

## The Documentary Basis for LaSalle's Supposed Discovery of the Ohio River

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During the many years in which historians have attempted to identify the discoverer of the Ohio River, the available evidence has led such scholars as Pierre Margry, Henri Harrisse, Francis Parkman, Reuben Thwaites, and Jacob Dunn to believe that Robert Cavelier de la Salle was the first white man to see the stream. Even though more recently Charles Hanna, Marc de Villiers du Terrage, Clarence Alvord, and Jean Delanglez tend to think that LaSalle did not find or explore the Ohio, nevertheless his claim of priority still has a few supporters, among them George Wrong and Beverley Bond.<sup>1</sup> As one might deduce from the fact that a controversy exists, the evidence which relates to the supposed discovery is not at all clear. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss briefly the pertinent documents in order to explain the bases for the differences of opinion.

LaSalle, who reached the New World sometime in 1667<sup>2</sup> after he had left the Jesuit order in France, settled near Montreal at LaChine.<sup>3</sup> Soon thereafter he heard about the exist-

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<sup>1</sup> For the opinions of these historians about LaSalle's possible explorations, see the following: Pierre Margry (ed.), *Découvertes et établissements des Français dans l'ouest et dans le sud de l'Amérique septentrionale (1614-1698)*, (6 vols., Paris, 1879-1888), especially vols. I, II, and III; [Henri Harrisse], *Notes pour servir à l'histoire, à la bibliographie et à la cartographie de la Nouvelle-France et des pays adjacents, 1545-1700* (Paris, 1872), 122; Francis Parkman, *La Salle and the Discovery of the Great West* (Boston, 1927), 33; Reuben G. Thwaites (ed.), *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents* (73 vols., Cleveland, 1896-1901), LVII (1899), 315; Jacob Dunn, *Indiana, a Redemption from Slavery* (Boston and New York, 1890), 10; Charles Hanna, *The Wilderness Trail* (2 vols., New York and London, 1911), II, 87; Marc de Villiers du Terrage, *La découverte du Missouri et l'histoire de fort d'Orléans, 1673-1728* (Paris, 1925), 3-14; Clarence Alvord, *The Illinois Country, 1673-1818* (Springfield, 1920), 78; Jean Delanglez, "La Salle, 1669-1673," in *Mid-America* (Chicago, 1918- ), XIX (1937), 197-216, 237-253; George Wrong, *The Rise and Fall of New France* (2 vols., New York, 1928), I, 428; Beverley Bond, Jr., *The Foundations of Ohio* (Columbus, Ohio, 1941), 65.

<sup>2</sup> Camille de Rochemonteix, *Les Jésuites et la Nouvelle-France en XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, d'après beaucoup de documents inédits* (3 vols., Paris, 1895-1896), III, 48.

<sup>3</sup> The next two paragraphs are based on the "Récit de ce qui s'est passé de plus remarquable dans le voyage de MM Dollier et Gallinée

ence of the Ohio from some Iroquois and obtained permission from the French governor, Courcelles, to go west in search of the river. His fund of information in 1669 is summed up in these words: "They [the Indians] told him that this river rose three days' journey from Sonnontouan [a Seneca village] and that after a month's travel one found the Honniasontkeronons and the Chiouanons, and that after passing the latter and a great cataract or waterfall which is in this river, one found the Outagame and the country of the Iskousogos, and finally a country so abundant in roedeer and wild cattle that they were as thick as the woods, and so great a quantity of tribes that there could be no more."<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the reports of the Indians led LaSalle to believe that if this river were followed for seven or eight months it would lead an explorer to the sea.<sup>5</sup>

At the head of a party of fourteen organized at his own expense, LaSalle joined forces with two priests, Dollier and Galinée, who were planning a missionary expedition up the St. Lawrence. The two groups traveled together until they reached the western end of Lake Ontario, when the religious members decided to go to the Ottawa country in the upper Great Lakes region. Because LaSalle of course had no desire to accompany them in that direction, the party separated into its component elements on October 1, 1669. What LaSalle's activities were after he left Dollier and Galinée is matter for conjecture, since he disappears from the recital of the expedition at this point, with an indication that he was planning to return to Montreal. But other documents exist which, in attempts to explain his subsequent whereabouts from 1669 to 1673, tell of his supposed discovery of the Ohio during those years.

