

A People Surviving Their Exile: The Effects of the French and Indian War and the Great Upheaval on the Acadian Population

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Acadians refer to the deportation of their ancestors from Nova Scotia as the ‘*Grand Dérangement*,’ or the Great Upheaval: it was a forcible relocation of the Acadian people residing in the modern Maritime provinces, and the subsequent destruction of their farms and settlements to ensure the permanence of the migration. This deportation was carried out by British governors of the territory—which had been ceded by France in 1713—who felt threatened by the presence of the French ‘neutrals,’ as they were referred to, for their involvement with Britain’s enemies. In reality, the Acadian residents attempted to maintain their neutrality even as Britain and France became embroiled in the French and Indian War in 1754, but their staunch refusal to ally with the British colonial forces spurred the commencement of their deportation for the ostensible safety of Nova Scotia. However, even as the Acadian people were dispersed across North America and Europe—often victims of sickness and death during the journeys—their resolve to rebuild their communities and preserve their rich culture proved to hold out. Despite the loss of land, disruption of culture, and fragmentation of communities that Acadians experienced as a result of the French and Indian War and the Great Upheaval, their society was not irrevocably eradicated in the years following their forced migration.

The historical boundaries of Acadia included modern-day Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and portions of both Quebec and Maine; as Acadians were expelled from their traditional lands by British forces, it marked a widespread loss that was not easily salvageable.¹ For over a century prior to their deportation, Acadian families spread across the land

¹ Dean Jobb, *The Acadians: A People’s Story of Exile and Triumph* (Mississauga: John Wiley & Sons Canada, Ltd., 2005), 13-4.

in search of fertile soil to support their agrarian lifestyle. They co-existed with Mi'kmaq populations in the same areas—making use of different resources and benefitting from mutual trade—and mastered the construction of dikes, which enabled them to establish communities on previously deserted marshlands that could now be reclaimed.² In 1755, hoping to minimize the presence of Acadians in the area and curtail their alliances with enemy Mi'kmaq and French forces, Nova Scotian governor Charles Lawrence ordered their removal from the territory in what would become an eight-year process.³ The result was disastrous for the former residents of the land; in the time during the Acadian exile that unfolded, the most fertile farmland was divided amongst New England Planters and other subjects of Britain who migrated to the area. This was made possible by destructive actions carried out by the British soldiers in Nova Scotia throughout 1755; namely, the mass burning of all Acadian settlements and structures scattered throughout the territory, which cleared the landscape for English settlers to move in. It also deterred Acadian exiles from returning to their homelands, as they would quickly discover the utter lack of resources and shelter necessary to sustain life throughout the seasons.⁴ The Acadian people lost their traditional settlements and lands during the Great Upheaval as a result of British-French conflicts, and it was British officials who prevented their return through policies and military action.

The deportation that occurred due to the war between Britain and France not only separated the Acadians from their cultural lifestyles but forcibly exposed them to the unfamiliar societies of the British colonies, which created tensions between the locals and the deportees. The Acadians were descendants of French Catholic settlers who travelled to the New World in the seventeenth

² Barbara Le Blanc, *Postcards from Acadie: Grand-Pré, Evangeline & The Acadian Identity* (Kentville: Gaspereau Press, 2003), 27.

³ Geoffrey Gilbert Plank, *An Unsettled Conquest: The British Campaign Against the Peoples of Acadia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 140.

⁴ A.J.B. Johnston, "The Acadian Deportation in a Comparative Context: An Introduction," *Journal of the Royal Nova Scotia Historical Society*, 10 (2007): 117.

century, and this made both their language and their religion distinctly different from those of the English Protestant settlers surrounding them. For this reason, Governor Lawrence of Nova Scotia believed that the loyalty of the Acadian people remained with the French; thus, as the French and Indian War became a significant issue in 1755, the deportation was seen as necessary for the protection of the British territory.⁵ The Acadians were sent by ship to nine of the thirteen British colonies to the south of Nova Scotia; here, nearly every subject was both English and Protestant. The Acadian exiles struggled with the stark contrast of their identity and, throughout the colonies, faced heavy discrimination as a result of their ancestral language and religion.⁶ This social alienation stemmed from the upheaval the Acadians faced through the deportation measures of the eighteenth century and the attempts of the British colonies during their war with the French to diminish the Acadian culture and lifestyle.

