

= French colonization of Texas =

The French colonization of Texas began with Fort Saint Louis in present @-@ day southeastern Texas . It was established in 1685 near Arenosa Creek and Matagorda Bay by explorer Robert Cavelier de La Salle . He intended to found the colony at the mouth of the Mississippi River , but inaccurate maps and navigational errors caused his ships to anchor instead 400 miles ( 640 km ) to the west , off the coast of Texas . The colony survived until 1688 . The present @-@ day town of Inez is near the fort 's site .

= = History = =

The colony faced numerous difficulties during its brief existence , including Native Americans defending their homeland , epidemics , and harsh conditions . From that base , La Salle led several expeditions to find the Mississippi River . These did not succeed , but La Salle did explore much of the Rio Grande and parts of east Texas .

During one of his absences in 1686 , the colony 's last ship was wrecked , leaving the colonists unable to obtain resources from the French colonies of the Caribbean . As conditions deteriorated , La Salle realized the colony could survive only with help from the French settlements in Illinois Country to the north , along the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers . His last expedition ended along the Brazos River in early 1687 , when La Salle and five of his men were murdered during a mutiny .

Although a handful of men reached Illinois Country , help never made it to Fort St. Louis . Most of the remaining members of the colony were killed during a Karankawa raid in late 1688 , four children survived after being adopted as captives . Although the colony lasted only three years , it established France 's claim to possession of the region that is now Texas . The United States later claimed , unsuccessfully , this region as part of the Louisiana Purchase because of the early French colony .

Spain learned of La Salle 's mission in 1686 . Concerned that the French colony could threaten Spain 's control over the Viceroyalty of New Spain and the unsettled southeastern region of North America , the Crown funded multiple expeditions to locate and eliminate the settlement . The unsuccessful expeditions helped Spain to better understand the geography of the Gulf Coast region . When the Spanish finally discovered the remains of the French colony at Fort Saint Louis in 1689 , they buried the cannons and burned the buildings . Years later , Spanish authorities built a presidio at the same location . When the presidio was abandoned , the site of the French settlement was lost to history .

Fort Saint Louis was rediscovered by historians and excavated in 1996 , and the area is now an archaeological site . In 1995 , researchers located the ship La Belle in Matagorda Bay , with several sections of the hull remaining virtually intact . They constructed a cofferdam , the first to be used in North America , to excavate the ship as if in dry conditions . In 2000 , excavations revealed three of the original structures of the fort , as well as three graves of Frenchmen .

= = La Salle expeditions = =

= = = First expedition = = =

By the late 17th century , much of North America had been claimed by European countries . Spain had claimed Florida as well as modern @-@ day Mexico and much of the southwestern part of the continent . The northern and central Atlantic coast was claimed by Britain , and New France comprised much of what is now Canada as well as the central Illinois Country . The French feared that their territory was vulnerable to the expansionist aims of its neighbors . In 1681 , French nobleman Robert Cavelier de La Salle launched an expedition down the Mississippi River from New France , at first believing he would find a path to the Pacific Ocean . Instead , La Salle found a route to the Gulf of Mexico . Although Hernando De Soto had explored and claimed this area for Spain

140 years before , on April 9 , 1682 , La Salle claimed the Mississippi River valley for French king Louis XIV , naming the territory Louisiana in his honor .

Unless France established a base at the mouth of the Mississippi , Spain would have an opportunity to control the entire Gulf of Mexico and potentially pose a threat to New France 's southern borders . La Salle believed that the Mississippi River was near the eastern edge of New Spain . On his return to France in 1684 , he proposed to the Crown the establishment of a colony at the mouth of the river . The colony could provide a base for promoting Christianity among the native peoples as well as a convenient location for attacking the Spanish province of Nueva Vizcaya and gaining control of its lucrative silver mines . He argued that a small number of Frenchmen could successfully invade New Spain by allying themselves with some of the more than 15 @, @ 000 Native Americans who were angry over Spanish enslavement . After Spain declared war on France in October 1667 , King Louis agreed to support La Salle 's plan . He was to return to North America and confirm " the Indians ' allegiance to the crown , leading them to the true faith , and maintaining intertribal peace " .

