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A Chronological Journey through the Revolutionary War

Sunday, October 15, 2023

ARP284 Pensacola



American Revolution Podcast

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Spring of 1781: the Spanish Army lays siege to the British at Fort George in Pensacola in West Florida



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Most of what I've been covering recently is the fighting through the south: Virginia, Georgia, and the week I'm going to head a little further south.

While the British and Americans were fighting in the southern states, the British had another fight all the way up in Mexico. We last focused on this region back in [Episode 229](#) when Spain first entered the war in 1763. General Bernardo de Gálvez took Baton Rouge and forced out the British outposts in what is today Louisiana.

Spain was not planning on a defensive war. It wanted to capture more territory wherever possible. Once he secured the area around Baton Rouge, he prepared for new offensives on British outposts in what is today

Fort Charlotte

Several months after his capture of Baton Rouge, Gálvez launched a fleet from New Orleans with the intent to capture the British Fort Charlotte, on the western shore of Mobile Bay. He had requested additional reinforcements from the British.

but had to proceed without them. It took several weeks for the fleet to land on February 9, 1780, at Fort Charlotte. A couple of weeks later, reinforcements from Cuba brought his total force to about 1200 :

Gálvez received word that the British garrison at Fort Charlotte was only about 300 men. Fort Charlotte had originally been Fort Conde, built by the French. At the end of the Seven Years War, the French burned the fort before turning the area over to the British. Although the British had rebuilt the fort, by the time the Revolution began, it had fallen into disrepair again. The garrison consisted of one regiment of regulars (the 60th) along with loyalists from Maryland and Pennsylvania, as well as some local militia. Captain **Elias Durnford** commanded the fort.

On March 1, Gálvez demanded the fort's surrender, which Durnford refused. Gálvez prepared for a siege, setting up cannons around the fort. Meanwhile Durnford sent an urgent request to General John Campbell at Pensacola for reinforcements. Campbell sent a relief column, which had to march overland. It was a difficult passage, made worse by heavy rains.

Spanish artillery hammered the fort for about two weeks, finally breaching the fort walls on March 13. The following day the British garrison surrendered.

With the fall of Fort Charlotte, Gálvez focused on the larger prize of Pensacola. Until he could get more reinforcements, however, Gálvez satisfied himself with securing Fort Charlotte, then traveling to Cuba to request more reinforcements.

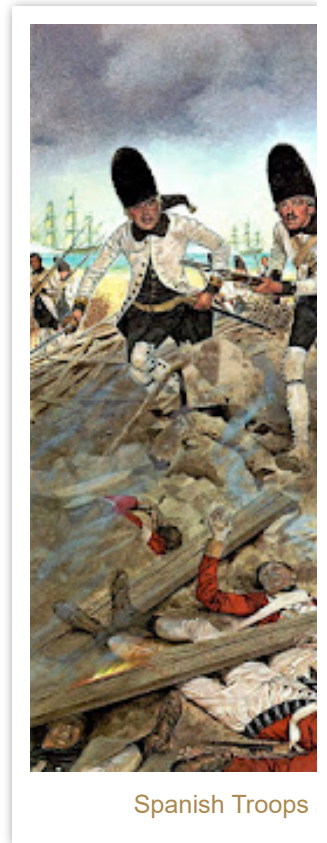
Gálvez had tried to bring a small fleet from Havana to Pensacola in the fall of 1780. The offensive fleet was wiped out by a hurricane.

Gálvez returned to Havana to raise another army. He left a force of 200 Spanish regulars in a new fort on the east side of Mobile Bay, only about thirty miles from Pensacola.

Battle of Mobile Bay

General Campbell commanded about 500 soldiers at Pensacola. Some were British regulars, along with Waldecker grenadiers. Waldeck was one of many small German states, like the Hessians, who had loaned soldiers to the British army.

The bulk of Campbell's forces were provincial regiments from Pennsylvania and Maryland. After the British severely weakened Spanish forces, Campbell sent a force of about 800 men led by Waldecker Captain Hanxleden. None of these were regulars. Hanxleden took a company of Waldeckers, but half of his force was composed of Loyalists. The other half was Creek, Chickasaw and Choctaw warriors who had agreed to fight for the British.



Spanish Troops

The Hanxleden expedition took three days to reach the Spanish defenses on January 6, 1781. The following morning at dawn. Many of the surprised Spanish were caught outside of the defenses. soldiers rushed for a nearby boat, the attackers fired a volley and cut them down. Native warriors the dead and wounded to scalp them.

