La Salle's Grand Dream

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In 1685, valiant French explorer Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, planted a small colony, Fort St. Louis, on Garcitas Creek, several miles upstream from Lavaca Bay. His endeavor, however, was doomed to fail. In this selection, Bruseth and Turner discuss La Salle's ambitious vision of founding a French base on the Gulf of Mexico.

In the name of the most high, powerful, invincible, and victorious Prince, Louis the Great, by the grace of God, King of France and Navarre, fourteenth of the name, I, this ninth day of April one thousand six hundred and eighty-two, do now take, in the name of His Majesty and of his successors to the crown, possession of this country of

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Less than four years before La Belle was lost on the Texas coast, La Salle, in a vast marshland with no one to hear him but a small band of followers and some curious local Indians, had claimed possession of one-third of the North American continent for France. After a long and arduous journey, he had finally discovered where the mouth of the Mississippi River emptied into the Gulf of Mexico.

The French claim in the New World now extended from the upper reaches of Canada to the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, encompassing savannas, forests, deserts, and plains. The land was watered by innumerable rivers, streams, and creeks and populated by thousands of American Indians who knew nothing of this moment or its implications.

A DRIVEN MAN

Scion of a wealthy family of merchants, La Salle was born in 1643, baptized a short time later, and grew up in Rouen, a major port on the River Seine in Normandy. Early in his life, La Salle joined the Jesuit priesthood, as did many French boys from well-to-do families. Entering the monastery meant La Salle must relinquish his share of the family's fortune, for he was expected to make the church paramount. Trained in the Jesuit Order, he became a teacher.

La Salle's quiet and introspective temperament, however, did not suit the vocation of teaching unruly schoolboys. He appealed to his Father Superior to be sent to a mission in China, where he could experience the excitement of remote parts of the world. His request was denied. Undaunted, he then petitioned to go to Portugal to teach mathematics; this request was also refused. With this rejection and after twelve years as a Jesuit, La Salle submitted his resignation.

La Salle then decided to travel to New France, or today's eastern Canada, to join his elder brother, the Abbé Cavelier, a priest of St. Sulpice in Montreal. In the spring of 1666, at the age of 23, La Salle thus made his first journey to the New World. Despite its unforgiving climate, the colony of New France was a bustling place, though its remoteness often weakened the rule of law. Opportunities for entrepreneurs were abundant. European powers had long sought a water passage through the New World to China and the East Indies for trade. The St. Lawrence River, leading to the Great Lakes and beyond, seemed a likely route. There was even talk of a great river that might traverse the continent and discharge into the Gulf of California.

The young La Salle was intrigued by the wealth and prestige that awaited the explorer who might discover such a route across North America. The conditions would be harsh, to be sure: there would be hostile Indians, severe winters, and uncertain food supplies. Nevertheless, he began to devise a plan—and met considerable opposition. The Jesuits, who had built a series of missions in the Upper Great Lakes, controlled the region through their religious emissaries and profited from the fur trade with the Indians, although they could not admit that profit was a motive in their endeavors. La Salle appeared to be a threat to the Jesuits' monopoly over trade.
The merchants of New France were even more alarmed at his intentions. Discovery of a new water route through the continent might interrupt the trade in furs and hides that flowed through Montreal and Quebec. The merchants did not wish to see their rewarding enterprise disrupted by this brash young Norman with grandiose ideas. These two groups, Jesuits and merchants, were to become the "enemies" about whom La Salle lamented many times during moments of despair: "I am utterly tired of this business; for I see that it is not enough to put property and life in constant peril, but it requires more pains to answer envy and distraction than to overcome the difficulties inseparable from my undertaking."

North American rivers and lakes were the seventeenth-century equivalent of modern highways, and knowledge of their locations could be turned into great monetary gain. Louis Joliet and Father Marquette, who had discovered the Mississippi River in 1673, were the first to understand the relationship of that river to the Great Lakes. They observed that the Mississippi, flowing southward, probably emptied into the Gulf of Mexico, rather than the Gulf of California. However, Joliet and Marquette never reached the Mississippi’s mouth.

