

# *Belle* Shipwreck Conservation Resurfaces

## THC Seeks Support for Vital Vessel's Preservation

It's been nearly 14 years since Texas Historical Commission (THC) archeologists discovered the *Belle* shipwreck off Texas' Gulf Coast, yet much work remains to bring this historically vital vessel to a publicly accessible condition. For most of the past decade, the hull of French explorer La Salle's ship — felled by a storm in 1686 in present-day Matagorda Bay — has been preserved through state-of-the-art technology and scientific methodology at Texas A&M University's Conservation Research Laboratory.

Considered one of the world's most important shipwrecks, the *Belle* was excavated in a cofferdam in 1996–97 and produced more than one million artifacts, including the hull, three bronze cannons, thousands of glass beads, pottery and even the skeleton of a crew member. The artifacts represent a kit for building a 17th-century European colony in the New World and as a group are unrivaled.

The *Belle's* hull is currently being treated at Texas A&M with polyethylene glycol (PEG). This petroleum-based product is the standard method for treating waterlogged wood from shipwrecks, and it was relatively inexpensive when conservation of the ship began more

than a decade ago. PEG reinforces the wood's cellular structure so it will not collapse when the wood is slowly dried.

PEG was also used to treat the remains of two other famous shipwrecks, the *Vasa* and the *Mary Rose*. The *Vasa* sank in 1628 in the Baltic Sea and the *Mary Rose* disappeared after a battle with the French off the south coast of England in 1545. After successful preservation treatments, both ships are now

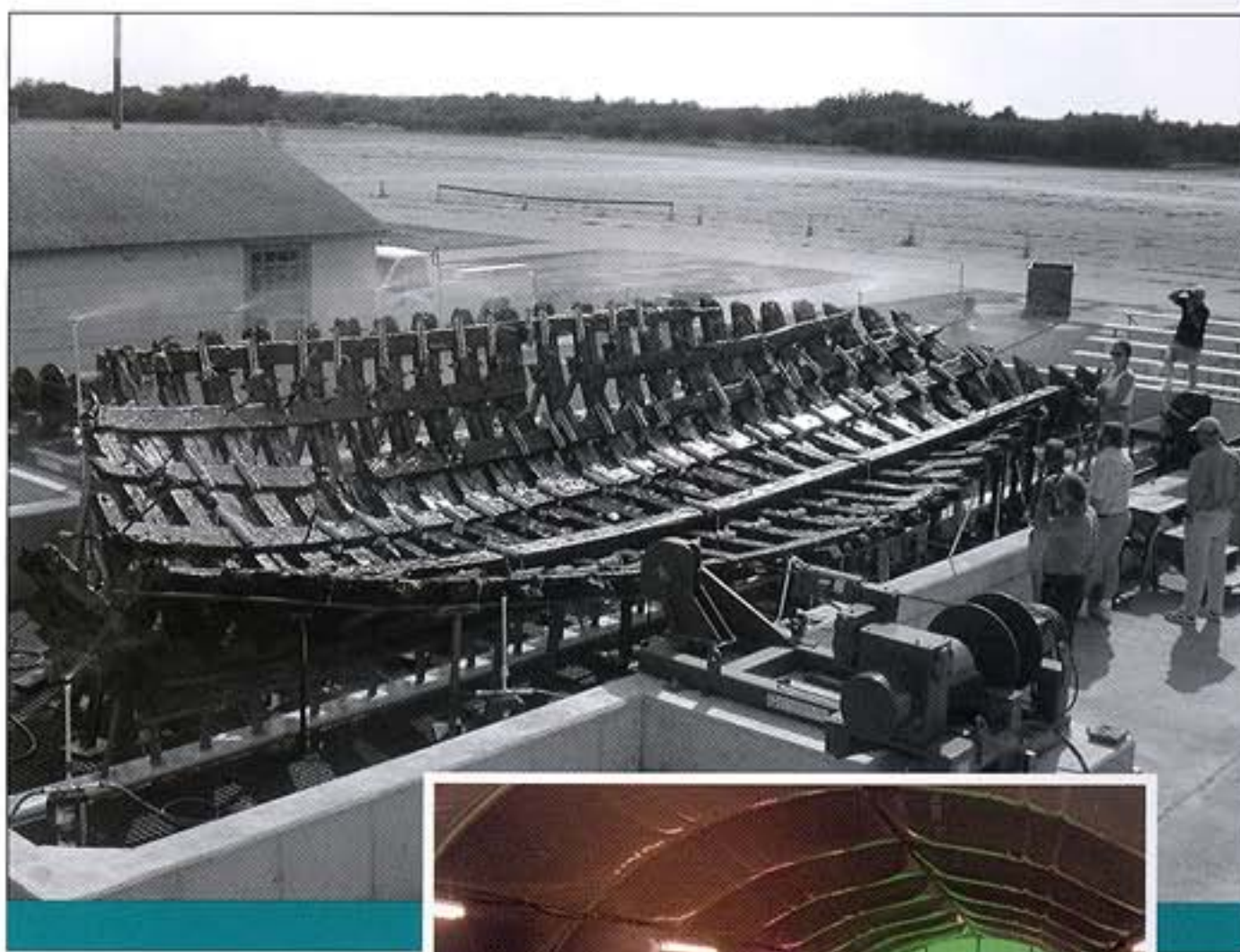
displayed in prominent European museums, offering visitors a firsthand opportunity to experience these vessels' historical significance to their countries.