One of the documents is the "Mémoire on the plan of LaSalle for the Discovery of the Western Part of North America between New France, Florida, and Mexico."<sup>6</sup> Neither its author nor date of composition has been determined; written probably about 1678, it is sometimes attributed to LaSalle

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(1669-1670)," in Margry, *Découvertes . . .*, I, 112-166, especially pp. 112-148. The journal has been translated by James H. Coyne in the Ontario Historical Society *Papers and Records* (Toronto, 1899- ), IV (1903), iii-xl, 1-89.

<sup>4</sup> Margry, *Découvertes*, I, 116.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 329-336.

himself, sometimes to the Abbé Bernou, one-time editor of the *Gazette de France* who may have wanted to be LaSalle's agent. The pertinent passage from the "Mémoire" may be translated as follows: "The sieur de la Salle, who had always been much inclined to make discoveries and to establish colonies which could be advantageous to religion and useful to France, went to Canada in 1666, and began the same year the village of LaChine, situated on the island of Montreal, beyond all the French habitations. In the year 1667 and the following, he made several journeys with much expense, in which he was the first to discover much country to the south of the great lakes, among others the great river Ohio. He followed it to a place where it falls from very high into vast marshes, at the latitude of 37 degrees, after having been enlarged by another very great river which comes from the north; and all these waters empty, according to all appearances, in the Gulf of Mexico, and make him hope to find a new communication with the sea, from which New France could some day draw very great advantages, as well as from the great lakes which occupy a part of North America."<sup>7</sup>

The second source, entitled "An Account of a Friend of the Abbé de Galinée,"<sup>8</sup> is supposedly based on a number of conversations the author had with LaSalle himself in Paris in June, 1678. The writer has been identified as Abbé Renaudot, son of the founder of the *Gazette de France* and later its editor. Estimates on the date of composition vary from 1678 to 1683. In part, the author of the account states: "Meanwhile M. de la Salle continued his way on a river which flows from the east to the west and passes to Onon-tague, then to six or seven leagues below Lake Erie, and having come to the 280th or 83rd degree of longitude, and to the 41st degree of latitude, found a cataract which falls to the west in a low, marshy country all covered with old stumps, some of which are still standing. He was then forced to land, and following a ridge which could lead him far he found some savages who told him that, very far from there, the same river which lost itself in this low, vast land reunited in a single bed. He accordingly continued his way, but since the hardship was great, 23 or 24 men whom he had led up to that time all left him one night, regained the river and

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 329-330.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 345-401.

escaped, some to New Holland, and others to New England. He then found himself alone 400 leagues from home, to which he did not fail to return, reascending the river and living from the hunt, from herbs and from what the savages whom he met on his way gave him."<sup>9</sup>

Another document which might conceivably relate to the problem is a letter written by LaSalle's niece in January, 1746, a time when the French were interested in establishing control over the headwaters of the Ohio. The letter, however, is not at all definite: "As soon as your letter was received, I sought a sure opportunity to send you the papers of M. de La Salle. There are some maps which I have added to these papers which should serve to prove that, in 1675, M. de la Salle had already made two journeys in these discoveries, since there was a map which I am sending you, by which mention is made of the place at which M. de La Salle approached the river Mississippi, another place which he names the river Colbert, in another, he takes possession of this country in the name of the king and has a cross planted, another which he names Frontenac, the river St. Lawrence in another place."<sup>10</sup>

