

French Connections: New France & the Old Colony

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French Connections explores **three** New World encounters between the French and the residents of the Old Colony.

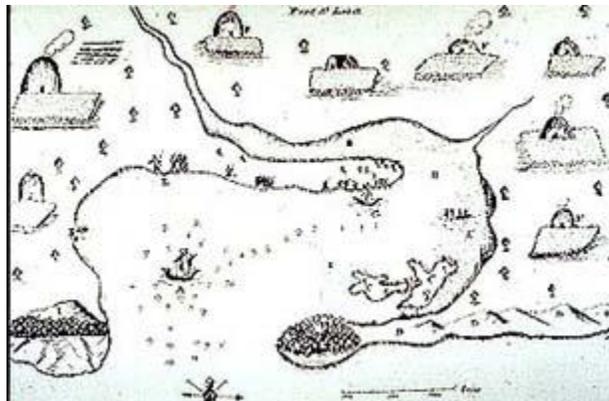
The **first**, a tale of adventure, is Frenchman Samuel de Champlain's exploration of the New England coast. The **second** encounter, a tale of romance, is the Cape Cod shipwreck of French physician/surgeon Francis LeBaron and his eventual acceptance into the small settlement of Plymouth. The **third** is the tragic tale of the expulsion of thousands of French-speaking Acadians from their homes in Canada; ordered in 1755 by the British, the deed was dutifully (albeit uncomfortably) carried out by General John Winslow of Marshfield, Massachusetts.

The First Tale - Champlain

2004 is the 400th anniversary of Samuel de Champlain's third voyage to America and the founding of France's first permanent colony in the New World.

In March of 1604, Champlain set sail from Le Havre, France, commissioned to found a colony for the purpose of trade. Over a period of three years he explored the length of the New England coast south to Martha's Vineyard, and made the first detailed maps of the coast.

Champlain arrived in the area we know as Plymouth in the summer of 1605, and named it "Port St. Louis." The map he drew of the harbor and its surrounding Wampanoag village was engraved later in Paris for the publication of *Les Voyages de Sieur de Champlain*, published in 1613.



The large number of Native People living in “Port St. Louis” in 1605 persuaded the Frenchman to look further north for a less populated area, and for the more abundant fur trade of a colder climate.

The Second Tale - LeBaron

As French and English forces struggled for control of the lands and resources of the New World through the 17th and 18th centuries, tales of war and sorrow dominated encounters between the two. One happy exception is the story of Francis LeBaron (1668-1704) who became one of Plymouth’s earliest and most distinguished medical practitioners. In 1832, physician and town historian James Thacher wrote:

1696. - A French privateer, fitted out at Bourdeaux, cruising on the American coast, was wrecked in Buzzard’s Bay. The crew were carried prisoners to Boston; the [ship’s] surgeon, Dr. Francis LeBaron, came to Plymouth, and having performed a surgical operation, and the town being at the time destitute of a physician, the selectmen petitioned the executive, Lieut. Governor Stoughton, for his liberation, that he might settle in this town. This was granted, and he married Mary Wilder, and practiced physic here during his life, but died in 1704, at the early age of 36 years...



Francis LeBaron's tombstone on
Plymouth's Burial Hill.
Photograph by Anthony I. Baker

LeBaron was a Frenchman, a prisoner of war, an enemy to England and to New England - yet a single demonstration of his surgical skills overrode his origins and gained him a place in the community. Francis’ son, Lazarus, his grandsons, Joseph and Lazarus, and members of succeeding generations of LeBarons followed in his footsteps, serving as physicians in Plymouth. In the late 19th century, the celebration of the nation’s bicentennial helped to fan the already existing popular interest in the founding of the country. The market for written and visual imagery describing the people, places and events of the nation’s colonial past blossomed. Stories and novels based on a true character but embroidered and enlarged to the point of fiction filled one market niche. Often, the tales reflected late 19th century tastes and values rather than those of the period in which they took place.

The young French surgeon's mysterious origins and dramatic story fueled the imagination of novelist Jane G. Austin. In ***A Nameless Nobleman*** (1881), Austin wove a romantic tale of an idealistic French youth who rejected his aristocratic family to study medicine and travel the world on his own.

Shipwrecked in the new world, Francis is saved by a brave young woman, Mary Wilde, who hides him and cares for him until his fine character and valuable surgical skills become apparent to the community, and he is invited to stay. Mary defends Francis' right to keep his past a secret (even from her), for in the new world respect is earned, not inherited. Because he will not reveal his family name (intimating it would be readily recognized - even by Americans!), Mary determines to call him "the Baron." Thus begins the fictionalized saga of the "Labaron" family in America. Austin continues the story in ***Dr. LeBaron and his Daughters: A Story of the Old Colony*** (1890). New York artist Frederick Dielman transferred Austin's romantic vision to paper.



Detail of *The Marriage of Francis LeBaron*,
by Frederick Dielman (1847-1935),
New York, 1894, etching.

The Third Tale - Acadia

The third French connection concerns the role of John Winslow (1703-1774) of Marshfield in the tragic history of the expulsion of 7,000 Acadian families from their homes in Canada in 1755.



Portrait of General John Winslow

John was the great-grandson of Mayflower passengers Edward Winslow and Susanna White Winslow. He rose quickly in the ranks of the colonial British military. Campaigns in the Caribbean and Canada preceded his expedition to remove the Acadians from their homes. As soldiers far from home often did, John Winslow kept a diary which is treasured today as the “best firsthand account of the physical removal of the Acadians...” (Plank 2001, 146). Not insensible to the great tragedy that would follow, Winslow wrote, “this affair is more grievous to me than any service I was ever employed in...” (quoted in Coons/Krusell 1975, 27).

The Acadians, settlers from different parts of France, began arriving in a region of the New World they called “l’Acadie” (in modern-day Nova Scotia), in 1630. There they maintained their agricultural lifestyle and French identity. Under the terms of the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, however, France gave Acadia and Newfoundland to the British. Cut loose from their mother country, the Acadians retained their common language and religion as well as the independent spirit developed over the decades as Acadians. When they refused after 40 years to take the oath of loyalty to King George, the British sought to neutralize their identity by scattering them among their colonies. Winslow saw to the removal of over 2000 men, women and children from Grand Pre. At least 4000 more were taken from the coasts of the Bay of Fundy, put on vessels, often with no provisions, and carried away, their homes and fields burned. It is estimated that southeastern Massachusetts received about 2000 persons, Connecticut 700; others were removed to Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, North and South Carolina, Georgia and New York (Plank 2001, 148-149).

Nearly a century after the expulsion, poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wove a romantic tale around a young Acadian woman in ***Evangeline*** (1847). Expelled from her homeland and separated from her lover, Evangeline’s courage and faithfulness lead her first to Cajun Louisiana and later to Philadelphia. They do not, however, lead her back to her own land. Rather, her sterling qualities are viewed as the means of her transformation into an American. Ironically, this story of the integration of foreigners into American culture brought Acadian culture into the popular imagination.

Selected bibliography

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