

From the pen of Georges Arsenault....

The Saga of Alexis Doiron

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Without a doubt, the Deportation constitutes the pivotal point in the history of the Acadians. It is impossible to grasp the full scope of this human tragedy, which drastically changed the course, not only of this people, but of the whole Maritime region. In terms of numbers, we know that between 1755 and 1763 approximately 10,000 Acadians were dispossessed of their lands in the territory that now comprises Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and Prince Edward Island, and were deported by the British to the American Thirteen Colonies, Britain, and France. A great many of the victims perished during the ordeal. The toll was particularly heavy among those deported from Ile Saint Jean in 1758: two-thirds appear to have succumbed during the crossing of the Atlantic or in the months following their arrival in France. The Acadians call this sad period of their history "le Grand Dérangement" (the Great Upheaval). The phrase refers not only to the actual deportation, but also to the Acadians' lengthy wanderings in search of a new homeland, a search that lasted, in many instances, until the early 1800s.

For many years, historians believed that the modern Acadians of Prince Edward Island were almost exclusively descended from a small group of refugees in the Malpeque area who escaped deportation in 1758. Now, decades of genealogical research into specific Island Acadian families are changing that notion. We are coming to realize that many Acadians who either fled Ile St. Jean or were deported, eventually made their way back here.

The task of reconstructing the history of the families who lived through these turbulent years is rather difficult. Documents from the period dealing with specific individuals or families are almost non-existent. The few papers which do exist generally give but fragmentary information. In spite of these drawbacks, it is still possible to trace and follow certain families. Such is the case with Alexis Doiron*, ancestor of the Doirons of Prince Edward Island and of the Pomquet region in Nova Scotia's Antigonish County. Through fragments of information collected from many sources, his saga can now be told in some detail. This representative Acadian lived through a remarkable odyssey punctuated by setbacks and ordeals. His story serves as a case study of how one Acadian family survived the catastrophic years of the Deportation to return to Prince Edward Island.

** The spelling of this family name varies greatly. In most cases, the spelling constituted a phonetic rendition of the name. In French language documents one finds: Douaron, Douairon, Doueron, Doyron and Douerand. The most common versions in English are: Dourong, Duyrong, Durong, Dorion, Duront, and Doirant.*

NOVA SCOTIA

Alexis Doiron was born in Pisiquid (modern Windsor, Nova Scotia) on 29 June 1723 to Louis Doiron and Marguerite Barrieau. His grandfather, Jean Doiron, the ancestor of the Doiron family in North America, was born in France around 1649 and settled in Acadia around 1670. When he was about four years old, Alexis lost his father. His mother did not remarry, and she raised her four children on her own. On 12 September, 1743, at the age of 20, Alexis married Marguerite Thibodeau, also of Pisiquid. Marguerite gave birth to at least three children before 1750: Alexis-Grégoire, Josaphat, and Théodore.

At the time of Alexis Doiron's birth, Acadia (that is, mainland Nova Scotia) had been a British colony for ten years. Despite this fact, the Acadian community was experiencing a period of peace and prosperity that would last for several decades. The declaration of war between England and France in 1744 marked

the end of these years of stability. During this international conflict, called the War of the Austrian Succession, France tried unsuccessfully to reconquer her lost Acadian colony. The treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle brought an end to the war in 1748, but the fallout from the conflict left the Acadians in a much more precarious situation than before. British authorities accused them of having supported the French troops during the hostilities. The British therefore became increasingly suspicious of these "French Neutrals," as they called the Acadians, who refused to take an unconditional oath of allegiance to the British monarch, but pledged to be neutral in case of war between their mother country and Great Britain.

In Pisiquid, where Alexis Doiron and his family lived, the British erected Fort Edward. Sensing danger, and encouraged by French missionaries, many families left their village for French territory, particularly Ile Saint Jean. Alexis Doiron, his wife Marguerite, their children, and other members of their extended family were part of this group. In 1750, they settled in Grande Anse (now Orwell Bay) on the south shore of modern day Prince Edward Island. It was the first of many displacements that the Doiron family would experience over the next 30 years.

