

# La Salle's Fort St. Louis in Texas

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## ABSTRACT

The location of La Salle's colony in Texas, established in 1685, has been in doubt. Comparisons with a model of topographic, physiographic, and geographic data, and physical cultural remains make it evident that the Keeran site on Garcitas Creek in Victoria County (41VT4) is the site of the colony. Part of the proof lies in the presence there of a ceramic ware made in Saintonge, France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

## INTRODUCTION

The location of La Salle's colony in Texas, Fort St. Louis, long has been the subject of discussion. To commemorate the three hundredth anniversary (1985) of the establishment of the colony, this report seeks to resolve doubts about its location. Since the finding by the historian H. E. Bolton of a 1691 survey map that compared favorably with modern maps of the Matagorda Bay area, the location has been generally accepted to be somewhere in that area (Figure 1).

Bolton (1924), on July 3, 1914, boarded a train in Austin, Texas, traveled to Placedo, Texas, contacted the local people, and found a site that had on the surface "small fragments of antique blue and white porcelain." A wall 2½ feet thick enclosing an area 90 feet square was traced and, although Bolton knew and admitted that these remains probably belonged to the Spanish presidio established at La Salle's colony, he was convinced that this was the site of La Salle's colony too. This site, now known as the Keeran site, is in Victoria County on Garcitas Creek, a stream flowing into Lavaca Bay, which in turn flows into the larger Matagorda Bay (Figure 1).

Because Bolton could not prove that this was the site of La Salle's colony, other historians were not convinced of the validity of his claim. Some thought the colony probably was on Galveston Bay; some, on the Lavaca River about 8 km (5 miles) east of Garcitas Creek. Finally in 1950 excavations were carried out by the Texas Memorial Museum at the site on Garcitas Creek (Figure 2) and non-Indian artifacts were found. It is the analysis (Gilmore 1973) of the material from these excavations plus recent additional information from France, Canada, and elsewhere (Gusset 1984; Barton 1981) that makes it possible to put to rest doubts about the location of La Salle's Fort St. Louis.

In the study of the data two objectives were kept in mind: to accept or reject the hypothesis that this was the site of La Salle's Fort St. Louis, and to deter-

