

The Annunciation of Big Bubba: Or, reflections on writing history in two worlds



In the summer of 1999, a few months before leaving my hometown of Logan, Utah, to attend graduate school in Chicago, I took a temp job laying a faux-hardwood floor in a local toy store. On hands and knees, my little crew (me, plus two riotously profane sub-contractors from California) crept from the front entrance toward the stockroom, sticking pieces of perfectly grained plastic onto the glue-covered cement slab. Behind us, electricians from Idaho followed on rolling scaffolds, installing light fixtures and doing occult things with wires high in the ceiling—from whence would soon come the Annunciation of Big Bubba.

Big Bubba was the head electrician's son, a large, bowling-pin shaped man of about twenty. Outfitted in trucker's cap and Wranglers, he looked for all the world like he was about to hold someone upside-down over a junior high washroom toilet. As Big Bubba loomed above us, one of the California guys asked me a hard question: "So, what's taking you to Chi-town?" Having long ago learned not to broadcast in public my intention to study eighteenth-century France, I ran through my catalog of lies (law school, commodities trading, professional baseball) before settling on a version of the truth. "I'm going to get a doctorate in European history," I offered. Pausing and puzzling, the floor-

layer wondered aloud, "Why would *anybody* want to learn about *European* history?" And then, with the authority of a messenger from the heavens, his face bathed in light of his own creation, Big Bubba leaned over the edge of his scaffold and proclaimed: "Cuz that way, if he goes to the bathroom next to ya, he can tell if *yer a-peein'*!"

As you can imagine, I've told the story of the Annunciation of Big Bubba a lot over the years. It gets laughs. But I've come to see what happened in that toy store as something that transcends bathroom humor. In fact, I've come to think of Big Bubba's words as a kind of prophecy, one that became more meaningful the farther my career has taken me away from that half-finished floor in Logan.

To be sure, the foreign in general and France in particular have retained their hold over my psyche, Big Bubba's disapproval notwithstanding. Like Mitt Romney minus the money, I spent two years in France as a Mormon missionary. Unlike Mitt, however, I've never had much reason to hide the acute, aching francophilia I picked up there. If my face allowed me to pull off the beret and pencil-moustache look, I'd probably do it. But as an American who wants to write about subjects that resonate with people back home, I confess that in addition to giving me reason to chuckle every time I go into a men's room, Big Bubba also keeps me thinking about the allure of the familiar.

Once I got to Chicago, graduate study exposed me not just to the wonders of French history, but to the then new-ish vogue for Atlantic studies. Like everybody I went to school with, I read books and articles celebrating the demise of old models of scholarship rooted in the institutions of early modern empire or (tsk, tsk) the mere pre-history of the United States. There was now a more excellent way: the study of an integrated Atlantic world that embraced the internally diverse African, Native American, and European cultures thrust into contact in the years after 1492.

Cowed by the job prospects facing French historians and guided by sharp-eyed mentors, I edged away from France while positioning myself to catch the Atlantic wave. More than I should have, I smirked at the passé and exulted at the revolution this new thinking seemed to promise. While I parroted my share of fancy talk about historiography, theory, and methods, I'm pretty sure that I latched onto Atlantic history with Big Bubba's words ringing in my ears. Here, perhaps, was a way of embracing the European without disavowing the *yer-a-peein'*. Pardon my French.

This personal compulsion to cling to two (or more) homelands, I think, tends to seep into scholarship, at least for some of us. We don't just want to participate in the construction of Atlantic history as yet another sub-field. We're not team players. Deep in our hearts, we know that the modern notion of an "Atlantic world," built to bring some sense of order to an unruly early modern past, will in the end go the way of straight-up historical Marxism, *annaliste*-style "total history," and the "new social history" of the 1960s and 1970s. It just happens. Ashes to ashes and all that.



Fig. 1. "A View of Fort Saint Louis at Acarron Bay," 1764, accession number 02057. Courtesy of the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. Click to enlarge in new window.

