

# **The Rare Spanish Carlos III, Al Merito Medals, a Chronology 1764 to 1783**

**By Steve Cox**

Little did I realize one cool December morning of 2004, that in April 2010 I would be writing an article about an early Spanish medal that at the time I had no knowledge of. It all started on a trip I made to visit a friend and fellow history buff. The area on, and surrounding his farm, is rich in sites from the first days of Indian Removal, early 1830's. While out on one such site, a historic Choctaw meeting place, he glanced down at the ground and saw what he thought was a silver dollar. After examining it closer he saw it was not a coin, but some kind of medal. The inscriptions on the medal were all in Spanish, and no date was on it that might help determine the age. After looking at it I didn't know a lot more about it than he did, but having spent 5 years running a gold dredging operation in Ecuador, I was able to translate the Spanish inscriptions on it. I was intrigued by it, and a few months after acquiring it, I decided to dedicate some time researching it. After 6 years and several hundred hours of research I decided it was time to put my work into a research paper. I am not a stranger to this type of project. In 1974 after a decade of historic site location and research, I became a founding member of the Southwest American Historic Artifact Research Association, referred to as "S.A.H.A.R.A." I served as President for many years, and enjoyed working with many archeologist, museums, and research groups.

After I started researching the medal, it didn't take long to figure out that it was an early Spanish medal dating to the reign of the Spanish King, Carlos III, 1759 to 1788. Fig. 3. The driving force behind my curiosity was the fact that for several years I was able to find only a few references and fewer images, and they were all of the larger Carlos III, Al Merito medal. For these first few years it was very baffling. I was not going to let up until I found an example of the smaller medal to compare to the one I had. Now even after 6 years, I have only documented one other Carlos III, Al Merito small medal. This was a day I will not forget. I was reviewing a book, and up popped an image of a small Carlos III, Al Merito medal, and it was identical to the one I had. Fig. 2. I got in contact with Morris Arnold, author of this book, "Rumble of a Distant Drum: The Quapaws & Old World Newcomers 1673-1804". Mr. Arnold was kind enough to help me contact the owners of the

medal, Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Supernaw; they are direct descendants of Buffalo Chief, a Quapaw Chief from 1760 to 1773, to whom this medal was presented.<sup>1</sup> The Supernaw family was very helpful in my research into this subject.

The practice of presenting medals to Indian Chiefs in America started long before colonial independence, even though the exact date is unknown, the Spanish, French, and British presented medals to Chiefs long before colonial independence.<sup>2</sup>

The first medals struck and presented as Indian Peace Medals to Indian Chiefs by the Spanish were the Carlos III, Al Merito medals, struck after the cession of Louisiana to Spain in 1762. The earliest known Spanish peace medals found in America, and struck specifically as Indian Peace Medals were Carlos III, Al Merito, large medals, Betts 536, referred to as “Spanish Indian (?) Medal.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1764 the Spanish Al Merito military decoration was created to present to Spanish militia officers in Havana for military accomplishments.<sup>4</sup> The first reference to the creation of the Al Merito medal appears in a communication dated Feb.14, 1769 from Julian de Arriaga, “Secretary of Marine, and of the Indies”, to Miguel de Muzquiz,” Secretary of the Spanish Treasury”, in which the following references are noted. *In a communication dated April 24, 1764 the Marquis of Esquilache advised Julian de Arriaga that the king, Carlos III had resolved to have some gold and silver medals made bearing his image on the obverse, and the words Al Merito on the reverse. These were to be military decorations to be awarded at the Governors discretion, to officers of the new militia units in Havana. It is also stated in 1764 that Secretary of War, Esquilachz, and Secretary of State, Grimaldi, who were appointed by Carlos III in 1762, as Ministerial Council for the Defiance of the Empire, personally saw to this mater. They also had commissioned Thomas Francisco Prieto to engrave the dies.*<sup>5</sup>

Prieto was appointed in 1748 as the Principal Engraver of the Royal Mint, in Madrid. In 1761 under Carlos III he was appointed Engraver General of Coins and Medals.

