

3-2010

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### Recommended Citation

Tucker, Gene R. (2010) "La Salle Lands in Texas: La Salle and the Historians," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 48 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol48/iss1/9>

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## La Salle Lands in Texas: La Salle and the Historians

by Gene Rhea Tucker

In April 1682 the expedition of René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, reached the mouth of the Mississippi River. Such a feat of exploration should have resulted in the correct cartographic placement of the mighty river, yet in 1684 when he was to return to the mouth of the Mississippi, his expedition landed over four hundred miles west in Matagorda Bay of present-day Texas. Scholars have since debated why La Salle could not find the river that he knew better than any other European. In the March 1969 volume of the *East Texas Historical Journal*, historian Ert J. Gum penned an article titled "La Salle and the Historians" that discussed the multitude of conflicting opinions concerning the course and nature of La Salle's final voyage. La Salle's foray brought East Texas into the conflicting world of European imperial and colonial politics, which led to the inclusion of Gum's article in a 1978 anthology of *East Texas Historical Journal* articles entitled *Eastern Texas History*. Looking at numerous works from 1856 to 1967, Gum recounted the utter lack of agreement among historians concerning both the motive of La Salle's 1684 mission and his intended landing place.<sup>1</sup> Since Gum wrote, there has been renewed interest in La Salle's last journey in the scholarly community, spurred on by the tercentenary of his death and the discovery of one of the ships under his command, the *Belle*, off the Gulf Coast. The major points of disagreement between scholars concern La Salle's intentions to either land at the mouth of the Mississippi or west of it, the possibility he deceived the French court and the motives behind this fraud, and the extent his inaccurate geographical knowledge of the Gulf impaired his judgment.

René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, was born to Jean Cavelier, a wealthy merchant, and his wife Catherine Geeset, in St. Herbland parish, Rouen, France, on November 21, 1643. He attended the Jesuit College in Rouen and entered the Society of Jesus as a novice in 1658. After nine years of education and a few teaching posts, La Salle thought himself unsuited for priestly life and left the Jesuit order in 1667. He sailed for Canada in 1667, where his brother Jean, a priest of St. Sulpice,

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had traveled the previous year. After more than a decade of exploration and trading, La Salle received a commission to descend the Mississippi and find its outlet with the sea.<sup>2</sup>

La Salle's expedition began to descend the Mississippi River at its junction with the Illinois River on February 13, 1682. As he began his trip down the river, his astrolabe gave him faulty readings, and his compass disabled. After more than a month of travel down the river, the group reached an oxbow lake that supported eight Taensa Indian villages. Here, La Salle took a reading with his astrolabe and calculated 31 degrees, in reality a full degree short. Such a reading led La Salle to doubt that the Mississippi entered the Bahía del Espíritu Santo, the bay many maps showed his river emptying into, as its northernmost point was supposed to be at 31 degrees.<sup>3</sup> His right hand man, Henri de Tonti, observed that it "caused him to believe that we were on the Abscondido [Escondido] River."<sup>4</sup> The Escondido (or "hidden") River was a waterway shown on early charts of the Texas coast as early as early as 1562, usually about where the Nueces River today is, "the mouth of which was 'hidden' from view when approached by sea."<sup>5</sup> Continuing past the Taensa villages, on April 6, 1682, the explorers came to three channels, which each reached the sea. On April 9, the party took formal possession of the land in a short ceremony. La Salle claimed the entire drainage basin of the Mississippi and all the land south to the Río de las Palmas in northern Mexico, for His Most Christian Majesty Louis XIV. A copper plaque was set in a squared-off tree trunk, a "Te Deum" was sung, and a musket volley saluted as the expedition members shouted "Vive le Roi!"<sup>6</sup>

Upon his return to France in December 1683, La Salle found that the French court did not support his proposed plan to colonize the mouth of the Mississippi and place a string of forts along the river up to the Great Lakes. Given such resistance, La Salle's backers in Paris and at Versailles, foremost among them the Abbé Claude Bernou, linked his plan to one proposed a few years before by Spanish turncoat Diego Dionisio de Peñalosa. Bernou and La Salle claimed that a colony planted at the Mississippi could, in the event of war between France and Spain, be a staging point for an invasion of the rich mine country just south of the Rio Bravo (the Rio Grande). The scheme assumed that the Mississippi was within easy striking distance of New Spain's fruitful Nueva Vizcaya province and the Rio Bravo. In order to legitimize their plan, La Salle and his circle moved the Mississippi farther west in each successive report, map, and memorandum they produced. While some scholars maintain

that La Salle deliberately falsified this geography, others maintain that La Salle was misled by the inaccurate geographical knowledge of his era and by faulty measurements made during his 1682 descent of the Mississippi. La Salle, in this latter theory, was simply a "lost explorer" who made an honest mistake in thinking the river discharged on the Texas coast.<sup>7</sup> Either way, La Salle's planned expedition soon received royal support.

La Salle sailed from Rochefort, France, on August 1, 1684, for the Gulf of Mexico and the mouth of the Mississippi River. Calamity and tension beleaguered the expedition from the start, including dissension between La Salle and the Royal Navy officer, Tanguy le Gallois de Beaujeu, the loss of a ship to the Spanish, and defections during a layover in Saint-Domingue. In late December and early January 1685, La Salle probably sailed very close to the many outlets of the Mississippi yet continued west, eventually landing in Matagorda Bay in present-day Texas on February 20, 1685. He told Beaujeu this was a western mouth of the Mississippi, but his misfortune continued. The party lost store ship *Aimable* at the mouth of the bay, and La Salle allowed Beaujeu, along with other disenchanted colonists, to return to France aboard the naval vessel *Joly*. After a few attempts to find the main channel of the Mississippi, the last remaining ship, the bark *Belle*, wrecked in the winter of 1686. Finally, in an attempt to reach Illinois country overland, disenchanted followers ambushed and killed La Salle in present-day East Texas. Karankawa Indians soon overran his settlement in Texas, dubbed Fort St. Louis.<sup>8</sup>

This simple outline history of La Salle's last two expeditions has spawned much speculation as to La Salle's true motives. Historians have generally answered in two ways: some believe that La Salle was honestly mistaken about the geography of the Mississippi, and he truly felt exited along the Texas coast; the other holds that La Salle deliberately falsified the geography of the Mississippi to gain royal support and intended to strike at Spanish possessions in Nueva Vizcaya. The two positions have a long and varied history and utilize much of the same evidence, since, in successive reports, there is no doubt that La Salle and his cohorts moved the Mississippi farther west. Each side of the argument, however, takes liberties with the available documents and perhaps ignores a possible interpretation that allows for an incorporation of all elements of the story.