= = = Second expedition = = =

La Salle originally planned to sail to New France , journey overland to the south and Illinois Country , and then travel down the Mississippi River to its mouth . To spite Spain , Louis XIV insisted that La Salle sail through the Gulf of Mexico , which Spain considered its exclusive property . Although La Salle had requested only one ship , on July 24 , 1684 , he left La Rochelle , France with four : the 36 @- @ gun man of war Le Joly , the 300 @- @ ton storeship L 'Aimable , the barque La Belle , and the ketch St. François . Although Louis XIV had provided both Le Joly and La Belle , La Salle desired more cargo space and leased L 'Aimable and St. François from French merchants . Louis also provided 100 soldiers and full crews for the ships , as well as funds to hire skilled workers to join the expedition . La Salle was forced to purchase trade goods himself for expected encounters with Native Americans . .

The ships carried a total of nearly 300 people , including soldiers , artisans and craftsmen , six Catholic missionaries , eight merchants , and over a dozen women and children . Shortly after their departure , France and Spain ceased hostilities , and Louis was no longer interested in sending La Salle further assistance . Details of the voyage were kept secret so that Spain would not learn about it . La Salle 's naval commander , the Sieur de Beaujeu , resented La Salle 's keeping their destination until the party was well underway . The discord between the two intensified when they reached the island of Santo Domingo and quarreled over where to anchor . Beaujeu sailed to another part of the island , allowing Spanish privateers to capture the St. François , which had been fully loaded with supplies , provisions , and tools for the colony .

During the 58 @- @ day voyage , two people died of illness and one woman gave birth to a child . The voyage to Santo Domingo had lasted longer than expected , and provisions ran low , especially after the loss of the St. François . La Salle had little money with which to replenish supplies , and finally two of the merchants aboard the expedition sold some of their trade goods to the islanders , and lent their profits to La Salle . To fill the gaps left after several men deserted , La Salle recruited a few islanders to join the expedition .

In late November 1684 , when La Salle had fully recovered from a severe illness , the three remaining ships continued their search for the Mississippi River delta . Before they left Santo Domingo , local sailors warned that strong Gulf currents flowed east and would tug the ships toward the Florida straits unless they corrected for it . On December 18 , the ships reached the Gulf of Mexico and entered waters that Spain claimed as its territory . None of the members of the expedition had ever been in the Gulf of Mexico or knew how to navigate it . Due to a combination of inaccurate maps , La Salle 's previous miscalculation of the latitude of the mouth of the Mississippi River , and overcorrection for the currents , the expedition failed to find the Mississippi . Instead , they landed at Matagorda Bay in early 1685 , 400 miles ( 640 km ) west of the Mississippi .

= = = First settlement = = =

On February 20 , the colonists set foot on land for the first time in three months since leaving Santo Domingo . They set up a temporary camp near the site of the present @-@ day Matagorda Island Lighthouse . The chronicler of the expedition , Henri Joutel , described his first view of Texas : " The country did not seem very favorable to me . It was flat and sandy but did nevertheless produce grass . There were several salt pools . We hardly saw any wild fowl except some cranes and Canadian geese which were not expecting us . "

Against Beaujeu 's advice , La Salle ordered La Belle and the Aimable " to negotiate the narrow and shallow pass " to bring the supplies closer to the campsite . To lighten L 'Aimable 's load , its eight cannons and a small portion of its cargo were removed . After La Belle successfully negotiated the pass , La Salle sent her pilot to L 'Aimable to assist with the navigation , but L 'Aimable 's captain refused the help . As the Aimable set sail , a band of Karankawa approached and carried off some of the settlers . La Salle led a small group of soldiers to rescue them , leaving no one to direct the Aimable . When he returned , he found the Aimable grounded on a sandbar . Upon hearing that the captain had ordered the ship to sail forward after it had struck a sandbar , La Salle became convinced that the captain had deliberately grounded the ship .

