

**GOVERNOR BERNARDO DE GALVEZ'S NEW ORLEANS BELLE:  
FELICITAS DE ST. MAXENT**

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(Resumen)

El ilustre soldado Bernardo de Gálvez nació en 1746 en el pueblo malagueño de Macharaviaya. Sirvió en la invasión de Argel en 1775 y al año fue destinado a Nueva Orleans donde casó con la criolla Felicitas de St. Maxent. Al terminar la guerra de 1783 el matrimonio regresó por un año a la península. Fue ascendido a virrey de México en 1785 donde murió al año. La viuda Felicitas regreso a España con sus cuatro hijos convirtiendo su palacete en Madrid en tertulia de los ilustrados de la capital, incluyendo al Conde de Aranda y Cabarrús, Sabatini, Moratín, etc. Fue desterrada en 1790 por dos años a Valladolid y Zaragoza por orden de la Reina María Luisa y Godoy. Murió en Aranjuez en 1799.

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Near the Department of State building on 21st and Virginia N.W. in Washington, D.C. is a monument with the typical general, mounted on the usual horse - - the unusual Bernardo de Gálvez -- the Spanish governor of the immense province of Louisiana, who contributed so much to the success of the American Revolution. This monument in the capital was sculptured under the direction of the famous Spanish sculptor, Juan de Avalos, who did also the Valley of the Fallen near Madrid in memory of the dead during the Spanish Civil War. The Gálvez monument, although the general appears considerably thinner than his portraits, was inaugurated by King Juan Carlos I as Spain's bicentennial gift to the United States in 1976 and in his presentation address at the unveiling of the monument on the third of June, the Spanish monarch stated:

On the unveiling and the presentation of this monument of Bernardo de Gálvez, the great Spanish soldier that contributed so decisively to the triumph of George Washington's army in its struggle for American Independence; I wish to remember in passing of the brilliant and valuable campaign which he commanded in the lands of the lower Mississippi Valley. The conquest of West Florida was, additionally a masterpiece of military strategy, which relieved the pressure by British forces against the American colonists who were fighting for their independence, contributing to the final victory of our armies and the

termination of the war with the birth of the United States. Bernardo de Gálvez...se casó con una criolla de Nueva Orleans...<sup>1</sup>

And who was this «criolla» from Louisiana that married Spain's famous war general at the time of the American Revolution? She was none other than Felicitas de St. Maxent, whose father was the co-founder of the city of St. Louis, the richest merchant of the territory of Louisiana and a hero in his own right during the conflict. To demonstrate these surprising early American-Spanish ties, not only did this New Orleans belle marry Bernardo de Gálvez at the commencement of the conflict, but her five sisters born at the capital near the mouth of the Mississippi all married distinguished Spanish military officers, including Gálvez's predecessor, a Basque although born «por casualidad» in the province of Málaga, lieutenant general Luis de Unzaga. Felicitas de St. Maxent's three brothers also did their part during the Gulf Coast campaigns as Spanish army officers. Her younger brother, Francisco Maximiliano, rose to the rank of field marshal, appointed Spanish commandant of Mobile and Pensacola, and captured at sea by British vessels while carrying the battle diary of the Gálvez victories on the Mississippi to be published in the press of the Spanish crown, *Gaceta de Madrid*.

Not only did this New Orleans belle have an illustrious clan, but her husband also descended from a noted family. Bernardo de Gálvez's father and three uncles all had vital positions at the time of the American Revolution. The former, Matías de Gálvez, commanded Spanish forces as captain general of Central America, which expelled British forces from that region, preventing the severing of the Spanish empire in the Americas and as a result, promoted to lieutenant general and to the prestigious position of viceroy of Mexico. Bernardo's «tío Antonio», the youngest of the four brothers also from the tiny malagueña village of Macharaviaya, was the banker of the family and during the conflict held the vital position of military commandant of the Bay of Cadiz, the Spanish port which supplied men, money, materiel and muskets to the embattled American forces through the port of New Orleans. «Tío Miguel» was the military adviser of the Casa Real and served as ambassador to the Prussian court of Frederick the Great and later at the Russian court of Catherine the Great in St. Petersburg, where he demonstrated the Gálvez commercial talents by importing highly prized Malaga wines during the long, cold Russian winter. On his death in the summer of 1792, his body was returned to Spain in one of his own wine barrels in a long, hot journey to his hometown near Malaga for burial. The last, but by far the most important, was «tío José», the omnipotent minister of the Indies, the key position for the military operations in support of the American cause during the conflict. He first gained prominence when sent to Mexico in 1765 as inspector general, serving for six years in this vital assignment. Much of his time was spent in the northern regions near the present borders of the United States. He oversaw the expulsion from Mexico of the Jesuits, many

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1. This paper is based on research in the author's book, *España y la Independencia de los Estados Unidos (1776-1783)*, Madrid: Colección MAPFRE 1492, Madrid, 1992.

of whom were in Baja California and in the province of Sonora. In addition to this mission, Gálvez sent two land and sea expeditions to Upper California in 1769 under Gaspar de Portolá and Fray Junípero Serra to establish presidios and missions. For carrying out these tasks, Carlos III granted him the aristocratic title of the marqués de la Sonora and vizconde de Sinaloa.