The main Spanish force got into its defenses and opened fire. The Spanish commander on site, Lie Castro y Gutiérrez launched a bayonet charge against the enemy. The British commander, Captain killed along with about twenty other soldiers. Although the Spanish were heavily outnumbered, the the attackers who turned and fled. The remaining expedition returned to Pensacola.

British Defenses

Over the winter, the British received more reinforcements. By early 1781, General Campbell comm of about 1300 British regulars, German soldiers, provincial regiments, and militia.



John Campbell

I've mentioned General Campbell before, Campbell was a Scottish c the British army during the Jacobite Rising of 1745. His father was a The younger Campbell helped put down the rebellion by his fellow cc Following the **Battle of Culloden**, his unit deployed to Europe where t Flanders in 1747.

He returned to active service during the Seven Years War as an offic Watch Regiment under **James Wolfe**. Campbell was wounded in the Fort Ticonderoga in 1758 during the French and Indian War. By the e was a lieutenant colonel commanding a regiment in the West Indies.

By 1775, Campbell was serving under General **Thomas Gage** in Bos of the relief force that rescued the British column at Lexington. The f was part of the British attack that captured New York City. In 1778, he received promotion to brigad commission as commander of West Florida, commanding from Pensacola.

Campbell found the defenses in West Florida to be woefully inadequate and immediately began req soldiers and resources to build fortifications. He spent much of the next two years using what he co British defenses in the region. In early 1779, he received a promotion to major general and comma all of West Florida, which stretched from the Mississippi River to just west of what is today Tallahass

Pensacola itself had been growing into a rather sizable town by colonial standards. But by 1780, th considerably. Part of this was the threat of war, but there was also a major earthquake in the region The quake damaged or destroyed most buildings in the town. Many colonists who could, left Pensac of the empire. By 1781, there were only a few hundred residents. A good portion of those were sla local militia was not a big consideration in British defenses.

He also had the promised assistance of nearly 2000 native warriors, primarily Choctaw and Creek. many of the native warriors had left. Campbell still had about 800 warriors, but sent another 300 ho

the Spanish were preparing another attack.

The Spanish commander, Gálvez, had received intelligence reports on British defenses in 1780, but been busy over the winter building more defenses.

The primary defensive work was **Fort George**. The British had originally built the fort in 1778 to protect Pensacola. General Campbell spent considerable time improving the fort's defenses. The fort sat on a hill just to the north of the town where it had a field of fire into the town and into the water beyond it. The fort was an earthen work, designed to withstand artillery fire. It was surrounded by a ditch and wooden palisades to prevent any direct assault.

Since there was a slightly higher hill to the north of the fort that an enemy could use against the fort, Gálvez built two redoubts, known as the Queen's Redoubt and the Prince of Wales Redoubt to deny the enemy access to high ground.

To prevent entry into the bay, the British had also garrisoned a long established fort just south of the bay entrance to Pensacola, known as the Royal Navy Redoubt.

Spanish Fleet from Cuba

After the hurricane in the fall of 1780, prevented a Spanish invasion at that time, Gálvez returned to Cuba. To succeed again, he sought an overwhelming force to take Pensacola and West Florida for the Spanish. In February 1781, Gálvez got the support he needed from Havana. A Spanish fleet carried about 1300 Spanish regulars. Captain Jose Calvo de Irazabal commanded the fleet.

Among the Spanish soldiers was Spain's Hibernia Regiment, made up of Irish soldiers who had joined the Spanish army. The regimental commander was **Arturo O'Neil**, an Irish-born officer who had served in the Spanish Army for more than 25 years. O'Neil and the Hibernia regiment had participated in numerous campaigns across Europe, Africa, and South America over the years.

The regiment had shipped out for Havana in 1780, part of a fleet of 141 ships carrying a total of nearly 12,000 infantry under the command of Lieutenant General Victoria de Navia. This was the largest single Spanish army sent across the Atlantic ever.

In Cuba, O'Neill met with Gálvez on one of Gálvez's first trips to Havana looking for reinforcements. The two officers knew each other from campaigning in Algiers many years earlier. The Hibernian Regiment remained in Cuba when Gálvez made his first attempt on Pensacola in the fall of 1780, when it was wiped out by the hurricane. When Gálvez returned to Cuba, O'Neill's regiment deployed with the new fleet.

The fleet consisted of thirty large ships, several smaller gunboats and over 1300 soldiers. It took a week for the fleet to sail from Havana to Mobile Bay.

On March 9, 1781, the fleet began to arrive. That evening part of the army landed on Santa Rosa Island just south of Pensacola. The Spanish found that the British artillery from the Royal Navy Redoubt had been moved to the island.



