

## Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle

(Robert La Salle)



Described in some sources as “one of the most celebrated explorers and builders of New France,” Robert La Salle’s contemporaries were not as complimentary in their descriptions of him. In fact, La Salle’s men murdered him during his last expedition. These contrasts made La Salle an enigmatic hero.

La Salle was born in France in 1643 to a wealthy merchant family. When he was 15, he studied to become a Jesuit priest and missionary in America. However, he abandoned his studies when he was 22 because of what he termed his “moral weakness.” La Salle thought he would become a farmer in Canada. He took an interest in fur trading and exploring North America. As many explorers before and after, he was interested in finding the Northwest Passage, a water route through North America linking the Atlantic and the Pacific. He went to Canada in 1666 and developed his home base, which he named *La Chine*, the French word for “China.” The Sulpician order of priests granted this land to La Salle. His brother, Jean, a member of the Sulpician order had arrived in Canada the year before. In July 1669, he sold his land at Lachine and went exploring with eight canoes and twenty-one men, eight of whom were priests.

La Salle seemed inexperienced and unreliable. One of the priests on the trip reported La Salle could not speak either the Algonquian or Iroquoian language and “was undertaking this journey almost in a daze, more or less not knowing where he was going.” On November 1, 1669, claiming illness, La Salle left the group on the north shore of Lake Erie. He was not seen again until the summer of 1670 and would later claim he had discovered the Mississippi River. This would predate the journeys of Jolliet and Marquette. His claim is unproven.

La Salle made several more explorations between 1671 and 1673. In 1673, he was named commandant of Fort Frontenac, near the present site of Kingston, Ontario. He returned to France, where the king granted him a patent of nobility and permission to set up trade at the fort in 1675. He returned to France in 1677, seeking more patents to build more forts, explore and trade with the Indians. According to one source, he bribed an official and grossly exaggerated his accomplishments to receive these patents. La Salle returned from France with

Henri de Tonti as his second in command. The two men became business partners and good friends.

In 1679, they traveled to the outlet of the Niagara River, built a trading post and, under Tonti's direction, built a sailing ship, the *Griffon*, to sail the Great Lakes. They sailed as far as present-day Green Bay, Wisconsin, and went by land from there along the shores of Lake Michigan, using canoes. When they returned to Green Bay, the ship had been wrecked in a storm, the post they had built was burned, and some of the men had left after stealing needed supplies. They built a fort at the site of present day St. Joseph, Michigan. From there, they followed the Illinois River and built Fort Creve Coeur. The name of the fort ("heartbreak" in English) proved appropriate. La Salle left Tonti at the fort with a small group of men and returned to Fort Frontenac for supplies. Iroquois attacked the fort, and Tonti and his men were driven out.

When La Salle returned, he went to look for Tonti; and in 1681 La Salle organized a federation of Illinois, Miami, and other tribes to be a counterforce to the Iroquois, enemies of the French. He found Tonti with Indians at Mackinac Island. They organized a forty-man canoe expedition to explore the Mississippi, hoping to follow it to the sea. La Salle realized the Mississippi did not reach the Pacific, but emptied into the Gulf of Mexico. He understood the commercial value of that location for the French colonies. They reached the Gulf of Mexico on April 9, 1682. They were probably the first Europeans to travel the entire length of the Mississippi River. At that point, La Salle claimed the Mississippi Valley for France. He named it "Louisiana" in honor of King Louis XIV, who commented the land was "utterly useless," when he got the news. As the expedition was returning, many of the men suffered illnesses and Indians attacked them. La Salle returned to the Illinois River and began construction of Fort St. Louis.

In 1683 the governor of New France revoked La Salle's authority, and La Salle returned to France to argue his case. The king granted him the authority to set up colonies and govern the areas between Lake Michigan and the Gulf of Mexico. The king originally wanted him to go to the Rio Grande River and seize Spanish mines in that area, but La Salle changed the king's mind by telling him the Mississippi River is farther north than it is. In July 1684, La Salle left France with four ships and two hundred twenty-eight men and women intending to reach the mouth of the Mississippi River. This voyage was plagued with problems. The supply ship was lost at sea, and they could not find where the river met the sea. The coastline all looked the same to La Salle from the Gulf of Mexico side. On February 20, 1685, they went ashore at Matagorda Bay, near present-day Houston,

Texas, after another of their ships, the *Belle*, ran aground. When Indians tried to steal from the wrecked ship and La Salle's men shot some of them, the Indians became hostile. The crew of one of the two remaining ships mutinied and sailed back to France.

Reduced to one ship, La Salle landed, built a fort on the Lavaca River, and sent search parties to find the Mississippi. The search was unsuccessful. In 1686, its drunken pilot wrecked the last ship. Now La Salle and his expedition were stranded in Texas. La Salle sent twenty men up the Lavaca River to reach the Mississippi. They could not find it, and only eight of them returned in October 1686. La Salle next took seventeen men and set out himself. After a few months of fruitless searching, five of La Salle's men mutinied. One of the mutineers, Pierre Duhaut, shot La Salle on March 19, 1687. Three men loyal to La Salle were shot as well. The survivors made it to Montreal in 1688. Indians attacked and killed the remaining people left at the fort in Texas.

La Salle's explorations were often failures; but they had favorable long-term results for France, Spain, and eventually the United States. He was a tireless explorer, but an inept leader, whose choices often resulted in his crewmembers' deaths. Of the two hundred twenty-eight people who embarked on his last voyage, for example, only fifteen survived, excluding those who mutinied on one ship. Nevertheless, his fearlessness and willingness to take risks may have been admirable and heroic. People who knew him said he could be arrogant and demanding. Yet, La Salle's explorations sparked renewed French and Spanish interest and colonization in the Gulf area and opened the way for future European and United States expansion.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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Discussion Questions:

1. Why did La Salle name Canadian land *La Chine*?
2. Where did La Salle think he would find the Northwest Passage?
3. Did La Salle think the Northwest Passage could be found by following the Mississippi River? Why or why not?
4. Was La Salle the first European to see the Mississippi River?
5. In what instances was La Salle untruthful?
6. Why did La Salle have problems with mutinies and desertions among his crew?