La Salle, who by this time had already begun searching for a transcontinental water route, received news of the Joliet-Marquette expedition with great interest. He formulated a plan to chart this potential watercourse through North America. If the Mississippi flowed into the Gulf of Mexico, it might be possible to establish a warm-water port at the mouth of the river. Furs and hides could be transported downstream, allowing the riches of Canada and the Great Lakes to be transported to France year-round. Traders could avoid the cold climate of eastern Canada and the icebound streams and lakes that made commerce impossible in winter. Moreover, France could control the land along the Mississippi, creating a vast empire that would keep the English and Dutch in the east and the Spanish in Mexico.

The realization of this grand dream would require a new series of forts along the river and substantial financial backing. La Salle had previously secured private funding to establish forts at various points along Lakes Michigan, Erie, and Ontario. But he was a poor manager, and each time a series of mishaps had eliminated the profits he promised his backers. Adding to his difficulties, his Jesuit detractors constantly undermined his credibility in Montreal and Quebec.

There was another problem: La Salle’s own personality. He often lapsed into a mysterious sickness, described as a “moral malady.” He probably suffered from periods of depression and might today be diagnosed as manic-depressive. This chronic debilitation fed La Salle’s arrogant and demanding nature, which in turn created a recurring inability to inspire and direct his men amid the challenges of exploring the wilderness. His failings were so severe that during a trip along the Ohio River in 1679 one of his servants tried to kill him by mixing hemlock into his salad. La Salle was sick for more than forty days. From that time on, he carried an antidote with him to protect against poisonings.

Though in 1682 he had traveled down the Mississippi River and found its mouth, La Salle knew his plan would be met with skepticism in France. His only choice was to present his case to the king himself. He traveled back to France in 1683 and petitioned Louis XIV to establish a colony where the Mississippi River met the Gulf of Mexico. In an effort to foil his plan, La Salle’s enemies had written to France that he was unfit for future explorations in the
New World. La Salle tried to get support from merchants in Rochefort and La Rochelle, but his reputation for leading failed enterprises in New France preceded him. Finally, he headed to Paris to enlist the support of two abbés, Claude Bernou and Eusèbe Renaudot, who enjoyed the favor of the French court. They agreed to lobby on La Salle’s behalf.

Spain had declared war on France the preceding October, and tensions between the two countries could not have been higher. La Salle was counseled that an expedition through the Gulf of Mexico would attract more royal support than a return to the Mississippi River mouth by way of New France and the St. Lawrence River. The French king was angry with Spanish opposition to foreign ships traveling in the Gulf of Mexico. French vessels violating this zone were captured and their crews imprisoned. La Salle’s effort would be a bold statement against Spain’s efforts to control the gulf.

Thus, from the point of view of the French monarch, the timing was just right for such a mission, but it was even more propitious when one considered Spain’s current role in the New World. Spain had ignored Nueva Vizcaya, what is now northern Mexico, since the early explorations of Pineda, Cabeza de Vaca, and De Soto had failed to find gold, silver, or other wealth there. Spain had also lost control of the seas with England’s defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 and had difficulty monitoring significant portions of its territorial claims. This was especially true of territories north of today’s Mexico between Florida and New Mexico.

It was against this backdrop of international incident and intrigue that La Salle presented his plan to the king in 1683. He proposed a three-pronged approach. First, he would establish a fort at the mouth of the Mississippi River to maintain the French claim to Louisiana. Second, he would establish trade with thousands of Indians and convert them to Christianity. Finally, he would establish a permanent colony, a base from which the future invasion of Spain’s Nueva Vizcaya could be launched.

