

Re-thinking of Old Orleans

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FIRST SHIPWRECK ON LAKE ONTARIO

In 1679 the famed French explorer Rene Robert Cavlier LaSalle was endeavoring to establish a shipyard at Niagara. He and his chief lieutenant Henri de Tonty left Frontenac in a thirty-foot-long ship bound for Niagara. Aboard were supplies and materials for a vessel which was to be built to sail the upper great Lakes.

On the way they landed near the mouth of the Genesee River (now Charlotte) and went inland to a Seneca village to meet with the natives. LaSalle who had been there before with others received permission to build a ship to Niagara. Returning to his vessel they then sailed for Niagara. LaSalle became impatient as progress was very slow so he and Tonty were set ashore in the vicinity of Oak Orchard Harbor and walked the remaining distance along the shoreline to Niagara. LaSalle ordered the pilot to keep on the course which he totally ignored. As soon as LaSalle and Tonty were out of sight, the crew paddled to shore in one of the cargo-canoes, built a campfire on the beach and went to sleep.

The ship lay motionless at anchor on the smooth lake which froze around it in the sharp January frost. During the night a gale came up causing high breakers to pound the beach. When the crew awoke, there was no chance to get out to the ship. They simply watched helplessly as the ship was blown on to the beach, breaking up and scattering its cargo.

LaSalle and Tonty meanwhile continued their trek, unaware of what had happened. After several days passed, LaSalle became impatient and set out on foot along the shore to investigate what had happened to his ship. The outcome of this expedition is not recorded although we can assume that LaSalle was highly annoyed with his pilot.

This ship may well have been the first sailing vessel on Lake Ontario, if not the Great Lakes. It was built in the Cataraqui River near Fort Frontenac and made its first voyage to Niagara in November 1678.

We can assume that this was the first shipwreck on Lake Ontario which took place over three centuries ago.

CORRECTION from last week's article on Fairview Manor. The house now located on the site of Fairview Manor was the former home of Burton Banker and was moved there from Back Street (West Ave.) in Knowlesville, not the N.Y.S. Training School grounds.