



Spanish and Latinx

Featured Biography: Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis

Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis is an untold hero who played a critical role in the victory of the Battle of Yorktown. He is rarely mentioned in history books; however, Saavedra was the man of the hour as the French Admiral de Grasse prepared for the naval battle of Yorktown. He assisted de Grasse in preparations for the trip from the Caribbean to Yorktown and to raise the money to supply and finance the French Army's voyage, and the Continental Army at Yorktown.

Born in 1746, the same year as Goya who would later paint his portrait, Saavedra was educated, urbane and insightful, an excellent selection as diplomatic emissary assigned to the strategic West Indies in 1779. Saavedra's mission was to promote the Spanish-French alliance and joint military operations against the British, and to ensure the movement of finances for this effort. His appointment and mission were known and approved by King Carlos III. Saavedra was acquainted with many of the leading characters in the Americas during his day and he was a protege of the Galvez family.^[1] Saavedra spoke and wrote French fluently, translating the works of French military writers into Spanish. His ideas of good books were those authored by Horace, Plutarch, Caesar, and Tacitus, and he was an eloquent and thorough correspondent.



Fortunately for our story, he was also a scrupulous diarist.^[2] The man who would play such an important role in the final battle of Yorktown would write a very detailed account of events. Saavedra's role has been overlooked by many talented historians, his position often described as that of "customers director" who had to be persuaded by Admiral de Grasse for assistance, even having his name misspelled as Salavedra.^[3] His actual office was an official of the Secretary of State and General Bureau of the Spanish Indies.^[4] The Admiral attempted to raise the funds in Santo Domingo from the French, offering French merchants his plantations as collateral for the loan. But the merchants, apparently not eager to gamble on the success of the expedition or prompt repayment by the French monarchy, hesitated to provide the funds.

Determined, fully briefed of the gravity of the situation, and anxious to sail north, de Grasse continued his dialogue of correspondence with the Spanish authorities in Cuba and with Bernardo Galvez. Bernardo de Galvez, who was the senior military commander in this theater

and who had the authority to request the French ships for his military stratagems, had already determined that he would release these ships, as well as the French corps at Saint Dominique that had been placed in Spanish service.^[5] Francisco Saavedra, then in Santo Domingo, received instructions from Jose de Galvez (Bernardo's uncle) on May 31, 1781, requesting him to confer with de Grasse about "the operations that must be executed."^[6]

Saavedra and de Grasse met for the first time on July 17, 1781. The French and Spanish had an impressive list of ambitions for impairing the British, including aid of the colonies so that the English would lose hope of subduing them, taking possession of various territories in the Windward Islands, and finally, the conquest of Jamaica, with its production of white gold sugar that was viewed as the source of British wealth. De Grasse would take possession of the Chesapeake Bay, moving inland via the rivers to "cut off the retreat and prevent the reinforcement of the army of Lord Cornwallis who was in that area. At the same time, General Washington, Comte de Rochambeau, and the Marquis de Lafayette, who had already agreed to the plan, would encircle him on all sides with their respective troops and totally destroy him or oblige him to surrender."^[7]

De Grasse had been planning to take no more than twenty-four ships-of-the-line in order to leave five or six vessels to protect the French commerce. Saavedra reviewed the intelligence that he had concerning the British fleet sizes under the English Admirals Graves and Digby. De Grasse suggested that four Spanish ships-of-the-line could join his fleet as they headed to the Chesapeake. Saavedra noted that "because Spain had not yet formally recognized the independence of the Anglo-Americans, there could perhaps be some political objection to taking a step that appeared to suppose this recognition."^[8] However, Saavedra reasoned, if de Grasse took all of his ships-of-the-line to the Chesapeake, Saavedra would request four Spanish ships-of-the-line to protect the merchant ships in Santo Domingo, and de Grasse would achieve his objectives.

The two men then worked out the military and resource allocation strategy for the following nine months that became known as the de Grasse-Saavedra Convention, recorded in both Saavedra's diary and the official French naval archives. De Grasse would join Rochambeau to aid the French and Continental Armies, returning to the West Indies in November of 1781. The French and Spanish troops would assemble in the early spring of 1782 to attack Jamaica, and the Spanish would be given a rendezvous point to participate on the attack against the Windward Islands (southern group of the Lesser Antilles in the West Indies).^[9]

With the battle plans in formation, de Grasse then set out to fulfill his promise to Rochambeau, to raise the 1.2 million livres in hard currency and return to the Chesapeake Bay with 3,000 Marine reinforcements and a naval fleet in time to battle the British. This assignment proved to be very challenging, even for a man as formidable as de Grasse. He met with merchants and planters of the Cape of France, offering the collateral of his own plantation in Haiti. Saavedra wrote that in late July, de Grasse had printed notices posted on the street corners of the French Cape, offering bills redeemable at the Treasury of Paris at a profitable rate of interest in return for hard currency. Having experienced unacceptable delays in the past when lending to their government, the French citizens of Santo Domingo declined, even at interest rates offered at 25%.^[10]

Concerned about the specific timeframe of the battle plans, de Grasse again turned to Saavedra for help. Saavedra reassured him that he was certain that the gold and silver would be available in Havana, since this was the departure port for the Spanish treasure ships for their return voyage. However, Saavedra and de Grasse soon learned that the expected transports with gold and silver from Mexico had not arrived, and that Havana was temporarily depleted of the gold from its official treasury.

According to Saavedra's Journal, announcements were promulgated in Havana, Cuba that "anyone who wished to contribute toward aiding the French fleet with his money should send it immediately to the treasury [in Havana]. Two French officers went to collect the funds, and in six hours the requisite amount gathered. The money was put aboard the [French] frigate. Don Bernard de Galvez had arrived at one o'clock in the afternoon. His arrival caused joyous celebration. He was told of what had happened and of the promptitude with which the 500,000 pesos needed by the Comte de Grasse had been collected, and he was delighted."[\[11\]](#)

The rest of the story, amigos, is history. As we all know, Admiral de Grasse reached Yorktown in time to defeat the naval fleet that the British had sent to rescue Cornwallis. Washington and his staff were able to purchase the supplies that were required for Yorktown and pay the Continental Army. The Battle of Yorktown effectively ended the long and precarious war.

[1] Sherry Johnson, *The Social Transformation of Eighteenth-Century Cuba* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2001), 99.

[2] Francisco Morales Padron, *Journal of Don Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis, 1780-1783* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1988), xiv.

[3] Charles L. Lewis, *Admiral de Grasse and American Independence* (Annapolis, Maryland: U.S. Naval Institute, 1973), 138.

[4] Juan F. Yela-Utrilla, *Espaa ante La Independencia de los Estados Unidos* (Lerida, Espana: Graficos Academia Mariana, 1925), 1:455, "oficial de la Secretaria de Estado y del Despacho universal de Indias Espana" is the complete title in Spanish noted.

[5] Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 242-243.

[6] Francisco Morales Padron, *Journal of Don Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis, 1780-1783* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1988), 192.

[7] Francisco Morales Padron, *Journal of Don Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis, 1780-1783* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1988), 200-201.

[8] Francisco Morales Padron, *Journal of Don Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis, 1780-1783* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1988), 202.

[9] Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 243-244.

[10] Francisco Morales Padron, *Journal of Don Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis, 1780-1783* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1988), 207-208.

[11] Francisco Morales Padron, *Journal of Don Francisco Saavedra de Sangronis, 1780-1783* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1988), 211