ILE SAINT JEAN

It must have been a painful decision for the Doirons and their neighbours to abandon their well-established farms on the shores of the fertile Minas Basin, and relocate to an isolated and densely wooded area. Not long after arriving on the Island, tragedy struck the Doiron family. Marguerite died, leaving her husband Alexis with three small children. The exact date of her death is not known, but it took place sometime before the King's census taker, Joseph de la Roque, visited Grande Anse in the summer of 1752. In his well-documented census, de la Roque gave a detailed picture of the Doiron household:

ALEXIS DOUARON, widower, ploughman, native of l'Acadie, aged 29 years, he has been in the country two years. He has three sons:

Gregoire, aged 8 years.

Joseph, aged 6 years.

Theodore, aged 3 years.

And the following live stock: two oxen, one horse and two pigs.

The land on which he is settled is situated as in the preceding case [at the farther end of Grand Anse]. It was given to him verbally by Monsieur de Bonnaventure. He has made no clearing.

Sieur de la Roque's census indicates that Alexis's family included his 58-year-old widowed mother, Marguerite Barrieau, and that his youngest brother, Jean, was settled on the neighbouring lot with his new bride Anne Thibodeau.

In 1752, the community of Grande Anse was made up of 17 families, mainly Acadians, most of whom had been established in the area for only one or two years. The majority of the settlers had improved enough land to be able to sow between two and six bushels of wheat. Alexis Doiron appears to have been slow getting started since de la Roque noted that none of his land had been cleared. It is possible, however, that the Doiron brothers were working together since one acre of Jean's land had been made into a clearing.

Alexis Doiron soon found a new wife to help him raise his three children and take care of the household. On 20 July 1753, he married a young girl half his age, 15-year-old Madeleine-Josèphe Bourg. Born in Cobequid (Truro, Nova Scotia), her family had also settled in the vicinity of Grand Anse. In the course of the next 25 years, she would give birth to at least 15 children.

Life on the Ile Saint-Jean proved to be immensely trying for the Doirons and the Acadian population in general. In 1748, the Island contained only 735 inhabitants. The Acadian emigration from the mainland

soon tripled this population, so that, in 1752, de la Roque enumerated 2,223 inhabitants. This sudden influx of people, with many more to arrive in the years that followed, caused local administrators many headaches as they struggled to shelter, feed, and settle the Acadian refugees.

Difficulty turned almost to disaster in the fall of 1755, when the British started deporting the Acadians of mainland Nova Scotia. Hundreds managed to flee to the Island, arriving with little more than the clothes on their backs. In 1756, the Commandant at Port LaJoye reported that the population of the colony was now over 4,400. The responsibility for sending relief to the refugees fell on Governor General Pierre de Vaudreuil of Québec. In August 1756, in a letter to the Minister of the Marine, he painted a very dismal picture of the situation on the Island: "Misery is great on Ile Saint Jean; most of the habitants are without bread, M de Villejoin having fed 1,257 refugees since last autumn."

By moving to the Island in 1750, Alexis Dorion and his family were spared the deportation that took place in 1755 in Pisiquid and other communities in Nova Scotia. But by 1756, Britain and France were formally at war once more. In 1758, a British expedition captured the great French fortress at Louisbourg on Ile Royale. Its fall doomed the little satellite colony of Ile Saint Jean. Later that fall, British forces began rounding up the Island's Acadian inhabitants.

DEPORTATION

Whereas the British had shipped the mainland Acadians to the Thirteen Colonies, they deported the population of the newly conquered islands of Ile Royale and Ile Saint Jean to France. Among the 2,500 deportees was the Doiron family. In the fall of 1758, Alexis, his wife Madeleine, and their five children, along with a few hundred other compatriots, were crowded onto a ship, which set sail for the port of St. Malo in Brittany. During the crossing, a great many of the deportees were carried off by disease, including two small children born from Alexis's second marriage, five-year-old Marie-Blanche and three-year-old Joseph-Marie.

