

# The slave freed by Bernardo de Gálvez

Research. The American Michael Henderson discovers the intervention of the governor of Louisiana in the manumission of Agnes Matthieu, whose figure is the focus of the celebration of the Independence Day of the United States in Macharaviaya today



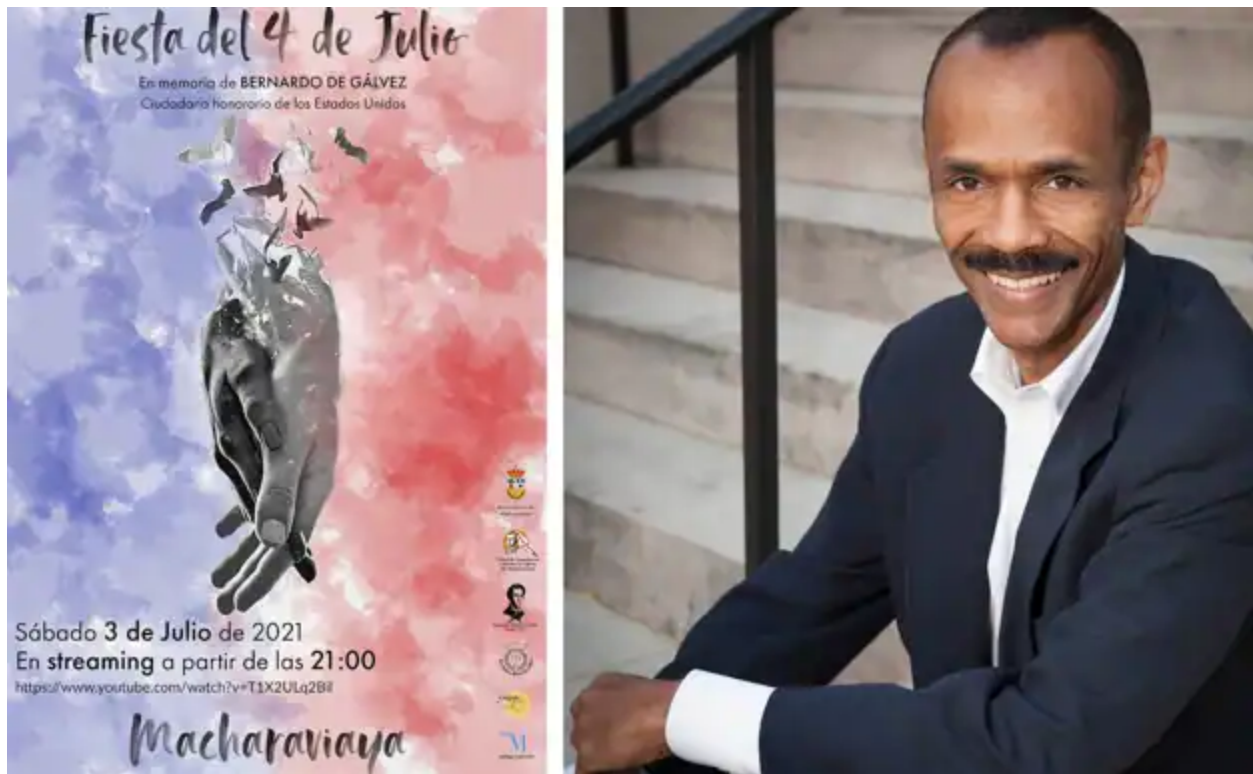
Documents of the sentence declaring the manumission of Agnes, signed by Bernardo de Gálvez (New Orleans Notarial Archives). On the right, researcher Michael Henderson, a descendant of the woman freed in 1779 by order of Malaga captain general Bernardo de Gálvez (below)

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Saturday, 3 July 2021, 02:00 | Updated 10:57 a.m.

It was one of those family secrets you don't talk about. A silence that had dragged on since the time when the Spanish flag flew in Louisiana in the eighteenth century. It was there that an American family had its origins that shamefully and discreetly forbade the use of the surname of French origin, Devaux. That mystery, buried by time and guilt, aroused the curiosity of **Michael N. Henderson**, who set out to climb the branches of the family tree of his lineage until he reached the founders, **Agnes and Mathieu. She, a black slave, and he, a French artillery soldier originally from Marseilles.** Nothing to do between the two except for one common name: **Bernardo de Gálvez**, governor of Louisiana.

"The elders in my family knew about the relationship between the two, but there was a sense of shame associated with their relationship, due to the intolerance of the laws of the time with mixed unions," explains the fourth-generation descendant of this couple, who has invested more than a decade in researching his ancestors since a cousin, Eleanor Douroux Lombard showed him old photos and told him the phrase that had been repeated from father to son since the eighteenth century: **"We were not allowed to use the surname Devaux."** "According to my cousin, that ban was related to Agnes and Mathieu, but I didn't know how," says Henderson, who took on the detective task of uncovering the story as if it were a family debt.