The earliest published account of La Salle's last voyage was the journal of Henri Joutel, one of the few survivors of the 1684 expedition that landed on the Texas Gulf coast. Published first in French in 1713, and in English one year later as *The Last Voyage Perform'd by Monsr. de*

*la Sale, To the Gulph of Mexico, To find out the Mouth of the Mississippi River*, it gave Joutel's opinion, that "Heaven refus'd him th[e] Succeeds"<sup>9</sup> of finding the river. Furthermore, La Salle declined to listen to any advice as he traveled farther west past the delta. Only after making landfall did it become apparent to La Salle that he was nowhere near the Mississippi, finally considering that it must lay east of his landing site.<sup>10</sup> Besides the concept that "Heaven" made the explorer miss the Mississippi, it seems from his account that Joutel supposed La Salle sailed past it because he thought the river lay at the western end of the Gulf. It must be remembered, however, that Joutel was one of La Salle's most ardent supporters.<sup>11</sup>

Many nineteenth century La Salle historians were preoccupied with the personalities of great men. In an era of imperialism and rugged individualism, they lauded La Salle as the consummate ideal of a man braving the odds.<sup>12</sup> In such histories, La Salle may have been mistaken, but never would he lie and mislead his superiors. Harvard historian Jared Sparks wrote that La Salle took an incorrect latitudinal reading in 1682 with "some rude instrument" and, believing his reading, sailed on until he was on the Texas Gulf coast at his 1682 reading.<sup>13</sup> Politician and historian George Bancroft portrayed the French explorer as a sort of fearless adventurer who has to fight the calumnies of both "heaven and man."<sup>14</sup> Bancroft's La Salle only noted that a colony at the mouth of the Mississippi might be useful as a staging point for an invasion of New Spain in the event of a war between Spain and France; it was not his intent to deceive the French court. Bancroft had La Salle actually believing he had landed his men on a western arm of the Mississippi.<sup>15</sup> Louisiana-based historians of the same era such as François-Xavier Martin, Charles-Étienne Arthur Gayarré, and Alcée Fortier portrayed La Salle as a French hero only motivated solely by the act of discovery and the aggrandizement of the French king—he was no deceiver of his patron. European historians of the age made similar claims.<sup>16</sup>

In 1869 gentleman historian Francis Parkman authored what has become the most popular and influential biography of La Salle in his *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West*. He depicted his subject as the greatest French explorer of the colonial era who only failed to realize his goals due to the machinations of his detractors.<sup>17</sup> Like Bancroft before him, Parkman suggested that La Salle introduced the idea of the conquest of New Spain only to interest the French government in his colonizing venture. Parkman's La Salle is too scientific to have made the mistake Sparks claimed--of marking an incorrect latitude in 1682. According to

his contention, La Salle traveled too far west only because he believed that the eastward-flowing Gulf current was stronger than it in fact is—no deliberate deception was involved.<sup>18</sup> Historian and pastor John S. C. Abbott's 1875 portrayal of La Salle is similar as well. Abbott is particularly laudatory in praise of the explorer:

*There is no one of the Pioneers of this continent whose achievements equal those of the Chevalier Robert de la Salle... Fear was an emotion La Salle never experienced. His adventures were more wild and wondrous than almost any recorded in the tales of chivalry.*<sup>19</sup>

No mention is made of the mistaken latitude reading in 1682 and again La Salle missed the Mississippi River only because he sailed too far west. After landing at Matagorda Bay, he searched both west and east for his river. La Salle's motives were again pure, as no mention is made at all of any possible use of the Mississippi colony as an invasion staging area.<sup>20</sup>

As the nineteenth century progressed, some authors questioned the prevailing portrayal of La Salle as a great hero. Prominent historian Justin Winsor wrote a number of works pertaining to La Salle such as *Cartier to Frontenac* and in certain articles of his eight-volume opus *Narrative and Critical History of America*. Winsor raised the then derogatory possibility that La Salle may have been motivated not by a kind of patriotism but by personal, monetary greed.<sup>21</sup> Winsor, like Bancroft, mentioned that La Salle and his supporters tied his scheme to the Peñalosa plan to subjugate the mine country of northern Mexico. Winsor did not think that La Salle faked his geography; he only calls the geography of La Salle, as embodied on the later maps of his official draftsman Jean Baptiste Franquelin, "confused."<sup>22</sup> Beginning in 1683, Franquelin's maps, based on La Salle's own, showed the southward-flowing Mississippi taking a ninety-degree turn between the Ohio and the Arkansas Rivers and actually run nearly due west before turning south and southeast again before entry into the Gulf of Mexico near the Rio Bravo.<sup>23</sup> Winsor mentioned that La Salle had taken a latitude reading in 1682, but chalks his passing of the Mississippi up to his inability to calculate longitude. La Salle, in Winsor's estimation, simply mistook Matagorda Bay as an outlet of the Mississippi; it only later dawned upon him that he was far from the great river.<sup>24</sup> For Winsor, La Salle may have appropriated the Peñalosa scheme for his own ends, but he was still a victim of his mistaken geographical ideas—he did not lie about the location of the Mississippi, he thought it was west of its true location.

