

Remains of French ship being reassembled in Texas

October 24 2014, by Michael Graczyk



In this Oct. 22, 2014 photo Roman numerals mark a timber from the 54-foot oak French frigate La Belle at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. Archaeologists are beginning to reassemble the remains of the ship recovered more than 300 years after the vessel was lost in a storm off the coast of Texas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

A frigate carrying French colonists to the New World that sank in a storm off the Texas coast more than 300 years ago is being reassembled into a display that archeologists hope will let people walk over the hull

and feel like they are on the ship's deck.

The 1686 wreck of the 54-foot oak frigate La Belle—in an expedition led by famed Mississippi River explorer Rene-Robert Cavelier Sieur de La Salle—is blamed for dooming France's further exploration of what would become Texas and the American Southwest.

But La Salle's short-lived Fort St. Louis near the shipwreck site in Matagorda Bay, about 100 miles southwest of present-day Houston, also convinced Spain to boost its presence in the region to ward off a feared French territorial expansion.

"In a very real way, it's responsible for our Hispanic heritage we have today," said Jim Bruseth, curator of the La Belle project at the Bullock Texas State History Museum. "They had nobody here, and it started the process of settling Texas.

"History oftentimes turns on seemingly small events," Bruseth said. "We have that actual ship, the remains of it here, that's the icon of that event."

Beginning Saturday, visitors to the Austin museum will be able to watch Bruseth and other archaeologists put the wrecked ship back together and talk with them as they work. The reassembly is expected to be complete by spring.

"It's going to be a lot of fun. It's like a dinosaur, big and dynamic and magnetic," said Peter Fix, one of the assembly team members and chief conservator for Texas A&M University's Center for Maritime Archaeology and Conservation. "Once we get the framing up it's going to look like a big beached whale, a bone carcass. And that's dynamic and hopefully it will pique curiosity."



In this Oct. 22, 2014 photo guest walk past a replica on the 54-foot oak French frigate La Belle at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. Archaeologists are beginning to reassemble the remains of the ship recovered more than 300 years after the vessel was lost in a storm off the coast of Texas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

The keel and other large structural pieces of La Belle—resembling old railroad ties—were discovered in 1995 by Texas Historical Commission archaeologists. Researchers built a dam around the site, pumped it dry, then retrieved the nearly intact hull that had been preserved in up to 6 feet of mud.

In 2012, the 600 waterlogged pieces were taken to Texas A&M, where the timber was stored at 60 degrees below zero in the world's largest archaeological freeze-dryer to remove more than three centuries of moisture.

Once the assembly is finished, the hull will be encased in a glass cabin-like structure so people can have the sensation of being on the ship's deck, peering into the hull and its cargo holds "and understand that

they're not looking at just a bunch of dirty old boards," Fix said.

La Salle was the first European to travel the Mississippi River south to the Gulf, claiming all the land along the river and its tributaries for France in 1682. Three years later, he sailed from France with more than 300 colonists aboard four [ships](#) including La Belle to establish a settlement at the mouth of the Mississippi—a destination he missed by 400 miles.



In this Oct. 22, 2014 photo Peter Fix, one of the assembly team members and chief conservator for Texas A&M University's Center for Maritime Archaeology and Conservation, works to reassemble the 54-foot oak French frigate La Belle at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. Archaeologists are beginning to reassemble the remains of the ship recovered more than 300 years after the vessel was lost in a storm off the coast of Texas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

By then, one ship had been lost to pirates. Another ran aground and sank. A third eventually headed back to France, leaving La Belle as his only

lifeline. That was severed with its sinking. Then the colony at Fort St. Louis was ravaged by disease, rattlesnakes, water shortages and Indians. Its inhabitants died or were killed while La Salle led a handful of men inland, where he wound up killed by some of them.

The museum exhibition also includes cannons and rifles, ammunition, cooking utensils, tools, building materials, trinkets like beads, bells and mirrors and even some of the 1,603 Jesuit rings recovered.

"We couldn't be any luckier in that sense," Bruseth said. "Rather than the ship being empty when it wrecked, everything he had left that you need for a colony was in the Belle."



In this Oct. 22, 2014 photo a timber from the 54-foot oak French frigate La Belle rests on a support where the ship is being reassembled at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. Archaeologists are beginning to reassemble the remains of the ship recovered more than 300 years after the vessel was lost in a storm off the coast of Texas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



In this Oct. 22, 2014 photo work to reassemble the 54-foot oak French frigate La Belle begins at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. Archaeologists are beginning to reassemble the remains of the ship recovered more than 300 years after the vessel was lost in a storm off the coast of Texas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



In this Oct. 22, 2014 photo artifacts from the French frigate La Belle are displayed at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. Archaeologists are beginning to reassemble the remains of the ship recovered more than 300 years after the vessel was lost in a storm off the coast of Texas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



In this Oct. 22, 2014 photo a timber from the 54-foot oak French frigate La Belle rests on a support where the ship is being reassemble at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. Archaeologists are beginning to reassemble the remains of the ship recovered more than 300 years after the vessel was lost in a storm off the coast of Texas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



In this Oct. 22, 2014 photo artifacts from the French frigate La Belle are displayed at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. Archaeologists are beginning to reassemble the remains of the ship recovered more than 300 years after the vessel was lost in a storm off the coast of Texas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



In this Oct. 22, 2014 photo ornate lifting handles decorate a bronze canon rescued from the French frigate La Belle on display at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. Archaeologists are beginning to reassemble the remains of the ship recovered more than 300 years after the vessel was lost in a storm off the coast of Texas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



In this Oct. 22, 2014 photo work to reassemble the 54-foot oak French frigate La Belle begins at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. Archaeologists are beginning to reassemble the remains of the ship recovered more than 300 years after the vessel was lost in a storm off the coast of Texas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)



In this Oct. 22, 2014 photo pieces of the 54-foot oak French frigate La Belle are laid out around a replica of the ship at the Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin, Texas. Archaeologists are beginning to reassemble the remains of the ship recovered more than 300 years after the vessel was lost in a storm off the coast of Texas. (AP Photo/Eric Gay)

© 2014 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Remains of French ship being reassembled in Texas (2014, October 24) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-10-french-ship-reassembled-texas.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.