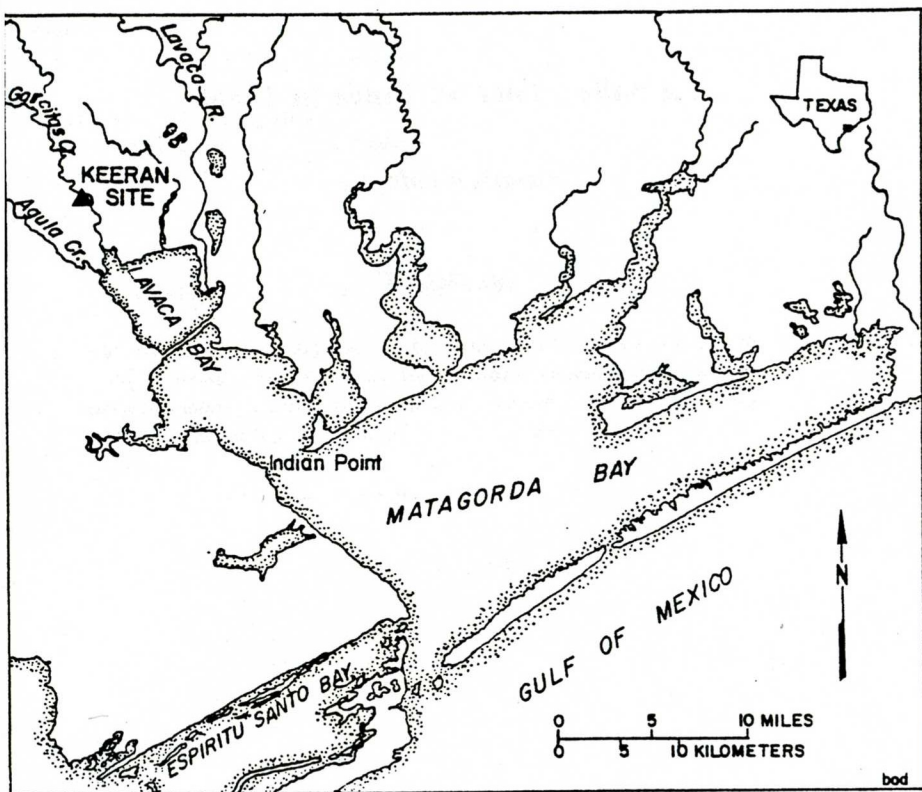


Figure 1. Map of the Matagorda Bay area of Texas showing location of the Keeran site (41VT4). Base map from AMS 1:250,000: Beeville, Bay City.

mine through study of the artifacts what materials were at the site and why they were there.

For the first and primary objective, the same method was used as had been employed in looking for the precise locations of other historical sites: the use of a conceptual model of what the site should look like in the field. To do this, four kinds of information (geographic, physiographic, topographic, and data about physical cultural remains) were gathered. For example, if La Salle's colony had indeed been on this site, what would be expected both in physical surroundings and in the ground. This information would come from research in historical documents and archeological material from sites of the same time period and cultural tradition; from a systematic analysis of each kind of information the conceptual model would be formed. Following is a historical sketch from which the conceptual model for this site was constructed.

### HISTORY OF LA SALLE'S EXPEDITION

La Salle sailed from La Rochelle, France on July 24, 1684, with four ships and about two hundred people: soldiers, tradesmen, derelicts, and women, all