These three records comprise the bases for positive arguments. Proceeding to arguments from the negative, a number of documents can be mentioned. In the first place, the only pertinent references to be found in the letters of the current intendant, Talon, merely indicate that LaSalle was exploring somewhere in the south, but not necessarily on this particular expedition, since they are dated in the 1670's.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, when LaSalle wanted to go to France in 1674, Frontenac wrote a letter of recommendation which praised LaSalle highly but which mentioned no discoveries.<sup>12</sup> Thirdly, LaSalle's patent of nobility, issued in March of the next year, briefly recorded his exploits as "scorning the greatest perils in order to extend our name and our empire to the end of this New World."<sup>13</sup> Another memoir on the undertaking of 1679 to 1681 in the Illinois Country merely alludes to the joint expedition: "He was the first to form the plan of these

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 377-378.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 82, 87-88, 92.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 286-287.

discoveries, which he communicated, more than fifteen years ago, to M. de Courcelles, governor, and to M. Talon, intendant of Canada, who approved it. He afterwards made several journeys in that direction, and one among others in 1669 with MM Dollier and Galinée, priests of the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice."<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the "Relation of the discoveries and of the Journeys of the Sieur de la Salle, lord and governor of Fort Frontenac," written by an unknown author at an unknown date, records LaSalle's desire to explore the southwest and to find the route to China, but it mentions no discovery of the Ohio.<sup>15</sup> And finally, when LaSalle's relatives drew up the list of his expenses for presentation to the king, they said nothing of a journey to the Ohio but contented themselves by beginning with the project in the Illinois Country in the late 1670's.<sup>16</sup>

LaSalle himself never claimed the discovery of the Ohio, at least in those of his papers which still exist; however, it must be remembered that very probably most of his records were destroyed in the various disasters which overtook him. One possible reference occurs in a letter of September 29, 1680, in which he wrote: "Moreover, even if, contrary to what we have been told and all that I can conjecture about this river [the Mississippi], it should not be navigable to the sea, this second barque which I have had begun in the Illinois country would always be very necessary to bring back the commodities of the Illinois country to Fort Frontenac *by a river which I have found*, this river being a great deal more convenient than the route by which Jolliet passed, the difficulties of which he concealed for reasons which I cannot guess.

"It is the only diagonal to conduct this trade with Canada, as you seem to wish, the expense and the risks being too great by the lakes. Moreover one could take out the hides of cattle that way, and I still persist in the sentiment that it is necessary to have them by the Gulf of Mexico, ready nevertheless to do it by this river, which I call the Baudrane. The Iroquis call it Ohio, and the Ottawa Olighincipou. . . .

"This river Baudrane rises behind Oneiout [Oneida] and after a westward course of about four hundred fifty leagues

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 285.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 435-436.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

almost always as large and larger than the Seine is before Rouen and much deeper, discharges in the river Colbert twenty to twenty-five leagues south-southwest of the mouth by which the river of the Illinois falls into this same stream. A barque could ascend this river until very far toward Tsonnontouan, and in this place one is distant only twenty to twenty-five leagues from the southern coast of Lake Ontario or Frontenac, from whence one can go in a barque to Fort Frontenac in fifteen hours of good wind, so that, by this way, only one establishment would have to be constructed at the mouth of the river of the Tsonnontouans on the shore of Lake Ontario and another on the river which I call *Baudrane* where one could feed horses and use them for transport."<sup>17</sup>

Another document, written a few days later on November 9, also contained the opinion—probably LaSalle's—that the Ohio was navigable to barques.<sup>18</sup>

In a highly confusing fragment describing the rivers and people of the new lands, apparently produced between 1682 (the year of the Mississippi journey) and 1684, LaSalle talked about the Chucagoa, the same stream which the French called the St. Louis, by which he apparently meant the present-day Ohio. Here he declared that the Ohio was one of the branches of the Chucagoa,<sup>19</sup> and then he added the significant comment: "I have not yet been able to descend it"; the reference seems to be to the Chucagoa. Later in the account he remarked that he did not know whether or not the Chucagoa fell into the Mississippi because of a split in the channel of the latter stream.<sup>20</sup> The fragment is apparently an attempt by LaSalle to prove that another large stream flowed to the southward east of the Mississippi—the Chucagoa of De Soto.

