

Discovery

Archeology

Why Texas is not part of Canada: The long-sought fort of the great explorer La Salle on the Gulf of Mexico has been found. New France's attempt to procure a warm-water port for the fur trade is now coming into focus

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In life, it seems, the churlish 17th-century Montreal fur trader and explorer Rene-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, was nobody's favourite. Prone to a "sickness of the mind," according to diarists of the period -- which some modern investigators suggest could have been manic depression -- the crusty former Jesuit, best known for claiming the Mississippi and its drainage basin for France, fought bitterly with his crews, deprived his men of food for minor offences and, according to one French expedition engineer, forced his male stewards to sleep with him. Although La Salle carried poison antidote with him wherever he went, a cadre of his men assassinated him in Texas, three years into his audacious attempt to colonize Spanish territory there, beginning in 1685. They shot him in the head.

Now, however, La Salle is the explorer of the moment. Archeologists are unveiling two finds, rich in artifacts, that tell the story of his miserable colony of about 180 settlers. One is the site of the colony itself on a corner of a ranch near Victoria, Tex. The other is the wreck of one of his ships, La Belle, which sank 15 miles south, in **Matagorda** Bay on the Gulf Coast. It has now been recovered, complete with a hold full of the colonists' supplies.

Together, they bring to life La Salle's original plan to colonize the mouth of the Mississippi and divert some of the fur trade to a warm-weather port -- a plan that went astray when a bad map caused him to overshoot the delta.

"Imagine what would have been the history of Montreal and Quebec if La Salle had succeeded in establishing a year-round port for the fur trade," observes Jim Bruseth, chief investigator for the Texas Historical Commission (THC), which is carrying out the La Salle excavations.

Certainly La Salle's presence changed Texas history. The French incursion spurred the Spanish to root him out and assert their claim with a colony.

With swarms of mosquitoes and a flock of migratory sandhill cranes for company, as well as rattlesnakes, alligators and bad-tempered wild hogs, archeologists from the THC are working feverishly against time and with limited resources on the 9,200-acre Keeran Ranch.

Experts had long suspected that the hill on the property overlooking Garcitas Creek was the likely location of La Salle's Fort St. Louis. But the landowners, who had prevented archeological investigation on their land for nearly 50 years, refused access until a ranch foreman uncovered a 300-year-old cast iron cannon there, while clearing a roadway in September, 1996.

As Terry Cullen, the trustee for the property, explains: "John Keeran had allowed Glen Evans to survey the area in the 1950s; then he said: 'OK, y'all have seen it. There's nothing there.'"

Using metal detectors in 1996, investigators found seven more French cannons close together in a pit, which exactly matched reports from General Alonso De Leon of Spain, who led the manhunt for La Salle. When De Leon found the French colony in 1689 and learned that the Karankawa Indians had massacred the colonists, he buried the artillery for later, interred the decomposed and partly gnawed corpses and burned the buildings.

Now, in the past month, archeologists have made a series of key discoveries on the site that seem to confirm, step by step, the journals of La Salle's post commander, Henri Joutel, and the records of the Spaniards who sought to squash the colony and establish their own presidio in its place. Most poignant has been the discovery of two skeletons, whose bones were found jumbled together in a small pit. Bruseth speculates that one might be the remains of Isabelle Talon, a French Canadian. One Spanish soldier from De Leon's expedition wrote a poem about the female corpse he found on the ground four months after the massacre:

And thou, cadaver, oh, so cold,

Who for a time did make so bold

And now consumed by wildest beasts

Which upon thee made their feasts.

Talon's children, the only colonists the Karankawa spared, lived for some time with the Indians, who tattooed the French children's faces and other body parts. Eventually the young Talons found their way back to France.

Harrell Gill-King, a physical anthropologist at the University of North Texas at Denton, is preparing the bones from the pit for assembly and testing, including DNA work, while descendants of the Talon family eagerly await his findings. Gill-King, a forensics specialist who also did work on the Oklahoma City bombing site, says it is too soon to tell even whether one of the skeletons is female. "I think these are individuals who had decomposed on the surface and were then buried by the Spaniards," says Gill-King. "We knew they were not native Americans, because the teeth were not worn down," noted one field archeologist.

Just a few days before the skeletons came to light, Bruseth's team also found evidence of a 16-point star stockade, confirming that the Spanish did in fact build their Presidio Loreto y La Bahia on the very site of La Salle's colony about 30 years later and occupied it from 1721 to 1725. Previously, fragments of Spanish and French ceramics had been found on the site, which was inconclusive. But the distinctively elegant stockade corresponds precisely to the Spanish designs for the presidio that were in the archival record. With great excitement, Mike Davis, who directs the day-to-day work on Fort St. Louis, points out the faint organic black circle where one of the stockade logs once stood and the unmistakable backfill of earth of a different colour.

Also in the past few weeks, the purpose of a former adobe building in the centre of the presidio parade ground has become clear. Archeologists reached the dirt floor level of the building and found artifacts that would suggest it was used as a residence: large pieces of Spanish olive jars, for example.

But it is the emerging picture of life in the colony that drives the archeologists in their daily labours. A piece of green French Saintonge ceramic here, animal bones there, gunflints and copper tacks, possibly used to attach buffalo hides to the roofs of structures. The team has located the blacksmith shop and chapel. According to Joutel's journals, the buildings were constructed "in the Canadian manner. The pieces were closed with dovetail corners." The dig has also confirmed that the only French wall at the settlement surrounded their vegetable garden -- little protection against the Karankawa. Indeed the colonists' numbers dwindled rapidly due to desertion, smallpox and Indian attack. With La Belle sunk in the bay, the colonists were stranded. As Henry Wolff, a local folklorist, points out, "King Louis XIV deserted La Salle. This poor guy sat there for three years."

The archeologists' goal is to find the formal French cemetery that Joutel's diaries describe. One hundred colonists died between La Salle's landfall at **Matagorda** Bay, and his departure and death. "The big thing we need to do is find that cemetery, because the larger the statistical sample the better," says Gill-King. Also, the ranch owners have asked the team to exhume all the colonists' remains from the ranch and eventually bury them in a public cemetery to prevent looting at Keeran.

Unfortunately, any artifacts found on the ranch have only been lent to the state for a number of years. The loan of the iron cannons, for example, expires in 2006. Under Texas law, any historical materials found on private property belong to the landowner. In this case, the matter is complicated by the fact that a trust holds the acreage. "As a trust we cannot give the assets away," says Cullen regretfully, although he is searching for ways to remedy this problem.

The Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull has expressed a desire to include some of the artifacts from the two projects in an exhibition about New France, scheduled for 2003. Jean-Pierre Hardy, curator for the exhibition, hopes to receive permission to display one of the cannons, some of the blue glass beads used for trading, brass Jesuit rings, used for baptism of the Indians and for trading, and any other items found in large numbers. That will give Canadians a taste of the exploits of the mercurial La Salle, who between fallow depressed periods and manic exploring, led an ill-fated expedition to Texas.

Black & White Photo: Conservation Research Laboratory, Nautical Archaeology Program, Texas A&M University / On the bottom of **Matagorda** Bay off South Texas, archeologists work in a cofferdam to reconstruct one of La Salle's ships, La Belle. This project is progressing well because the ship was a 17th-century pre-fab, with numbered ribs, to be assembled in either France or the New World.; Black & White Photo: Texas A&M University / A head modelled from the skull of one of the French or Canadian colonists