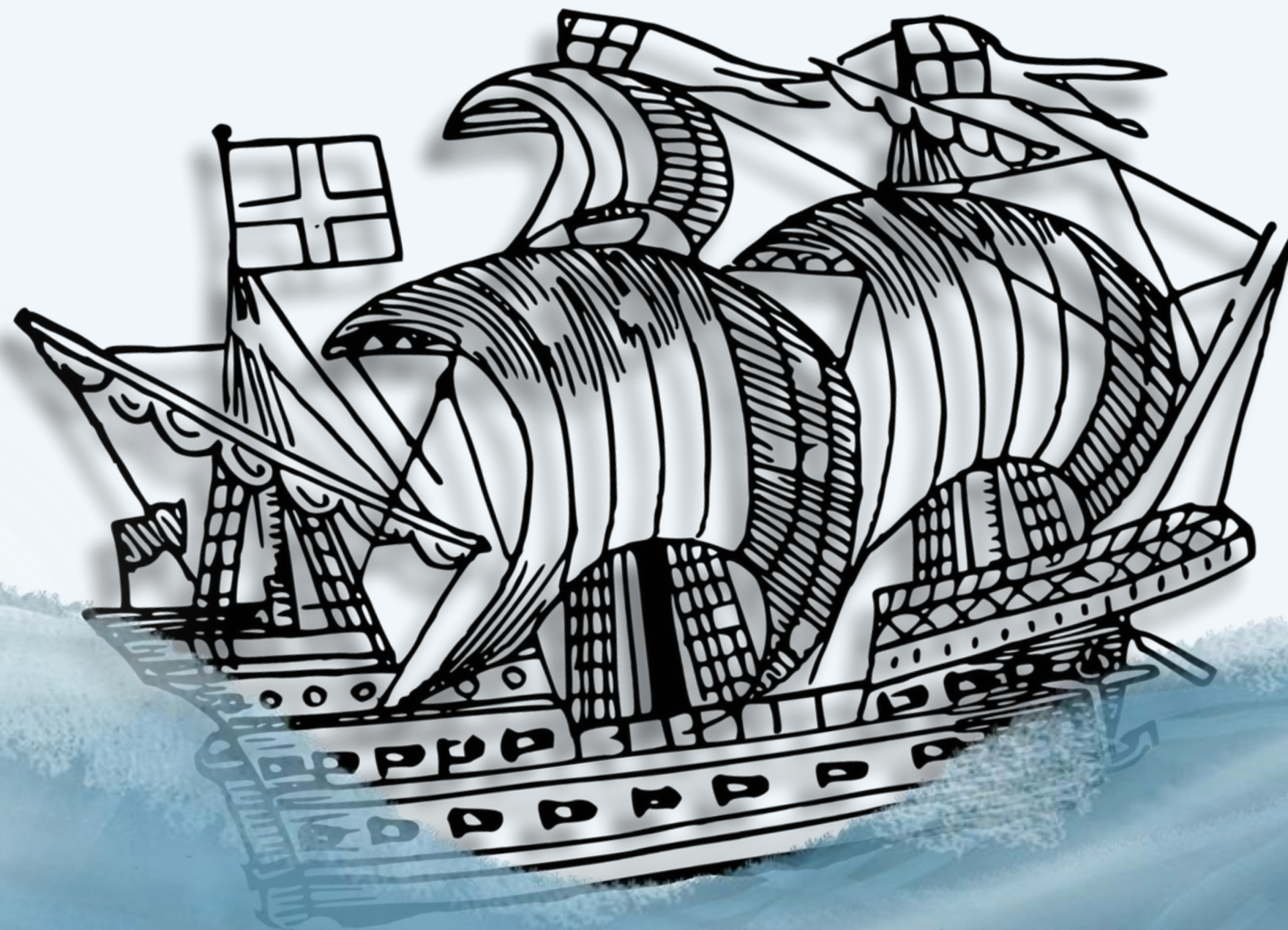


# La Salle's Epic Journey and the Discovery of the *La Belle*





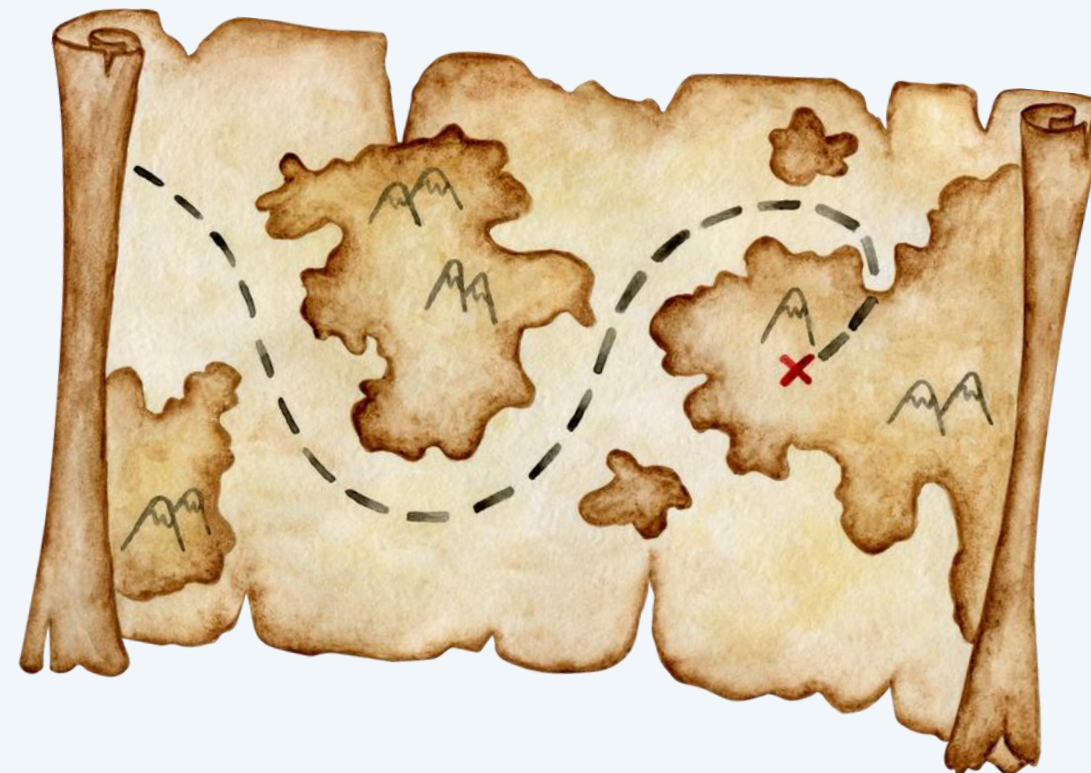
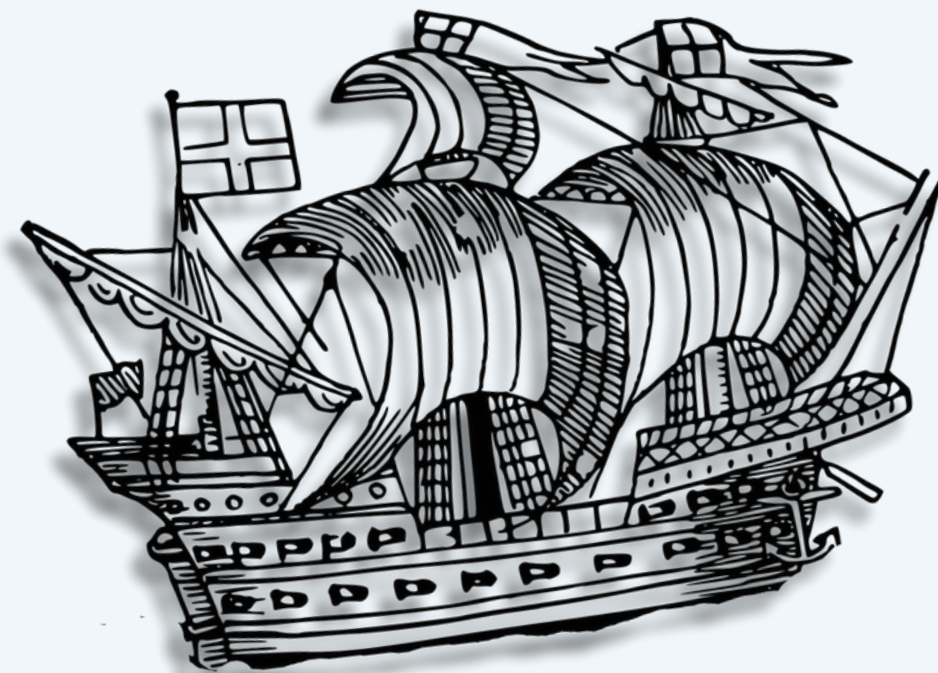


# What students will discover...



- The Discovery of the *La Belle*.
- Who was La Salle and why did he set off on the expedition?
- Journeying and sailing to the new world.

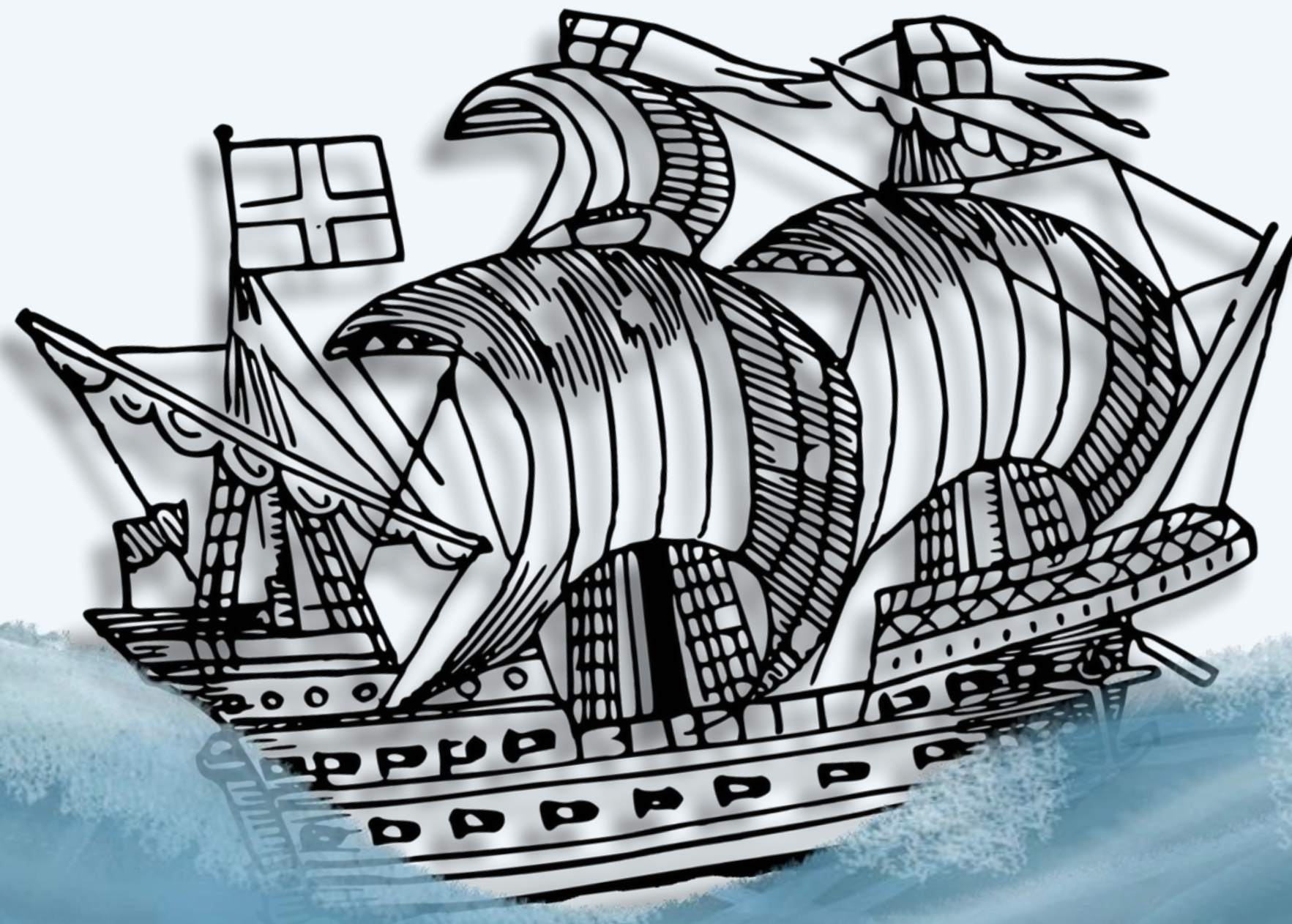
- Where did La Salle arrive and who did he meet?
- Who were the Karankawas?
- Finding the *La Belle*, a historical ship.