Thus a brief survey of the pertinent documents shows at once that a great many problems arise in an attempt to reconstruct the actual occurrences. In the first place, the "Mémoire" which tells about LaSalle's following the Ohio to a place where it falls "from very high" or from a great height into vast marshes might seem to refer to the falls of the

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, II, 79-81.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>19</sup> This analysis seems to be confirmed by Franquelin's map of 1684 as sketched in Reuben G. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, LXIII, frontispiece.

<sup>20</sup> Margry, *Découvertes*, II, 196-197.

Ohio at Louisville. But the falls drop only twenty-seven feet in a course of two and one-half miles,<sup>21</sup> hardly a great height. The reference to marshes might be interpreted to imply that LaSalle came down the river during flood time—but in that case the rapids would not have been noticeable, as one can judge from some of the accounts of later travelers on the Ohio.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Louisville is located at 38° 15' N, rather than at 37°; and finally, the dates in the passage are not accurate.

In considering the second passage, the account of the friend of the Abbé de Galinée, new questions arise. This recital states that LaSalle explored from the 330th degree of longitude to the 268th, and from the 55th degree of latitude to the 36th. Latitude 36 passes approximately through Nashville and Knoxville, Tennessee; 55° crosses central Alberta and Saskatchewan, cutting off James Bay from Hudson Bay. But the question of longitude is more confusing than that of latitude, for it is not known whether the measurements were made from Ferro, the westernmost island of the Canaries, or from another point. Delanglez thought that Ferro was not the prime meridian, since—according to him—it was not used as such until the eighteenth century.<sup>23</sup> Yet Erwin Raisz in his *General Cartography* specifically records that in the seventeenth century the king of France compelled all his cartographers to use Ferro;<sup>24</sup> at any rate; on Hennepin's map of 1683,<sup>25</sup> the 360th meridian clearly runs through the western Canaries. On the basis of Ferro, the territory measured by the longitude recorded above corresponds to the region from a point somewhere in the ocean east of Newfoundland westward to 110°, which passes through Montana, Wyoming, Utah and Arizona. On Hennepin's map of 1683, 330° skirts the eastern coast of Newfoundland, while 268° passes half way between the upper Mississippi and California. Whatever

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<sup>21</sup> Delanglez, "LaSalle, 1669-1673," in *Mid-America*, XIX, 213. This article was reprinted in his *Some La Salle Journeys* (Chicago, 1938), 3-39.

<sup>22</sup> Reuben G. Thwaites, *Early Western Travels* (32 vols., Cleveland, 1904-1907), X (1904), 242-243, and 43. The references occur in the journals of John Woods and Thomas Hulme.

<sup>23</sup> Delanglez, "La Salle, 1669-1673," in *Mid-America*, XIX, 241-242.

<sup>24</sup> Erwin J. Raisz, *General Cartography* (New York and London, 1938), 79.

<sup>25</sup> Hennepin's map is reproduced in Charles Karpinski, *Historical Atlas of the Great Lakes and Michigan* (Lansing, 1931), 19.

system of longitudinal measurement is used, the area involved is indeed a huge expanse for one person to explore! It is interesting to note too that the document located the falls at 280° or 283° of longitude, and the 41st degree of latitude, co-ordinates which on Hennepin's map are approximately the site of LaSalle's colony in north-central Illinois; measured from Ferro these co-ordinates would locate LaSalle in Nebraska. Another discrepancy occurs in the mention of the twenty-three or twenty-four men who deserted, for LaSalle himself had hired only about fourteen, some of whom seem to have returned to the settlements by November, 1669.<sup>26</sup>

