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At left, Texas DPS officers closed off 18th Street in downtown Austin Tuesday so that large portions of the ship, 'La Belle,' could be moved into the Bullock Museum.

Museum sets stage for 'La Belle' exhibition

A 330-year-old Texas story taking shape at the Bullock Museum

SEPTEMBER 19, 2014 (AUSTIN, TX) — One of French explorer Robert Cavelier, sieur de La Salle's ships that landed along the Texas coast nearly 330 years ago will be reassembled in the galleries of the Bullock Texas State History Museum beginning October 25, 2014. Museum staff began setting the stage this month for a dynamic new exhibition centered on the ship that sank in Matagorda Bay in 1686 and was later excavated in the 1990s.

This week marks the arrival at the Bullock Museum of rare artifacts for the upcoming exhibition, "La Belle: The Ship That Changed History," including a 17th-century French Naval ledger on loan from the Archives du Port de Rochefort in France, and the movement of two key ship timbers into place in preparation for this highly anticipated exhibition.

Texas Department of Public Safety officers closed down sections of two Austin streets briefly on Tuesday to allow portions of the historic ship to be moved from storage, around the museum, and into the gallery in preparation for the exhibition. The 800-pound keel and 1,100-pound keelson are the largest portions of what remains of "La Belle." These pieces form the foundation of the bottom third of the ship's hull.

Over the coming weeks, the museum will build the entire show around the ship's keel and keelson. Once the exhibition opens, project conservator Peter Fix of the Texas A&M University Conservation Research Lab will lead a team of experts to rebuild this 600-piece "jigsaw" puzzle, reassembling the hull, timber by timber.

La Belle

The Ship That Changed History

A French Naval ledger from Port De Rochefort, Service historique de la Defense, which is affiliated with the Musée national de la Marine, was among artifacts arriving at the Bullock Museum. The ledger is a 1684 record of "La Belle's" dimensions, and it notes that the ship was loaned to La Salle and eventually lost. The excavated ship and associated artifacts belong to the French government, according to International Maritime Law, but a treaty signed in 2003 says they can stay in Texas unless there is a renegotiation of terms.

More than 125 artifacts will be on display with the ship, and the exhibition will feature newly edited film footage, touch pad activities, and interviews with archaeologists and other experts. Some of the artifacts in "La Belle: The Ship That Changed History" will travel to France in 2016, but most will join the ship to become the centerpiece of a completely renovated first floor of the state's history museum.

A new book about "La Belle" and its associated artifacts is available online and at the museum. "Shipwrecked," a new 4D immersive theater experience premieres Saturday, October 25, 2014 in conjunction with the exhibition. The film follows the perilous journey of the French explorer La Salle, revealing the personalities and struggles that beset both the voyage and colony as told by one of the few survivors, a young boy named Pierre Talon. The 26-minute family film uses 4D effects felt by the audience to create a dynamic experience. For showtimes, museum hours and programs, visit TheStoryofTexas.com or call (512) 936-8746.

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Exhibition Credits

"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.

Images

High-resolution images with credit lines and cutlines for this event and related to the *La Belle* project — from discovery and excavation, to preservation and exhibition — may be accessed through Dropbox. Please send an email to elizabeth.page@TheStoryofTexas.com for an invitation to the folder.

Calendar Entry

Set sail for 17th-century Texas with "La Belle: The Ship That Changed History," an exhibition on view from Oct. 25, 2014 to May 17, 2015 at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. Showcasing portions of La Salle's ill-fated ship that sank in Matagorda Bay in 1686, the exhibition will feature newly edited film footage, touch pad games, interviews with archaeologists and other experts, and 125 of the more than 1 million artifacts recovered. Watch as this 600-piece, three-dimensional "jigsaw puzzle" is transformed into a recognizable ship over the course of the exhibition.

About the Bullock Museum

The Bullock Texas State History Museum in downtown Austin tells the unfolding story of the history, culture and people of Texas. One of the most popular attractions in Central Texas, the Museum has welcomed more than 6.5 million visitors since it opened in 2001. The Museum and IMAX Theatre are located at 1800 N. Congress Avenue, between the State Capital complex and the University of Texas campus. For more, visit TheStoryofTexas.com or call (512) 936-8746.