the Mississippi and paddled down that stream to plant a settlement on its banks below Baton Rouge. It is quite certain that some came from Maryland by that route. The first official mention of their coming to Louisiana is found in a letter written by Commissaire Foucault February 28, 1765 in which he states that a few days previously several Acadian families numbering 193 persons had arrived from Santo Domingo. They were given assistance until they could choose lands in the Opelousas District. On May 4 eighty more Acadians arrived and were sent to the Attackapas District; and on May 13 forty-eight families were also sent to the Attackapas and Opelousas Districts. These families were housed in temporary camps until they could be assigned to lands by the commandants in charge. These newcomers were welcomed by the French and Spanish authorities and given every assistance in securing suitable farms on which to settle and start life anew. From 1765 to 1780 and especially from 1765 to 1788 there was a steady influx of these Acadians coming from San Domingo, Guiana, the ports of New England and from France where many of them had found temporary refuge. From these centers these industrious people gradually spread out into south and southwest Louisiana where they, for many years to come, formed the basic population of that area. By 1780 they numbered 2500; by 1790, 4000 and by 1900 between 40,000 and 50,000. Here in their new homes they engaged in farming and cattle raising on a large scale as they had done in Acadia; and diligently preserved their customs, traditions and language with the greatest fidelity.