Returning to Bernardo who accompanied his uncle to Mexico, serving from 1765 to 1771 on the northern frontier, and wounded often in various engagements. On returning to Spain, Bernardo served for three years in the highly prized position as an exchange officer with the Cantabrian infantry regiment near Pau in southern France, studying the language which would prove valuable in his later assignment as governor of Louisiana.

Then for Bernardo in 1775, it was the disastrous invasion of Algiers of General Alejandro O'Reilly, who six years before had commanded the Spanish expedition that reasserted Spanish control of Louisiana after a revolt by the French population when the vast Louisiana Territory passed to Spanish control as a result of the peace treaty at the conclusion of the Seven Years' War. Curiously, Bernardo's future father-in-law, Gilbert Antoine de St. Maxent, from a French village near Verdun, was one of the few denizens of New Orleans who supported the new colonial power. Bernardo de Gálvez, like too many of his comrades during that summer day of 1775 on the North African coast, suffered severe wounds.

The following year, the American Colonists gave their Declaration of Independence on the 4th of July. José de Gálvez after his success in Mexico, was named to the powerful position of minister of the Indies, with responsibility for support of the American cause. He was instrumental in having his only nephew -- he himself had no children at that time -- promoted to coronel of the Louisiana infantry batallón, assuming command in New Orleans at the end of 1776. Bernardo soon replaced Governor Luis de Unzaga, who had recently married the primogenitor of the nine St. Maxent children, Isabel.

Bernardo at that time in New Orleans was still married to the army, and a bachelor, until he met the younger sister of the previous *gobernadora*, Felicitas de St. Maxent, a beautiful 19 year old widow, with a two year old daughter, Adelaida Destrehan. At the end of 1777, Bernardo turned his attention from martial to marital affairs, marrying Felicitas at his home due to a serious illness, desiring to fulfill his promise to marry in the event he were to die. Besides, and possibly even more important, he did not have the required royal permission for a governor to marry a native of the province. Additionally, it is easy to see why Bernardo fell in love with Felicitas. While Bernardo had somewhat of a combative personality, his New Orleans belle, by all accounts, was beautiful, intelligent, generous, loyal, and, had a wealthy father. Before Alexander von Humboldt departed Aranjuez in 1799 on his epic five year expedition to the Americas, he expressed interest in getting impressions of Mexico from the former «virreina» Felicitas, and found her, «of surprising beauty, and loved by all!»

With his «novia» as his nurse, Bernardo recovered rapidly and then threw himself into the task of supplying the blockaded Americans at Fort Pitt (Pittsburg)

through the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. This was the period before Spain officially declared war; thus, the support was largely done clandestinely from 1776-79, carried out by private Spanish companies, such as José Gardoqui and Sons of Bilbao, administered by Diego de Gardoqui, who would become Spain's first ambassador to the United States in 1784.

At the outbreak of war in June of 1779, Bernardo seized the British forts on the Mississippi at Manchac, Baton Rouge and Natchez and prevented the British from capturing St. Louis and the Arkansas post to the north. He also launched a joint Spanish-American expedition in Upper Illinois and captured Fort Joseph on the southeastern point of Lake Michigan. After New Year's day of 1780, Bernardo left Felicitas with Adelaida and their own one-year old daughter Matilde, in order to assault Fort Charlotte at Mobile. Mission accomplished; and then it was the epic assault on Pensacola. There, after two failed invasion attempts, the third time was the charm as Gálvez took Pensacola in May of the following year, forcing the bay after a delay by the naval commander, for which Bernardo de Gálvez is remembered in history and on his coat-of-arms as «Yo Solo».

