

Phantom Letters: Acadian Correspondence, 1766-1784

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INTRODUCTION

AT A SESSION ON THE ACADIANS during the 1974 Southern Historical Association Convention at Dallas, Texas, a member of the audience suggested that the influx of Acadians from the Anglo-American colonies, Nova Scotia, Saint-Domingue [Haiti] and France into Louisiana between 1765 and 1785 was possibly more than an uncanny coincidence.¹ He then inquired whether or not correspondence between the widely separated groups of exiles were extant. Although the assembled Louisiana historians agreed that the exiles must have corresponded amongst themselves, no one could cite documentary evidence supporting this hypothesis.

Intrigued by this historical mystery, this writer has searched for traces of these phantom letters for nearly 18 years. This search has produced abundant evidence to support the hypothesis put forth by the Southern Historical audience. Unfortunately, there are no extant copies of letters between Acadian exiles. But the late 18th-century documentary records of France, Spain and the United States contain numerous references to them. In January 1763, for example, the Acadians exiled to England provided a French secret agent with information regarding the Acadians in England, in France and in the English seaboard colonies, based upon information obtained through correspondence with other exiles.²

Perhaps the most significant traces of correspondence between Acadian exiles exist in the Belle-Île-en-Mer records. Following the installation of numerous Acadian exiles upon the windswept French island near the Breton coast, the French government, in 1767 and 1768, interviewed several elderly Acadian settlers in an attempt to reconstruct their family genealogies. This information, it was hoped, would partially offset the loss of the birth, marriage and burial records from the pre-dispersal Acadian settlements in Nova Scotia. The deponents, despite having been confined in detention camps in England for eight years and despite having been forced to relocate in France on several occasions, were able to identify accurately not only the status, but the current location of literally hundreds of relatives scattered throughout the world, including exiles in Quebec, the British seaboard colonies, St. Pierre and Miquelon, the West Indies and Louisiana. Indeed, a random sampling of the Belle-Île-en-Mer records includes status reports on the indicated number of individuals in the following locales: Maryland, 33;

1 For an earlier study, see Carl A. Brasseaux, "A New Acadia: The Acadian Migrations to South Louisiana, 1764-1803", *Acadiensis*, XV, 1 (Autumn 1985), pp. 123-32.

2 Memoir on the Acadians, February 1763, Correspondance générale, Acadie (C11D) volume 8, folios 242-51, Archives des Colonies, Archives Nationales [AN], Paris.

Massachusetts, 13; Miquelon (includes one reference to "St. Pierre and Miquelon"), 8; Pennsylvania, 7; Quebec, 5; Virginia,³ 5; Carolina, 3; Louisiana, 3; Miramichi, New Brunswick, 3; New York, 3; the Antilles, 2; Cayenne, 2; Port Toulouse, Nova Scotia, 1; Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1.⁴ While no mention is made of any Acadian correspondence between individuals in these widely separated Acadian communities, an effective communications network clearly existed.

The nature of this network is set out in numerous references in other collections. These references indicate that, as early as 1763, letters were frequently exchanged between widely separated Acadian communities. Spanish Louisiana records suggest that ten to 20 per cent of the surviving exiles were at least literate enough to affix their names to a petition.⁵ Given the well-formed letters in some of the signatures, it appears that at least a few Acadians were capable of both writing and reading the correspondence exchanged by the dispersed communities of exiles. Whether most of these letters were sent through normal postal channels or entrusted with the numerous Acadian exiles who secured employment as seamen aboard British merchantmen is not known. The latter possibility seems more likely, for some letters are known to have eluded government censors during the period of exile.

What is certain, however, is that many letters found their destination and that those that did were circulated widely within individual groups of dispersed Acadians. In 1763 Acadians exiled to England, for example, notified friends and relatives in the British seaboard colonies of the diplomatic attempt by the French government to end their detention by British authorities. Overjoyed by the news, groups of exiles from throughout the seaboard colonies responded with petitions for assistance from Louis XV. Later, in November 1764, a group of Acadians preparing to leave Halifax, Nova Scotia for Saint-Domingue, received correspondence from relatives in the French sugar island warning of maltreatment by colonial authorities, who had pressed them into service as forced laborers. Heeding the warning, the Halifax Acadians changed their itinerary and sailed instead for New Orleans via Saint-Domingue. Following their arrival and settlement in Louisiana, these Acadians, in turn, contacted relatives in Maryland, Pennsylvania and France, urging them to migrate to the Mississippi Valley. In each case, these letters achieved the desired results. The scant available evidence suggests that the trans-Atlantic correspondence continued, though more haphazardly, for several decades, at least until the arrival of nearly 1,600 Acadians from France in 1785.

