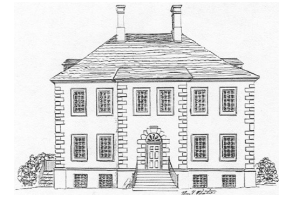




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Docent Dispatch



March 2004

Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Global Perspectives:

Cuba's Role in the American Revolution

by Caridad de la Vega

In the annals of history, the involvement of foreign powers in the American Revolution is often limited to the role the French played in aiding the thirteen colonies to sever ties with the mother country, England. France's animosity over losing their territorial strongholds in North America fueled France's desire to aid the colonies in securing their independence. However, another global power, Spain, and its island colony south of the North American continent, Cuba, were very much involved in the American Revolution. This is a little known and unacknowledged chapter in American history. In 1762 Spain lost Florida to England and was fueled by a sense of national pride and need for revenge to help the American colonists against the greatest global power.

Cuba played an obscure yet integral role as Spain's closest colonial territory to the North American continent. Cuban troops and money were utilized in the liberation effort. In 1777 Spain fiscally lent their support with one million *livres*. Furthermore, José Elio de la Puente, born in St. Augustine, Florida of Cuban parents, was recruited as a spy in 1777 and sent from Havana to St. Augustine to spy on the British. Within that same year Juan Miralles, a Havana merchant, was sent as an emissary to help George Washington and the Continental Congress. Miralles settled in Cuba as a young boy and later married into a prominent Cuban family. Miralles landed in Charlestown, South Carolina, and traveled to Williamsburg for a clandestine meeting with the well-known revolutionary, Patrick Henry. Miralles and Henry planned a strategy that required "Spanish and American troops to take the city of Mobile and the British West Florida capital of Pensacola, sweep through British

East Florida and its capital of St. Augustine, and contact colonials fighting in Georgia." This plan was sent to Madrid, Spain, in anticipation of a 1779 declaration of hostilities between Spain and Britain. In the meantime Miralles took a residence in Philadelphia where he oversaw the shipment of supplies from Cuba.

During this period Miralles and General Washington became friends. Miralles so admired Washington that he sent portraits of him as gifts to officials in Havana and Madrid. After a meeting between the two, Miralles "horrified at the plainness of Washington's fare, decided to symbolize the bounty of his royal master by sending presents: crystal flasks and wine which to fill them, chocolate, sugar, [Cuban] guava jelly, candies, a box of [Cuban] lemons to make punch with, and a hundred-pound sea turtle" to Washington and his wife Martha. Once Spain officially declared war against Britain, Miralles stayed that winter at Washington's headquarters in Morristown, New Jersey. While there he succumbed to pneumonia. He was fittingly buried with full military honors with Washington presiding over the funeral cortege. This marked one of the first Catholic services officially attended by the United States government and Congress.

In implementing the plans that Miralles and Henry had drawn, under the command of Spanish General Bernardo de Galv  z, Cuban troops secured western

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Florida and ousted the Redcoats. As the Spanish colonial governor of Louisiana, Galvéz secured Baton Rouge and seized British forts along the Mississippi, before turning his attention to the re-conquest of Florida by the Spanish. Having secured these two victories by the fall of 1779, Galvéz received additional reinforcements of 1,400 troops from Havana, and the following spring ousted the British garrison at Mobile. However the reconquest of Florida remained a daunting task that required even more men. With this objective in mind Galvéz sailed to Havana to raise an army and garner supplies to challenge the 2,500 Redcoats and their Native American allies. In the end, 4,000 Cubans out of a total army of 7,000 troops were recruited to challenge the British in west Florida. A Cuban field marshal, Juan Manuel de Cagigal (who hailed from Santiago de Cuba), deployed troops to block the British escape both by sea and by land. The final decisive act of the battle was the explosion of a British powder depot that caused 100 British casualties. The British saw no other alternative than to surrender to the Spanish, who once again secured western Florida with the aid of an army largely composed of Cuban men that included free slaves and mulattoes among their ranks. These operations redirected the attention of British troops that could have been utilized against patriot armies to the north.

Yet another very significant contribution by Cubans to the American cause took place towards the end of the revolution. By 1781 the American forces were nearly bankrupt and were faced with the prospect of only being able to pay the army for another two months. General Washington initially sent an urgent request for financial help to American financier Robert Morris, but to no avail. Thereafter, the Comte de Rochambeau as General Washington's French ally implored French authorities in Haiti and Marqués de Saavedra in Santo Domingo, but neither had the financial resources or the manpower to spare. Rochambeau, believing that the Cubans could supply the monetary aid they were seeking, sailed on August 15, 1781 aboard the frigate *Aigrette* towards Cuba. He sought the aid of the recently appointed governor of Cuba, Juan Manuel de Cagigal, who fortuitously for the colonists happened to be the very same military officer who aided the Spanish in ejecting British forces from Pensacola. Cagigal immediately took action and secured 1,200,000 French *livres*; (300 million in today's value) a combination of private donations and funds from the Cuban municipal treasury. A popular

myth surrounding the rapid succession of events that took place after the request for funds, is the story that Cuban woman pawned their jewelry in order to raise the funds needed to help the American patriots.

These events were surely motivated by two factors; the desire for Spaniards to aid an enemy of the British, and by the Cubans' desire to aid the first attempt among colonists in the North American continent to fight for their independence from the mother country. Nonetheless, Cuba's involvement speaks to the crucial role that international allies played in the effort towards American liberation. In addition, their involvement underscores the deep historical roots shared by Cubans and Americans, history that surely predates the takeover of Cuba by Castro.

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