

## PRESERVING THE PAST

The Conservation Research Laboratory at Texas A&M University is conducting ongoing preservation of artifacts from the *Belle*. It will take several years to complete the delicate conservation process. Please see the Texas Historical Commission web site for an online photo journal of the excavation at [www.thc.state.tx.us](http://www.thc.state.tx.us).

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The Texas Historical Commission wishes to thank **Mobil Exploration & Producing U.S. Inc.** for its generous support of the *Belle* excavation during a critical period of the project and for funding the printing of this brochure. The information gained from this discovery has been invaluable to archeologists, historians and educators in understanding the age of exploration in the 17th century. The project piqued global interest and serves as a model for public and private partnerships in support of archeology.



The Texas Historical Commission wishes to thank all contributors for making the *La Salle Shipwreck Project* so successful including:

The Cullen Foundation, The Fondren Foundation, Houston Endowment Inc., The Meadows Foundation, Mobil Exploration & Producing U.S. Inc., Dennis O'Connor, Shell Oil Company Foundation, The Summerlee Foundation  
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# LA BELLE



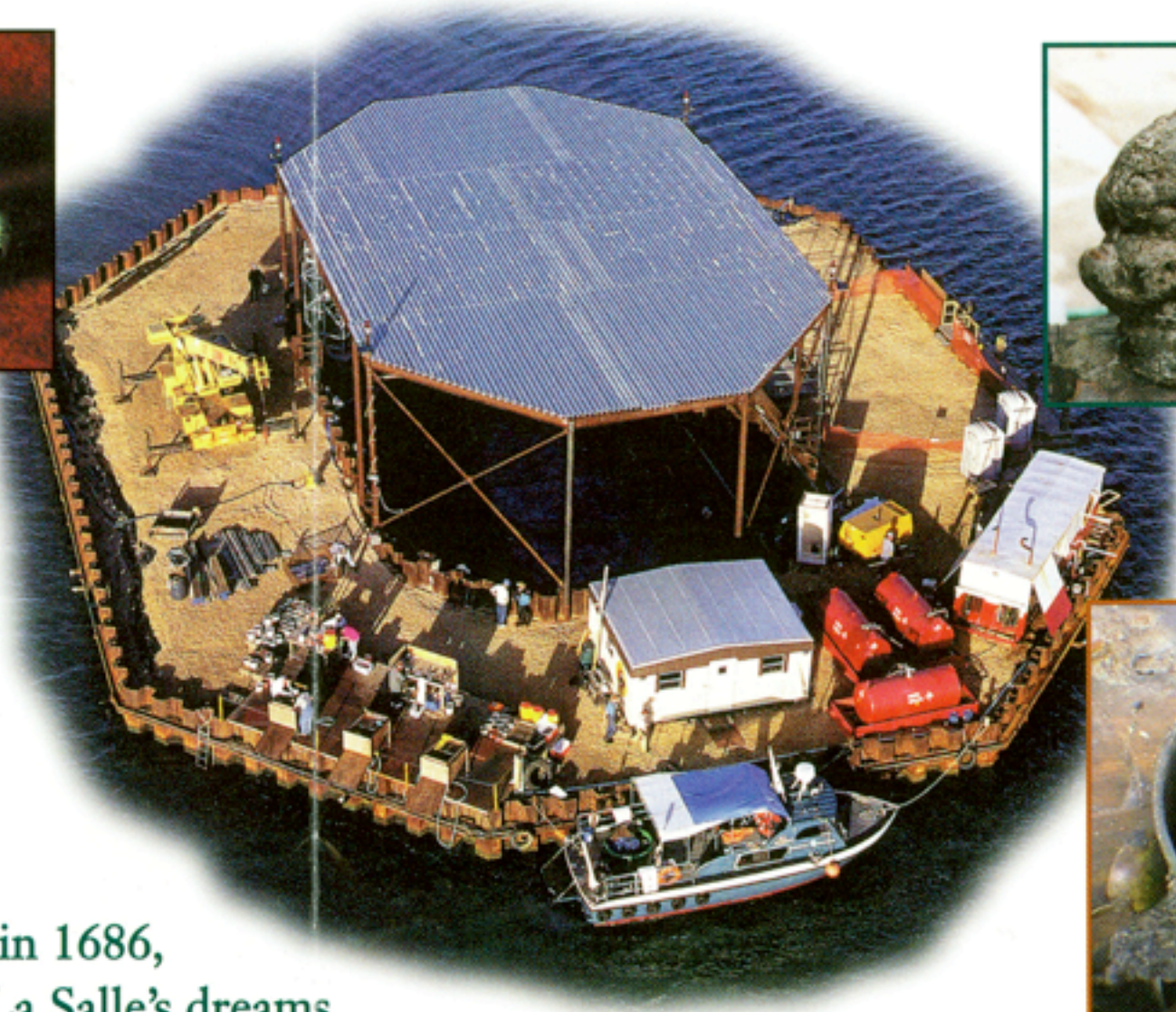
*The Mystery  
of La Salle  
in the Gulf*

Led by French explorer La Salle, the settlers that sailed to the New World hoped to establish a colony and build new lives. Instead, they encountered disaster, mutiny and death. What they left behind, now retrieved from the murky waters of Matagorda Bay, tells us their story.



## DISCOVERY

The *Belle* was one of a fleet of four ships that French explorer Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle led to the New World in the late 17th century. When it went down in a storm in 1686, after the fleet's storeship sank, La Salle's dreams and supplies for the new colony perished. After much research, Texas Historical Commission archeologists discovered the ship in 1995 and began one of the decade's most exciting excavations.



## 17TH CENTURY ARTIFACTS

Artifacts from the *Belle* were remarkably preserved in the sediment, only 12 feet underwater. The found objects included:

- three bronze cannon
- a human skeleton
- brass sword guards
- thousands of glass beads
- copper kettles and powder flasks
- bronze candlesticks
- brass Jesuit rings
- pewter dishes
- the ship's wooden hull, which will eventually be reconstructed.



## AN UNUSUAL EXCAVATION

Shipwrecks are typically excavated underwater by divers, but the discovery of the *Belle* required a more ambitious plan. The Texas Historical Commission built a cofferdam, a reinforced barrier to hold out seawater, around the ship. The cofferdam's steel pilings were driven more than 40 feet into the silt of Matagorda Bay. Once the water was pumped out, the archeologists and volunteers worked in the sand the ship had rested in for more than 300 years. It took the team eight months, working seven days a week, to excavate and document the hull and cargo.

