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The Mystery of La Salle in the Gulf

Led by French explorer La Salle, the settlers that sailed to the New World hoped to establish a colony and build new lives. Instead, they encountered disaster, mutiny and death. What they left behind, now retrieved from the murky waters of Matagorda Bay, tells us their story.
DISCOVERY

The *Belle* was one of a fleet of four ships that French explorer Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle led to the New World in the late 17th century. When it went down in a storm in 1686, after the fleet's storeship sank, La Salle's dreams and supplies for the new colony perished. After much research, Texas Historical Commission archaeologists discovered the ship in 1995 and began one of the decade's most exciting excavations.

AN UNUSUAL EXCAVATION

Shipwrecks are typically excavated underwater by divers, but the discovery of the *Belle* required a more ambitious plan. The Texas Historical Commission built a cofferdam, a reinforced barrier to hold out seawater, around the ship. The cofferdam's steel pilings were driven more than 40 feet into the silt of Matagorda Bay. Once the water was pumped out, the archaeologists and volunteers worked in the sand the ship had rested in for more than 300 years. It took the team eight months, working seven days a week, to excavate and document the hull and cargo.

17TH CENTURY ARTIFACTS

Artifacts from the *Belle* were remarkably preserved in the sediment, only 12 feet underwater. The found objects included:

- three bronze cannon
- a human skeleton
- brass sword guards
- thousands of glass beads
- copper kettles and powder flasks
- bronze candlesticks
- brass Jesuit rings
- pewter dishes
- the ship's wooden hull, which will eventually be reconstructed.