The first edition of the Carlos III, Al Merito medal “the small medal” was struck July 20, 1764. The obverse bearing a naked bust of Carlos III, in Roman style, with short hair and a crown of Laurel leaves, around the border were the words **CARLOS III REY DE ESP DELAS INDIAS** and on the reverse, surrounded by a wreath of Laurel leaves, the words **AL MERITO**. The inscription on each side was in Spanish rather than Latin, which was the only language permitted for official medals of the kingdom. The medals had suspension rings which apparently were applied,<sup>6</sup> however appear to have

been part of the casting. In Prieto's medal accounts of July 20, 1764 the first striking consisted of 12 Gold, and 32 Silver medals. It is also likely, as was the custom, that some were struck in bronze to be given to persons participating in the minting of the medal. These would not have had suspension rings. In May 17, 1765, 50 more silver medals were ordered, 68 were cast, but only 50 were struck. This order, like the first order was to be sent to America. References to these early medals being used as Indian peace medals can be found 2 years later in the spring of 1767 when Governor of Louisiana, Antonio de Ulloa, sent an expedition to the mouth of the Missouri River. In a communication to the commander it was stated that it had always been a practice to give medals of the king to the Chiefs and Sub Chiefs.<sup>7</sup>

The Al Merito medals were not struck again until 1769, when on Feb. 22 of the same year Mazquiz issued a royal order to strike 18 Gold medals, and to conserve the dies for possible future orders. In Prieto's medal accounts of March 29, 1769 he had struck 20 medals, of which 6 were sent to Julian de Arriga on April 2. Shortly after, Alejandro O'Reilly succeeded Ulloa as governor of Louisiana. In the fall of 1769, he distributed small Spanish medals left to him by Ulloa, to the chiefs living within 60 leagues (207 Miles) of New Orleans.<sup>8</sup> The small medals were presented to Chiefs of the following tribes, Tunicas, Taensas, Pacanas, Houmas, Bayogoulas, Ofogoulas, Chaouachas, and Ouachas, and on Oct. 22, to Chiefs of the Chahtos Biloxis, Pascagoulas, and Mobilians, and on Oct. 29, the Chitiachas, and on Nov. 16, the Quapaws.<sup>9</sup>

In 1770 Athanase de Mezieres, Lieutenant Governor of the Spanish Frontier distributed the small Spanish medals to Chiefs of the Cadodacho, Petit Cado, and Yatansi tribes.<sup>10</sup>

On Oct. 16, 1770, 2 more were sent to the Viceroy of Peru. On July 27, 1771, 2 Gold and 2 silver medals were sent to Arriaga. In 1771 Fernando de Leyba, Governor of Spanish Illinois, was sent a small medal by Luis de Ungaza, the Governor of Louisiana, to be presented to the Quapaw Chief, Cazenonpoint. In return the Chief was to surrender his French medal. After seeing that the Spanish medal was smaller than the French medal, Cazenonpoint declared the Spanish had cheated him, and demanded his French medal be returned.<sup>11</sup>

On Feb. 26, 1772, 2 medals were sent to Peru. On August 24, 1772, 2 more medals were sent to Peru.

Between the years of 1764 and 1773, the Quapaw Chief (Ki-He-Kah) Buffalo Chief, was presented a small Spanish medal. This medal is in the possession of descendants of Buffalo Chief. This is one of only two Carlos

III, Al Merito small Spanish medals I have found record of that is still in existence today. The second one being the one found on the Choctaw site in Oklahoma in Dec. 2004, and mentioned earlier in this paper. This medal is in the Steve Cox Collection.

On April 8, 1775 at the request of Luis de Unzaga, the Governor of Louisiana, 4 Gold and 2 silver medals were sent to the Department of Marine, and the Indies. Unzaga the Governor of Louisiana had also distributed small medals left to him by the previous Governor of Louisiana, Alejandro O'Reilly. In July 1777, 2 more gold medals were sent to Chile. In July 1778, under the governor of Spanish Illinois, Fernando de Leyba, 2 small medals were given to Osage Chiefs, and another 4 to 6 more medals were requested.<sup>12</sup>



**Small Specimen #1, Fig. 2**  
**This medal presented to the**  
**Quapaw Chief (Ki-He-Kah)**  
**Courtesy of Morris Arnold**

In February 1776 Carlos III ordered the creation of a new Al Merito medal of a greater diameter. The reason for this order was given in a communication on August 19, 1777 from Jose de Galvez to Miguel de Muzquiz, indicating that the Indian Chiefs of the Province of Louisiana were insulted because the medals given them by the English were larger than the ones given to Unzaga, governor of Louisiana, to be distributed to them.