For the French Crown, the colony was a critical part of La Salle’s plan. While Spain had been shipping gold, silver, and other treasures from the New World, France had been forced to content itself with beaver pelts from its Canadian colonies. Louis saw his opportunity to capture some of Spanish King Charles II’s wealth.

Several variations on La Salle’s proposal were discussed, some involving the use of French buccaneers to help invade Nueva Vizcaya and seize control of the silver mines. The king finally granted La Salle the authority to “command . . . all the lands of North America that may hereafter be submitted to our [French] rule, from Fort St. Louis on the Illinois River to Nueva Vizcaya.” Louis also gave La Salle substantial support for the expedition, including two ships rather than the one he had originally requested. Specifically, La Salle was granted the naval gunchip Le Joly and a barque longue (light frigate) christened La Belle. As it turned out, these two ships did not possess enough cargo space for such a venture, and La Salle was forced to lease two other vessels, the frigate l’Aimable from La Rochelle ship owner Jean Massiot and a small ketch, Le Saint-François, from François Duprat, also of La Rochelle. The king’s grant included full crews, a hundred soldiers, and funds to hire carpenters, masons, coopers, and other skilled workers to establish his colony. The expedition included about three hundred persons in all.

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Some supplies, such as goods to trade with the Indians, were not provided by the king, which meant that La Salle and his men had to buy them. The explorer had persuaded twenty thousand Shawnee, Illinois, and Miami Indians to settle around Fort St. Louis des Illinois, which he had established in 1682. La Salle’s plan was that these Indians would hunt and trap in the northern Great Plains and Great Lakes and bring the furs and hides to the fort for trade, where he would ship them down the Mississippi River to the settlement he envisioned on the Gulf of Mexico, and then onward to France. From the warm gulf port, France could import goods year-round, a distinct advantage over the ports of Montreal and Quebec, where the St. Lawrence River was iced over half the year. The medium of exchange that would drive all this would be the glass beads, brass pins, finger rings, iron knives, and hatchets they purchased to trade to the Indians.

DESTINATION: A NEW WORLD

La Salle set sail from La Rochelle, France, on July 24, 1684, to fulfill his dream of a colony at the mouth of the Mississippi River—and to enrich himself.

On January 1, 1685, after a long and difficult journey across the ocean, La Salle’s expedition sighted land along the Gulf Coast, somewhere in today’s Louisiana west of the Mississippi. By this time, only three vessels remained: Le Joly, l’Aimable, and La Belle. The Saint-François had been captured by Spanish privateers off the western coast of Hispaniola as the ship traveled from Port de Paix to Petit Goâve.

La Salle had been warned about strong easterly currents that carried ships towards the Bahamian Channel. Upon sighting land, he concluded that they had not made enough westward progress and were in fact east of the Mississippi. He decided to travel west, following the Gulf Coast as closely as possible.

For the next two and a half weeks the ships continued to sail westward, turning toward the southwest as they progressed. La Salle remained certain that the Mississippi lay in this direction. Measurements of latitude were taken daily to help chart their progress, but longitude—a time-dependent measurement—could not be accurately calculated until the eighteenth century. Consequently, there was no accurate method to determine exactly how far west they were traveling—a problem La Salle recognized. In addition, an astrolabe La Salle suspected to be faulty had hampered measurements of latitude during his 1682 journey down the Mississippi River, so those earlier calculations were erroneous as well. To complicate the situation further, some period maps showed the Mississippi flowing into the Gulf of Mexico through what is now central Texas. Despite these problems, La Salle believed the Mississippi River lay farther to the west, and he instructed Captain Beaujeu to continue sailing in this direction.

Finally, they noticed that they were moving more southwest than west, and suspected they might have passed the Mississippi. La Salle and Beaujeu quarreled about their location, but La Salle remained resolute that they were near one of the western branches of the great river. The relationship between the two men had deteriorated to the point that they were communicating only
to him to be towed. La Salle also ordered the pilot of La Belle to help the captain of the Aimable with what he had to do as that ship had already entered. But the captain sent the pilot back, telling him that he was capable of bringing the ship in without him.”