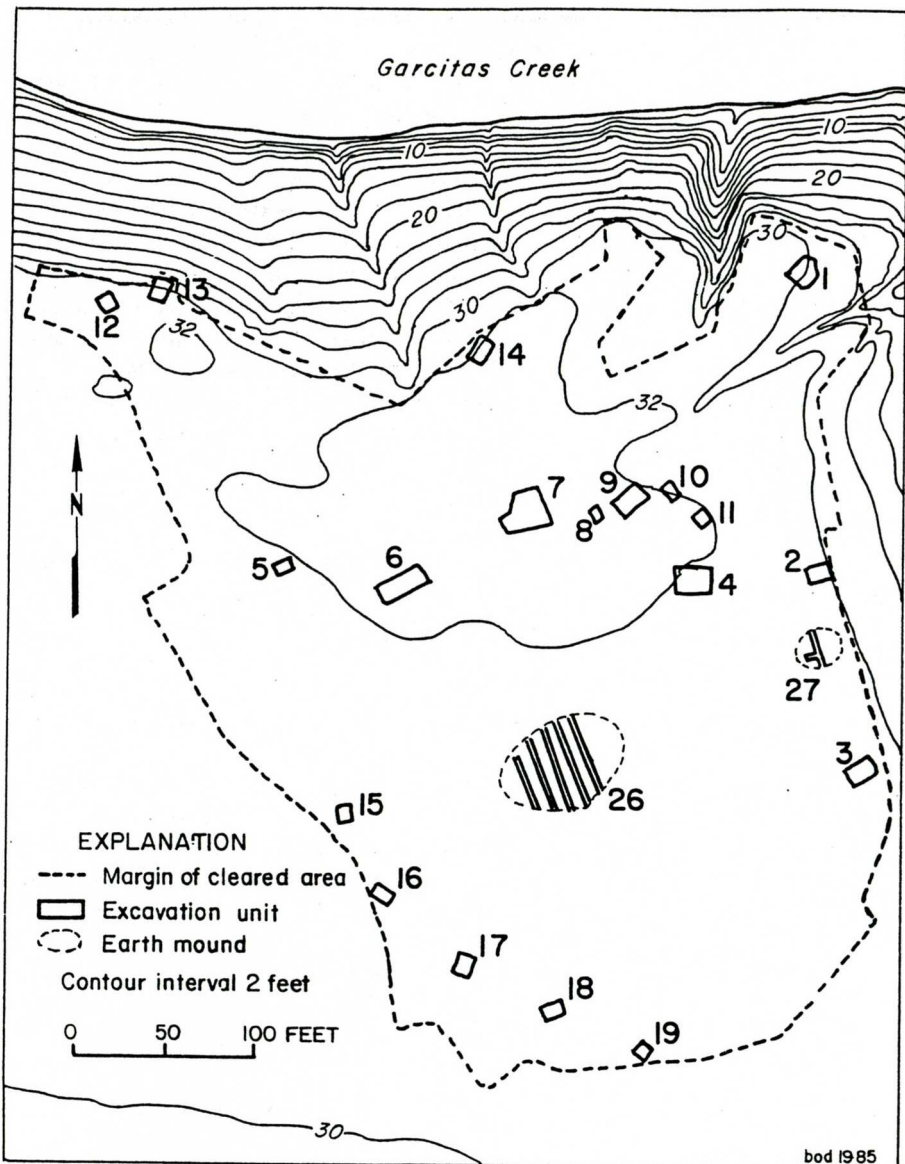


Figure 2. Topographic map showing the 1950 excavations by the Texas Memorial Museum at the Keeran site. Contour interval 2 ft. Map by Texas Memorial Museum.

sparked with enthusiasm by the romance and wealth of the exotic New World. This colony was to be established at the mouth of the Mississippi River, which, together with all the land drained by the river, had been claimed by La Salle for France when he explored the river down to its mouth in 1682. One of his supply ships, the *St. Francis*, was captured by privateers in the West Indies. After a stay in Hispaniola, the expedition, now three ships (a supply ship, a small frigate, and

an escort man-of-war), finally landed on February 20, 1685 at the mouth of a river that La Salle hoped was the Mississippi.

Upon entering the channel the supply ship ran aground and was wrecked. Some cannon had been removed to lighten the load and other material was salvaged, but this ship had contained most of the supplies for the colony: the forge, mill, colonists' possessions, cannon balls, and most of the medicines. The people, all of whom were saved, gathered with the salvaged material on the shore not far from the entrance to the bay (Joutel 1962:49). With both supply ships lost, a large supply of goods would not be expected at the settlement.

La Salle then set out to explore the area to find the mouth of the Mississippi River and a place for a settlement. He found a spot on a small hill, 2 leagues (about 8 km, or 5 miles, using 2.6 miles as equivalent to 1 league) up the smallest river that flowed into the bay from the northwest. La Salle's personal ship, the small frigate *Belle*, because of a sand bar, could not anchor near the settlement. A depot was set up opposite the bar so material could be carried in the *Belle* from the original camp to the depot camp, from which it was then transported to the settlement in canoes. (A memorial statue of La Salle now stands at Indian Point near the site of the depot camp at the entrance to Lavaca Bay.) Canoes were scarce; some were appropriated from the Indians to their great displeasure.

It has been confirmed that the settlement was on a rise, 2 leagues (ca. 8 km, or 5 miles) up the smallest river draining into the bay from the northwest.

One house at the settlement was built of timbers obtained—at great sacrifice—about a league (about 4 km, or 2.6 miles) upcountry. A house next to the first was built of salvaged ship timbers.

While La Salle was exploring the region in search of the Mississippi, the *Belle*, which was at anchor awaiting his return, was blown across the bay and grounded. According to La Salle's brother Jean Cavelier (Delanglez 1938), "all boxes, clothing, papers, utensils, linen, plates, and dishes" belonging to La Salle and the people of his company were on board. Most of La Salle's belongings were salvaged, together with some swivel guns and rigging.

Two more buildings were built: a chapel made of stakes driven into the ground and "a sort of separate building" of logs plastered with clay mixed with earth and thatched with reeds. A palisade around the settlement was started. Gardens were planted with chicory, melons, pumpkins, cotton, celery, and asparagus, but rabbits and rats ate the tender shoots, and an alligator devoured what remained (Joutel 1962:70).