As far as the letter of LaSalle's niece is concerned, besides the reference to two journeys nothing of importance can be determined. The maps to which she referred have disappeared and apparently were not produced by the French to reinforce their claims to the upper Ohio, a use which would almost certainly have been made of them had they proved French priority.<sup>27</sup>

The portions of LaSalle's writings which might indicate that he had discovered the Ohio are also not helpful. In the first place, when in his letter of September 29, 1680, he referred to a stream which he had found—the Ohio—he did not mention a falls or rapids, a fact which is totally at variance with the documents already discussed, wherein appear references to a high falls. Furthermore, it is not necessary to put a great deal of faith in the phrase, "which I have found," for in another letter LaSalle made a similar claim; he then proceeded to describe a river which does not exist. He wrote: "I have found a route more convenient than that of the lakes. . . ."

"The river which you have seen marked on my map of the south shore of Lake Erie toward the end, called by the Iroquois Tiotontaraeton, is indeed the passage to go to the river Ohio or Olighinsipou, which means in Iroquois and in Ottawa 'the beautiful river.' The distance from the one to the other being considerable, communication is more difficult, but about a day's journey from its mouth in Lake Erie, where it washes everywhere beautiful country within a musket-shot

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<sup>26</sup> Etienne Faillon, *Histoire de la colonie française en Canada* (3 vols., Villemarie, 1865-1866), III, 297.

<sup>27</sup> E. B. O'Callaghan (ed.), *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York* (15 vols., Albany, 1853-1887), X (1858), 243 and 293.



from its banks, there is a little lake from which issues a large brook three or four toises wide, more than a toise deep at its exit from the lake, which soon is changed into a river by juncture with a number of similar streams, which, after a course of more than a hundred leagues without rapids receives another little river which comes from nearby, that of the Miami, and five or six others as large, and then, flowing with more velocity along a mountain slope, it empties into that of the Illinois two leagues below the village and from there in the Colbert. Its name is Ouabanchi or Aramoni."<sup>28</sup> Apparently this discovery too was based on hearsay, rather than on actual exploration. The survival of such an example of downright falsification on the part of LaSalle certainly should be kept in mind in trying to evaluate his exploits elsewhere!

Secondly, in the fragment written two or more years later, while he was describing the Ohio as a branch of the Chucagoa or the present Ohio, he stated definitely: "I have not yet been able to descend it," the Chucagoa, on which the falls would have been encountered. As noted above, in this document LaSalle confessed ignorance about the lower course of the Chucagoa. Yet in so doing he certainly contradicts the definite wording of the official report of March 13 and 14, 1682, which recorded his taking possession of the Mississippi: "I, by virtue of the commission of His Majesty which I bear and which I hold now in my hand, ready to show to whomever it might concern, have taken and take possession in the name of His Majesty, of his heirs and successors of his crown, of the country of Louisiana and of all the lands . . . from the mouth of the river Saint-Louis, called Ohio, Olighinsipou and Chukagoa, and along it and of all and each of the rivers which empty therein from the east of the mouth of the River of Palms from the west, along the river Colbert, called Mississippi, and of all of the rivers which empty into it from the east side."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, three members of his exploring party of 1682—Nicholas de la Salle, Henri Tonti, and Father Zénobre Membré—specifically wrote that the stream did empty into the Mississippi; if the records have not been changed at a later date, they indicate that the travelers were aware of the fact when they went down the river, for they mentioned

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<sup>28</sup> Margry, *Découvertes*, II, 243-244.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 181-185, especially 184.

passing the mouth of the St. Louis, or Wabash, or Chicagoua, or the Ohio; they added that the river came from the country of the Iroquois, and one told of stopping at its mouth.<sup>30</sup> It is significant to note in passing that none of these men made any reference at all to a previous connection of LaSalle with the stream; and neither do they mention a split in the Mississippi's channel, as LaSalle's fragment did.

