



The Mitten

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Biographers of René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle offer different views of the famous French explorer. One author claims that La Salle was a man “whose energy and single-minded **ambition** made him one of the greatest explorers of his time.” A different historian believes that most of La Salle’s projects and plans were failures “due to his own defects.”

Born in France in 1643, La Salle traveled to New France in 1666. Having a “desire for exploration,” he got permission from the governor of New France to explore the Ohio Valley.

A few years later, La Salle wanted to expand the French fur trade by building forts at important places between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River. He founded one of these forts at the mouth of the St. Joseph River. La Salle called the settlement Fort Miami after the Indians who lived in the area. Fort Miami was the first European settlement in Michigan’s Lower Peninsula. La Salle also built the first sailing vessel on the Great Lakes, the *Griffin*.

In March 1680, La Salle was at Fort Miami. He wanted to return east, so he walked across the Lower Peninsula. On March 25, La Salle and five



René-Robert Cavelier SIEUR DE LA SALLE

search for the mouth of the Mississippi River. After spending almost three years wandering around the coast of the future states of Texas and Louisiana, La Salle’s men **mutinied** and murdered him. Only a few of La Salle’s crew survived the expedition.

companions left Fort Miami. There were no roads to follow and the Frenchmen avoided trails to prevent being noticed by the Native Americans. Two days after leaving Fort Miami, La Salle recorded, “We continued our march through the woods, which was so **interlaced** with thorns and brambles that . . . our clothes were all torn and our faces so covered with blood that we hardly knew each other.”

At the present-day city of Dexter, La Salle’s men built a **dugout canoe**. They paddled it down the Huron River to the Detroit River south of Grosse Ile. They rafted across the Detroit River. One month after leaving Fort Miami, La Salle reached Niagara. He had become the first European to walk across the interior of Michigan.

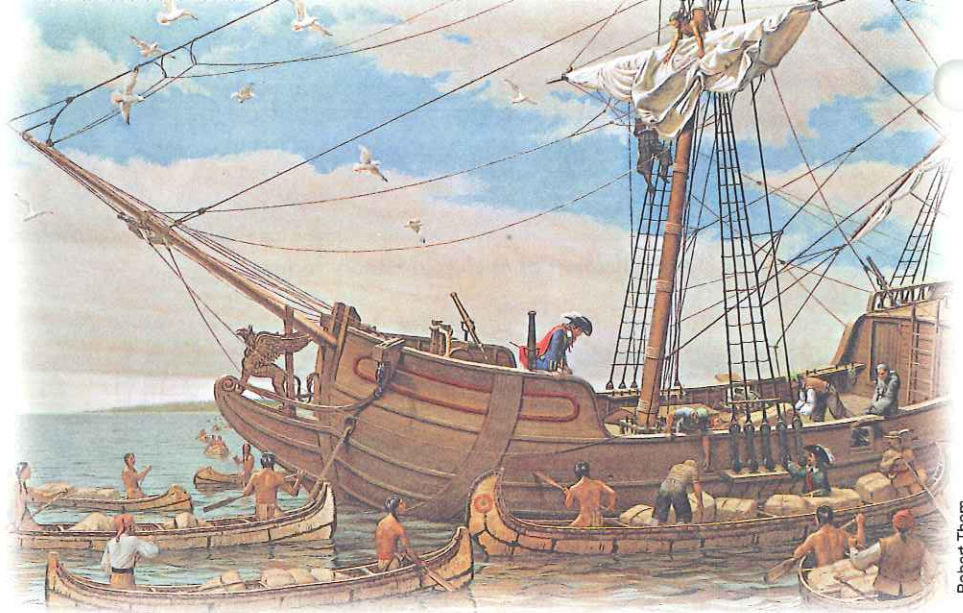
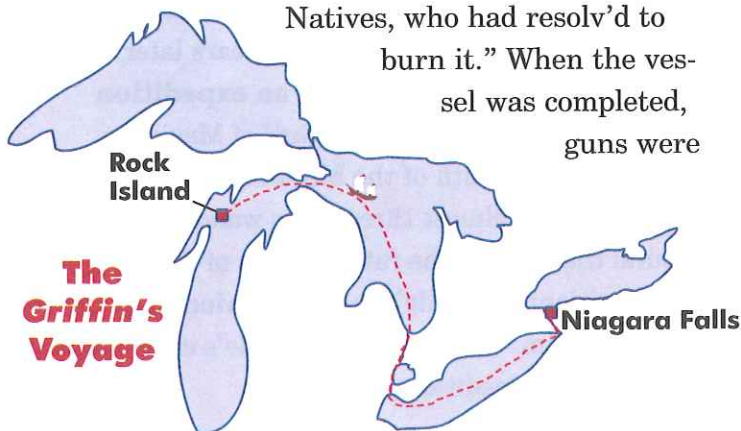
In 1682, La Salle became the first European to travel the length of the Mississippi River. Two years later, La Salle led an **expedition** to the Gulf of Mexico to

On September 18, 1679, a boat set sail from an island in northern Lake Michigan. Bearing a load of pelts, it was headed for eastern Lake Erie. The boat, named the *Griffin*, was the first sailing vessel on the Great Lakes. During the voyage, it disappeared without a trace.