Lesson 1

# An Unusual Discovery in Matagorda Bay







# The Discovery

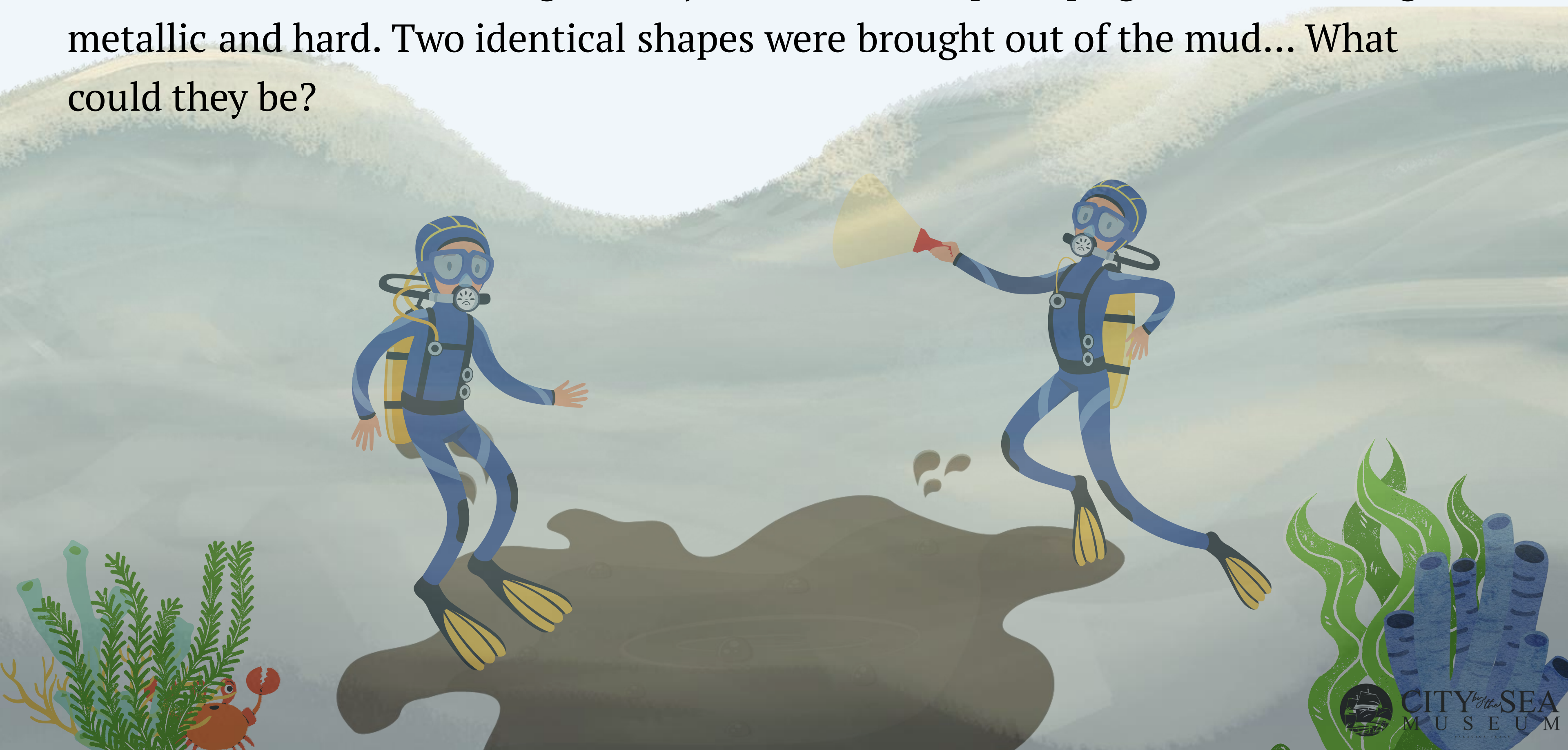
The year was 1995 when two scuba divers named Chuck Meide and Sara Keyes were swimming in Matagorda Bay - they made an amazing discovery!







The two divers swam through murky water and bumped up against something metallic and hard. Two identical shapes were brought out of the mud... What could they be?





## Lesson 1

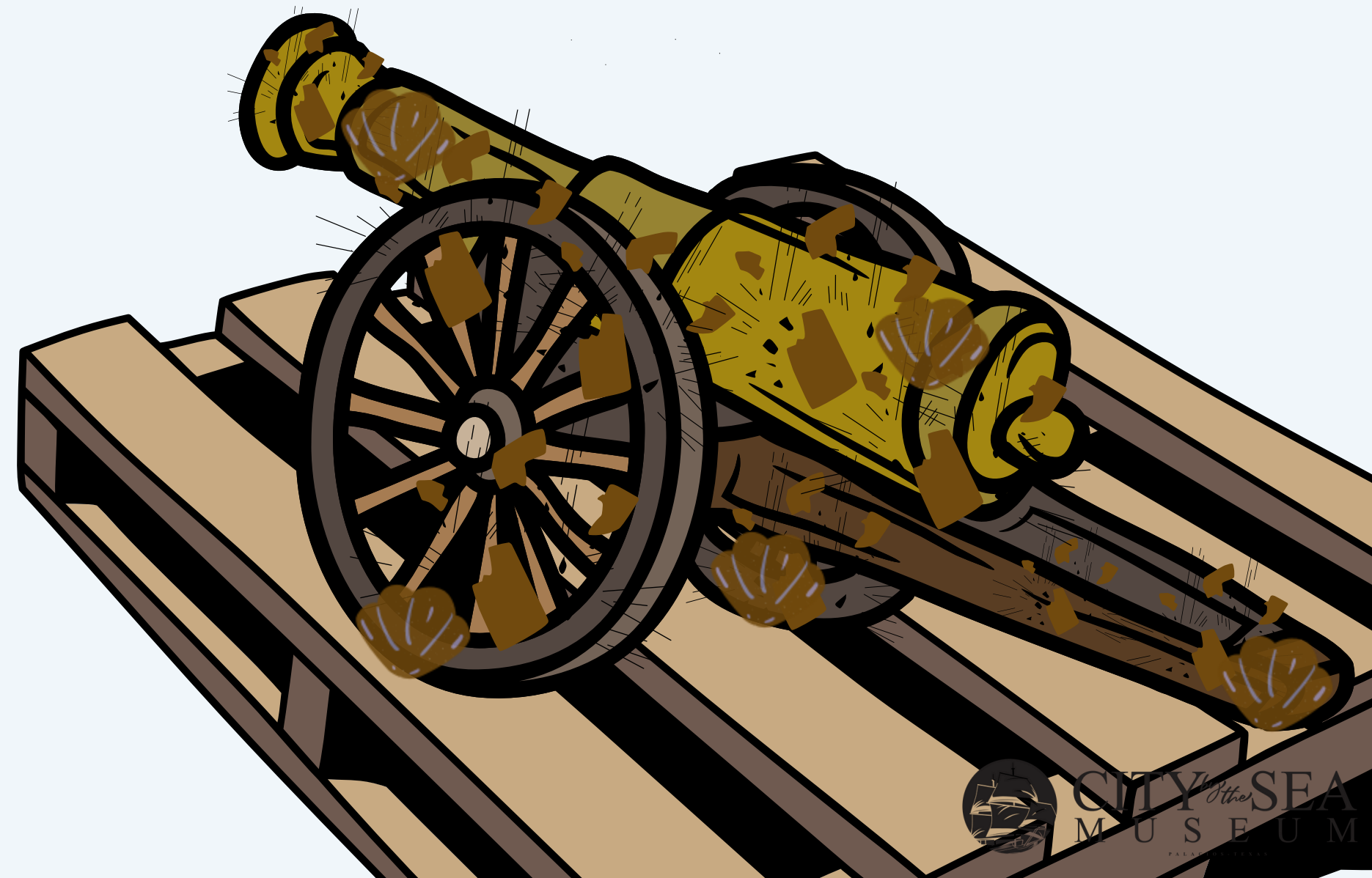
Chuck recognized the shapes were two antique cannons that belonged to the lost ship the *La Belle*! A discovery was made!





# The Recovery

794 pounds! The cannon that was excavated was a six-foot, solid bronze barrel that was covered in shells and debris. Technicians from a conservation lab in Corpus Christi, Texas cleaned the cannon and uncovered the insignia of Louis XIV of France, a 17th century ruler.





## Lesson 1

After further cleaning of the cannon, there was an engraving of crossed anchors and a scroll with the words *Le Comte de Vermandios* meaning *The Count of Vermandios*. When researchers and archeologists looked up the name, they found the person to be the Grand Admiral of the French Navy in 1683 when *La Belle* was built.

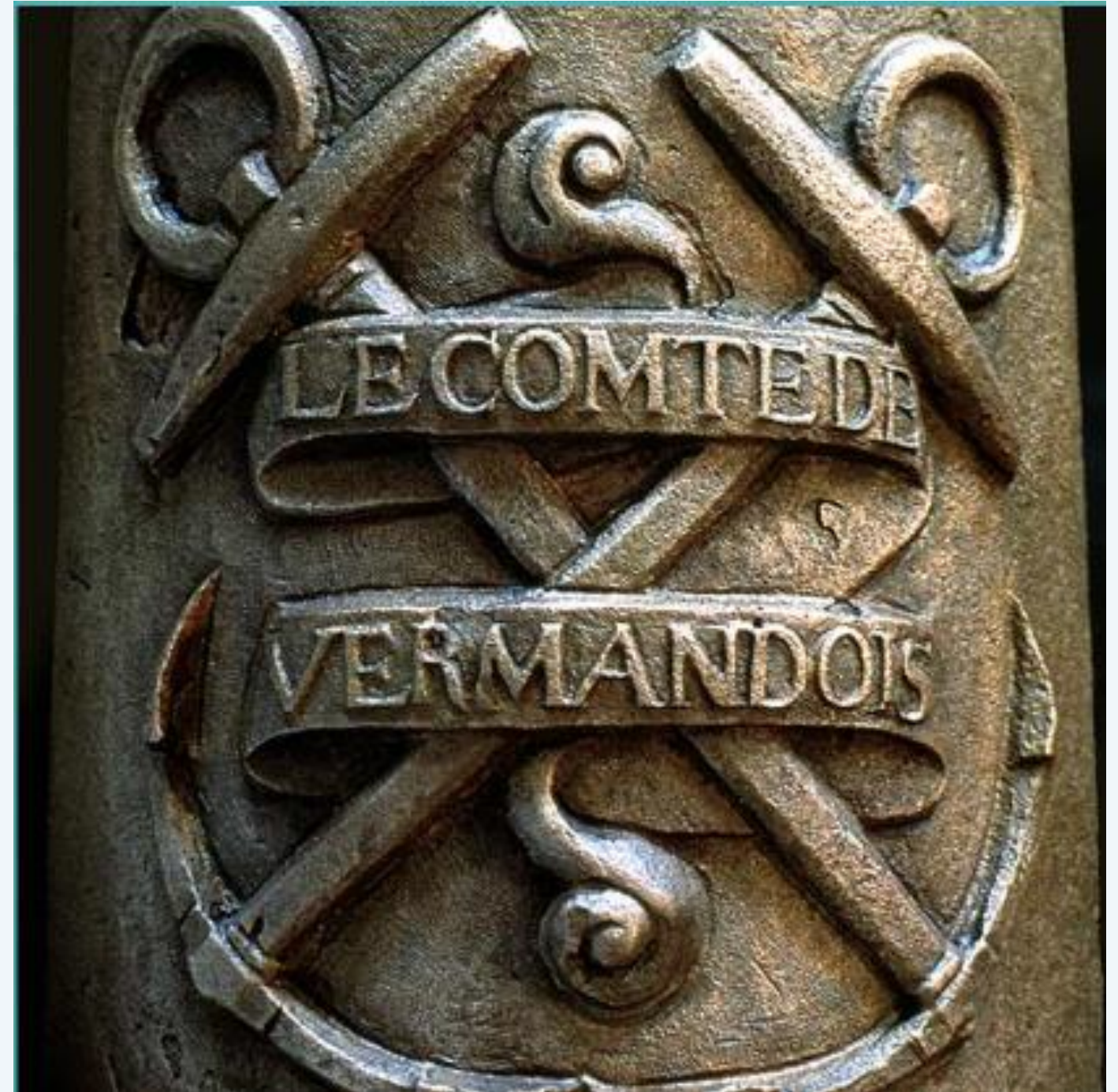


Image sourced from the Bullock Museum website





The shipwreck was only 12 feet underwater! For the next two months, the divers found plates, cups, and musket balls. Then something peeked out of the water... what could it be?







It was the top edges of a wooden ship! The archeologists tied white bouys that mapped out the outline of the ship on the surface of the water.





Lesson 1

# Pictures of the recovery from Matagorda Bay and discovered cannons from the *La Belle*.



Images from The Texas Historical Commission



Lesson 1

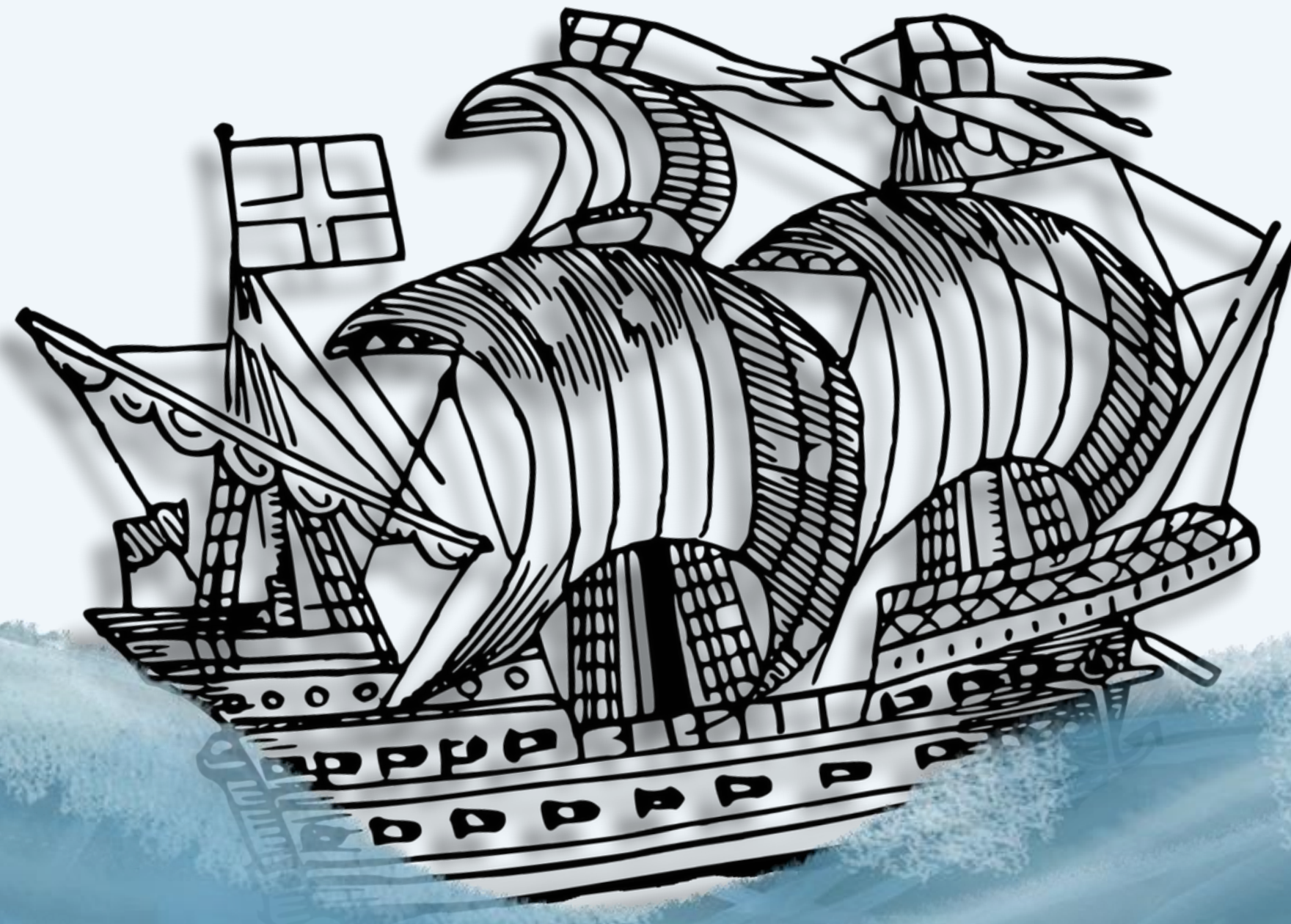
Picture of a colony kit found in the recovery of the *La Belle* from Matagorda Bay.



