René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, (1643–1687) was a French explorer who claimed many areas on the North American continent for France.

René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, was born in 1643 in Rouen, France. He studied for the Catholic priesthood but left his religious studies because he was considered too adventurous and unstable to become a priest.

La Salle emigrated to New France (now Canada) in 1667 and was given some land on the island of Montreal. Around 1669 he sold the land and used the profits to finance an expedition to find the Ohio River, which he hoped would eventually lead to the Pacific Ocean. Partway into the expedition he became sick and returned to Montreal.

Prepares to Explore North America  In 1673 La Salle was given command of Fort Frontenac at the site of present-day Kingston, Ontario. In 1678 he received permission from King Louis IV to explore the area of North America between New France, Florida, and Mexico. La Salle began by constructing a fort on the Niagara River, where his men built a sailing ship, the *Griffon*, to explore the Great Lakes.

La Salle and his men sailed through Lake Erie into Lake Huron and then to the Straits of Mackinac. Leaving the *Griffon* at Mackinac, they traveled south on Lake Michigan in canoes. Near present-day Peoria, La Salle built Fort Crevecoeur to serve as a supply center for future explorations.

Travels Length of Mississippi River  La Salle returned to New France in 1680. In the fall of 1681 he left with a party of 40 men. They returned to Crevecoeur and then traveled the Illinois River, eventually reaching the Mississippi River. They headed down the river in canoes and passed the mouth of the Ohio River, which La Salle had long been seeking. At the site of present-day Memphis, Tennessee, they built a fort called Prud’homme. La Salle’s party reached the Gulf of Mexico in 1682. There La Salle erected a large cross and proclaimed the lands he had seen to be part of France.

Sails Off Course to Texas  La Salle went back to France in December 1683. There he convinced the king and rich French merchants to fund an expedition to set up a colony near the mouth of the River. This voyage set sail in 1684. La Salle’s plan was to sail through the Gulf of Mexico to the Mississippi. However, the ships passed the mouth of the Mississippi without realizing it and continued sailing west. The colonists finally landed near Matagorda Bay, south of what is now Houston, Texas.

La Salle established a fort in what is now Victoria County. A dispute over stolen supplies led to unfriendly relations with the Karankawa natives. Over the next two years the French colonists suffered more and more deaths from hunger, disease, Native American attacks, and various mishaps. By 1687 only 42 remained, and La Salle’s men hated him for his arrogance and for causing them such misery. A group plotted against La Salle and killed him. A handful of colonists, including La Salle’s brother and the Talon children, survived and left accounts of the expedition’s fate.

Review Questions

1. How did La Salle use the profits from the land he sold?
2. Why did La Salle build Fort Crevecoeur?
3. Why did La Salle’s men grow to hate him?

Critical Thinking

4. Analyzing  Why do you think La Salle wanted to find a route to the Pacific?
5. Drawing Conclusions  Do you think La Salle was an effective leader? Why or why not?
6. Summarizing  Why do you think La Salle’s explorations were important to France?
7. Making Inferences  How do you know that the explorations led by La Salle were difficult and dangerous?