The Carlos III, Al Merito small silver medals were struck between July 20, 1764, and the spring of, 1783. I know of only two existing specimens of this medal. Small Specimen #1, Fig. 2. The medal presented to the Quapaw Chief (Ki-He-Kah) between 1764 and 1773. Small Specimen #2, Fig. 3. Steve Cox Collection

On August 22, 1777 orders were given to



**Small Specimen #2, Fig. 3**  
**Steve Cox Collection**

the Royal Mint to create new dies for the Al Merito medal that would increase the diameter from 36 mm to 54 mm. The new medals were to be similar to the first issue in almost everything but size. This job again fell to Prieto.

In April 1778, 30 large silver medals had been struck.<sup>13</sup> Other than size, the second edition medals were almost identical to the smaller first edition medals, the main difference being the bust of Carlos III, on the larger medal Carlos wears the Golden Fleece on a ribbon around his neck, and the engravers name "Prieto" under the bust.

On April 14, 1778, 24 of the larger medals were delivered to Governor Jose Galvez. On May, 2 more were given to Don Gabriel, the son of the king. The 4 that remained were sent to the Dept. of the Treasury. As with the first edition small medals, there were also Bronze medals struck without suspension rings, and given out to persons involved in the minting. The larger medals were to be struck specifically for presentation to Indian chiefs of Louisiana, and to be struck in silver only.

In May 1778, as a result of orders given by Jose de Galvez, 95 of the original 108 small 1764 first edition medals were to be sent back to the Royal Mint to be melted down. After May 1778, the small medals were to be struck specifically as military decorations to be awarded to militia officers in the Americas. These were to be only struck in gold.

It should be noted however that the small silver medals were still being requested for Quapaw Chiefs as late as 1785. In a letter dated 1785 from Captain DuBreuil, Commandant of Arkansas Post, He recommended a Quapaw Chief named Thagesideska, for a small medal.<sup>14</sup> Chiefs at this time were commissioned as Large Medal Chiefs, Small Medal Chiefs, and Gorget Chiefs which would indicate that both small and large medals were still being presented. This practice continued into the reign of Carlos IV.

On July 1778, 2 gold medals were struck to send to Galvez. Starting in 1779 both large silver and small gold medals were struck and sent to America. On March 11, 1779, 102 large silver medals were struck. On April 5, 1779, 20 of these and 4 previously struck large silver medals and 24 Small gold medals were sent to Guatemala. May 16, 1779, 32 more gold medals were struck and sent to America. In 1780, 52 small gold medals were struck, but never sent to America.

In Feb. 1781, at St. Louis, the Spanish Governor Don Francisco Cruzat received 16 medals to distribute to Sac Chiefs.<sup>15</sup>

On March 16, 1783 the last 2 small gold medals were sent to America to the Viceroy of Santa Fe.

The Carlos III, Al Merito large medals were struck between April 1778, and March 16, 1783. I know of only three existing specimens of this medal. Large Specimen #1, Fig. 4. This medal is in the Museum Lazaro in Spain. Size noted as 56mm, Photos exist in the 1948-1950 photographic inventories, Camps Cazorla. Large Specimen #2, Fig. 5. This medal is from the John W. Adams Collection, size listed as 55.5mm, Stack's Americana Sale 2009. Large Specimen #3, Fig. 6. This medal is

somewhat clouded with mystery. It was discovered in 1862 in Wisconsin in an Indian mound at Lower Prairie du Chien. The early account I have of the medal describes it as follows. Its diameter is two and one-eighth inches "54mm". It's weighs 776 grains "50 Grams". Its material is chiefly silver. Its obverse bears a bust, one and one half inches high. The bust was originally encircled by an inscription now almost illegible. Upon the reverse is the word

Merito. This legend is in the midst of a wreath tied with ribbons. This relic has a hole bored through it in the margin, so that it could be hung round one's neck. The word Merito seems to have been originally

Por Merito. On



**Large Specimen #1, Fig. 4**  
**Museum Lazaro Madrid Spain, 1948-1950**  
**photographic inventories, Camps Cazorla**



**Large Specimen #2, Fig. 5**  
**This medal is from the John W. Adams Collection,**  
**Courtesy of Stack's, Americana Sale 2009**

the Obverse the words Carlos, Espana and Indias are decipherable. After careful study the words were thought to be "*Carlos III. Rey D'España de las Indias.*"<sup>16</sup> This medal has remained in the collection of the Wisconsin Historical Society since the 1860's.

