The Battle of New Orleans was fought during the War of 1812 because the British had the idea that if they could capture New Orleans and the Mississippi River they could attack the fledgling United States from its unprotected back door.

It wasn’t a new idea.

They’d had the same thought the last time they’d fought the Americans, during the American Revolution - and they might have done it then, except that a Spanish governor used a handful of Cajun and Indian allies to help put a latch on that back door.

That’s why in St. Martinville today you will find the famed Evangeline statue overlooking a monument erected by the Daughters of the American Revolution in memory of French Acadians who fought for Spain against the British in the cause of America.

The merchant class of Louisiana, by and large, supported the American cause during the Revolution. They were developing profitable business relations with the Yankees, and if they didn’t always agree with American politics they seldom refused their money. The Acadians had just arrived in Louisiana and still had vivid memories of their mistreatment at the hands of the British. Spain, which ruled Louisiana then, got into the fray mostly because they saw a chance to take Gibraltar and some other European territory they thought they might like to have. But they also had good reason to fight the British in America.

For one thing, they wanted to protect their territory east of the Mississippi from British encroachment. For another, the British had taken Florida from them the last time European battles had spilled over into the New World, and Spain wanted Florida back. And the Americans wooed them hard, because New Orleans controlled the mouth of the Mississippi and that was important.

With the river closed to the English, the Americans could transport supplies purchased in New Orleans to the Ohio Territory, where they were preparing for a campaign that, some say, would be a turning point in the Revolution.

The British had been trying to stir up the Indians along the Ohio frontier since almost the beginning of the Revolution. They figured Washington’s Revolutionary volunteers would be less willing to fight the British if they were worried about Indians attacking their women back home.

The best way to end the Indian threat was to drive the British troublemakers out of the region. But that meant sending an army up the Ohio Valley and keeping it supplied. The Americans appealed to Spain for help. Spain responded by extending credit to the Americans, who were then able to move supplies and arms up the Mississippi River, to a ragtag army under Gen. George Rogers Clark. With this Spanish support, he was able to break the back of British power in the Northwest region, which meant Washington could fight elsewhere without looking over his shoulder.

But Louisiana’s Gov. Bernardo Galvez wanted to do more than send arms and lend moral support. He wanted to fight. His plan was to attack the British from the rear, rather than let them do the same thing to the Americans. As things stood, the British were able to harass the Americans by slipping past Spanish New Orleans by way of Bayou Manchac and the Amite River (both controlled by the British), which connected to an English fort at Baton Rouge and to another one at Natchez.

On May 3, 1779, the moment Galvez had long waited for finally came, when Spain formally entered the war. He immediately began plans to take the offensive, knowing that the British had been massing troops in preparation, he surmised, for an attack on New Orleans.

Supplies were collected. Several boats were commandeered and added to his little fleet of gunboats. He called for reinforcements from...
Havana and other Spanish outposts.

He was ready to begin his maneuvers in mid-August, but on August 18, a hurricane struck New Orleans and — in just three hours — sank every boat he'd collected on the river.

Undaunted, Galvez began rebuilding his force and gathering again the supplies and munitions he would need. Boats were brought in from elsewhere to replace those he had lost. Four ships were raised from the bottom of the Mississippi and refitted. Arrangements were complete again within weeks of the hurricane.

The little army set out on the afternoon of August 27. It was composed of 170 veteran soldiers, 330 recruits recently arrived from Mexico and the Canary Islands, 20 carabiniers, 60 militiamen, 80 free blacks and seven American volunteers. The force totaled 667 men "of all sorts, nationalities and colors, but without a single engineer, and with the artillery officer very sick."

Marching through the Mississippi River's German and Acadian Coasts upriver from New Orleans, Galvez collected another 720 volunteers, many of them were Acadians, 120 of them were Indians.

These men would be used to good advantage. As historian John Walton Caughey would report: "The militia, particularly the Acadians, who had not forgotten the persecutions they had suffered at the hands of the English, behaved splendidly."

The lightly guarded Fort Bute on Bayou Manchac was the first victim of Galvez' surprise maneuver and fell quickly before a direct assault. After a few days of rest the troops moved on to Baton Rouge, about 15 miles away. The fort there was much stronger, so Galvez used a trick. He sent a Spanish force up the river to cut off the fort from the British outpost at Natchez. Meanwhile, he pretended to prepare for an attack from one direction while really intending to come from the other. The British fell for the ruse and aimed their artillery at empty forest. The fight was brisk, but short. The British surrendered 375 men at Baton Rouge. The Natchez post surrendered at the same time.

With the British in Louisiana taken care of, Galvez turned his attention to English forts in East Florida. Fort Charlotte at Mobile fell easily enough, but Fort George at Pensacola was more difficult. It took reinforcements from Cuba and several attacks before the Pensacola garrison was worn down, but, after a lucky shot into the British gunpowder supply blasted a hole in the fort's wall, Galvez and his troops prevailed.

The end result: The campaign restored Florida to Spanish control, blocked the threat of British troops advancing up the Mississippi, and forced the British to use up troops that could have been fighting Americans elsewhere.

Two of the Acadians who helped that to happen were Amand Broussard, whose house you will find restored today at Vermilionville, and his brother Claude, sons of the old guerrilla fighter Joseph "Beausoleil" Broussard. Other names found on the St. Martinville memorial include Joseph Babin, Jean Bernard, Michel Bernard, Jean Louis Bonin, Paul Bonin, Francois Boutte, Philippe Boutte, Francois Broussard, Joseph Broussard, Silvain Broussard, Joseph Castille, Michel Doucet, Jean Ducat, Claude Duhon, Pierre Gaillard, Barthlemy Grevemberg, Francois Grevemberg, Charles Guibau, Francois Guibau, Jean Baptiste Hebert, Joseph Hebert, Jean Baptiste LaBauve, Amant Landry, Simon LeBleu, Jacques Lepine, Pierre Nzat, Marin Prejean, Joseph Proust, Firmin Robichaux, Amant Thibaudeau, Oliviere Thibaudeau, Paul Trahan, Joseph Wilse, Philippe Wilse, Antoine Patin.