

*La Belle*  
The Ship That Changed History



A 330-year-old ship rebuilt in the galleries of the Bullock Museum now become the centerpiece of its permanent exhibitions.

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## **Journey's end is new beginning at the Bullock** *Ship's last passage signals a new era at state history museum*

**MAY 12, 2015 (AUSTIN, TX)** — After 330 years under water off the coast of Texas, the French ship "La Belle" will be moved to its final destination this month, signaling a new era for the state's history museum. French explorer Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle's ship that sank in Matagorda Bay in 1686, and was excavated in the mid-1990s, now has been reassembled at the Bullock Texas State History Museum. The ship will become the centerpiece of the museum's galleries when it is moved to its permanent location within the museum on May 21, 2015.

"La Belle: The Ship That Changed History," considered to be one the most significant exhibitions on European colonization in the United States, closes May 17 at the Bullock Museum in Austin. In February, the entire first floor of the museum's permanent exhibitions was closed to prepare for a major renovation centered on the addition of the reassembled ship to its permanent galleries. About 11,000 of the museum's 34,000 square feet of space will undergo a complete transformation over the next 18 months during this \$10-million project to renovate the Texas History Galleries.

Ralph Appelbaum Associates (RAA), the world's largest museum exhibition design firm, was chosen to develop the design, and museum staff have engaged scholars to research and develop a new interpretive approach that examines the dynamic and complex encounters between regional American Indians, the French, and the Spanish that greatly influenced the course of global history and laid the foundation for Texas's own unique story.

The new approach will feature hundreds of original artifacts spanning 13,000 years of history. A fresh design and new digital media components will provide visitors with a new and deeper understanding of the story of Texas.

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"Featuring a shipwreck of this age and magnitude offers visitors one of the most unique experiences in any museum in the country," Bullock Museum Director Dr. Victoria Ramirez said. "Permanently featuring the ship and its cargo as the centerpiece of the museum's first floor galleries offers visitors a compelling look at a little-known era in Texas history."

It is rare for a state history museum, or any museum, to have such a comprehensive collection of artifacts from the 1680s, according to Ramirez. "La Belle" and its cargo will combine with other original artifacts, documents, and interactive video on the first floor to tell the story of early Texas through 1821.

The cornerstone of the special exhibition that opened Oct. 25, 2014, has been a live-action rebuild of the ship by conservators in full view of visitors and streaming online. During the seven-month exhibition, a staff of three experts spent 2,400 hours reassembling this important piece of Texas history. The exhibition brought together for the first time the 17th-century ship timbers, more than 120 of the 1.6 million artifacts excavated in Matagorda Bay, never-before-seen video footage, and a 4D film that tells this important Texas narrative.

"'La Belle' is really two stories," Ramirez said. "One of a 17th-century French expedition that would change the course of Texas history. And another of a 21st-century excavation and conservation project that will preserve this piece of history in perpetuity and give visitors a chance to experience original artifacts that relate to this important time in Texas history."

On April 8, 2015, the Texas Association of Museums awarded "La Belle: The Ship That Changed History" its highest honor — the President's Award, which recognizes excellence in the museum field. The "La Belle" exhibition has been featured on television programs airing on C-Span and the Travel Channel and will be the subject of an episode of the international series "Salvage Masters" this summer. This unique Texas story was featured in "Popular Mechanics" and on the cover of "American Archaeology" magazine, in addition to receiving national and international coverage in major magazines, newspapers and online outlets.

The renovated first floor will be unveiled in 2016, and the hull of the ship will be preserved under a walkable deck of glass along with hundreds of original artifacts, ranging from tiny beads and personal belongings to cannons and muskets.

The Bullock Museum collaborates with more than 700 museums, libraries, archives and individuals to display original historical artifacts and produce exhibitions that illuminate and celebrate Texas history and culture. This steady rotation of original artifacts, combined with the first-floor renovation and other updates to the permanent galleries, will allow visitors to experience a "new" Bullock Museum in 2016.

For more information and updates, visit [TheStoryofTexas.com](http://TheStoryofTexas.com) and follow the Bullock Museum on Twitter and Facebook.