3 Often confused with Maryland in contemporary records.

4 These statistics are drawn from Mathé Allain, trans., "Records of Belle-Île-en-Mer", *Attakapas Gazette*, XVI (1981), pp. 103-10, 165-72; XVII (1982), pp. 36-45, 76-83, 123-31, 183-92; XVIII (1983), pp. 73-80, 108-13. In practically every instance, the above-mentioned individuals were heads of households, indicating also the location of numerous children.

5 See, for example, Petition to Unzaga [3 of 17 -- 17.65%], 16 October 1773, legajo 189A, folio 498, Papeles Procedentes de Cuba, Archivo General de Indias [AGI] Seville, Spain; List of Persons Unhappy with Bellevue's Land Survey [6 of 53 -- 11.32%], 1773, legajo 189A, folio 511, Papeles Procedentes de Cuba, AGI.

The following excerpts from official correspondence [in their original spelling and punctuation] constitute the known extant references to the exiles' phantom letters in primary source collections.

CARL A. BRASSEAU

Document One⁶

... Parmi ceux qui oné été transportés en Angleterre, un grand nombre a succombé à la misere et aux maladie qu'elle entraîne. Ceux qui y ont échapé sont detenus dans divers Ports d'angleterre et principalement à Liverpool. Ceux ci ayant fait parvenir a M. le Duc de Nivernois une requete dans laquelle, après luy avoir rendre attachement pour la france, ne cessoit de leur attirer, ils reclamoient Sa protection, et comme francois et comme malheureux son Ex^{ce} jugea à propos de leur depecher secretement le Sr de la Rochette. . . .

Le Sr de la Rochette partit le 26 x^{bre} 1762 et arriva à Liverpool le 31. Il se transporta au quartier des acadiens, et après s'etre fait connoitre a ceux qui avoient envoyé la requete a M. le Duc de Nivernois, en leur produisant cette meme requete Il leur fit part de sa mission et des ordre qu'il avois recus de son Ex^{ce} Quelques precautions qu'il eut prisent pour le engager à moderer leur joy. il ne put empecher que les cris de vive le Roy ne se fissent entendre de leur quartier au point meme que quelques Anglois en furent scandaliser. . . .

Lorsqu'ils furent revenus de ce point exces de joye le Sr de la Rochette obtint d'eux les eclaircissemens suivant sur leur situation actuelle.

Depuis sept ans on les a detenus dans la ville de Liverpool ou ils ont été transportés de la Virginie, quelques mois après leur arrivée on leur assigna un certain nombre de maisons dans un quartier separé en leur donnant la ville pour prison. on assigna pareillement une paye de six sols par jour a tous ceux qui avoient plus de 7 ans et de trois sols aux enfans au dessous de cet age.

Ils arriverent a Liverpool au nombre de 336. et ils sont reduits aujourd'hui à 224. pendant les Sept années de leur detention on les a peu inquietés: mais depuis que la Paix est decidée on ne cesse de travailler a les Seduire. Langton Commissaire Anglois des Prisonniers francois des fit paroître devant lui dans les premiers jours de decembre, et leur representa que la france les ayant abandonné depuis si longtems, le Roi d'angleterre vouloit bien les regarder comme ses Sujets, et qu'il les renverroit en Acadie ou on leur vendroit leurs terre et leurs Troupeaux. Ils repondirent tous unanimement qu'ils étoient francois et que c'étoit au Roy de france a decider de leur sort.

Le Comm^{re} les trata de rebelles. Il les menaca de les faire renfermer et de reduire leur paye; mais comme rien ne les intimidoit, il eut recours aun moyen qui par l'attachement qu'ont les Acadiens pour leur religion Sembloit etre infaillible.

