



The Revolutionary War Battle for Mobile

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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



Detail, British West Florida in 1776, roughly including the Gulf Coast between the Mississippi River and the Apalachicola River | Darlington Digital Library at the University of Pittsburgh

Most people associate the fighting in the Revolutionary War exclusively with New England, the Atlantic Coast, and, among the more informed, perhaps, the interior woodlands of the Carolinas. But the Gulf Coast figured into this international war, as well. In the British colony of West Florida, which stretched from the Mississippi to the Chattahoochee and included large parts of what are now Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida, a high stakes contest between Spanish and British forces was waged concurrent to and associated with the war for American independence. This war within a war, fought between rival colonial powers alternately sympathetic or hostile to the concept of American independence, was conducted for control of West Florida. In battles on land and water from Baton Rouge to Pensacola between 1779 and 1781, the struggle for dominion over the “fourteenth colony” played out. Two of the larger battles took place along the shores of Mobile Bay. The first of those, the fight for the city of Mobile, is our subject for today.

In 1780 Mobile was a struggling frontier colonial outpost of some 300 or so individuals, a large portion of whom were either traders or in the employ of the British government. Yet the town stood as a strategically important Gulf port at the mouth of one of the largest river systems in North America, protected by Fort Charlotte, one of the largest fortifications in all of West Florida. The previous year, Bernardo de Gálvez already had seized control of an enormous swath of the colony in fighting along the Mississippi. With the dawn of the new year, he made plans to continue his campaign of conquest. Gálvez assembled a multinational, multiethnic army that eventually numbered over 2,000 men for the task. He landed this sizable force on the western shore of Mobile Bay, approximately 15 miles below the city of Mobile, in late February 1780. By the end of the month, the invaders had arrived at the outskirts of Mobile after heaving their enormous siege artillery through the humid coastal swamps.



Bernardo de Gálvez | Library of Congress

The next day, the British fired on a Spanish scouting party conducting a reconnaissance of Fort Charlotte, while one of Gálvez’s ships, the Valenzuela, moved into the Mobile River and lobbed a few shells in its direction from a distance. The battle for Mobile had begun.

Inside Fort Charlotte were approximately 300 troops and some forty pieces of artillery under the command of former West Florida governor Elias Durnford. On March 1 Gálvez sent a subordinate under a flag of truce through the no man’s land between the Spanish and British lines to demand the surrender of the outpost. Durnford replied in a defiant fashion, acknowledging the disparity of forces but claiming the fighting ability of his troops to be “much beyond your Excellency’s conception.” Extending an awkward professional courtesy, he asked if the Spaniard would be so kind as to stay and dine with him before returning to his army. The two enjoyed a sumptuous meal and drank glasses of wine to the healths of their respective Kings and friends before an amicable parting. As soon as the Spanish emissary had left, Durnford gathered his men and read aloud to them Gálvez’s demand for surrender. When he then read to them his defiant reply, they erupted into cheers. Seizing on the energy of the moment, Durnford at once offered publicly any man in his confident command too afraid to stand with him a chance to leave at that moment with no consequences. As he had calculated, not a soul took him up on the offer. The show of bravado both improved morale and bought precious time, for Durnford knew a relief force had been hastily assembled in Pensacola and had likely already begun the march west toward the imperiled city of Mobile. Neither they nor Durnford had any idea whether they would arrive in time to aid him in his plight, however.



Modern-day Fort Charlotte

On March 2, 1780, the Spanish army moved into a camp a mere 2,000 yards from the western gates of Fort Charlotte and formally began the siege. They began construction of batteries from which their large artillery pieces could be protected as they rained destruction on the British post. By the morning of March 12, Gálvez had his guns in position for the final bombardment, just a few hundred yards from the fort. At ten o’clock he opened on the fort with a thunderous barrage that rang out across the lower Mobile-Tensaw Delta. In short order, the deadly accurate fire of the Spanish artillerymen dismounted some of the guns at Fort Charlotte and inflicted heavy damage on its walls, opening gaps in places reportedly big enough for a man to walk through. As the sun began its slow descent into the western horizon, Durnford’s long-suffering little force found itself on ammunition and their ragged and battered fort in danger of being rendered untenable. The relief column from Pensacola was nowhere in sight. At dusk on March 12, 1780, Durnford raised a flag of truce over the ramparts of

his pummeled fort and the guns of the contending armies at last fell silent. At 10 a.m. on Tuesday, March 14, 1780, the British garrison marched out of their fort, colors flying and drums beating, and stacked arms. Moments later, the Union Jack was lowered and the Spanish flag set to the breeze over Fort Charlotte.

The capture of Mobile was of enormous consequence in the war between the Spanish and the British despite its relatively small casualty figures—the British suffered only one man killed and eleven wounded in the fighting in front of Mobile, while the victory came at the cost of eight killed and about a dozen wounded for the Spanish. Not only had the British, already suffering staggering reverses in the war with the upstart Americans elsewhere on the continent, lost another strategically vital post controlling one of West Florida’s most important harbors and interior river systems, but they had seen another of their armies captured and hauled off to prisons in Veracruz and Havana. Virtually all that remained of the colony of West Florida was Pensacola, and that prize now lay squarely in Gálvez’s sights.



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