Bern

operational and did not fire on them. The Hiberniens set up their own artillery and forced the withdrawals that were in Pensacola Bay.

Gálvez attempted to sail into the bay. The bay was a difficult one. Barrier islands made the entryway and sandbanks made the draft rather shallow for larger ships. Gálvez had to offload supplies to Saragosa in order to make sure the ships could clear the shallow water in the entrance to the bay.

One of the ships, the 64 gun *San Ramon* ended up getting grounded in its attempt to enter the bay. British artillery was able to fire on the ships, although the distance from Fort George made the fire relatively ineffective.

Still the shallow water and enemy fire was enough for the Spanish Naval commander, Captain Calvo, to refuse to send any more naval vessels into Pensacola Bay. Gálvez disagreed. As Governor of Louisiana, he was able to commandeer the part of the fleet that was from Louisiana and enter the bay with those ships. Gálvez sailed into Pensacola bay on March 18 aboard the *Gálveztown*. Three other ships from Louisiana followed.

Calvo and the rest of the fleet refused to enter, despite the fact that British artillery fire in the ships had proven ineffective. Calvo decided that his mission to deliver his army to Pensacola was complete. He raised anchor and sailed his ships back to Havana, leaving a small army on their own.

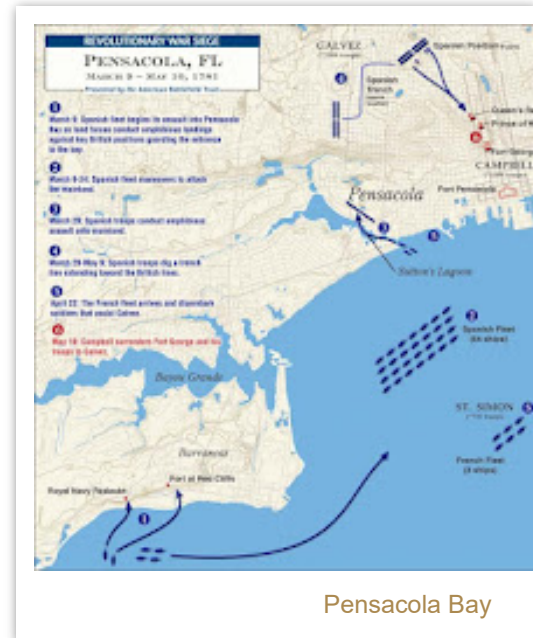
The Siege

Gálvez made O'Neill his aide-de-camp and put O'Neill in charge of scouting patrols. A few days later O'Neill's scouts landed on the mainland near Pensacola and defended against an attack by about 40 Choctaw warriors. As the Spanish established themselves just outside of Pensacola, they received reinforcements from Spanish troops marching overland from Mobile.

After scouting the considerable British defenses, Gálvez and O'Neill decided against a direct assault and opted for a siege. The Spanish dug trenches and built a covered road to protect soldiers from British artillery.

On April 12, while reconnoitering British fortifications, Gálvez was wounded. He turned over battlefield command to one of his officers and a close friend, Colonel José de Ezpeleta.

A week later, the Choctaw launched another attack. While fighting off this attack, the Spanish observed a British relief fleet approaching the bay. They feared a British relief fleet would trap them inside the bay and compel them to retreat overland to Mobile or surrender. However, it turned out to be a joint Spanish-French fleet under the command of Solano y Bote and François-Aymar de Monteil. The fleet carried thousands more soldiers and sailed under the command of Field Marshal Juan Manuel de Cajigal.





Spanish at Pensacola

Havana had received reports that a British fleet was moving to relieve Pensacola, so the Spanish had to ensure a Spanish victory. After the fleet arrived, the attacking force totaled over 8000 soldiers. Forces landed on April 22. This time, the Spanish remained to protect the besiegers from a

The Spanish continued to dig trenches and bring in more men and artillery. Several days after the British arrival, the Choctaw launched a third attack, which was repulsed once again. Two days later, British forces from the Queen's Redoubt launched an assault on the Spanish positions that were getting too close to the Spanish lines. They were also driven back into their defensive

By April 30, Gálvez believed the Spanish could launch an all-out attack on Fort George. Spanish artillery began firing in an attack that continued day after day. The size of the attack force, only a massive British relief fleet or an act of God could prevent the fall of

Then, a few days into the assault, another hurricane blew over the region. The fleet had to move out to sea, but was being wrecked against the shore. Gálvez and the army, however, remained in place. Torrential rain fell on the trenches with water as the men did the best they could

As the hurricane subsided a group of Creek chiefs came to meet with Gálvez. They offered to sell cattle to the army and offered to mediate an agreement with the other Creek and Choctaw warriors who had attacked the Spanish. It appears the local tribes realized that the Spanish were likely to prevail and wanted to get on their good side before it was too late.

