

### Discovering Acadie / Acadia

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Do you have ancestors from Acadia (the Canadian Maritime Provinces)? Perhaps you're just curious about Longfellow's poem *Evangeline*, or you're wondering what the Cajuns have to do with Acadia. Regardless of the source of your curiosity, the history of the French in the Maritimes is worth exploring as an important part of the heritage of all of us who share French descent. Also, this is a gorgeous area, and the scallops alone are worth the trip – Digby sea scallops are huge and juicy!

I just returned in August [2008] from visiting a small part of it, the north shore of Nova Scotia, called The Evangeline Trail, and I'll pass on a bit of what I learned. If you're driving from Maine, you'll be arriving by ferry at Yarmouth, N.S. We, however, flew in to Halifax from Chicago and rented a car. The airport is easy to exit and driving in Nova Scotia is a cinch. We headed west to Grand Pré.

My companion, Jacqueline C. Tessier Keller, and I had planned this trip so that she could learn more about her Acadian and Mi'kmaw Indian roots.<sup>1</sup> And I had jumped at the chance to see Port-Royal, site of Champlain's 1605 fort, where my ancestor Louis Hébert first arrived in North America in 1606. We both found what we were looking for.

#### Grand Pré

By luck, we visited Grand Pré on Acadia Day, August 15. Mass was being held on the parkland grounds near the famous statue of Evangeline and the replica church.<sup>2</sup> There were Acadians in traditional dress singing their anthem and other old French songs. And there was even an "Evangeline" and a "Gabriel," one of several couples chosen yearly from among the worthy teens in each Acadian community. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is held in high esteem here for raising the consciousness of Acadians, Cajuns, and the world at large to a heritage that was nearly lost.

Although Longfellow's *Evangeline* is not a true story, it captures the pathos of a tragedy which is starkly true and still burns in the souls of Acadians and Cajuns everywhere. For it is the story of the crushing of a culture --*Le Grand Dérangement* – the banishment in 1755 of thousands of peaceful settlers and the destruction of their property. Many families were separated and many died. Those who survived either suffered at sea until dumped along the eastern seaboard from Maine to Georgia or were left with no resources in England or France. Some eventually worked their way south to French Louisiana where they became known as Cajuns. Later, some were able to return to Québec or Acadia (now Nova Scotia and the other Maritime Provinces), but they could not reclaim the lands their ancestors had improved with dykes. They had to scrape a living from the sea in the rocky areas the English didn't want. Their original lands had been claimed by American Loyalists and settlers from Great Britain.

#### Annapolis Royal

You would expect a lot of bitterness from the descendents of those who survived, but we instead were impressed by the conciliatory stance of our Acadian guide, Alan Melanson. We met him at our next stop,

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<sup>1</sup> The "Mi'kmaq", also called "Souriquois" by the French, is an eastern Algonquian-speaking people who mainly lived on the resources of the sea. "Mi'kmaw" is the adjective or denotes an individual. "Mi'kmaq" is the noun referring to more than one Mi'kmaw person or to the nation. W.P. Kerr, *Port-Royal Habitation The Story of the French and Mi'kmaq at Port-Royal 1604-1613*, (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing Ltd., 2005).

<sup>2</sup> The replica church is used as a museum. There is also a large interactive museum near these grounds with many informative displays and a video explaining *Le Grand Dérangement*. All offer both English and French. The gift shop sells many books, in both languages, which are hard to find elsewhere.

Annapolis Royal, the charming World Heritage town southwest of Grand Pré, where we stayed. Of course, he agreed that the deportation was handled callously and deplorably, but he could see why the English felt they needed to displace the Acadians. He explained that England had a tenuous hold on Halifax throughout the eighteenth century and had been attacked numerous times by New France. Although the Acadians claimed neutrality and promised that they would be loyal subjects if only they would not be forced to kill fellow Frenchmen, the English questioned this when they found Acadians among the soldiers of New France they were fighting. The Acadians countered that they had only fought the English when forced on pain of death to do so by the French. The outnumbered English believed, however, that the only chance for the survival of their colony was to replace the French settlers with English ones.