In truth, I run with the Atlanticist crowd for a selfish reason: because Atlantic history allows me to be in two places at once. And by "be," I mean "be," as in "exist or live," or better yet, "belong." In the course of my travels, I've retraced the steps of a refugee boy orphaned in the 1750s through the streets of modern Philadelphia, and I've looked out across Brittany's Gulf of Morbihan toward Belle-Ile-en-Mer, imagining how the people I write about made sense of their own small niches in a world grown large. In addition, I've been lucky enough to ferret out and stumble upon the traces of obscure yet extraordinary men, women, and children in archives on both sides of the Atlantic. I get emotional about these little discoveries. But I'm not ashamed to admit that 250-year-old letters have nearly brought me to tears—which, being in an archive and all, I just blamed on the dust.

It wasn't the dust. Rather, it was the breathtaking recognition of a ghostly, flickering point of connection between my own (admittedly trivial) struggles and the *bona fide*, life-threatening crises faced by my subjects in the eighteenth century. My colleague Craig Harline, a historian of Reformation-era Europe, describes these moments as well as anyone can: "[Y]ou sense something familiar, and your special History muscle goes into action to find it—flattening time in your head, dragging the past forward, pushing the present back, until the story from five or fifteen centuries before looks a lot like a story that happened to you just last week, and seems just as vital and personal too."

Before taking my first research trips, I was an unlikely candidate for such an experience. No doubt spurred on by an overactive subconscious, I had fashioned a dissertation topic centered on what are now the Maritime Provinces of

Canada—which, I now realize, are roughly the same distance from Utah and France. Despite knowing very little about them, I hit upon the idea of writing about Acadians. These, I gathered, were French colonists who, after living uncomfortably under British rule for forty years, were driven from their homes in the mid-eighteenth century, and whose descendants had become the Cajuns of Louisiana. It sounded like a pretty good story, but given my coddled modernity, I had no inkling that I would ever see myself in its protagonists.

As I made my way to the North American archives containing the earliest traces of the Acadians' history, I did my best along the way to visit sites where that history actually took place. I struggled to get my bearings. The first French families to put down roots in Acadia, I discovered, did so in the mid-seventeenth century, establishing villages on the eastern shore of the Bay of Fundy while courting the good graces of the indigenous Mi'kmaq. But instead of hacking their homesteads from forests or prairies like the westward-probing English of Massachusetts or Virginia, Acadians walled out the sea. Using techniques honed along the rivers of western France, they built up a network of dikes and sluices to drain vast areas of fertile marshland. Long ago, my pioneer ancestors headed for the Utah hills; these folks clung to the coast.

In terms of productivity, it worked. By 1713, when the Treaty of Utrecht abruptly transformed the French colony of Acadia into the British province of Nova Scotia, the Bay of Fundy seemed poised to serve as a "granary" for the market-oriented towns of New England. Even as they mulled over the idea of expelling Nova Scotia's "neutral French" and replacing them with "good Protestant subjects," British officials strained to make sense of the otherworldly environment the Acadians had created. The uplands, they reasoned, were so much safer—no storm surges, no freak tides, no burrowing muskrats to pierce the sod walls and flood the fields. As I surveyed the site of the Acadian village of Grand Pré and the ruins of its elaborate system of dikes on a blustery Saturday in 2001, I felt much the same confusion. I marveled at Acadian tenacity, but worried that whatever it was that made them tick, I of all people wasn't going to get it.

Learning about their expulsion from the Maritimes and the diaspora that saw them scattered across the Atlantic world made the Acadian experience seem even less comprehensible. Beginning in 1755, Anglo-American troops began a campaign to hunt down, arrest, and deport all 15,000 Acadians living on or near the Bay of Fundy. Among the first offensives in what would become the Seven Years' War, the deportation was also among the most successful. Within three years, some 10,000 Acadians had been captured and shipped off to exile in the port cities of British North America, Great Britain, and France, while the rest mostly hid out in the wilds of New France. By the mid-1760s, Acadians had washed up in bizarre colonies in Saint-Domingue, Guiana, the Falkland Islands, and the French countryside. The toll in lives was staggering. By the hundreds, Acadians drowned in shipwrecks off the Azores, died of malaria in Guiana, and succumbed to starvation in Normandy. The physical and psychological trauma these people had endured exceeded anything I had known, and most of the darkest things I had

imagined. Trying to relate to their experience, I realized, was a little like trying to relate to that of a slave, post-Middle Passage.

