



Rene-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle

1643 - 1687

**French Explorer of the Mississippi River
Claimed the Mississippi River Region for France,
Named it “Louisiana”**

RENE-ROBERT CAVELIER, SIEUR DE LA SALLE WAS BORN on November 22, 1643, in Rouen, France. His name when he was born was Rene-Robert Cavelier. His parents were Catherine and Jean Cavelier. The “Sieur” portion of his name was added later, by King Louis XIV of France. “Sieur” is a title, meaning “Lord.” “La Salle” was the name of the family estate in France. He is known as “La Salle.”

La Salle went to school at a Catholic school. He studied to be a Jesuit priest. But when he was about 20, he decided he'd rather be an explorer.

NEW FRANCE: La Salle left France in 1666. He sailed to Montreal, Canada, which was part of **New France** at that time. He was given land and became a farmer and fur trader.

La Salle was very successful, but he was still eager to explore. Like earlier French colonists, he had heard of a great waterway inland from Montreal. It was the Mississippi River. The French wanted to explore it. They thought it might lead them to the Pacific Ocean. If it did, it would be an important trade route for them.

VOYAGE OF 1669: La Salle began his first explorations in 1669. He sold his land and set out to explore what is now Ohio. He followed the Ohio River, hoping it would lead him east to the Pacific. His crew included eight canoes, trading goods, and several priests.

He didn't reach the Mississippi on that expedition. In 1673, **Louis Jolliet** and **Jacques Marquette** led the first expedition down the Mississippi.

FRONTENAC: In 1673, Frontenac, the governor of **New France**, sent La Salle to the north shore of Lake Ontario. There, near modern-day Kingston, Ontario, he met with the local Indians, the Iroquois. Frontenac wanted to protect the French fur trade in the area. The Indians agreed to allow the French to build a fort to protect their interests.

MEETING KING LOUIS: In 1677, La Salle returned to France to meet with King Louis XIV. He wanted the King to allow him to explore

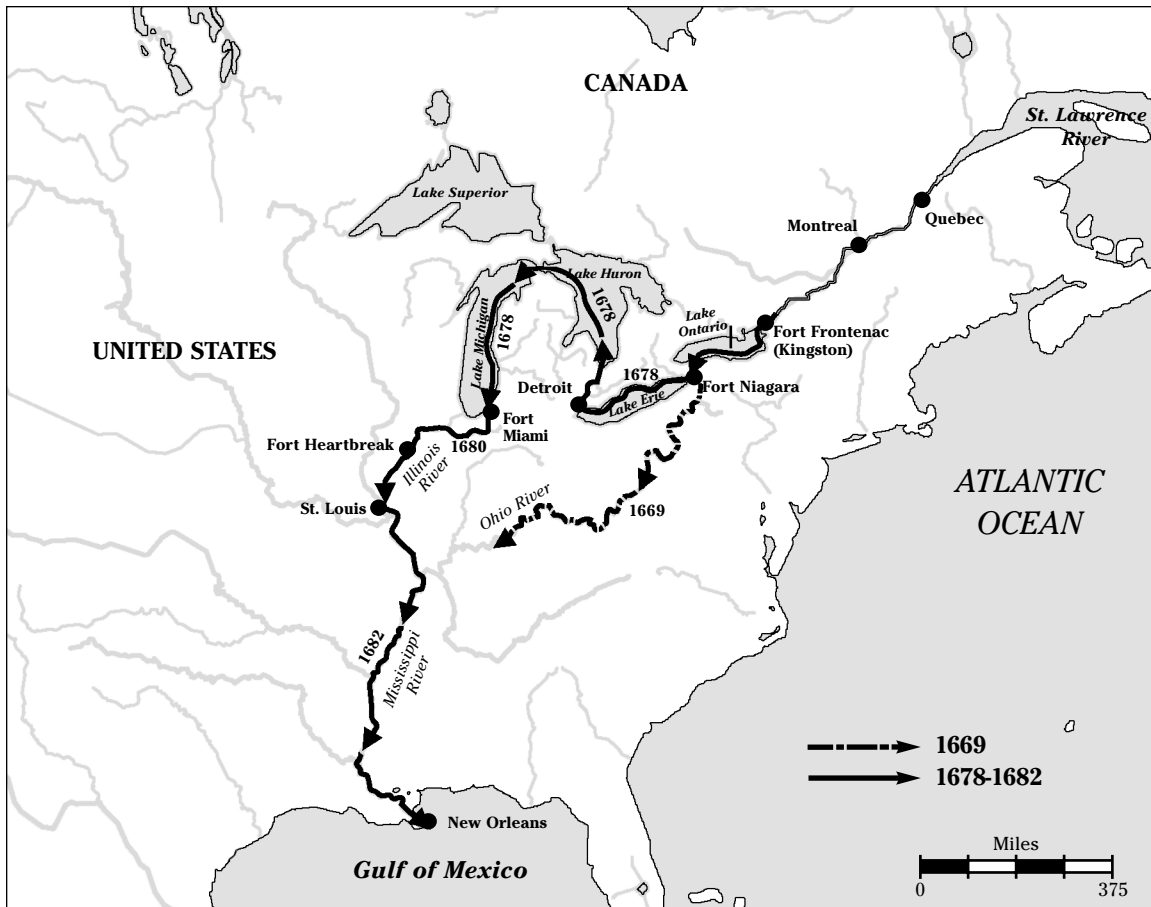


The building of the Griffin.

“the western parts of New France.” He also wanted to build forts and control part of the fur trade. King Louis agreed, but La Salle had to raise the money for the expedition himself.

