

Acadian Heritage and Indigenous History in Canada

~Cowdrey

“Do not tell me that I am not indigenous, I am American!”

Acadian Heritage

Acadian history is rooted in the lands and waters of northeastern North America. Acadian communities developed in the region known as Acadia and continued through generations of residence, family connections, language, traditions, and community life. The Acadian people have maintained a distinct identity in what is now Canada for centuries.

The history of Acadia includes French settlement, Indigenous communities, and generations of contact between the peoples living in the region. The Mi'kmaq were established throughout their traditional territory long before European settlement. French settlers entered this existing Indigenous world and formed relationships with Mi'kmaq communities through trade, diplomacy, family relationships, and intermarriage.

Acadian families developed through these historical circumstances. Some families have French ancestry, some have Indigenous ancestry, and some have both. Family histories can therefore contain several ancestral lines that have remained connected to the same region for many generations.

The Meaning of Indigenous

The word **indigenous** comes from the Latin *indigena*, referring to someone native to a particular place. The French word *indigène* comes from the same Latin origin. The word originally carried the general meaning of being native or originating in the place where a person or population lived.

French dictionaries have preserved this broader meaning. The Académie française defines *indigène* as someone who is originally from the country where they live and identifies *autochtone* as a related term for someone originating from the country where they live. These definitions demonstrate that the language itself has a broader geographic meaning beyond the modern political use of the capitalized word **Indigenous**. (dictionnaire-academie.fr)

Historical French dictionaries also used *indigène* when discussing peoples living in places that Europeans encountered during colonization. The 1798 *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* used the word in reference to peoples established in a country from ancient times and included a reference to the Indigenous peoples of America. The word therefore existed with a general meaning and a colonial-era meaning within the French language. (dictionnaire-academie.fr)

Native to Canada

The word **native** can describe someone born in or originating from a particular place. A family can become native to a region through generations of residence, community development, and connection to the land. Language, family history, traditions, and continued residence all contribute to the historical development of a people.

Acadians became a North American people through their history in Acadia. Their language developed into Acadian French, a recognized variety of French with characteristics preserved from earlier forms of French spoken during the colonial period. Acadian communities continued to develop their own traditions and identity throughout Atlantic Canada.

(vitrinelinguistique.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca)

The French language of Acadia itself reflects this long history. Acadian French is spoken in communities throughout Atlantic Canada and has maintained linguistic features associated with the early history of French settlement in North America. Its continued use represents a cultural tradition that developed on this continent across generations.

(vitrinelinguistique.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca)

Acadians and the Mi'kmaq

Mi'kmaq history is inseparable from the history of Acadia. The Mi'kmaq occupied their traditional territories for thousands of years before European settlement and maintained their own communities, languages, political relationships, and cultural traditions. French settlers entered these territories and established relationships with Mi'kmaq communities.

Historical records describe trade, diplomacy, military alliances, family relationships, and marriages between French settlers and Mi'kmaq people. These relationships produced descendants with both French and Mi'kmaq ancestry. Historical testimony before the Parliament of Canada has also documented the significance of French-Mi'kmaq relationships during the early colonial period. (ourcommons.ca)

Acadian family histories can therefore contain Indigenous ancestry reaching back many generations. Genealogical records, parish records, family histories, oral traditions, historical documents, and genetic research can all contribute to understanding those ancestral connections. A person who has a documented Indigenous ancestor retains that ancestry regardless of the number of generations that have passed.

Five Hundred Years of Ancestry

Five hundred years represents approximately twenty generations, depending on the average generation length used. An ancestor who lived around 1526 would therefore be separated from a person living today by roughly five centuries. Indigenous ancestry from that period remains ancestry today.

There is no biological expiration date for ancestry. A person's genetic inheritance may become smaller as generations pass, and a particular ancestor may eventually contribute no detectable DNA to a distant descendant, but genealogical ancestry remains part of the family history. Historical records can establish ancestry even when a modern DNA test cannot identify every individual ancestral line.

This matters for families researching early North American ancestry. A family may have an Indigenous ancestor who lived many centuries ago while later generations developed an Acadian identity. The later identity does not remove the earlier ancestry from the family history.

Acadian Identity in Canada

Acadian identity developed in North America and became associated with the communities of Acadia. Acadians developed their own language, customs, family networks, traditions, and collective history. Their descendants continue to identify as Acadian throughout Canada and elsewhere.

Acadian French provides evidence of cultural continuity. The language has remained distinct within the broader French-speaking world and continues to be spoken in Atlantic Canadian communities. The Office québécois de la langue française recognizes Acadian French as a distinct variety spoken in Atlantic Canada. (vitrinelinguistique.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca)

Acadian culture also developed through the experiences of families living in North America. Generations of births, marriages, migrations, community institutions, religious practices, occupations, and family relationships created a culture with its own historical character. Acadian identity therefore has a substantial history on this continent.

