

Dear editor:

I recently read an article in your summer 2020 issue by Richard Gross and Craig P. Howard titled “Colbert, La Salle, and the Search for Empire” in which some of my work was referenced, misinterpreted, and straw-manned. I hope the *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* will grant me a few pages to respond. Messrs. Gross and Howard pick apart my 2010 historiographical essay “La Salle Lands in Texas: La Salle and the Historians” for the *East Texas Historical Journal*.¹ Though they noted it was a historiography, they apparently did not understand that in a historiography I would detail what other scholars thought and believed about La Salle and why he landed in Texas. As such, Gross and Howard mistakenly state that “Tucker’s thesis” is that historians have generally fallen into two camps: (a) La Salle was genuinely “lost” in his geography; and (b) La Salle intentionally deceived the French court about his geography. This is, of course, not *my* thesis, but a mere description of the field. Having thus misconstrued the intent of the article, they then proceed to straw-man me, putting the words, ideas, and theses of other authors in my mouth. Gross and Howard state: “That La Salle exhibited deception, fraud, and impaired judgement immediately became the leitmotif of Tucker’s analysis.” They then proceed to say I am “expressing this fantasy,” purveying a “quartet of falsehoods,” am guilty of repeating “presentist arguments,” that I “ignore possible bias,” and I “discounted La Salle’s defenders.”² Of course, I do no such thing. In a historiography I presented the ideas and theses of all the authors that attacked La Salle as a

¹ Gene Rhea Tucker, “La Salle Lands in Texas: La Salle and the Historians,” *East Texas Historical Journal* 48, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 40-58.

² Richard Gross and Craig P. Howard, “Colbert, La Salle, and the Search for Empire,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 113, no. 2 (Summer 2020): 76-78.

deceiver and I presented the ideas and theses of all the authors that “defended” La Salle as a confused explorer. Though I explain both sides of the issue, Gross and Howard mistakenly impute the claims of one side to me! The culmination of this is the false claim of plagiarism: “On his own Tucker then called this ‘the greatest hoax in the history of North American exploration’ without attributing this direct quotation of DeVorse.”³ Well, this entire paragraph is not “on my own,” but a continuation of the previous paragraph explaining De Vorse’s ideas; and the entire paragraph in question they incorrectly attribute to me is in fact cited to De Vorse and his work.⁴ That I did not put quotation marks around ten common words is indeed my fault: *mea culpa*.

Now, the actual point/thesis that I made at the *end* of “La Salle Lands in Texas” was that the two camps are both right if you put them together: “La Salle was, in a sense, a lost explorer—he did incorrectly place the Mississippi on his maps. But he was also a deceiver—he and his circle had no qualms about fudging the geography of his river.”⁵ Gross and Howard, and Gross in a separate article (“A Second Look at ‘La Salle: Discovery of a Lost Explorer,’” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*), apparently want to absolve La Salle of any deception, faking of geography, or intrigues at the French court of Louis XIV. In their attempt to whitewash La Salle, Gross and Howard must ignore mounds of evidence that indeed show La Salle and his backers altered the geography of the Mississippi. As such, they must ignore that I agree with the notion La Salle’s geography was confused and he

³ Gross and Howard, “Colbert, La Salle, and the Search for Empire,” 77.

⁴ Tucker, “La Salle Lands in Texas,” 50, 58n54.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

thought the Mississippi's mouth was in Texas. They must portray me as a "La Salle is a deceiver" only theorist. They thus ignore my conclusion in "La Salle Lands in Texas" and my other works, such as my 2008 article for the journal *Terrae Incognitae*: "Coronelli's Texan Mississippi: A Reinterpretation of the *America Settentrionale* of 1688."⁶