Alan Melanson showed us a rare survivor of those battles in Annapolis Royal. It is Fort Anne, considered as Canada's oldest national historic site. This star-shaped fort was originally built by the French in 1630, but it was taken over by the English in 1710. The only French-built parts that remain date to 1702: the powder magazine and the rolling earthen embankments. The Officers' Garrison houses the original deportation notice which was read to the astonished Acadians of Grand Pré on September 5, 1755. The men had been ordered to the church that day where they were informed that all Acadians would be expelled forthwith.

The story of Alan's family is one bright spot in a sea of tragic stories. Many ships left Acadia for various ports between 1755 and 1762. Alan's ancestors, the Melansons, were held below decks on one of them. Conditions were life-threatening in the dank hold, so six men at a time were hoisted up to the deck for air. As they rose, the previous six were lowered. At just the right moment, the twelve rose up together and overwhelmed the crew. They took over the ship and sailed it to Québec.<sup>3</sup> The patriarch died there, but his sons lived to eventually return to Nova Scotia where their descendants remain a prominent family. Both Alan and his twin, Wayne, are community historians and leaders. Intrepid returning families like this have founded several communities on the north-western shores of Nova Scotia known as the Municipality of Clare. Here the Acadian flag flies, and a patois of old French with a smattering of Mi'kmaq remains the dominant language.

There are still one or two buildings standing in Annapolis Royal that date to French times, but most are stately 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorians. They have been beautifully preserved (many as B&Bs) with the encouragement of the dedicated historical society, headed by Alan and his wife Durline. Both lead informative and entertaining walking tours.<sup>4</sup> Although this is a small town, it has more historic landmarks than anywhere else in Canada. Also, see the beautiful Historic Gardens in Annapolis Royal with their replica Acadian house and dyke remnants. The clever Acadians, mainly from Brittany, had used dyke-building techniques from Old France to keep back the sea and reclaim the land. Now, no longer on land that can be farmed, they have successfully switched to fishing, shipbuilding, and mink ranching.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> [Note from Suzanne Sommerville: The ship was the *Pembroke* and one of my ancestors, Marie Melanson, daughter of Jean and Marie Joseph Lanoue, is believed to have been on board. Source: Michael B. Melanson, *Melanson – Melançon, The Genealogy of an Acadian and Cajun Family* (Dracut, Massachusetts: Lanesville Publishing, 2004) (1041 pages), pp. 32-33 and pp. 68-69.]

<sup>4</sup> If the name "Durline" doesn't sound particularly French, it's because she was born a Texan with no French ties. Many years ago, she led a tour from Dallas to Annapolis Royal. As soon as she set eyes on Alan, she knew she had just met her husband. She also knew she only had thirty minutes to convince him he had just met his wife! Many letters and phone calls later, he too was convinced. This happy couple shares a passion for history that is infectious.

<sup>5</sup> For more details, see Andrew Hempstead, *Moon Handbooks Nova Scotia*, (California: Avalon Publishing Group, Inc., 2006). For more about the deportation, see this historic novel by a descendent, R.W. "Ben" Benoit, *Surviving Damnation* (Denver: Kimko On Demand Printing, Second Edition 2007) [www.benoitbooks.com](http://www.benoitbooks.com)

Although our trip was limited to this small area of Nova Scotia, there are many other Acadian communities and historic sites to visit throughout The Maritimes.