Pictures sourced from The Bullock Museum website



# La Salle and the Expedition





# Who was La Salle?

René Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle was a 23 year old Frenchman who was the son of a wealthy merchant. La Salle loved the pioneer life as a farmer and organizer of settlement land.

He enjoyed living in the wilderness and felt at home with fellow Indigenous neighbors.

He enjoyed the company of his Indigenous friends because they knew survival techniques and how to navigate the land.

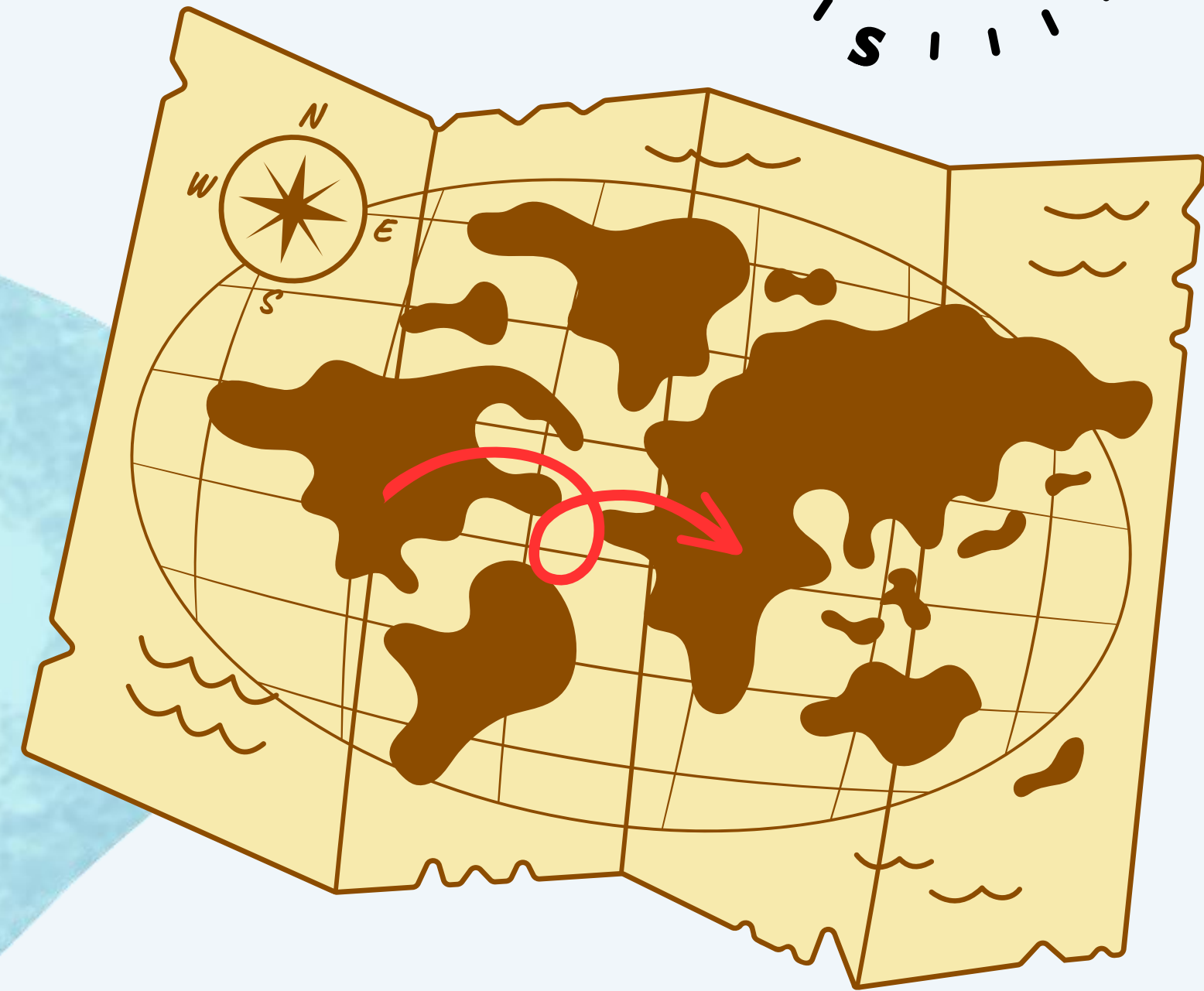




# The Expedition

La Salle did not explore much, but he was curious about a river system called the *Messipi* or Mississippi.

It was said that Europeans dreamed of finding the "Passage to the Orient," a short cut through North America to China and India. Surely the Mississippi was the river that would lead La Salle there!





# To the Mississippi

La Salle's expedition had a few set-backs, but after two years, La Salle finally reached the Mississippi River (near present day St. Charles, Missouri).

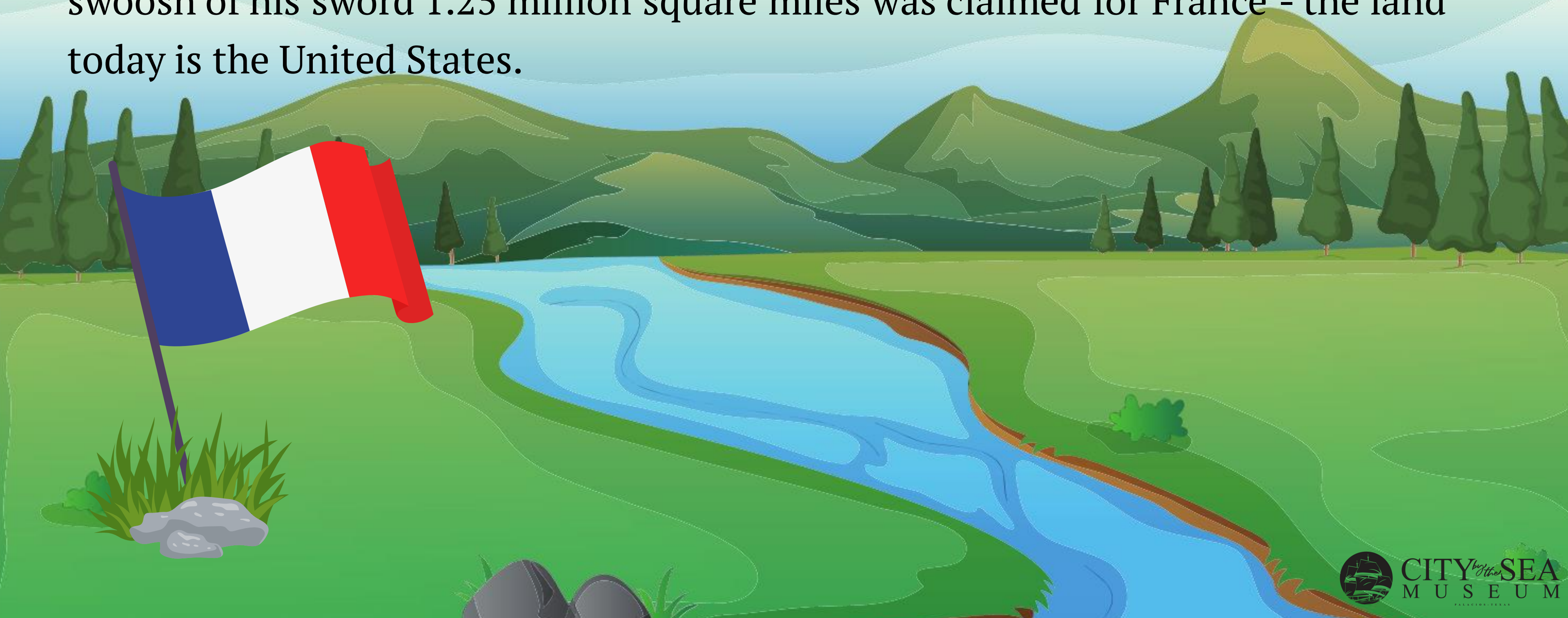
It was winter when La Salle reached the Mississippi. La Salle and his crew of men and Indigenous people sang songs and paddled to a nearby bank to camp. The travellers became friends with the local Indigenous people and celebrated their journey together.





## Lesson 2

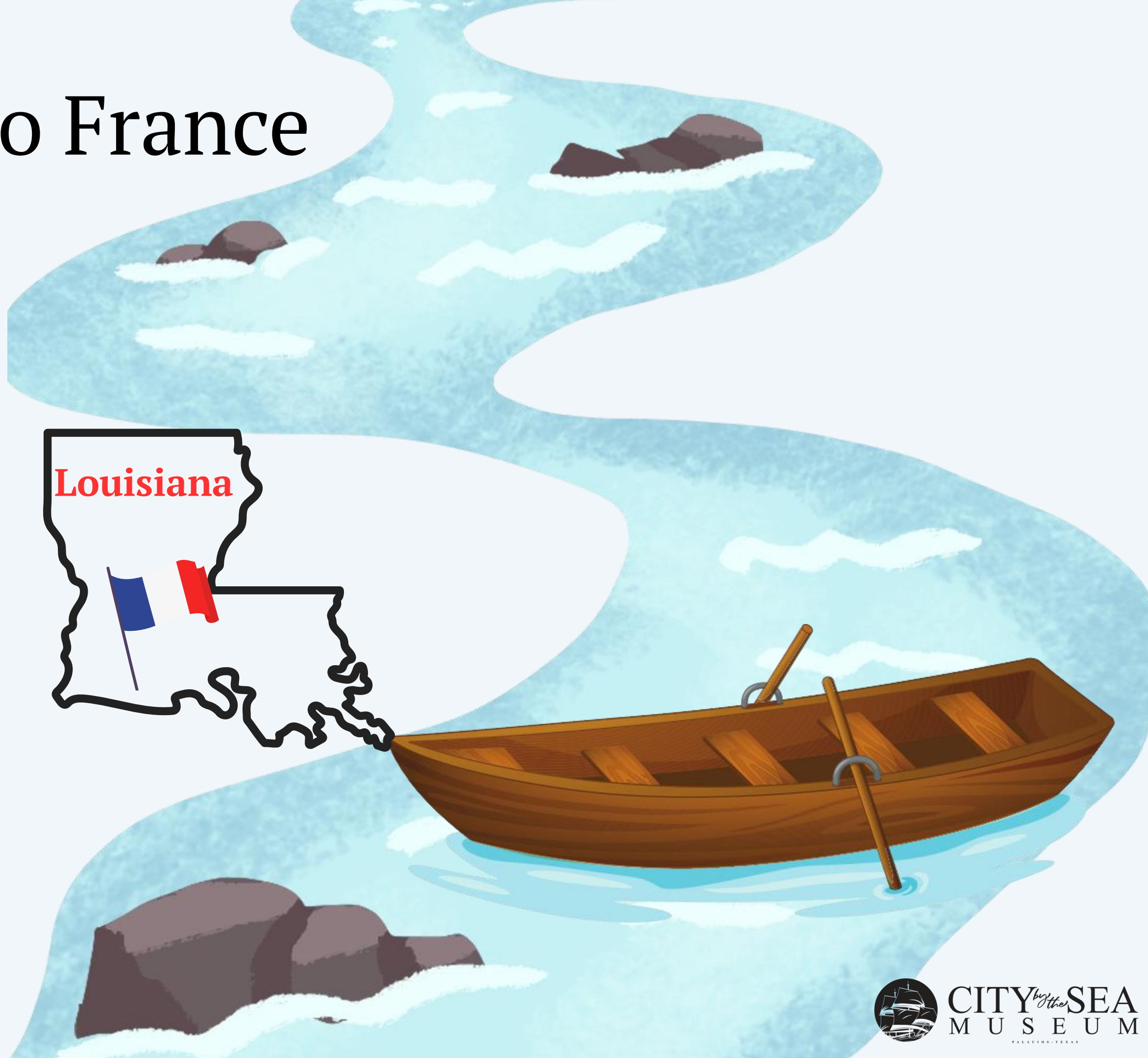
The Indigenous people watched in awe as La Salle spoke in French claiming their village for King Louis effective April 9, 1682. He claimed the lands, rivers, people, towns, villages, harbors, bays, ports, and everything else. With one proud swoosh of his sword 1.25 million square miles was claimed for France - the land today is the United States.





