



# *Un Hombre Esencial*

## *An Essential Man*

Bernardo de Gálvez's contributions to the Revolutionary cause were critical in battles along the Gulf Coast.

By Nancy Mann Jackson

In December 2014, Congress made good on a 231-year-old promise when it hung a portrait of Bernardo de Gálvez in the U.S. Capitol. Gálvez, a Spanish military leader who became a hero in the Colonies during the Revolution, had been long forgotten by many Americans.

But those who remembered him waged a long campaign to convince congressional leaders to honor the promise made by the Continental Congress in 1783 to hang his portrait in their meeting place. (See page 46 for more on the portrait.)

More than just the fulfillment of a promise, the Gálvez portrait that now hangs in the Capitol symbolizes the crucial contributions made by Spaniards in the fight for American independence. And as the people of the United States reflect an increasingly diverse ancestry, it is important for Americans to understand their shared past in building the country's institutions and culture.

"As we become more globally connected through social media and the ease of international travel, I believe we are more aware of the importance of our allies," says DAR President General Lynn Young. "Without the assistance of Spain and France, the Revolutionary War may have had a much different outcome."

Many Americans are surprised to learn that the War of Independence was not fought exclusively in the original 13 Colonies, and that key battles also took place in what was known as the Gulf Coast Campaign, led by Gálvez. "His help in protecting the Port of New Orleans and thus the Mississippi River and the Gulf Coast made him indispensable to the Patriot effort," Mrs. Young says.

### Early Successes

Born in Spain in 1746, Gálvez attended the military academy at Ávila and began his career as a soldier at the age of 16. He fought for Spanish interests in Portugal and Mexico, which was then part of New Spain, and in 1770 became the commandant of arms over two northern provinces

of New Spain. After returning to Spain he spent time in France, where he learned to speak French, which prepared him well to serve in Louisiana.

Gálvez was sent to Louisiana in 1777 to serve as a colonel and interim governor of the territory, which was later part of the Louisiana Purchase. There, Gálvez would participate in the freedom-fighting work that would cement his status as a patriotic hero.

### Aiding Americans, Fighting British

Gálvez endeared himself to the American cause because of his willingness to help Revolutionary troops secure the supplies they needed and, eventually, through his ability to

defeat British troops in key battles.

The British had blockaded many of the Colonies' ports, but the route from New Orleans up the Mississippi River was a viable alternative for shipping supplies. King Charles III (or Carlos) of Spain, who had recently lost Florida to Great Britain, instructed Gálvez to smuggle goods for American troops along that route. Working with Irish-American Patriot and Revolutionary financier Oliver Pollock, Gálvez shipped gunpowder, muskets, uniforms, medicine and other supplies to Colonial troops.

In 1779, Spain declared war on Great Britain, and Gálvez was in a perfect position to lead Spanish troops against British troops fighting in America. Gálvez intercepted a secret letter from Britain's King George III to General John Campbell detailing Britain's plans to attack New Orleans. Gálvez was able to swiftly and secretly prepare Louisiana and its capital city for battle.

That year, Gálvez successfully defeated British forces at Bayou Manchac, about 115 miles up the Mississippi River from New Orleans; Baton Rouge, La.; and Natchez, Miss. The Battle of Baton Rouge freed the lower Mississippi Valley from British control and secured New Orleans. In 1780, Gálvez recaptured Mobile, Ala., from the British in the

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DAR PRESIDENT GENERAL LYNN YOUNG



Battle of Fort Charlotte. And in 1781, he attacked Pensacola, which was the British capital of West Florida. After taking Pensacola and Mobile, Gálvez left the British without a base along the Gulf Coast.

When the War of Independence came to an end, Gálvez was one of the international leaders who helped draft the terms of the Treaty of Paris in 1783. His contributions to the American victory were widely recognized by the Founding Fathers. Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry even wrote him letters of thanks for his service.

### Sharing His Story

In the more than 200 years since Gálvez helped win the war for American independence, his name has been largely overlooked among the era's great Patriots. There are pockets of awareness of Gálvez in some areas across the country: The city of Galveston, Texas, is named for him, as is Galvez Street in New Orleans. However, the role that he and his Spanish troops played in winning American freedom is mostly unknown, says Tyler Hancock, who leads the DAR Spanish Task Force as national vice chair of the Lineage Research Committee.

"As the number of Americans of Spanish descent continues to grow, it has become increasingly important to share the story of Gálvez and those who fought with him," Ms. Hancock says. "When speaking to groups of schoolchildren, they all appreciate knowing the role their ancestors played in our independence, whether it was serving with Gálvez, serving with one of the original 13 Colonies or donating money in the form of a *donativo*, or contribution.

"When children learn that their ancestors may have participated in the Revolutionary War and had a hand in our American independence, the look on their faces is priceless," she says. 🇺🇸

See page 48 for more on Spanish Patriots.

## Patient for A Portrait

In 2013, Teresa Valcarce's mother sent a newspaper clipping from her native Spain. The story detailed how the Continental Congress had passed a resolution in 1783 to honor Bernardo de Gálvez, a Spanish hero of the Revolution, by placing his portrait "in the room in which Congress meets." However, that portrait had never been hung, according to the Spanish newspaper.

After reading the article, Valcarce decided she could take care of it. "I work down the street from the Congress," she said. "I'll just go down there and tell them to put it up," she told *The Washington Post*.

It wasn't that simple. Valcarce quickly learned that making something happen in Washington, D.C., requires patience, strategy and plenty of allies. But she was dedicated: She spent more than two years researching the portrait and garnering support from archivists, expatriates, historians, professors, genealogical societies and historical groups. Eventually Valcarce connected with Senator Robert Menendez of New Jersey, who helped her navigate the inner workings of the Capitol.

In December 2014, the Gálvez portrait was finally hung in the Foreign Relations Room at the Capitol. Gálvez was also made an honorary U.S. citizen, a privilege that has been granted to only a handful of individuals, including Mother Theresa and Winston Churchill.

"As an American and Spanish citizen, it was my duty to recover a forgotten page of our common history," Valcarce says. "Every country



has the responsibility to care about and recognize their heroes, and every citizen has the responsibility to help recover the history of our country. As Americans, we know and value how hard it was to get our freedom and how hard it is to preserve it today. We don't forget our heroes and friends, neither our current ones nor those who lived more than 200 years ago."

The DAR supported Valcarce's campaign by housing the Gálvez portrait in the DAR Museum's fine art storage area for three months until Congress agreed to hang it.

Valcarce complimented DAR members who were "there in those moments when I was desperately in need of help," she says. "The spirit of the DAR and its members is an inspiration."

Valcarce hopes her work to honor Gálvez will be an important step toward honoring the many Spanish contributions to U.S. history.

"Recognizing the figure of Bernardo de Gálvez and getting his portrait displayed on the walls of Congress tightens the relationships between both countries and closes an unfinished chapter of our county's history," she continues. "Finally, it fulfills the wishes of our Founding Fathers when they passed the original resolution."