Il Seduisit un certain Pretre Ecossois directeur des Acadiens, en lui promettant la Place de Curé principal des Villages Catholiques d'Acadie. Cet homme leur precha des sermons Scandaleux, et 54 parmi lesquels sont presque tous les vieillants se determinerent d'apres ces sermons a repasser dans leurs Pays. on doit dire

6 Memoir on the Acadians, February 1763, C11D, vol. 8, folios. 242-51, Archives des Colonies, AN.

cependant qu'ils n'ont voulu Signer aucun des ecrits que le Comm^{re} leur a fait presenter. Le reste aux nombre de 170 personnes faisant 38 familles etoit presque ebranlé et auroit suivi cet exemple sans le nommé Normand du Plessis Pilote francois né au havre et rancon a Liverpool pour M. de la Touche de la Martinique.

Duplessis engagea les Acadiens à presenter une requete à M. le Duc de Nivernois avant de se laisser aller aux insinuations du Commissaire et du Pretre. Et d'y determinerent; mais comme le Commissaire ouvre toutes les Lettres qu'ils ecrivent ou qu'ils recevent, ils firent entre eux une contribution de quatre Guinées pour envoyer un Exprès a Londres. Cet exprès fut un Irlandois Catholique marié à une Acadienne, et qui demande pour sa recompense qu'on veuille bien lui permettre de Suivre les Acadiens par tout ou il plaira au Roi de les établir.

Les dits Acadiens detenus a Liverpool ayant fait Savoir a M. le Duc de Nivernois qu'il se trouvoit encore pres de 600 de leurs freres à Southampton, Penryn, et Bristol, son Ex^{ce} donna ordre au S^r de la Rochette de se rendre secretementd dans ces trois villes et d'y faire usage des Instructions qu'il avoit recues pour Liverpool au mois de X^{bre} 1762. . . .

Le S^r de la Rochette arriva a Bristol le 31 Janv^{er}. il y trouva les Acadiens au nombre de 184 personnes qui s'abandonnent entières^t a la protection du Roi. Ils n'eurent aucune peine a prendre confiance dans le S. de la Rochette, par ce qu'ils avoient vu les deux Deputés qui de Southampton l'étoient rendu aupres de M. de Duc de Nivernois.

Il y a une defiance generale qui prevaut plus ou moins dhez tous les Acadiens et dont voici les ppaux. motifs.

1^o Leurs freres qui furent transporter en france au commencement de la guerre y resterent plusieurs mois sans recevoir aucun secours. Ils craignent d'éprouver le meme sort en arrivant dans le Royaume.

2^o Ils craignent d'etre separés ou transportés dans les Antilles.

3^o Leurs Pretres actuels qui sont Anglais ou Ecossois et que l'on a flattés de l'esperance de devenir leurs Curés en Acadie, ne cessent de les exhorter a renoncer a la france qu'ils leur represen comme un Pays abandonné de Dieu.

4^o Ils se flattent toujours de retrouver an Acadie et d'y jouir du libre exercice de leur Religion sous protection du Roi. Ceux meme qui Sest en France, à Boulogne, S^t Malo et Rochefort persistent dans cette opinion et l'ont meme ecrit aux acadiens en Angleterre.

5^o Ils craignent que le Roy n'abandonne leurs freres disperser dans les Colonies angloises du Continent Septentrional de l'Amerique. Ceux là forment le plus grand nombre, et ils Sont plus de 10,000 qui meurent de faim? De tems en tems il s'en sauve quelques uns en Europe, et deux familles de ces malheureux sont arrivés, il y a quelques semaines de Boston à Bristol. Les Anglois cependant en transportens tous les jours, et lorsque le Chev. de Ternay s'empara de Terreneuve, ils en firent passer a la Nouvelle Angleterre (ou il y en a deja un grand nombre) 700 qui se trouvoient encore a Chebouctou ou aux environs. . . .

Document Two⁷

A M. Mistral
A Compiègne le 13 7^{bre} 1766

Jay Recu M. avec votre Lettre du 12 du mois d'ér La Copie de Celle que le Né Semer⁸ Accadien Etabli a la Louissiane a Ecrit a Son pere, qui reside au havre. vous me marquez que Les details que Semer fait dans Sa lettre de la Bonte du sol et du Climat de cette Colonie et des avantages qu'on luy a fait ainsy qua tous Ses Camarades a fait naitre parmi toutes les familles accadiennes qui Sont au havre l'envie de passee dans cette colonie et quils demandent a etre transporter au frais du Roy avec tous Leurs Effets.

