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*This article is based on extensive research of first-hand documents in Spanish and American Archives. In Spain: Archivo General de Indias, Archivo General de Simancas, Archivo Histórico Municipal de Antequera, Archivo Histórico Diocesano de Málaga, Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios (Ceuta), Iglesia de Santa María de Gracia (Cartagena), and Gazeta de Madrid at BOE.es. In the USA: Indiana Historical Society, Missouri Historical Society, and New Orleans Notarial Archives.*

*All translations are the author's.*

## **Fernando de Leyba (1734-1780)**

By Kristine L. Sjostrom

The captain was once told by his superior, when faced with the prospect of attack from the British at Vincennes:

I am infinitely sorry that I cannot come to your Aid and hope that your Zeal and activity will overlook no means by which you may avoid confrontation . . . that in the case Hamilton tries to attack, you will know how to handle yourself in such a way that preserves the honor of the Arms.<sup>1</sup>

One year later, on a Monday afternoon in late May 1780, as Fernando de Leyba observed from his tower the rush of Indians upon the settlement of St. Louis, he might have recalled those words. He might have wondered if his zeal and activity had been enough to protect this defenseless town; if he could now lead a resistance that brought honor to the Spanish Arms; if he would prove himself worthy of the calling he had been born into and raised upon.

### **Roots**

Fernando de Leyba belonged to the Leyba y Córdova family of Antequera whose long military tradition and roots can be traced back to the Christian reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula. In the 15th century, his ancestors settled in Andalusia on land granted by the King of Castile in reward for their service in the conquest of Granada. Over time, the knights and noblemen of the Leyba y Córdova line became prominent citizens in Antequera, a small city in the province of Málaga where they possessed several homes and farmsteads. They belonged to that class of nobles who, while untitled, enjoyed power and prestige on a local level, the so-called urban elite. For centuries they served their king in battle, and a military career in the Army of Carlos III was the fate of many Leyba y Córdova descendants, including Fernando's father.

Fernando de Leyba was born in the Spanish enclave and military plaza of Ceuta on Africa's northern coast on July 24, 1734. He was the fifth of seven children born to Captain Gerónimo de

Leyba y Córdova and Josepha Vizcaigaña. After residing as a child at different locations across the country, Fernando signed on as a cadet at the age of 16 with the España Infantry Regiment.

### **Military background**

Fernando rose through the infantry ranks at moderate speed. He became a 2nd lieutenant (subteniente) on May 25, 1756 and served this rank for a total of 7 years, 4 months and 16 days in Spain's armies in Andalucía, Africa, Mallorca and America. In America, he saw action with the Regiment of Aragón in the 1762 British siege of Havana and was taken prisoner of war when the Morro Castle fell to English Arms. Upon returning to Spain, he received his promotion to lieutenant. Just four-and-a-half years later, on June 4, 1768, he made the rank of captain. On this occasion, Fernando received, as well, the command of a company in the new Louisiana Battalion destined to serve permanently in New Orleans. On the fateful morning of May 26, 1780, about to face in St. Louis his second action of war, he was unaware that already the king had awarded, in royal order of September 19, 1779, his promotion to the rank of brevet Lt. Colonel.

Throughout his military career, Fernando de Leyba was judged by his superiors to possess great capability and courage, this last considered "proven" with his defense of Havana. He generally received good marks in effort, especially in later years. As 2nd lieutenant it was noted that he knew his mathematics well and could be useful in the Corps of Engineers where he would have liked to transfer. His conduct over the years was variable, however. Well-behaved as a cadet, Fernando's behavior as lieutenant received in 1764 a poor rating with the observation that he was much taken to gambling. "This corrected and showing more effort," wrote his superior, "he could be useful in the future."<sup>2</sup>

### **To America**

It was perhaps during his years as lieutenant that Fernando began courting his future wife, Maria Concepción de César, of Cartagena. News of his promotion to captain and move to Louisiana prompted the couple to marry, and they were wed in Murcia in early June 1767. By the time they embarked on their voyage to the Americas the following year, Maria was pregnant. The Leybas' first child Maria Josefa, or Pepita, was born in Havana sometime in early 1769.

Capt. Leyba arrived in Louisiana in 1769 with Alejandro O'Reilly's expedition to regain control of the colony after the expulsion of Spanish governor Antonio de Ulloa the previous year. There Leyba was assigned the Louisiana battalion's Third Company. He had under his command Lt. Luis de Salles, 2nd lieutenant Lecler Dubucle and 42 troops. While the Third Company was stationed in New Orleans, during his career Leyba would twice be sent to command at Louisiana outposts: Arkansas Post (1771-1774) and St. Louis (1778-1780).

