The Explorer René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle
In 1684 King Louis XIV sent French explorer La Salle on a voyage to North America. The King hoped to build a settlement at the mouth of the Mississippi River from which to trade with American Indians and invade the Spanish silver mines in Mexico. In the end, the expedition to find the Mississippi River failed, and La Salle was killed by his own men.

Ship's Equipment
La Bella's crew relied on experience, maps, and tools to navigate the ocean. They used compasses to measure and calculate distance and a nocturnal to tell time at night. Needles were used to patch sails, and sounding weights measured water depth. Unfortunately, La Salle's map and measurements were incorrect, and he missed the Mississippi River by 300 miles.

GETTING TO TEXAS
La Salle on a voyage to North America. The Sieur de la Salle

FINDING, EXCAVATING AND PRESERVING LA BELLE

Excavating La Bella
Once scientists located La Belle in Matagorda Bay, they built a cofferdam. They constructed two circular walls around the ship and pumped out the water. This allowed archaeologists to work on dry land in the middle of the bay to remove the ship's artifacts and timbers.

Human Remains
Not all the remains archaeologists found on La Belle were cargo — they also discovered two human skeletons with the ship. By studying their bones, forensic scientists learned about each person's appearance, age, past injuries, and cause of death.

Preserving La Belle
Since La Belle was underwater for over 300 years, scientists needed to protect the ship from drying out. They sprayed the timbers with sea water and soaked the hull in a wax-like chemical. Then scientists freeze-dried the timbers to evaporate the frozen water. The ship is now ready to be displayed at the Bullock Museum.

CONTINUE THE JOURNEY:

LIVING IN TEXAS
Trade Goods
Many of the items found on La Belle were trade goods such as glass beads, brass bells, finger rings, and axe heads. La Salle and his men planned to barter with the American Indians for items like furs and hides.

Weapons
Archaeologists discovered weapons like three bronze cannons, muskets, and gunpowder. La Salle planned to set up a permanent colony so he made sure La Belle carried weapons for the settlers to defend themselves from the Spanish and from possible attacks by Karankawa Indians or pirates.

Daily Life
The colonists brought household items to use in the new settlement like clay containers, wooden spoons, brass cooking kettles and utensils. They also packed writing and medical instruments, jewelry and game pieces.

The Fate of the Colony
The French colonists built their settlement, known as Fort St. Louis, but life was difficult and many people died from weather, disease, and poor diet. Eventually the Karankawa Indians attacked the remaining people, but spared some children. Fort St. Louis was destroyed.

CONTINUE THE STORY:

VISIT La Belle at the Bullock Texas State History Museum
EXPLORE the story and the artifacts at theSTORYofTEXAS.com
WATCH the 4D film, Shipwrecked, to see the story from the eyes of a 14-year-old colonist
INTERACT with a Bullock Museum educator during a distance learning program

La Belle: The Ship That Changed History is organized by the Bullock Texas State History Museum with the Texas Historical Commission, the Musée national de la Marine, and Texas A&M University. Support provided by the State of Texas, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, and the Texas State History Museum Foundation.