

La Belle: The Ship That Changed History

GETTING TO TEXAS

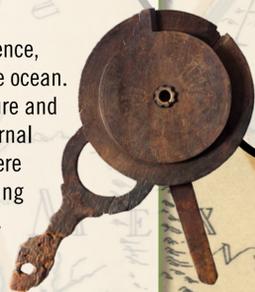
The Explorer René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle

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.



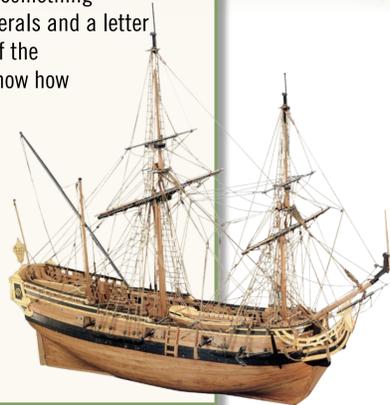
Ship's Equipment

La Belle'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.



The Ship La Belle

When archaeologists found the shipwreck in 1996, they discovered something unexpected. Roman numerals and a letter were carved onto many of the timbers. The markings show how the pieces fit together, and are evidence that La Belle was a "kit." Ship kits were easy to transport to other locations and build at a later time.



Courtesy Center for Maritime Archaeology and Conservation at Texas A&M University, College Station



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VISIT La Belle at the Bullock Texas State History Museum



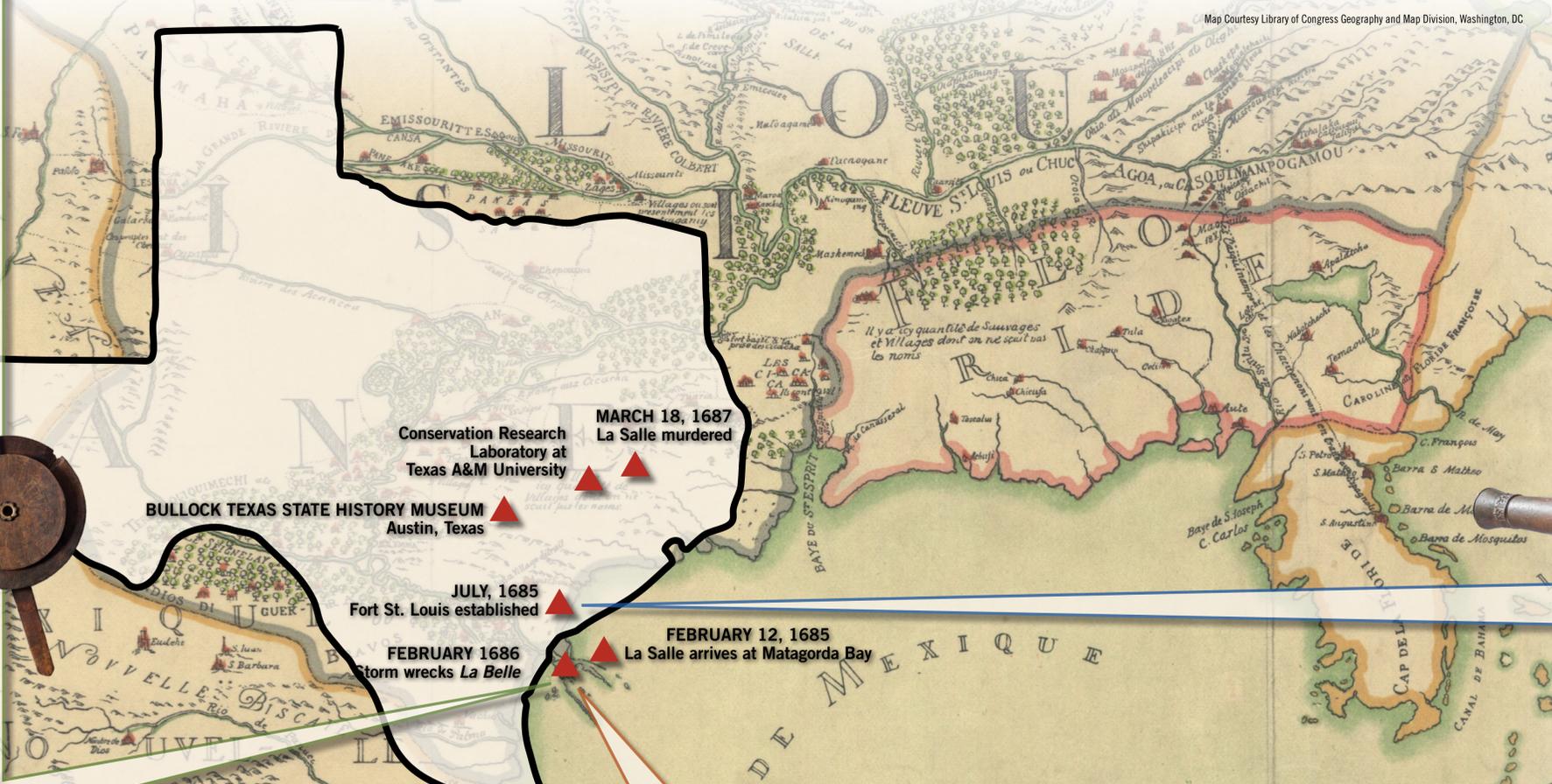
EXPLORE the story and the artifacts at TheSTORYofTEXAS.com



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



BULLOCK TEXAS STATE HISTORY MUSEUM
Austin, Texas

Conservation Research Laboratory at Texas A&M University

MARCH 18, 1687
La Salle murdered

JULY, 1685
Fort St. Louis established

FEBRUARY 1686
Storm wrecks La Belle

FEBRUARY 12, 1685
La Salle arrives at Matagorda Bay

FINDING, EXCAVATING AND PRESERVING LA BELLE

Photo by Robert Clark



Excavating La Belle

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.

Photo by Robert Clark



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.

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 JOURNEY:

Key to images in left sidebar, top to bottom: Portrait of La Salle by Albert Ferland; Nocturnal; Markings on the timbers of the La Belle; Scale model of the ship La Belle

Right sidebar, top to bottom: Finger rings and axe heads; Bronze Cannon; Cooking kit; Illustration of Fort St. Louis by Charles Shaw.

(All images unless otherwise noted)
Courtesy Texas Historical Commission, Austin