

Lewiston  
History  
Mysteries

# French ship, Frontenac, is the first to sail up the Niagara River to Lewiston

## Explorers were looking for site to build a larger ship, LeGriffon, several miles above the Falls

### Early French Exploration Time Line

**1673:** The French build Fort Frontenac in today's Kingston, Ontario, located on the shores of Northeast Lake Ontario, about 40 miles northwest of today's Watertown, NY. The Fort controlled the lucrative fur trade to the West. Explorer Sieur de LaSalle was put in command.

**1673-1677:** Fort Frontenac becomes the construction site for four sailing ships. Two of the ships will be used to carry supplies to today's Niagara Falls, NY, to construct a larger ship, LeGriffon, that will map and explore the Great Lakes. The first ship, called "Frontenac" was a sloop vessel with a single mast, about 40 feet long, and carried Fr. Louis Hennepin and his companions to Niagara where they plan to establish a construction site to build LeGriffon.

**Nov. 18, 1678:** Hennepin sets sail for Niagara onboard the Frontenac. Bad weather forces the ship to sail along the north shore of Lake Ontario.

**Nov. 26, 1678:** The ship takes refuge near today's Mississauga, Ont. and the Frontenac soon gets locked in ice.

**Dec. 6, 1678:** Finally, the ship is freed and Hennepin sails to the Niagara River and hikes to see Niagara Falls, which he later writes about — it's the first time people in Europe learn about the falls. Soon after, the Frontenac is brought to Lewiston and secured at the gully (ravine) at today's Artpark.

**Dec. 24, 1678:** LaSalle and his crew depart Fort Frontenac on a bigger ship of an unknown name filled with supplies. The destination is Niagara Falls. The purpose is to begin construction of LeGriffon.

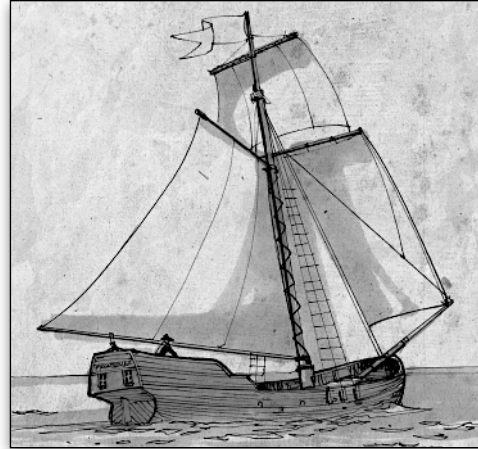
**Christmas 1678:** LaSalle arrives at today's

Rochester, NY. He decides to leave the ship in the hands of the pilot and crew and continues on by foot to Niagara.

**Jan. 8, 1679:** Control of the ship is lost when strong winds carry it west near today's Golden Hills State Park in the Town of Somerset where it breaks apart and sinks. It is the first shipwreck on the Great Lakes. The men salvage what they can. The remains of the ship have never been found.

**Jan. 26, 1679:** Working with the supplies on hand, LaSalle lays the keel and drives the first bolt into LeGriffon as construction begins near today's Griffon Park in Niagara Falls.

**Aug. 7, 1679:** LeGriffon, under LaSalle's command, sets sail on the uncharted Great Lakes and later



**"Frontenac"**

This was the first ship to sail up the Niagara River in 1678 to Lewiston, with Father Louis Hennepin aboard. It was a part of LaSalle's historic explorations and was built by the French at Fort Frontenac in Kingston, Ontario.

The 350th anniversary of the Frontenac's arrival is in 2028 and there are ongoing discussions on the possibility of constructing a replica of the Frontenac that would give rides to tourists and visitors between Lewiston and Youngstown. Or, it could be permanently docked within the Gully at Artpark where the French secured it from the river currents, wind and snow.

lands near today's Green Bay, Wisconsin. LaSalle and a small party decide to continue to explore Lake Michigan in canoes. Meanwhile, he orders the LeGriffon and her crew to drop off supplies and head back to Niagara with a cargo of valuable furs.

**Sept. 18, 1679:** The LeGriffon sets sail for Niagara and is never seen again.

Despite all sorts of harrowing tales and dangers, LaSalle and Hennepin continued their explorations as they sought to find the "Northwest Passage" to China and Japan. They explored the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers extensively.

LaSalle died in 1687 at age 43 in present day Huntsville, Texas, shot by a mutineer. Fr. Hennepin died in Rome, Italy, in 1704 at age 78. A large painting by Thomas Hart Benton hangs in the Power Vista depicting Fr. Hennepin seeing Niagara Falls for the first time.



***"On the 6th, being St. Nicholas Day, we got into the fine River Niagara, which any such ship as ours had never entered before. We sang Te Deum and other prayers to return thanks to God Almighty for our prosperous voyage."***

— Diary of Fr. Louis Hennepin, December 6, 1678

Fr. Louis Hennepin was a Belgian priest who explored the continent with Sieur de LaSalle. He visited today's Lewiston and saw Niagara Falls in 1678. The gazebo park at 4th and Center Street is named after him.

Frontenac sketch by Canadian artist/historian Andrew King

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