La Salle and the Historians

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W. E. Dunn, in 1916, wrote that the story of the Texas expedition of Rene Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle, an individual perhaps as well known as any other among the French explorers of North America, had been told in enough places that it needed no repetition, and apologized for another article on the subject. It well may be that the story of La Salle in Texas needs no further investigation, at least as far as the skeletal outline is concerned, but a brief survey of some of the printed material published between 1856 and 1952 reveals that on several points, including some dates, there is little, if any, agreement among historians concerning the La Salle Texas expedition.

The first of the items about which writers disagree is the motive behind La Salle's attempt to establish himself in the southwest, which, for the purposes of this brief paper will be understood to include present day Alabama and Louisiana. The second item on which there is no consensus is the intended location of the proposed colony—both LaSalle's intended location and that location the government desired. Thirdly, the authors here surveyed are in general disagreement as to where La Salle went on two exploring trips. Finally, there is a difference of opinion concerning where he was killed; some recent writers of both monographs and textbooks give an erroneous impression as to the manner in which he met death, while a few have the wrong date for the killing.

Other than authors of textbooks, those here reviewed have utilized the same sources. From the French side the sources have been primarily the Cavalier family papers, the French Marine (naval) archives, and the Memorial Historique of Henri Joutel, a member of the expedition to Texas; and from the Spanish side the archives of the Council of the Indies.

Real French interest in the southwest seems to have been sparked by the explorations of Marquette and Joliet in 1673. That interest soon changed into a desire to seize the Mississippi Valley, but for nine years the French in North America took no action to make the desire a reality. Then, in 1682, La Salle journeyed to the Gulf of Mexico and took possession of the territory in the name of His Most Catholic Majesty, Louis XIV. On these bare facts the historians here reviewed are all in agreement, and few current historians will find fault with them. They also all agree on the French “Grand Design” for North America once the government became interested in the southwest.

Troubles in Europe kept early governmental interest in abeyance, if it existed at all, and not until 1683 did the government actively become involved in the Mississippi Valley. The historians here examined are in agreement that government involvement stemmed from a memorial made by La Salle in late December, 1683, following his return to France in October of that year. In his memorial La Salle proposed to establish a settlement on the Gulf of Mexico at the mouth of the Mississippi. Here the agreement of the historians surveyed comes to an abrupt end, with most in disagreement concerning La Salle's designs. Justin Winsor, in his book, Cartier to Frontenac, suggests that in addition to other motives La Salle perhaps was motivated by personal greed, for La Barre, the then governor of
Canada, had impoverished him through the seizure of his lands, goods, and frontier establishments. Winsor also holds that early proposals indicate La Salle’s interest was in commerce only. However, in later proposals he added the element of conquest in that he proposed to attack New Biscay in the viceroyalty of New Spain and to seize the silver mines in that region. The question, “Why did La Salle not mention his plans for conquest in his first proposal?” immediately rises. Winsor makes no attempt to answer the question, but Francis Parkman in his *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West* suggests that La Salle was forced to introduce conquest because of his failure to interest the government in a commercial venture. Parkman further holds that La Salle deliberately falsified the geographical relationship of the Red River and New Biscay, which he reported were only fifty leagues apart. He agrees, however, that La Salle may have contemplated conquest at a later date.

Bernard de Voto in his *The Course of Empire* accepts Parkman’s view on this point as well as the idea that conquest was added to interest the Sun King, as does E. T. Miller in an article entitled “The Connection of Penalosa with the La Salle Expedition” published in the *Texas Historical Association Quarterly* in October, 1901.

Carlos E. Castaneda, however, in his *The Finding of Texas* 1519-1693, makes little mention of commerce. He holds that the proposal made by La Salle was primarily a military one and hints that he proposed to be a continuing irritant to the Spanish.

It will be recalled that I earlier made the statement that French governmental interest in the Mississippi Valley stemmed from La Salle’s proposals beginning in 1683. It should be noted that an earlier proposal for the conquest of New Spain made by Dom Diego Penalosa, a former governor of New Spain, had elicited no response from the French government. This might cast some doubt on Parkman’s notion that La Salle introduced conquest to interest Louis XIV if it were not for the fact that war between Spain and France erupted in 1683. Penalosa’s proposals closely resembled La Salle’s, and our historians can no more agree on Penalosa and his relationship to the Frenchman and his Texas venture than on the motive question.