In the latter work, I reiterate again that La Salle was indeed "lost." That with his faulty compass and the incomplete geographical knowledge of the day, La Salle concluded that the Mississippi's mouth was in Texas at what the maps of the time called the Río Escondido.⁷ This accords with Gross's conclusions,⁸ and numerous others before him. What Gross (and Howard) ignore is the fact that La Salle's geography and the official accounts of the expedition down the Mississippi were indeed changed. Gross asserts that the maps of Jean-Baptiste Franquelin and Jean-Baptiste Minet, both from 1684, were copies of "La Salle's notion about its [the Mississippi's] course" made "under the direct supervision of La Salle, using La Salle's data."⁹ The maps of Franquelin and Minet show the Mississippi taking wide, nearly ninety degree turns to the west then south and southeast. These maps were indeed made under La Salle's direction, but these maps *do not* show La Salle's first conception of the river, nor do they echo the first reports of his expedition, both official and unofficial. I show in "Coronelli's Texan Mississippi" that cartographer Vincenzo Coronelli took the original reports of the expedition and portrayed

⁶ Gene Rhea Tucker, "Coronelli's Texan Mississippi: A Reinterpretation of the *America Settentrionale* of 1688." *Terrae Incognitae* 40 (2008): 82-101.

⁷ Tucker, "Coronelli's Texan Mississippi, 86.

⁸ Richard Gross, "A Second Look at 'La Salle: Discovery of a Lost Explorer,'" *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 62, no. 1 (Winter 2021): 5-32.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

them in the large terrestrial globe (fifteen feet in diameter) he finished for Louis XIV in 1683. It was the cartographic information from this globe that Coronelli published later in his 1688 map of North America titled *America Settentrionale*. On Coronelli's 1683 globe, using first-hand reports, the Mississippi River is depicted as a river that runs generally north to south with its mouth on the Texas coast. This Mississippi is separate from the Río Bravo (the Spanish name for the Rio Grande).¹⁰ Only later, in 1684, does La Salle's conception change, as shown on the later maps of Franquelin and Minet. In these maps, the Mississippi takes a wide, zig-zagging course, and the Río Bravo flows into La Salle's Mississippi!¹¹ Images of these maps can be found easily online: compare Coronelli's globe¹² and map¹³ to Franquelin's map¹⁴ and Minet's map.¹⁵

Gross and Howard, in order to whitewash La Salle, must ignore my "Coronelli's Texas Mississippi," they must ignore Coronelli's globes and maps, and they must ignore the first state of official reports and relations of La Salle's expeditions. Aside from the difference in maps

¹⁰ Tucker, "Coronelli's Texan Mississippi, 85-98.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 87, 92-93.

¹² The globes Coronelli made for Louis XIV are on display at the Bibliothèque nationale de France and many images can be found of them online. For more information on them, see Monique Pelletier, "Les Globes de Louis XIV: les Sources françaises de l'oeuvre de Coronelli," *Imago Mundi* 34 (1982): 72-89; and Monique Pelletier, "Les globes de Marly, chefs-d'œuvre de Coronell," *Revue de la Bibliothèque nationale* n° 47 (1993): 46-51.

¹³ Vincenzo Coronelli, *America Settentrionale Colle Nuove Scoperti fin all' Anno 1688*, [Venice: Academia Cosmografo degli Argonauti, 1695?], color map, 59 x 88 cm, University of Texas at Arlington, call number 142/700568. For an image see: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Coronelli_America_Settentrionale_Colle_Nuove_Scoperti_fin_all%27_A_nno_1688_UTA.jpg.

¹⁴ See: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Franquelin%27s_map_of_Louisiana_LOC_2001620469.tif.

¹⁵ See: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1683_LaSalle_Carte_de_la_Louisiane.png.

from 1683 when compared to those from 1684, I will now quote from the primary sources to show the changes from 1683 to 1684.

