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## “La Salle’s Last Voyage”

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The French explorer Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, is probably best remembered for being the first man to sail the length of the Mississippi, from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico. It was he that first claimed the huge drainage area that he sailed for the French Crown, naming it Louisiana after his patron, King Louis XIV.

However, in 1684, La Salle began another voyage, this time aiming to reach the mouth of the Mississippi through the Gulf of Mexico and establish a colony there. He began on July 24, 1684, with four ships and three hundred men, but by the end of his ill-fated voyage, he would be 400 miles off course, all his ships would be gone or lost, the colony he founded would collapse and fail, and he himself would be killed by a mutinous crew.

There were bad signs from the very start of the voyage. La Salle was forced to share a command with Captain de Beaujeu, and the two immediately began to form an intense rivalry. The St. Francois was seized by pirates, reducing the number of ships to three. Many of the crew, hating La Salle’s strict discipline, deserted during a stop on Saint-Domingue.

La Salle arrived in Matagorda Bay, a bay on the Texas coast protected the barrier island chain, in January of 1685. Despite being some 400 miles off course, La Salle was convinced that he had reached the western arm of the Mississippi.

While entering the bay, the Aimable, the mission’s supply ship, ran aground. As it sank, it

carried down almost all of the mission's food, medicine, and tools, and with it sank almost the last hope of the mission's success. Soon after the Aimable sank, the Joly sailed back for France with homesick sailors, leaving La Salle with only the Belle.

La Salle, still convinced he had found the Mississippi, ordered his remaining men to build a fort, which would be called Fort St. Louis, for the 180 men that were still in Matagorda Bay. Many of the men died of disease, poisonous fruit, snakebite, or were killed by natives. La Salle offered no moral support to his dwindling colony, leaving for months at a time to vainly search for the main branch of the Mississippi.

The final blow to the mission came when the Belle ran aground and sank in Matagorda Bay. She had been anchored offshore, holding supplies and a handful of colonists, but when she ran out of water, her captain, both desperate and drunk, could not fight the fierce norther that began to blow across the bay, and she sank with all but six of her crew, who returned to Fort St. Louis to tell the bad news.

Now totally cut off from France, in a hostile land, and under the command of a man they hated, the settlers felt isolated, "cast away in a savage country," as La Salle's brother Jean Cavelier put it. In 1687, La Salle finally set out to seek help. He took along about 17 of the less than 40 men who remained in the colony. En route, he was ambushed by five of his men and shot. The men stripped the corpse of their hated commander, cursed it, and left it to rot near the Trinity river.

Five men on the expedition still managed to reach Canada and sail back home to France, but King Louis XIV refused to help the beleaguered colonists back in Fort St. Louis. The fort's population would be killed by disease and Indians, leaving the empty fort and the sunken skeleton of the Belle as mute and ghastly testaments to the total failure of La Salle's last voyage.

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The National Geographic article in which this story appears has, in fact, two purposes. It details the tragic story of La Salle's last voyage, but it also mixes with it the details of the archaeological excavation of the remains of the Belle. The result seems almost one of time travel; the background of the ship find is elaborated on one page, while on the next, the reader is suddenly whisked away to the narrative of La Salle's tragic voyage. And then, as an almost ghastly closure, the next and final section of the article speaks of the desperate last days of the Belle, and the remains of the drowned and dehydrated men who were entombed beneath the water when she ran aground.