# La Salle Returns to France

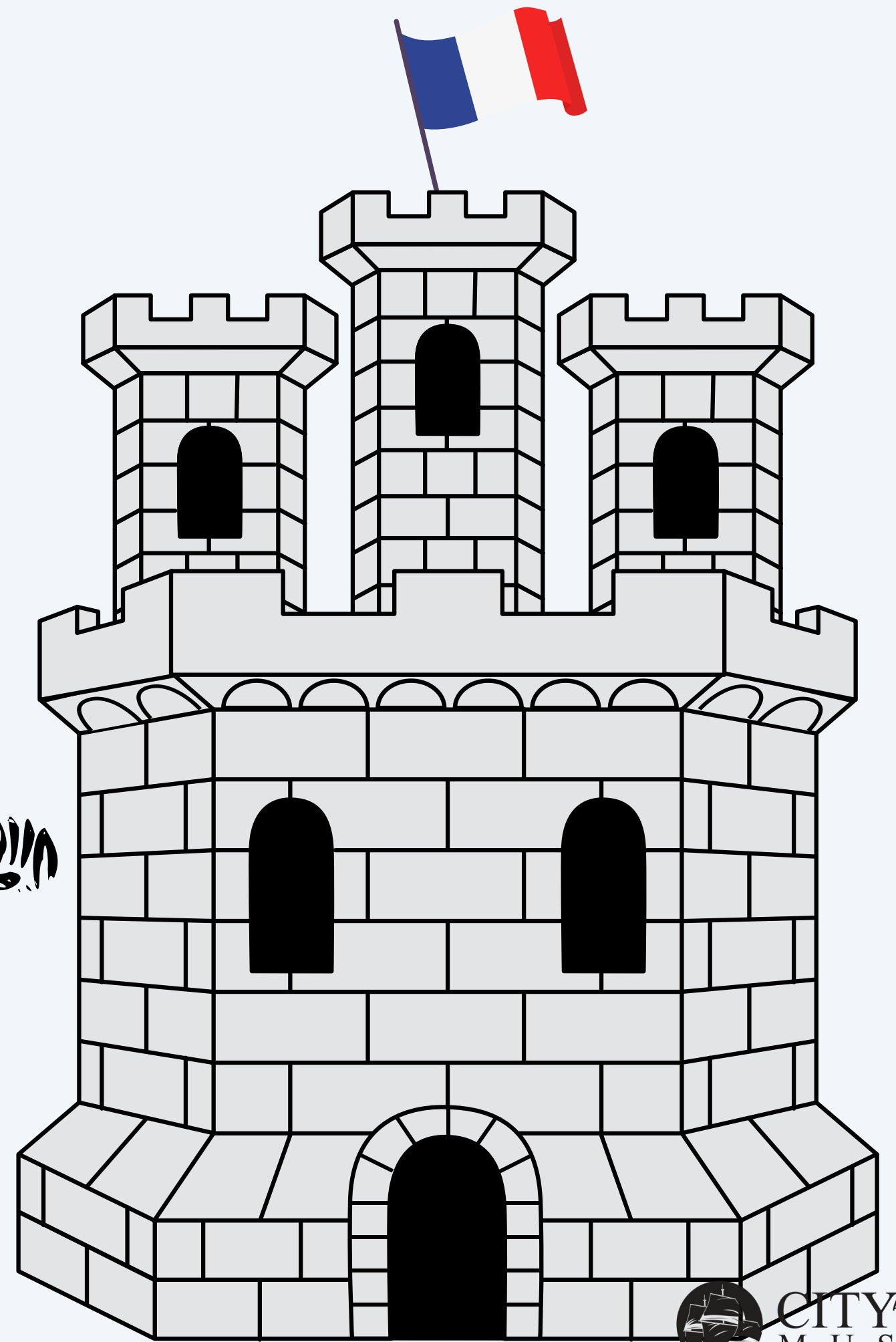
La Salle's journey home started in his canoe paddling up river. La Salle wanted to tell King Louis about the new land "Louisiana" that was claimed for him and France. La Salle hoped this new discovery would secure another expedition.





## Lesson 2

He planned to tell the King of a way to make a profit building a French fort at the mouth of the Mississippi. This would allow France to have a year-round trade center for fur trade.





The King loved the idea and agreed to fund another expedition. The King made La Salle commander of all French forces and assigned him four ships: the *Joly*, the *Aimable*, the *St. Francois*, and the *La Belle*. The *La Belle* was a personal gift from King Louis for all La Salle had done for his country.

**The  
Joly**



**The Aimable**



**The St. Francois**

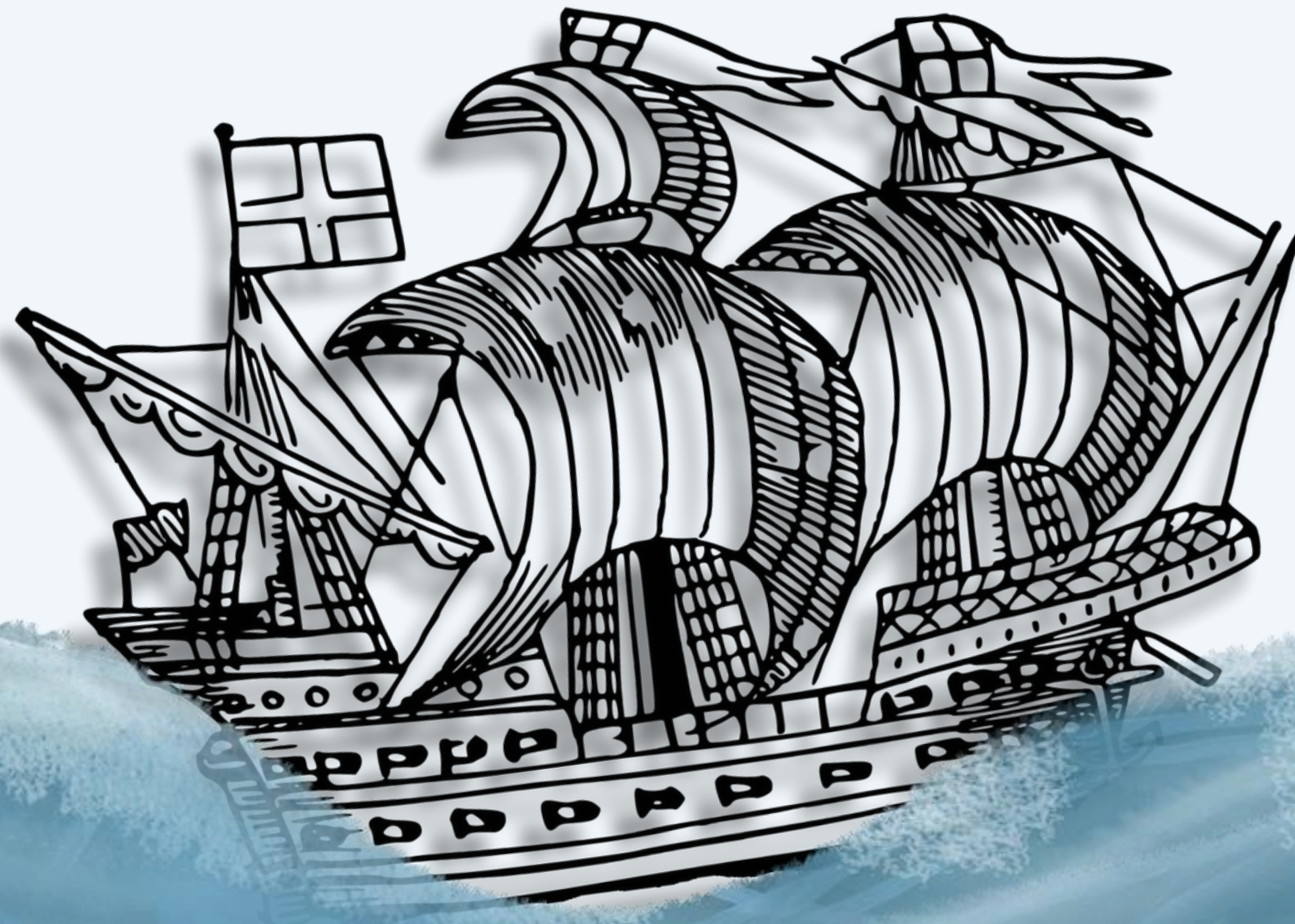


**The La Belle**





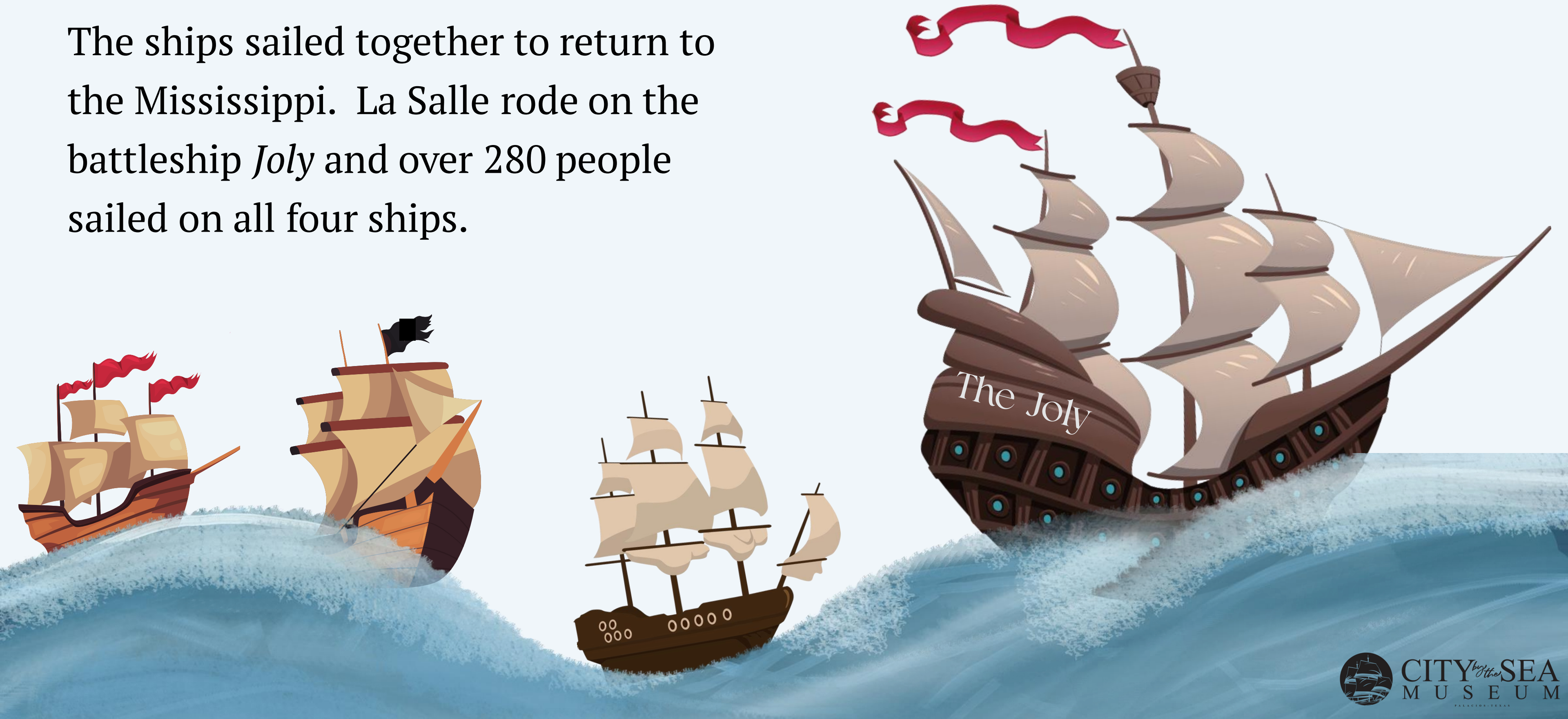
# Sailing to the New World





# La Salle's Return to the Mississippi

The ships sailed together to return to the Mississippi. La Salle rode on the battleship *Joly* and over 280 people sailed on all four ships.





There was constant ocean spray and rain on the open sea. No one could stay dry. As for *La Belle*, it was a small ship and not meant for the pounding waves of the Atlantic.





There were many challenges faced on this voyage.

Pirates captured the  
*St. Francois* ship!

Many of the crew fell sick!

A baby boy was born.



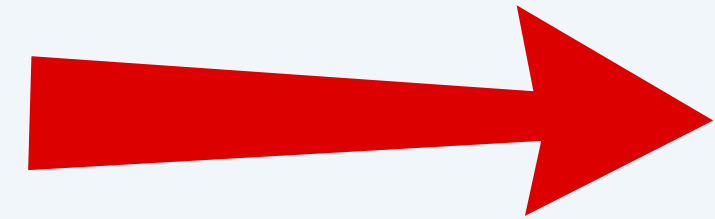


## Lesson 3

La Salle decided to ask a pirate captain for directions on sailing into the Gulf. Three days after Christmas in 1684, La Salle saw the coast. He did not know it at the time, but he was sailing the wrong direction! He had to turn right to sail to the Mississippi, but instead La Salle turned left.

