



## The Revolutionary War Battle at "The Village"

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By Mike Bunn, Director of Historic Blakely State Park. Adapted from his forthcoming book,

*Fourteenth Colony: The Forgotten Story of the Gulf South During America's Revolutionary Era*



West Florida map, 1767 | Public Domain

After his capture of Mobile in March 1780, Bernardo de Gálvez had wanted to follow up on his success by moving straightaway for Pensacola. But he needed more men and supplies and the cooperation of authorities in Havana in order to obtain either. He therefore determined to return to New Orleans for the time being to plan his next move and left his trusted subordinate, Col. José Manuel de Ezpeleta y Galdeano, in charge at Mobile to solidify Spanish control of the city and surrounding region. Before his departure, Gálvez had authorized the construction of an observation post on Mobile Bay's eastern shore from which the Spanish could monitor British activity and better protect their newly won prize. The outpost stood near the small shoreside farming community which traced its origins to the French occupation of the region known simply "The Village" (La Aldea to the Spanish). Records are unclear as to the exact size, construction, and even the specific location of this outpost, but it likely consisted of some form of lightly fortified wooden stockade along the shoreline at the head of the bay near the route of modern Interstate 10 running between the modern cities of Daphne and Spanish Fort, about 8 miles east of the city of Mobile. This small fortification would become the site of the second deadliest battle in the war between the Spanish and the British for control of the Gulf Coast.

British forces at Pensacola, though reeling from the loss to the Spanish of multiple strategic garrisons and cities across the breadth of their colony of West Florida by 1780, were determined to not sit back and wait for another offensive. They actually hoped to retake Mobile, and targeted the little observation post on the bay's eastern shore as the first object in plans to make that happen. Gen. John Campbell assembled a force of some 500 men for the task, including regular troops, loyalist volunteers from Pennsylvania and Maryland, some German mercenaries, and allied Creek Indians. This small army was to cooperate with a naval squadron to be sent into Mobile Bay to prevent the Spanish from sending reinforcements to the exposed outpost at The Village and its garrison of about 200 men. The mixed British column, along with two four-pounder cannon they had to lug through the wilderness roads en route to their destination, departed Pensacola on January 3, 1781, intent on surprising and routing the Spaniards at The Village and moving on from there to retake Mobile. A few days later, three British ships slipped into Mobile Bay flying the flag of Spain so as to deceive the small garrison stationed on Dauphin Island and coordinate with the advancing infantry.



Bernardo de Gálvez | NPS

Just before dawn on Sunday, January 5, 1781, the British force arrived at The Village and stealthily advanced on the Spanish garrison there under cover of a thick fog and opened the attack. The British had divided their troops into two columns as they made their way to the Spanish entrenchments, ordering the Indians to surround the palisade while the other troops attacked head-on. The orderly plan broke down into a confusing free-or-all almost immediately once the battle opened, however, and in a matter of moments became a brutal, close-quarters contest featuring hand-to-hand combat and a flurry of shouting, gunshots, and bayonet thrusts. Some of the most eager British troops, led by the German mercenaries, nearly overran the Spanish in their outer works before they could even mount a defense, but, without adequate support in the van of the attack, were forced back by desperate defenders who rushed to meet them. Several Spaniards were gunned down or bayoneted in their trenches during the opening moments of this first furious assault. Others, caught outside the palisade, fled for their lives ahead of the advancing Indian warriors covering the open ground between the fortification and the shoreline, running toward the water where a lone small boat lay moored. A number were cut down by pursuers who, according to witnesses, followed them into the shallow water.



Philip Barton Key | Public Domain

At length the defenders managed to rally and slowed down the attackers before they could breach the palisade's walls. At some point early in the chaos of the frenzied initial assault, the stalwart Col. Johann Ludwig Wilhelm Von Hanxleden, leader of the German troops and in overall command of the assault, fell dead from a musket shot. Almost immediately the British attack began to lose coordination and devolve into isolated pockets of uncoordinated fighting. Command of the attacking force fell to Capt. Philip B. Key (uncle of future composer of the American national anthem Francis Scott Key), the erstwhile leader of the corps of Pennsylvania and Maryland loyalists. Suddenly thrust into overall command of men he had little familiarity with, the majority of them speaking a foreign language, Key was hard-pressed to manage the attack effectively, much less keep up its original momentum.

Many of the Indians that had marched with the British column—over half of their force—became the first to disengage.

Their initial fervor seemed to lose steam once they no longer had any stragglers outside the walls of the fort to chase down, and they appeared to have little enthusiasm for a more traditional advance on a fortified position. When other British officers fell dead in rapid succession, the entire offensive at last began to lose cohesion. Small groups of troops and Indians continued to fire on the fort in uncoordinated fashion for a few more minutes until the result became obvious. Finding themselves to be of no use to the beaten force and hearing a rumor that a Spanish fleet from Havana was en route to Mobile, the British warships in the bay below weighed anchor and returned to Pensacola. The battle would be remembered as the bloodiest day of the Revolutionary War in what became Alabama. At least 15 and perhaps as many as 20 members of the attacking army lay dead on the eastern shore's sandy soil once the smoke had cleared. Many more were wounded, with at least three of these casualties unable to retreat with the army and taken prisoner. For their part, the Spanish reported suffering 14 killed and 23 wounded in the process of repulsing the attack. In turning back the attempt to recapture Mobile, the battle set the stage for the campaign against West Florida's capital city.



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