Near the settlement was a marsh where fish and birds were found, among them turkeys, partridges, a bird they called the *great gullet* (pelican), and one with pale red feathers they called *spatula* because of the shape of its beak (undoubtedly a roseate spoonbill). Rattlesnakes were common, and there were large alligators in the rivers. Both live oak and deciduous trees grew there and also a plant whose leaves they described as *like rackets and full of prickles* (prickly pear cactus). Other plants, harsh and sharp pointed, with *leaves like gutters*, were probably Spanish daggers.

So it is clear that the site of La Salle's settlement should be found in an area where pelicans, roseate spoonbills, turkeys, partridges, rattlesnakes, and large alligators existed, and there were growing in the vicinity live oak trees, prickly pear cactus, and a plant similar to if not the Spanish dagger.

La Salle became convinced at last that he was not at the mouth of the Mississippi and, since the wreck of the *Belle* made communicating by sea impossible, the only alternative he had was to return to France for help, overland by way of the Illinois country and Canada. On January 12, 1687, almost two years after landing, only 37 of the 200 or more people who had landed were left; 17 people set out on the journey, leaving in the settlement 20 people, 70 or 75 swine, 18 or 20 hens, some casks of meal, powder, ball, and eight pieces of cannon without any bullets (Joutel 1962: 84).

On March 20, 1687 La Salle and others were killed by members of their own party, leaving 15 survivors from the 17 who set out on January 12. Six of the 17 eventually returned to France and 9 were captured by the Spaniards (Wedel 1973).

From the time of the capture of the supply ship *St. Francis* in the West Indies, the Spaniards had known of plans for the French colony, and many expeditions had been sent by land and by sea to search for it. A land expedition headed by Alonso de León came upon the French settlement on April 22, 1689 (León 1909) and found it sacked. It was littered with broken chests, bottle cases, and furniture, about 200 torn and scattered books (in French), and gun stocks without locks or barrels. They found and buried three bodies; no living creatures were found. They counted six houses (Figure 3): nearest the arroyo (Garcitas Creek) at the north edge of the settlement was a house of four rooms built of ship's timbers; near this, a one-room house; toward the south, two more houses; and toward the west, two more. A small hut faced the arroyo. Eight iron cannon and three old swivel guns were there. They buried the cannon and one swivel gun and carried off two swivels, together with the other iron they found (Bolton 1959: 398–399). They drew a plan of the site (Figure 3), and one of the soldiers composed a poem of lament (León 1909: 336).

When de León learned that there were two Frenchmen living with the Indians some distance away, he sent for them, and they told about the destruction of Fort St. Louis. The two surviving Frenchmen had stayed with the Indians in East Texas after La Salle's murder and immediately after they heard that the Indians had raided the Garcita's Creek fort about three months previously, they had gone there and found it devastated. They buried 14 bodies and exploded about 100 barrels of powder.

De León himself was sent back the next year (1690) to burn the fort. While he and his men were exploring the area looking for further French activity, in the bay at the mouth of the river they saw two objects they suspected were buoys. This discovery caused consternation in Spanish colonial government circles, and a sea expedition with engineer Cárdenas aboard was sent to find and destroy the buoys, map the bay, and search for evidence of the French in the area (see

