



MISSOURI BROADSIDE



COMMEMORATING THE 250TH ANNIVERSARY OF NOTABLE EVENTS OF THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

Battle of Fort San Carlos May 26th, 1780

Background

The Spanish entered the American Revolutionary War in 1779. The British military planners in London wanted to secure the corridor of the Mississippi River against both Spanish and Patriot activity. Their plans included expeditions from West Florida to take New Orleans and other Spanish targets, including several expeditions to gain control of targets in the Upper Mississippi, such as the small town of St. Louis. Ultimately, the expedition from West Florida was never accomplished because due to the work of Bernardo de Gálvez, the Governor of Spanish Louisiana. Gálvez moved rapidly to gain control of British outposts on the Lower Mississippi and threatened action against West Florida's principal outposts of Mobile and Pensacola, effectively limiting British influence in the area.

British Expedition Toward St. Louis

Patrick Sinclair, the military governor at Fort Michilimackinac, organized the British expeditions from the north in present-day Michigan. Beginning in February 1780, he directed traders to circulate through their territories and recruit interested tribes for an expedition against St. Louis. Sinclair offered the fur traders the opportunity to control the fur trade in the upper parts of Spanish Louisiana as an incentive to participate.

Most of the force gathered at the border of Wisconsin and Iowa, where Emanuel Hesse, a former militia captain turned fur trader, took command. The force numbered about two dozen fur traders and an estimated 750 to 1,000 Natives when it left Prairie du Chien on May



Mural of the Battle in the Missouri State Capitol

2nd. 200 Sioux warriors made up the largest contingency of the force, with sizable companies from Chippewa, Menominee, and Winnebago as well as smaller numbers from other nations. The Chippewa chief, Matchekewis, was given overall command of the Native forces. When the armies reached Rock Island, they were joined by about 250 men from the Sac and Fox nations. These warriors were somewhat reluctant to attack St. Louis, but Hesse gave them large gifts to secure their participation in the venture. The diversity within the expedition led to some animosity among the tribes. The Chippewa and Sioux, in particular, had a history of conflict with each other. However, Chiefs Wapasha and Matchekewis promoted unity during the expedition.

Spanish and American Defenses

The village of St. Louis was primarily a trading hub on the Mississippi River that was under the control of Lieutenant Governor Fernando de Leyba, a captain in the Spanish Army, but it was also the administrative capital of Upper Spanish Louisiana. Leyba was warned by a fur trader in late March 1780 that the British were planning an attack on St. Louis and the nearby American post at Cahokia. He began

developing plans for the village's defense. At his disposal, Leyba had an inexperienced militia force of 168 men dispersed around the surrounding countryside and only 29 regular army soldiers of the Fijo de Luisiana Colonial Regiment.

Leyba developed a grand plan of defense that included the construction of four stone towers. Without funds or the time to get them from New Orleans, Leyba asked the villagers to contribute funds and labor to the construction of these fortifications and paid for some of the work from his private funds. By mid-May, a single round tower had been built that was about 30 feet (9.1 m) in diameter and 30 to 40 feet tall. The tower, dubbed Fort San Carlos, provided a commanding view of the surrounding countryside. As there did not appear to be sufficient time to build more towers, trenches were dug between the tower and the river to the north and south of the village. Three four-pound and two six-pound cannons from Fort Don Carlos were mounted in the tower, and other cannons were emplaced at each end of the line of trenches.

With a force of only 197 men, it was highly probable that the opposing British and Native combined force of 1,000 would overwhelm Fort San Carlos. However, Leyba appealed to Francois Valle, a former captain of the French militia who was located 60 miles to the South of St. Louis at the site of the French Colonial Valles Mines. Valle sent his two sons and 60 well-trained and equipped French militiamen to aid the understaffed Spaniards. By Royal Decree on April 1, 1782, King Carlos III of Spain conferred upon Francois Valle the rank of lieutenant in the regular Spanish army, thus making him a Spanish don.

On May 15, Leyba was visited by John Montgomery, the American commander at Cahokia, who proposed a joint Spanish and American force to counter Hesse's expedition, an idea that never reached fruition. On May 23, Leyba's scouts reported that Hesse's force had landed their canoes only 14 miles (23 km) away and were coming overland.

Battle of Fort San Carlos

On May 25, Hesse sent out scouting parties to determine the situation at St. Louis. These

parties were unable to get close to the village due to the presence of workers in the fields outside the village. The following morning, Hesse sent Jean-Marie Ducharme and 300 Natives across the river to attack Cahokia, while the remainder arrived around 1:00 pm near St. Louis. A warning shot was fired from the tower when they came into view. The Sioux and Winnebagoes led the way, followed by the Sac, Fox, and fur traders. Leyba directed the defense from the tower and opened fire on the approaching enemy from the trenches and tower when they came in range. On the first volley, most of the Sac and Fox fell back, apparently unwilling to fight, leaving many of the other participants suspicious of their motives in joining the expedition and complaining of their "treachery."

Wapasha and the Sioux persisted for several hours in attempts to draw the Spanish defenders out. They went as far as brutally killing some captives they had taken in the fields, many of whom were women and children. Although this angered some of the townspeople, Leyba refused to allow the militia to assemble a counterattack force. The attackers eventually withdrew and headed north, destroying crops, livestock, and buildings as they went.

On the other side of the river, Ducharme's attack on Cahokia was easily repulsed. George Rogers Clark, an American militia officer, made a timely arrival to lead Cahokia's defense. Clark's reputation as a frontier fighter made the Native force reluctant to pursue the attack any further.



Image Depicting the Fort Constructed in St. Louis