

**Spanish Floridians and the American Revolution: A Look into the Efforts Spanish
Floridians Played Towards the Weakening of British Power in North America from
1779-1781.**

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Introduction

When it comes to discussing the American Revolutionary War, many historians and history enthusiasts will often have New England (Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Massachusetts and Connecticut) and the other former British Colonies (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia) in mind due to their historical associations with not only the British but also the Patriots and leaders such as George Washington. However, it is often not mentioned that there were two additional British colonies (albeit they were Spanish for much of their history and only briefly British) that were around during the time of the American Revolutionary War – East Florida (with its capital in St. Augustine, previously established by the Spanish in 1565) and West Florida (with its capital in Pensacola which was a British settlement built atop the ruins of a Spanish fort named San Miguel de Panzacola).

The British Floridas, which were now home to a predominantly British colonial population, was known as a loyalist haven and the few battles that took place there between the Patriots and the British were largely failures for the Patriots. In fact, according to historian Roger Smith, on August 11, 1776, when British St. Augustine received the news of the Declaration of Independence, the largely British inhabitants became so enraged that they built effigies of Patriots such as John Hancock and Samuel Adams, hung them on trees in the plaza and set them on fire in protest.¹ Such acts reflect the strong loyalist sentiment that existed in the Floridas at the time. However, while the Floridas were largely loyalist, there still existed a minority of dissenters of Spanish *Floridanos* (Hispanic Floridians) that remained in St. Augustine. Through

¹ Dr. Ben Brotemarkle, “Florida’s importance in Revolutionary War largely overlooked”, *Florida Today*, October 18, 2016, <https://myfloridahistory.org/frontiers/article/135>.

these individuals it would ultimately be revealed that the Floridas also had an Achilles heel that would ultimately be exploited by their Catholic enemy further south, Spain in a move that would ultimately not only result in Spain reconquering the Floridas, but it would also directly go on to provide the Patriots with a much-needed advantage over the British.

As will be revealed in this paper, thanks to the efforts of these Spanish Floridian spies and dissenters as well as the leadership of Spanish Louisiana Governor Bernardo de Gálvez at the decisive 1781 Siege of Pensacola, the British were left in a weakened state which would prove pivotal to paving the way for a Patriot victory at the Siege of Yorktown that would take place months later.

Historical Background

In the summer of 1762, the British sieged the Spanish port city of Havana resulting in a brief period of occupation of the important city. This pushed the Spanish into negotiations with the British resulting in the 1763 Treaty of Paris with one of its provisions being the cession of Spanish Florida to Great Britain in exchange for the return of Cuba.² Thus, Spanish Florida, once home to the Presidio town of St. Augustine established in 1565 and several failed Catholic mission settlements, had become British and was split into 2 colonies – East Florida and West Florida. With the transfer, the bulk of the Spanish *Floridano* population had departed with the majority going to Cuba or to New Spain and most of the properties in St. Augustine being sold off to new British settlers.³ While Florida was lost, the Spanish however did manage to receive

² Robert L. Gold, "Politics and Property during the Transfer of Florida from Spanish to English Rule, 1763-1764." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1963): 16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30139990>.

³ Robert L. Gold, "That Infamous Floridian, Jesse Fish." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (1973): 3. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30150975>.

Louisiana. As part of the 1763 Treaty, France agreed to cede Louisiana (a land they did not value as much) to Spain which would include the city of New Orleans.⁴ Under Spanish rule, New Orleans would go on to become a very prominent city in Spanish America inhabited both by Francophone speakers as well as Hispanophone speakers. Louisiana also served as a territorial buffer to halt British southward expansion towards her silver mines in what is today Mexico.⁵