The epidemics that broke out during the lengthy crossing of the Atlantic Ocean continued to take their toll on the Acadians in the months following their arrival in France. The Doiron family was not spared. On 6 March 1759, young Théodore, aged ten, died at the St. Malo hospital, and on 25 April, Alexis' and Madeleine's four-month-old baby François-Xavier, apparently born during the crossing, died at the same institution. By the spring of 1759, the Doiron family had been reduced to four: Alexis, Madeleine, and the two oldest boys, Grégoire and Josaphat.

Although cruelly tried, the Doirons had survived the deportation. Such was not the case for many other families. It is believed that Alexis' uncle Noël Doiron and some 120 members of his extended family were among the 300 Acadians who perished in the loss of the Duke William, which sank in a storm in the English Channel on 13 December, 1758. They had lived in the Pointe Prime (Prim Point) area, not far from Grand Anse.

FRANCE

In France, Alexis and his family were lodged for a while by Royal authorities in St. Servan, a small town located near St. Malo. They later moved across the Rance River to St. Énogat (present-day Dinard) where Alexis was able to find work on a farm. Three more children, Jean-Charles, Marie-Madeleine, and Marie-Ange (who died in infancy), were born there.

The Doirons were not the only Acadians in St. Énogat. In fact, the Acadian community consisted of 50 families, including Alexis' brother, Jean Doiron. Jean and his wife Anne had been severely tested during the deportation, losing all of their four children. At St. Énogat, they began to rebuild their lives and their family; four children were born to them there.

As the British authorities would later attempt with American Loyalists, the French government decided to resettle the exiled Acadians as a way to compensate them for their losses. In the fall of 1765, a contingent of 78 Acadian families waiting to be resettled (56 of whom were temporarily located in Morlaix and 22 in the area of St. Malo) set sail for Belle-Ile-en-Mer, the largest of the Breton Islands. Among this party were the families of Alexis and Jean Doiron. They were sent to the village of Bortereau in the parish of Locmaria, hoping, no doubt, that this would be their final destination.

When he settled on Belle-Ile, Alexis Doiron, like all other Acadian families, was granted land on the condition that he pay a small annual occupation fee. He was also given a two-room house, a bake house, a barn, a stable, a pair of oxen, a cow, a horse, a cart, a plow, and all necessary tools. This "package deal" even included some coal and iron for repairs at the forge!

Well settled at last, Alexis Doiron could afford to believe in a more stable and promising future for himself and his growing family. But destiny would decide otherwise. Once again, misfortune befell the Acadian families. Disease decimated a good part of the livestock brought over from mainland France, and drought severely affected the crops every year between 1767 and 1772. Overwhelmed by this bad luck, the Acadians on the island could not even manage to pay their small annual occupation fee. Completely discouraged, two-thirds of the families left for the mainland hoping to find something better elsewhere.

Alexis Doiron and his family abandoned their farm on Belle-Ile late in 1771 and returned to St. Énogat. Neither misfortune nor dislocation disrupted the expansion of his family. During their stay at Belle-Ile, Madeleine had borne five more children: Marie-Rose (1765); Joseph, nicknamed Medjo (1766); Sébastienne-Josèphe (1768); Henriette-Catherine (1769); and Marie-Ange (1771). Like her namesake sister, born in 1764, Marie-Ange died before her first birthday.

ST JOHN'S ISLAND

Thirteen years had now passed since the Doirons had arrived in France. Like a great number of his exiled compatriots, Alexis was becoming increasingly exasperated with the slowness of the French Government regarding the permanent resettlement of the Acadians on suitable land. Many families wanted to move to Louisiana where other Acadians were living under Spanish protection. Others were prepared to return to Acadia and other former French colonies, even if it meant taking the oath of allegiance to the King of England. It was illegal to leave France without permission; after all, it was not in the French interest to have its subjects settle under a foreign flag. Nevertheless, many Acadians ignored these restrictions and sailed away in secrecy from the kingdom of Louis XV. Such was the case with Alexis Doiron and his family. Their destination? Ile Saint Jean.