Respected American Catholicism historian John Gilmary Shea viewed La Salle as a schemer who appropriated the plan of Peñalosa for

his own gain. For Shea, it was always La Salle's intent to land far west of the Mississippi for an attack on Nueva Vizcaya. In a strong content note to his 1881 translation of *First Establishment of the Faith in New France* by French historian Chrétien Le Clercq, Shea stated:

*It was pretended that La Salle sailed from France to settle in Louisiana. This farce has been kept up till recently, and historians generally have been misled... all show that his real object was the conquest of the Santa Barbara and other mines in Mexico. It would seem to have been his object from the first to reach the rich mining country by means of the Mississippi.*<sup>25</sup>

He continued to expound this thesis in his next work, *The Expedition of Don Diego Dionisio de Peñalosa*.<sup>26</sup> Shea's reputation as a serious scholar kept this proposition in the spotlight, and many early twentieth-century historians embraced it with vigor.<sup>27</sup>

Building on this growing critical distrust of La Salle, the 1904 work of historian and political scientist Frederic Austin Ogg, *The Opening of the Mississippi*, delved further into the Frenchman's business dealings. Ogg's La Salle again offered the closeness of his proposed colonies to the Nueva Vizcaya mines and the facility of staging an invasion from Louisiana as a sop to gain government approval for his venture. La Salle's primary interest was in gaining his trading concession on the Mississippi. No mention is made, however, of La Salle's faulty astrolabe reading at the Gulf or the subsequent alteration of the hydrography of the North American continent's interior on his maps and in his reports.<sup>28</sup> Still, the La Salle as "great man" thesis survived. Peter Joseph Hamilton, an amateur historian with the Alabama Historical Society early in the twentieth century, mentioned La Salle's final expedition, but claimed he had just inadvertently missed the Mississippi. Hamilton singularly declared that La Salle's fame was all that was needed to secure financing for his final voyage into the Gulf.<sup>29</sup>

In the October 1901 edition of the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, E. T. Miller stoked the debate over La Salle's intentions and his appropriation of the Peñalosa plan to secure the king's support for his 1684 Mississippi venture. Since the writings of Shea, historians had mentioned Peñalosa, but Miller described in detail La Salle's usurpation of the Spaniard's plan. Although he characterized La Salle as a schemer as Shea had done, willing to deceive to gain support for his cause, Miller maintained that the explorer's true intent had always been to land at the mouth of the Mississippi. His geographical ignorance, Miller declared, led

him to believe the river actually met the coast at the Gulf's northwestern corner.<sup>30</sup>

As the twentieth century dawned, most historians held that La Salle utilized the notion of his river's military closeness to the mine country of Nueva Vizcaya only to gain financial support. The maps produced under his direction, by Franquelin and Minet, were confused in their geography, but La Salle was still not a cartographic deceiver. Historians split over whether La Salle intended to land at the Mississippi or west of it, closer to the mines. Most accounts had him accidentally sailing past the Mississippi, Parkman the foremost of these, but a growing number of historians, led by Shea, believed his intended goal was always the Texas coast for a military adventure. A minority, exemplified by Miller, acknowledged La Salle's acceptance of the Peñalosa plot to invade Nueva Vizcaya, but still clung to the notion that La Salle's geographical notions forced him to sail past the true location of his Mississippi.

Historian Carl A. Brasseaux, writing in "The Image of La Salle in North American Historiography," has noted that many twentieth century works suffered from the bias of presentism, as some scholars became fascinated with pointing out the flaws of their subjects and removing prominent figures from their Victorian-era pedestals.<sup>31</sup> Denigrating the psychological makeup of La Salle, as some authors have done, does not prove his motives one way or the other. Looking at history through the lens of the present has also led many historians to stress the technological inexactitude of La Salle's time. Historian Christopher Morris noted:

*It is perhaps telling, that historians have argued over navigational measurements and technology. It is as if they were onboard L'Aimable with him, pouring over charts, taking compass and astrolabe readings... In fact, all his maps were worthless, as were most of his navigational tools. And yet historians, no less than La Salle, have put their faith in charts and instruments, seeking ways to make the technology work by calculating which was most accurate, or estimating degrees of error and then correcting measurements. It might even be possible to determine the error in compass readings caused by the magnetic poles and correct them. But this misses the point.<sup>32</sup>*

Robert S. Weddle, well-respected amateur historian of the Gulf of Mexico, agreed:

*Historians still bog down over the reasons for La Salle's misplaced landing, ascribing it to either navigational error or his "secret" design for striking Mexico. Actually, neither reason applies. The confusion*

*arises from assigning to the seventeenth-century explorer a geographical understanding that came only in a later period.*<sup>33</sup>

Historians on both sides of the issue have used the issue of technology for their own ends. For instance, in 1910 J. F. Steward told the Illinois State Historical Society that La Salle was misled by mistakes in longitude, when, in fact, he had no viable way to determine it in the seventeenth century.<sup>34</sup> Proponents of the conspiratorial theory posit that with his mariner's tools, La Salle could never have been *that* lost—therefore he must have lied about his geography and perhaps his intentions. Advocates of the La Salle as “lost explorer” camp believe that with his faulty geographical notions and inaccurate tools La Salle never knew where he was or where he was headed—therefore he must have been lost. Judging the technology available to La Salle accurate on the one hand and inaccurate on the other is not a helpful historical argument—technological evidence that “proves” two opposing hypotheses is no proof at all.

Nevertheless, the twentieth century saw a continued critical eye placed on La Salle and the motives behind his final trip into the Gulf of Mexico. The preeminent historian of La Salle in the first half of the twentieth century, Jesuit scholar Jean Delanglez, made careful analysis of primary and secondary sources, including hundreds of maps, which led him to explode many of the prevailing notions of La Salle historians such as Parkman. In numerous books and articles on the French exploration and colonization of North America, Delanglez reexamined many aspects of La Salle's life and travels.<sup>35</sup> In *Some La Salle Journeys*, he investigated the role of Abbés Eusèbe Renaudot and Claude Bernou in linking La Salle's proposed colonization of the Mississippi with Peñalosa's plan to conquer the silver mine country of northern Mexico. With access to Bernou's papers, manuscripts that Parkman and others did not have, Delanglez pointed out that Bernou, not La Salle, was the prime mover in making the plan palatable to French minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Marquis de Seignelay, and the rest of the court.<sup>36</sup> With his emphasis on cartography, Delanglez showed that La Salle and his circle actually altered their geography in successive reports and maps. Delanglez judged that Parkman was “quite unaware of La Salle's geographical hoax, which Franquelin faithfully copied [in his maps].”<sup>37</sup> He took Parkman to task for trying to whitewash La Salle, claiming that “[T]he efforts of Parkman to absolve his hero from indirectness—a rather mild term for deception—are totally unconvincing.”<sup>38</sup>

