

Parting the Waters

Underwater Archeological Excavation of LaSalle's 300-Year-Old Ship

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PORT O'CONNOR, Texas – The French explorer La Salle got lost. His ships sank. His own men deserted him, poisoned his food, and eventually shot him in the head.

But during an incredible, if ill-fated adventure in the New World, La Salle and his crew charted the Great Lakes, discovered the mouth of the Mississippi River and claimed half the American continent for their homeland. And, through their blunders and miscalculations, they altered Texas history.

So when divers and archaeologists from the Texas Historical Commissions found the wreckage of La Salle's ship, *La Belle*, in the murky waters of Matagorda Bay last summer, they began an adventure of their own. Their mission is to bring up the 300-year-old ship – at least the 20 percent that's left of it – and to study and display its artifacts.

Standing in their way are tons of muddy seawater and the threat of bad weather of the kind that sunk *La Belle* three centuries ago and hundreds of ships since. So they will do what has never been attempted before: They will move the mighty ocean out of the way.

"It just seemed the most logical and practical thing to do," said marine archaeologist Barto Arnold, who is leading the \$4 million excavation. "To do any kind of decent archaeology, you have to be able to see."

Last week, as brown pelicans flew overhead and dolphins swam nearby, workers aboard three barges labored under the oppressive sun, welding together the massive steel supports for a huge "cofferdam," a watertight structure that will surround the *La Belle* and allow archaeologists to excavate on relatively dry land.

A similar strategy was used once before in a shipwreck excavation in the late 1970s for the recovery of a Civil War ship sunk in the James River in Virginia. In that excavation, however, the water was not drained from the cofferdam. Instead it was filtered and chemically treated to improve visibility.

The *La Belle* excavation marks the first time a cofferdam has been built around a shipwreck in ocean waters, and the first time archaeologists will pump the water out to conduct a dry-land excavation.

Plans call for a roof to protect the site from the sun and rain, and a barge alongside the cofferdam to house a field lab, offices, restrooms and sleeping quarters for some crew members who will live at the site. An observation deck will allow the public to dock their boats and watch the six-month excavation, set to begin by early August.

"This is not a treasure ship. There's no gold or silver or jewels," explained Arnold. "The treasure is in its historical value and in what it can tell us. Our whole purpose is to bring it to the public, so we're glad people are going to be able to see some of the dig take place."



The ship was given to Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, by King Louis XIV of France after the explorer had discovered the mouth of the Mississippi, tracing the river southward from Illinois. *La Belle* was one of four ships La Salle and 300 soldiers and settlers sailed back to the New World in 1684. The goal of their expedition was to reach the Mississippi River from the Gulf of Mexico and to start a permanent French colony.

After one ship was seized by Spanish pirates, the rest of the fleet landed in the West Indies, regrouped, then set sail for the Mississippi. Relying on hypothetical maps of the uncharted territory, La Salle overshot the river by hundreds of miles and mistook Matagorda Bay for the western estuary of the Mississippi.

The *La Belle* successfully navigated the hidden sandbars and entered the bay, but the *La Aimable*, which carried the colonists' food, medicine, tools and other supplies, ran aground and broke up on a reef. The third ship, *La Jolly*, returned to France, leaving La Salle with limited provisions and 180 settlers, many of whom were sick and ready to desert.

La Salle and his party eventually founded Fort St. Louis at the head of Lavaca Bay on the bank of Garcitas Creek.

Bad luck followed them though. Some of La Salle's followers ate poison berries, died of snakebites, were attacked by alligators and killed or captured by Indians.

La Salle pressed on, exploring the bay in 1686 and then marching west for more than two months, determined to reach the Mississippi by land. By the time he returned, later than promised, *La Belle* – protected by a handful of amateur sailors fond of the bottle – had run aground in a squall.

Survivors assembled two makeshift rafts and headed for shore. One, loaded with La Salle's papers and some supplies, made it to dry land.