The story of the *Griffin* begins on January 26, 1679. On that day, French explorer René-Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle hammered in the first pin to construct the *Griffin*. La Salle planned to use the *Griffin* to transport pelts from the upper Great Lakes eastward. Built near Niagara Falls, the *Griffin* was about 40 feet long and about 18 feet wide. It had a single mast with several sails. Except for the timber, which was cut on the site, all the rigging, anchors, sails and guns on the *Griffin* were brought to Niagara Falls.

According to Father Louis Hennepin, the Native Americans who watched the *Griffin* being built “expressed some Discontent at what we were doing.” Hennepin noted that the dozen French carpenters who built the boat “made all the haste we could to get it a-float . . .

to prevent the Designs of the Natives, who had resolv'd to burn it.” When the vessel was completed, guns were



Robert Thom

The Griffin

No one knows for sure what the *Griffin* looked like. This painting of the *Griffin* was based on other ships of the time. Find the griffin in this picture.

fired, a religious hymn was sung, and there were “loud Acclamations of Joy.” According to Hennepin, the Iroquois joined the celebrations because the French gave them “some Brandy to drink.”

Named after the legendary beast pictured on the coat of arms of the governor of New France, the *Griffin* left Niagara on August 7, 1679. On board were Father Hennepin, La Salle, the boat’s pilot and about 30 other men. The *Griffin* reached Mackinac Island on September 2. A few days later, it arrived at Rock Island, south of the Garden Peninsula.

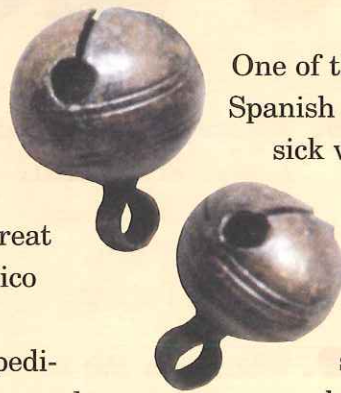
On September 18, the *Griffin* and a small crew set sail for Niagara. At the same time, La Salle and his men headed south to continue their explorations. They never saw the *Griffin* again. It sank somewhere in northern Lake Michigan. The first sailing vessel on the Great Lakes also became the first shipwreck on the Great Lakes. The *Griffin*’s remains have never been found.

LA SALLE'S **La Belle**

AFTER LEAVING the Great Lakes, René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle wanted to establish a French settlement at the mouth of the Mississippi River. He hoped to send furs from the Great Lakes down the river to the Gulf of Mexico for easier shipment to France.

In July 1684, La Salle led his expedition of four ships and 300 crewmen and colonists westward from France.

Things went wrong as soon as the expedition crossed the Atlantic Ocean.



One of the ships was captured by the Spanish and many of the Frenchmen got sick with tropical fever.

La Salle's expedition also got lost. For more than two years the Frenchmen wandered around the coasts of present-day states of Texas and Louisiana looking for the Mississippi River.

Finally, the survivors of the expedition murdered La Salle.

For the next 300 years, the *La Belle*, one of the ships from La Salle's expedition, lay beneath the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. In 1995 the boat's remains were discovered twelve miles off the Texas coast. Archaeologists first pumped the water from the site. Then, they spent eight months excavating the boat's remains. They recovered more than one million artifacts. Several of these artifacts are currently on display at the Priscilla U. Byrns Heritage Center in St. Joseph, Michigan.

The rope and hawk bells were found on the *La Belle* wreck. The bells were worn as decorative items by Native Americans.

Artifacts Texas Historical Commission

Where to Take Your Family

FORT MIAMI HERITAGE CENTER'S *Shared Waters* exhibit in St. Joseph tells how Great Lakes waterways brought together Native American and French cultures during the seventeenth century. Weapons, model canoes, silver brooches, paintings, and many other items were brought to St. Joseph from as far away as France for this exhibit. Some of the items on display at Fort Miami were recovered from the remains of René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle's ship. The *La Belle*, which sank in Texas in 1686, contained useful things such as pewter plates and rope for the colony La Salle wanted to establish. For information, telephone (616) 873-1191 or visit www.fortmiami.org.

What Did You Learn?

BONUS:

Who was the Griffin named after?

- a. La Salle's son
- b. A legendary beast
- c. A famous fur trader

Vocabulary WORDS



Ambition: a strong desire to achieve

Dugout canoe: a canoe made of a hollowed-out log

Expedition: a journey undertaken with a definite purpose

Interlace: to connect or intertwine

Mutiny: open rebellion against authority

Pelt: the skin of an animal with the fur still on it

1. Where was the first European settlement in Michigan's Lower Peninsula?
 - a. Fort Mackinac
 - b. Fort Miami
 - c. Fort Detroit
2. What was the name of the first sailing vessel on the Great Lakes?
 - a. Griffin
 - b. La Belle
 - c. La Salle
3. Why did La Salle want to establish a colony at the mouth of the Mississippi?
 - a. to have a place for missionaries to live
 - b. to establish a boat-building center
 - c. to receive furs from the Great Lakes and send them to France

D G O A Z G E N L N M X L Z I X C B C V D
 U P S S T R I N E I C I G T A M Z V L I G
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Find the following
LA SALLE
 words
GRIFFIN
EXPLORER
MISSISSIPPI
MIAMI
VESSEL
COLONY
EXCAVATE