### Université Sainte-Anne

My fellow traveler, Jacqueline, learned a lot about how her ancestors lived here in harmony with the Indians with whom they sometimes intermarried. It is said that about 15% of all Acadians have Indian heritage, but she also hoped to see specific records. For this, Alan sent her to Centre Acadien at Université Sainte-Anne, the only Francophone university in Nova Scotia. It's located a few miles southwest of Annapolis Royal at Church Point. Here Jacqueline received the gracious assistance of a student who provided some relevant genealogical materials. Jacqueline had already done a lot of research, but she had hit some dead ends. The student suggested some resources (mainly based on the work of Stephen White), and he gave her a tip about marriages that show a wife with no last name. These, he said, were probably Indian women. Jacqueline was finally zeroing in on a possible source of her Indian Haplogroup A2 mtDNA.<sup>6</sup>

### Port Royal

Across the Annapolis Basin from Annapolis Royal is the original site of Champlain's Port-Royal, which I was eager to see. This is the oldest European settlement north of Saint Augustine, Florida. On the way, we stopped by the Melanson settlement, an archaeological National Historic Site. This is the family compound settled by Alan Melanson's family in 1664. It was occupied continuously by the family for ninety years until the deportation. Like all the other Acadian homes, it was burned to the ground in 1755. All one can see now are depressions in the ground where the structures once stood, but there are artifacts on display at Fort Anne.

Although the brutality of *Le Grand Dérangement* cannot be forgiven and should not be forgotten, healing was promoted by the acts of two Americans of British descent: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow with his sensitive poem, mentioned above, and also Harriette Taber Richardson of Cambridge Mass. She felt strongly that the English were responsible for the destruction of Port-Royale (*sic*), so their descendents should take on the responsibility of recreating it. In 1930, she formed the Associates of Port-Royale to raise the necessary funds for the project. She struggled to keep the dream alive during the Great Depression, and it was finally realized in 1939. Fortunately, Champlain had left detailed plans of its architecture, even as to room function and who stayed where, and this replica is an outstanding rendering of it. Built by master shipbuilders in 1938-39 using seventeenth century building techniques, it is a work of art.

How satisfying to visit the replica of Louis Hébert's room and see the herbs and tools he would have used as the colony's apothecary. Here he mixed his herbs nearly four hundred years ago in a desperate attempt to save the colony's good friend, Membertou, the M'ikmaw chief, who nonetheless passed away on September 18, 1611.<sup>7</sup>

An artist's depiction of Louis Hébert at Port Royal shows a man well past his prime. He was, however, only about thirty-one when he arrived.<sup>8</sup> Sitting in the dining room, I could imagine him and his fellow

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<sup>6</sup> At website <http://centreacadien.usainteanne.ca> can be ordered one's Acadian genealogy for a nominal fee. As Jacqueline sorts out her genealogy, she hopes to submit a follow-up to this article in 2009.

<sup>7</sup> W.P. Kerr, p. 73-4.

<sup>8</sup> Armelle Fournier, "Louis Hébert Notre Ancêtre Our Ancestor," *Le Fournier*, Vol. 4, #2-3, June 2002 and November 2002. This excellent, bilingual biography places his birth around 1575. For more about the founding of

adventurers toasting one another during their grand banquets. And looking out at the bay, I could picture the performance of the first play on Canadian soil, Mark Lescarbot's *Le Théâtre de Neptune*. What a fine time was had here by *l'Ordre de Bon Temps*, the first New World expression of *laissez les bon temps rouler*: Let the good times roll. Later, in 1617, having learned a lot about wilderness survival at Port-Royal, Louis would bring his family to Québec to become the first settlers there and the ancestors of about a third of all French-Canadians.



Susan Colby in Louis Hébert's room at Port-Royal, Nova Scotia, August 2008. Photos by Jackie Keller.

Jacqueline and I retraced his steps, but by train instead of water, as we took the excellent Canadian Via Rail from Halifax to Québec City for the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Québec. The beginnings of the French story in North America were becoming coherent now that I had traced the histories and explored the lands of these two separate and very different colonies.



Reproduction of mural of Acadians by Claude Picard – “Early Acadian – 1635-1755”

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Acadia and about Champlain and Louis Hébert, see the excellent new biography, David Hackett Fischer, *Champlain's Dream*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008.