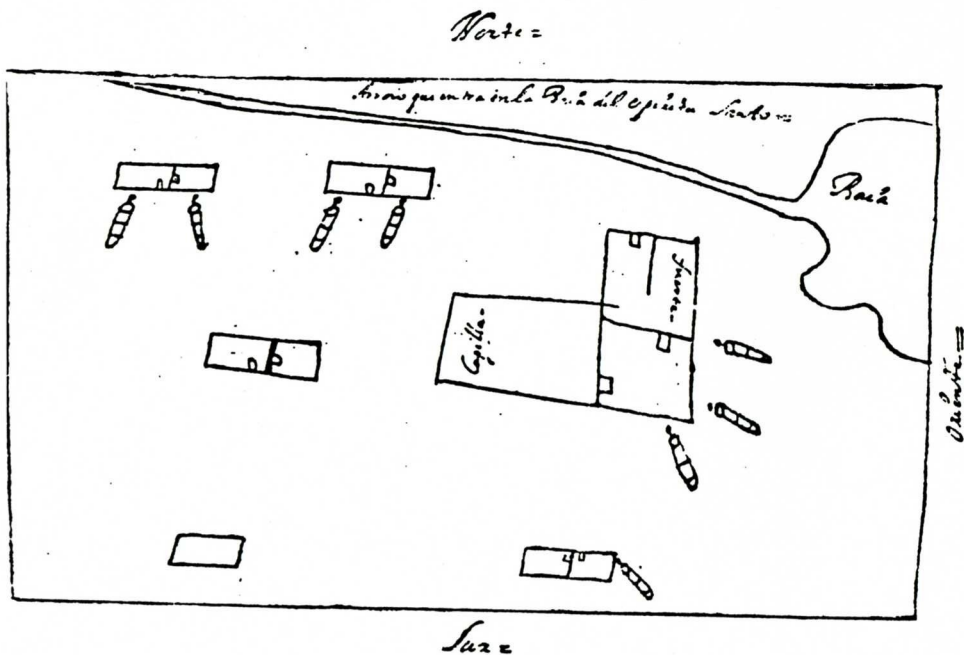


Figure 3. Sketch plan of the French settlement in 1689 (León 1909:330).

Gilmore 1973, Appendix III). The buoys proved to be logs grounded by high water, and no evidence of French activity was found.

The map made by this expedition (Figure 4) compares favorably with modern maps of the Matagorda Bay area; the route the expedition took around the bay can be traced with ease. According to the map, the river on which the Pueblo de los Franceses was located has an island at its mouth, and it enters the bay (Lavaca Bay) from slightly west of north. Another small river enters the bay to the south, and another larger river enters southeast of the Río de los Franceses.

The next spurt of Spanish activity was in response to French activity on the Red River, when the Aguayo Expedition was sent by Spanish authorities in 1722 to establish missions and presidios throughout the area. One presidio, Nuestra Señora de Loreto La Bahía, was built on the site of the French settlement. While ditches were being dug for these fortifications, "pieces of gun locks and fragments of other things used by the French were found," according to the diarist for the expedition. Lines for four bulwarks were drawn, each curtain to be 45 varas (38 meters, or 125 ft.) long. The place where the powder had been exploded in 1689 was enclosed within the lines of the fort (Peña 1935:63-64). A mission, Espíritu Santo, was established across the same river, three-quarters of a league (3 km, or 2 miles) distant. But Presidio Loreto did not prosper as expected, and four years later, in 1726, both the presidio and the mission were moved farther inland.



Figure 4. Map showing the route of the Cárdenas-Llanos Expedition of 1691. From the J. P. Bryan Collection (24a, 1691), The University of Texas at Austin.

The similarity of the Cárdenas map to modern maps of Matagorda Bay, and the fact that the route of this expedition can be traced accurately on a modern map, demonstrate that the French colony of St. Louis was located in the Matagorda Bay area. Therefore, the model to be considered for the location of La Salle's settlement will be in the Matagorda Bay area.

### THE MODEL

Fort St. Louis was described as on a small hill 2 leagues (8 km, or 5 miles) up the smallest stream emptying into the bay that stretches northwestward. At the mouth of this river was said to be a small island. From the modern map (Figure 1) we can see that Agula Creek on the south may be smaller than Garcitas Creek but it has no island at its mouth, and the Lavaca River on the southeast has islands at its mouth, but it is the *largest* river flowing into this bay, and the Cárdenas map shows the French settlement on a river that comes into the bay at a more northerly point. Birds of many kinds, including pelicans and roseate spoonbills, inhabit the area; rattlesnakes abound and are held in great respect. The writer has seen no alligators there, but there are marshes southwest and northeast of the Keeran site. Live oaks, yucca, and prickly pears grow in the area. Therefore the topographic, geographic, and physiographic parts of the model coincide clearly with field data from the Keeran site.

