A Battle of Revolutionary Importance: The Siege of Pensacola

Not always a tourist destination full of oranges, beaches, and Disney princesses, Florida has long had a turbulent history, stretching back to revolutionary times. While other colonies fought for representation in the 18th century, the District of Pensacola was involved in international contest (Brotemarkle 6a). The fledgling America received support from both France and Spain, mainly due to their near-constant warring with England. As British West Florida’s administrative capital and the final region held under British control, Pensacola was the epicenter of the action (Brotemarkle 6a). Being one of the few towns in the territory seized by the British in 1762, Spain was determined to reclaim this important city.

English General John Campbell, following his promotion to Major General in early 1779, was given control of all Floridian troops and immediately set to work to improve the defenses of Mobile and Pensacola, as the present forts were dilapidated (Nester 61). He was also given orders to, with the help of local tribes, secretly attack New Orleans, if possible (O’Brien 124).

Upon Spain entering into the war in June 1779, the Governor, Bernardo de Gálvez, and forces from Spanish Louisiana started offensive operations, quickly and effectively gaining control of British territory (Caughey 184). Within six months, they controlled the lower Mississippi River, following the capture of Fort Bute (Nester 120). Due to poor communication, this conquest was unknown to Campbell until he had already departed to attack New Orleans, necessitating him to refocus on defending Florida; meanwhile, Gálvez was preparing to attack Fort Charlotte and Mobile. Following a two-week siege, both of these territories fell, and British troops fled back to Pensacola. With the surrender of those two areas, the totality of British West Florida was now the District of Pensacola (Nester 114).

Playing a waiting game with Campbell, Gálvez took a year to advance his offensive into Pensacola (Caughey 212). On March 11, 1781, Gálvez’s eleven warships and fifty-one transport ships entered Pensacola Bay, carrying thousands of sailors and soldiers. Throughout March and April, these Spanish troops encountered and dismantled fortifications. As they did so, the Spanish began preparation for an exhaustive siege while also being interrupted intermittently by largely ineffective groups of Choctaw warriors (O’Brien 126). Following one of these attacks, ships were sighted in Pensacola Bay carrying over 3000 French and Spanish reinforcements. On April 30th, the Spanish started their first major attack on Pensacola. Using cannons and howitzer shells, they were able to destroy the magazine in Fort Cresent (Nester 112). The Spanish immediately raided and captured the fort and did the same to two more structures over the next few days. Realizing that Fort George and any remaining assets could not withstand the continued onslaught, General Campbell surrendered on May 10, 1781(Brotemarkle 6a). 1100 British troops were imprisoned and 200 causalities were discovered. The Spanish themselves only suffered 74 deaths and had 198 wounded soldiers.

Gálvez personally acknowledged Campbell’s surrender and established complete Spanish control in West Florida. He then provided a governor for Pensacola and sailed on, leaving the city to become an important foundation for every society which rules it, be they American, French, or Spanish (Caughey 212).

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