

ROBERT S. WEDDLE



The
Wreck

of the *Belle*,
the

Ruin



of La Salle

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the Ruin
of La Salle



NUMBER EIGHTY-EIGHT

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Texas A&M University*

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the Ruin
of La Salle



Robert S. Weddle

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In Loving Memory

NAN AVIS WILLIAMSON WEDDLE

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*Until her energies failed,
she read these pages as they were written.
At last I held her dying hand
and told her that the book was finished.*

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FOREWORD

During the summer of 1995, archaeologists from the Texas Historical Commission discovered the wreck of *La Belle*, a small ship used by the French explorer Robert Cavalier de La Salle in attempting to colonize the Gulf of Mexico between Florida and Mexico. Realizing the great importance of the vessel and its contents, archaeologists planned and implemented an amazing recovery of the wreck. In 1996 a large steel structure, called a cofferdam, was built around the ship, and seawater was pumped out from the interior. This exposed La Salle's lost ship for the first time in more than three centuries. The relatively dry interior allowed the archaeological team to carefully excavate the ship's cargo over a six-month period and to dismantle and recover the remains of *La Belle*.

An amazing array of artifacts was found, numbering more than one million and representing a "kit" for building a French colony in a seventeenth-century New World. The artifacts are undergoing conservation at Texas A&M University to ensure their preservation and will be studied by teams of specialists to learn as much as possible about the French effort to settle the Texas Coast. The materials will also be displayed in museums around Texas and throughout the nation to tell the story of the French settlement in Texas.

While scholarly interest in France's attempt to colonize Texas has long existed, the discovery of *La Belle* has greatly increased attention among the general public about the Lone Star State's early French history. Extensive media attention to the recovery of *La Belle*, and now to the ongoing excavation by Texas Historical Commission archaeologists at La Salle's colony, Fort St. Louis, have whetted public interest and created a demand—and a responsibility—to provide more.

This volume is the first step in chronicling the La Salle expedition to Texas. Robert Weddle's detailed examination of La Salle describes his deeds and elucidates his motivations leading up to the expedition. Weddle uses firsthand archival documents, many written by La Salle and other members of the expedition, to expand our understanding of La Salle's true intentions in settling the Gulf Coast.

For the broader archaeological project, Weddle's volume provides the historical context for the French attempt to colonize the Texas Gulf Coast. This volume, then, serves as the historical background for others that are to follow on the archaeological excavations of *La Belle* and the Fort St. Louis colony. Future books will provide detailed descriptions of the artifacts left by the French colonists and will interpret these materials within this broad historical framework. Undoubtedly, when the new information is fully published, many new insights will be made into the La Salle expedition to Texas.

James E. Bruseth
Texas Historical Commission
November 13, 2000

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Life's greatest lessons often come from the most trying circumstances. Perhaps it is only from being severely encumbered that one appreciates the true worth of kind-hearted souls—friends and strangers—who stand ever poised for the rescue. Such thoughts come from contemplation of the task just finished: an undertaking that would have been impossible without the help of those whose names are recalled in the following paragraphs. To them I offer this work as a tribute, with the hope that it is a worthy one.

In a sense, my involvement in this project began more than twenty years ago when Barto Arnold—then state marine archeologist with the Texas Antiquities Committee—invited me aboard the *Anomaly* for a magnetometer survey of Pass Cavallo: the natural access of Matagorda Bay, where La Salle's ships entered—or died trying. Just back from a research trip to Spain (funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities), I had in hand a copy of Juan Enríquez Barroto's diary detailing the Spanish discovery of the wreck of the *Belle*.

There was, however, much yet to be learned about the *Belle* and the La Salle Texas expedition of which she was such a vital part. Discovery of the lost vessel by Texas Historical Commission (THC) archeologists in 1995 provided the incentive and brought forth the public interest requisite to sustained inquiry. I am indebted to the Texas Historical Commission; to Curtis Tunnell, then THC executive director, now retired; and James E. Bruseth, director of the THC Archeology Division, for providing the enabling stipend for this book; the opportunity to visit the *Belle* site while it was being excavated; and a significant quantity of research material and photographs.

Kathleen Gilmore, whose investigations into the La Salle Texas episode have often run parallel to my own, has been generous in sharing information, especially on Jean L'Archevêque and other expedition members.

Many other persons have provided important material, or assistance in locating books and documents. Foremost among these is Patricia R. Lemée, whose willingness to track down elusive facts and to share both her books and her own research files has been a boon to the project throughout. She and Al McGraw combined their efforts to make possible my visit to the

site of La Salle's Texas settlement during THC's excavation, despite seemingly impossible circumstances at the time. Appreciated immensely are Al McGraw's sharing of maps and ideas.

The interlibrary loan of microfilmed translations of the Margry papers from the Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, was graciously arranged by Janet Whitson. Invaluable material from French archives was provided by John de Bry, Bernard Allaire, and Marcel Lussier, whose visit in my home to exchange material and ideas was a special treat.

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Donald E. Chipman not only located important works on La Salle's exploits but gave generously of his time to read the manuscript and offer valued suggestions. Barbara McCutcheon and staff of the Bonham Public Library obtained books and microfilm on interlibrary loan and made available their microfilm reader and printer. Assistance also was provided by H. G. Dulaney and Doretha Gay of the Sam Rayburn Library in Bonham; Daniel Spurr; Light T. Cummins; Kinga Perzynska (Catholic Archives of Texas); Leroy J. Politsch; Pauline Cusson; Mrs. William S. Doherty; Pierre Lebeau; Carl A. Brasseaux; and especially Roland Pantemuehl, who produced the maps.

