

Lorenzo de Zavala

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On November 15, 1836, Texas lost one of the most influential patriots for the cause of liberty and democracy, Lorenzo de Zavala. Born near Merida, Yucatan on October 3, 1788, Manuel Lorenzo Justiniano de Zavala y Sáenz changed the world he came into. His birth came at a time when the enlightenment was at its peak, with the American Revolution and the start of the French Revolution. It was a time when knowledge in all areas was spreading along with the rights of man. Lorenzo de Zavala was born into this changing world.

Born the fifth of nine children and the second male, Spanish tradition dictated that Zavala join the clergy. Zavala had a thirst for knowledge. He learned to read at an early age and excelled in school. He attended the Seminario Conciliar de San Ildefonso. Zavala was mentored by a professor that taught him to question what he was taught. This idea would stick with him throughout his career. He excelled in his courses and enjoyed reading everything he could get his hands on. This love of reading led him to discover some books that had been confiscated by the Inquisition. These banned books were written by philosophers, scientists and other intellectuals and they criticized conventional ways of thinking. It was the works of Galileo, Locke, Rousseau and others that opened his mind to new ideas, some of which would get him in trouble. After graduating the seminary, Zavala married Teresa Josefa Correa y Correa in 1808 and left school.

Lorenzo found himself at the head of a family just as Mexico was on the verge of revolution. Zavala and a group of intellectuals met regularly to discuss books that were banned by the Inquisition. He was known for his eloquent speeches against the clergy and Spanish officials. In 1812, the Spanish Cortes (legislative body) met in Spain and adopted a constitution,

which limited the role of the monarchy and gave citizens the right to representation. The new constitution allowed for a printing press to be introduced into Yucatan, and Zavala took advantage of this new form of expression. He edited and wrote for several newspapers and was very critical when it came to the church forcing a tithe on the Indian population of Mexico. His constant criticism landed him in jail at San Juan de Ulúa prison in Veracruz. In prison, Zavala taught himself English in order to read medical books, he also had long discussions with other imprisoned intellectuals. Upon his release, Zavala continued to criticize the government; something that would land him a position in the Spanish Cortes representing the Yucatan. His arrival in Spain and his participation in the Cortes led him to believe that Mexico should be independent, as he felt that the needs of the colonies were being ignored. He traveled to Paris after Mexican Independence before making the trip back by way of New Orleans.

Upon his arrival in Yucatan, he was elected to represent the state in Mexico City. Zavala was assigned to two committees in Mexico City, finance and colonization. Mexico was struggling with the idea of whether or not to allow Anglo colonists into Texas. He met with potential *empresarios* including Stephen F. Austin to discuss the matter. This meeting would later lead him to Texas. Zavala worked hard to try to get the Mexican government to act on the issue of colonization, but Emperor Agustin I was hesitant. Lorenzo became disenchanted with the process and began to see a republic as the ideal government for progress, not a monarchy. He published a series of pamphlets criticizing Iturbide, which led to the establishment of many committees and eventually the granting of an *empresario* contract for Stephen F. Austin under the new Imperial Colonization law of 1823. Iturbide's empire came to an end due to a successful coup, which brought Mexico hope for democracy.

In 1824, delegates in Mexico debated whether the government should be centralist or federalist. In the end, centralism was defeated. A new constitution was drafted modeled after the Spanish Constitution of 1812 and a new president was elected. After two years in the new legislature, Zavala was elected Governor of the state of Mexico. Once in the position, Zavala created a public library for the people, apart from those created by the church. Zavala would continue to attempt reforms, but the political climate in Mexico was changing. Federalism was losing ground to centralism, and Zavala was again in danger of arrest for his political views. By July 1830, Zavala was forced to leave Mexico for the United States. During his exile, Zavala spent his time working on filling an empresario contract for Texas. He spent long hours traveling in the U.S. and France trying to convince people to move to Texas. It was while in Paris, that he received word that his wife had died. He returned to Mexico in 1832 and was later named an ambassador to France for Mexico under President Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna. When Santa Anna became a centralist, he ordered Zavala to return to Mexico, but instead he went to the United States and eventually to Texas.

In 1835, Zavala went to Texas with a goal of uniting the federalists against Santa Anna's regime. After a short time, he began to see a need for independence. Following the Texian victory at the Battle of Bexar, Texas chose to seek independence. The first step was to elect officials to the Consultation and Convention of 1836. Zavala was among those elected to serve. He was the most qualified among the delegates, having helped write the Constitution of 1824. William Fairfax Gray would call him "The most interesting man in Texas." He worked hard for the cause of Texas independence and was a respected member of the Convention. He was elected the first vice president of the Republic of Texas and was instrumental in translating documents for the Mexican Army following the Battle of San Jacinto. As 1836 neared its end,

Zavala was in ill health and died of pneumonia as a result of his boat capsizing. Texas and the world lost a man whose quest for knowledge led him to change the world for the better.