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Lorenzo de Zavala



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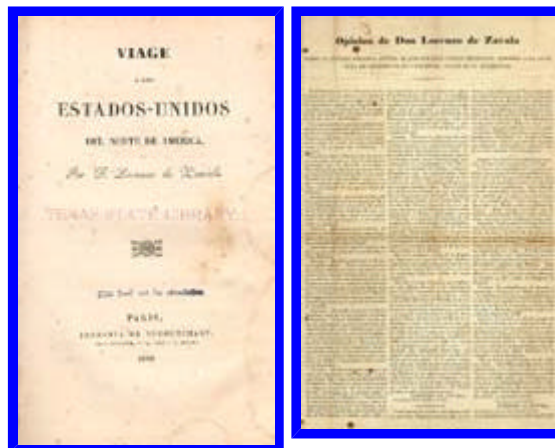
Manuel Lorenzo Justiniano de Zavala y Sáenz was born the fifth of nine children of Anastasio de Zavala y Velázquez and María Bárbara Sáenz y Castro in the village of Tecoh near Mérida, Yucatán, on October 3, 1788. He graduated from the Tridentine Seminary of San Ildefonso in Mérida in 1807, and almost immediately embarked on a political career that spanned more than a quarter of a century. By the time that Lorenzo de Zavala arrived in Texas in July 1835, he had already held office on the local, state and national levels in the Mexican Colonial, Imperial, and National governments.

Zavala was twice imprisoned for his political beliefs. The first time, he spent three years, 1814-1817, in San Juan de Ulua prison for advocating democratic reforms in the Spanish government. While in prison he studied English and medicine. He took up the practice of medicine upon his release and actively pursued it until 1819 when he returned to politics. Later, after the overthrow of President Guerrero in 1829, he was kept under house arrest and then forced into exile the following year.

In addition to holding office, Zavala further affected political life in Mexico by his active part in establishing York Rite Masonry in Mexico in 1826. Serving as an alternative to the Scottish Rite Grand Orient style of

Masonry favored by the politically conservative and centralist leaders, the York Rite boasted a membership that championed liberal ideals and a decentralized, federal plan for government. Zavala became the Charter Master of Independencia Lodge No. 454, and he continued in that office until his exile in 1830.

Zavala extended his political influence both as a writer and newspaper publisher. He established the first newspaper published in Yucatan, and from 1807 until his death he contributed articles and editorials to his own and other newspapers. In addition, he published a number of pamphlets, memorials, broadsides, and books. As an author, he is perhaps best known for his two-volume history of Mexico, *Ensayo Historico de las Revoluciones de Megico des 1808 hasta 1830* (Paris and New York, 1831 and 1832) and his *Viages a los Estados-Unidos del Norte de America* (Paris, 1834).



Title page from *Viage á los Estados-Unidos del Norte de América*, 1834

Broadside for the meeting at Lynch's tavern, 1835

Texans, too, acknowledged Zavala's importance. Zavala had been representing Mexico in Paris when he got word that Santa Anna had taken dictatorial control of Mexico. He came to Texas to work for the restoration of democratic government of his country. Although orders for Zavala's capture and deportation were issued by many of the Texas authorities, he was never in real danger of arrest throughout 1835-1836. Instead, Zavala was invited to attend a conference of all representatives in the Brazos District to be held at San Felipe July 15. Asked to speak at meeting planned for August 8, 1835 at Lynch's tavern, Zavala was forced to decline because of ill health. However, he wrote a summary of the political situation to be read at the Lynchburg meeting. In late September he joined Stephen F. Austin at San Felipe, and many of Zavala's proposals were incorporated in

Austin's October 3 Circular addressed to "The People."

A pragmatic politician throughout his career, Lorenzo de Zavala tailored his proposals to allow the fullest extension of democratic practices within the existing or proposed political systems. This ability to adapt to circumstances is perhaps best reflected in the three stages of his participation in the Texas Revolution.

In the first stage, Zavala hoped to involve all of the people of Mexico, including Texans, in a revolt against Santa Anna's centralist government. At this time, Zavala favored separate statehood for Texas within a democratic Mexican federation.

Zavala went to San Felipe on October 15 as one of the five delegates from Harrisburg to the Consultation, a meeting of representatives from around Texas that conferred on the state of affairs with Mexico and evolved into Texas' earliest provisional government. Zavala succeeded Stephen F. Austin as the chairman of the central committee of the public safety. As a member of the Permanent Council (which served as interim government while waiting for a quorum of the Consultation to arrive), he served on the finance committee and wrote an important article urging the Mexican population of Texas to support the revolution for the October 31 *Telegraph and Texas Register*.

When the Consultation finally convened on November 3, Zavala was named to represent Harrisburg on the "committee of 12" (one delegate from each municipality) in order to write a declaration "setting forth to the world the causes that impelled us to take up arms, and the objects for which we fight." With the membership split between those advocating an immediate declaration of independence from Mexico and the majority desiring to return Mexican government to a federal system, Zavala was influential in drafting the Declaration to the Public (November 7, 1835) in support of a federal Mexican government and separate statehood for Texas. The Consultation then appointed him to translate the Declaration into Spanish.