It is widely accepted that this medal was presented to Chief Huisconsin or Chief Mitasse, of the Sauks and Foxes by Spanish Governor Don Francisco Cruzat on Nov. 20, 1781, in St. Louis.

I think it is likely that the discrepancies in the wording and means of attachment for this medal are due to its very poor condition. To validate this opinion I made a scale transparent overlay of Large Specimen #2, and it matched Large Specimen #1. The overlay also matched the remaining features of Large Specimen #3, including on the obverse, Bust and



**Large Specimen #3, Fig. 6**  
**Medals awarded the Indians, European**  
**Colonization America, A Historical and**  
**Numismatic Study, 1916**

hair lines, wreath and ribbon lines, and parts of the word Carlos. On the reverse the matches are clear on the wreath and the word merit. The letter L of Al Merito is also very clear, which dismisses the early speculation that the word was Por. In addition the remains of an attaching ring seem to be present.

Betts # 536 is describing this medal, and gives the same origin "Prairie du Chien" and description that is given in the "Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, for the years 1880, 1881 and 1882, Vol. IX". For these reasons I believe that the 3 known specimens I list here, as well as "Betts #536" are all the same design, Carlos III, Al Merito large medal, struck between April 1878, and March 16, 1783.

On Dec. 14, 1788 Carlos III died and the medals became invalid. There are sufficient differences in these medals, and the Carlos IV Al Merito medals to rule out any confusion between the two.

In conclusion I hope the information presented here will help answer many of the questions that surround the Carlos III, Al Merito medals, and their intended uses.

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- <sup>1</sup> Phone conversation between Steve Cox and Risa Proctor Supernaw, Feb. 14, 2008
- <sup>2</sup> Indian Peace Medals in American History, Francis Paul Prucha
- <sup>3</sup> American Colonial History Illustrated By Contemporary Medals, 1894, Charles Wyllys Betts. Page 239
- <sup>4</sup> The First Spanish Military Decorations, Thomas Francisco Prieto's Al Merito Medals, Elvira Villena, From the Medal No. 36, page 25.
- <sup>5</sup> Archivo General de Simancas (A.G.S.) Superintendent and Secretary of the House , Madrid, Page 834
- <sup>6</sup> The First Spanish Military Decorations, Thomas Francisco Prieto's Al Merito Medals, Elvira Villena, From the Medal No. 36, page 27.
- <sup>7</sup> Instructions to Ulloa, March 6, 1767. The Spanish Regime in Missouri. Louis Houck, R.R. Donnelley and Sons Co. 1909, Page 11-12.
- <sup>8</sup> Statement accompanying O'Reilly to Julian de Arriaga, Oct. 17, 1769, Spain in the Mississippi Valley, By Lawrence Kinnaird, 1949, Volume 1, Page 102.
- <sup>9</sup> Indians Settlers and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy through the Lower Mississippi Valley before 1783, By Daniel H. Usner, JR. 1992, Page 131.
- <sup>10</sup> Spanish Louisiana Historical Association, Notable Men and Women of Louisiana, "Athanasie de Mezieres" 2004, By Truman Stacey, Page 1.
- <sup>11</sup> Fernando de Leyba to Luis de Unzaga y Amezaga, The Education of Fernando de Leyba: Quapaws and Spaniards on the Border Empires. By Kathleen DuVal, Printed in the Arkansas Historical Quarterley, Volume 60, No. 1, Spring 2001, Page 1-29.
- <sup>12</sup> Galvez to Leyba, Sept. 2, 1778, Spain in the Mississippi Valley, By Lawrence Kinnaird, 1949, Volume 1, Page 305, 321.
- <sup>13</sup> A.H.N. Fondos Contemporaneous Ministerio de Hacienda, Madrid, Leg 7870, Exp.3.
- <sup>14</sup> Rumble of a Distant Drum: The Quapaws & Old World Newcomers 1673-1804, By Morris Arnold, 2000, Page 82
- <sup>15</sup> Martin to Cruzat, Feb. 15, 1781, Spanish Regime in Missouri, Volume 1, R.R. Donnelley and Sons Co. 1909, Page 199
- <sup>16</sup> Report and Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, for The years 1880, 1881 and 1882, Vol. IX, Page 122.