The ultimate goal is to place the *Belle* on exhibit at the Bob Bullock Texas State History Museum in Austin for the education and enjoyment of the general public.

“Our plan has always been to have the *Belle* on display for people to learn about the fascinating and

real stories of early European expeditions to Texas,” says Dr. James Bruseth, director of the THC's Archeology Division. “Unfortunately, the cost of the PEG treatment is becoming astronomical, and that's posing a serious threat to our conservation project.”

The Conservation Research Laboratory needs to acquire further PEG supplies to ensure there will be an adequate amount to complete the *Belle's* conservation. Current estimates determine an additional \$1.2 million is needed to complete the conservation of the *Belle's* hull. This funding will be considered by the Texas Legislature for use during the FY 2010–11 biennium.



*Without additional funding, the Belle's conservation treatments at Texas A&M University may cease.*



“Without this funding, the conservation of the *Belle* will stop progressing, and this contradicts requirements in our international agreements,” Bruseth explains, noting Texas is charged with preserving the hull in documents signed by the United States, the Republic of France and the State of Texas according to an international treaty signed in 2002.

In the meantime, the Friends of the Texas Historical Commission is dedicating efforts to secure funding for the immediate future.

“Generous donations from foundations, corporations and individuals have always been critically important to preserving the *Belle*, and we will always be grateful for support from the private sector to match the public funding,” says Toni Turner, the THC’s development officer. “We hope private donors will come forward once again to help us purchase more polyethylene glycol.”

The Friends’ 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization was established in April 1996 with the objective of educating the public about the *Belle’s* remarkable discovery and excavation.