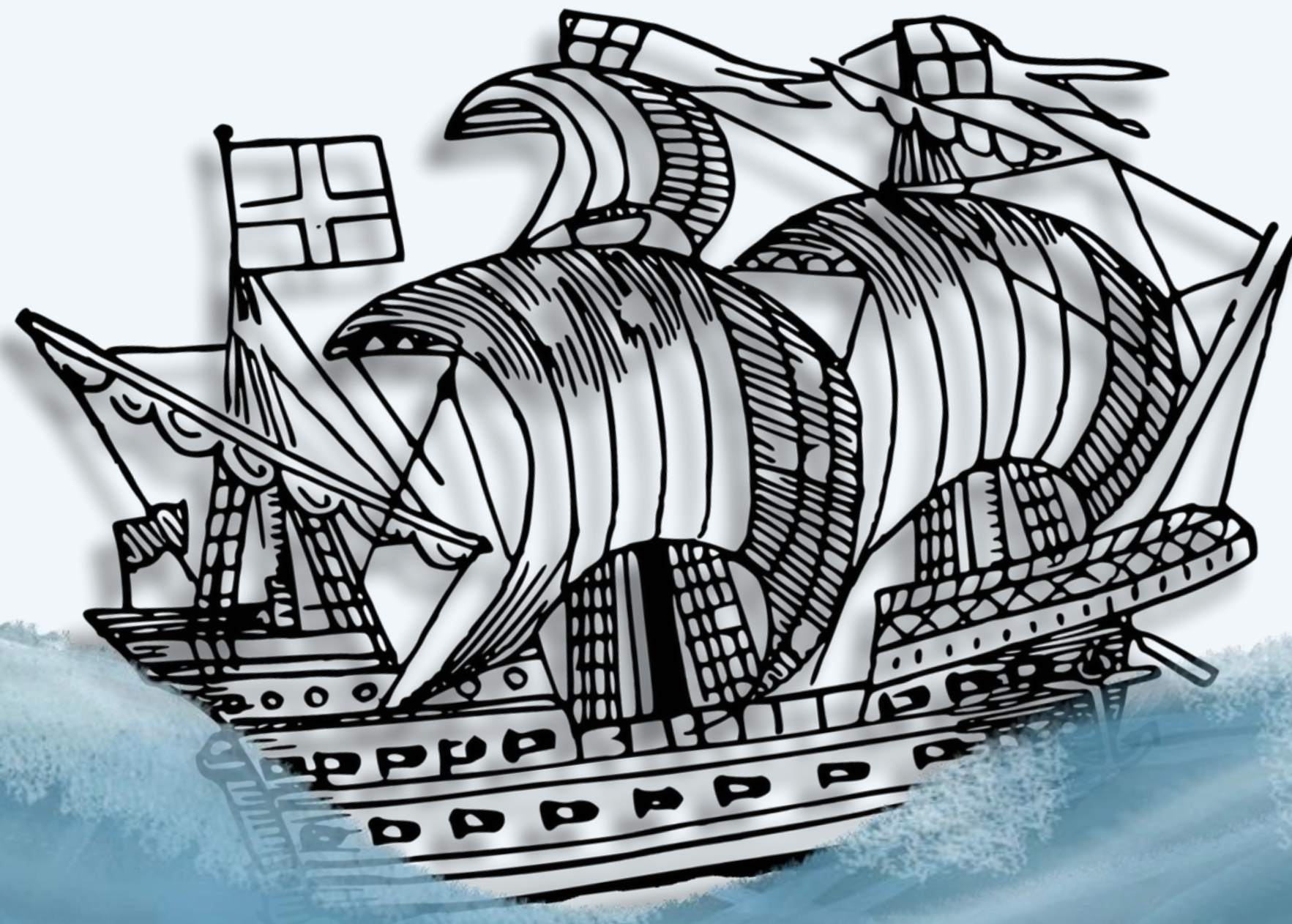


Turn Right!!





# La Salle and The Karankawas



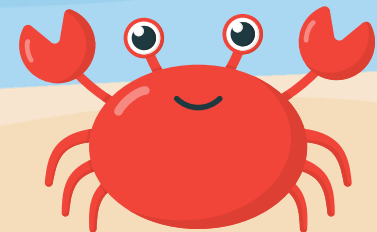


# The Texas Coast

The ships sailed down what is now the Texas coast. La Salle was sure he would see the Mississippi, but no luck. His crew became tense but then La Salle saw a body of water in the distance. La Salle thought he had reached the Mississippi, but actually it was Matagorda Bay. The Mississippi was 400 miles to the East!



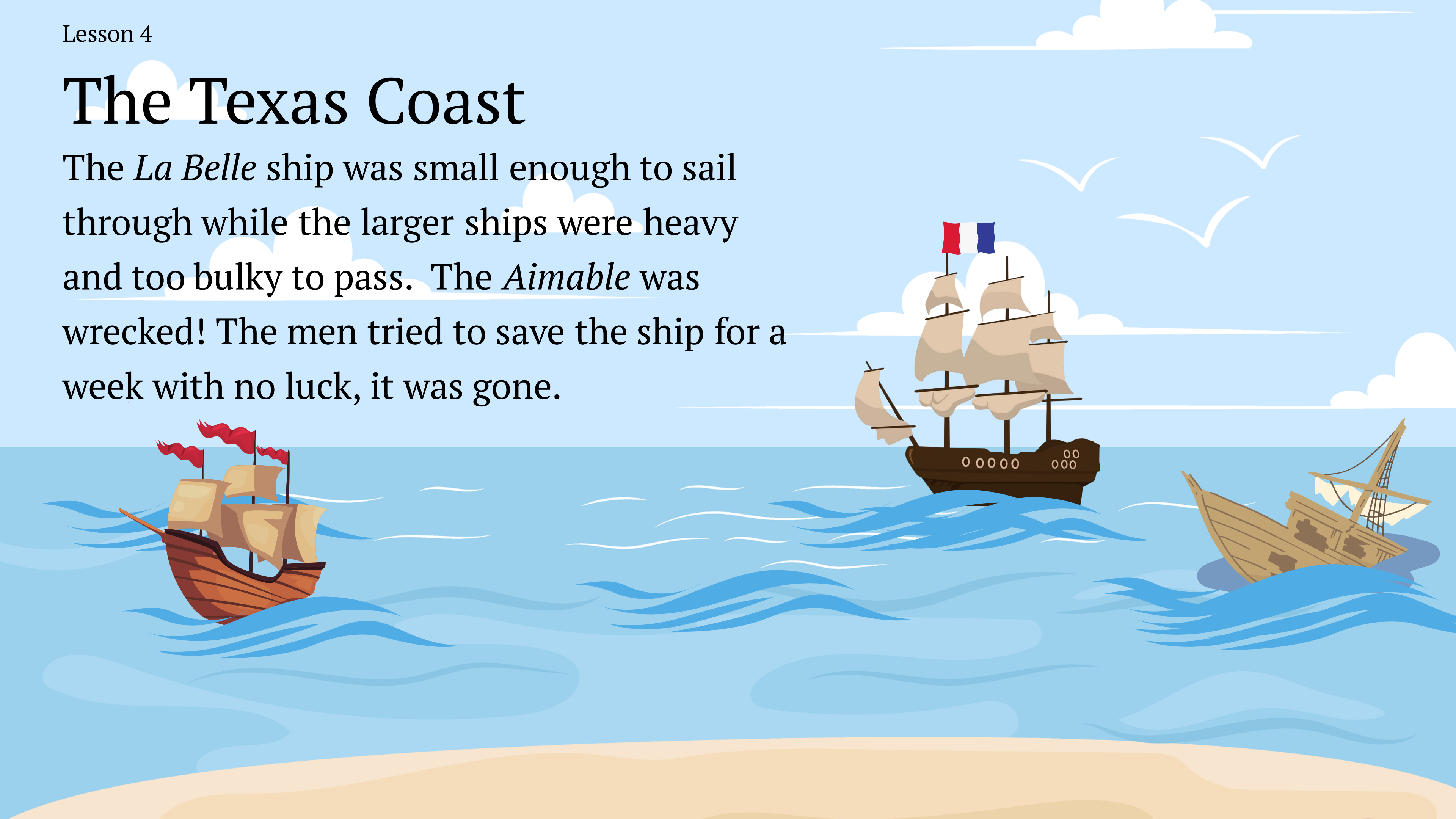
Welcome to  
Matagorda Bay!





# The Texas Coast

The *La Belle* ship was small enough to sail through while the larger ships were heavy and too bulky to pass. The *Aimable* was wrecked! The men tried to save the ship for a week with no luck, it was gone.





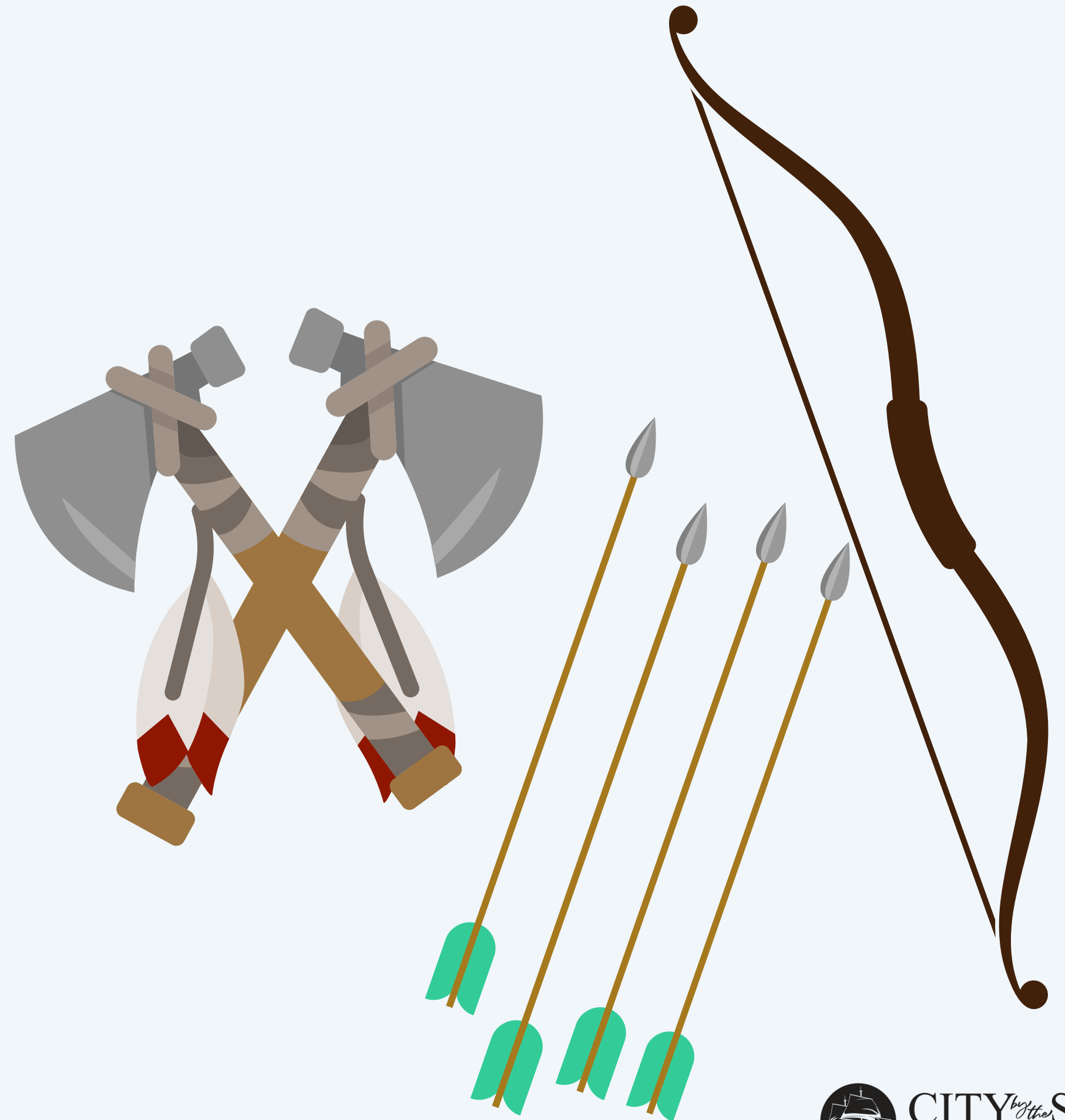
# Who were the Karankawas?





## Lesson 4

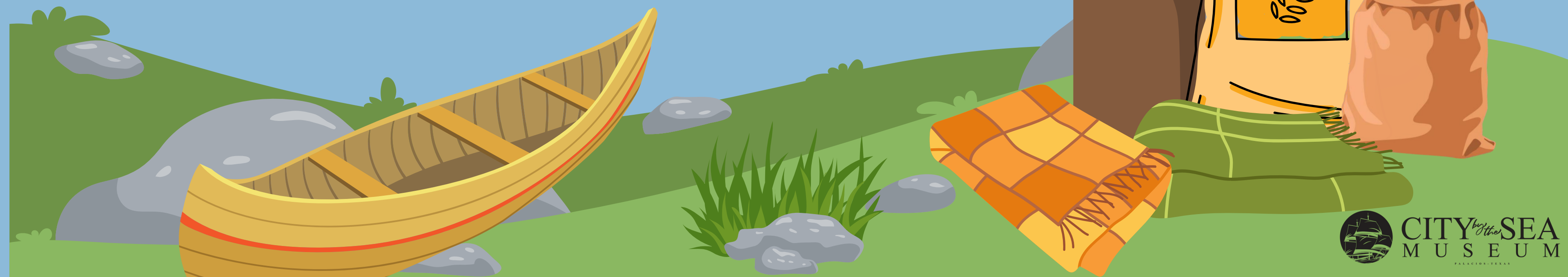
The French tried to save their cargo when they suddenly saw 100 people lined up on the land. It was the Karankawas! They were silent with tomahawks and long bows. They wore muddy animal shaped hides and had painted white faces. La Salle was in shock! He had never seen anyone like this before.



