

Exploring La Salle's long-lost treasures

Story by Shea Wiggins
Photographs by Pat James

Four ships sailed the ocean to create a French civilization in the New World in the 17th century. Rene Robert Cavalier, sieur de La Salle, led the expedition on a search for the Mississippi Valley.

Pirates captured the St. Françoise in Santo Domingo, and L'aimiable (The Friend) ran aground off the Texas coast. Many fearful colonists, trepid in the wilderness of North America, sailed back to France on a third ship, Le Joli (The Jolly).

While La Salle ardently searched for the Mississippi on foot, the last ship, La Belle, sank in a desperate attempt by the remaining colonists to reach Fort St. Louis.

Lost in January 1686, the La Belle re-emerged in July 1995 in Matagora Bay, off the coast of Texas.



Above right: The jawbone of a man was found near the wreck of the La Belle. Far right: This sword hilt was found in the wreckage of the La Belle. Above: A researcher displays a 17th-century hand grenade. Behind story: This spoon was recovered from the La Belle.

Texas A&M conservation experts from the University's Nautical Archaeology Program were given a hands-on opportunity to analyze, interpret and feel the remains of La Salle's expedition.

Dr. Donny Hamilton, head of the Nautical Archaeology Program, said A&M contracted with the Texas Historical Commission to conserve the artifacts from the La Belle and eight iron cannons found four months ago near Victoria. The cannons were lost when Fort St. Louis was abandoned.

Some of the artifacts found included coils, wire, barrels of axes, tools, mirrors, bells, 17th century lancets, ceramic pots and beads for trade with the Indians.

French visitors to the lab identified French pottery obtained from the La Belle.

"The most interesting item — although it is not an artifact — recovered from the wreck is a skeleton with the brain still preserved within the cranium," Hamilton said. "This is the first time I have seen this in an excavation."

Hamilton said workers built a dam around the ship, like a doughnut, which was filled with gravel. The water was pumped out of the middle, to be able to excavate the ship as though it were on dry land.

"I have never seen a shipwreck that had as much material on it as this ship," Hamilton said. "It had everything on board to create a French settlement."

Hamilton has also excavated a 1692 sunken city in Port Royal, Jamaica, and a 1300 B.C. shipwreck off the coast of Turkey.

Advanced technological techniques are being applied to artifacts in the Archeology Preservation Research Laboratory by Wayne Smith, a research scientist for Texas A&M.

Hamilton estimates the conservation process will take up to five years.

Jason Barrett, a research assistant in the A&M Conservation Research Laboratory and an anthropology graduate student, said they are working with new conservation techniques.

"We keep everything in water," Barrett said. "This keeps the materials from breaking down. We are just beginning the conservation process."

Barrett said he is fascinated by the designs of the bronze cannons, as well as ceramic pots discovered.

"The ceramic fire pots were filled with combustibles," Barrett said. "They are metal, round cannonball shapes which have a fuse in them. I had no idea about the antiquity of grenades. It is interesting to see the technologies of war then."

Peter Fix, a research assistant in the A&M Conservation Research Laboratory and an anthropology graduate student, photographs artifacts as they are shipped to the lab.

"There are over 12,000 different lot numbers for the site," Fix said. "Some lot numbers have only a couple of artifacts, and some have 100,000 or more."

Fix said he is interested in the ship itself, as a container of the artifacts.

"I am immersed in all of them (the artifacts)," he said. "I like the history of the archeology of seafaring...the skeletons, cannons, or fragments of caskets, barrels...all play an integral part in understanding."

Fix said another series of photos will be shot after the artifacts are conserved.

Jon Faucher, a research assistant and an anthropology graduate student, read a collection of rare books regarding early 18th century French ship-builders and journals of the historical accounts of the expedition.

"After the project started, I became very interested in the background information," Faucher said. "I read all of the historical documents. I am not necessarily obsessed, but something very close to it."

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