La Salle sailed back to New France. With him on the journey was **Louis Hennepin**, a priest who would explore with him. Also on the journey was an Italian soldier named Tonty. He became La Salle’s friend and fellow explorer.

La Salle and his comrades built a new fort, near Niagara Falls. He also built a merchant ship, the *Griffin*. It was the first merchant ship in the Great Lakes. La Salle hoped to use the *Griffin* to trade



La Salle's voyages of 1669 and 1678-1682.

furs. In 1678, La Salle, Hennepin, and Tonty sailed on the *Griffin* through Lakes Erie, St. Clair, Huron, and Michigan, ending at the southern end of Lake Michigan. They loaded the boat with goods and sent it back to Niagara Falls. Sadly, the ship and all its cargo were lost along the way.

La Salle built another fort, Fort Miami, near modern-day St. Joseph, Michigan. Now he began his quest to find the Mississippi.

THE MISSISSIPPI: La Salle and his crew of 23 Frenchmen and 18 Indians set out in 1680. They traveled down the Kankakee and

Illinois Rivers. They built another fort, Fort Heartbreak, near what is now Peoria, Illinois.

But the expedition faced many problems. Part of the crew, including Hennepin, was captured by Indians while exploring a branch of the Illinois River. Fort Heartbreak was also destroyed.

La Salle was determined to follow the Mississippi to its end. Finally, in April 1682, La Salle and Tonty reached the Gulf of Mexico.

CLAIMING LOUISIANA FOR FRANCE: La Salle held a ceremony in which he claimed the entire area — one half of North America — for France. He named it “Louisiana” in honor of his King.

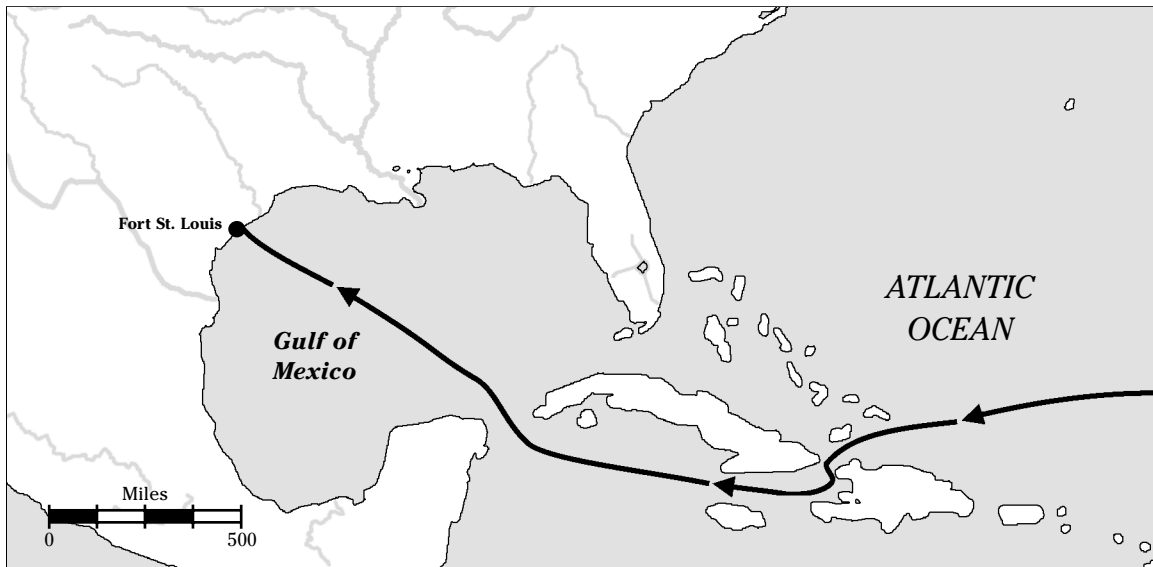
La Salle traveled back up the Mississippi. He built a new fort, called “St. Louis.” He asked the leaders of New France for help to build a settlement. But the new governor refused.

RETURN TO FRANCE:

La Salle returned to France. He met with King Louis and asked him to reverse the governor’s decision. King Louis did, and he also agreed to La Salle’s plan to build a permanent French settlement at the mouth of the Mississippi. The expedition had another purpose: to try to take lands claimed by Spain.



The Griffin.



La Salle's voyage of 1684.

FINAL VOYAGE: La Salle returned to the **New World** as head of a huge expedition. In August 1684, he led 300 colonists, on four ships, from France to the Gulf of Mexico. There, they were to find the entrance to the Mississippi and build a colony.

This final voyage of La Salle was a disaster. One ship was sunk by the Spanish, and the other three sailed past the entrance to the Mississippi. La Salle landed on the coast of what is now Texas in 1685. They were in the Matagorda Bay, 500 miles west of the Mississippi. One of the three remaining ships ran aground. The commander of another ship sailed back to France.

The remaining ship, under La Salle's command, tried to find the Mississippi. That ship, too, was wrecked on the coast of Texas. The remaining colonists built a fort, Fort St. Louis. They suffered from hunger and illness, and many died. They were later attacked by hostile Indian tribes.

In January 1687, La Salle took a party of 17 men and headed north. Three months later, La Salle was killed by his own men, near Navasota, Texas.

HIS DISCOVERY: La Salle is a controversial figure in the history of exploration. He had great goals, but he had trouble achieving them. His life and last expedition ended in tragedy and failure.

Yet La Salle is remembered for navigating the length of the Mississippi and for claiming Louisiana for the French. That led to French control of the Mississippi Valley for many years.

WORLD WIDE WEB SITES:

http://www.civilization.ca/vmnf/explor/lasal_e2.html

<http://www.sec.state.la.us/archives/lasalle/lasalle-b.htm>