

Cajuns - Part II

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Migration to Louisiana

After nearly a decade of wandering, one group of Acadian exiles found its way to Louisiana, which was then a Spanish Colony. Seeing the Acadians as potential buffers against encroachment by British settlers, the Spanish welcomed the exiles. Louisiana's colonial government provided them with land, livestock, tools, and other necessities and settled them in the fertile, semitropical region known as Attakapas in the south-central part of the state. These first Acadians in Louisiana wrote to other distant groups of exiles, providing glowing descriptions of their new homes. (Although a largely nonliterate people, some Acadians were able to read and write, and those who could not were able to find someone to read or write for them.)

Stirred by these letters, other exiles made their way to Louisiana during the ensuing decades, arriving from Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, and France, among other places. When the colony's Spanish governor, Antonio de Ulloa, forced some of the exiles to settle on the Mississippi River near present-day Natchez, Mississippi, far from their Attakapas kin, the Acadians marched on New Orleans with other discontented colonists and overthrew the governor in the Insurrection of 1768.

About 3,000 Acadian exiles eventually made their way to Louisiana. Like their ancestors, these exiles remained subsistence farmers, producing only enough material goods to survive. Within a few generations, however, a small number of young Acadians adopted the South's plantation system and its brutal institution of slavery. By the 1810s, the Acadians had evolved from a single group of poor subsistence farmers into three distinct groups. First, there was a small group of wealthy, slave-owning cotton and sugar planters, who would later be called "genteel

Acadians.” In addition, there was a small group of middle-class Acadians made up of farmers and artisans, including blacksmiths, carpenters, and bricklayers. Members of this group might own a few slaves but certainly not as many as planters. Finally, a very large number of Acadians continued to labor as subsistence farmers, working their land without the assistance of slaves. While upper- and middle-class Acadians increasingly adopted the customs of the region’s elite French Creoles and new Anglo-American settlers, the poor Acadians preserved the values and traditions of their ancestors. It was from this mass of poor Acadians that the Cajun people would spring.