

Mobile Under Spanish Rule

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In a young country such as The United States of America, we seem to be drawn to claims of “The First” and “The Oldest.” Perhaps this explains Mobile’s emphasis on our French roots. It was the French who planted the earliest seeds of Europe along the Gulf Coast. Beginning in 1702, Bienville and his successors saw that the French Flag, along with that nation’s language and culture ruled where the rivers spilled out to form Mobile Bay. The lasting impact of those sixty-one years is never more obvious than during the weeks preceding Ash Wednesday – Mardi Gras.

But, the Spanish were here first. Explorers, adventurers and map makers from Spain had sailed, search and charted the central Gulf Coast as many as two hundred years before the French founded Old Mobile.

To the victor goes the spoils of war, and in 1763 the French were bested by the British in what we tend to call the French and Indian War, a war that is more generally known as the Seven Years’ War. Part of these “spoils of war” was Mobile, and for seventeen years the British Union Jack would fly over Mobile and the renamed Fort Charlotte.

Even when the thirteen colonies waged a war for independence, Great Britain maintained control of the Gulf Coast. As the war progressed the British strategy shifted to the south and Mobile could have been key to an American defeat. However, Spain was to spoil the plan and set the stage for American victories at Kings Mountain, Cowpens and Yorktown.

General Bernardo Galvez, the governor of Louisiana led his army to successes at Baton Rouge, Mobile and later Pensacola. Fort Charlotte’s small but determined garrison was surrounded by Galvez’s force of two thousand. Among his soldiers were Spanish regulars, militiamen, free

people of color and even twenty-six Americans. By early March of 1780, Spanish ships had moved up the bay and fired on the fort while Galvez's men march north from Dog River. After a day-long exchange of fire, Elias Durnford, the British commander, raised a flag of truce and after a day of negotiations the surrender terms were agreed upon so that on the morning of March 14, 1780, Galvez took possession of the fort and raised the Spanish flag.

The Treaty of Paris of 1783 ended the American War of Independence and confirmed Spanish possession of Mobile and the central Gulf Coast. Although Mobile remained under military control, we read the "Spanish rule was mild and the inhabitants well satisfied. The major attraction of Spanish rule was that there was little or no rule at all for honest citizens."

For most of Mobile's thirty-three years as part of the Spanish empire, life here was quiet and men from Britain, France, Spain and the young United States were able to set aside nationalistic animosity. On the streets of Mobile you would find Choctaws, Chickasaws, Seminoles and Creeks; slaves, free people of color and Creoles. In Peter Hamilton's classic *Colonial Mobile*, his description of Spanish Mobile includes, "About the streets walked stolid Spanish officials and the vivacious French inhabitants, together with negro slaves and picturesque Choctaws, ... after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 there would be seen a wide-awake Yankee, come to make his fortune."

The international impact of the French Revolution and Napoleon's rise to power would set into motion the end of Spanish rule of Mobile. Confusion over the details of the Louisiana Purchase and creation of the Mississippi Territory would combine with Spain's continental concerns and set the stage for Mobile to become an American city.

In 1812, just days after Louisiana was admitted as the eighteenth state of the United States, Mobile and the surrounding area were incorporated into the Mississippi Territory. This act adds to Mobile's interesting and at times confusing history by have Mobile County being created while still under the watchful care of the Spanish garrison at Fort Carlota.

By the spring of 1813, during, but not directly part of the War of 1812, General James Wilkinson arrives. Soldiers from New Orleans approach Mobile from the south. Others, commanded by Colonel Bowyer, approach from Ft. Stoddert near Mount Vernon and a small fleet of gunboats control the bay and river.

Given few options, the garrison commander Captain Perez begins negotiations for the peaceful change of control of Mobile and the details of the agreement were approved by the two commanders on April 13, 1813. Mobile was then free of European guidance and would be forevermore an American City.



At the conclusion of the ceremony which also included remarks by Sam Jones, Mayor of Mobile and Mr. Juan Molina, Acting Ambassador of Spain to the United States of America, the lowering of the historic Spanish flag and the raising of the historic American Flag, Mr. Sirmon gave closing remarks which were followed the playing of “Hail Columbia”:

“A report of Spanish garrison commander Captain Perez peacefully passing control of Fort Carlota to American General Wilkerson was recorded in numerous newspapers. One account read, in part:

Mobile in our Possession

By judicious arrangements with which General Wilkinson has conducted the business, the good has been accomplished without any intermixture of evil and the government has been transferred without the smallest loss of blood or treasure, although it is clearly ascertained that the Spaniards had contemplated a vigorous resistance. The American troops made their landing and the first intimation which the Spanish garrison had of their approach was the music of Hail Columbia.

The music titled “Hail Columbia” was composed for the inauguration of George Washington as America’s first president and served as our national anthem for most of the nineteenth century.

We now end our ceremonies with the same music that two hundred years ago heralded the beginning of Mobile as an American city:

Hail Columbia, happy land!

Hail, ye heroes, heav'n-born band,

Firm, united let us be,

Rallying round our liberty.

Wayne E. Sirmon is the Chairman of the Alabama Commission of the Commemoration of the War of 1812. A History Instructor at the University of Mobile, he also serves as the vice-chairman of the History Museum of Mobile. Active in community affairs, he is a Director of the Mobile Bay Area Veterans Day Commission and a past president of the General Galvez Chapter of the Sons of the American Revolution.

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