When the water level was sufficiently high, La Salle signaled for the ship to enter the pass. At about the same time, he was told that local Karankawa Indians had taken some of his men hostage. La Salle was now compelled to go search for them. He traveled about a league and a half (about three miles) until he found the Indian village, but before entering it he could see l’Aimable’s sails, indicating that she was beginning to enter the pass. She appeared to do so incorrectly, however, running too close to the shoals. La Salle was greatly concerned, but he was powerless to influence the situation. Soon a cannon was fired, indicating distress aboard the ship. Next l’Aimable’s sails were furled, confirming his fear that a disaster had occurred. La Salle met with the Indians, retrieved his men, and returned to assess the damage to his supply ship.

L’Aimable was grounded hard against a sandbank. Upon questioning the captain and crew, La Salle grew suspicious that the captain, Aigron, had intentionally run the ship aground. Aigron was unhappy with La Salle’s efforts to find the Mississippi, believing that the explorer had missed the river and was taking the expedition into uncharted areas that would result in failure of the colony. La Salle concluded that Aigron had deliberately steered the ship past the buoys marking the safe entry and directly onto a sandbank. Once the ship was stuck, the captain could have thrown out an anchor and freed the vessel. Witnesses stated that, instead, the captain ordered the ship to sail forward until she was firmly grounded on the shallow sandy bottom. There was now no hope of saving the ship.

According to Joutel, “we learned how the captain had disgraced himself. The incident made one conclude that the mischief must have been by design or premeditated act. Four buoys had been placed and one only had to steer by them. Moreover, a sailor was in the topmast for seeing better. Although the sailor continually called out ‘to luff sail,’ the ill-intentioned captain called out to the contrary and gave the command to bear down until he saw he was on the sandbanks.”

L’Aimable, a large private merchant vessel, contained much of the planned colony’s provisions. La Salle prepared to unload as much cargo as possible, but the ship was far from shore and he had only small longboats. The crew could remove cargo when the waters were calm. But l’Aimable broke apart one night during a period of heavy seas, and in the morning the buoyant cargo was found floating in the water.

In early March Le Joly’s captain, Beaujeu, decided to return to France. He had orders only to accompany La Salle to the New World and unload his ship’s cargo. Once this had been accomplished, his job was done. Beaujeu was impatient to leave the wild country and the arrogant explorer with whom he often quarreled, and a number of the colonists decided to join him. La Salle asked Beaujeu to ensure that supplies would be sent back to assist his colony. On March 14, Le Joly departed with 120 of the original 300 colonists, leaving La Salle with a diminished number of men and greatly compromised provisions for building
a settlement. La Salle’s request for more supplies was delivered to officials in France, but it was never honored.

With only La Belle and 180 colonists, La Salle began to seek a more permanent location for his fort. He sought a safe site where he could leave many of the colonists while he searched overland for the Mississippi. When he found the river, he would build his second and final settlement. La Salle and a few men left the temporary camp near Pass Cavallo in late March, 1685, and began searching along the western side of Matagorda Bay for a more suitable site for a fort. He found a creek that he called “the River of the Bison” (now known as Garcitas Creek) flowing into the north-western part of today’s Lavaca Bay. On a high, flat rise on the western side of the creek, about four miles upriver from the bay, he began construction of the temporary settlement, Fort St. Louis, where he would begin colonizing the Gulf Coast.

Provisions from l’Aimable and Le Joly, together with cargo from La Belle, were moved to a supply depot about midway between the pass and the Grand Camp. From the depot they were transported by canoe upriver to the fort. Wood suitable for buildings was not readily available, so La Salle commanded his men to travel a league inland and bring back trees of suitable size. This proved difficult work, and several men died from the exertion. Finally La Salle resorted to salvaging timber from l’Aimable to build the fort.