By 1770, there were brewing troubles in British Boston further north, and as a result of (but not limited to) ongoing restrictive British policies in response to said troubles, a separatist sentiment significantly grew and transformed into a larger movement for independence from the British Motherland.⁶ By that time, Spanish Louisiana was being governed by Luis de Unzaga and following the Battles of Lexington and Concord in 1775, Unzaga was ordered by the Spanish authorities to maintain a stance of neutrality. Despite the stance of neutrality, he was also told to be receptive with the Patriots. In fact, in April 1776, Governor Unzaga gave refuge to several Patriot ships in New Orleans that were being pursued by the Royal Navy.⁷ In May 1776, Unzaga set up a shell company in New Orleans called Roderigue Hortalez et Cie which was used to clandestinely supply contraband gunpowder, firearms, blankets, food, medicine and more to the Patriots without the British being any the wiser. Connections to the Patriots were also maintained through the collaboration with Irish-American financier Oliver Pollock who also assisted in financing the Patriots as well as supplying them with arms, ammunition, medications and

⁴ Woodward, Ralph Lee. "Spanish Commercial Policy in Louisiana, 1763-1803." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 44, no. 2 (2003): 137. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4233915>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Roy Clark Hanaway, "The Causes of The American Revolution Reconsidered." *Social Science* 3, no. 4 (1928): 395. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23902311>.

⁷ Jose Manuel Guerrero Acosta, *Memorias Recobradas: España, Nueva Orleans y La Ayuda A la Revolucion Norteamericana (Recovered Memories: Spain, New Orleans and the Support for the American Revolution)* (Biscay: Iberdrola, 2018), 131.

provisions with his own money as well as money from his Spanish and French contacts, including the Governor of Spanish Louisiana and the Captain-General of Cuba.

In 1777, Unzaga was then succeeded by the malagueño Bernardo de Gálvez who allowed the assistance to the Patriots to continue under his administration. In 1777, Governor de Gálvez gave refuge to the Patriot privateering vessel *Columbus* owned by a Captain John Barry. In March 1777, 3000 kegs of gunpowder and uniforms were sent to the Patriots and in June 1778, a total of \$39,971 pesos were spent on provisions, uniforms for Illinois troops and naval supplies for the Patriots in New Orleans.⁸ Not long after all of this, the political situation for Spain would get much more complicated and thus Spain's role was to transform from that of a neutral European power in North America to that of an opponent in a war with Great Britain. It would be then that we would see Spain put together a much fiercer effort to weaken Great Britain's grasp in North America. This now takes us to the city of St. Augustine where we see Spain operating a clandestine spy network using some of the few remaining *Floridanos* in the city.

Spain Officially Joins the American Revolution and Spies on British Florida

Following the signing of the Treaty of Aranjuez, Spain aligned itself with France and declared war against Great Britain on June 21, 1779. Since they were now at war with the British Empire, Spain decided to further intensify their efforts against the British. One way they decided to do that was to utilize clandestine espionage. Given that there were a few remaining *Floridanos* in St. Augustine, Spain decided to harness the existing pre-British sentiment amongst these few *Floridanos* and utilize some of them as spies supplying Spanish authorities in Cuba with needed intelligence from inside the British Floridas. One of those spies was the native Spanish Floridian

⁸ Ibid, 131-136 & 193.

Luciano de Herrera who came from an old St. Augustine *Floridano* family. At the time of the cession of Florida to the British, the last Spanish Florida governor Melchor Feliú left behind seven soldiers and an interpreter in St. Augustine for the purpose of looking after a few certain properties for the Spanish Crown and one of those men was none other than Herrera himself.⁹

As one of the few Spanish *Floridanos* remaining in now-British St. Augustine, he became a spy for the Spanish authorities in Havana from very early on gathering intelligence in the region. As a clandestine spy, he gathered intelligence on the British including the whereabouts in 1776 of a Spanish vessel called the Santa Barbara that reportedly encountered bad weather and was pushed towards the Pennsylvania colony, the ongoing tensions and revolts between some of the British colonists and the British Crown and the number and location of British military and naval forces in North America, any rumors of British attacks against Spanish territories. Around 1777, he informed the Spanish authorities of how the Patriots persisted in their rebellion against the British and that the city of St. Augustine was growing in defensive importance for the British. That same year, he also reported of how the British planned to split New England from the other colonies by sending a British force from Canada led by General John Burgoyne through Lake Champlain and the Hudson River to New York City in order to join other British forces on Manhattan Island. Through 1778-1779, Herrera continued providing reports and on June 18, 1779 (a few days before Spain's declaration of war), Herrera informed the Spanish of how the Patriots were likely to successfully drive the British away from the Georgia colony. Following Spain's declaration of war that very year, Herrera continued to supply them with ongoing intelligence reports that is until St. Augustine's British Commander

