

## **Acadians, The First French Settlers in Atlantic Canada**

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The Acadians were the descendants of 17th-century French settlers who established a distinct culture in Maritime Canada (Acadia) beginning in 1604, long before British dominance. Centered around Port-Royal (established in 1605), these settlers thrived as farmers by reclaiming salt marshes with dykes and built strong relationships with the Mi'kmaq people, creating a stable and autonomous society for over a century prior to British control.

### **Key Aspects of Early Acadian Settlement (1604–1710)**

**Foundation:** Pierre du Gua, Sieur de Monts, along with Samuel de Champlain, established the first colony at Île Sainte-Croix in 1604. The settlement was later relocated to Port-Royal in 1605.

**Expansion:** By 1671, the population had grown and settlements expanded from Port-Royal to the Bay of Fundy, the Minas Basin, and Beaubassin by the late 17th century.

**“Dykeland” Farming:** Acadians developed innovative agricultural techniques, constructing dykes (aboiteaux) to convert tidal salt marshes into fertile farmland, allowing for sustainable and productive communities.

**“Golden Age” of Neutrality:** Despite Acadia changing hands between France and Britain multiple times, the Acadian population grew peacefully to over 10,000 by the 1740s. They maintained a policy of neutrality, refusing to take sides in imperial conflicts, this period is often referred to as their “Golden Age.”

### **Pre-British Acadian Lifestyle**

Acadian society was primarily Roman Catholic and centered on subsistence farming, fishing, and trapping. Their reliance on dyke systems allowed them to build agricultural communities that were uniquely adapted to the environment and distinct from later British settlements. They also maintained cooperative and respectful relationships with the Mi'kmaq, which contributed to the stability and longevity of their society.

### **Transition to British Rule**

The British captured Port-Royal in 1710. However, it was not until the Treaty of Utrecht (1713) that Acadia was formally and permanently ceded to Britain, becoming known as Nova Scotia. Between 1713 and 1755, the Acadians attempted to preserve their neutrality by refusing to take an unconditional oath of allegiance to the British Crown. This position ultimately contributed to rising tensions.

### **The Acadian Ethnic Cleansing & Expulsion**

In 1755, the British initiated the forced removal, slavery, and ethnic cleansing of the Acadians, known as the Great Dérangement. This mass expulsion displaced thousands of Acadians from their homeland, scattering them across various regions, including New England, Louisiana, and overseas to the Caribbean, where many were forced to work on plantations.

### **Summary**

Acadians were the first permanent French settlers in Atlantic Canada, establishing Acadia in 1604—well before British rule. Settling in what is now Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and

Prince Edward Island, they:

- Built a distinct agricultural society using innovative dyke systems
- Maintained strong cultural and religious traditions
- Fostered cooperative relationships with Indigenous peoples
- Lived in relative neutrality for over a century
- Established a unique identity that endured despite displacement

**Note by Courchene-Cowdrey:**

This event was not recognized until 2003 by Queen Elizabeth, and it is still underplayed. However, the truth is that the Acadians were victims of genocide, and their population today remains small despite being among the first settlers of Canada. They were among the first victims of mass atrocity on the continent. They were forced into slavery, forcibly culled on ships where entire family lineages were lost at sea, and subjected to starvation. Their property was stolen or burned, and they lost everything.

The Acadians then suffered historical erasure, being forcibly assimilated into British culture with the goal of reshaping their identity within just two generations so that their heritage would be forgotten. The British were largely successful; rather than being recognized as victims of genocide, they were portrayed simply as “whites,” and their suffering went unrecognized. The United States has still not issued an apology for this early mass atrocity.

Today, the United States and Canada might look very different if not for this conflict. Perhaps less violent, less abusive, more cohesive with First Peoples, more compassionate, less slavery, less war and more autonomous. The Acadians and the Mi'kmaq were self-dependent, open-minded, and deeply compassionate, embracing both Indigenous American and French Indigenous cultures and forming their own shared spirit and understanding of life.

Cowdrey is Acadian, not only in bloodline but also in heart and spirit. She hopes that other Acadians, as well as those of Mi'kmaq descent and Métis heritage, will remember, especially for those Americans who are still unaware of this history. Perhaps the world we live in today, with racial conflict occurring daily, would awaken to a new understanding of Native American and Acadian suffering if we acknowledged this early settler expulsion.