Under what circumstances did the Doiron family return to Ile Saint Jean, by now the British colony of St. John's Island? In fact, very little is known. A document found in the Scottish Record Office in Edinburgh indicates that the Doiron family settled on a 50-acre lot in Township 59 on 1 June 1772. Alexis, whose name is barely recognizable on the document ("Alexis Dubon"), seems to have been brought to this part of the Island, along with 13 other Acadian families and 18 British families, by David Higgins, one of the proprietors of the lot. In partnership with James William Montgomery, lord advocate of Scotland, Higgins had established a fishing, lumbering, and mercantile business in the area known as Three Rivers, near the present-day Georgetown. Of the other Acadian families settled in this eastern part of the island, some, like Alexis, had come over from France, while others arrived from the French Islands of St. Pierre and Miquelon in the northern Gulf of St. Lawrence.

It appears that Alexis, his wife and six of their children* came back to St. John's Island, via the Isle of Jersey, a British possession located in the English Channel not far from St. Malo. It is known, for instance, that on 20 March 1772, Alexis' son, Josaphat sailed from Brittany to the Isle of Jersey. From there he crossed the Atlantic some time after his father, eventually settling with his father-in-law, Pierre Duon, in Pomquet, Nova Scotia. It is possible that the Doirons and others were recruited by Jersey entrepreneurs seeking workers for their fishing ventures on the other side of the Atlantic. Certainly, it

was Higgins' intention to employ his Acadian settlers in the fishery.

** Only one of Alexis' children remained in France, the eldest, Alexis-Grégoire. In 1767, he married H  l  ne Aucoin in St.   nogat. They also lived in Chatellerault and Nantes. According to family tradition, Alexis-Gr  goire died at war. His widow married Louis Dantin in 1784 and the couple emigrated to Louisiana in 1785 with Alexis-Gr  goire's two daughters.*

Some oral history relating to Alexis Doiron's return to the Island was collected in 1880 from a nonagenarian grandson, Joshua (Joachim) Doiron of Rustico. He told of his grandfather going on an expedition from Three Rivers to Port LaJoye with his son Jean-Charles, sometime after his arrival on the Island, in search of certain valuables left there at the time of the Deportation. During the excursion, the father and son were forced to kill and eat their dog to survive!

The Doiron's stay in Three Rivers lasted less than ten years. In fact, all of David Higgins' Acadian tenants eventually left Lot 59. Their departure is probably linked to the serious financial problems that overtook Higgins. Head over heels in debt, Higgins had little choice but to sell his interest in lot 59 to his father-in-law, Job Prince, a prominent Boston merchant. Not long afterwards, he settled an important debt with his Scottish associate, Montgomery, by deceitfully conveying to him the share of Lot 59 that he had just transferred to Prince! Higgins' final ruination came with the American Revolution (and the accompanying depredations of American privateers), and he died penniless in Charlottetown in April 1783. The Island's Lieutenant Governor, Thomas Desbrisay, paid homage to this pioneer entrepreneur. As a colonizer, wrote Desbrisay, Higgins "did more service to the Lower Class of People here, than all the officers of Government, put together."

Most of the Acadians who had settled in Three Rivers eventually left for Cheticamp, Cape Breton Island, where it was much easier to become a freeholder and where the Jersey merchant Charles Robin ran a fishing establishment. Alexis Doiron was one of the few who remained on the Island. He moved his family to Rustico, Lot 24, on the Island's North Shore, where he joined several other Acadian families, mainly Gallants, Pitres, and Martins. The year of Doiron's arrival in Rustico is unknown but it was obviously before 20 August 1782, since his name appears on a petition drawn up that day in the community. Haunted by the spectre of famine, the petitioners were soliciting relief from the government because their grain fields had been completely ravaged by a plague of mice. Apparently, misfortune still stalked the Doiron family.

A few years after his arrival in Rustico, Alexis Doiron had no choice but to sign a lease for the land on which he was settled. The property was owned by an absentee landlord, Montreal merchant Isaac Todd. On 1 May 1787, like 15 other heads of households in Rustico, Alexis recognized Alexander Fletcher as the landlord's agent and accepted a perpetual lease for a 200-acre lot. According to the document, rent could be paid either with cash, wheat, or cod. On the same date, Alexis' daughter, Marie-Madeleine, and her husband, Barth  lemy Mius, signed a lease for a 40-acre farm.