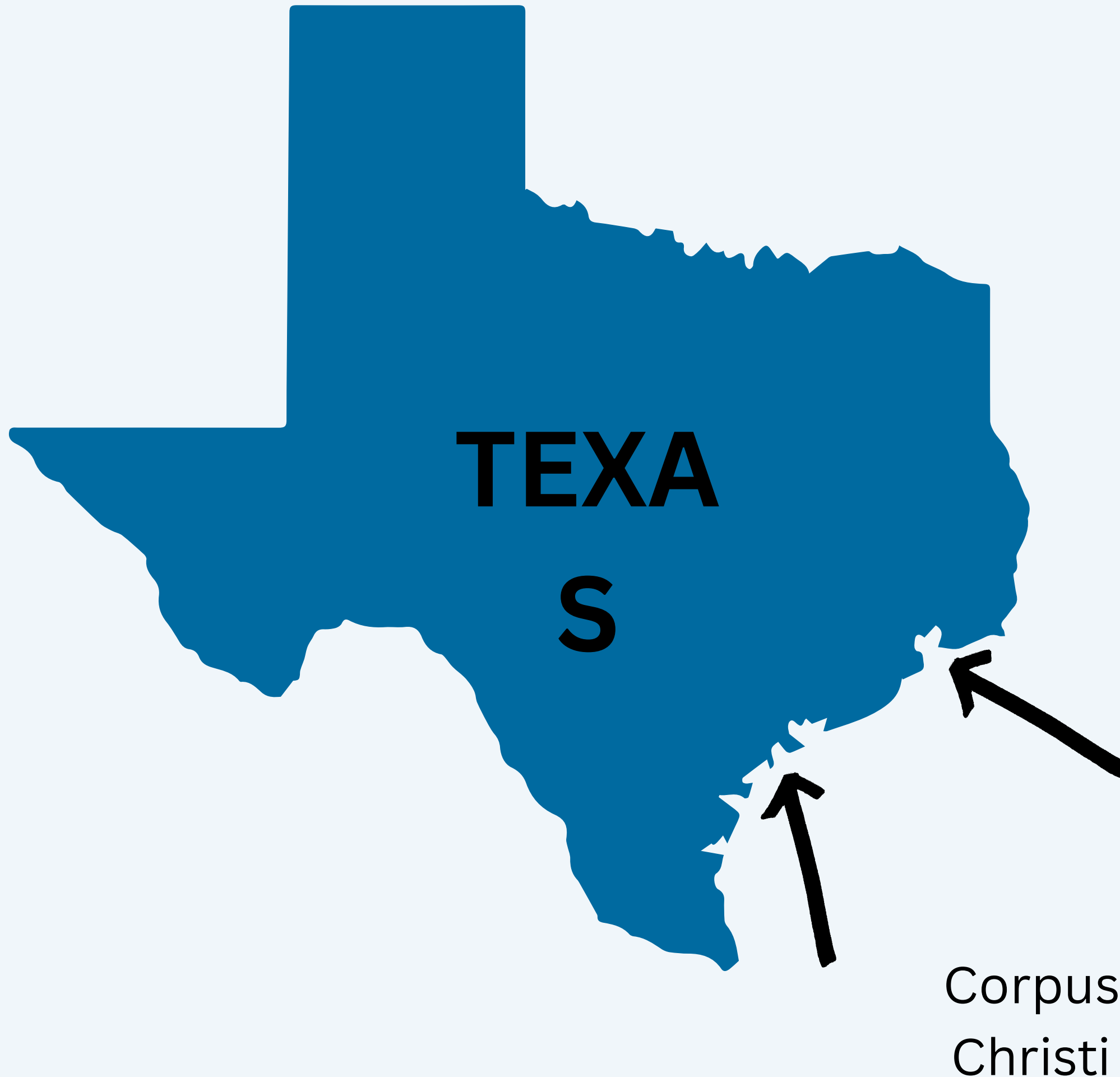


## Lesson 4

The Karankawas began looking at the cargo of the wrecked *Aimable* ship and helped themselves to blankets and goods. The French did not like that, so they took the Karankawas by surprise at their hunting camp and stole some canoes. The Karankawas retaliated by killing two crewmen in the night.





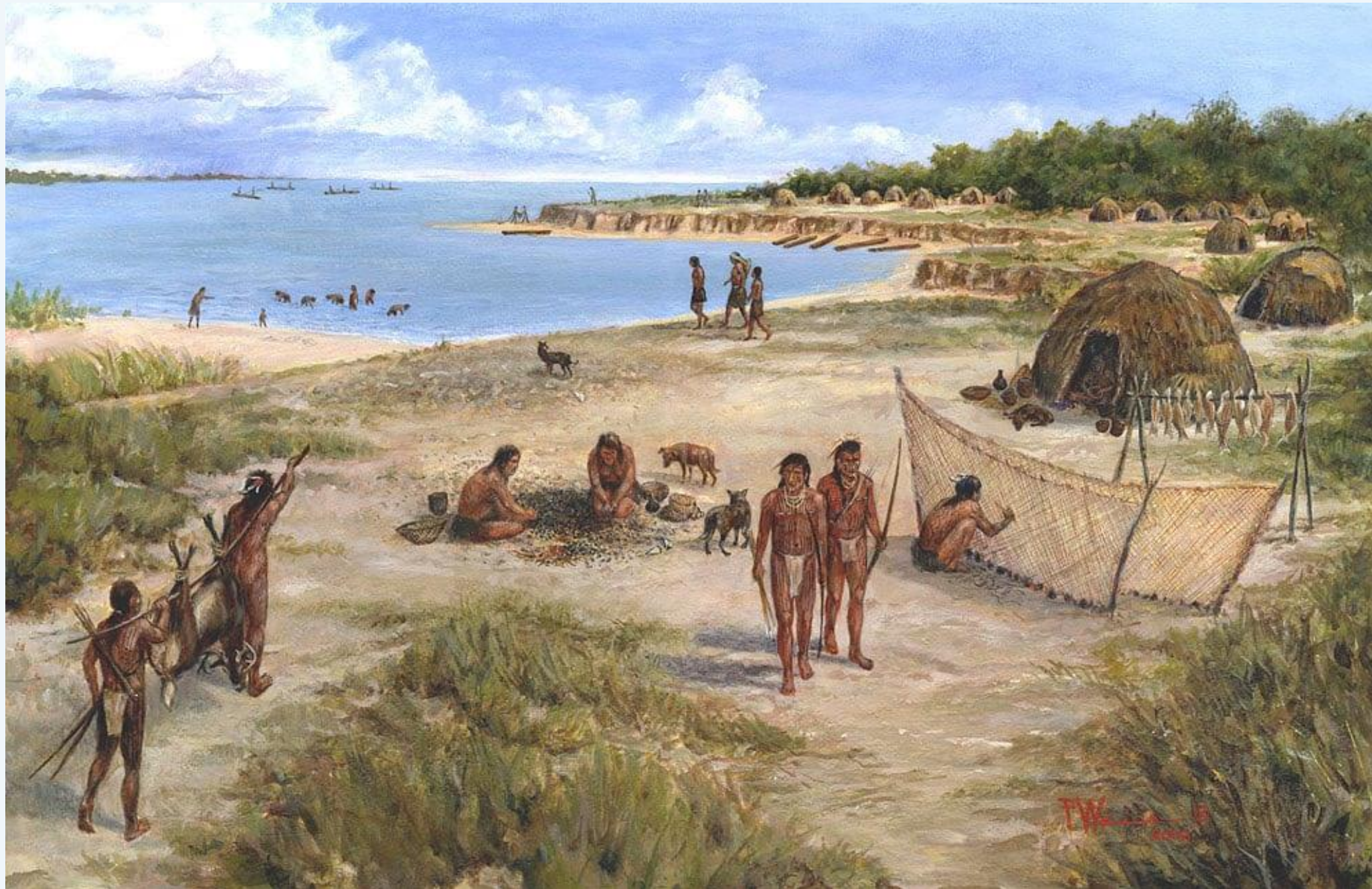


The Karankawa homelands were located along the Texas Gulf Coast from Galveston Bay to Corpus Christi. They moved around according to the seasons and availability of food.

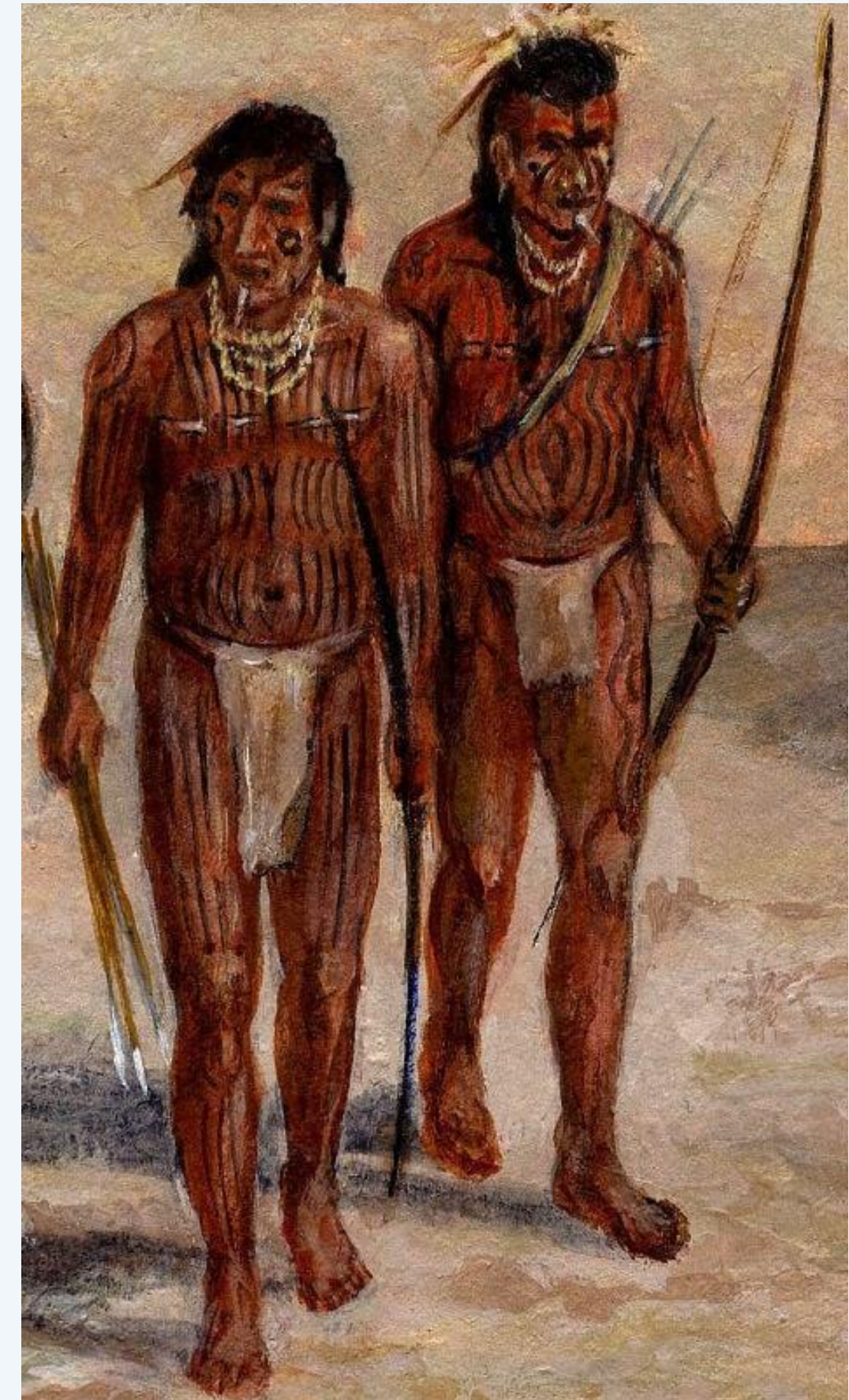


## Lesson 4

The Karankawa's homes were simple and made of palm fronds or leaf branches.



Painting, Karankawa Native Americans by Frank Weir. Courtesy of [Texas Beyond History](#). Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with [Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107](#).



Karankawa Warriors. Courtesy of [Texas Beyond History](#). Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with [Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107](#).



# La Salle Sails the Coast on *La Belle*





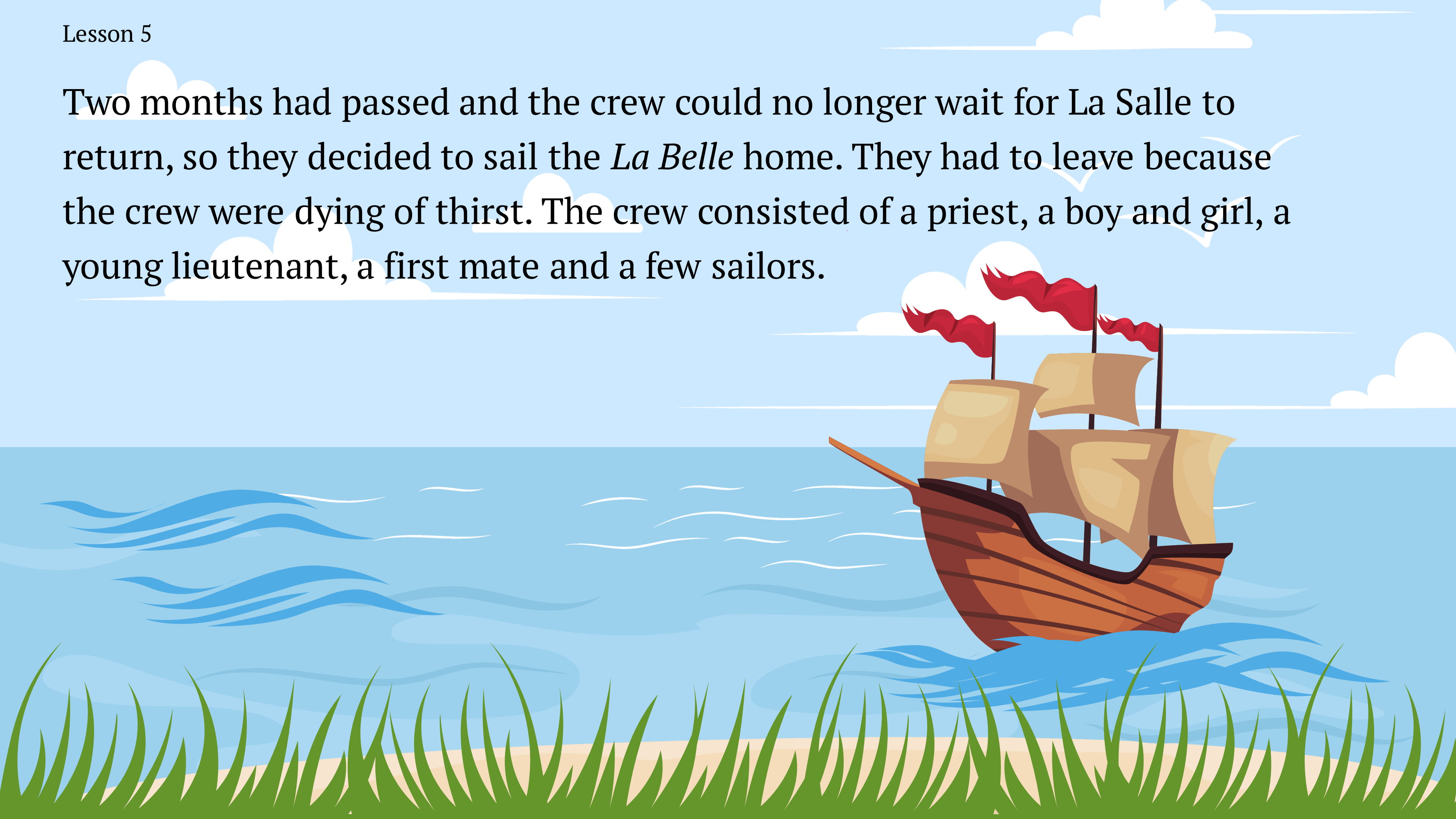
# La Salle Sails the Coast

In hopes of still finding the Mississippi, La Salle and the *La Belle* landed on the Texas Coast. La Salle decided to explore the coast with 50 of his crew. A few more of the crew decided to follow but got lost and perished. Only a few crew remained on *La Belle* waiting for La Salle to return.