Parkman gives Penalosa a footnote and suggests he may have affected La Salle’s proposals, but evidently feels there was no intimate connection between them. Others, however, give more attention to the problem. Winsor notes there was a “remarkable resemblance” between La Salle’s and Penalosa’s proposals, while Castaneda flatly asserts that in February, 1684, an attempt was made (by whom he does not say) to join the proposals of the two men. Miller disclaims any tangible connection between the two, while De Voto maintains La Salle was forced to accept Penalosa’s proposals. Though there is no agreement on this point, all who mention Penalosa’s plans agree on his proposals, which were to raise a force of buccaneers at Santo Domingo, invade New Spain at Panuco late in 1685, and drive to Durango. La Salle, on his part, proposed to raise 15,000 Indian warriors, advance up the Red River, turn to the south to attack New Biscay, join Penalosa and cut northern New Spain off from Mexico City, and perhaps even attack Mexico City itself.

All who handle this question agree that for whatever reason, La Salle obtained his commission and Penalosa faded from the picture. In obtaining his commission
La Salle received four ships, men and equipment, and the governorship of all land between Lake Michigan and the Gulf of Mexico. All agree that command was split at sea with La Salle in command of the route and soldiers, while Captain Beaujeu of the Royal Navy commanded the sailors; such a split in command soon caused friction between the explorer and the sailor.

Part of the friction, according to Winsor, was due to La Salle’s resentment of Beaujeu’s better judgment, a factor not mentioned by any other. However, both Winsor and Parkman mention La Salle’s suspicions of Beaujeu because his wife was a confidant of the Jesuits, whom La Salle felt were responsible for his misfortunes. While none of the other mention it, Parkman insists Beaujeu did his best to get along with La Salle, but La Salle’s vile temper made it impossible.

The friction began at La Rochelle, where they outfitted, and continued throughout the voyage. On this facet of the story, Parkman and Winsor are more descriptive than the others. Both record that La Salle refused to take on water at Madeira for fear of the Spanish’s gaining knowledge of the expedition. Parkman and Castaneda mention that Beaujeu refused to put in at Port de Paix and sailed on to Petit Goave, which resulted in one of the ship’s becoming separated from the others and being captured by the Spanish. Of this incident Winsor merely reports the capture due to the ship being separated from the others by a storm.

All agree that La Salle was ill at Santo Domingo. Winsor and Castaneda suggest that his illness accounts for many desertions to buccaneers anchored there. They all agree that not until late November could La Salle move out, now short one ship, and that he moved from Beaujeu’s ship to the next largest one. Parkman claims that the reason for the move was that Aigron, Captain of the ship to which La Salle moved, threatened to quit the expedition due to La Salle’s foul temper.

From this point the writers here surveyed shift their emphasis to the question of where the little fleet went after leaving Santo Domingo and why. Parkman, on this point, claims no person aboard La Salle’s fleet knew the Gulf of Mexico, even though he had recruited some fifty pirates while at Petit Goave. He insists La Salle and Beaujeu had been misled by reports of the strength of the currents in the Gulf of Mexico and as a result sailed too far to the west. Both Parkman and Winsor make the claim that when they sighted land on 28 December, 1684, La Salle and Beaujeu thought they had reached the northwest Florida coast and were in Appalachee Bay. Winsor reports they were probably at Atchafalaya Bay, and Parkman ventures no guess.

A dense fog settled on 30 December and lay on the water until well after 1 January, 1685, and when it lifted revealed that Beaujeu’s ship was not in sight. Parkman reports that on 1 January, La Salle went to explore the coastline with a pilot, and in the dense fog found only marshes.

Castaneda dates this event as 10 January, and reports La Salle asserted he was too far east to be even near the Mississippi. In Castaneda’s opinion, La Salle was at the mouth of the Mississippi. Further, he believes La Salle probably knew where he was but would not admit it, and deliberately went past the river. While Parkman asserts La Salle went ashore with the pilot, Castaneda claims he did not and that he ignored the pilot’s report that he thought a river was there. Both Parkman and Castaneda report the north latitudinal location as approxi-
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approximately 29°, the approximate latitude of the Louisiana coast. Parkman claims La Salle did not know the longitude of the river which, until 1770 and the invention of the chronometer, could not be determined.