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**MEDIA EVENT**

**\*\*Media Event MAY 21, 2015 at 2 p.m.**

**WHAT:** Movement of the La Belle historic ship's hull from the Herzstein Hall to its permanent location in the first-floor gallery. Move preparation happening all day from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. with the highlighted move to its final resting place in the permanent gallery slated for 2 p.m.

**WHO:** Dr. Jim Bruseth, Dr. Peter Fix, Dr. Victoria Ramirez and project staff.

**WHEN:** THURSDAY, MAY 21 with a window of arrival from 1:30 to 3 p.m. and the final move photo/video opportunity at 2 p.m. **\*\*Please call 254-625-1426 with questions**

**WHERE:** Bullock Texas State History Museum - Herzstein Hall - 1800 N. Congress Avenue / Austin, Texas, 78701.

**MEDIA IMAGES:** High-resolution images with credit lines and cutlines related to the "La Belle" project — from discovery and excavation, to preservation and exhibition — may be accessed at <http://bit.ly/la-belle-ship>

**BACKGROUND**

**About "La Belle"**

"La Belle" is one of the most important shipwrecks ever discovered in North America, according to archaeologist and guest curator Dr. James Bruseth. The new exhibition will offer an unprecedented opportunity to actually reorient the way we educate the public about 17-century regional, national, and world history. The wreck of "La Belle" in Matagorda Bay and collapse of La Salle's Fort St. Louis colony near Victoria, Texas, changed the course of history — not just for Texas, but for America and the world.

**Excavation**

"La Belle" was the oldest French shipwreck ever revealed in the Western Hemisphere at the time of its discovery in the mid-1990s. It was excavated by the Texas Historical Commission in the mid-1990s under the direction of archaeologist Dr. James Bruseth through the use of a revolutionary cofferdam. Bruseth has authored books about the discovery and excavation of "La Belle" and La Salle's ill-fated expedition to establish a colony in the late 1600s.

**Conservation**

Head "La Belle" conservator Dr. Peter Fix of the Texas A&M University Conservation Research Laboratory and Center for Maritime Archaeology and Conservation, has been involved with the project since 1996. Fix utilized a ground-breaking freeze-drying method to preserve the ship's timbers and has spearheaded the assembly of the ship in the museum gallery in preparation for its final preservation.

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### **Exhibition**

The exhibition of the shipwreck "La Belle" is the culmination of nearly 20 years of work by dozens of experts in the fields of archaeology, marine conservation, history, and exhibition design. Very few museums in the world have on view such a vast collection of 17th-century artifacts that tell such a compelling and extraordinary story. During the course of the exhibition, the ship has been reassembled in full view of the public. An interim exhibition featuring the hull and artifacts will re-open Aug. 8, 2015 at the Bullock Museum and "LaBelle" will be featured permanently as part of a complete renovation of the first floor of the museum to be unveiled in 2016.

### **"Shipwrecked" 4D Film and Catalogue**

In conjunction with the exhibition, "Shipwrecked," a 4D immersive film experience shows daily in the museum's Texas Spirit Theater. 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 a young boy who was one of the few survivors. The 26-minute, age-appropriate film uses 4D effects felt by the audience to create a dynamic experience. A companion catalogue about "La Belle" and its associated artifacts, excavation and preservation is available online and in the Bullock Museum Store.

### **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 related to the "La Belle" project — from discovery and excavation, to preservation and exhibition — may be accessed at <http://bit.ly/la-belle-ship>

### **About the Bullock Museum**

The Bullock Texas State History Museum in downtown Austin includes three floors of exhibitions, an IMAX® theater, a 4D special-effects theater, café, and museum store. The Museum collaborates with more than 700 museums, libraries, archives and individuals to display original historical artifacts and produce exhibitions that illuminate and celebrate Texas history and culture. Named for the state's 38th Lieutenant Governor, Bob Bullock, the iconic building is located at 1800 N. Congress Avenue. For more, visit [TheStoryofTexas.com](http://TheStoryofTexas.com) or call (512)936-8746.

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**Bullock Texas State History Museum**  
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