Though Delanglez heartily believed that La Salle consciously deceived his backers in an effort to secure funding, he was careful enough to note the French explorer still labored under faulty geographical notions. Delanglez analyzed the so-called "Chucagoa fragment," a short letter written by La Salle and widely published in 1879 in *Découvertes et Établissements des Français dan L'Ouest et dans le Sud de l'Amérique Septentrionale, 1614-1698* by Pierre Margry.<sup>39</sup> In this document, La Salle gave his reasoning for equating the Mississippi River with the Río Escondido as portrayed on maps of the period. Delanglez held that even if La Salle had utilized a functioning astrolabe when he took his latitude reading at the Gulf in 1682, his inaccurate geographical knowledge would have led him to place the Mississippi along the Gulf's western shore. Having no conception of an extended deltaic mouth during his descent of the river, La Salle noted that the river reached the sea after traveling eastward, that morning mists rolled in from the same direction, and Indians gathered sea salt from the east as well—his river, he thought, must lie along the western Gulf Coast. The first reports of La Salle's 1682 expedition noted that the mouth of the Mississippi was about thirty leagues from the Río Bravo. Still, Delanglez notes that after La Salle's return to France in December 1683, he needed to bring the Mississippi closer to the Río Bravo to please government ministers.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Bernou and La Salle obliged with a "fanciful" hydrography of North America and "deliberate tampering with the geography of the Lower Mississippi such as can be explained only by his will to deceive Seignelay by making the river flow near New Biscay."<sup>41</sup> In a later 1684 report, Bernou even had the Mississippi flow directly into the Río Bravo, making that once Spanish river a mere tributary of the French great river, a fact noted in later maps by La Salle's new draftsman Franquelin.<sup>42</sup> Delanglez determined that even if he did not originate this geographical hoax, he countenanced it, concluding: "When it suited his purposes to deceive people, he was not one to be bothered with scruples."<sup>43</sup> La Salle the deceiver missed landing at the Mississippi because he thought it was elsewhere.

Yet Delanglez's "middle road" claim that La Salle was both misled by his conception of North America's geography in 1682 and 1683 and then a cartographic deceiver in 1684 has been little regarded. Even though Delanglez is oft-quoted and well-respected in scholarly circles, his thesis has not been accepted. Through the twentieth century, most authors held to the notion that La Salle lied about his river's location only to receive funding for his 1684 expedition to the Gulf. In Carlos Eduardo

Castañeda's *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1936*, the author held that La Salle's intent was always to carry out the military aspect of the appropriated Peñalosa plan.<sup>44</sup> Making a claim no other author has made, Castañeda contended that La Salle's instructions were to fortify a point sixty leagues *south* of the Mississippi, not sixty leagues *up* the river. "It must be concluded," said Castañeda, "that he passed the mouth of the great river purposely, rather than accidentally."<sup>45</sup> Historian Bernard Augustine De Voto, in 1952's *The Course of Empire*, not only declared that La Salle "was forced to forfeit the integrity of his plan and to falsify the geography of the Mississippi" to gain government approval of his project, but disparaged him as "a doomed man" and "monstrously despotic."<sup>46</sup> De Voto's La Salle knew he was a liar and while at sea en route to the Gulf "wanted to give up before they made their landfall."<sup>47</sup>

Historian Henry Folmer reserved a special revulsion for La Salle in his *Franco-Spanish Rivalry in North America, 1524-1763*, published in 1953. Folmer's La Salle has almost no redeeming features. He is a pawn of Louis XIV, the bogeyman of the seventeenth century. As early as 1678, Folmer claims, La Salle's mission was to find a quick access route to the silver mining region of northern Mexico. After his 1682 descent of the Mississippi, La Salle immediately appropriated the Peñalosa plan and "thus began a series of lies and deceptions, misrepresentations, and fantasies which were ultimately to lead to La Salle's ruin" in East Texas.<sup>48</sup> Folmer continued: "La Salle must have realized that the distance from the Mississippi to Mexico was actually far too great for his proposed settlements on that river to be of any assistance in the conquest of New Spain."<sup>49</sup> Still, La Salle, according to Folmer, falsified the course of the Mississippi "placing its mouth some two hundred leagues westwards" and "making this river turn sharply westwards between the mouths of the Missouri and the Arkansas rivers."<sup>50</sup> Only then did the river turn southeast and enter the Gulf along the Texas coast. As the ships of the 1684 expedition headed toward the location of his fake river mouth, Folmer claimed that La Salle tried to lose Beaujeu so he could then turn back to the real Mississippi River.<sup>51</sup> Other authors, like biographer John Upton Terrell, cleaved to the notion that La Salle was genuinely a "lost explorer." His 1968 biography of La Salle discussed the appropriation of the Peñalosa proposal as a patriotic gesture meant to bring glory to France. According to Terrell, La Salle did not alter the geography of his 1682 discoveries; he was just a victim of his era's cartographic ignorance.<sup>52</sup>

In 1982, Louis De Vorse gave new impetus to the La Salle as

deceiver hypothesis, discussing the explorer's more than twenty-year impact on the cartography of the Mississippi region in "The Impact of the La Salle Expedition of 1682 on European Cartography."<sup>53</sup> De Vorsey surmised that upon finding no officials at the French court interested in his proposal to colonize the mouth of the Mississippi, La Salle deliberately fabricated geographical evidence to gain the needed support.