Bernardo next went to Guarico on the northern coast of the Caribbean island of Hispaniola, where he received assignment to lead a large Hispanic-French expedition being assembled to attack the British bastion of Jamaica. However, Jamaica was never invaded during the conflict due in part to the defeat of the French naval squadron of admiral De Grasse near the island of Guadalupe by the British fleet of admiral George Rodney. Bernardo, of course, after three years service in France and with his years in Louisiana spoke French, an important asset in Guarico. Felicitas, additionally, was of great assistance in promoting Franco-Hispanic amity while making preparations for the projected invasion. In 1782 at Guarico, Bernardo became a proud father as Felicitas gave birth to their only son, Miguel.

At the conclusion of the conflict and anxious to have Bernardo join the victory celebration, King Carlos III recalled him to the Court, and to receive his impressions on the negotiations between Spain and the new nation of the United States. Back in Madrid, the Gálvez family lived in a «palacete» on Cibeles, close to the enormous Buenavista palace being constructed by the Duchess of Alba.

After 14 months in Spain, the Gálvezes returned to the Americas with Bernardo as captain general of Cuba, Louisiana and Florida, stationed in La Habana, with responsibility to oversee the relations with the United States. He was only in Cuba a short time, when he soon received word of the death of his father in Mexico. Bernardo was named to replace him as viceroy in 1785 and became very popular. Fame, though, is fleeting as death came to Bernardo de Gálvez near Mexico City on November 30, 1786, at forty years of age. A posthumous daughter was born eleven days later at the viceregal palace in Mexico City and baptized Guadalupe, in honor of México's patron saint. The following year, and in accordance with Bernardo's last will and testament, Felicitas was not to return to her home in New Orleans but go to Spain, where the children could receive a proper education, with the clan arriving in Madrid the following year.

Felicitas, who retained all of her beauty and charm, as well as a considerable inheritance left by Bernardo, was a rather merry widow in the «Villa y Corte», living in a «palacete» on Corredera Baja de San Pablo, in front of the fountain of the church of San Antonio de los Portugueses. She formed a close relationship with the Basque financier, Conde de Cabarrús, who had advised Bernardo on financial matters. Felicitas had one of Madrid's most famous «tertulias» of the era, attended by such «afrancesados» as: Cabarrús; the former ambassador to France and future minister of State, Conde de Aranda; the great playwright, Lorenzo Fernández de Moratín; the illustrious architect, Francisco Sabatini; the director of the Philippine Company, Gaspar Leal; the Intendant of Louisiana, Martín Navarro; in addition to many other figures of the Spanish Enlightenment. But with the death of Carlos III in 1788 and the outbreak of the French Revolution the following July, Spain suffered traumatic changes. Manuel Godoy commenced his stranglehold on the political power of Spain and feared that the French Revolution would erupt in neighbouring Spain. As a result of her «tertulia» and close relationship with Cabarrús who had been imprisoned for silver contraband and political reasons, Felicitas and her three daughters were exiled for two years in Zaragoza and Valladolid. With Aranda assuming control of the Ministry of State in 1792, Felicitas was released and reunited in Madrid with her son Miguel, who had been retained at the «Real Seminario de Hijos de Nobles.»

Felicitas continued to reside in Madrid, while her mother and two brothers had been required to leave Spain and return to New Orleans at the time of her arrest in 1790. She died at her home at in Aranjuez on May 20, 1799 and buried at the church of the nearby village of Ontigola. Felicitas was survived by her four children: Adelaida Destrehan, born in New Orleans in 1774 and married in 1792 to Benito Pardo de Figueroa, veteran of the Pensacola campaigns, lieutenant general and ambassador to Prussia and Russia, where he died at the court of St. Petersburg in 1812, witnessed by his American colleague, John Quincy Adams, sixth president of the United States; Matilde, born in New Orleans in 1778, married in 1795 to field marshal Raimundo Minutolo de Capece of the Naples aristocratic family of the Prince of Canosa; the following year after her wedding in Madrid she had the leading role in the Italian opera of *Eugenia* at the Theatre de Caños de Peral (Teatro Real) and because of a clash with Godoy, the family left Spain for Naples, where she led a conspiracy in 1807 to assassinate King José Bonaparte, with the French investigators referring to this New Orleans belle as the «mariscala de campo» of the plot, she died on a trip to Malaga in 1839, survived by three daughters in Italy; Miguel, had a military career, rising to captain before taking an early retirement; he returned to the military as a lieutenant coronel and served «Pepe Botella» during the French Invasion and later escaped to Paris, returning to Madrid in 1820, dying five years later; and Guadalupe, on the death of her mother in 1799 she went to live in Malaga with her aunt Isabel St. Maxent de Unzaga, dying two years later.

Bernardo de Gálvez married into a remarkable clan from Louisiana that contributed much to the success of the American Revolution -- the St. Maxents of New Orleans.