In 1798, Alexis Doiron's name appeared on a document for the last time. The document in question was the Island's first major nominal census after the British conquest. At that time, Alexis was about 75 years old, one of the three oldest citizens of Rustico. Without being named, four other persons shared his home. These were probably his wife, his sons Pierre and   lie, and his youngest daughter, Marie Ange, his third child by that name. All around this patriarch were settled the families of his sons and daughters. After decades of wandering, Doiron had at last been able to put down roots.

CONCLUSION

At what date did Alexis Doiron's remarkable odyssey come to an end? As yet, no document has been found that would answer this question. One can however guess that he died at some point during the first decade of the 19th century, leaving behind a very large progeny. Today, his genes must be part of the genetic code of virtually all Rustico Acadians and of thousands of other Islanders. His descendants are

also numerous across Canada and in the United States, some carrying the name "Durant," a version of the name that is easier to pronounce in English than Doiron and which has been adopted mainly by members of the family who emigrated to New England.

Alexis Doiron's life had come full circle. The arduous journey that began with his emigration to Ile St. Jean ended with his return there. In between lay thousands of miles and a lifetime's worth of hardship and tragedy. His story is compelling, both for its own sake, and for what it teaches us about the post-Deportation experience. For in Alexis Doiron's exile, and return, is rooted an essential part of the Acadian experience on Prince Edward Island.

SOURCES

Versions of this article have appeared in French under the title "La Saga d'Alexis Doiron, ancêtre des Doirons de l'Île-du-Prince-Édouard," in *Racines et Rameaux français d'Acadie*, bulletin no 13 (juillet 1995), and in *La Voix acadienne*, 27 September 1995 - 15 November 1995.

The information for the piece comes from a great variety of sources. But first of all, I would like to thank very sincerely genealogist Stephen White, of the Centre d'études acadiennes (Université de Moncton), who kindly gave me access to his latest research on the Doiron genealogy, which is due to be published in the *Dictionnaire généalogique des familles acadiennes*.

For the pre-deportation period, I have consulted Allen Doiron and Fidèle Thériault's *La famille Doiron (Gould). Les descendant-e-s de Pierre Doiron et de Anne Forest* (Fredericton: 1994); "Tour of Inspection Made by the Sieur de la Roque Census of 1752", *Report Concerning Canadian Archives for the Year 1905*, volume 2 (Ottawa, 1906) and Vaudreuil's letter to the Minister of the Marine on 7 August 1756 (Archives des Colonies, C11A, vol.101, p.85)

For the period 1758-72, the sources are greatly varied: Stephen A White, "Rapport du secteur de généalogie," *Contact-Acadie*(Number 15, June 1990, pp.23-24); "Registres des Acadiens de Belle-Ile-en-Mer," *Collection de documents sur le Canada et l'Amérique*, Volume 3, (Québec: le Canada français, 1890); Ernest Martin, *Les Exilés acadiens en France au XVIIIe et leur établissement en Poitou*, (Poitiers : Brissaud, 1979 [1936]); M. Caillebeau, *Les Acadiens de Belle-Ile-et leur liens avec l'établissement du Poitou* (supplement to *Bulletin de l'Association pour l'Histoire de Belle-Ile-en Mer*, 1976); Albert J. Robichaux, *The Acadian Exiles in Saint-Malo, 1758-178* (Eunice, LA: Hebert Publications, 1981); Milton P. Rieder Jr., & Norma Gaudet Reider, *The Crew and Registration List of the Seven Acadian Expeditions of 1785*, (Metairie, LA: 1965).

For the years 1772-1810, J. M. Bumsted's article on David Higgins, published in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Volume IV (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), has been very helpful, and I have consulted the 1798 Island census in Duncan Campbell, *History of Prince Edward Island* (Charlottetown: Bremner Brothers, 1875).

