

Spain and the American Revolution



The following activity is suggested to engage scholars in learning the importance of Southwest Arizona, the role of the Spanish in American History, and how history can be found throughout their studies in many subjects. It takes into account the 2018 Arizona Standards in its design.¹

Suggested time – Class 40 minutes, Homework 30 minutes

Objectives –

- Students will be exposed to the role of Spain in the American Revolution and learn why it is important in the study of history.

Materials –

Each Student will need:

Read the introduction to the history of Spain and the American Revolution.

Print and complete the Homework Assignment.

Instructions –

Read the introduction to the history of Spain and the American Revolution pages. When finished complete the Homework Assignment.

“If the Spaniards would but join their fleets to those of France and commence hostilities, my doubts would all subside—without it, I fear the British Navy had it too much in its power to counteract the schemes of France.” Go. Washington

George Washington’s letter to Gouverneur Morris, October 4, 1778. *The papers of George Washington Digital Edition*, ed. Theodore J. Crackel. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.

¹ Material taken from: Guillermo Calleja Leal and Gregoria Calleja Leal, *Gálvez and Spain in the American Revolution* (Madrid, Spain: Spanish Commission of Military History of the Spanish Center for National Defense Studies, 2016), Martha Gutiérrez-Steinkamp, *Spain: the Forgotten Alliance: Independence of the United States* (North Charleston, SC: Create Space Publishing Platform, an Amazon.com company, 2013), and David J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).

History of Spain and the American Revolution

The Spanish started the written history of European civilization in the Americas, but because the English (and Dutch and Germans) established the original thirteen colonies on the East Coast of North America, very little of Spanish involvement is included in the history taught about the United States. France is often mentioned during the American Revolution because French troops fought with General George Washington. However, if it were not for Spanish involvement in the war outside the thirteen colonies the rebel forces would never have won the war.



Spain provided financial assistance to the rebels and used its navy, along with leaders like Diego de Gardoqui and Bernardo de Gálvez, to restrict the advance of the English in critical areas, distract the English navy and troops, and allowed for the independence of the North American colonies. French troops and its navy, along with the smaller but vital contribution of Dutch bankers and the Dutch navy, also provided assistance. Much of this assistance was provided after secret negotiations so the history is not as readily available as the actions between the rebels and the English. The American Revolution started in 1775 and lasted until 1783.

It may be thought that the war for American Independence started with the Seven Years War between England and France from 1756 to 1763. It was called the French and Indian War in North America. The English spent a lot of money on this war and began to tax the American colonies to replenish its funds. There were many English Acts, like the Sugar and Stamp Acts, which upset the American colonists who thought they should not have to provide all the replacement revenue on their own. So, they began to revolt against what they thought was an oppressive government.

In Europe at the time, the ruling families of France and Spain were related through the House of Bourbon. They formed an alliance called the Family Compact which meant that when France again went to war with England, Spain would do the same. By 1778, war in North America meant that there was also war between England and the French and Spanish Alliance in other parts of the world, particularly India, the Philippines, Gibraltar, Nicaragua, and other locations. England had a superior navy over any other one country, but when France, Spain and the Dutch agreed to work together they outnumbered the English ships. This was important since all the fighting men had to be transported to places of conflict by ship and many battles were fought at sea.

The Gardoquis family from Bilbao, on the coast of northern Spain in Basque territory, were wealthy and respected merchants. They started by supplying salted and dried cod to sailors for long ocean voyages. The Spanish king, Charles III, gave this family one hundred and twenty thousand pesos to add to what the Gardoquises were already providing the rebels in America. In 1775 this included 30,000 muskets with bayonets, 512,314 boxes of ammunition, 251 bronze cannons, 300,000 pounds of gunpowder, 12,868 grenades, 30,000 uniforms and 4,000 tents. The Spanish especially traded with Boston and other New England towns. The Anglo-American

rebels were reliant on Spanish help that in November 1776 they adopted the *peso* as official unit of currency. The rebels also relied on Spanish-directed spies for information about English activities in Florida and on the western frontier.

Although Spain had been supplying the American colonies with goods and arms since 1775, the declaration of war against England by Spain as France's ally in 1779 allowed for open support of the rebels. Spain had been readying for conflicts since 1750 and established the most advanced shipbuilding techniques based on the best science of the day. Spain used the revenue from the Americas to construct more than 200 ships and frigates. With Spain now publically in the war the English had to spread their fleet out to bring troops to fight the rebels in North America, protect Gibraltar, its islands in the Caribbean, and against a possible invasion of England. In 1776 Spain again made a large cash contribution to the war effort, but did it in secret through the French.

Fortunately, the cost of war is very high. The Spanish Treasury was being depleted quickly, so a war tax was placed on the Spanish citizens in the Americas. Californios contributed 4,216 pesos and *Sonorenses* contributed 22,420 pesos of which 459 came from the new presidio of Tucson.

When Spain entered the war they occupied Louisiana and the Mississippi River Valley. They also controlled most of the Pacific Ocean and the Philippines, and most importantly, had commanders in the Gulf of Mexico who were smart strategist and willing to wage war on the English. José de Gálvez was in overall command of the Caribbean for Spain. He decreed that the war against England was more important than fighting the worrisome Apache and also called a halt exploration of the California coast. José appointed his twenty-nine year-old nephew Bernardo de Gálvez to be governor of the Spanish holdings in Louisiana.

English loyalists in the colonies fled the fighting by moving north to Canada, but also to the West Indies and Florida. Gálvez attacked West Florida and the lower Mississippi River Valley up to Natchez and cleared the area of British ships and troops. He conquered Mobile and Pensacola, leading his forces, many of whom were Blacks and mulattos, going where his own Admirals feared to go, and brought great fame and victory to the Spanish.