### **Arkansas Post**

Leyba's assignment at Arkansas Post was prompted by the fact that in his first year in New Orleans he had administered his company's finances poorly and accumulated a hefty debt with the Royal Treasury. Governor Luis de Unzaga assigned him a command in Arkansas country so that, profiting from trade with local hunters and Indians, he might pay off his debt and restore his honor.

In mid-March of 1771, Capt. Leyba, his wife who was again pregnant, and toddling Pepita set off along the winding Mississippi River for the Arkansas Post. It was hardly a pleasant journey as

rumors of unrest among the Indians unnerved the captain and illness kept him from eating or sleeping for days on end. Yet the party landed safely at their destination after 47 days of travel on the 29th of April. The Leybas' second child, Rita, was born at Arkansas Post on July 4, 1771.

Fernando de Leyba's Arkansas command proved a veritable training ground for the officer who was unseasoned in the ways of the wilderness. He arrived to find the fort in a pitiful state: stockade and barracks in desperate need of repair, unpaid troops on the verge of rebellion, and an inexplicable shortage of flour that threatened to leave the whole settlement without bread. These issues resolved, Leyba's command then focused on maintaining the general welfare of the inhabitants, controlling trade and the sale of liquor, and maintaining a good rapport with the local Indian nation, the Quapaw. He also had orders to seek peace with the warring Osage nation who often raided hunting camps on the rivers. To achieve these goals, the captain was put to the test to use his scant resources efficiently and, at the same time, bring in a profit to cover his debt.

After three years in Arkansas country, Capt. Leyba had managed to keep up the good governance of the post and win over the local Indian nation. He had also managed to profit from trade, enlisting the help of garrison soldier Francis Vigo, who would become in later years his good friend and partner in trade. In a surprisingly short time that impressed his superiors, Leyba was able to cover his debt with the Royal Treasury.

It was poor health that eventually prompted the captain to give up his command at Arkansas Post, and he returned with his family in the spring of 1774 to New Orleans. At last financially sound, he bought a home, purchased several slaves, and provided an allowance for his widowed mother in Barcelona. A telling sign of his improved situation, he lent large amounts of money to those who had once been his creditors.

## **St. Louis**

Fernando de Leyba's service record for 1776 reports a man who was also recovered in health and motivated to further his military career. He was "good for promotion."<sup>3</sup> In the spring of 1778, Louisiana's new governor and battalion colonel Bernardo de Gálvez assigned Leyba command of St. Louis and its dependencies. There he would carry the title of Lt. Governor of the Western Part of the Illinois. On March 9, 1778, the Leyba family again set off along the Mississippi River. This time a journey of 93 days, they landed on June 10th at the small prospering village of St. Louis.

Capt. Leyba approached his St. Louis assignment with every intention of proving himself worthy of that command. With enthusiasm and determination, he took charge of issues that ranged from fomenting cultivation to regulating trade; from improving Indian relations to keeping a watchful eye on Britain's war with her colonies. The captain's letters to his superior offered numerous plans and suggestions for improvements in the Illinois country, two of which he implemented: the cutting of a road from St. Louis to Ste. Genevieve, and the formation of a cavalry company. His letters also contained the latest war intelligence. Together with American colonel George Rogers Clark, Leyba provided an inland line of communication between New Orleans and Virginia. Inspired by his country's anti-British policies, Leyba personally extended himself as much as possible to favor the American cause.

While Leyba's strict enforcement of regulations and control over trade made him unpopular with St. Louis citizens, records of his ordinances and judicial rulings reflect a man who was fair. Again faced with the challenge of having to balance scarce resources with the need to be

effective, he often resorted to giving from his own pocket. Two notable instances of this were his efforts to supply credit to the American troops when they came, shirtless and penniless, in search of provisions, and his personal contribution of 400 Spanish dollars for the building of a defensive structure around St. Louis.

### **Private Life**

Fernando de Leyba was seemingly as active and involved a gentleman as he was an officer. An inventory of his estate indicates that the Leybas might have done a great deal of entertaining, as they possessed tableware and chairs to accommodate up to 30 people at one sitting. Indeed, on receiving Col. Clark in their home, Leyba put on a dinner which lasted two days, with music and dancing and as many as 30 guests. Clark later remarked to a friend, "I was much surprised in my expectations; for instead of finding that reserve thought peculiar to that Nation, I here saw not the least symptoms of it, freedom almost to excess gave the greatest Pleasure."<sup>4</sup>