The following documents have provided important information: "Leases granted by D. Higgins, May 1775" (Scottish Record Office, Gift and Deposits, 293\279\52); "Petition [of] Distressed Inhabitants [of the] Island of St. John's, 20th August 1782 [Grand Rustico]" (Centre d'études acadiennes, fonds Placide Gaudet, 1.36-7); Isaac Todd Merchant to Alexis Duyrong Farmer, Lease forever of 200 acres of Lands part of Lot or Township No. 24," dated 1st May 1787 (PARO, lease not recorded); "Letter of John C. Doiron to George Alley, New Glasgow [P.E.I.]. 20 March 1880" (Collection of Dr. T. W. Stewart, Ottawa).

Many thanks to Stephen White and Sally Ross for reading this article and making many helpful comments.

ALEXIS DOIRON b. 29 June 1723 in Pisiquit, NS

[m. 1.] **MARGUERITE THIBODEAU**, 12 Sept. 1743, (daughter of Alexandre Thibodeau and Françoise Benoit of Pisiquit, NS)

Alexis-Grégoire (b. 15 April 1744) m. **Hélène Aucoin**, 19 May 1767 (Daughter of Antoine Aucoin and Elisabeth Amireau; she was widowed and m. **Louis Dantin** in 1784)

Josaphat (b. 21 November 1746) m. **Marguerite Duon** 12 August 1766 (Daughter of Pierre Duon and Marguerite Aucoin of Pomquet, NS)

Théodore (b. ca.1749 - d. 6 March 1759)

[m.2.] **MADELEINE-JOSÈPHE BOURG**, 20 July 1753 (daughter of François Bourg and Marguerite Hébert of Cobequid, NS)

Marie-Blanche (b. ca. 1753 - d. 1758 or 59)

Joseph-Marie (b. ca. 1755 - c. 1758 or 59)

François-Xavier (b. ca. 1758 d. 25 April 1759)

Jean-Charles (b. 13 Aug. 1760) m. **Scholastique Poirier**, ca. 1786 (daughter of Joseph Poirier and Marguerite Lavigne)

Marie-Madeleine (b. 8 Feb. 1762) m. 1) **Barthélemy Mius**, ca. 1776 (son of Charles Mius and Marie-Marthe Hébert) and m. 2) **Basile Cormier**, 1 Sept, 1812 (son of François Cormier and Anne Chiasson)

Marie-Ange (b. 16 Sept.1764 d. ca. 1764)

Marie-Rose (b. 24 Oct. 1765) m. **Jean Pitre**, ca. 1785 (son of Jean-Baptiste Pitre and Marguerite Arseneau)

Joseph (nicknamed **Medjo**) (b. 14 April 1766) m. **Marie-Angélique Gallant**, ca. 1790 (daughter of Ange Gallant and Marguerite Picard)

Sébastienne-Josèphe (b. 23 feb. 1768) m. **François LeBrun**, ca. 1790

Henriette-Catherine (b. 31 July 1760) m. **Pierre Gaudet**, ca. 1790 (son of Paul Gaudet and Marie Bourg)

Marie-Ange (27 Jan. 1771 - 8 Dec. 1771)

Pierre m. **Marie-Julie [Juliette] Buote**. ca. 1799 (daughter of François Buote and Marie Belliveau)

François-Xavier (nicknamed **Mico**) m. **Modeste Gautrot**, ca. 1798 (daughter of Honoré Gautrot and Anne Comeau)

Élie (nicknamed Notte-Chatte) m. Suzanne Gallant, ca. 1808 (daughter of Pierre Gallant and Modeste Arseneau)

Marie-Ange (b. ca. 1778) m. 1) Augustin Chiasson, ca. 1800 (son of Jean Chiasson and Isabelle Boudrot) and m. 2) Boniface Benoît, ca. 1830 (son of Boniface Benot and Marie-Josèphe Boucher)

Acadians of PEI
Acadian Entrepreneurs of PEI
Acadians of Summerside
en Français
Dauphine Arsenault
François Douville
Saga Alexis Doiron
Settlement Havre St-Pierre

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