Two months had passed and the crew could no longer wait for La Salle to return, so they decided to sail the *La Belle* home. They had to leave because the crew were dying of thirst. The crew consisted of a priest, a boy and girl, a young lieutenant, a first mate and a few sailors.





A few crew weighed the anchor, but the *La Belle* moved on her own by the power of the north wind. Without a Captain of the ship, the crew could not manage the rigging or the sails.

The ship picked up speed away from the mainland toward the Gulf. The priest and sailors dropped another anchor to try to stop the ship, but it did not slow down.







The *La Belle* scudded across the bay then stopped with a loud “crrrrunch”! The crew saw sand and grass only 1500 feet away.





The *La Belle's* crew reached the shore safely. For two months they lived like castaways. The crew made trips to the ship to collect blankets, barrels, and personal things.





The *La Belle* sank, and a storm knocked the ship on its side. The waves began to cover everything except the masts of the ship. The *La Belle* was gone.



# The Discovery in Matagorda Bay







# Dramatic Findings

Years later in the 1990s, a discovery was made. The dramatic findings off the Texas coast revealed the gift of a ship from a French King to an ambitious French explorer. The sunken ship revealed itself from underwater for the first time, it was the *La Belle*!





## Lesson 6

Many land archeologists, marine archeologists, and anthropologists assisted in preparing a headquarters for the excavation of the *La Belle* ship in Palacios, Texas.

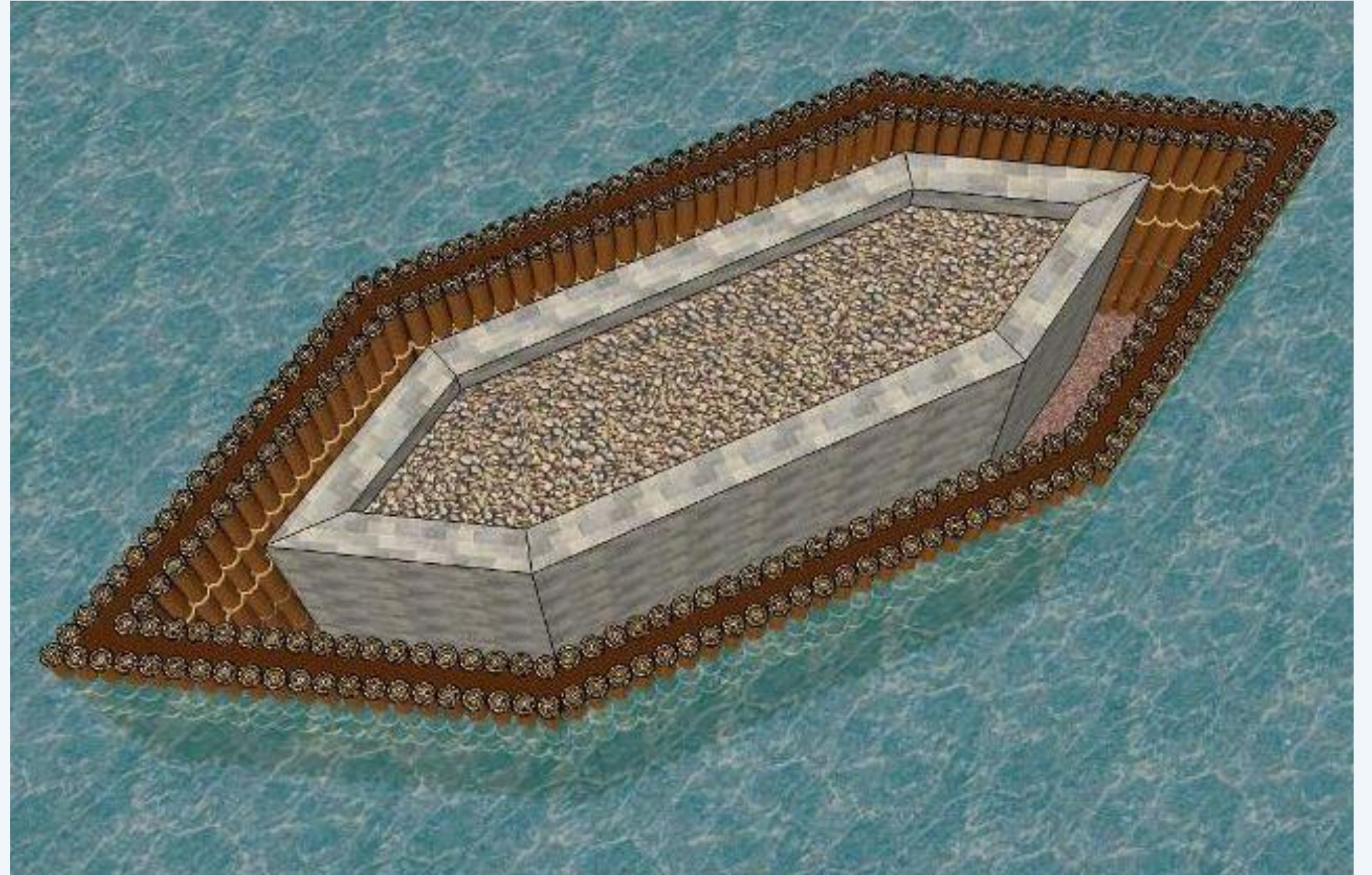




## Lesson 6

To prepare the site for excavation, a special structure had to be created called a cofferdam. A **cofferdam** is used in marine construction and is a structure that retains water and allows a work area to be drained so crews can excavate.

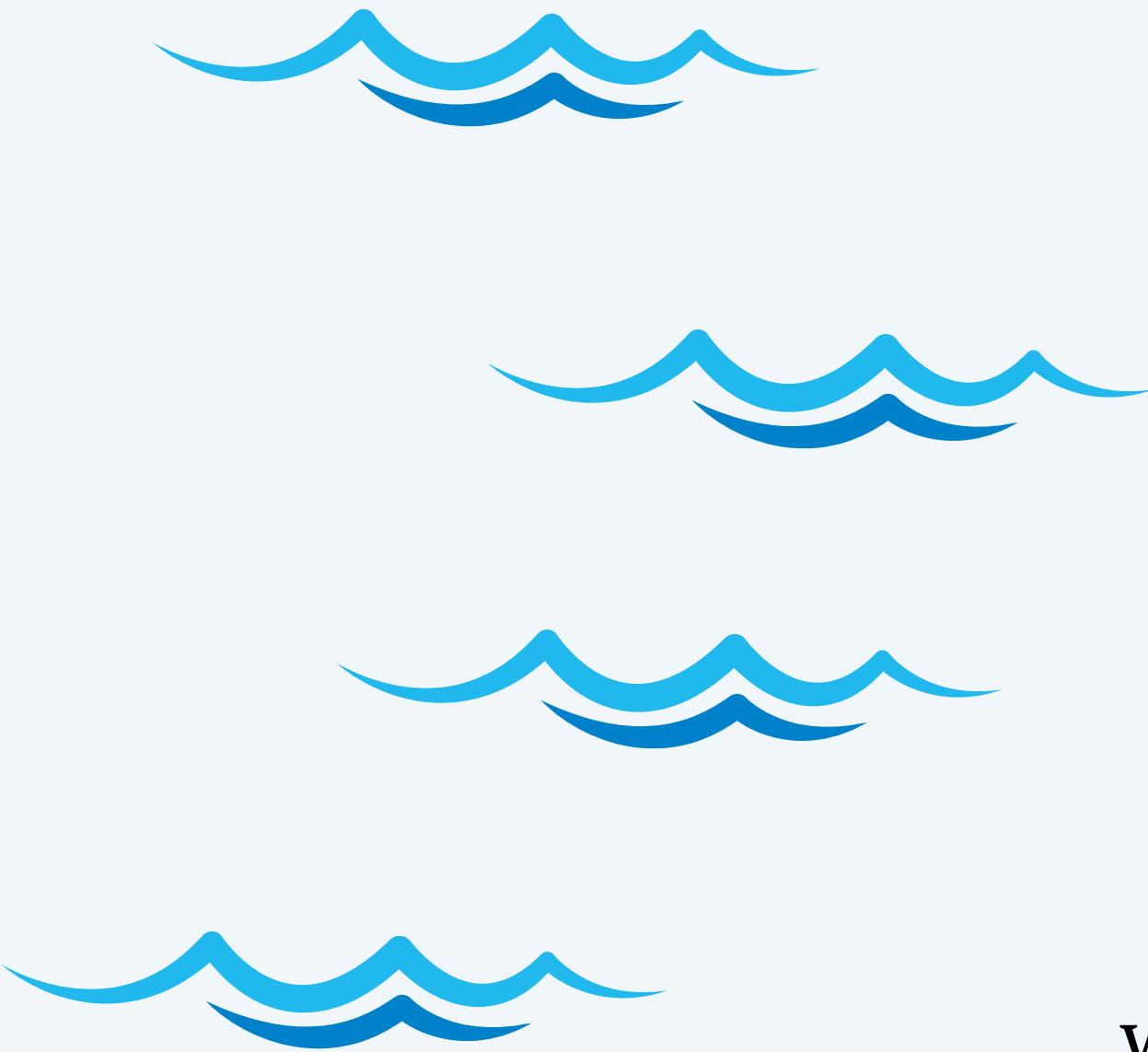
A cofferdam was constructed around the *La Belle* to drain the water so that archeologists and crews could begin excavation.





Lesson 6

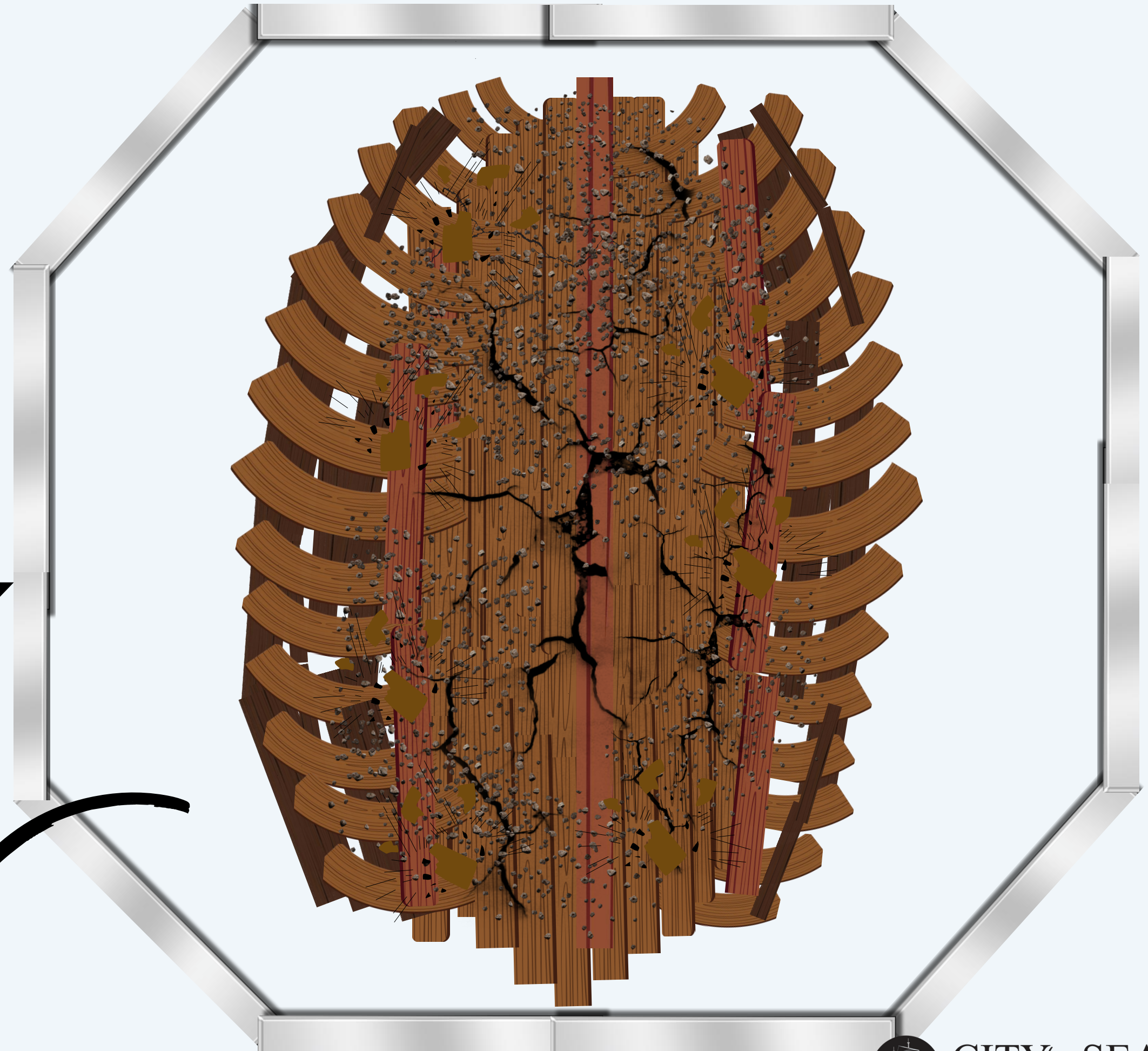
Steel plated walls plunged forty feet into the sediment of the bay floor and generators pumped water out of the structure.



