
Our Acadian Roots

Acadia had been, until this time, mostly left alone. The Acadians had been forced, several times, to take oaths of allegiance to Great Britain. Those who took this oath were allowed freedom of religion and were guaranteed protection so that they did not have to bear arms. That made them less of a threat and they were largely ignored by both the French and the English. They did not have to serve in military service, paid no taxes and were left to their own rule. With the settlement of Halifax and the influx of English settlers, mostly military, this changed the makeup of Acadia. You can imagine what happened to Nova Scotia when it exploded from about 250 settlers to over eight thousand.¹

ACADIAN HISTORY

In this work, you will find much on Acadian history. Although the Bélanger family established itself in Quebec and stayed there until its migration to New Brunswick, the Acadian story has much to do with its later generations. The Bélangers married Acadian women and, although the Michaud and Gagnon lines were Quebecois, the Cormier, Damboise, Cyr, Leblanc and Hebert Acadian maternal lines are an important part of the more recent history of the Bélangers. I have attempted to present a parallel view of what was happening on the Acadian front during the time when the Quebec Bélanger story was unfolding so that the reader might have a feeling for the Acadian history which later became such an important part of our heritage. If you find that there is a lot of Acadian history intermingled with this unfolding story, it is done with a specific purpose of informing you that your 20th century heritage is based on Acadian as well as Quebecois roots.

It is said that the Quebecois were a hard working people who plunged their lives into their work and were unconcerned about anything else. The Acadians, on the other hand, were enterprising and entrepreneurs. While the Quebecois made a good union man and was happy to have work, the Acadian was always pushing for something better and made a good business man. Let it not be lost, if one believes the analogy between Quebecois and Acadian, that Quebecois men married to Acadian women were destined to be businessmen due to the genuine support and constant prodding from their Acadian wives. It has been said that, behind every Quebecois business man is a hard working Acadian wife. Having settled in New Brunswick, a Quebecois could not but be influenced by Acadian lifestyle, philosophy and upbringing. A transplanted Quebecois, like our grandfather Lucien, could not avoid the Acadian culture which surrounded him and his children who grew up in its midst. Lucien's children mostly married into Acadian families which accounts for much of our Acadian history.

ACADIA & PORT ROYAL

In 1603 a small group of French merchants formed a company to which the King of France granted a monopoly for all the fur trade in the Gulf of St Lawrence region. As soon as winter broke, they left France on a three month crossing to the new world. In early summer of 1604, their vessels

¹ About 1,000 more were scattered in Cape Breton and Prince Edward Island and in present day New Brunswick

approached the southern end of Nova Scotia (this was called Acadia by the French) and established a settlement on an island at the mouth of the St Croix River. Many did not survive the tremendous chore of building homes and growing enough food to endure the coming winter. The first winter claimed many lives from scurvy because food, good drinking water² and shelter were scarce. In the Spring of 1605 these settlers moved across the Bay of Fundy and established a permanent community called Port Royal. Port Royal was the beginning of Canadian Acadian history. The settlers built a

mill and planted gardens with the seeds and plants brought in from France. One must realize the sacrifice these people made by saving these seeds and plant through the winter famine.

Samuel de Champlain was the community's first leader and he established "The Order of Good Cheer". This was a way of life where everyone in the community worked together as one big family (possibly the first "Canadian commune") and took turns at preparing the food. When it came to be your turn to gather and prepare the food, you wore a golden chain. Meals were eaten as one huge family and were accompanied by song, stories and ceremony. In this way, the new settlers practiced their heritage and handed down their homeland customs to their children. This practice not only made for very efficient use of time and material but made the community very close knit with little room for dissension.

The main purpose for making the ocean voyage, in the first place, was to trap and export furs. Since Port Royal was really not in the deep woods and not conducive to the trapping of furs, Champlain went further inland. In 1608 he established a settlement in what is today Quebec City. This location was not only ideal for the "Rendezvous" that the trappers needed but was a good location for a strong defense because of the narrowing of the river with its high bluffs.

In 1613, Port Royal was attacked by a raiding party from Virginia and destroyed. Thus Port Royal passed into the hands of the British. In 1621, a Scottish nobleman reestablished Port Royal and changed the name from Acadia to Nova Scotia, which meant New Scotland. The French regained the territory in 1632 and for the next three hundred and fifty years the Acadian French participated in the establishment and expansion of Canadian history. Acadia switched between French and British rule many times during the period following 1632.

In 1629 war broke out between the French and English and this lasted until 1632. Every time France and England went to war in Europe, the English in the American colonies would send contingents of men to attack the Acadian population. The peace minded Acadians endured many of these unprovoked attacks from the English colonists. That explains the old adage that, "if you were a Catholic in Boston you could be shot without cause" and the reverse was also true about noncatholics in Canada. Although carried off by the British, Champlain returned to Quebec after peace had been restored and remained there until his death in 1635. When Champlain returned to Quebec, he found that the wars had decimated the population which now was only about one hundred.

NEUTRAL ACADIANS

The Acadians had always resisted taking oaths of allegiance to England and this made them known as the "neutral French". Because many of them had taken this oath, it made them unpopular with the French. So, these neutral peoples were not thought of as a threat by either side but, at the same time, were not considered loyal by either. It put the Acadians in the middle of the struggle that developed. New France kept trying to instigate the Acadians and the Indians against the English and the English were always fearful that the Acadians would declare their loyalty to the French. Without the English

² Even the fresh water rivers were salty due to the tides and the tremendous ocean backup into fresh water outlets

government's knowledge, the governor of Nova Scotia, Gabriel Dangeac, decided to solve the problem by removing the Acadians from their homes and force them from the colony.