⁹ Katherine S. Lawson, "Luciano de Herrera, Spanish Spy in British St. Augustine." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (1945): 170. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30138526>.

discovered his clandestine activities.¹⁰ However, he was not alone. Another one of the *Floridano* spies was Juan Francisco Ruiz del Canto Escalona, born in 1730 also in St. Augustine to a Spanish *Floridano* family with roots in Florida since around 1579. At the time of the cession to the British, Canto served as a real estate agent who assisted in the sale of structures in St. Augustine to the new British colonists.

He also had experience as an interpreter and negotiator with the Creeks who settled in West Florida.¹¹ While the Creeks were historically allied with the British, Canto noted that relations with the British continued to be strained which can be evidenced by the words of John Stuart of how the Creeks held what the Cherokee had told them “as incontestable proofs of our bad intentions.”¹² Following Spain’s declaration of war against Great Britain, Canto was then tasked by Captain-General of Cuba Don Diego Jose Navarro to go out on two expeditions to the Apalachee region in the Floridas where he was to camp at the former fort of San Marcos de Apalache and make contact with the Creeks located near the fort. The first took place in 1779 and the second in 1780. In both, Canto had made his way to Apalachee near the former fort of San Marcos de Apalache where he was met with several Creek men and women including Chief Tunape who received him. Canto had provided them with gifts and informed them of how Spain had declared war on the British and convinced them to remain neutral despite pressures from both the British and the Patriots. Canto was informed by the Creeks that around 400 warriors

¹⁰ Ibid, 170-176; Luciano de Herrera, “Letter from Luciano de Herrera to Spanish Authorities, March 21, 1777”, AGI (Archivo General de Indias) Papeles de Cuba 1227. In Lawson, “Luciano de Herrera”, 174-175; Light Townsend Cummins, *Spanish Observers and the American Revolution 1775-1783* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 20, 44, 65, 75, 98, 100 & 105.

¹¹ José Gueits Romero, “Juan Francisco Ruiz del Canto y Escalona (1730-1802): Promotor de la “Red de Espionaje Española” en La Florida.” *Revista Ejercito* No. 935 (March 2019): 93-95.

¹² Bryan C. Rindfleisch, “Cherokee Kings and Creek Kings: Intra-Indigenous Connections and Interactions in the Eighteenth-Century American South.” *The Journal of Southern History* 85, no. 4 (2019): 796–797. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26827688>.

were fighting alongside the British, that the garrison at Pensacola was in need of provisions and that the majority of the city's troops and provisions were shifted to the other posts alongside the Mississippi River. The Creeks assured Canto that the Spanish were free to use San Marcos de Apalache and got them to agree to being provided with two war drums and a flag with the Spanish coat of arms in order to rouse the people and declare that San Marcos de Apalache belonged to the Spanish Crown.¹³

His efforts did not end there as in early February 1780, while on his way from Apalachee to Spanish Louisiana to inform Governor Bernardo de Gálvez of his findings, a 34-canon British war frigate not far from Pensacola spotted him and opened fire on his vessel. Immediately, Canto guided his vessel to a nearby key for safety. On the next day, however, Canto decided to do the unthinkable and return back to the area where he was nearly killed the day before. This time, around 4 in the afternoon, he spotted a small schooner that was destined for Pensacola. He fired off two shots near the vessel and successfully intercepted it and the men onboard. Aboard the vessel were Captain Robert Holmes as well as several other Englishmen and at least three black men. These men were then taken to the Spanish authorities in Havana. Captain Holmes reportedly provided the Spanish authorities with some very useful intelligence on the British fort at Pensacola and the surrounding areas.¹⁴ This intelligence was then forwarded to the attention of Governor de Gálvez in New Orleans. These men were not the only spies working for Spain in the North American continent as even slaves such as Petit Jean from Mobile delivered messages to