As I now recall it, I drove from Grand Pré back to my hotel in Moncton, New Brunswick, that Saturday in 2001 in an intellectual funk. I had never really wanted to analyze the past; I wanted to *commune* with it. That prospect now seemed dim. But as I neared Moncton, a town that has long served as a center of resurgent Acadian culture in the Maritimes, the sight of a bar got me thinking. Located on Champlain Street in the nearby town of Dieppe, it was called "Le Pub 1755." A British-style pub with a French name that made reference to the year of the Anglo-American assault on Acadians? I pulled over to think about *that* for a few minutes.

Back in Moncton, I parked at the hotel and walked to the center of town in search of a cheap dinner. Teenagers from the hinterlands were arriving to drag Main Street—or rue Main, in this case. Jacked-up trucks, mesh-backed baseball caps, and Metallica T-shirts abounded. Skirting past the knots of kids forming on the sidewalk, I caught bits and pieces of familiar conversations about music, sports, the opposite sex, and where beer might be had. The scene could not have been more familiar or more small-town American—except that in Moncton, it took place in *chiac*, a local dialect that combines archaic French and Internet-era English. How historically aware Moncton's teens were I couldn't tell, but it struck me that night that those Acadian kids, like the pub owner on Champlain Street, were participants in the long process of figuring out how to belong to two places at once. And that, at least, I could understand. I might even be able to commune with it.

A year later, I felt that communion even more powerfully at the Archives départementales de la Vienne in Poitiers, a middling city in France's middle. The archive itself was bright and well-organized, far less Gothic and more Napoleonic than I had hoped. Not so for "dépôt 22," the collection of documents I had come to see. The archivist delivered them to my station not in a cardboard box or folder, but in an ancient, elaborately latched chest. With a nod to me, he opened it, revealing a pile of several hundred letters to and from a local nobleman, the marquis de Pérusse, all penned during the mid-1770s. The chest's interior was a riot of paper, with brown, crusty vellum sheets sticking out from a cascade of robin's egg-blue linen stationary. It all smelled vaguely of cathedral vault.

I plowed through the letters, growing more animated as I realized what they contained: a tale of intrigue and violence linking Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, Louis XVI's famous, wealthy controller-general of finances, and Jean-Jacques Leblanc, an ordinary, impoverished Acadian refugee from the western borderlands of Nova Scotia. They made an odd couple, and they came together in odd fashion. In the 1760s and 1770s, a cadre of French thinkers and statesmen became united in their disgust with the supposedly languishing state of French agriculture. Their solution was to colonize France itself. They hoped to found colonial companies like those that had once invested in North America or the Caribbean,

but who would instead pour capital into the clearing and farming of uncultivated land within the kingdom. Among the first to step forward with a proposal was the marquis de Pérusse, the forward-thinking owner of a large, bramble-ridden estate near Poitiers.

The search for loyal, hardworking, and pliable agricultural laborers for this promising enterprise led royal officials to the Acadians, about 3,000 of whom had been scraping by in French seaports since the expulsions of the 1750s. In 1773 and 1774, nearly 1,500 Acadians made their way to Pérusse's lands, where masons were (on the royal dime) busily constructing six new villages exclusively for the colonists. Among them was Jean-Jacques Leblanc.



Fig. 2. "Large and Particular Plan of Shegnekto Bay," engraving on paper by Thomas Jeffreys, 34 x 38 cm. (1755). Courtesy of the John Clarence Webster Canadiana Collection (W295), Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada.