Shortly after the visit, a lucky Spanish shot managed to hit the ammunition magazine in one of the British redoubts, killing much of the garrison. This was what the British called the Queen's Redoubt, and what the Spanish called Fort Crescent. Colonel Ezpeleta then charged into the redoubt, capturing it for Spain. He then moved howitzers and cannons into the remains of the redoubt to open fire on the other British redoubt and Fort George.



Destruction of Queen's Redoubt

The British returned fire, but soon realized that their position was untenable. On May 8, two days after the fall of the Queen's Redoubt, General Campbell accepted the inevitable. He ordered Fort George to raise a white flag and surrender.

Aftermath

Over the course of the Siege, the British had suffered about 200 casualties, with about 1100 troops becoming Spanish prisoners of war. The Spanish attackers had lost 74 dead and 198 wounded.

Gálvez personally accepted the British surrender. West Florida became a Spanish colony. On June 8, 1763, the Spanish-French fleet, along with most of the army, left Pensacola and returned to Havana. The fleet also took other British possessions in the West Indies. Spain's Hibernia regiment returned to Havana with the rest of the army, but their commander, Colonel O'Neill, remained in Pensacola. Gálvez appointed O'Neill to serve as Spanish military-governor.



Arturo O'Neill

Under the terms of capitulation, Spain took prisoner the entire British garrison, the possession of the fort and all its supplies, and the entire colony of West Florida. On some accounts about 300 British colonists who were living in West Florida fled to Georgia following the Spanish takeover of the colony. The Spanish captured the garrison back to British occupied New York where they were held in parole until exchanged.

Back in Pensacola, Governor O'Neill did his best to prepare a defense against a future British attack. He built up the Royal Navy Redoubt in Pensacola Bay to make it more difficult for an enemy fleet to enter. The Redoubt was deemed too far from the coast, so O'Neill built a second fort closer to the coast. These forts would later become known as **Fort Barrancas Coloradas** and **Fort Mifflin**, artillery positions on Santa Rosa Island, on the other side of the entire Pensacola Bay in order to make any attempted entry by ship very costly.

O'Neill also spent considerable time building up the defenses north of Fort George in order to protect against a land-based attack.

As it turned out the defenses would not be needed. The British would not attempt to retake West Florida. The Spanish victory at Pensacola would put the colony under Spain's control for the remainder of the War. When the war ended, the British would also cede East Florida to Spain. The Spanish victory at Pensacola helped to bring about that.

Next Week, we return to the Carolinas, where the absence of the British army under General Cornwallis and the Continental militia and Continentals under General Greene to retake the region.

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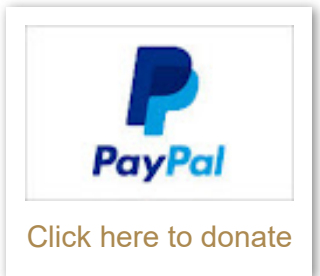


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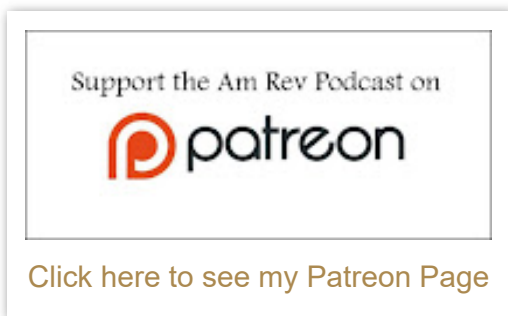
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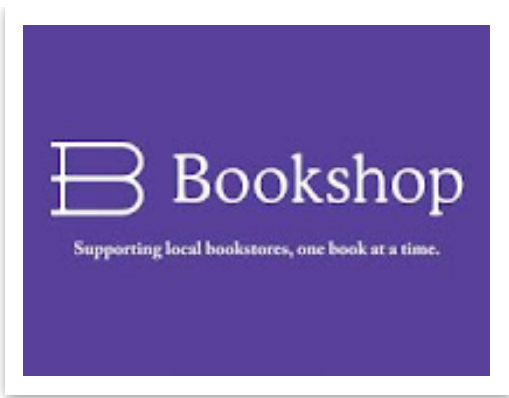
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