La Salle accomplished this turnabout by launching the greatest geographical hoax in the history of North American exploration, a hoax which, among other things, had the effect of arresting European cartography of the continent for twenty years. What La Salle did was to make it appear that the mouth of the Mississippi River was on the western coast of the Gulf in Texas rather than in present-day Louisiana where he had placed the king's arms and read his *procès verbal* in April of 1682. By this stratagem he made his planned colony appear to be an ideal staging point for an aggressive attack on the fabled mines of New Spain. It would seem certain that La Salle was well aware of the favorable reception which Seignelay and the king were extending to the plan for a similar attack then being promoted by the Spanish exile Peñalosa.<sup>54</sup>

De Vorsey does not even begin to countenance that La Salle might not have known where he really was, implying the Frenchman knew he was "in present-day Louisiana."<sup>55</sup> Besides running down the evidence that La Salle and Bernou began moving the outlet of the Mississippi closer and closer to the Rio Bravo to gain royal favor, De Vorsey looks at the maps of the period, primarily those of Franquelin and the engineer Minet. These two draftsmen are known to have copied La Salle's personal, but now lost, map of the North American interior. The Mississippi depicted on their maps begins by heading due south, makes a ninety-degree turn to the west for about ten degrees of longitude, before swinging south and southeast for the last one hundred leagues or so and emptying into the Gulf along the coast of present-day Texas. Later Franquelin maps even showed the Rio Bravo, now christened the Fleuve Seignelay, flowing into the Mississippi.<sup>56</sup>

De Vorsey made some logical errors in his thesis. He brazenly equated the maps of Franquelin and those of the Venetian Franciscan, Vincenzo Coronelli, who had been commissioned to make an enormous set of terrestrial and celestial globes for the Sun King. While it is true that Coronelli was in Paris from 1681 to 1683 and was in a perfect position to hear the first news of La Salle's descent of the Mississippi, De Vorsey implies that his globe, and subsequent maps based on these

globes, was a part of the La Salle "conspiracy."<sup>57</sup> Coronelli's Mississippi is shown running due south through what would be today's Great Plains states and disgorge on the Texas Gulf Coast. Coronelli's depiction of the Mississippi was created *before* La Salle's return to France and *before* the explorer and Bernou began adjusting their cartographic data to entice Seignelay and others to finance his expedition. The fact that the maps of Franquelin and Minet, known to have been copied from La Salle's map and made at his direction, differ so substantially from Coronelli's proves that Coronelli was not a part of the larger conspiracy. If the Mississippi flowing far west of its true location, near to the mines of Nueva Vizcaya, was all that mattered to La Salle, why did he just not point Siegnelay to the famous completed Coronelli globes and use them as proof?<sup>58</sup> De Vorsey also scoffed at the notion that La Salle, whom he called a "gifted former Jesuit teacher of mathematics" and a "genius," would be unable to determine his longitude—thus he must have landed at Matagorda Bay on purpose.<sup>59</sup> This notion, of course, ignored the fact that few could easily and accurately determine longitude until the late eighteenth century.

In 1984 Peter H. Wood published a rejoinder entitled "La Salle: Discovery of a Lost Explorer," in *The American Historical Review*.<sup>60</sup> Wood took many historians to task, De Vorsey especially, for assuming that La Salle's seventeenth-century geographical knowledge was on par with that of the twentieth-century. He scoffed at the thought that La Salle erred because he could not ascertain his longitude, as nobody could. Wood instead puts La Salle in his cartographic milieu, listing the preconceptions he probably held as he descended the Mississippi to the Gulf in 1682. These included that the north Gulf coast was at about 30 degrees north latitude; this coast ran east-west with no protruding delta; a Bahía del Espíritu Santo was the prominent feature along the coast; east of this bay several rivers entered the Gulf; the Texas coast curved west of it, and several rivers flowed southeast and east into the Gulf there; and "One of these rivers, the Escondido, was often particularly prominent, with a large entrance to the gulf near 27 degrees (and with forks upstream to the north and west that gave it features similar to those of the actual Rio Grande)."<sup>61</sup> These preconceptions led La Salle to believe that his Mississippi indeed flowed into the Gulf at its northwestern end, based on his observations of the lower river's southeastern flow, mists from the east, and his astrolabe reading of 27 degrees at the mouth.

Wood went over La Salle's geographical reasoning, faulty, though logical, as embodied in the "Chucagoa fragment." He ultimately

concluded that in 1684 La Salle headed to where he honestly thought the Mississippi's mouth was located.<sup>62</sup> Wood's contention that La Salle may have been misled by his conception of North American hydrography perhaps laid too much emphasis on absolving La Salle of any deception, as Wood totally ignored the alteration inherent in successive Bernou-written proposals and Franquelin-created maps. De Vorsey issued a riposte in a 1988 article titled, "La Salle's Cartography of the Lower Mississippi: Product of Error or Deception?"<sup>63</sup> He pointed to La Salle's portrayal of the Mississippi and wondered how he could honestly confuse the river's real-life, slightly curved, north-south direction with the zigzagging course found on the charts of Franquelin and Minet. De Vorsey then claimed that the Chucagoa fragment was of dubious authorship and, even if it was written by La Salle, it could be evidence of his continued dissembling as he perpetrated his hoax on the French court. In this article, De Vorsey focused not on longitude, but on latitude. He wondered why La Salle, who excelled in mathematics at the Jesuit College Henri IV at La Fleche, could incorrectly accomplish the "comparatively easy" task of determining latitude.<sup>64</sup> Here De Vorsey ignored the first-hand evidence that La Salle's astrolabe was defective.<sup>65</sup>

One of the most respected La Salle scholars today is amateur historian Robert S. Weddle. Weddle takes a fairly reasoned approach similar to that of Wood: La Salle honestly believed his river lay on the Texas coast. He called De Vorsey's conspiracy hypothesis a "specious argument."<sup>66</sup> "Consider, then," he wrote, "that La Salle was lost not only when he overshot the Mississippi in 1685 but also three years previously when he descended the river from Canada."<sup>67</sup> With a broken compass, a malfunctioning astrolabe, and the mistaken geographical concepts of his time, La Salle was bound to think that the Mississippi's mouth lay along the Texas coast. Weddle viewed the "Chucagoa fragment" as La Salle's thought process as he "wrestled with the confusing facts of his exploration."<sup>68</sup> Weddle further claimed that there was little connection between the proposals of La Salle and those of Peñalosa. When La Salle landed at Matagorda Bay, Weddle argued, he honestly thought it was a western arm of the Mississippi.<sup>69</sup> Weddle concluded that:

*La Salle clung tenaciously to his mistaken concepts. His stance bespeaks no shrewd plot to deceive his king and the minister; rather, it reflects the prevailing ignorance of his time concerning the northern Gulf shore and its hinterlands.*<sup>70</sup>

Weddle also made some serious missteps. Like De Vorsey, but for different reasons, he noted the map evidence of both Franquelin and

Coronelli.<sup>71</sup> Coronelli's maps, of course, were made without the benefit of La Salle's and Bernou's later alterations.<sup>72</sup> Weddle, in his latest work from 2001, *The Wreck of the Belle, the Ruin of La Salle*, noted Bernou's part in creating La Salle's reports and maps. For Weddle, Bernou may have made some dubious claims, but La Salle was not a party to them. Weddle discussed Bernou's equation of the Rio Bravo and the Mississippi and stated, "La Salle had never identified his river [the Mississippi] as the Río Bravo."<sup>73</sup> Weddle also discounted the theory that La Salle had heard of the Peñalosa proposal before his descent of the Mississippi.<sup>74</sup> Such a notion ignored La Salle's certain knowledge of the reports Bernou made for his benefit. He also ignored all the evidence that La Salle's circle in France appropriated the Peñalosa plan and changed it to further their designs. As early as 1931 historian Marc de Villiers du Terrage noted that Bernou had informed La Salle of the Peñalosa scheme in a letter before his 1682 expedition.<sup>175</sup>

The debate over La Salle's motives and actions on his last voyage has been the subject of frequent debate. Was his landing at Matagorda Bay the product of error or deception? Did he miss the Mississippi because he thought it lay farther west? Did he knowingly falsify the riverine geography of North America? Was it his intention to land west of the Mississippi for an invasion of Nueva Vizcaya? Nineteenth century historians, perhaps motivated by a form of imperial hero-worship, tended to turn a blind eye to any hint of La Salle's deceptive "moving" of the Mississippi closer to Mexico in the maps and reports of 1683 and 1684. If they mentioned his appropriation of the Peñalosa plan at all it was only made to secure government backing. In the twentieth century, historians have both highlighted La Salle's complicity in deceiving the French court or displayed how he was hopelessly lost. Even Tony Coulter, in a 1991 biography of La Salle written for teenaged readers takes sides:

*With a pair of ambitious lobbyists, Eusèbe Renaudot and the Abbé Claude Bernou, La Salle soon became involved in a bizarre scheme to pique Louis's interest by proposing that his colony be used as a base from which to attack New Spain. In order to make his proposal more attractive, La Salle presented the king with a map that greatly distorted the true path of the Mississippi by making it appear as if the river veered west, leaving its mouth on the western coast of the Gulf of Mexico, in present-day Texas—an ideal location from which to harass the Spanish and raid their silver mines. Through this distortion, La Salle created confusion about the actual location of the Mississippi's mouth, which remained a mystery until 12 years after his death.*<sup>76</sup>

It is a pity that historians have not more widely accepted the ideas of Jean Delanglez. His La Salle is naïve enough to make a geographical mistake, yet deceitful enough to lie about his intentions, an interpretation that allows for all evidence to be taken into account. La Salle's limited, erroneous, geographical knowledge, as embodied in the reasoning of the "Chucagoa fragment" can be taken at face value. La Salle thought his river's mouth was on the west coast of the Gulf of Mexico. This was confirmed, in his mind, by his inaccurate astrolabe reading at the mouth of the Mississippi in 1682. Still, it is also a fact that Bernou's reports, which La Salle at least tacitly approved, brought the Mississippi ever closer to Mexico, culminating in its imaginary commingling with the Rio Bravo. La Salle was, in a sense, a lost explorer—he did incorrectly place the Mississippi on his maps. But he was also a deceiver—he and his circle had no qualms about fudging the geography of his river to secure funding from the French government. Placing too much stress on La Salle as either a cartographic deceiver or an erroneous fool means that some evidence must be ignored.



<sup>1</sup>Ert J. Gum, "La Salle and the Historians," *East Texas Historical Journal* 7, no. 1 (March 1969): 5-12; Ert J. Gum, "La Salle and the Historians," in *Eastern Texas History: Selections from the "East Texas Historical Journal,"* Archie P. McDonald, ed. (Austin: Jenkins Pub. Co, 1978) 29-54.

<sup>2</sup>Jean Delanglez, "A Calendar of La Salle's Travels, 1643-1683," *Mid-America* 22, no. 4 (October 1940): 278-305. The best biography of La Salle is still, even modern historians claim, Francis Parkman, *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West* (New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1879), though Jean Delanglez, *Some La Salle Journeys* (Chicago: Institute of Jesuit History, 1938) makes some useful corrections and annotations.

<sup>3</sup>Delanglez, "A Calendar of La Salle's Travels, 1643-1683," 300-301; Robert S. Weddle, *The French Thorn: Rival Explorers in the Spanish Sea, 1682-1762* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1991), 3-4.

<sup>4</sup>Pierre Margry, *Découvertes et Établissements des Français dans l'Ouest et dans le Sud de l'Amérique Septentrionale, 1614-1698*, vol. 1, *Voyages des Français sur les Grands Lacs Découverte de l'Ohio et du Mississippi, (1614-1684)* (Paris: Maisonnueve, 1879), 602. Translation from Weddle, *The French Thorn*, 4.

<sup>5</sup>Jack Jackson, *Flags Along the Coast: Charting the Gulf of Mexico, 1519-1759: A Reappraisal* (Austin: Book Club of Texas, 1995), 7. Jackson and Weddle both make note of the fact that the Nueces is "hidden" from view by the barrier islands of the Texas coast, yet no map until the 1690s showed these islands.

<sup>6</sup>Weddle, *The French Thorn*, 4-5; Delanglez, "A Calendar of La

Salle's Travels," 301.