He was unhappy to be there. For years he had told his Acadian friends that leaving France altogether was their best bet. The Spanish, he knew, were trawling for families to populate the frontiers of Louisiana, and had even made generous offers for groups willing to settle their own internal colony in the Sierra Morena of Andalusia. Even the hated British seemed to have softened on the Acadians: as early as 1763, rumors had flown across the English Channel of plans to settle France's Acadians on the island of Jersey, while mysterious British agents had promised to carry them back to Nova Scotia, Irish priests in tow, to recreate their lost homeland. Louisiana appealed to Leblanc; several dozen Acadians had already landed there, and the Spanish were eager for more. But there was a catch. All of the European nations angling for new settlers offered the best terms to large, coherent groups. Mere individuals—or, as Catherine the Great of Russia called them, "fugitives and passportless people"—merited no special attention. So whatever France's Acadians did, they had to do it as a community. And so Leblanc had reluctantly followed his compatriots to Poitiers while plotting a next move.

He soon got a hand from Versailles. Turgot, who became controller-general of finances under the young Louis XVI in mid 1774, opposed the Acadian colony as well. His reasons were straightforward: it cost too much, and it was deeply unfair. Although Turgot was sympathetic to promoters of internal colonization,

Pérusse's project had been funded by a previous administration less concerned with the kingdom's mounting debt. Worse, in their efforts to lure the Acadians to Poitiers, Turgot's predecessors had promised them what amounted to hereditary privileges—tax exemptions, a daily allowance from the royal coffers, cheap tobacco, and so on. Turgot despised privileges, styling them a fundamental barrier to economic vitality. As his correspondence made clear, he wanted the colony near Poitiers dismantled and its Acadians off the dole.

In the fall of 1774, the possibility of conspiring with Turgot hit Leblanc like a thunderbolt. After securing a passport and letters of introduction from some of Pérusse's local enemies, he slipped away to Versailles and talked his way into a meeting with the controller-general. Leblanc then returned to Poitiers and got to work. With some burly friends, he formed a goon squad that roamed the colony's farms. They recommended, in no uncertain terms, that Acadian colonists agree to leave their homes, abandon their privileges, and move together to the Atlantic port of Nantes. In response to foot-dragging, they issued threats, pelted homes with rocks, and hurled logs down wells, blocking off water supplies. One Sunday after mass, Leblanc's henchman Simon Aucoin collared a few colonists as they left their parish church, growling that he would "knock them senseless" if they refused to follow Leblanc's lead. For his part, Turgot delayed the Acadians' allowance and threw up every administrative roadblock he could think of. Resistance by those who wished to remain on Pérusse's estates began to crumble.

As I neared the bottom of the chest of letters, Jean-Jacques Leblanc finally prevailed. In 1776, all but a few of the colony's 1,500 Acadians fled together, taking great wagon convoys to Nantes. Nearly a decade later in 1785, almost exactly the same number of Acadians sailed from Nantes to Louisiana—minus Jean-Jacques Leblanc, who died in 1781. If you know Cajuns, some of their ancestors probably lived through these strange events.

As I cobbled the letters into a narrative, the story spoke to me. Big processes were reflected in it: old regime France's little-known attempt to colonize itself, the widening eighteenth-century market for free laborers, and the mysterious processes by which people forged collective identities and loyalties.



Fig. 3. "Portrait of Anne Robert Jacques Turgot," 1774. Courtesy of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, France.

Little things, though, stuck out even more. Jean-Jacques Leblanc, his friends, and their foes were all trying to negotiate the intricacies of belonging to two places at once. Some abandoned the old for the new. Gervais Gotrot endured Leblanc's mistreatment in the Acadian colony near Poitiers, but instead of going to Louisiana he struck out on his own, settling in the English Channel port of Boulogne-sur-Mer, where he raised sons and grandsons who sailed warships for Napoleon Bonaparte's empire. Many, of course, never recovered from the loss of their Maritime homes. Guillaume Gallet and his deranged adult son simply gave up, dying homeless in the French town of Saint-Malo in 1787. Others, however, groped for a way to claim the best of both worlds—the rustic liberty of the Americas and the security afforded by proximity to European power and sophistication.