Physical cultural remains, the fourth part of the model to be reconciled with the field data, are known not only from historical documents, but also from archeological information from sites of the same time period and same cultural traditions.

In this part of the model, structural remains and ceramic artifacts have been emphasized. Stylistically and technologically, ceramics are sensitive indicators of cultural traditions, and it seemed a good probability that French ceramics of the period could be isolated from those of the Spanish more effectively than could other artifacts. For the Spanish settlement there should be indications of the four bulwarks outlined by Aguayo, in addition to certain artifacts left by the Spaniards.

*Majolica ware* is Spanish-Mexican tin-enameled earthenware. *Tin-enameled earthenware* has a soft, absorbent, white to light red or buff paste, and is coated with a vitreous tin-bearing opaque glaze. The technique of manufacture was brought from Spain to Mexico soon after the conquest in the middle of the sixteenth century. Tin-enameled earthenware made in France is usually referred to as *faience*, and that made in Holland and England as *delft*. *Majolica* and *faience* can be differentiated usually by design style and technique of glaze application. *Majolica* potsherds serve as "index fossils" for Spanish Colonial sites, and a chronological sequence of design styles has been devised.

*Majolica* types for the occupation at the Keeran site should include some of those found at Spanish Colonial sites of the same period (e.g., the second location of Presidio Loreto, the Alamo, and certain sites in Florida), and among these



types would be Puebla Polychrome, San Agustín Polychrome, Puebla blue on white, and possibly Abo Polychromes. Sherds of San Luis Polychrome were found at the second location of this presidio (Loreto) and might be found here as well.

Of the 10,200 tin-enameled sherds examined, only 20 were polychrome. Some are Puebla Polychrome, and most of the blue on white majolica seem to be San Agustín plates, cups, and bowls. Although the type variety expected was not found, the types that were found do coincide with the model, confirming the Spanish occupation of this site during the first half of the eighteenth century.

For the French settlement we should find the outlines of six burned houses, five of which should contain fragments of burned daub or clay and possibly burned timbers or charcoal. These house outlines should fit the pattern on de León's map and his description, and associated artifacts should be of French origin, provided the construction and occupation of the Spanish presidio did not destroy them.

The fortress of Louisbourg in Nova Scotia was started about 1715 (Lunn 1973), Fort Michilimackinac in Michigan was occupied by the French at about the same time, and the French occupation at Santa Rosa Pensacola in Florida was in 1719 (Smith 1965). Since faience from France was found at these three sites, it would be expected at Fort St. Louis. At Louisbourg (Marwitt 1966; Barton 1981) and Michilimackinac (Miller and Stone 1970), many coarsewares or kitchenwares were found, and considering the nature of the pioneer settlement, more coarsewares than finewares probably would be found at Fort St. Louis.

As expected, in the Keeran site collection was one group of French sherds (Figure 5) of a type that, to the best of the writer's knowledge, does not occur at any other site in Texas. The interiors are covered with a white slip over which a green glaze was applied; this glaze varies from dull greenish yellow to deep grass green. The lips on these sherds have been rolled onto the exterior, making them much thicker than the bodies of the sherds. The paste is buff to pink, with red specks. At the time of the original analysis (Gilmore 1973), this ware was thought probably to have been made in France. Research carried out in both Canada and France since that time has shown definitely that the ware originated in Saintonge, France (Gusset 1984), not far from La Rochelle, which was the center of colonial trade and the port where La Salle embarked on his last adventure. Unmistakable clues to this origin are the paste, the glaze technique, and the rim treatment. A shallow bowl found at Louisbourg of similar ware, but decorated with brown dots and lines, has been dated from the late seventeenth century (Webster 1969:Figure 1), and a shallow undecorated bowl of this type is in the Tunica collection from Louisiana (Brain 1979:59). The Tunica Indians were early and long-time trading friends of the French. Examples have also been reported from Port Dauphin, Dauphin Island, Mobile Bay—primarily occupied from 1702 to 1717 (Brain 1979:59)—and Fort Michilimackinac (Miller and Stone 1970).