Il est d'autant nons possible d'avoir Egard a cette demande qui dun Cote La Colonie de la Louisianne n'appartenant plus a la france. Les frais considerables qu'occasioneroit le transport detant de personnes seroit en pur perte pour S M et que de l'autre le Gouvernement Soccupe actuellement des moyens de places dans le le Royaume toutes les familles de l'amerique septentrionale et que ce projet ne tardera pas a avoir son Execution vous pouvez en prevenir les Accadiens de Votre departement.

Document Three⁹

. . . un Acadien, m'a dit qu'ils venoient de recevoir une lettre de l'isle St. pierre, par la qu'elle leurs Compatriotes, leurs mandent qu'ils iroient les trouver, Si les Espagnols vouloient les bien traiter, cet homme m'a demandé ce qu'ils devoient répondre, après lui avoir rappellé les bontés que vous avés pour eux et la reconnaissance qu'ils devoient toujours avoir pour tous les bienfaits et charités que sa Majesté Catholique¹⁰ exerceoit a leur égard, il m'a dit quil alloit écrire une lettre Signée des notables et principaux pour engages leurs freres a venir les joindre et comme je lui ay demandé combien il en pourroit venir, il m'a répondu deux mil.

7 Duc de Praslin [Minister of Marine] to Mistral [Intendant at Le Havre], 13 September 1766, Archives des Colonies, Series B (ordres du roi, correspondance envoyée), volume 125, folio 450vo, AN.

8 Jean-Baptiste Semer, an Attakapas resident, arrived at Louisiana in 1765. The 1774 Attakapas census indicates that Semer and his wife had four children, 36 cattle and eight pigs. See Jacqueline K. Voorhies, *Some Late Eighteenth-Century Louisianians* (Lafayette, 1973), p. 280.

9 Charles Philippe Aubry [former acting French governor of Louisiana] to Antonio de Ulloa [Spanish governor of Louisiana], 3 June 1767, legajo 187A, non-paginated, Papeles Procedentes de Cuba, AGI.

10 The King of Spain.

Document Four¹¹

EXCELLENT SIR:

I have enclosed to your Excellency a faithfull copy of a letter dated New Orleans July 31, 1767 it having no nominal or manual signatur Credit could not be given to it here; besides it hints only at the questions pointed at, permit me to request an answer more explicit. Grant me also the favor [of] your pardon, if I undertake to acquaint you, that a British subject is free, that he may emigrate Where he pleases. In time of peace, nothing Can stop him but his creditors, Should he have any. Your Court and governors of his Catholic Majesty, need by under no apprehensions, of Kindling any Jealously in the Breast of [the] British Ministry on that account, because a clearance from the officer of the port where the adventurers Would ship themselves as migrators is not only a passport and permission, but a positive assent of his Britannic Majesty ratified by his officer affixing his seal to it. The Letter of the 31 July says, land are granted in property Without fee, or future taxation. It does not inform What is the lot of individuals, or What people of property, may purchase or What price.

Was this certyified [*sic*] with the other proposal of y[ours] of 2d may many Who are the descendants of pure noble and ancient Blood Would settle among you. Objection: unless we have his most Catholic Majestys [*sic*] royal assurance of Irish or English priests the Migrants could not comply With [the] dutys incumbent of a Roman Catholic, nor have any spiritual consolation at the hour of death. This the letter Says his Catholic Majesty shall be necessarily consulted on; all that would enter to plant there familys [*sic*] among you could not have objection to taking the oath of allegiance to his Catholic Majesty, as their intentions Would be to become his subjects; in consequence, must conform to all the Laws and customs as every good [subject] should doe [*sic*] Where he resides. None of the roman Catholics of this province have never betrayed there [*sic*] allegiance.