<sup>7</sup>David Buisseret, *Mapping the French Empire in North America: An Interpretive Guide to the Exhibition Mounted at the Newberry Library on the Occasion of the Seventeenth Annual Conference of the French Colonial Historical Society (La Société d'Histoire Coloniale Française)* (Chicago: Newberry Library, 1991), 21; David Buisseret, "Spanish and French Mapping of the Gulf of Mexico in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *The Mapping of the American Southwest*, eds. Dennis Reinhartz and Charles C. Colley, 3-17 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), 15; Louis De Vorsey, "The Impact of the La Salle Expedition of 1682 on European Cartography," in *La Salle and His Legacy: Frenchmen and Indians in the Lower Mississippi Valley*, ed. Patricia K. Galloway, 60-78 (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1982), 70-71; Louis De Vorsey, "La Salle's Cartography of the Lower Mississippi: Product of Error or Deception," *Geoscience and Man* 25 (June 30, 1988): 5. The works of De Vorsey are the most recent and complete account of the La Salle "conspiracy theory," i.e. that he knew the Mississippi was not where he placed it. Peter H. Wood, "La Salle: Discovery of a Lost Explorer," *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 2 (April 1984): 294-323, is the standard bearer for the contrary theory, that La Salle was just "lost."

<sup>8</sup>See Parkman, *La Salle*; Delanglez, *Some La Salle Journeys*; Weddle, *The French Thorn*.

<sup>9</sup>Henri Joutel, *The Last Voyage Perform'd by de la Sale* (London: A. Bell, 1714; facs. Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966), 20.

<sup>10</sup>Joutel, *The Last Voyage Perform'd by de la Sale*, 20, 27ff.

<sup>11</sup>Weddle, *The French Thorn*, 26.

<sup>12</sup>Carl A. Brasseaux, "The Image of La Salle in North American Historiography," in *La Salle and His Legacy: Frenchmen and Indians in the Lower Mississippi Valley*, ed. Patricia K. Galloway, 3-10 (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1982), 3.

<sup>13</sup>Jared Sparks, *The Library of American Biography*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little and Brown, 1848), 127ff.

<sup>14</sup>George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery of the Continent* (New York: D. Appleton and Co, 1888), 2:173.

<sup>15</sup>Bancroft, *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery of the Continent*, 2:160-174.

<sup>16</sup>Brasseaux, "The Image of La Salle in North American Historiography," 4.

<sup>17</sup>Brasseaux, "The Image of La Salle in North American Historiography," 5.

<sup>18</sup>Parkman, *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West*, 345ff; Wood, "La Salle: Discovery of a Lost Explorer," 299. This was a reason, but not the only reason he missed the river.

<sup>19</sup>John Stevens Cabot Abbott, *The Adventures of the Chevalier de La Salle and His Companions* (Dodd, Mead, and Co., 1875), 5.

<sup>20</sup>Abbott, chapters 13-15.

<sup>21</sup>Brasseaux, "The Image of La Salle in North American Historiography," 7; Gum, "La Salle and the Historians," in *Eastern Texas History*, 33.

<sup>22</sup>Justin Winsor, ed., *Narrative and Critical History of America*, vol. 4, *French Explorations and Settlements in North America and those of the Portuguese, Dutch, and Swedes, 1500-1700* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1884), 234.

<sup>23</sup>Jean Delanglez, "The Cartography of the Mississippi: The Maps of Coronelli," *Mid-America* 30, no. 4 (October 1948): 258; Jean Delanglez, "Franquelin, Mapmaker," *Mid-America* 25, no. 1 (January 1943): 29, 34-35, 60-61.

<sup>24</sup>Winsor, *French Explorations and Settlements in North America*, 233-238.

<sup>25</sup>Chrestien Le Clercq, *First Establishment of the Faith in New France*, trans. John Gilmary Shea (New York: John G. Shea, 1881), 202, footnote.

<sup>26</sup>Nicolás de Freytas, *The Expedition of Don Diégo Dionisio de Peñalosa., Governor of New Mexico, from Santa Fe to the river Mischipi and Quivira in 1662, as described by Nicholas de Freytas. With an account of Peñalosa's projects to aid the French to conquer the mining country in northern Mexico, and his connection with Cavalier de la Salle*, trans. John Gilmary Shea (New York: John G. Shea, 1882; reprint, Albuquerque: Horn and Wallace, 1964); Delanglez, *Some La Salle Journeys*, 92, n. 119.

<sup>27</sup>E. T. Miller, "The Connection of Peñalosa with the La Salle Expedition," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (October 1901): 111.

<sup>28</sup>Frederic Austin Ogg, *The Opening of the Mississippi: A Struggle for Supremacy in the American Interior* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1904), 110, 117-119ff.

<sup>29</sup>Peter Joseph Hamilton, *Colonial Mobile: An Historical Study* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910), 40-41.

<sup>30</sup>Miller, "The Connection of Peñalosa with the La Salle Expedition," 104ff., 109-112.

<sup>31</sup>Brasseaux, "The Image of La Salle in North American Historiography," 3-4.

<sup>32</sup>Christopher Morris, "Finding Louisiana: La Salle's Encounter with the Mississippi River Delta Plain," *Terrae Incognitae: The Journal for the History of Discoveries* 36 (2004): 31. Morris's article tries to prove that La Salle's last expedition probably skirted the Mississippi's delta but did not recognize the signs, encouraging him to continue westward.

<sup>33</sup>Robert S. Weddle, ed., *La Salle, the Mississippi, and the Gulf: Three Primary Documents* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1987), 7.

<sup>34</sup>J. F. Steward, "La Salle a Victim to His Error in Longitude," *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* 15 (1910): 129-136. For the inability to determine longitude in the seventeenth century see Dava

Sobel, *Longitude: The True Story of a Lone Genius Who Solved the Greatest Scientific Problem of His Time* (New York: Penguin, 1996).

<sup>35</sup>Jean Delanglez, *A Jean Delanglez, S.J., Anthology: Selections Useful for Mississippi Valley and Trans-Mississippi American Indian Studies* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985) is a selected compilation of some Delanglez articles and contains a useful bibliography of his works compiled by Mildred Mott Wedel.

