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# "Evangeline," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's North American Tragedy

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Arthur P. Dudden

September 9, 2004

#### "EVANGELINE," Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's North American Tragedy

Broadly speaking, most educated Americans know this poem exists. A good number could even fit its title into place in a cross-words puzzle. Many of them, moreover, could even recite the opening lines of this lengthy epic poem and indeed from time to time may do so, though likely not the entire Prelude. Very few, among my acquaintances can, in truth, attest to having ever read the entire poem.

Most of these partial readers are also aware that the setting of the poem is far away somewhere in Canada. Unfortunately, Canada's geography continues to be a terra incognita to all too many of my fellow citizens. Only a handful among those familiar with something of the poem "Evangeline" know, furthermore, that its tragic ending occurs in the city of Philadelphia, or why it does. Longfellow's "Evangeline," one of the greatest of all the works of one of the best known of American poets, sheds a radiance about the life of Canada's Acadians and the history of Acadia. It was published in 1847, ninety-two years after the decisive point of its tragic tale, and since then it has reappeared in many editions in the English language as well as numerous translations. It is still popular and embodies such melody and feeling, such pathos and simplicity, that comprise intimations of the poem's immortality.

I shall begin by reading to you the eighteen lines of Longfellow's Prelude to his poem "Evangeline," which is no fewer than fourteen hundred lines overall. [Click [here](#) for the entire poem.] Much of Longfellow's verse needs to be performed, but demands a polished performer. Done right, Evangeline, which has often been criticized for the regularity of its meter, can sound quite impressive.

ACADIE AND ACADIANS (per Canada's National Parks and National Historic Sites "Welcome" sheet)

In 1524, Verrazano applied the name Arcadia to the region he was exploring along the Atlantic coast of North America. Later maps show the name evolving to Acadie, and being used to designate the area that is now Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, parts of Quebec and Maine. In mid-17th century, a group of French settlers came to Acadie to establish a French colony. Today several million people claim descent as Acadians from this original group of about 500 people.

Note, however, that the Acadians were not the first people from France known to have come to North America. Red Bay, Labrador, on the remote Straits of Belle Isle separating Newfoundland from Labrador, was settled annually during the summers of the latter half of the 15th century long before Columbus arrived in the New World, by Basque whalers from SW France and NW Spain. Red Bay takes its name from the heaps of shipboard ballast discarded there by these whale hunters, this ballast being comprised of shards of broken rooftop tiles. (Sample & Photos.) Note, also, that the hinterland of North America by the early 17th century had known Dutch, English, and French explorers led by Samuel de Champlain, and likewise fur traders and trappers, while the Spanish gold or silver seekers and priests largely confined themselves to the Floridas, Texas, and the Southwest. Huron Indians were middlemen between French traders (via Quebec, Montreal, and the Ottawa River) and the hunting Indians of the Great Lakes and valleys of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers. Coureurs de bois (rangers of the woods), who were pairs of hunters and Jesuit missionaries, spread France's influence far and wide. Place names still attest to their efforts: Duquesne, Detroit, Duluth, Marquette, Joliet, Saint.Louis, New Orleans, Louisiana, Prairie de Chien, and Coeur d'Alene.

The World Wars of the 18th century between Protestant England and Catholic France, aided by their Native American and European allies, began as dynastic struggles but grew over time into an enormous contest for the balance of power in Europe and empire overseas. The prizes won by Britain in 1763 were America and India. The

balance of power in Europe and empire overseas. The prizes won by Britain in 1763 were America and India. The Acadians of Longfellow's tragedy became helpless pawns in 1755 within this maelstrom unable to control their own destiny.

### GRAND PRÈ

For the first half of the 18th century, Grand Prè (French for great meadow) was the most important Acadian population center for Nova Scotia which came under British rule in 1713. 150 to 200 houses there were spread along 21/2 miles of tidal marshland, with dykes holding back the ocean. Agriculture, fruit picking, hunting, and fishing brought prosperity to these farm folk. Asked to swear allegiance to the British crown, many signed a conditional oath in 1730, when they were promised they would not be forced to take up arms against the French. The situation changed drastically in the 1740s and 1750s as wars broke out repeatedly between England and France. The British governor in Halifax decided to settle the Acadian question once and for all. In what would become known as The Great Upheaval (Le Grand Dérangement), expulsion of the Acadians from the lands they held for up to a century became British policy. During 1755 alone, 6,500 were expatriated, mainly to British colonies in North America. In all, 14,000 Acadians including those from Grand Prè were deported up to 1763, when the Treaty of Paris ended the war. Longfellow's poem, *Evangeline*, is about fictional persons who typified the tragedy of the deportation from Grand Prè.

[Professor Dudden then outlined the poem, asking the audience to follow his remarks on their handouts. He concluded, by saying . . .]

My purpose in choosing this topic, based on repeated readings while vacationing in Atlantic Canada, has been drastically altered to consider the opportunity for research into the fate of the Acadians. A fresh treatment of this topic could well begin in Philadelphia, not just end there, as it did for Gabriel and Evangeline in Longfellow's fiction. Some 500 of them were dumped into Philadelphia, into "a concentration camp," according to Buck Scott, himself of Cajun descent and a historian of their Great Upheaval.