Nor it never has been demanded of them by his Britannic Majesty. The fertility of your soil and healthiness of the climate are well Known from history, and converse With those Who have travelled and resided there. We have seen many letters from the Acadians to their Countrymen, praying them to speed themselves to partake of their good fortune in that fruitfull [*sic*] region [Louisiana], as they could not have been a Sufficent time in the Country, to render an account of it, and in general, but illiterate people not great confidence could be reposed in their relations; in many essential particulars they are very much Wanting. First how they are served or the natives in the Country, With priest or Missionar[ie]s; New Orleans we Know, does not want them. Are the seculars or what religious orders are among you. We Know, since his Catholic Majestys [*sic*] late orders no jesuits reside in his extensive dominions. Your Excellency may be assured, there are hundreds of roman Catholic familys [*sic*] here, to whom the advantages granted to the Acadiens [*sic*]

11 Henry Jerningham to Antonio de Ulloa, 28 November 1767, in Lawrence Kinnaird, trans. and ed., *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-97: Translations of Materials from the Spanish Archives in the Bancroft Library* (Washington, D.C., 1949), vol. II, pp. 36-7.

Who are gone among you Would be a great blessing to them; but men of property and fortunes must Know before they dispose of their estates here on What terms they can acquire an equivalent among you which is not to be attached so as to leave no further doubts among us. You Can not Expect, on such a treaty, any person to appear authorized With a Public character because it relates solely to the roman Catholics.

Who Can not represent or serve, in any office under the British government. Secondly tho[ugh] the constitution does not impede his Subjects from migrating to any part of the globe Sound police dictates to her as to all other nations, to Encourage to encrease [*sic*] rather than decrease of their inhabitants.

I am your Excellency's [*sic*] most humble and obedient Servant

Henry Jerningham,
m Doctor and Eques Angelicanus

Document Five¹²

Most Excellent Sir:

The Catholics in Maryland, having received the unsigned reply which I wrote them on last July 31, a copy of which I sent Your Excellency, have again written to me through the recently arrived Acadians. From the copies of the two letters which I have received from them and send to Your Excellency, you will note fully what they have to say. The signs are for the purpose of making the letters recognizable...

Document Six¹³

I have daly [*sic*] propositions from a number of French familys of fortune & Consequence [*sic*] to come over & Settle on our Side of the Mississipi, they want large tracts of Land, as they have plenty of Black Cattle and Negroes. They want a Town to be Layd out for them opposite to point Coupe [*sic*], of which I made mention in my last, and a priest to be allow'd them by Government, and named the Curate of Mobile, as he is looked upon to be a very good man, and much attached to the English, I would propose a Sallery for him of 50 Guin[ies] to be continued for two or three years, until the Inhabitants are settled and grow rich. They offer to build a Hansom [*sic*] Church Themselves. Be assured my Lord taking this little notice of the new Comers would induce a Number of good familys [*sic*] to come over to us, and at lest [*sic*] 350 of the Arcadian [*sic*] familys [*sic*] if these latter meet any Encouragement; I was myself at the houses of many of them & am fully well acquainted with their Sentiments. I think I could be answerable to Your Lordship to procure Every one of them, when I receive Your Lordships Sentiments on that head. The French in & about Orleans write me they are more and more discontented with the Spanish Government & Seem greatly pleas'd with the

12 Ulloa to Grimaldi, 11 February 1768, in Kinnaird, trans. and ed., *Spain in the Mississippi Valley, 1765-97*, vol. II, pp. 40-42.

13 Montfort Browne to the Earl of Hillsboro, 10 August 1768, C.O. 184/5, Colonial Office Records, vol. 585, pp. 165-7, Public Record Office, London.

accounts they receive daly [*sic*] of the good treatment their Countrymen receive in Cannada [*sic*] and the Cadea [Acadia] Islands.¹⁴ You see My Lord nobody can be more Sanguin to see This part of the province flourish; I am now Endeavoring to put a Stop to the Embarkation of a Number of Arcadians who I hear are going from different parts of the Continent to the french Islands, particularly to Cape Francois, at which place I hear many of them are promised Land. As I hear there are Some Interior Governments to be made, and that from Fort Bute to the Illinois is to be *one*; I humbly beg leave to put your Lordship in mind that Should You think me Capable & deserving of so great a favour as one of them, I shall Exert my utmost Endeavours to merrit [*sic*] Your approbation[.]

