

La Belle: An Historical Perspective

The 20th Century discovery of a small ship that lay underwater off the Texas coast put pieces of a 300 year old puzzle in place. In 1684, René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, sailed from France with four ships and a plan to establish a settlement at the mouth of the Mississippi River. They missed the mouth of the great river and made landfall in Texas. The excavation and recovery of *La Belle* and her artifacts from 1995 through 1997, coupled with research from journals, ship's logs and French records, completed the puzzle. People, places and events are now in historical perspective with the solid evidence from *La Belle*.

During the Age of Exploration (15th -17th Centuries), European countries competed with one another for land as their understanding of the known world expanded. French, English, Spanish, Dutch, Italian, and Portuguese explorers traveled the world in search of new land to claim for their homelands. France had established settlements along the St. Lawrence River in what is today eastern Canada. La Salle explored the Great Lakes and Midwest Regions for France. In 1682, he established Fort St. Louis des Illinois on the Mississippi River, at present day Starved Rock, Illinois. This settlement was a base for the French and Indian fur trade. La Salle dreamed of expanding the North American French empire to the South where the milder climate would allow year round shipping of trades furs and hides.

Also in 1682, La Salle sailed to the mouth of the Mississippi River at the Gulf of Mexico and claimed the river and all of the lands drained by it for France. He named it Louisiana after King Louis XIV. The explorer then returned to France in 1683, and presented his plan to the king to establish settlements along the river. He assured the king that the settlements would secure the region for France. Locating the primary settlement at the mouth of the river would prevent the Spanish from entering. It would also place the French closer to Mexico and the Spanish silver mines that France could one day control.

In 1684, King Louis XIV commissioned La Salle to return to North America to carry out his plan. The king gave the explorer two ships, *Le Joly* and *La Belle*, and supplies. La Salle leased two additional ships to complete the expedition *l'Aimable* and *Le Saint-François*. Through a series of mishaps, a faulty astrolabe, and the lack of knowledge to accurately calculate longitude at sea, the ships missed the mouth of the Mississippi River. Instead they made landfall on the Texas shore in Matagorda Bay in January 1685. The ship *Saint-François* had been lost to pirates in the Caribbean. A second ship, *l'Aimable*, ran aground on a sandbar while attempting to enter the bay through a narrow passage. The third ship, *Le Joly*, unloaded cargo and returned to France with disillusioned colonists who chose to abandon the effort due to the dire circumstances.

La Belle was a light frigate intended to be spared the rough ocean journey. The plan was to transport *La Belle* as a kit aboard one of the larger vessels in the fleet; however, *La Belle* was assembled and sailed from La Rochelle, France as the fourth ship in the fleet. The vessel was a barque longue with three masts and a single deck. She was a cargo transport, not a passenger ship, and designed to explore shallow water such as rivers and estuaries.

There were approximately 300 people who made the journey from France. Only about 180 remained to establish Fort St. Louis on Texas soil. The buildings of this early temporary settlement were built primarily of salvaged timbers from *l'Aimable*. The settlers were to live at the fort until their search parties could find the mouth of the Mississippi River where they would establish a permanent settlement. Hostile Karankawa, lack of potable water, and an adequate food supply, as well as poor leadership and unskilled settlers, all contributed to the decline and eventual demise of Fort St. Louis.



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With the intention of sailing *La Belle* up the Mississippi River, La Salle ordered that most of the goods for the Mississippi settlement and his personal effects be placed on *La Belle*. This action, moving the best possessions intended for the Mississippi settlement aboard *La Belle* preserved a significant episode of the French presence in Texas history.

La Salle left the fort numerous times in search of the Mississippi River. He was away in early 1686 when the crew pulled anchor during a winter storm; *La Belle* drifted and ran aground several miles across the bay. While *La Belle* was still partially above water it was ransacked by the Spanish and ravaged by frequent Gulf storms. The ship eventually came to rest hidden on the bay floor.

In early 1687, La Salle and 16 men set out from Fort St. Louis, once again in search of the Mississippi River. La Salle made unreasonable demands upon the men. Their lack of trust turned to revenge. Some men in the party plotted to kill the leader. Pierre Duhaut fired the shot that murdered La Salle, probably near the present day town of Navasota in East Texas. The Shawnee Indian hunter Nika, the surgeon Saget, along with La Salle's nephew, Colin Moranget were killed by Etienne Liotot. Some of the others in the party joined Indian communities in the area; however, five of the original seventeen men found the Mississippi River in the spring. They traveled up river and across the Great Lakes to the French settlements on the St. Lawrence, on the way home to France.

Henri Joutel, Pierre Tessier, Father Anastase Douay, and La Salle's relatives, his brother, Abbe Jean Cavelier and his nephew, Colin Cavelier, sailed to France in 1688. Henri Joutel carried with him his journal of the expedition.

When La Salle and his search party set out the last time, there were only about twenty men, women, and children remaining at Fort St. Louis. Although some of the adult settlers survived living with the Indians, within two years of La Salle's death, most of the adult settlers at the fort were dead. The Talon and Breman children were kidnapped by the Karankawa.

During the 1970's the Texas Historical Commission (THC) marine archaeologists searched, without success, for the La Salle ships, *l'Aimable* and *La Belle*, in Matagorda Bay. By the 1990s new technology gave THC another opportunity to explore sites in the bay. In the summer of 1995, a review of 17th Century French and Spanish maps and records narrowed the search. Using magnetometers and global positioning systems, the Commission team pinpointed wreckage along the southern end of Matagorda Bay. They first found a wooden plank then several musket balls and then the artifact that would identify the expedition—an 800 pound bronze cannon with handles in the shape of leaping dolphins. The marine archaeologists had found *La Belle*.

The team knew they had found an underwater site of historical significance. Cannons of this era usually had inscriptions that identified the country of origin and the year forged. The inscription on this cannon was Le Comte De Vermandois. It is the crest of Louis de Bourbon, born in 1667, the son of King Louis XIV. The king honored his infant with the commission of Admiral of the Navy. The child's title was placed on all naval cannons produced during that period.

More than one million artifacts were recovered and catalogued from the excavation. Evidence of the French on Texas soil in the late 17th Century was confirmed.

Many of the artifacts are exhibited at the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin. Others are exhibited in the seven La Salle Odyssey Project museums along the Gulf Coast. The hull is currently undergoing restoration at the Conservation Research Laboratory at Texas A&M University.