A two-story structure similar to buildings La Salle had constructed in Canada was erected. It was divided into four rooms: one for La Salle, another for the priests, a third for the officers of the expedition, and a fourth, the upper story, for supplies. Smaller structures were erected to house other members of the expedition. L’Aimable’s eight cannons would help fight off Karankawa Indian attacks.

With the settlement established, La Salle again concentrated on finding the Mississippi. Now realizing that the river almost certainly had to be toward the east, he organized an exploration party. He left supplies for the colony on La Belle, along with all of his personal possessions and those of his men. He instructed her captain to proceed as far up the bay as possible, where he should lay anchor and wait for La Salle’s return. The exploration party, meanwhile, would travel along the shore and head east to find the Mississippi.

La Salle expected to be gone about ten days; instead he was absent for more than two frustrating months. The Indians he encountered along the way knew nothing of the great river. In fact, these native peoples did not even speak the languages he had heard along the Mississippi on his earlier travels. La Salle traded for horses and food with the Caddo Indians and returned to Fort St. Louis, where he was devastated to discover that his sole remaining ship had been lost in a storm.

Le Belle had contained all the remaining supplies to build his final New World colony. With his grand dream of a French settlement on the Gulf of Mexico in great jeopardy, La Salle’s only recourse now was to go overland to his settlement at Fort St. Louis des Illinois and up to Canada to get supplies—a journey of twelve hundred miles.
MURDER ON THE TRAIL

On January 12, 1687, La Salle and sixteen men departed the small settlement on Garcitas Creek to obtain supplies from Canada. It was to be the explorer’s last expedition.

Remaining at Fort St. Louis were twenty men, women, and children—a meager fragment of the more than 180 who had stayed to help build the settlement. Disease and Indian attacks had taken the rest. The survivors would be stranded on Garcitas Creek for two years, waiting in vain for La Salle’s return with the desperately needed provisions. In late 1688 or early 1689, the Karankawas would launch a final attack on the vulnerable outpost, killing almost all the remaining colonists and kidnapping several children.

In March, 1687, La Salle and his overland party reached a spot near today’s Navasota, Texas, where they crossed the River of the Canoes and camped. During La Salle’s previous trip, he had buried food supplies at a crossing a short distance downstream. He gave orders for some of his men to go and recover the stores because hunting was lean this time of the year. The men found the food, but it was spoiled. Luckily, La Salle’s trusted Shawnee Indian hunter, Nika, shot two buffalo while returning to their leader. The men stopped to smoke the meat and sent word to La Salle.

As the men prepared to eat the portions that could not be smoked, La Salle’s nephew, Colin Morenger, instructed them that he would control the remaining food and would decide who would eat what portion. For the dispirited men who had endured countless hardships and depredations, this was the final insult, and they plotted to kill Morenger. Revenge was planned by five men: Duhaut, Liotot (the expedition surgeon), Hiems, Tessier, and L’Archevêque. Later that night, they murdered Morenger, Nika, and La Salle’s servant, Saget.

The murderers had accomplished their immediate plan, but they knew that La Salle, still at the other camp and waiting for the buffalo meat, would exact punishment. The five planned yet another murder: the assassination of Robert Cavelier, Sieur de la Salle. They knew that La Salle would soon come looking for them, and they waited in ambush.

Within a few days, a gunshot warned the men that La Salle was nearby. Duhaut and L’Archevêque crossed the river on a trail that La Salle would follow and waited in the bushes. As the explorer approached, L’Archevêque stepped into view. La Salle asked where Morenger was, and L’Archevêque replied that he had drifted away. Before La Salle could respond, Duhaut, who was hidden from view, fired a musket shot into the explorer’s head, killing him.

At the age of 43, after twenty years of conquering and colonizing the wilderness of North America, the great explorer lay dead. La Salle’s killers took his possessions, even his clothing, and left his body “to the discretion of the wolves and other wild animals.”