For several days the men attempted to salvage the tools and provisions that had been loaded on the Aimable , but a bad storm prevented them from recovering more than food , cannons , powder , and a small amount of the merchandise . The ship sank on March 7 . The French watched the Karankawa loot the wreckage . As French soldiers approached the Native American village to retrieve their supplies , the villagers hid . On discovering the deserted village , the soldiers not only reclaimed the looted merchandise but also took animal pelts and two canoes . The angry Karankawa attacked , killing two Frenchmen and injuring others .

Beaujeu , having fulfilled his mission in escorting the colonists across the ocean , returned to France aboard the Joly in mid @-@ March 1685 . Many of the colonists chose to return to France with him , leaving approximately 180 . Although Beaujeu delivered a message from La Salle requesting additional supplies , French authorities , having made peace with Spain , never responded . The remaining colonists suffered from dysentery and venereal diseases , and people died daily . Those who were fit helped build crude dwellings and a temporary fort on Matagorda Island .

= = = Fort Saint Louis = = =

On March 24 , La Salle took 52 men in five canoes to find a less exposed settlement site . They found Garcitas Creek , which had fresh water and fish , with good soil along its banks . They named it Rivière aux Boeufs for the nearby buffalo herds . Fort Saint Louis was constructed on a bluff overlooking the creek , 1 @.@ 5 leagues from its mouth . Two men died , one of a rattlesnake bite and another from drowning while trying to fish . At night , the Karankawa would sometimes surround the camp and howl , but the soldiers could scare them away with a few gun shots .

In early June , La Salle summoned the rest of the colonists from the temporary campsite to the new settlement site . Seventy people began the 50 @-@ mile ( 80 km ) overland trek on June 12 . All of the supplies had to be hauled from the Belle , a physically draining task that was finally completed by the middle of July . The last load was accompanied by the 30 men who had remained behind to guard the ship . Although trees grew near the site , they were not suitable for building , and timber had to be transported to the building site from several miles inland . Some timbers were salvaged from the Aimable . By the end of July , over half of the settlers had died , most from a combination of scant rations and overwork .

The remaining settlers built a large two @-@ story structure at the center of the settlement . The ground floor was divided into three rooms : one for La Salle , one for the priests , and one for the officers of the expedition . The upper story consisted of a single room used to store supplies . Surrounding the fort were several smaller structures to provide shelter for the other members of the expedition . The eight cannons , each weighing 700 to 1 @,@ 200 pounds ( 320 to 540 kg ) , had been salvaged from L 'Aimable and were positioned around the colony for protection .

= = = Difficulties = = =

For several months after the permanent camp was built , the colonists took short trips to explore their surroundings . At the end of October 1685 , La Salle decided to undertake a longer expedition and reloaded the Belle with many of the remaining supplies . He took 50 men , plus the Belle 's crew of 27 sailors , leaving behind 34 men , women , and children . Most of the men traveled with La Salle in canoes , while the Belle followed further off the coast . After three days of travel , they learned of hostile Native Americans in the area . Twenty of the Frenchmen attacked the Native American village , where they found Spanish artifacts . Several of the men died on this expedition from eating prickly pear . The Karankawa killed a small group of the men who had camped on shore , including the captain of the Belle .

From January until March 1686 , La Salle and most of his men searched overland for the Mississippi River , traveling towards the Rio Grande , possibly as far west as modern @-@ day Langtry , Texas . The men questioned the local Native American tribes , asking for information on the locations of the Spaniards and the Spanish mines , offering gifts , and telling stories that portrayed the Spanish as cruel and the French as benevolent . When the group returned , they were unable to find the Belle where they had left her and were forced to walk back to the fort .

The following month they traveled east , hoping to locate the Mississippi and return to Canada . During their travels , the group encountered the Caddo , who gave the Frenchmen a map depicting their territory , that of their neighbors , and the location of the Mississippi River . The Caddo often made friendship pacts with neighboring peoples and extended their policy of peaceful negotiation to the French . While visiting the Caddo , the French met Jumano traders , who reported on the activities of the Spanish in New Mexico . These traders later informed Spanish officials of the Frenchmen they had seen .

Four of the men deserted when they reached the Neches River . La Salle and one of his nephews became very ill , forcing the group to halt for two months . While the men recovered , the group ran low on food and gunpowder . In August , the eight surviving members of the expedition returned to Fort Saint Louis , having never left East Texas .