The Modern Meaning of Indigenous

The word **Indigenous** has acquired a specific political and legal meaning in Canada. Section 35 of the Constitution Act, 1982 recognizes the Aboriginal peoples of Canada, including Indian, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Canadian institutions now use Indigenous terminology within this constitutional and political framework. (canada.ca)

The United Nations also uses Indigenous peoples as a modern international category. The United Nations describes Indigenous peoples through characteristics including historical continuity with societies that existed before colonization, relationships with ancestral lands, distinct cultures and institutions, and continuing community identities. The United Nations does not establish a single universal definition that applies identically to every country and people. (un.org)

Modern political terminology developed long after many of the communities now discussed under that terminology had already existed. Historical populations lived according to their own identities, family relationships, territories, languages, and community structures. Their histories cannot be fully understood from modern terminology alone.

Acadian Heritage and Indigenous Heritage

An Acadian family can carry several forms of heritage at the same time. A family can have French ancestors, Mi'kmaq ancestors, ancestors from other Indigenous communities, and descendants who identify strongly as Acadian. These ancestral histories can exist within the same family tree.

A person can therefore identify as Acadian while recognizing Indigenous ancestry within their family. Genealogical evidence can establish relationships between generations, while historical records can provide information about the communities and places in which those ancestors lived. DNA testing can provide additional genetic information, although it cannot by itself establish citizenship in an Indigenous nation.

The history of an individual family must be examined through its own records. Parish registers, baptismal records, marriage records, land records, census records, notarial documents, Indigenous records, oral histories, and other historical materials can reveal connections that broad population labels cannot show. Family history can therefore contain details that are not visible from a broad description of Acadians as a whole.

Bonus! Canada now welcomes Acadians home with an opportunity for citizenship.

Source: <https://www.getmaplepass.com/guides/acadian-cajun-canadian-citizenship>

Acadia and the Name of the Region

The name **Acadia** has a complicated history. Its origin has been connected by scholars to Indigenous terminology as well as to European naming traditions, and the exact etymology remains debated. Historical evidence shows that European writers used forms of the name before the later development of the Acadian population.

Mi'kmaq historical traditions also contain their own explanations of the name and its relationship to the land and people living there. Such traditions form part of the historical record and deserve consideration alongside written European sources. The existence of different explanations means that the history of the name should be investigated through linguistic and historical evidence. (ourcommons.ca)

Acadians as a Canadian People

Acadians have lived through a distinct Canadian history. Their communities experienced colonization, displacement, migration, settlement, family formation, language preservation, and cultural survival. Those experiences produced a people with a recognizable identity that continues today.

Acadian identity is connected to particular places in Atlantic Canada. Family histories frequently connect generations to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, Quebec, Maine, and other areas of the historic Acadian world. These geographic connections form an important part of Acadian heritage.

The word **Canadian** itself also has Indigenous linguistic roots. The name Canada ultimately comes from the St. Lawrence Iroquoian word *kanata*, meaning a village or settlement, which was recorded by Jacques Cartier during his voyages in the sixteenth century. The name of the country therefore has an Indigenous linguistic origin even though the modern Canadian state developed centuries later.

Historical Identity

Historical identity is formed through people, families, communities, languages, territories, and memories. Names applied by governments or later institutions do not necessarily capture every aspect of an earlier population's identity. The history of Acadians must therefore include the people who formed Acadian communities and the Indigenous communities with whom they interacted.

Acadian heritage can include centuries of North American family history. Indigenous heritage can also form part of that family history through documented descent and community relationships. These histories belong to the descendants who carry them forward.

Conclusion

Acadian heritage is a North American heritage with deep roots in the history of Canada. Acadian communities developed in Acadia, maintained distinctive language and culture, and continued through generations of family and community life. Their history includes extensive relationships with the Indigenous peoples of the region, including the Mi'kmaq.

The word **indigenous** has an older meaning connected to being native or originating from a place. The French word *indigène* comes from the same Latin root and historically carried a general meaning alongside its later colonial and political uses. Modern Canadian use of **Indigenous** represents a particular legal and political framework that developed over time.

For an Acadian family with documented Indigenous ancestry, that ancestry remains part of the family's heritage regardless of how many generations have passed. An Acadian identity can carry French ancestry, Indigenous ancestry, Canadian identity, and centuries of North American cultural development within the same family history. Understanding this history requires examining the actual people, families, records, communities, languages, and lands that produced the heritage being held today.