**Motion for Zavala to
translate the Texas
Declaration to the
Public into Spanish**



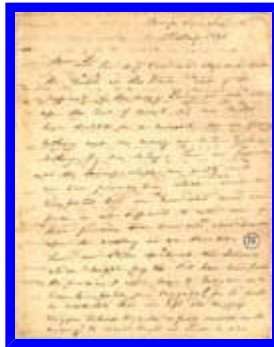
Declaration del Pueblo de Tejas, November 1835

The second stage of Zavala's involvement in the revolution began with the defeat of his ally, Jose Antonio Mexia, in his insurrection against Santa Anna in Tampico Expedition. In addition, the balance of power at the Consultation had begun to swing towards those who favored separation from Mexico.

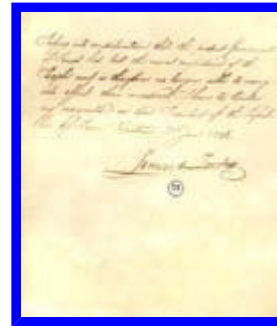
Zavala realized that a national Mexican revolt against Santa Anna was not in the cards, and when the Convention met at Washington-on-the-Brazos in March 1835, Lorenzo de Zavala was forced to reassess his own beliefs. On March 3 he was among the signers of the Texas Declaration of Independence, an act that would brand him a traitor to his fellow Mexicans to this day. He and Jose Antonio Navarro were appointed to the committee to draft a Constitution. Zavala chaired the section on Powers of the Executive Branch and served on the defense, naval affairs, and flag design committees. On March 17 he was unanimously elected Vice President of the *ad interim* government.

Following the adjournment of the Convention, Zavala found himself in frequent disagreement with President David G. Burnet. On April 22, citing his desire to assist the government in a more active capacity, Zavala submitted the first of three resignations. On the 28th, Zavala met with the captive President-General Santa Anna. In the following weeks he would serve as the interpreter and liaison between Santa Anna and the Texas government, particularly during the Velasco treaty negotiations completed May 14. In cabinet meetings he maintained a neutral position on the topic of negotiating with Santa Anna. When he returned to Velasco he found that both a public and a secret treaty had been ratified and that the cabinet had appointed him and Bailey Hardeman to accompany Santa Anna to Mexico to

negotiate treaty of recognition for Texas.



Letter to President Burnet protesting the conduct of the war



Zavala's second resignation letter, 1836

Zavala resigned a second time on June 3, after President Burnet gave in to cabinet complaints and army protests led by Thomas Jefferson Green. Although already on board ship for transfer to Vera Cruz, Santa Anna was returned to prison in Velasco and threatened with execution. Zavala condemned the action stating: "a government that takes orders from armed masses is no longer a body politic." He further extended his protest by helping Santa Anna compose a letter, addressed to Burnet, denouncing his treatment at the hands of the mob.

The fiasco at Velasco led to the third stage of Zavala's thinking about his new country. Writing to Mexia, he declared his sense of having satisfied his obligations to Texas, but he was inclined to side with those favoring union with the United States: "for by this action the stability of *our* government will be assured and because I believe it will be very difficult for Texas to march alone among the other independent nations."

Throughout the rest of the summer he suffered recurrent bouts of malaria. On September 11 he wrote that he expected to be strong enough to attend opening session of the government, but two weeks later, found himself still too ill to attend. On October 14, President Burnet wrote suggesting that both he and Zavala resign their offices so that the newly elected government could be inaugurated at once. Since Congress had not accepted the previous two resignations, Lorenzo de Zavala submitted his third and final resignation dated October 17, 1836.

In his inaugural address Vice President Mirabeau B. Lamar eulogized Zavala:

"Gentlemen, I should be doing an injustice to my own feelings if I were to resume my seat, without paying to my

predecessor in office that tribute of respect to which he is justly entitled by his public as well as his private virtues. Through a period of a long life the ex-vice-president, Governor Lorenzo de Zavala has been the unwavering and consistent friend of liberal principles of free government. Among the first movers of the revolution he has never departed from the pure and sacred principles upon which it was originally founded. This steady and unyielding devotion to the holy sacred cause of liberty has been amply rewarded by the confidence, of the virtuous portion of two republics. The gentleman, the scholar and the patriot, he goes into retirement with the undivided affections of his fellow citizens; and I know, gentlemen, that I do not express only my own feelings when I say that it is the wish of every member of this assembly that the evening of his day may be as tranquil and happy as the meridian of his life has been useful and honorable; a gentleman, a patriot, a scholar and one who loves his fellow man."

On November 15 Lorenzo de Zavala died after contracting pneumonia, the result of a boating accident on Buffalo Bayou.

PRINCIPAL SOURCES:

Henson, Margaret Swett. *Lorenzo de Zavala, the Pragmatic Idealist*. Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1996.

Estep, Raymond. "Lorenzo de Zavala and the Texas Revolution." *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly*. Vol. LVII, pp. 322-335.

[Handbook of Texas article on Lorenzo de Zavala](#)

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