1755

The expulsion of the Acadians began in the summer of 1755. Troops marched into the villages and the people were called to be told of their fate. They were asked to assemble in the churches and other places of assembly on the ruse that they were to receive special instruction. No weapons were allowed in the churches and in the assembly halls so they were left outside. Once inside, the villagers were unarmed and defenseless. Ships had been prepared and hundreds were forced onto them without warning. Families were destroyed and no attention was paid to whether one was loyal or not. The Acadians were scattered from Salem Massachusetts to Savannah Georgia and to France and England. There were about 7,000 Acadians deported by the order of Colonel Charles Lawrence and between 1755 and 1762 several thousand more were deported each year. It is odd to find that such good records of the numbers³ deported were kept.

It is odd to find that such good records of the numbers⁴ deported were kept.

1. 1500 were deported to Virginia
2. 450 were deported to Pennsylvania
3. 2000 sent to Massachusetts
4. 1027 bound for South Carolina but some departed in Boston
5. 900 to Connecticut
6. 250 to Maryland
7. 450 to Georgia

No Acadians were deported from Acadia directly to Louisiana. The old story of Evangeline which relates an exile to New Orleans is fictional but based on facts of the deportation. Any Acadians who ended up in Louisiana got there after having been deported to the French Indies, France or England and then found their way to New Orleans.

Upon their arrival at the ports where they were "dumped" off, they quickly assembled in small groups to attempt at recapturing their lives and regrouping their families. They were not wanted by the people among which they were deposited and they were forbidden to form large groups. This forced them into small clusters among which an information pipeline was formed to pass word along as to who was where and what was happening. This news highway soon became highly developed with information being passed among the colonies and by ship's sailors to other parts of the continent. It can be said, with a high degree of reliability, that, from the day of deposit on strange shores, the Acadians continually attempted at regrouping and going back to the homeland they had been exiled from.

By Spring of 1756 an underground highway leading north (perhaps the model for the Negro underground railroad during the American civil war) had been established with Acadians skirting the coastline of the Carolinas, Virginia, Maryland, Delaware and New Jersey. Some were intercepted in New York and Massachusetts where their goods and water craft were confiscated and they were sent to the interior of those states. This did not dissuade them as they continued to migrate North toward a

³ The Acadian Miracle by Dudley J LeBlanc, published by Evangeline Publishing Co., Lafayette, Louisiana

⁴ The Acadian Miracle by Dudley J LeBlanc, published by Evangeline Publishing Co., Lafayette, Louisiana

homeland that no longer wanted them. These activities resulted in the State of Massachusetts passing a law which said that French Neutrals living in large groups was a danger to the colony and, when that happened, they were to be dispersed into small clusters among many communities. A second law made it illegal for Acadians to cross the town lines of the communities they were sent to which did not allow them to leave those towns and therefore restricted their movements. Even these laws did not discourage the constant attempts to go North.

By 1763 the King of France had been informed of the fate that had been dealt to the Acadian population. During the negotiations of the Treaty of Paris, the French King claimed the Acadians as his loyal subjects. As a result, an announcement was made that he would send boats to gather the Acadians and bring them to France. The highly developed information highway spread this news like lightning and this was the reason Acadians disregarded any laws restricting their movement. They left their temporary homes and traveled toward Acadia.

A group of Acadians, led by Jacques Vigneault, hired a ship and departed from Boston and, on October 1, 1763, they landed on the shores of Miquelon Island. These Acadians had the surnames of Vigneault, Hebert, Cyr, Cormier, Bourgeois, Theriault and Leblanc. This group was followed by another with the names of Arsenault, Bertrand, Blanchard, Boudreau, Bourgeois, Chiasson, Comeau and Cormier. More groups followed carrying back the names of Beliveau, Blanchard, Boudreau, Chiasson, Comeau, Deveau, Doucet, Lapierre, Bonnevie, Brault, Bourg, Hebert, Gaudet, Gousman, Nuirat, Onel, Poirier, Damours, Dugas, Landry, Gaudet, Gauthier, Guedry, Goguen, Guibault, Moise, Pitre, Richard and Renaud dit Provençal.

All of this history of the Acadians should give the reader the feeling of community and togetherness that the Acadians developed. One does not miss something nearly enough until one has suffered the loss of it. These terrible ordeals and times that Acadians lived through forced them to suffer the loss of family, family records, their heritage and homeland. The survivors and all who finally came back to Acadia, and later settled further West in Maine and New Brunswick, had an inbred instinct for family and closeness of community never before shared by anyone. This can be seen even in the 20th century in settlements in New Hampshire, Connecticut and other states. One after another, families joined those who ventured to establish themselves in other territories until, more often than not, the entire family was again reunited at the new location.

This Acadian heritage is important as it plays a great part in the lives of those who settled Van Buren, Maine, Grand Falls, New Brunswick and the entire St John Valley. The Belanger family, being researched here, is very rooted in the Acadian heritage. Although the Belangers themselves connect directly to Quebec, the more recent generations married in Acadian country and to Acadian women. The Acadian history is our history.