

Bernardo de Gálvez - Spanish Hero of the American Revolution

He was intelligent and modest, good looking and brave, the Viscount of Galveston and Count of Gálvez was a Spanish military leader and colonial administrator who served as Governor of Louisiana, Governor of Cuba and Viceroy of New Spain (now Mexico).

Bernardo de Gálvez (1746-1786) was born in Macharaviaya, in the province of Málaga, Spain, on July 23, 1746. He attended the Military Academy of Avila and at the age of 16, took part in the Spanish invasion of Portugal and was promoted to Lieutenant. In 1762, he joined his uncle José de Gálvez, then Inspector General of New Spain, who ordered him to Chihuahua to fight the Apaches, with his Opatá Indian allies. He learned the Apache language and wrote a manual outlining how to deal with them.

He was wounded and was promoted to Captain for his bravery.

He returned to Spain in 1772 in the company of his uncle José de Gálvez and was sent to Pau, France with his regiment, where he learned the French language. This proved useful to him when he became Governor of Louisiana. While a professor at the Avila Military Academy, he joined the attack on Algiers. Although ambushed, he saved his men and was wounded during the disastrous campaign. He was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and returned to Avila.

In 1777, his uncle José de Gálvez, by then President of the Council of the Indies, appointed him a Colonel and Interim Governor of the province of Louisiana. This was the territory that was later to become the Louisiana Purchase. It had been ceded by France to Spain in 1763 as compensation for the loss of Florida to Britain during the Seven Years' War.

In New Orleans, he met, fell in love with and married Marie Felicité de Saint-Maxent, the widow Destrehan. Her first husband, Jean Baptiste Honoré Destrehan died in 1775, with whom she had one daughter, Adelaide. Bernardo and Marie had three children, Matilde, Miguel, and Guadalupe (this last child born 2 weeks after Bernardo's death).

Governor Gálvez instituted smuggling operations to supply the North American rebels in early 1777 under Royal Orders from Charles III of Spain. Since the British forces blockaded the Eastern colonial ports, he established a route from New Orleans up the Mississippi River to Illinois and Ohio. He worked with Oliver Pollock, a North American patriot, and the Spanish firm of Gardoqui and Sons to ship gunpowder, muskets, uniforms, medicines and other supplies. He also protected an American force letting them sell goods raided from the British in New Orleans even before Spain declared war against Great Britain.

He founded Galveztown (renamed New Iberia, LA in 1847) for settlers from his home province of Malaga.

Spain finally declared war on Britain, on June 21, 1779. On June 25, 1779 a letter from London marked Secret and Confidential, was sent from King George III to British General John Campbell in Pensacola, Florida, ordering an attack on New Orleans. Unfortunately for General Campbell, this secret letter fell into the hands of Governor Gálvez, who immediately organized Louisiana and New Orleans for war. He carried out a "masterful military campaign" and defeated the British forces at Manchac and Baton Rouge in 1779 and forced them to surrender Natchez the same year.

These battles freed the lower Mississippi Valley of British forces and relieved the threat to New Orleans. The following year, in 1780 he captured Mobile from the British at the battle of Fort Charlotte.

His greatest military victory came at Pensacola on May 9, 1781. After a three-month siege, the longest battle in the American Revolution, he captured the former Spanish capital of Florida, defeating General John Campbell. This left the British with no bases in the Gulf of Mexico.

In 1782 his forces also took the British forts in New Providence in the Bahamas. Just as peace was declared in 1783, he was preparing for an attack on Jamaica, the last remaining British outpost in the Caribbean.

Gálvez returned to Spain in 1783 where he helped draft the terms of the Peace of Paris (1783) which returned East and West Florida to Spain and granted the United States its freedom. King Carlos III awarded Gálvez many honors including promotion to Lieutenant General and Field Marshal, Governor and Captain General of Louisiana and Florida and the titles of Viscount of Galveztown and Count of Gálvez.

Returning to Cuba as governor, Bernardo de Gálvez learned of the death of his father Matias de Gálvez y Gallardo, then Viceroy of New Spain. Bernardo was appointed to replace him. He arrived in Veracruz on May 26, 1785 and made his formal entry into Mexico City in June.

During his first months in office, he opened the granaries to help halt a famine, using his own funds to help the poor. He traveled in the city in an open carriage, was present at bullfights, joined pilgrimages, presented awards to students and hosted public fiestas.

During his tenure, he began Chapultepec Castle and installed street lights in Mexico City and worked to complete the Cathedral. He continued with the construction of a highway to Acapulco and took measures to reduce the abuse of Indian labor on that project. He advanced art, literature and science in New Spain, sponsoring the expedition of Martin Sessé y Lacasta, which sent to Spain a comprehensive catalog of diverse species of plants, birds and fish found in Mexico.

After only a year in office, he became ill with amoebic dysentery contracted originally, it is believed, in New Orleans. He was confined to bed in Tacubaya, a Mexico City suburb. On November 8, 1786, he turned over all his duties to the Audiencia and died on November 30, 1786 at the young age of 40. He was interred in the church of San Fernando in Mexico City.

In recognition of his work and help to the American cause, George Washington and the American Congress cited Gálvez for his aid during the revolution, agreeing to hang a portrait of Gálvez, in "the halls where Congress meets." In 2014, honoring their promise, the U.S. Congress hung his portrait in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee room. There is an equestrian statue of him near the State Department Building in Washington D.C., a gift from the Spanish crown in 1976.

On December 12, 2014, the United States Congress conferred Honorary Citizenship on Bernardo de Gálvez, calling him a "hero of the Revolutionary War who risked his life for the freedom of the United States people and provided supplies, intelligence and strong military support to the war effort."

The city of Galveston, Texas, Galveston Bay and Galveston County, Texas were named after him after a survey by José de Evia in 1785 while Bernardo de Gálvez was Viceroy of New Spain.

Excerpted and summarized from Internet postings which were based on Caughey, John Walton (1998) *Bernardo de Gálvez in Louisiana 1776-1783* (Pelican) and Chávez, Thomas (2002) *Spain and the Independence of the United States: An intrinsic gift* (University of New Mexico Press).

Source: Manuel Olmedo Checa