Leblanc's violent push toward Louisiana was a manifestation of this double-edged desire. So too was the face of Jean-Pierre de la Roche, one of the Acadian exiles I met while rummaging through the chest containing dépôt 22. De la Roche showed up only once. His passport, which enabled him to cross provincial borders as he traveled to Pérusse's Acadian colony, was buried near the bottom of the heap. According to the clerk who described him, he was not attractive: "Acadian, twenty five years old, five feet two thumbs [*pouces*, a couple of inches each] in height; gray, sunken eyes, pointy nose, a scar below his lower lip." The clerk then added a line that caught my eye: "He wears a wig." Like thousands of French men, de la Roche had seized on the vogue for cheap wigs as an assertion of status and respectability—a display that would have irked his North American ancestors, but which for him, having arrived in France as a thirteen-year-old boy, seemed sensible. Even as I scanned his crumbling passport, generating a less-than-flattering mental image of young Jean-Pierre, the impulse to see this short, rodentine, bewigged refugee as kin became overwhelming. Were we not connected in our confusion?

After leaving Poitiers, documents elsewhere began to look less like flat paper and more like inter-dimensional portals. Peering in wasn't easy. I recoiled at letters from the Connecticut State Archives recounting the story of two Acadian couples who traveled from Annapolis, Maryland, to Woodbury, Connecticut, in the winter of 1756-57. I'm not sure how it happened, but during the expulsion of 1755 the two sets of parents became separated from their seven children. Sent off to Annapolis, they scoured newspapers and queried travelers for over a year before discovering that their children had landed in Woodbury. After a midwinter journey by sea and land, they arrived frostbitten, clothed in vermin-infested rags. During a reunion reluctantly organized by some of Woodbury's town leaders, the Acadian parents realized something awful. The youngest kids had essentially forgotten them. They were terrified by their parents' ghoulish appearance, while the older children were hardly enthusiastic about giving up friends and apprenticeships in Woodbury in favor of family with little to offer besides skin and bones.

From Philadelphia to Ottawa to Boston to Aix-en-Provence, visits to diverse archives (during which, after the Connecticut discovery, I missed my own kids all the more) produced a strange duality. On the one hand, the geographical parameters of my project kept expanding at what seemed like an absurd rate—before long, I was writing about Guiana, Mauritius, and, somehow, Antarctica. On the other, my subjects' unsteady, deeply personal pathways through transatlantic dislocation seemed to converge with my own.

True, reconstructing the Acadians' efforts to live in multiple worlds didn't help me resolve my own benign identity crisis. But I do like to think that my experience as a confused wanderer between France and Utah in easy times allowed me to unlock something of their globe-trotting lives in hard times. For as integrated as their eighteenth-century Atlantic world was becoming, and as linked and networked and hybridized as ours currently is, the act of crossing boundaries always leaves its mark.

For me anyway, going back to Europe and immersing myself in musty papers always makes the old French scars ache a little; trips to archives in the United States make me wonder if I really am, or can ever be, at home. Some readers will doubtless see these reflections as self-indulgent at best, meaningless at worst—as I write these lines, I can practically hear my tough-minded dissertation adviser making irritated animal noises. But sensibilities like mine have been with Atlantic history from the start. Early on, scholars made the Atlantic turn with NATO and the Soviet threat on their minds: others did so apolitically, as an extension of their expanding vision of early Native American, African, or European history; still others, as Bernard Bailyn notes, “were simply pursuing narrow, parochial interests that proved to have wider boundaries than they had expected.”

Bailyn's statement may well be the best face I can put on my participation in Atlantic history. But as I prepare to fly from Salt Lake to Paris again this summer, planning to split time between the massive, bureaucratic Archives

nationales and a few smaller libraries, I'm mostly thinking of a higher power. For the Annunciation of Big Bubba, I suspect, will be with me always. And not just in the men's room.

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