Thanks are due Paul Newfield III, Roy Tallon, and Laura Watanabe for sharing with me their family connections to members of La Salle's company. Finally, it should be noted that much of this book has its basis in my previous ones; persons who contributed to them, therefore, have assisted this one also.

This work has provided an opportunity to reassess former conclusions, correct old errors of fact, and expand on tentative assertions. Those whose sharing has been a blessing, however, bear no responsibility for the outcome. To borrow a thought from the late President Harry S. Truman, "The buck stops here."

INTRODUCTION

Wild and untamed, the mighty river that sliced the continent and drained half the present-day continental United States excited the imaginations of adventurous seventeenth-century Europeans. Yet none had sailed upon it, save a band of lost Spaniards, defeated by the wilderness and seeking escape from its savagery; and even they, in their destitution and misery, were sparing in details of their odyssey.

As the century waned, the focus on the mysterious river called Meche Sebe (or some variant thereof) intensified until that historic moment in April, 1682, when the French explorer La Salle reached its mouth and claimed its valley for his king. But the discovery alone was not enough; lacking was the ability to put it into the proper context. The river itself, with tortuous meanders beneath a sunless sky, fading into a jagged maze of swamps and deltaic channels, had proved confusing enough. The technology for exact computation of longitude by celestial observation was a century in the future. A broken astrolabe (for determining latitude) and maps that did not fit the landscape added to the confusion; when La Salle emerged from one of the Mississippi's eastern passes into a salt-water lagoon, he saw it not as the Río del Espíritu Santo of ancient lore but as a different river in a different place.

On such an unproved hypothesis, backed by his monarch, La Salle launched from France a voyage to find his river mouth by sea. In the more than three hundred years since that undertaking, its story has been told in countless ways, from various perspectives leading to diverse conclusions. So much has been said, in fact, that a retelling of the tale scarcely seemed warranted. But all that changed on July 13, 1995, when archeologists of the Texas Historical Commission brought up from the depths of Matagorda Bay a 793-pound bronze cannon engraved with the arms of Louis XIV. Around this ornate piece of weaponry lay the crumbling hull of the French Royal Navy ship *La Belle* and over a million artifacts pertaining to La Salle's effort to plant within the Gulf of Mexico—that traditionally Spanish sea—a French colony that included women and children. The *Belle*, victim of storm-driven disaster, had been the colonists' last hope of seeing France again.

At once new questions arose. The moribund story of La Salle, his two hundred colonists, and their effort to establish the first European settlement on the Gulf coast between Pensacola Bay and the Río Pánuco in Mexico suddenly breathed new life. As history had provided the reasons for the archeological discovery, archeology now helped fill the blanks of history. With the emergence of new data, some old hypotheses and misconceptions have been disproved or brought to question; hence, a reframing of an old picture, for viewing in the light of new discovery.

My opinion of La Salle and his endeavors at the end of this study contrasts sharply with that held at the beginning. He who reads these lines with unjaundiced view quite likely will undergo a similar transition. One of the most striking aspects of La Salle's career is the often deliberate lack of candor that surrounded his endeavors. Nearly everyone who shared in his adventures and gave testimony thereof felt the need at some point to avoid the truth. Even the name of the French settlement on the Texas coast as it has come down to us (Fort-Saint-Louis) is an invention.

The web of deceit began with La Salle himself. As his failures mounted early in his career, so did his need to conceal certain facts from his creditors. The deception mounted rapidly when the Renaudot faction in Paris perceived the explorer's potential usefulness and began to polish his image with spurious accounts of his deeds. Deceitfulness spread among various members of the Gulf of Mexico expedition who, for one reason or another, had personal axes to grind—or guilt or inadequacy or failure to hide.

Accounts published in France followed the pattern. Apart from revisionists who found the original narratives (as of Henri de Tonti and Henri Joutel) too prolix or prosaic for the popular audience, there were writers with a religious thrust who sought to varnish over failure in priestly conduct by La Salle's clerics.

In the end, the Frenchmen who were captured and taken to Mexico related falsely events of La Salle's murder to conceal their own involvement or someone else's. They omitted from their depositions any facts that would betray the extent of France's designs on Spanish territory, for which they might be held culpable. La Salle's brother, Abbé Cavelier, the most impudent liar of them all, not only concealed his brother's death for personal gain but involved others in his deception. Included was the redoubtable Joutel, who, as a Cavelier loyalist, may stand guilty of omitting other details at the behest of La Salle or his mendacious brother.

The maze of falsehood is difficult to penetrate. My attempt to present a cogent narrative, with logical interpretation, has required careful study and

thoughtful analysis. Yet it stands to reason that not all the myths have been perceived. La Salle's advocates are not likely to abandon him; it is not possible to undo at a stroke the accumulated mythology of three centuries, even if all of it were known. There have been other attempts, though largely piecemeal, to do so. Whatever may be said of this effort, it seems clear that the circumstances surrounding the wreck of the *Belle* and the tragic conclusion of the episode may now be seen as the natural culmination of La Salle's life and the way he lived it: a true reflection of the man himself.

No attempt is made here to survey the entire body of La Salle literature that has accrued since the end of this history-making episode; there would not be space for such in a single volume. Rather, the purpose has been to penetrate the shroud and present from the most reliable evidence a forthright narrative that will enable readers to draw their own conclusions.

I



THE PRICE OF GLORY