Winsor and Parkman report that on 1 January, 1685, La Salle was probably at the mouth of the Sabine River, and that on 6 January, while looking for Beaujeu and his ship, which had become separated in the dense fog of 31 December and 1 January, he probably discovered Galveston Bay. Thus, between these historians there is no agreement except that he was off the southern coast of North America and in the Gulf of Mexico. It is evident that they even disagree on dates, though Winsor and Parkman generally agree; Castaneda, however, seems a bit careless on this point. Winsor further does not accept the notion that La Salle deliberately overshot the Mississippi, but De Voto holds that missing the Mississippi was a part of the concessions to the government made by La Salle to obtain his commission to establish a settlement. Only one thing is certain—he did not sail into or enter in any way the Mississippi River. From the foregoing, one might ask “what was his real intention,” and our historians have.

Winsor contends that the documents indicate La Salle intended to establish his settlement some sixty leagues up the Mississippi. Castaneda claims he intended to settle sixty leagues down the coast (west) from that river, though he reports that La Salle proposed to Louis XIV to settle at the mouth of the river. Miller maintains the settlement was to be up the river toward Fort St. Louis on the Illinois.

At any rate, they all agree La Salle spent most of the month of January, partly with Beaujeu with whom he made contact accidentally, exploring the Texas Coast and looking for his “fatal river.” They are in agreement that finally, near mid-February, 1685, he decided to put his followers ashore at Matagorda Bay under the claim that it was the Mississippi. Only Parkman stoutly defends the position that La Salle thought he was on the Mississippi and admits that La Salle finally accepted the fact he was not on his river only after making a brief exploration upon going ashore. Winsor reports that La Salle wrote the Marquis de Seignelay that he was on the west mouth of the Mississippi and believed the main channel to be twenty to thirty leagues east, but soon gave up the notion and decided to establish a permanent camp from which to search for the river. If La Salle thought he was on the west mouth, why did he not take one of his two remaining ships (one had been lost in going ashore) and search for it? Or why not simply return to Santo Domingo if De Voto is correct in his assertion that La Salle wanted to give up before landfall had been made?

All agree on the location of the camp site as being on the Garcitas River—except Parkman, who contends it was on the La Vaca River, so named from the number of buffalo grazing its banks. The establishment of a fort is handled rather cursorily by all, the story varying only in the amount of detail recorded. In this area Parkman gives the most information, while Castaneda and Winsor are equally terse. At this point all are in agreement except Henderson Yoakum, that La Salle knew he was not on his river and planned to explore to find it, but could not leave his little band before October, 1685. They agree he left on 30 October, but on nothing else. Winsor reports it was an aimless march, lasting six months, netting nothing, though he does report La Salle said he had found the Mississippi and left six men in a palisade on it. They were never heard of again. Neither Fr. Charlevoix in his Journal of a Voyage to North America, nor N. Maynard Crouse
in his study of d'Iberville make mention of finding such an outpost. Winsor apparently believes that on this trip La Salle probably journeyed to the north and east. Parkman asserts La Salle went south to Matagorda Bay and then turned eastward. He then gives details of existence at La Salle's small fort and brings him back at the end of March, 1686, without having found the river. He reports that La Salle claimed he had met Indians who knew the Spanish and told him it would be easy to cross the Rio Grande. Here the palisade story is told, also, Castaneda reiterates the story of his having met Indians who knew the Spaniards, and asserts that to have done so La Salle would performe have been in present west Texas or perhaps even in New Mexico. He believes the explorer probably reached the Rio Grande.

Having had no success, in mid-April, 1686, La Salle left again. All agree that he traveled in an easterly direction, though they only guess at how far east he advanced. Parkman says La Salle probably reached the Sabine. How far north he went also is conjecture, the only evidence resting in the fact that he did meet the Cenis, or Tejas, Indians and obtained from them a few horses. Castaneda claims the Trinity as the major river reached, and has La Salle perhaps fifty miles south of Nacogdoches. Hampered by weather, illness, and a shortage of powder he returned to his fort in August only to learn of the loss of his one remaining ship. After a bout with "illness" and hernia he determined to go to the Illinois country for succor, and left early in January.

