

General Bernardo de Gálvez: a Lagniappe American Citizen

In creole French Louisiana, Lagniappe is a southern term for “a little something extra.” Its origin is from the Spanish word “*la napa*,” meaning “something added.” General Bernardo de Gálvez y Madrid, Viscount of Galveston and Count of Gálvez represents that “something extra” to Americans. The revered Spanish military officer served as a Colonel and Governor of Spanish-ruled Louisiana in 1776. Though a native Spaniard, Gálvez also spoke French, which proved quite beneficial to him as Governor of the former French colony, Louisiana. And, despite his allegiance to Spain, Gálvez expressed patriotic sentiments toward the revolutionary cause. First, Gálvez risked his life, and those of his soldiers, to smuggle much-needed rations, medicine, ammunition and supplies, as well as critical military intelligence, to American troops garrisoned along the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers in 1777 – two years before Spain officially declared war against Great Britain. In addition, Gálvez protected American patriots seeking refuge in Louisiana; he even prevented the British from capturing patriot James Willing, who had publicly conducted raids of British forts and ships up and down the Mississippi River. Moreover, he routinely exchanged military information with American patriots, including George Washington, Patrick Henry, Thomas Jefferson, and Oliver Pollock, and thwarted British attempts to utilize the port of New Orleans and the Mississippi River.

Most importantly, Gálvez’s strategic military success in securing British forces at Bayou Manchac (which officially represented Spain’s involvement in the American Revolutionary War), Baton Rouge and the ports of Natchez in 1779, Biloxi, New Orleans, and Mobile in 1780, and Pensacola in 1781 from the British greatly strengthened the allied forces’ control of the East Coast. Significantly, Gálvez’s two-month attack on Pensacola in 1781 was a strategic turning point in the Revolution, as Spain victoriously gained control of the capitol of British West Florida -- thus destroying any hope of a British fleet anchoring the Gulf of Mexico. Many historians believe Gálvez’s critical port victories ultimately led to the British surrender at Yorktown.

Even when Gálvez was injured during the Siege at Pensacola, he remained loyal and committed to the colonists’ fight for freedom. Throughout the war, Gálvez always highly regarded the interests of the American patriots, thus garnering respect and gratitude from soldiers of all ranks and ethnicities and military leaders alike. His sound reasoning and judgment even led General Washington to enlist him in drafting Revolutionary War treaty terms. And, when his wartime services were no longer needed, Gálvez’s contributions to the burgeoning United States continued. He helped navigate previously unchartered territories, including the Gulf of Mexico.

Although Gálvez died in 1786, his legacy lives on as the United States continues to honor him, including cities bearing his name in Galveston, Texas and Galvez, Louisiana. Plazas, government office buildings, streets and statues also bear his name in Washington, D.C., Mobile, Baton Rouge, New Orleans, and Pensacola.

Gálvez’s contribution to the American cause for freedom was so significant that General George Washington and the Continental Congress formally applauded his service on October 31, 1778. And, just four years ago, in 2014, the United States Congress officially granted him

honorary citizenship to the United States, a title bestowed on only seven other individuals since the birth of our great nation, thus making him a true Lagniappe American citizen.

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