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(Copland, 2009)

Story: French

Page 2 – The Akaroa settlement

1839:

French Colony at Akaroa

Background

France's true intentions for the South Island are a matter of course, but it is clear that French interest speeded up Britain's decision to annex New Zealand.

In 1838 Jean François Langlois, commander of the whaling ship *Cachalot*, embarked on a grandiose scheme for a French colony at Akaroa. After a dubious land purchase from Māori he established the Nanto-Bordelaise Company in France to carry out the project. In 1839 King Louis-Philippe agreed to provide assistance.

The French representative for the settlement, Captain Charles François Lavaud, sailed for New Zealand in April 1840. A month later, the *Comte de Paris* set off for Akaroa carrying 53 emigrants.



The immigrants



Women of the settlement (1st of 3)



Historic sites (1st of 2)

Paradise lost

Still smarting from the missed opportunity to colonise Akaroa, the region's French governor wistfully observed its advantages:

'The wheat seems better than in France. All the vegetables are growing well. It is truly regrettable that we arrived here after the British.'

The French scheme sparked debate in England and France. Bowing to pressure to colonise the country, the British government sent out William Hobson in 1839. He signed the Treaty of Waitangi on 6 February 1840, and claimed sovereignty over the South Island on 17 June.

When Lavaud reached the Bay of Islands in July, he learned that New Zealand had already become British. Hobson was friendly, but sent the *Britomart* to observe the French in Akaroa. Lavaud accepted that France could not create a colony without causing hostility. When the *Comte de Paris* arrived in August, the Union Jack was flying over Akaroa.

The settlers

The French colonists flourished briefly, enjoying trade with the whaling ships. In 1843 they numbered 69, intermingling with 86 British as well as Māori and a few Germans. At first life was tough, but they replaced the original tents with houses, and began to grow fruit and vegetables. The French navy built roads, bridges and wharves, and French priests taught the children. Shops, hotels, bakeries, and cafés opened. The British government eventually granted the settlers official ownership of land. Lavaud administered French law, although the settlers lived under British rule. By the mid-1840s there was a decline in whaling, and the French navy left in the early 1850s. Most settlers stayed and became naturalised, but numbers were always small. Today, some architecture, the cemetery, and names such as Rue Balguerie and Rue Benoit, French Farm and Duvauchelle, along with thousands of descendants, are testament to the original colonists.

Footnotes:

1. Quoted in Peter Tremewan, ed., *French Akaroa: an attempt to colonise southern New Zealand*. Christchurch: University of Canterbury Press, 1990, p. 178. >

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