From the “Relation officielle” of 1683, probably written by Bernou¹⁶:

...la rivière Mississippi.... Elle tombe dans le golfe du Mexique au delà de la baye du Saint-Esprit, entre le 27e et le 28e degré de latitude, et à l’endroit où quelques cartes marquent le Rio de la Madalena, et d’autres Rio Escondido: elle est éloignée d’environ trente lieues de Rio Bravo, de 60 de Rio de Palmas, et de 90 à 100 lieues de Rio Panero, où est la plus prochaine habitation des Espagnols sur la coste. Le sieur de la Salle, qui porte toujours dans ses voyages un astrolabe, a pris la hauteur précise de cette embouchure.¹⁷

My translation:

...the river Mississippi.... It empties into the Gulf of Mexico, beyond the Bay of the Holy Spirit [bahía del Espíritu Santo], between the 27th and the 28th degree of latitude, and at the place where some maps mark the Rio de la Madalena [Río Magdalena], and others the Rio Escondido: it is distant about thirty leagues from the Rio Bravo, 60 from the Rio de Palmas [today’s Río Soto La Marina], and 90 to 100 leagues from the Rio Panero [Río Pánuco], where is the nearest settlement of the Spaniards on the coast. The Sieur de la Salle, who always carries an astrolabe in his travels, took the precise latitude of this mouth.

Now, from a report written in January 1684, if not written by Bernou, the ideas are his¹⁸:

L’autre moyen de réussir à faire la conquête de la mesme province de Nouvelle-Biscaye est de remonter le fleuve nommé par les Espagnols Rio-Bravo, et qui se trouve heureusement estre le mesme appellé par les Sauvages Mississipy, dont le sieur de La Salle, gouverneur pour le Roy du fort Frontenac, dans la Nouvelle France, vient d’achever la descouverte jusques à la mer, et est nouvellement arrivé à Paris pour en rendre compte....¹⁹

¹⁶ Jean Delanglez, *El Rio del Espíritu Santo: An Essay on the Cartography of the Gulf Coast and the Adjacent Territory during the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (New York: United States Catholic Historical Society, 1945), 110.

¹⁷ “Relation de la découverte de l’embouchure de la rivière Mississippi dans le golfe de Mexique, faite par le sieur de La Salle, l’année passée 1682,” ed. Jean Delanglez, *Mid-America* 22, no. 1 (January 1940): 33.

¹⁸ Jean Delanglez, *Some La Salle Journeys* (Chicago: Institute of Jesuit History, 1938), 71-72.

¹⁹ “Mémoire sur les affaires de l’Amérique, Janvier 1684,” in *Découvertes et Établissements des Français dan L’Ouest et dans le Sud de l’Amérique Septentrionale, 1614-1698*. Vol. 3, *Rechere des Bouches du Mississippi et*

My translation:

The other way to succeed in conquering the same province of New Biscay is to ascend the river named by the Spaniards Río Bravo, and which fortunately happens to be the same called by the savages [i.e. Native Americans] Mississippi, which the Sieur de La Salle, governor for the King of Fort Frontenac, in New France, has just completed the discovery of down to the sea, and has recently arrived in Paris to report on it....

Bernou and his circle, supporters of La Salle, have now *equated* the Mississippi and the Río Bravo (the Rio Grande), bringing it closer to the silver mines of New Biscay in New Spain. As later events would make clear—as detailed by scholars like Jean Delanglez, Robert Weddle, and others, including myself—Bernou, Renaudot, and La Salle would use the nearness of the Mississippi/Río Bravo to New Spain to win approval for La Salle’s final expedition. Somebody had deceptively changed the maps and geographical information, and it is hard to believe that this happened without La Salle’s cognizance and/or consent. Gross and Howard must ignore the blatant changes in the maps and documents from 1683 and 1684 in order to absolve their hero La Salle of any chicanery, skullduggery, and deception.

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Coronelli's map of North America, 1688, based on his 1683 globe, shows the Mississippi as a river flowing north to south through what is now Texas; the Rio Bravo is a separate river south of the Mississippi.



Minet's map of Louisiana, 1683, shows the Mississippi zig-zagging far to the west, then south, then southeast through what is now Texas; there is no separate Rio Bravo south of the Mississippi.



Franquelin's map of Louisiana, 1684, shows the Mississippi zig-zagging far to the west, then south, then southeast through what is now Texas; there is no separate Rio Bravo south of the Mississippi.