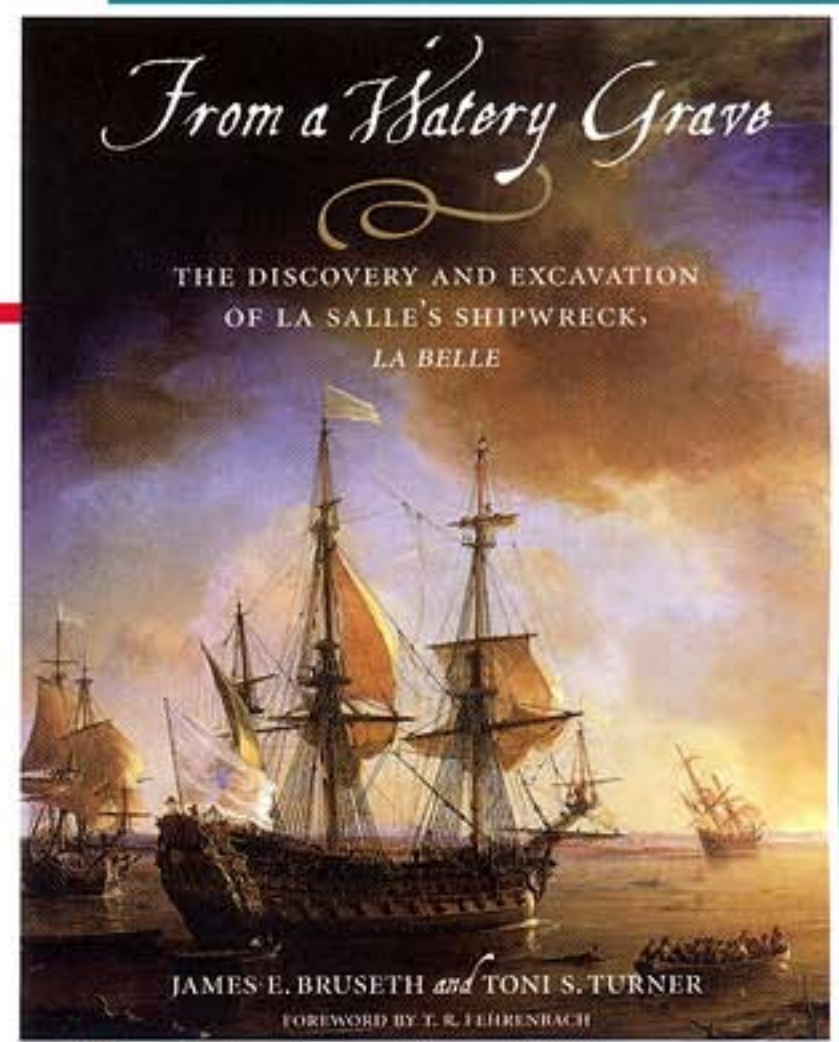
“Our two La Salle projects — the shipwreck excavation and the subsequent archeological investigations at Fort St. Louis — were the Friends’ major priorities for several years,” Turner adds. “Through the Friends, the THC has raised more than \$7 million and has expanded its mission to support other programs like the Red River War Battle Sites Project, the Texas in World War II Initiative, the THC Preservation Fellows student internships, the Texas Civil War Monuments Fund and many other projects.”

When Texas A&M Nautical Archaeology Program members stepped in to help preserve *Belle* artifacts, the need to utilize state-of-the-art conservation technology became particularly evident. Conservationists noted that although mud sealed the vessel from decay for more than three centuries, the waterlogged hull and hundreds of thousands of fragile artifacts (including brain matter in the skull of one unfortunate sailor) would have been a futile preservation effort without new technologies such as PEG.

“The conservation phase is time consuming and expensive — it often costs more than the original excavation,” says Bruseth, who will deliver a keynote address at the International Symposium on Nautical Archeology in Lorient, France, in June. “But without conservation, most artifacts will perish, and important historic data will be lost.”

Bruseth and THC Executive Director Larry Oaks recently met with Bullock Museum representatives to discuss the *Belle’s* eventual installation in the museum. Slated to take place in 2013, the *Belle’s* display is a highly anticipated event already generating discussion among marine archeologists throughout the world.

“The opportunity to display the *Belle* and provide interpretation about its historical significance has been a primary objective of ours from the beginning,” Bruseth says. “We’re excited to be nearing this stage and look forward to sharing our findings in a dynamic museum environment.” ★



## *Belle* Book Receives Prestigious Award

Jim Bruseth and Toni Turner recently received the distinguished James Deetz Book Award for *From a Watery Grave* (Texas A&M University Press, 2005), which chronicles the discovery and excavation of the *Belle*. The Deetz Award, sponsored by The Society for Historical Archaeology, recognizes books about historical or post-medieval archeology that are well written and accessible to all potential readers. The society presented its 2009 award to Bruseth and Turner on Jan. 9 at its annual conference in Toronto, Canada. This is the fourth major award recognizing the authors’ research and writing.