The sheer societal instability that the conflicts between Britain and France—and, therefore, the Great Upheaval—inflicted on Acadian communities was a significant factor leading to their widespread collapses and dissolutions in the mid-eighteenth century. The territory of Acadia was passed between France and Britain several times in its history; in 1749, during its time as a British territory, Halifax was established as its capital.⁷ The consolidation of British power in Acadia was extremely worrying for locals, who began migrating in large numbers to neighbouring French territories in attempts to avoid what they believed to be intensifying antipathy between the two massive colonial powers in the area. Over six thousand Acadians had already abandoned their ancestral homes in favour of safety by the time the Great Upheaval began in 1755, an indication of worsening conditions in the area.⁸ In the eight years following the order for involuntary removal,

⁵ Jean Daigle, *The Acadians of the Maritimes: Thematic Studies* (Moncton: Centre d'études acadiennes, 1982), 45.

⁶ André Magord, *The Quest for Autonomy in Acadia* (Brussels: P.I.E Peter Lang S.A., 2009), 45.

⁷ Bona Arsenault, *History of the Acadians* (Saint-Laurent: Fides, 1994), 108.

⁸ Arsenault, *History of the Acadians*, 113-4.

over ten thousand Acadians were taken from Nova Scotia, a number that represents the majority of the population residing in the territory at the time.⁹ Upon reaching the British colonies, countless communities and families were separated due to colony laws that first scattered the Acadian refugees into numerous townships, then prohibited transit between these settlements.¹⁰ These measures effectively destroyed the kinship ties between Acadian families and dismantled any sense of collective belonging that the displaced peoples might have felt upon being forcibly taken from their lands. The dispersion of Acadians throughout the British colonies was a pointed tactic to prevent families from returning to their homes; as a consequence, the society in Acadia that had existed prior to 1755 was dismantled and the British war aim of removing the Acadian threat was achieved.

Despite the efforts of the British colonies to prevent Acadians from moving back to their land as a consequence of the French and Indian War, its end brought freedom of migration to many families. The war ended in 1763, by which point the Acadian diaspora had been separated from the historical lands of Acadia for eight years. Although the Acadian peoples were now free to emigrate from the British colonies, returning to their previous homesteads in Nova Scotia proved impossible due to the ongoing presence of the New England Planters and other English settlers who had been granted the farmland in the wake of the Great Upheaval.¹¹ Instead, the land claimed by Acadians in the years after their exile was scattered throughout Nova Scotia and New Brunswick in less desirable areas.¹² Many Acadians also sought land in the southern territory of Louisiana, which belonged to the French prior to 1762; by the time Acadian migrants arrived in 1765, it was a colony of Spain and much more tolerant of French Catholic settlers than the British

⁹ Daigle, *The Acadians of the Maritimes*, 153-4.

¹⁰ Jobb, *The Acadians*, 148.

¹¹ Johnston, "The Acadian Deportation in a Comparative Context," 117.

¹² Arsenault, *History of the Acadians*, 232-3.

colonies were during the period of exile.¹³ Although the effects of the French and Indian War and the actions of its participants prevented the Acadian people from regaining their traditional lands in the modern Maritime region, the lifting of their exile in 1763 allowed the Acadians to establish new homesteads in other areas of North America in a display of perseverance.

