Thomas Jefferson Didn't Trust Cajuns...

by Marc Unel

While the bicentennial spirit is still fresh in our minds, perhaps it would be good to examine the attitude of the great patriots of the revolution toward the French inhabitants of North America, those in Quebec and Acadia, and those in Louisiana.

In 1759 the British completed their conquest of eastern Canada, and the French settlers there became British subjects. In 1774, seeking to win the loyalty of these French colonists, England passed the Quebec Act, which basically gave the French in Canada freedom of religion and freedom to retain their language.

These might seem like small concessions today, but among patriots of the American Revolution the reaction was hysterical. Alexander Hamilton said that as a result of the Quebec Act "in time the Inquisition would be burning Protestants at the stake in Boston."

In Philadelphia the delegates to the First Continental Congress included the Quebec Act among the grievances they listed in their 1774 "Address to the People of Great Britain." The English parliament, they stated, had approved in Québec "a religion that has deluged throughout every part of the world." This attitude toward the French had certainly not changed by 1803 when the United States bought Louisiana and all its French colonists. The French and Acadian settlers in the area were considered to be unworthy and incapable of self-government.

Thomas Paine in particular had an abiding hatred for the Louisiana French. As early as the summer of 1803, even before the actual transfer of sovereignty, he suggested sending "thousands and tens of thousands in England and Ireland and also in Scotland" to settle in Louisiana so as to overwhelm the French population.

He even proposed that the name "Louisiana" be changed, so that the vestiges of French culture and influence could be permanently erased. Paine proposed that the people of Louisiana should be governed directly by Congress "till there be a sufficient number of American settlers to be trusted with constitutional powers."

Thomas Jefferson proposed many schemes to send thousands of English-speaking settlers to Louisiana, stating that half its present inhabitants were such that they could not be counted on in case of an invasion.

To govern the colony Thomas Jefferson sent William C.C. Claiborne. In 1804 Claiborne reported to James Madison that "the principles of a popular Government are utterly beyond the comprehension" of the Louisiana French. The representative system was described as "an enigma that at present bewilders them."

Jefferson specified that the majority of the seats in the first governing council should be held by English-speaking people, with the rest going to French and Spanish settlers. This ignored the fact that the English-speaking Americans made up only a tiny portion of the population.

The reaction to all this among the French-speaking inhabitants of Louisiana, who made up perhaps 90% of the population, was outrage. Joseph Dubreuil, a wealthy French-speaking planter, wrote in 1804: "It is not known here, after reading over Northern public papers, that the ceded territory has been described to congress as some sort of Tower of Babel, suffering from the confusion of tongues, and the Louisiana men stumped by despotism or ignorance, and therefore unable to elevate themselves for a long time to the heights of a free constitution."

That was the beginning. Today, after 174 years of attempts to abolish the French language and culture of Louisiana, the French language and the Acadian culture are still firmly established. And they will be here for the tricentennial.

...But Now We’re Loved in Washington

by Barry Ancialet

Louisiana French culture was represented in the official inaugural celebration for President Jimmy Carter during the week of January 18-21, 1977, in Washington, D.C.

The Beau Soleil Cajun band was invited to perform by Ralph Rinzler, director of the Smithsonian Institution’s folklife program, who extended the invitation through James Domengeaux, Chairman of CODOFIL. The young Cajun musicians were chosen to represent the French renaissance movement in Louisiana.

Beau Soleil performed every day during their stay in the nation’s capital. On Tuesday afternoon, Beau Soleil performed in the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts on the banks of the frozen Potomac.

That evening was filled with a double performance at the Folk/Ethnic dance and concert held in the National Visitor’s Center. The group was introduced by Alan Jabbour, director of the new Folklife Division of the Library of Congress.

On Wednesday, Beau Soleil brought the sounds of Cajun music to the hallowed halls of the Russell Senate Office Building during the official reception of the Louisiana Democratic Party.

On Thursday, after watching the inaugural ceremonies, Beau Soleil again appeared in the Senate Office Building, this time on invitation from Senators Russell Long and J. Bennett Johnston.

Friday brought a close to the sounds of Cajun music in Washington as Beau Soleil performed for the regional television program, "9 a.m., Washington." Later that evening the Cajun group closed the Folk/Ethnic concert program at the National Visitor’s Center, receiving several standing ovations and playing four encores.

The group joined Ralph Rinzler: noted musicologist Alan Lomax; Bass Lomax Horvitz, director of folk arts program of the National Endowment for the Arts; Kimmy Driftwood, composer of the song “Battle of New Orleans” and international folksinger Jimmy Collier in an emotional performance of "This Land is Your Land."

Beau Soleil is composed of Mike Doucet, on fiddle, BessyL Duhon, accordion, and Bruce McDonald, guitar, who are also members of the popular local dance band Coteau, and the Richard brothers, Sterling on guitar and Kenneth on mandolin, who gave an emotional performance of "I'm a Man of Constant Sorrow."

The group was composed of Mike Doucet, on fiddle, Bessyl Duhon, accordion, and Bruce McDonald, guitar, who are also members of the popular local dance band Coteau, and the Richard brothers, Sterling on guitar and Kenneth on mandolin, who gave an emotional performance of "I'm a Man of Constant Sorrow."