While La Salle was gone , six of those who had remained on the Belle finally arrived at Fort Saint Louis . According to them , the new captain of the Belle was always drunk . Many of the sailors did not know how to sail , and they grounded the boat on Matagorda Peninsula . The survivors took a canoe to the fort , leaving the ship behind . The destruction of their last ship left the settlers stranded on the Texas coast , with no hope of gaining assistance from the French colonies in the Caribbean Sea .

By early January 1687 , fewer than 45 of the original 180 people remained in the colony , which was beset by internal strife . La Salle believed that their only hope of survival lay in trekking overland to request assistance from New France , and some time that month he led a final expedition to try to reach the Illinois Country . Fewer than 20 people remained at Fort Saint Louis , primarily women , children , and those deemed unfit , as well as seven soldiers and three missionaries with whom La Salle was unhappy . Seventeen men were included on the expedition , including La Salle , his brother , and two of his nephews . While camping near present @-@ day Navasota on March 18 , several of the men quarreled over the division of buffalo meat . That night , an expedition member killed one of La Salle 's nephews and two other men in their sleep . The following day La Salle was killed while approaching the camp to investigate his nephew 's disappearance . Infighting led to the deaths of two other expedition members within a short time . Two of the surviving members , including Jean L 'Archeveque , joined the Caddo . The remaining six men , led by Henri Joutel , made their way to Illinois Country . During their journey through Illinois to Canada , the men did not tell anyone that La Salle was dead . They reached France in the summer of 1688 and informed King Louis of La Salle 's death and the horrible conditions in the colony . Louis did not send aid .

= = Spanish response = =

La Salle 's mission had remained secret until 1686 when former expedition member Denis Thomas , who had deserted in Santo Domingo , was arrested for piracy. trying to have his punishment reduced , Thomas informed his Spanish jailers of La Salle 's plan to found a colony and eventually conquer Spanish silver mines . Despite his confession , Thomas was hanged .

The Spanish government felt the French colony would be a threat to their mines and shipping routes , and Carlos II 's Council of War thought that " Spain needed swift action ' to remove this thorn which has been thrust into the heart of America . The greater the delay the greater the difficulty of attainment . ' " The Spanish had no idea where to find La Salle , and in 1686 they sent a sea expedition and two land expeditions to try to locate his colony . Although the expeditions were unable to find La Salle , they did narrow the search to the area between the Rio Grande and the Mississippi . Four Spanish expeditions the following year failed to find La Salle , but helped Spain to better understand the geography of the Gulf Coast region .

In 1688 , the Spanish sent three more expeditions , two by sea and one by land . The land expedition , led by Alonso De León , discovered Jean Gery , who had deserted the French colony and was living in Southern Texas with the Coahuiltecan . Using Gery as a translator and guide , De León finally found the French fort in late April 1689 . The fort and the five crude houses surrounding it were in ruins . Several months before , the Karankawa had attacked the settlement . They destroyed the structures and left the bodies of three people , including a woman who had been shot in the back . A Spanish priest who had accompanied De León conducted funeral services for the three victims . The chronicler of the Spanish expedition , Juan Bautista Chapa , wrote that the devastation was God 's punishment for opposing the Pope , as Pope Alexander VI had granted the Indies exclusively to the Spanish . The remains of the fort were destroyed by the Spanish , who also buried the French cannons left behind . The Spanish later built a fort on the same location .

In early 1689 , Spanish authorities received a plea , written in French . Jumano scouts had received these papers from the Caddo , who asked that they be delivered to the Spanish . The papers included a parchment painting of a ship , as well as a written message from Jean L 'Archevêque . The message read :

I do not know what sort of people you are . We are French [ ; ] we are among the savages [ ; ] we would like much to be Among the Christians such as we are [ . ] ... we are solely grieved to be among beasts like these who believe neither in God nor in anything . Gentlemen , if you are willing to take us away , you have only to send a message . ... We will deliver ourselves up to you .

