



Ignacio Zaragoza and Cinco de Mayo

Probably most people in Dallas County who are familiar with Texas have heard of the annual celebration called “El Cinco de Mayo” or just “Cinco de Mayo,” but fewer may know the actual event that it celebrates and memorializes.

For a few years during the 1860s, Mexico was under the control of France during what is called the Second French Intervention. France, under the rule of Napoleon III, had tried to establish control over the republic of Mexico in an effort to expand its domain in the Americas and also to end the rule of Benito Juárez. Juárez had served as president of Mexico since 1858. Some citizens of Mexico, opposed to Juárez, supported the French intervention and were in favor of establishing a monarchy. Others resisted the French actions, regardless of whether they favored Juárez.

The army of France began to arrive in Mexico in early 1862 with the ultimate goal of taking Mexico City. Two forts protecting the Mexican town of Puebla, in the State of Puebla, around 80 to 85 miles southeast of Mexico City stood in their way. French forces attempted to take Puebla, were thwarted from doing so and were defeated on May 5, 1862 under the leadership of General Ignacio Zaragoza. Though the town of Puebla eventually fell to the French, the date became celebrated for the initial battle which delayed the French attacks for the better part of a year. Honoring the date has since become a regular event in Mexican culture, perhaps even greater in the United States than in Mexico. Although it may be thought of by some as a celebration of Mexican Independence, which it is not, the origin dates back to this early battle with the French. Mexican Independence Day, on the other hand, occurs in September and memorializes Mexico’s independence from Spain.

A key individual in the defense of Puebla in 1862 was Ignacio Zaragoza. In the tradition of honoring maternal names, he is also known as Ignacio Zaragoza de Seguín. He was born in the presidio on March 24, 1829 at Bahía del Espíritu Santo, which at the time part of

Mexico. It is now the town of Goliad, Texas. His father was Miguel María Gerónimo Zaragoza Valdés and his mother was María de Jesús Seguín, a cousin of Juan Nepomucema Seguín. Ignacio's father and mother were married in San Fernando Cathedral in Bexar/San Antonio on July 5, 1826 when they were both in their upper teens. Ignacio's father was a lieutenant serving there and Juan Seguín was a colonel. The Zaragoza family later transferred first to Matamoros and then on to Monterrey, Mexico during (or possibly shortly after) the years of the Texas Revolution. In 1844, young Ignacio enrolled at a seminary in Monterrey where he remained about two years before deciding to pursue a military career as his father had done. This coincides with the end of the Mexican-American War around 1846. Not having been immediately accepted in the Mexican army, he worked in a mercantile business until the early 1850s. He later entered the military by joining the national guard. During Mexico's very complicated history following the Texas Revolution, he was politically aligned in opposition to centralist ruler Santa Anna.

Some sources have him previously being married to a granddaughter of Vicente Guerrero, second President of Mexico, but it seems likely that his only marriage was to Rafaela Padilla de la Garza in 1857. With Rafaela he had three children, only one of whom lived to be an adult. His wife Rafaela died of unknown causes in early 1862.

Santa Anna was deposed in the 1850s after what was essentially a civil war, resulting in the success of the liberal movement under future Mexican president Benito Juárez. Zaragoza was influential and successful in his military career, receiving promotions in rank as well as receiving a political appointment, being named as minister of war and commander of the Mexican navy. Mexico's political and economic situation remained unsettled throughout the presidency of Juárez, overlapping the beginning of the French invasion. As tensions with France increased, Zaragoza resigned his political appointment and returned full time to the military.

Zaragoza had been assigned to defend Puebla and its forts and had been doing so since early 1862. His father and younger brother also served at Puebla. Before the historic battle at Puebla, Zaragoza had previously engaged the French led by Charles de Lorencez at Cubres de Acultzingo. There his troops fought the French on April 28, 1862 on open ground, until Zaragoza elected to withdraw his forces and reestablish them at Puebla. The French arrived at Puebla about a week later and set about trying to take the Mexican fortifications. However, the French were rebuffed by Zaragoza's troops and lost 500 to 1,000 men before withdrawing.

The defeat of the French was a significant boost of morale for the Mexican people and the government. Zaragoza was called to Mexico City in August, 1862 and honored as a hero. He returned to Puebla soon afterward. At some point, he contracted typhoid fever and died on September 8, 1862. Three days later, President Juárez declared the date of the battle a national holiday and by decree he changed the name the town from Puebla de Los Angeles to Puebla de Zaragoza. Zaragoza was first interred in Mexico City. His remains were later removed to Puebla.

The French succeeded in seizing control of Mexico and installing Emperor Maximilian, an Austrian, but their empire was not to last. French control continued only until around 1867, when their rule ended and their forces were withdrawn. Maximilian was executed in July, 1867.

Following his death, Zaragoza has been remembered and honored regularly now for over 160 years. Ignacio Zaragoza societies have formed in Mexico and the United States to remember the battle and Zaragoza. One of the earliest mentions of an Ignacio Zaragoza Society was in 1886 in Texas newspapers. In 1962, soil from Goliad was taken to Puebla by relay runners. It was done as a goodwill gesture and covered a length of about 1,000 miles.

In Goliad, a festival has continuously been held commemorating the events of May, 1862. In Mexico and the United States, many towns, streets, schools and other locations are named for Zaragoza. There are also various monuments to Zaragoza. In Puebla City, Mexico on the edge of a large park, a boulevard named Canzada Ignacio Zaragoza is engineered such that it allows the traffic to pass on either side of a statue of Zaragoza seated on his horse. There is another equestrian statue on a large pedestal in Monterrey, Mexico. In Guadalajara, Mexico there is a statue of him standing and also a bust of Zaragoza located in Tlalpujahua, Mexico.

Two miles south of Goliad, Texas is the General Zaragoza State Historic Site which dates from the 1960s. A stone house was reconstructed at the footprint of a structure that was believed to have been his birthplace. About twenty years later, a statue was added to the site. It was a gift from the Mexican state of Puebla to Texas.



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