

# **The Life and Times of Bernardo de Gálvez, Spain's Great Hero of the American Revolution**

**Part 2 of 2**

**By Robert H. Thonhoff\***

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Spain formally declared war against Great Britain June 21, 1779, and King Carlos III commissioned Gálvez to raise a force of men and conduct a campaign against the British along the Mississippi River and the Gulf Coast. In order to feed his troops, Gálvez sent an emissary, Francisco García, with a letter to Texas governor Domingo Cabello requesting the delivery of Texas cattle to Spanish forces in Louisiana. Accordingly, between 1779 and 1782 an estimated ten to fifteen thousand head of cattle were rounded up on ranches belonging to citizens and missions of Béxar and La Bahía. From La Bahía, the assembly point, Texas rancheros and their vaqueros trailed these herds to Nacogdoches, Natchitoches, and Opelousas for distribution to Gálvez's forces. Providing escorts for these herds were soldiers from Presidio San Antonio de Béxar, Presidio La Bahía, and El Fuerte del Cíbolo. Several hundred horses were also sent along for artillery and cavalry purposes. Fueled in part by Texas beef, Gálvez, with 1,400 men, took to the field and waterways in the fall of 1779 and defeated the British in battles at Manchac, Baton Rouge, and Natchez. The next year, after a month-long siege with land and sea forces, Gálvez, with over 2,000 men, captured the British stronghold of Fort Charlotte at Mobile on March 14, 1780. The climax of the Gulf Coast campaign occurred the following year when Gálvez directed a joint land-sea attack on Pensacola, the British capital of West Florida. He commanded more than 7,000 men, including a part of the French fleet under Chevalier de Monteil, in the two-month siege of Fort George in Pensacola before its capture on May 10, 1781.

The Battle of Pensacola was a brilliantly executed and pivotal battle of the American Revolution. To recognize the bravery of Gálvez in breaching the entrance into Pensacola Bay single-handedly with his flagship, the *Galveztown*, so that the Spanish and French fleets might also enter, King Carlos III authorized the addition of the inscription, *Yo Solo* (I Alone) to the Gálvez coat-of-arms.

In the meantime, Gálvez's Spanish forces secured the upper Mississippi and Ohio rivers by defeating the British at San Luís (St. Louis, Missouri), at San José (St. Joseph, Michigan), and by assisting George Rogers Clark in his battles at Vincennes (Indiana), Kaskaskia (Illinois), and Cahokia (Illinois). Additionally he secured the river ports at Sta. Genoveva (St. Genevieve), Cape Girardeau, and Arkansas Post. It can be added that General Bernardo de Gálvez won every battle that he and his Spanish forces fought in the North American campaign of the American Revolution.

Spain fought the British not only on the North American Continent but also in the far off Philippines, Galápagos, Juan Fernández Islands, Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Bahamas, Jamaica, Minorca, and Gibraltar while constantly posing a possible Spanish-French invasion of Great Britain. France extended the worldwide dimensions of the war by fighting the British in India, Hudson Bay, and Sierra Leone in addition to the North American Continent and the West Indies.

Gálvez had under his command men from Spain, Majorca, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hispaniola, and Ireland. From Louisiana he recruited Frenchmen, Germans, Acadians, Canary Islanders, Indians, and Blacks, both slave and free. Under his command, also, were a contingent of the American First Continental Marines and a part of the South Carolina Navy. He also had many troops, sailors, and ships from México (New Spain). One of his top generals was Major General Gerónimo Girón, a direct descendant of Montezuma. His aide-de-camp in the Pensacola campaign was Francisco Miranda, the precursor of independence in Venezuela.

On May 8, 1782, Gálvez's Spanish forces, aided by the South Carolina Navy, captured the British naval base at New Providence in the Bahamas. Gálvez was busy preparing for a grand campaign against Jamaica when peace negotiations ended the war.

After the fighting, Gálvez helped draft the terms of the treaties that ended the war and established the boundary between Florida and the United States. Shortly thereafter he was cited by the American Congress for his aid during the war for independence. After the peace accords in April 1783, General Gálvez, accompanied by his wife and their three small children, returned to Spain for a brief rest. In October 1784 he was recalled to América to serve as Captain-General and Governor of Cuba. Accompanied again by his wife and three children plus the newly appointed Chargé d'Affaires to the new American Republic, Diego de Gardoqui, he embarked for America again. In February 1785 Gálvez went to Savannah and Baltimore to represent Spain in negotiations with the United States concerning the boundary between Florida and the United States. In April he was at Havana, where he learned that his father, Matías de Gálvez, had died on November 3, 1784, and that he was appointed to succeed his father as Viceroy of New Spain.

Gálvez and his family arrived in Mexico City on June 17, 1785, to begin his duties as Viceroy of New Spain. Two of his main accomplishments were to finish the rebuilding of the Castle of Chapultepec (memorialized in the Marines Hymn as the Halls of Montezuma) and to complete the construction of the Cathedral of México, the largest church in the Western Hemisphere. México City, the capital of New Spain, was in the throes of famine and disease at that time. Gálvez endeared himself to the people of México City by opening up not only the resources of the government but also his personal fortune to help the populace through the difficult times. Gálvez, however, contracted the illness and died in Mexico City on November 30, 1786. His body was buried next to his father's crypt in the wall of the Church of San Fernando. Symbolic of his love to the people and place of México, his heart, as per a custom of the time, was placed in an urn and enshrined in the Cathedral of México. On December 12, 1786, twelve days after his death and eight days after his funeral, his widow gave birth to another child, Guadalupe. On November 30, 1986, exactly two hundred years after his death forty members of the orders of the Granaderos and Damas de Gálvez from Texas, including my wife Victoria and me, in conjunction with the Sociedad Mexicana de Amigos de España, placed a bronze plaque on Gálvez's crypt to honor the life and deeds of this great Spanish hero of the American Revolution. One cannot help wondering why it took two hundred years to mark the tomb of this truly great man of history; however, better late than never.

Over the years a number of places were named in his honor of Bernardo de Gálvez. In 1767, the Paso de Gálvez, a ford on the Pecos River, was named in his honor, and in 1778, San Bernardo, a Taovayan village on the Red River in Texas, was named in honor of Gálvez, then the governor of Louisiana. Both, however, have long since been lost and generally forgotten in history. While he was viceroy of New Spain, Gálvez ordered José de Evia to survey of the Gulf Coast; the map maker named the biggest bay on the Texas coast Bahía de Gálvez, a name later altered to Galveston Bay. Later, the city, county, and island of Galveston were named in his honor. In Louisiana, St. Bernard Parish was named in his honor, and the parishes of East Feliciana and West Feliciana were named in honor of his wife, Feliciana, who, after Bernardos death, moved back to Europe and lived out her life in Spain and Italy.

Much more could be written about the life, deeds, and legacy of Bernardo de Gálvez. Suffice it to say here that the reader of this article can learn much more about this great Spanish hero of the American Revolution from many sources. A start may be made in the references that follow.

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\* Robert H. Thonhoff is an author, historian, speaker, emcee, retired educator, retired Karnes County Judge, former President of the Texas State Historical Association, and an Honorary Granadero de Gálvez. He and his wife Victoria, an Honorary Dama de Gálvez, reside in Karnes City, Texas, and have three children and five grandchildren.

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