De León later rescued L 'Archeveque and his companion Jacques Grollet . On interrogation , the men maintained that over 100 of the French settlers had died of smallpox , and the others had been killed by Native Americans . The only people known to have survived the final attack were the Talon children , who had been adopted by the Karankawa . According to the children , the settlement had been attacked around Christmas of 1688 , and all the remaining settlers had been killed .

= = Legacy = =

Only 15 or 16 people survived the colony . Six returned to France , while nine others were captured by the Spanish , including the four children who had been spared by the Karankawa . The children were initially brought to the viceroy of New Spain , the Conde de Galve , who treated them as servants . Two of the boys , Pierre and Jean @-@ Baptiste , later returned to France . Of the remaining Spanish captives , three became Spanish citizens and settled in New Mexico . Although the French colony had been utterly destroyed , Spain feared that another French attempt was inevitable . For the first time , the Spanish crown authorized small outposts in eastern Texas and at Pensacola . In 1722 , the Spanish built a fort , Presidio La Bahia , and Mission Nuestra Señora del Espíritu Santo de Zúñiga on the site of Fort Saint Louis .

France did not abandon its claims to Texas until November 3 , 1762 , when it ceded all of its territory west of the Mississippi River to Spain in the Treaty of Fontainebleau , following its defeat by Great Britain in the Seven Years ' War . It ceded New France to Britain . In 1803 , three years after Spain had returned Louisiana to France , Napoleon sold the territory to the United States . The original agreement between Spain and France had not explicitly specified the borders of Louisiana ,

and the descriptions in the documents were ambiguous and contradictory . The United States insisted that its purchase included all of the territory France had claimed , including all of Texas . The dispute was not resolved until the Adams @-@ Onís Treaty of 1819 , in which Spain ceded Florida to the United States in return for the United States ' relinquishing its claim on Texas .

The official boundary of Texas was set at the Sabine River ( the current boundary between Texas and Louisiana ) , and following the Red and Arkansas rivers to the 42nd parallel ( California 's current northern border ) .

= = Excavation = =

In 1908 , historian Herbert Eugene Bolton identified an area along Garcitas Creek , near Matagorda Bay , as the location of Fort St. Louis . Other historians , before and after Bolton , argued that the fort was located on Lavaca River in Jackson County . Five decades later , the University of Texas at Austin funded a partial excavation of Bolton 's site , a part of the Keeran ranch . Although several thousand items were recovered , archaeologists could not accurately distinguish between French and Spanish artifacts of the 17th century , and no report on the findings was ever issued . In the 1970s , the artifacts were reexamined by Kathleen Gilmore , an archaeologist at Southern Methodist University . She determined that while most of the artifacts were Spanish , some definitively matched artifacts recovered from French and French @-@ Canadian excavations of the same time period .

In late 1996 , Keeran ranch workers exploring with metal detectors located eight cast @-@ iron cannons buried near Garcitas Creek . After excavating the cannons , the Texas Historical Commission ( THC ) confirmed they were from Fort Saint Louis . In 2000 a THC excavation discovered the locations of three of the buildings that had housed the French colony and the three graves dug by the Spanish .

For decades , the THC had also been searching for the wreckage of La Belle . In 1995 , the shipwreck was discovered in Matagorda Bay . Researchers excavated a 792 @-@ pound ( 359 kg ) cast @-@ bronze cannon from the waters , as well as musket balls , bronze straight pins , and trade beads . Large sections of the wooden hull were intact , protected from the damaging effects of warm salt water by layers of muddy sediment which " essentially creat [ ed ] an oxygen @-@ free time capsule " . La Belle was the oldest French shipwreck discovered in the Western Hemisphere to that date . To enable the archaeologists to recover as many of the artifacts as possible , a cofferdam was constructed around the ship . The cofferdam held back the waters of the bay , allowing archaeologists to conduct the excavation as if it were on land . This was the first attempt in North America to excavate a shipwreck in dry conditions . Previous shipwreck excavations using cofferdams were completed in Europe , but never on a ship as large as the Belle .

The National Underwater and Marine Agency searched for L 'Aimable from 1997 until 1999 . Although they found a promising location , the ship was buried under more than 25 feet ( 7 @.@ 6 m ) of sand and could not be reached .