¹³ James L. Hill, "'Bring Them What They Lack': Spanish-Creek Exchange and Alliance Making in a Maritime Borderland, 1763–1783." *Early American Studies* 12, no. 1 (2014): 62-63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24474846>; Gueits Romero, 97; Sherry Johnston, "The St. Augustine Hurricane of 1811: Disaster and the Question of Political Unrest on the Florida Frontier." *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (2005): 37 & 51-52. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30150915>; Cummins, *Spanish Observers*, 96-98.

¹⁴ Gueits Romero, 97-98.

and from Governor de Gálvez's ship in the Mobile River regarding British operations near the Pensacola region thus providing the Spanish Louisiana authorities with even more additional intelligence on the British in the region.¹⁵ With all of this information gathered, a siege of the fortifications of Pensacola was in the works.

Francisco Xavier Sanchez Provides Aid to Imprisoned Founding Fathers

While the Siege of Pensacola was being planned, it was business as usual for the British in St. Augustine. However, in 1780, St. Augustine would actually be the place where three of the Founding Fathers would actually be held captive by the British. Following the British Capture of Charleston on May 12, 1780, several Patriots were taken as prisoners by the British to the city of St. Augustine.¹⁶ Amongst those captives were Edward Rutledge, Arthur Middleton and Thomas Heyward Jr. and Christopher Gadsden from South Carolina. Rutledge, Middleton and Heyward were all signers of the Declaration of Independence.¹⁷ They were to be in St. Augustine for long. According to Josiah Smith's Diary, Gadsden was to leave St. Augustine aboard the brigantine Nancy Capt. Watson whereas Rutledge, Middleton and Heyward were to leave aboard the schooner East Florida. Smith also recorded of how a local St. Augustinian (which he called "a Native Spaniard, and who carries on the Butcher business here" [in St. Augustine]) named "Mr. Francis Sanches" presented the departing prisoners on the brigantine and the schooner with the departing gifts of "a good Yearling Heifer, half a large Hogg, some fowls & Ducks, and about

¹⁵ Kathleen DuVal, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2015), 173-174.

¹⁶ Alexander R. Stoesen, "The British Occupation of Charleston, 1780-1782." *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 63, no. 2 (1962): 71 & 77. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27566396>.

¹⁷ Thomas Jefferson, et al., "The Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776". At National Archives, "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription", Accessed July 5, 2026, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

100 very good pumpkins” which was done in gratitude for the respect the prisoners gave him during their stay in the city.¹⁸ This Spaniard was none other than Francisco Xavier Sanchez, a native St. Augustinian from a *Floridano* family who was a very prominent businessman and landowner who also operated a successful cattle empire and plantation named San Diego (which kept between 800-900 cattle, 30-40 horses and 34 slaves).¹⁹ Sanchez was yet another *Floridano* who, despite doing business during the British Period, still managed to hold an anti-British and pro-Spanish sentiment that ultimately allowed him to sympathize with Patriot captives which also included three of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

The Siege of Pensacola – The End Result

Having received the intelligence from Herrera and Canto, Governor de Gálvez’s plan was finally put together. Initially, the Spanish intended to attack Pensacola in 1780 towards the end of the year. Indeed, on October 16, 1780, the Spanish force – consisting of a chambequin, two packet-boats, a lugger and 57 transport ships commanded by Don Josef Solano as well as around 3,800 men led by Governor de Gálvez sailed from Havana to launch their siege. On the very next day, they encountered a powerful hurricane around 4 PM that lasted until around 9 PM that night causing the ships to separate and resulting in damage to the vessels, loss of cargo such as horses and even the loss of life of some crewmen. Most of the vessels that survived returned back to the port of Havana whereas a few others arrived at Mobile, New Orleans and Pensacola with no such