Poster of the 4th of July celebration in Macharaviaya, which will feature the intervention via streaming of Michael Henderson. SOUTH AND LORIKAY

It didn't take long for the investigation to focus on Agnes, whose release was the key to the whole story. Thus, **she discovered that when her ancestor was only a child, at the age of 13, she was acquired, along with her mother and siblings, by the German immigrant Barbara Herterlin in 1771.** Seven years later, the slave petitioned a court for the application of the Spanish colony's self-purchase law, which was more advanced than the French and allowed subject people to acquire their independence for a fair price set by appraisers. But Agnes ran into a problem: her owner's repeated refusal to sign her manumission by refusing her slave's valuation up to three times. The lawsuit dragged on for more than a year, as shown by the files preserved in the Notarial Archives of New Orleans and in which Henderson himself discovered that the person who granted freedom to his predecessor was not Herterlin herself, but Governor Bernardo de Gálvez himself.

## **Finding the Connection**

In those documents written in old Castilian were hidden the clues to discover the mystery of the intervention of the Malaga native. In the processes for a liberation, a third person was always involved who was the one who paid the appraisal to the owner of the slave. **In the case of Agnes vs Herterlin, the triangle was completed by the Frenchman Mathieu Devaux dit Platillo.** "I researched documents to find out more about his life in Spanish Louisiana and came to his participation in the militia and his service in the American Revolution, under General Bernardo de Gálvez," says Michael N. Henderson, who, as a retired lieutenant commander in the U.S. Navy, shares that military status with his ancestor.

**This Saturday, Macharaviaya celebrates U.S. Independence Day with a connection with Michael Henderson, who hopes to visit Bernardo de Gálvez's hometown next year**

The Frenchman participated in the great battles fought by the Spanish strategist, including that of Pensacola. **"Devaux was instrumental in the artillery corps against the British at Baton Rouge in September 1779, so he asked Gálvez to intervene in the case of Agnes,"** Henderson reveals. So when three months later the judicial review of the slave's manumission took place, the president of the court was none other than the man from Malaga who "granted freedom with the stroke of a pen".



Bernardo de Gálvez, governor of the Spanish colony of Louisiana, present-day United States. SOUTH

And although the laws of the time did not allow mixed couples and the Devoux were never able to bear their father's surname, there is no doubt that **Agnes and Mathieu were pioneers and ahead of their time**. This is evidenced by another document, the will of Marseille himself, who in 1810 named Agnes as the mother of his seven children. Despite the laws of the time, "Mathieu and Agnes lived together, prospered financially, and raised a family whose descendants were never enslaved again, despite America's terrible history of slavery," says **Henderson, who has captured all his research in the book 'Got Proof!' (Proof Taken!: My Genealogical Journey Through the Use of Documentation)** and that on July 3 – one day before the anniversary of the independence of the United States – he will be the protagonist of the celebration of this day in Macharaviaya, the hometown of Bernardo de Gálvez.

## Visit to Malaga

"The story of my ancestors and their connection to Spain's participation in my country's independence demonstrates a fascinating intersection between slavery in the United States and the struggle for freedom and independence," says the researcher and member of the National Society of Sons of the American Revolution (NSSAR), who first heard **Teresa Valcárcel** talk about the town in the Axarquía, who brought to the Capitol in Washington the painting of Bernardo de Gálvez that hangs in this institution in recognition of his contribution to the founding of the North American country. **"This Independence Day in Macharaviaya will be streamed from Little Spain in New York and we will have a connection with Michael Henderson,** who we hope will be able to come in person next year when the pandemic is over," explains the deputy mayor of the town, Katie Hallybone, who anticipates that they plan to perform a representation of the intervention of the Malaga general in the emancipation of Agnes by then.

A signature that was stamped on December 16, 1779. And that it would be premonitory, since in one of those unexpected winks of history **the first African-American president of the United States, Barak Obama, returned the gesture to Gálvez** by granting honorary U.S. citizenship to the Malaga native on December 16, 2014. The same day that Agnes debuted her freedom 235 years ago.

**Follow here the live of the celebration of Independence Day in Macharaviaya (Saturday, July 3, from 9 p.m.):**

<https://youtu.be/T1X2ULq2BiI>

## **Macharaviaya connects with New York's Little Spain to celebrate the day**

Bernardo de Gálvez's link to the creation of the United States has been inherited by his hometown, Macharaviaya, which celebrates its own Independence Day every July 4. The pandemic reduces the presence of the events this year, but the town council has designed a program that will bridge distances thanks to the usual connections via streaming. Thus, the town of La Axarquía will connect this Saturday with the Little Spain market in New York -promoted by Ferrán Adriá and the recent Princess of Asturias Award for Concord, chef José Andrés-, who will join this year's party and in which the researcher Michael N. Henderson will take part, who will remember Gálvez's intervention in the liberation of his fourth-generation great-grandmother when she was a slave in the city. the eighteenth century.

The event from Little Spain, which will start at 9 p.m. (Spanish time), will also be attended by Teresa Valcárcel, a great expert on the figure of the Malaga military and his vindication in the United States, and the journalist Guillermo Fesser, author of the book 'Meet Bernardo de Gálvez', which brings the figure of the governor closer to the little ones.