<sup>36</sup>Delanglez, *Some La Salle Journeys*, 65-82; Delanglez, "Franquelin, Mapmaker," 60.

<sup>37</sup>Delanglez, "Franquelin, Mapmaker," 60.

<sup>38</sup>Delanglez, *Some La Salle Journeys*, 81 n. 65.

<sup>39</sup>Pierre Margry, *Découvertes et Établissements des Français dans l'Ouest et dans le Sud de l'Amérique Septentrionale, 1614-1698*, vol. 2, *Lettres de Cavalier de La Salle et Correspondance Relative à ses Entreprises, (1678-1685)* (Paris: Maisonnueve, 1879), 196-203.

<sup>40</sup>Jean Delanglez, "The Cartography of the Mississippi: II. La Salle and the Mississippi," *Mid-America* 31, no. 1 (January 1949): 36-37; Delanglez, "Franquelin, Mapmaker," 60; Jean Delanglez, *El Rio del Espíritu Santo: An Essay on the Cartography of the Gulf Coast and the Adjacent Territory during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society, 1945), 105-106; Delanglez, *Some La Salle Journeys*, 65-81.

<sup>41</sup>Delanglez, *Some La Salle Journeys*, 78, 79.

<sup>42</sup>Robert S. Weddle, *The Wreck of the Belle, the Ruin of La Salle* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001), 92; Delanglez, *El Rio del Espíritu Santo*, 106-111; De Vorsey, "The Impact of the La Salle Expedition of 1682 on European Cartography," 70.

<sup>43</sup>Delanglez, *Some La Salle Journeys*, 80.

<sup>44</sup>Carlos Eduardo Castañeda, *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1936*, vol. 1, *The Mission Era: The Finding of Texas, 1519-1693* (Austin: Von Boeckmann-Jones Company, 1936), 283.

<sup>45</sup>Castañeda, *Our Catholic Heritage in Texas, 1519-1936*, vol. 1, *The Mission Era: The Finding of Texas, 1519-1693*, 283.

<sup>46</sup>*The Course of Empire* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1952), 138.

<sup>47</sup>Bernard Augustine De Voto, 138.

<sup>48</sup>Henry Folmer, *Franco-Spanish Rivalry in North America, 1524-1763* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1953), 144.

<sup>49</sup>Folmer, *Franco-Spanish Rivalry in North America, 1524-1763* 146.

<sup>50</sup>Folmer, *Franco-Spanish Rivalry in North America, 1524-1763* 146-147.

<sup>51</sup>Folmer, *Franco-Spanish Rivalry in North America, 1524-1763* 134-160.

<sup>52</sup>John Upton Terrell, *La Salle: The Life and Times of an Explorer* (New York: Weybright and Talley, 1968), 208-215.

<sup>53</sup>De Vorsey, "The Impact of the La Salle Expedition of 1682 on

European Cartography," 60-78.

<sup>54</sup>Vorsey, "The Impact of the La Salle Expedition of 1682 on European Cartography, 70-71.

<sup>55</sup>Vorsey, "The Impact of the La Salle Expedition of 1682 on European Cartography, 70.

<sup>56</sup>Vorsey, "The Impact of the La Salle Expedition of 1682 on European Cartography, 71-74.

<sup>57</sup>Vorsey, "The Impact of the La Salle Expedition of 1682 on European Cartography, 71.

<sup>58</sup>De Vorsey, "The Impact of the La Salle Expedition of 1682 on European Cartography," 71-74; Delanglez, "The Cartography of the Mississippi: The Maps of Coronelli," 257-284. The misinterpretation of Coronelli's well-known globes and his 1688 *America Settentrionale* by those who link him to any La Salle "conspiracy" is treated in a paper by the author presented at the 29th Annual Mid-America Conference on History, Tulsa, OK, September 27, 2007 entitled "Coronelli's Texan Mississippi: A Reinterpretation of Coronelli's 1688 Map of North America." The journal *Terrae Incognitae* plans to publish "Coronelli's Texan Mississippi: A Reinterpretation of the *America Settentrionale* of 1688" in their 2008 volume.

<sup>59</sup>De Vorsey, "The Impact of the La Salle Expedition of 1682 on European Cartography," 76.

<sup>60</sup>Wood, "La Salle," 294-323.

<sup>61</sup>Wood, "La Salle," 294-323. The quotation is from p. 301.

<sup>62</sup>Wood, "La Salle," 308-311, 318.

<sup>63</sup>De Vorsey, "La Salle's Cartography," 5-23.

<sup>64</sup>De Vorsey, "La Salle's Cartography," 5-23. Quotation is from p. 18.

<sup>65</sup>Margry, 2:603; Delanglez, "The Cartography of the Mississippi: The Maps of Coronelli," 274.

<sup>66</sup>Weddle, *The Wreck of the Belle*, 276 n. 32.

<sup>67</sup>Weddle, ed., *La Salle, the Mississippi, and the Gulf*, 8.

<sup>68</sup>Weddle, *The French Thorn*, 9.

<sup>69</sup>Weddle, *The French Thorn*, 3-25, 353 n. 25; Weddle, ed., *La Salle, the Mississippi, and the Gulf*, 7-8; Robert S. Weddle, *The Wreck of the Belle*, 276 n. 32.

<sup>70</sup>Weddle, *The French Thorn*, 25.

<sup>71</sup>Weddle, *The Wreck of the Belle*, 96; Weddle, ed., *La Salle, the Mississippi, and the Gulf*, 9.

<sup>72</sup>See note 58, *supra*.

<sup>73</sup>Weddle, *The Wreck of the Belle*, 92.

<sup>74</sup>Weddle, *The Wreck of the Belle*, 77-92.

<sup>75</sup>Marc de Villiers du Terrage, *L'Expédition de Cavalier de La Salle dans le Golfe du Mexique, 1684-1687*, (Paris: A. Masionneuve, 1931), 31.

<sup>76</sup>Tony Coulter, *La Salle and the Explorers of the Mississippi* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1991), 87.