A year later, La Salle set out for the Illinois River, hoping to convince French settlers there to help his stranded colony and eventually make his way back to France by way of Quebec. His men killed him en route. Indians later attacked Fort St. Louis, killing everyone but a few children, who were later rescued by Spanish expeditions and taken to Mexico.

Although La Salle's odyssey ended in failure, the French intrusion into Texas sparked Spain's interest in exploring the area and establishing its own colonies here.



Unlike shipwreck excavations in clear ocean waters, or even in the often-cloudy Gulf, diving in Matagorda Bay is extraordinarily difficult. Some days the water is so muddy you can't see anything; even under the best conditions, only two feet. That's before you start digging around in the muck.

It took the Historical Commission 17 years to find the *La Belle*, even though it was relatively close to shore, about 12 feet below the surface, and apparently had been "discovered" years earlier by fishermen who took it for one of many historical insignificant shipwrecks in the treacherous bay.

Last July, following leads from local shrimpers and historic accounts of *La Belle's* sinking, Arnold and his crew narrowed down the area and used electronic equipment to chart several anomalies in the wreck-ridden bay. When the time came to get in the water, "fate had it that Barto said, 'Let's start here on this one,'" said archaeologist and dive master Gary Franklin.

Arnold, as it turns out, was much luckier than La Salle. *La Belle*, the oldest French shipwreck in the New World, is one of the most significant underwater archaeological discoveries in North America.

Before lunch on the first day of diving, Arnold and his team had uncovered parts of the ship's hull, lead bullets, a bronze buckle that dated the ship before the 1800s, and a 6-foot-long, 800-pound bronze cannon.

In the following weeks, divers found hundreds of smaller artifacts, including small bells, rings, straight pins, a sword hilt, a human leg bone and pewter plates.

The Corpus Christi Museum of Science and History cleaned the artifacts and found a French inscription on the cannon with the name Le Comte de Vermandois, who was the admiral of France until 1683, the year before La Salle began his trip to Texas waters.

At summer's end, Arnold and his crew covered the wreck with several feet of sand to protect and hide it while the Historical Commission raised funds for a larger excavation. The Legislature has since set aside \$1.7 million for the project, and donors have contributed nearly \$600,000. A total of \$4 million is needed to complete the excavation and pay for the preservation and display of the artifacts, Arnold said.

Over the winter, a security officer made daily checks of the shipwreck site to prevent looting. Any artifacts that may have been removed from the site over the years – regardless of who found them and brought them to the surface – belong to the state of Texas, which one of the most restrictive shipwreck recovery laws in the country.

Franklin said the crew's focus for this summer's excavation was to find a way to work in the bay's muddy water. They brainstormed over coffee, compared notes on other projects they had worked on, then consulted engineers to see whether a cofferdam was feasible.

The structure consists of two rectangular steel-plate walls surrounding the wreck and inserted 41 feet below the bay's floor to prevent water seepage. Once it is completed later this month, the water will be pumped out and sand will be used to fill the gap between the inner and outer walls. That area will become a roadway for a crane to move around the site and lift materials from the site to a bare docked nearby.

Once the project is completed, the cofferdam's steel sheets will be sold for scrap to recover part of the \$1 million construction cost.

Arnold and Franklin said they hope to find personal possessions of La Salle and his officers, as well as *La Belle's* anchor and other supplies from the 17th century ship. Franklin, who found a human femur on the wreck last summer, also hopes to find the rest of the skeleton, and possibly find out more about its age and identity.

Archaeologists and students will map the area and document each artifact, then bring it all up for preservation and study at labs at the Corpus Christi museum and at Texas A&M University in College Station.

Because the preservation process is slow, the artifacts will not be ready for display for at least a year, Arnold said. However, a mini-exhibit of materials recovered from the wreck last year will be on display beginning Aug. 1 at the Corpus Christi museum and in the small towns along Matagorda Bay.

Future plans call for an excavation of surrounding waters to search for remains of the two rafts La Salle's men used to escape *La Belle*, as well as the shipwreck of *La Aimable*, believed to be nearby.

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