

CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST BROUSSARD IN ACADIA

Three decades before he would become the father of the most famous, and, by most accounts, the most ferocious freedom-fighter in French Canada, François Brossard paid a widow for the clothes of her drowned husband René Bonnin, a trapper. It was an obscure yet poignant moment in the history of the struggling colony known then as Acadia, or, in French, Acadie. Nothing could be wasted in the new colony. Sentiment gave way to the practical. Sudden death was common. Survival was the ultimate prize and it was won by the strong, the lucky, the clever, and, most of all, the determined.

The purchase of the clothes was documented by Acadian geneologist, Stephen White, *Centre d'études acadiennes* at the University of Moncton, New Brunswick. This transaction confirms that François was in Acadie as early as February 3, 1672.

It was an epoch and a way of life similar to that of upstate New York as depicted by James Fenimore Cooper in *The Last of the Mohicans*. Shortly, by historical measure, Acadie would become embroiled in the same international conflict of that historical novel. However, the Acadian story concluded with unimaginably tragic results. Acadia was only sixty-seven years in existence when Brossard bought a dead man's clothes. Although there had already been hostilities between the colony and neighboring British settlers, François Brossard had no way of knowing that the community, as he knew it, would crumble only eighty-four years later. With the colony nearly at the halfway point between its founding and its disaster, he had yet to marry, much less conceive either his famous sons or the events that would transpire to displace his progeny halfway across the North American continent and into history and legend.

On June 26, 1604, Pierre Dugua, Samuel de Champlain and seventy-seven other men had arrived at ill-fated St. Croix Island (now on the U.S.-Canadian border in Maine) to carve out the first French settlement in North America. Dugua, a nobleman known as Sieur de Monts, is remembered for besting the English in establishing a settlement in North America.¹ Dugua sailed with two galleons into Passamaquoddy Bay and up a river to an island that appeared defensible and well-

suites to his planned settlement. Armed with a grant from the king of France, his mission was to colonize the land and bring Christianity to its inhabitants. Dugua named the island St. Croix because it was near the confluence of rivers resembling the arms of a cross.

The settlers cleared a site, erected dwellings, a kitchen, storehouse, blacksmith shop and chapel, and planted gardens. In early October, 1604, not long after Champlain returned from a historic voyage to Mount Desert Island, the first snow fell, setting the stage for an unusually harsh winter. By Christmas, the river was choked with ice floes, cutting off access to the mainland. The settlers ran low on drinking water, fresh food and firewood. They developed scurvy, surviving on preserved food, wine and melted snow. Thirty-five of the men died and were buried on the island. After a supply ship arrived in June, Dugua dismantled the settlement and moved it to Nova Scotia at a spot Champlain named Port Royal.

French colonists were sent to Acadie on orders of King Henry IV of France. The 1604 settlement came three years before English colonists landed in Jamestown and sixteen years before the Pilgrims sailed the Mayflower to Plymouth, Massachusetts. They began to settle and cultivate the land to develop a foothold for France's first settlement in North America. Though Acadia was small, it was strategically important because it lay close to New England, the mouth of the St. Lawrence River, and the North Atlantic fishing banks.² In 1632, Cardinal Richelieu, Minister to King Louis XIII, organized the departure to Acadia of French families of diverse origins and professions.

In 1678, François Brossard, the first known Brossard in Acadie, married Catherine Richard (daughter of Michel and Madeline Richard) and followed his friend Pierre Thibaudot to settle the hamlet of Chipoudie (now known as Hopewell Hill, New Brunswick) in what was then considered mainland Acadie near the Petitcouidiac River.³ Eleven children were born of their marriage:⁴ Madeleine (b. 1681, married Pierre Landry); Pierre (b. 1684, married Marguerite Bourg); Marie Anne (b. 1686, married Rene Pierre "dit Laverduke" Doucet); Catherine (b. 1690, married Charles Landry); Elizabeth (b. 1693, married Pierre Bourg); François (b. 1694); Claude (b. 1695, married Anne Babin); Françoise (b. 1697); Alexandre (b. 1699, married Marguerite Thibodeaux); Joseph *dit Beausoleil* (b. 1702, married Agnès Thibodeaux) and Jean Baptiste (b. 1703, married Cecile Babin).⁵

origin of the name of the colony is in fact believed by some linguists to come from the Mi'Kmaq word "*cadique*," meaning a good place to camp or settle. Remarkably, the Mi'Kmaq saved some French colonists from starving one winter by inviting the settlers to live with them. The two peoples maintained a rigorous and flourishing trade in furs, the basis of the early colony's economy. The Mi'Kmaq and Acadians developed intertwined links through marriages, mutually sustained admiration, and protective alliances.⁹

Early in his life, François came to be known by the British as a dissident. About 1713, shortly after Nova Scotia became a British possession, he was imprisoned along with four other Acadians from Port Royal. This was a gesture of retribution by the newly-arrived British authorities for the seizing of a British soldier by an Acadian, Abraham Gaudet. Although François was liberated from confinement shortly thereafter, he remained fiercely anti-British for the rest of his life. His militancy and hatred of the British profoundly influenced his children – particularly *Beausoleil*.

According to church records, François Brossard died unexpectedly on December 31, 1716, without receiving the final sacraments of the Catholic Church. Although there are no records for substantiation, it is believed that his wife Catherine Richard died in the late 1750s at an advanced age during the tumultuous period known as *le Grand Dérangement*, or the Acadian exile, which commenced in 1755.¹⁰