As Acadian families pursued new lands in which to settle and rebuild communities, their central cultures and lifestyles adapted to their new environments after nearly a decade of suppression in the British colonies. As minorities during their exile from Nova Scotia—ethnically, linguistically, and religiously—the Acadians experienced discrimination and a heavily reduced ability to foster their traditional living practices.¹⁴ Throughout the colonies, Acadian children faced assimilation as indentured servants of English patrons to support their families.¹⁵ However, once these families were freed from exile after the war's end and able to migrate to new lands—primarily in Nova Scotia and Louisiana—their identities as Catholic French farmers were able to flourish as they had prior to the disorder of the Great Upheaval's deportations. In Nova Scotia and New Brunswick, the former exiles adapted to a fishing and mercantile lifestyle as British immigrants settled the majority of the farmland in the area.¹⁶ The Acadians who travelled to Louisiana spread across the colony and established farms, where they abandoned their traditional crops of flax and oats in favour of cotton and corn. Orchards were planted in a manner reminiscent of those left behind in Acadia. Their former method of house-building proved inefficient against the cycling southern rains and heat; thus, the Acadians modified their dwellings to suit their environment. By 1812, the 'Cajun' identity was well under development, which fundamentally

¹³ Jobb, *The Acadians*, 188.

¹⁴ Magord, *The Quest for Autonomy in Acadia*, 45.

¹⁵ Jobb, *The Acadians*, 149.

¹⁶ Le Blanc, *Postcards from Acadie*, 48-9.

incorporated the Great Upheaval and the Acadian exile within the common history of its people.¹⁷ It was the French and Indian War that led to the exile and eventual freedom of the Acadians scattered throughout North America, enabling them to establish renewed cultures centred around the lands that they would finally end up settling in.

Although communities were quickly founded in the aftermath of the Acadian exile, the isolating effect of the French and Indian War was such that the return to any semblance of a cohesive societal structure was a slow—but still inevitable—process for every Acadian settlement that emerged after 1763. The communities created in the former Acadian lands proved to be sparsely populated and scattered far apart by the design of the New Brunswick and Nova Scotian governments, which made gatherings and trade between Acadians significantly more difficult.¹⁸ Nevertheless, as Acadians were politically legitimized and their identity was reinforced over several decades, their communities grew and became strengthened. Twenty years after Acadians returned to their homeland in the northern British colonies, laws were passed to grant Catholics the right to establish schools; prior to this, Acadian communities were largely uneducated, and the newfound ability to organize schooling brought the settlements together under a common front.¹⁹ Similarly, the gradual resurgence of the Catholic church in the northern British colonies was essential for creating official institutions within Acadian communities throughout the area. The French and Indian War stifled the activity of Catholics—who were primarily French—for several decades throughout Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. By the early nineteenth century, however, missionaries had been dispatched to Acadian communities for several years already and proper dioceses were later established. The Catholic church helped to consolidate the activities of Acadian

¹⁷ Jobb, *The Acadians*, 200-3.

¹⁸ Daigle, *The Acadians of the Maritimes*, 49.

¹⁹ Daigle, *The Acadians of the Maritimes*, 53.

communities and brought them together through their religious faith, an endeavour that was not possible during the war and subsequent exile.²⁰ After the French and Indian War dispersed Acadian communities across North America, the return of Acadians to their homelands allowed for an increased array of institutions and rights within their settlements over a slow period of enactment.

The Great Upheaval, born from the French and Indian War and the fears of the British units who coexisted with the Acadian people, fragmented every existing Acadian community along with its society. As a result, however, a new collective society was formed through the experiences of those who were exiled and their discovery of new lands and customs in the Upheaval's aftermath. This aspect of the Acadian deportation is vital for understanding the subsequent communities that congregated across North America; although the traditional Acadian lands were lost as a result of the war, new lands were established as Acadian territory and cultures then flourished from these foundations, reinvigorated with change. With potential future research dedicated to the long-term effects of the French and Indian War on these reinvented communities founded in the wake of the Acadian deportation and exile, the full picture of Acadia's displacement and redistribution will be complete.

²⁰ Daigle, *The Acadians of the Maritimes*, 53-5.

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