Between Maine and California can be found over 3,000 French place names, testimony to the zeal and dynamic spirit of the early North American French. Their first permanent settlement was at Quebec in 1608, a year following the first permanent English settlement at Jamestown, Virginia. Some were habitants (subsistence farmers), Catholic priests, and miners, but fully a third of them were full- or at least part-time fur-traders. This commerce dominated French interests in North America for 150 years. While the British colonists were still enclaved at the Atlantic Coast, the search for furs dispersed the French as far as the Rocky Mountains and beyond, the profits to be made in the fur trade inducing the French to develop great skills in Indian diplomacy and to seek good relations with distant Native American tribes.

Among the important Indian allies of the French fur-traders and the voyageurs who carried the pelts back to Quebec were the Cree and Chippewa people, whom the French encountered during their initial explorations of the Great Lakes. Intermarriages of Frenchmen and women of these tribes resulted in the creation of a people who today continue traditions, language, and arts passed down from Indian and French forebears. Such a group are the 16,000 Mitchif Indians, half of whom live upon the small Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota. (In Canada they are commonly called Métis [mixed].) Mitchif fiddlers play in the Quebec manner, beating a rhythm with their feet, while dancers such as the respected Mitchif patriarch, Alex Morin, beautifully fluent in French, perform the "Red River Jig," a dance that combines the European jig form with Indian dance steps and rhythmic cadences.

The British and French colonies were drawn into a series of wars and disputes in the New World that lasted for two centuries. These wars left an
indelible imprint not only upon the geography of the continent but also upon
the direction of government and culture in North America. In the 1713 Treaty
of Utrecht, France ceded to Britain Nova Scotia (Acadia), Newfoundland and
the vast Hudson Bay region. When the French residents of Acadia were
reluctant to swear allegiance to the British crown, the British began drastic
measures that culminated in the 1755 expulsion of the Acadians. After great
hardships, many of these refugees from Canada settled the plains and prairies of
southwestern Louisiana and eastern Texas where they now have at least
900,000 descendants, many of whom still speak French.

Both Britain and France viewed their colonies as sources of raw materials
and a market for finished goods, but French control was much greater. The
location of mineral resources, even at sites far removed from potential North
American markets, created companies charged with extracting the material. A
small pocket of French culture still extant in southeastern Missouri resulted
from such a mining venture. When voyageurs noticed surface lead deposits on
the west bank of the Mississippi, inflated stories about the richness of these
deposits reached France. In 1719 Le Sieur Renault, scion of a smelting family,
left France with a mining expedition of at least 200 members. In 1723, he
received the earliest documented land grant in upper Louisiana. By 1742 his
mining had ended, but some Frenchmen continued to live in the area. In time,
their descendants became miners of the barite deposits (known locally as tiff)
found with the lead. Some 400 French-speaking families still live in Washington
County, Missouri, most of them near the area popularly called “Old Mines.”

French government formally ended in North America with the Louisiana
Purchase. Still, many thousands of French-speaking people remained, sur-
rounded by Protestants and governed by systems most did not understand. In
Quebec the French-speaking people suddenly became a minority in their own
country. Feeling more abandoned than defeated, they turned inward to the two
institutions left—the family and the church. In families and small communities
they created a rich body of oral literature and a variety of folk musics. While
their farms tended to be poor, due to the conditions of the soil and climate,
their crafts flourished.

The opening of the mill towns of New England drew many thousands of
Quebecois south. The great majority of today’s French-American New
Englanders trace their ancestry to Quebec Province through those who came
to take entry-level jobs in New England mills. A “Little Canada” can be found in
most of the older mill towns, a place where poor Quebec workers lived. The
late Louis Beaudoin, a brilliant French-American fiddler and many times a
participant in the Festival of American Folklife, was a third generation Ameri-
can born in the “Little Canada” of Lowell, Massachusetts.

The French Americans have been partners in the cultural, economic and
political development of North America from the beginning. They have left this
country a cultural legacy rich in music, language, song, material culture,
foodways and celebrations. Fortunately, the diversity of transplanted French
culture is beginning to be appreciated for its contribution to the mosaic of the
New World.