¹⁸ Mabel L. Webber, ed., “Josiah Smith’s Diary, 1780-1781: Annotated by Mabel L. Webber”, The South Carolina Historical and Genealogical Magazine Vol. 34, No. 1 (January 1933), 31-32.
https://dn790003.ca.archive.org/0/items/sim_south-carolina-historical-magazine_1933-01_34_1/sim_south-carolina-historical-magazine_1933-01_34_1.pdf.

¹⁹ Jane Landers, “Felipe Edimboro Sues for Manumission, Don Francisco Xavier Sanchez Contests”, In Richard Boyer & Geoffrey Spurling, eds., *Colonial Lives: Documents on Latin American History, 1550-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 249-250. This 1794 case involves a successful manumission case made against Mr. Sanchez where the slave, Felipe Edimboro, who was provided with his own attorney, had successfully won manumission.

siege taking place as planned.²⁰ The Spanish, however, were not going to be deterred in their efforts to weaken the enemy nor lose out on the opportunity to reconquer the Floridas which was once theirs.

A Spanish force of more or less around 7,224 people including Spaniards, Louisiana black and mulatto men, Flemish Walloons, Frenchmen and Irishmen would ultimately serve in the aid of Spain in this effort. An additional French force of around 725 men was also gathered to aid in the effort. Pensacola was being defended by around 2,000 British forces including of British soldiers, Waldeckians as well as Provincial loyalists from Pennsylvania and Maryland.²¹ On March 9, 1781, the first of the Spanish forces arrived ashore on the western end of nearby Santa Rosa Island and made camp. In the early morning hours of March 10, 1781, the Spanish captured three cannons and also seized two British vessels with seven British sailors who were seeking to feed the cattle on the island. Not long after the capture of Santa Rosa Island, the Spanish forces entered Pensacola Bay where they battled with the British forces. In April 1781, additional reinforcements arrived to assist in Spain's attack and not long after that, it became harder for the British to defend the fort given the fact that they were outnumbered. On May 8, 1781, a Spanish grenade blew up Pensacola's Half-Moon powder magazine destroying it and killing several British. The Spanish seized control of the battery and then fired heavy shots on Fort George. It was now the end of the line for the British. British General John Campbell rose a white flag of surrender at Fort George and following talks with the Spanish, the British marched out of Fort George and laid down their arms leaving Pensacola back to the Spanish.

²⁰ Everett C. Wilkie, (1983) "New Light On Gálvez's First Attempt to Attack Pensacola," *Florida Historical Quarterly*: Vol. 62: No. 2, Article 6. (1983), 194-199. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol62/iss2/6>.

²¹ Albert W. Haarmann, "The Siege of Pensacola: An Order of Battle," *Florida Historical Quarterly* Vol. 44: No. 3, Article 6. (1965), 193-197. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol44/iss3/6>.

The British had now lost a key fortress in the Deep South and the Spanish had also taken around 1,400 British prisoners which included General Campbell as well as Vice-Admiral Peter Chester who was the Governor and Captain-General of West Florida.²² Amongst those who had served alongside Governor de Gálvez include the Governor's brother-in-law Juan Antonio de Riaño as *teniente de fragata* (naval frigate lieutenant) as well as Julian Agustino, Juan Antonio de Bassot and Francisco Bouligny. Agustino was from Old Castille and he was a member of the Louisiana Infantry serving alongside Governor Bernardo de Gálvez previously at the 1780 Siege of Mobile. Bassot (from Lorraine, Germany) served in the Light troops of Louisiana and also fought alongside de Gálvez at Manchak, Baton Rouge, Natchez and Mobile. Bouligny (from Alicante) as lieutenant colonel also fought alongside de Gálvez at Fort Bute, Baton Rouge and Mobile and he would go on to become a Governor of Spanish Louisiana.²³ With such a force of men serving alongside him, Governor de Gálvez was able to deliver not only a major victory for the Spanish Crown but he was able to ultimately change the history of the Floridas forever as they were now in the process of returning formally to Spanish hands.