With regard to family, the captain expressed himself seldom but lovingly in his letters. When his support of the Americans threatened his financial ruin, worry brought on the untimely death of his beloved wife of 13 years. Capt. Leyba wrote the governor of his consternation: "my family cries and I share in their just sentiment."<sup>5</sup> He anguished over his daughters' future, fearing that his efforts to provide for them might not have been enough to keep them from mendicancy when he died. As the situation in St. Louis became more hostile and dangerous, he sent Pepita and Rita to the safety of the Ursuline nuns in New Orleans where he knew they would be cared for "with the same tender love that I profess for them myself."<sup>6</sup>

While Capt. Leyba could send his daughters away, he could not unburden himself of the ailment that plagued him. His years at Arkansas Post were riddled with bouts of illness that brought him several times near death. Years later from St. Louis he wrote Gálvez, "My deteriorated health does not promise me many years of life."<sup>7</sup> As Leyba stood that fateful day in St. Louis atop his tower, he was again dangerously ill. Yet the captain had promised his colonel that no enemy would take the fort at St. Louis without paying dearly for it. Despite his feeble condition, there he stood firm to defend it.

### **British-Indian attack on St. Louis**

On March 9, 1780, Capt. Leyba notified his governor of rumors of war.

From some travelers I have heard, and the American commandant of the other shore has written me, that our court has declared war on that of London; this news, together with news I have that a large number of the Indian nations, commanded by a certain Dujarm (of the French nation and subordinate to the British) are to attack and destroy this post, makes me believe the matter of war to be true.<sup>8</sup>

While hoping beyond hope that the threat was just bravado, the captain prepared for the defense of St. Louis. He brought in five pieces of cannon from an abandoned fort on the Missouri River and drew up an elaborate plan for the building of a defensive structure around the settlement. Much to his dismay, funds ultimately provided for the construction of just one tower of the four he had projected.

On May 9th, Leyba received his first intelligence: an enemy force of 300 British regulars and 900 Indians were 80 leagues away and advancing toward the post. He spurred preparations, ordering two trenches dug along the north and south sides of the settlement, and the one tower

was hastily completed and armed with the cannon. He called in the militia from St. Genevieve and summoned all hunters within 20 leagues of the post. He then sent out a militia captain with 40 men to reconnoiter to a distance of 12 leagues, as well as 2 canoes of 6 men each to scout as far as 20 leagues away. The militia spied the approaching army on May 23rd.

It was just after noontime on the 26th when the enemy fell upon the settlement of St. Louis. Approaching from the north, they found the place unprotected and advanced upon the town in a frenzy of excitement and fury. Soldiers and civilians alike took their positions in the trenches, in the tower, and around the government house where the women and children had been gathered. Capt. Leyba was taken to the tower to command the artillery.

Resistance from the trenches and fire from the cannon surprised the raiding army. They desisted in their attempt on the town only to unleash their fury in the surrounding fields. Five hours of mayhem and destruction took the lives of 21 people, mostly laborers and slaves who'd been working in the fields. Upon retreat, the assailants took up to 70 prisoners as they made their way north whence they had come.

### **The aftermath**

Fernando de Leyba, too weak to pen his own letters, dictated on June 8th his report of the attack on St. Louis. Two days later he dictated the terms of his will. Illness finally took the captain in the early morning hours of June 28, 1780. Fellow officer Pedro Piernas responded to the news of his death, "I have learned with regret, Monsieur, of the death of M. de Leyba, my old friend, for whose small family I deeply feel."<sup>9</sup>

The defense of St. Louis was hailed a success in Spain. The *Gazeta de Madrid* ran the news of the battle in its February 16, 1781 issue. It published, too, Leyba's posthumous promotion to Lt. Colonel, reward from his king for his achievements and services in general and, in particular, for his vigorous defense of St. Louis.

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1 Bernardo de Gálvez to Fernando de Leyba, March 23, 1779, Archivo General de Indias (AGI), Cuba 1, no. 866.

2 Service record of Fernando de Leyba, 1764, Archivo General de Simancas, SGU, leg. 2656, archivo 8, doc 42.

3 Service record of Fernando de Leyba, August 1776, AGI, SD 2661, no. 135.

4 George Rogers Clark to George Mason, November 19, 1779, George Rogers Clark Papers, 1771-1784. Edited with introduction and notes by James Alton James, Vol 1 (Lexington, Ky, 2002), 129.

5 Leyba to Gálvez, October 18, 1779, AGI, Cuba 1, no. 1243.

6 Leyba to Gálvez, March 9, 1780, AGI, Cuba 2359, no. 81.

7 Leyba to Gálvez, October 18, 1779, AGI, Cuba 1, no. 1240.

8 Leyba to Gálvez, March 9, 1780, AGI, Cuba 2359, no. 81.

9 Pedro Piernas to François Vallé, August 4, 1780, AGI, Cuba 113, no. 613.