40 feet  
down



water is  
pumped out





## Lesson 6

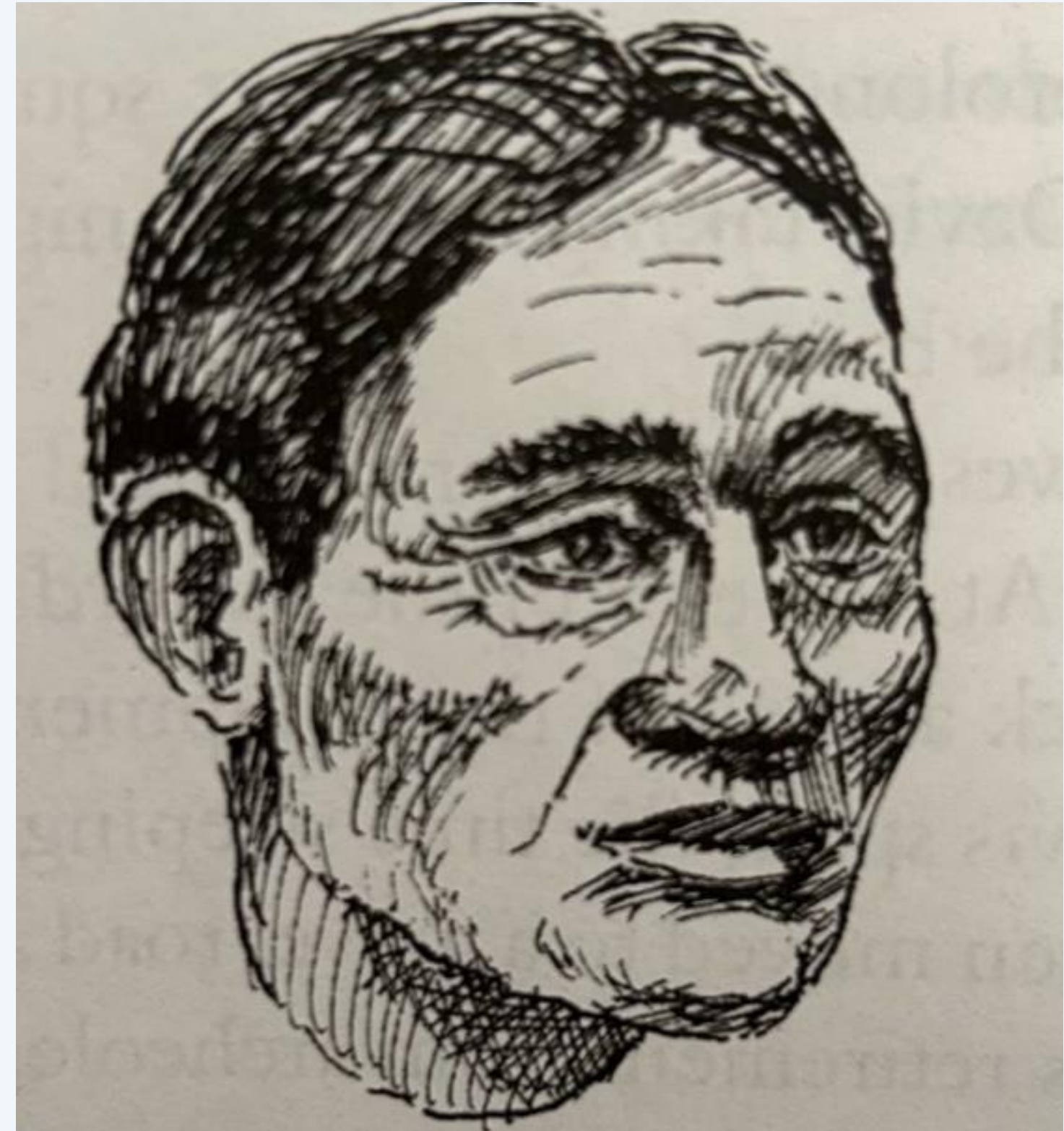
All over the ship many artifacts were found including clothes, a boot, a slipper, deer antlers, pots, bowls, candlesticks, musket balls, cannon balls, a fire pot, and sword handles.







Among the findings something unusual surfaced. It was the skeletal remains of a man who went down with the *La Belle*. Palacios locals called the man “Dead Bob”. Who was he and how did he die? The theory is that he was an unknown sailor who may have died of thirst or drowned. To this day it is unknown how he died and evidence shows that his DNA was corrupted. Because of this, archeologists were unable to identify who he was.



Graphic sourced from Raising La Belle by Mark Mitchell



## Lesson 6

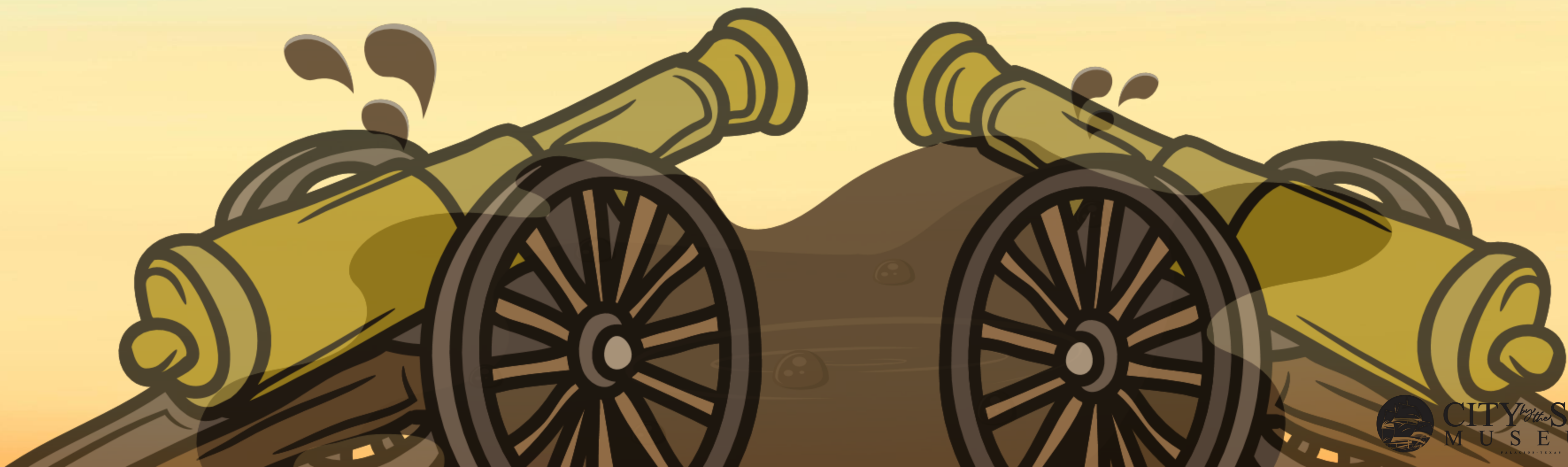
The excavation of the *La Belle* continued longer than expected. Many worked through the holidays with no time off to recover the ship. Volunteers sifted through sand-filled buckets to make sure no artifacts were missed.





## Lesson 6

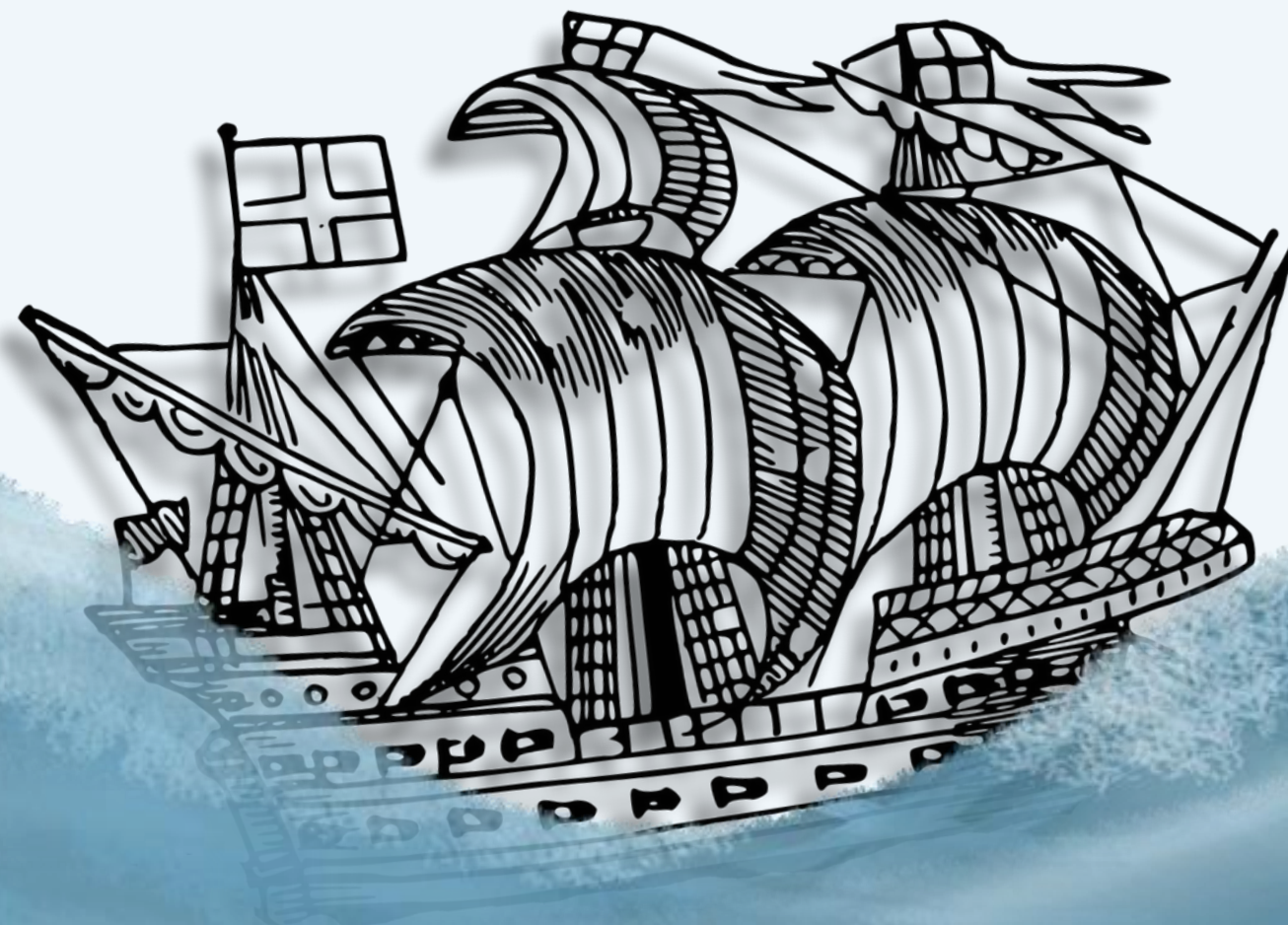
The excavation of the *La Belle* uncovered two bronze cannons laying side by side on the sea floor that La Salle would have used for the fort he would build on the expedition to find the Mississippi.





# Conclusion

La Salle was an ambitious explorer and his journey to find the Mississippi was rewarding and challenging. He set out and explored rivers and land that he would claim in the name of France. Having missed the Mississippi River, he landed in Matagorda Bay to continue his exploration. The only remaining ship of his fleet, the *La Belle*, drifted into the bay eventually sinking only to be discovered many years later.





# Historical Images of the *La Belle* Excavation Courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission



Cannons being excavated



Cannons excavated on the *La Belle* ship



# Historical Images of the *La Belle* Excavation Courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission



The *La Belle* ship in cofferdam



Archeologists excavate the *La Belle*



# Historical Images of the *La Belle* Excavation Courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission



Archeologists preserving the *La Belle*



Archeologists excavating the *La Belle*



# Historical Images of the *La Belle* Excavation Courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission



Sifting to find artifacts from the *La Belle*



Beads found from the *La Belle*



# Historical Images of the *La Belle* Excavation Courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission



Beads found from the *La Belle* excavation



# Historical Images of the *La Belle* Excavation Courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission



Rings discovered from the *La Belle*



Beads discovered from the *La Belle*



# Historical Images of the *La Belle* Excavation Courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission



Rings discovered from the *La Belle*



# Historical Images of the *La Belle* Excavation Courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission



Plates discovered from the *La Belle*



# Historical Images of the *La Belle* Excavation Courtesy of the Texas Historical Commission



Plate discovered from the *La Belle*





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**MUSEUM**  
PALACIOS - TEXAS

**Thank you for joining us on this  
exciting journey!**  
**Please visit the Student Notebook  
for aligned activities and the  
Escape Room game found on the  
City by the Sea Museum website.**