Oftentimes the deficiencies of evidence derived from documents can be supplemented by cartographical data. Unfortunately, however, existing maps pertinent to the issue do not offer much help. According to Father Delanglez, Jolliet's maps which have not been changed at a later date do not indicate that LaSalle had explored the Ohio. He thought that the maps which have been changed to indicate such a discovery, apparently in the early 1680's, are open to question. Furthermore, Delanglez pointed out that later reproductions of Jolliet's maps, made in the late 1680's, again omit reference to LaSalle on the Ohio.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand, Beverley Bond decided that the alterations on the maps support the authenticity of the supposed explorations.<sup>32</sup>

One possible solution, based on Franquelin's Map of 1684, does present itself. This map shows a stream, corresponding roughly to the Ohio, labeled St. Louis or Chuc-Agoa; into it empties another, called the Ohio or Olighin, which rises in central New York and flows southwest until it joins the Ohio approximately south of the west end of Lake Erie; however, this river is not a distortion of the Wabash, for the sketch shows another tributary approximating the course of the Indiana stream. On the basis of this map, which was drawn nearly fifteen years after the supposed discovery, it is possible to speculate that LaSalle may have crossed Lake Erie in 1669 and reached the Allegheny or some other river in northwestern Pennsylvania, which he called the Ohio. Possibly his desire for glory led him to repeat a story of his supposed discovery, using the details he had already learned from the Indians; or possibly later, in an attempt to detract from the fame of Jolliet, some of LaSalle's friends proceeded to illuminate his name by recording the rumors related

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 551 and 596, and John D. Shea, *Discovery and Exploration of the Mississippi Valley* (Redfield, New York, 1853), 167.

<sup>31</sup> Delanglez, "La Salle, 1669-1673," in *Mid-America*, XIX, 243-253.

<sup>32</sup> Bond, *The Foundations of Ohio*, 66-67.

by LaSalle as reports of discovery.<sup>33</sup> After the desertion of part of his men, LaSalle may have turned to the fur trade, for Nicholas Perrot reported seeing him together with a hunting party of five or six Frenchmen and ten or twelve Iroquois on the Ottawa River in the summer of 1670.<sup>34</sup> This hypothesis is re-enforced by documents, dated 1671 and 1672, which relate to LaSalle's purchase of merchandise,<sup>35</sup> a fact which seems to indicate that he was collecting furs somewhere. But here again one must be cautious in reaching a conclusion. In the first place, the Franquelin Map of 1684 labels a roughly sketched Maumee as the Agoussaké, while in the fragment describing rivers and peoples LaSalle clearly implied that the Agoussaké joined his so-called Ohio before that stream fell into the Saint-Louis, or present-day Ohio. And this fragment was apparently written at about the same time the map was drawn. Secondly, Perrot's testimony appears in a reminiscence written many years later, and Perrot did at times confuse dates.<sup>36</sup>

In surveying the documentary evidence so far uncovered, if one considers the difficulties raised, it is hard to reach any other conclusion but that LaSalle had no first-hand knowledge of the Ohio. The descriptions of the region are highly inaccurate, the evidence of the various documents certainly does not tally at all, and his own references betray ignorance, evident misinformation, and downright untruths. Therefore it seems reasonable that the historian might well question the authenticity of the supposed discovery until better, more exact, and more conclusive evidence is produced.

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<sup>33</sup> See discussions by Delanglez, "La Salle, 1669-1673," in *Mid-America*, XIX, *passim*, and de Villiers, *La Découverte du Missouri*, 3-18.

<sup>34</sup> Perrot's *Mémoire* is translated in Emma H. Blair, *Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi and the Great Lakes Region* (2 vols., Cleveland, 1911-1912), I, 23-272. The statement referred to appears on page 211.

<sup>35</sup> Faillon, *Histoire de la colonie française en Canada*, III, 312.

<sup>36</sup> Frances Gaither, *The Fatal River: The Life and Death of La Salle* (New York, 1931), 48-49.