Conclusion

A few months later, the British would once again battle the Patriots at the Siege of Yorktown further north where the Patriots would land a victory against them. That victory would change the outcome of the war in favor of American Independence and result in the signing of

²² Eric Beerman, "'Yo Solo' Not 'Solo': Juan Antonio de Riaño," *Florida Historical Quarterly* Vol. 58: No. 2, Article 6. (1979), 178-182. <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol58/iss2/6>; Haarmann, 193; DuVal, *Independence Lost*, 189-215.

²³ Beerman, 174; Jack D.L. Holmes, *Honor and Fidelity: The Louisiana Infantry Regiment and The Louisiana Militia Companies 1766-1821* (Sulphur: Wise Publications, 2024), 89-90 citing "Service Sheet of Julian Agustino, December 31, 1792", AGS (Archivo General de Simancas) GM, leg. 7291, VIII, 106; Ibid, 93 citing "Service Sheet of Juan Antonio de Bassot, June 30, 1793", AGI Papeles de Cuba leg. 161-a; Ibid, 98 citing "Service Sheet of Francisco Bouligny, June 30, 1793", AGI Papeles de Cuba leg. 161-a.

the 1783 Treaty of Paris where the United States of America would finally be born. However, as has been reflected in this paper, such an effort was not only the fruit of the brave Patriots and the French who were allied with them, it was also equally the fruit of many efforts by yet another Old-World power – Spain. Luciano de Herrera’s espionage efforts provided the Spanish royal authorities with details on the efforts of the Patriots, existing tensions between British colonists and the British Crown as well as information on British vessels. Ruiz del Canto not only gave Spain the reassurance that they had allies amongst the Creek living near San Marcos de Apalache but he also gathered some crucial intelligence on the British fortifications at Pensacola. Be it via the Creeks or through the testimony gathered from Robert Holmes and the other British captives, Governor Bernardo de Gálvez was able to gather enough information in order to plan a fruitful and potent siege of the town.

Sanchez in East Florida, despite living as a successful *Floridano* businessman and planter in British St. Augustine, showed himself disposed favorably towards the captives being held by the British in the city. By providing them with aide, he also revealed that he himself may have done business with the British, but he was by no means entirely favorable to them. Even when an initial attempt to invade Pensacola ended in failure due to an unforeseeable act of God, Governor de Gálvez nevertheless took his chances with proceeding with the siege. The successful outcome of the Siege of Pensacola left the British demoralized and weakened. The capture of West Florida Governor Peter Chester by the Spanish and the fall of Fort George signaled that the tide of the American Revolution was slowly moving in favor of American independence. The usage of a risky clandestine spy network was a very strategic move on Spain’s part as it allowed them to gather the needed intelligence in order to take on such a foe. In American historiography, the Siege of Pensacola and its historical significance have been largely downplayed traditionally.

Yet, it should be argued that due to the clandestine espionage efforts by Spanish Floridians and the leadership of the Governor Bernardo de Gálvez, the British were left in a weakened state just a few months before Yorktown which left them in a more vulnerable state.

Indeed, thanks to the referenced efforts of the Spaniards (including Spanish Floridians) in the Floridas, the British suffered a devastating loss at the Siege of Pensacola just a few months before the Siege of Yorktown thus leaving the British in a weakened state and proving pivotal to paving the way for a foundational Patriot victory at the Siege of Yorktown. While Florida has historically been downplayed as an important place for the American Revolution, that should be completely reconsidered as there would likely be no United States of America had it not been for the efforts of Spanish Floridians and their Spanish leaders in New Orleans in seizing the opportunity to expel the British from the Florida peninsula.

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