The Spanish also travelled far north from New Orleans. Gálvez sent 10,000 pounds of gun powder to the rebels fighting the English at Fort Pitt, present-day Pittsburg. He gave clothing, medicine and military supplies to Generals Washington and Lee on the borders of Pennsylvania and Virginia. He led his men and supplies to Lake Michigan to meet with George Rogers Clark, who was able to use these to take control of the Ohio River Valley.

The English under General Cornwallis were at Yorktown, Virginia. The colonial rebels desperately needed additional troops and financial support. Gálvez was in charge of both the French and Spanish fleets in the Caribbean. Gálvez conferred with the French who agreed to send troop to Yorktown while the Spanish fleet protected French islands in the Caribbean. The Spanish organized an emergency collection of funds from the citizens of Havana, Cuba. They collected 500,000 pesos in just a few hours. Five days later, another Spanish ship came from

Mexico with an additional 1,000,000 pesos. The assistance and funds given to the rebels by the Spanish allowed the French to help General George Washington, and ensured the eventual victory at Yorktown by colonial forces over the British.

At the end of the war in 1784, Diego de Gardoqui, who had been instrumental in negotiating the aid needed by the American rebels with Spain, was appointed by Spain as Minister Plenipotentiary (*Encargado de Negocios*) to the newly formed United States. He lived in New York City and built the first Catholic church there – The Basilica of St. Peter on Barclay Street. Gardoqui was the first Spanish representative to the U.S. Congress in negotiating control of the area between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. He was also a special guest of George Washington at the first President’s swearing-in ceremony. In recognizing the vital contributions made by France and Spain, Washington placed Lafayette on his right and Gardoqui on his left. These gentlemen were the only two foreign dignitaries at the inauguration.

Bernard de Gálvez was appointed the 49th Viceroy of New Spain in March 1785. From Mexico City he originated many good civil works, and also made powerful enemies. In October, 1786 he developed strong stomach pains, probably appendicitis, and died on November 30th, at the age of 40. The city of Galveston, Texas is named for him. A statue of Gálvez was presented to the United States by Spain during the Bicentennial and was placed so it faced the State Department on June 3, 1976. Then on December 10, 2014, a portrait of Gálvez was hung in the Capital Building in the Senate Foreign Relation Committee room. He was also posthumously awarded honorary U.S. citizenship that same year.

The contribution of Spain to the independence of the United States of America is a complex, and often hidden, history. However, it is also an engaging and valuable lesson about how history is written and the depth of research that should go into the telling of any event. The involvement of Spain in “American” history has far reaching consequences and should be acknowledged as a critical factor in the path the United States took to be the country it is.

In 2018, the Sons of the American Revolution honored Ensign Juan Manuel Ortega, who is buried beneath St. Ann’s Catholic Church in Tubac, as being the first recognized Spanish soldier in Arizona who served during the American Revolution.

The Spanish Origins of the U.S. Dollar: Silver from European and American mines flooded the international currency markets in the 16th and 17th centuries. “In 1518, Bohemia minted a coin called *joachimsthaler* because the silver came from a mine in Joachimstal (today Jachymov in the Czech Republic). Shortened to *thaler*, the name found its way into other languages: *daler* in Swedish, *tolar* in Czech, *talar* in Polish, *daalder* in Dutch, *taliro* in Greek, *táIRO* in Spanish and dollar in English.

In 1614, the Dutch founded Nieuw Amsterdam, a city that grew rapidly thanks to the fur trade and the export of furs to Europe. It was conquered by the British in 1664 and renamed New York. Because of that early Dutch presence, the *daalder* was used in the Thirteen Colonies of North America. The peso, a Spanish silver coin with a nominal value of 8 *reales* (royals), was the precursor of the American dollar and also known as the *peso fuerte*, piece of eight and Spanish dollar.”

“Widely circulated internationally and trusted, the *peso fuerte* became the most common currency in the Americas and Southeast Asia. It remained the most widely used coin in the Thirteen Colonies, and retained its popularity in the early decades of the youthful United States until it was withdrawn from circulation in 1857. In Asia, the Manila Galleons (*Galeón de Manila*) brought substantial amounts of silver for trade with China, as Chinese merchants only accepted silver as payment. The silver Spanish coins were marked with a Chinese character to indicate that a reliable Chinese merchant had certified their validity and they were called “chopped dollars.” That makes it easy for us to understand why the Chinese *yuan* was based on the fractions of eight that were central to the Spanish monetary system. The influence of the fractions of eight system persisted at the New York Stock Exchange until 1997, as shares were sold in units of 1/8s of a dollar until then. Today they have a decimal value.

The lack of mints in the Thirteen Colonies and severe restrictions imposed by the British monetary system made British coins scarce, so colonists accepted the *peso fuerte* or Spanish miller dollar as a means of payment. Because fractional currency was unavailable in British America, Spanish coins were often cut into eight pieces called *bits*. Even today, particularly in America’s southern states, the words “two bits” refer to one quarter of a dollar.”²

² Guillermo Calleja Leal and Gregorio Calleja Leal, *Gálvez and Spain in the American Revolution* (Madrid, Spain: Spanish Centre for National Defence Studies, Spanish Commission of Military History, 2016), 394–395.

**Spain and the American Revolution
Homework Assignment**



1. Explain why the rebels of the thirteen colonies needed help from both France and Spain to win the Revolution with England.

2. Sometimes, individuals and the actions they take, can make a big impact on events and influence history. Name two such Spanish people who helping with the American Revolution.

3. Was the American Revolution only fought in the thirteen colonies or did battles happen in other places? Give an example:

4. When researching an event in history that involved people from other countries, where could you look for documents to find out what happened?

5. How many *reales* are in a *peso*? _____