

Despite All Obstacles: La Salle and the Conquest of the Mississippi

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Tom McNeely, Illustrator

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The story of the explorer La Salle shows that dreams are not always achieved in a lifetime. One man's "failure" may actually pave the way for someone else's success. As a young Frenchman, La Salle became a Jesuit because he dreamed of travelling to exotic lands where the order had missions. Instead of being sent to China, he was told to teach young boys in France. Unhappy, he resigned and boarded a ship bound for Canada.

Adept at language, and filled with boundless curiosity, La Salle studied Indian tribes and learned how to communicate with them. The Iroquois told him of a great winding river—called the Mississippi—leading to the sea. Wondering if this were another route to the Orient, La Salle decided to raise money for an expedition. In July 1669, he set off for Lake Ontario with twelve men and Iroquois guides. La Salle spent the next three years exploring the Great Lakes region trying to find the Mississippi. He had the idea that France's territory in North America could be increased, and he hoped for backing and favor from King Louis XIV. A trip to France proved successful.

In 1682, he discovered the Mississippi River and followed it by canoe to the Gulf of Mexico, naming the area from Canada to the Gulf "Louisiana." After the king said the discovery was "useless," La Salle was ruined and broke. His later expeditions were failures. He was killed by his own men in 1687.

The well-documented text, tableau-style illustrations, and a foldout map of La Salle's three expeditions make this an outstanding resource book for homes, classrooms, and libraries. Previously, the author wrote the first two "Great Explorers" books—Beyond the Sea of Ice: The Voyages of Henry Hudson and A Long and Uncertain Journey: The 27,000-Mile Voyage of Vasco da Gama, for which award-winning illustrator and commercial artist McNeely also created the images.

Goodman does not flinch at telling the truth about hardship and setbacks, nor does she gloss over the explorer's disappointments and demise. She frames his defeats and successes in a larger context—examining what one dreamer can do, and looking beyond his life to see his dreams eventually become reality, when the Mississippi was finally used for commerce and a seaport was developed.

LINDA SALISBURY (January / February 2002)

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