Parkman has him leaving on his last trip on the morrow of 12th night, 7 January, 1687, while Castaneda has him departing on 12 January, 1687. All agree that he took a northeasterly route and that movement was slow due to heavy rains and swollen rivers. They give no details of this journey until the time of his murder, the date and place of which is in dispute. Winsor simply puts the time as mid-March; Parkman and Yoakum set the day as 19 March, 1687, while Castaneda places the date as 20 March. Winsor places the spot of the killing on the Trinity; Parkman near the Trinity, and Castaneda the Navasota.

Textbook authors have done even worse by the story than those who have researched it. By no means have I surveyed all textbooks on American history, but I have taken a few samplings.

Oliver Perry Chitwood in his History of Colonial America has a brief paragraph on the Texas venture, but La Salle does not appear in the index of the second edition of this work. Curtis P. Nettles in his The Roots of American Life, 2nd edition, simply states that La Salle, in 1684, lost his life while attempting to establish a settlement on the Mississippi and capture the southern fur trade, with the possibility of an attack on New Spain thrown in. Note that Nettles has La Salle killed before he reached the coast. Ray Allen Billington in his Westward Expansion only states that La Salle intended to settle on the Mississippi, missed it, and that his followers rebelled and killed him, which is in error. Incidentally, De Voto's account of La Salle's murder is suspiciously like Billington's, and De Voto has his death occurring in 1689.

Survey texts are worse yet. John D. Hicks, George Mowry, and Robert Burke in their The Federal Union, latest edition, give the Texas attempt a couple of lines and use Nettles' date, 1684, for the murder. Harry Carman, Harold Syrett, and Bernard Wishy in their A History of the American People, Vol. I, 2nd ed., make no mention of the great Frenchman in their section on exploration and set-
tlement or in the section on French and British rivalry in North America. La Salle suffers the same fate at the hands of Ralph Harlow and Nelson Blake in their *The United States*, 3rd ed., revised.43

I believe enough areas of disagreement have been suggested to indicate that Dunn, when he apologized in 1916 for publishing another article on La Salle’s Texas venture, was mistaken in thinking the facts were then well enough known. It is an area in which the definitive work has not yet been written, and perhaps it cannot be; but it certainly warrants further investigation.

**FOOTNOTES**


3Ibid., 310.

4Ibid., 297.

5Ibid., 309.


7Ibid.


12Winsor, *Cartier to Frontenac*, 309.


15DeVoto, *Empire*, 137.


17Winsor, *Cartier to Frontenac*, 310.


"Winsor, Cartier to Frontenac, 310, 312; Parkman, La Salle, 366-367.
"Parkman, La Salle, 368, Castaneda, Finding Texas, 285.
"Winsor, Cartier to Frontenac, 312.
"Ibid.
"Parkman, La Salle, 372.
"Ibid., 373.
"Parkman, La Salle, 373; Winsor, Cartier to Frontenac, 312.
"Ibid; Ibid.
"Parkman, La Salle, 373.
"Castaneda, Finding Texas, 286.
"Ibid., 286, 287.
"Parkman, La Salle, 374.
"Winsor, Cartier to Frontenac, 312-313.
"De Voto, Empire, 137.
"Parkman, La Salle, 376-377; 378-379.
"Ibid., 388-389.
"Winsor, Cartier to Frontenac, 316-317.
"De Voto, Empire, 138.
"Parkman, La Salle, 392.
"Henderson Yoakum, History of Texas From its First Settlement in 1685 to its Annexation to the United States in 1846. (New York: Redfield, 1856), 22. Hereafter cited as Yoakum, Texas.
"Winsor, Cartier to Frontenac, 318, 319, 320.
"Parkman, La Salle, 396-402.
"Ibid., 403.
"Castaneda, Finding Texas, 292-293.
"Parkman, La Salle, 405-406; 411-417.
"Castaneda, Finding Texas, 294-295.
"Ibid., 293.
"Parkman, La Salle, 417.
"Castaneda, Finding Texas, 296-297.
"Winsor, Cartier to Frontenac, 321.

2"Parkman, La Salle, 426-429; Yoakum, Texas, 40.

3"Castaneda, Finding Texas, 296-297.

4"Winsor, Cartier to Frontenac, 321.

5"Parkman, La Salle, 426-429.

6"Castaneda, Finding Texas, 296-297.


10De Voto, Empire, 138.

