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Society plants a plaque for Revolutionary player Galvez credited for thwarting British in Baton Rouge, Mobile

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Joel Escamilla, governor general of the Granaderos y Damas de Galvez, speaks at the unveiling of the historic marker for the statue of Bernardo de Galvez in New Orleans on Thursday.

Rusty Costanza, The Times-Picayune

New Orleanians -- even people who live on Galvez Street -- might be surprised to learn that there is a society dedicated to the memory of Bernardo de Galvez, the Spanish military leader who served as governor of Louisiana starting in 1777. They might be even more surprised that the society, the Granaderos y Damas de Galvez, is based in San Antonio.

Leaders of the society -- the Grenadiers and Ladies of Galvez, in English -- were in New Orleans on Thursday to dedicate a new historical marker honoring Galvez as a "hero of the American Revolution."

The marker is a few feet from an equestrian statue of Galvez that has stood since 1976 between the former World Trade Center building and the ferry terminal at the foot of Canal Street. Hundreds of thousands of people probably have passed the statue over the years, but it's likely that few realized whom it depicted.

The new marker, including a portrait of Galvez and a map of Spanish colonies in the late 18th century, celebrates the role that Galvez played during the American Revolution, when he led Spanish military expeditions that captured Baton Rouge, Mobile, Pensacola and other British bases.

Not that Galvez, or the king of Spain whom he represented, had any love for democracy or real interest in the American colonies' grievances against King George III. But Spain was allied with France, which was supporting the American cause for its own reasons, and Spain -- then in control of Louisiana, Cuba, Mexico and most of the rest of Latin America and the Caribbean -- was happy to expand its influence in the Gulf of Mexico at the expense of Britain, which had gained possession of Florida in 1763.

Galvez's exploits rate at most a brief mention in many histories of the American Revolution, but to his present-day supporters, Spain and Galvez played a vital role in determining the war's outcome.

The mission statement of the Granaderos y Damas de Galvez says it was created to "inform the public about Spain's substantial although generally little-known contributions to the success of the American Revolution." The group's website goes further, saying its activities are designed to recall "the collaborative efforts of Generals George Washington and Bernardo de Galvez" during the war.

The Order of Granaderos de Galvez was founded in 1975 by two San Antonio businessmen. Other chapters were later formed in other Texas cities, including Galveston, a city named for Galvez, as well as in Florida and Washington, D.C. But even though New Orleans was Galvez's headquarters as governor of Louisiana, the organization has never taken root here.

Galvez, born in 1746, already had extensive military experience in both the Old and New worlds before he arrived in New Orleans in 1776, taking office as governor on Jan. 1, 1777. Starting in 1776, Spain provided substantial aid to the American colonists fighting up and down the East Coast, with much of it moving through New Orleans, and after Spain declared open war on Britain in June 1779, Galvez moved quickly to attack British forts on the east bank of the Mississippi River and along the Gulf Coast.

He first captured Fort Bute at Manchac in September and then forced the surrender, successively, of Baton Rouge, Natchez and Mobile by early 1780. His final victory was at Pensacola, the capital of British West Florida, which he captured in May 1781 after a two-month siege. His exploits gave the Spanish control of all of West Florida and ended the possibility of any British offensive up the Mississippi River. Galvez never returned to Louisiana and died in Mexico City in 1786 at age 40.

Whether his actions really had much effect on the course of the fighting in the 13 colonies is open to debate, but according to the Granaderos y Damas de Galvez, the new nation's Congress expressed its gratitude. And almost two centuries later, the society reports, President Ronald Reagan cited Galvez in paying tribute to Hispanic Americans' contributions to the nation.

"Their bravery is well known and has been demonstrated time and again, dating back to the aid rendered by General Bernardo de Galvez during the American Revolution," Reagan said.