Document Seven¹⁵

Le nommé Augustin Boudreau¹⁶ Acadien Etablie dans ce pays,¹⁷ ayant recue d'un de ces oncles, une lettre par laquel il luy fait a scavoir, que Monsieur Chabot Negotiant a Québecq ayant esté payé des papiers qu'il avoit entre ses mains, il se trouve avoir au dit Augustin Boudreau une Somme de 7800#, Mais la Difficulté de sa faire parvenir cette Somme avec Sureté, Il desireroit luy même faire ce voyage, c'est en conséquence de quoy Il a l'honneur de se presenter à vous, pour suplier votre Bonté de vouloir bien luy accordée un passeport pour passer Sur quelque Batiments Anglais,¹⁸ comme estant la seule voix, la plus courte, et la moins couteuse, de passer de ce pays en Canada et qu'apres avoir terminé ces affaires, Il S'allé reviendra Joindres Sa familles.

Ce que je me suis fait l'honneur de vous marquer par ma précédent touchant le départ de quelque Acadiens, Je vous Dirait que le Nombre en augment tout les jours, et je crois qu'il y en a déjà de partie, de ceux Etablie dans la paroisse de l'ascension, d'ailleu il n'y a rien autre chose qui merite que je vous informer.

14 An apparent reference to Cape Breton Island and to Ile Saint-Jean, present-day Prince Edward Island, which had been recently recolonized by returning Acadian exiles. This could also be a reference to the new Acadian settlements at St. Pierre and Miquelon.

15 Nicolas Verret [commandant at the Cabannocé post] to Luis de Unzaga [Governor of Louisiana], 25 September 1771, legajo 188C, folio 72, Papes Procedentes de Cuba, AGI.

16 According to Acadian historian and genealogist Bona Arsenaull, Augustin Boudreaux, born ca. 1745 at Grand Pré, Nova Scotia, was the son of Pierre Boudreaux and Marie Préjean. He married Osite Hébert at St. Jacques de Cabannocé on 7 January 1771. See Bona Arsenaull, *Histoire et généalogie des Acadiens* (Québec, 1978), vol. VI, p. 2427.

17 The Cabannocé post, present-day St. James Parish, Louisiana.

18 England obtained free navigation of the Mississippi River through the Treaty of Paris (1763).

Document Eight¹⁹

Monsieur,

Jais un veritable chagrin de navoir put Jusqua present vous envoyer Coppie des lettre que les acadien on Recue de france, de leurs amis, une des lettre at Etté perdue dans une poche de Cullotte qui at Etté misse a la lesive, et lautre at Etté envoyer aux atakapas, pour Rejouir Ceux des acadiens qui attende de leurs parens et amis. Je puis assurer votre Seigneurie, que Jai vue une de Ces lettre datter de Nante qui annoncee, lembarquement de 60. famille pour ce pays²⁰—au mois de may dernier, et la commune opinions est quil Devois venir Dans Ce pays 1500 personne, Sous la protection de Sa Majestée Catholique. Beaucoup D’habitans Dicy Craigne que Ces famille on veritablement EDtté embarqué a Nante, mais Conduit a Cayenne Cest monsieur tous ce que Je puis avoir l’honneur de vous Dire pour le present

Jai l’honneur DEstre tres Respectueusement

Monsieur

Votre tres humble Et
tres obseissant Serviteur

Louis Judice²¹

a la fourche le
19 X^{bre} 1784

19 Judice to [Esteban Miro], 19 December 1784, legajo 197, folios 359-60, Papeles Procedentes de Cuba, AGI. This date is evidently in error. See footnote 20.

20 This is an apparent reference to the first two Acadian “expeditions” of 1785. The *Bon Papa*, which sailed from Paimboeuf, France, on 10 May 1785, with 36 Acadian families (156 individuals) aboard. The vessel docked at New Orleans on 29 July 1785. The frigate *Bergère*, which sailed from Paimboeuf on 12 May 1785, carried 73 Acadian families numbering 273 persons. The ship arrived at New Orleans on 15 August 1785. The third Acadian transport, the *Beaumont*, did not sail from France until 11 June 1785. No Acadians sailed from France for Louisiana before May 1785; nor were any Acadians sent from Nantes to Cayennes in May 1784. Negotiations between Spanish agents and French mercantile firms for the use of merchantmen to transport Acadians from France to Louisiana began in March 1784 and continued throughout the year.

21 Louis Judice, Sr. served as co-commandant and later as commandant in Louisiana from the mid-1760s to the mid-1790s.