Great quantities of this inexpensive utility ware were exported to the New World in the seventeenth century and most of the eighteenth. Intense rivalry be-

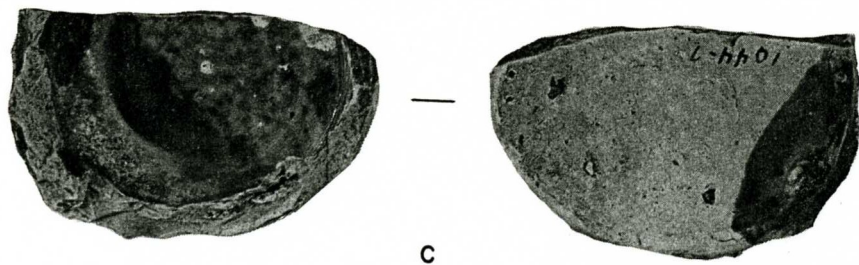
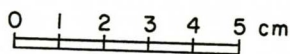
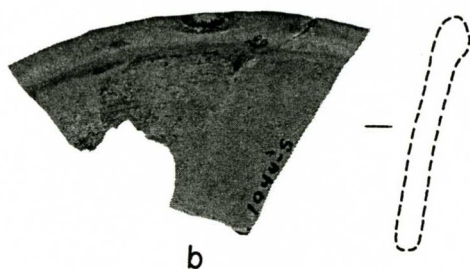
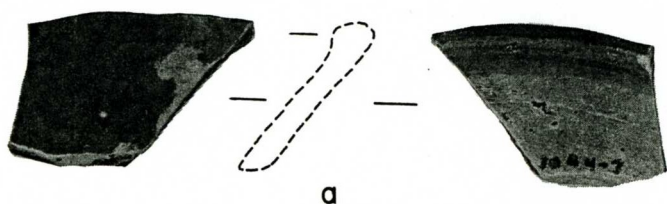


Figure 5. Photographs of green glaze ware from Fort St. Louis.

tween Spain and France would have precluded the bringing of this French ware to the site by the Spaniards. Furthermore, by 1722, when the Spanish presidio was established on this spot, both tin-enameled ware and utility wares were being produced in quantity in Mexico.

Other utility wares abound in the collection. Some undoubtedly are French, and some may have been made at the site. A scaffito sherd depicts an animal with an arrow sticking in or out (as the viewer prefers to see it), done in a technique similar to that of Louisbourg coarseware from the early eighteenth century (Webster 1969:Figure 5). A few tin-enameled sherds in the Keeran site collection may be French.

Further application of the model to the field data reveals that the 86 sherds of the green glaze ware were recovered only in excavation units 1, 5, 7, 12, 13, and 14 (Figure 2). Possible faience occurred only in units 4, 7, 12, and 13. Clay daubing in the collection in the greatest numbers came from units 1, 5, 7, and 19, and was also found at units 3, 4, 6, 12, and 26. The percentages are biased by what the excavator decided to bring in.

This clustering indicates that the French houses depicted by de León (Figure 3) were in these areas; the four-room house nearest the arroyo was in unit 14; the two houses toward the south were in units 5 and 7; the two houses toward the west, in units 13 and 12; and a small hut facing the arroyo was in unit 1.

All parts of the model are in agreement with the field data, and there are artifacts of French origin and of the time of La Salle's colony at the Keeran site on Garcitas Creek. These facts make it certain that the Keeran site was the scene of the tragic events that started 300 years ago on February 20, 1685, at the settlement at Fort St. Louis.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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