From Contraband Capital to Border City: Matamoros, 1746-1848

By
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Abstract

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This dissertation project describes the developing political and cultural economy of the port of Matamoros, especially focusing on the city’s insertion into vibrant trade networks that originated in New Orleans, Louisiana. I approach my study from two different angles: first, through a reconstruction of the economic activity of the city and its trading partners, and second, by surveying the dynamics of political interactions between local players. The city’s port was the conduit for a vibrant contraband trade during this period, and my dissertation uses various innovative methods (especially the reconstruction of trade networks) and obscure sources to quantify the degree to which this illicit commerce contributed to the growth of Matamoros and the region more broadly. My work also analyzes the port’s legal trading connections to New Orleans and other North American entrepôts as well as to the interior of the Mexican North, west to Monterrey, and north across the Rio Grande to Texas. Finally, I untangle the complex ways that Matamoros’ merchants and political elite defended international maritime trade—the lifeblood of the economy—by carefully maneuvering among a multiplicity of state, national, and international actors.

Using the tools of political economy, my dissertation provides a complex understanding of the relationship between politics and trade in Mexican history, blurring the one-way lines of causation found in much of the current scholarship. Although the primary methods I use are those of political economy, I see cultural exchanges and influences as integral to the developing trade networks. My findings complicate Mexican economic and political historiographies as well as our current understanding of trans-Caribbean trading systems.
For my parents,
Janine and José Galván
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Introduction

For México, the Caribbean Sea is our third border: a border with a shared history and close relationship, where a rich mosaic of languages and cultures come together, and, at the same time, a space privileged with opportunities for exchange and cooperation.

-Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo, 1998

On a chilly January morning in 1998, ex-Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo welcomed Trinidad and Tobago’s newly installed Prime Minister Basdeo Panday to the National Palace in front of a crowded hall of foreign diplomats and intellectuals. In a fashion typical of such events, the Yale-trained economist spoke of economic affairs and transnational cooperative agreements. But especially significant, yet mostly overlooked, was his assertion that the area we now refer to as the circum-Caribbean—which includes the territory that extends from the tip of Florida westward all the way along the Gulf of Mexico to the northern part of South America, and covers more than 24 modern-day countries—should be regarded, and has historically served, as Mexico’s “third” border.

Three of Mexico’s most historically-significant ports lie on the Gulf—Veracruz, Tampico, and Matamoros—all of which would be “border cities” according to this concept of a third border. But only Matamoros was a border city in the more traditional

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sense as well, since it stands at the northernmost coastal point of the modern-day land border between the United States and Mexico. This dissertation chronicles the rise and rapid fall of Matamoros, which was at one time poised to rival New Orleans and Veracruz as a maritime economic powerhouse, and which was also a highly contested city during the wars that established the land border with the United States. In other words, the dissertation chronicles the period leading up to, and during which, Matamoros attained a kind of double border-city status, both landed and maritime.

**Historiography and Argument**

This project operates at the intersection of a number of different thematic and regional historiographies. Although there is overlap, four distinct historiographies inform my project: works with a geographic concentration on the far Mexican North, the new and ever-diversifying literature on the U.S.-Mexico borderlands, the new scholarship on transnationalism, and an older literature on Mexican economic history. The dissertation not only draws on but also contributes to these literatures by pushing us to reevaluate the far-reaching influence and dynamism of a regional settlement that had strong connections to the outside world, but which has been underestimated within the literature because of its distance from the colonial and national metropole of Mexico City and its relatively short-lived commercial prominence.

**The Mexican North**

Far from occupying the economic, political, and/or social history backwaters as it once did, the Mexican North during the late colonial and early national period is attracting the attention of scholars on both sides of the border.\(^4\) Much of this literature

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builds on the long-standing “many Mexicos” approach, now applied to the North, on which there is a growing body of work that embraces local, state, and subregional perspectives. This study contributes to that literature with its focus on the Mexican Northeast, a sub-region of the North (comprising the modern-day Mexican states of Tamaulipas and Nuevo León) that has yet to attract the widespread attention of scholars that the Northwest has commanded. While the economic importance of the Northeastern port of Matamoros is recognized beginning with the American Civil War, the process by which it attained its reputation as a multicultural trading center is largely unstudied. American recognition of and familiarity with Mexico’s complex external trade networks did not materialize out of thin air in 1862, and as this dissertation uncovers, evidence of a vibrant, far-reaching import-export economy in the Mexican Northeast can be traced as far back as the mid-eighteenth century.

One reason for the lack of interest in the Northeast as a region by North American researchers might be the absence of lasting semi-autonomous indigenous communities that borderlands historians such as Cynthia Radding and Susan Deeds have studied in the Northwest in much detail. This is not to say that Indians were not an important part of the region’s history. As they did elsewhere, Spanish colonists in the Mexican North enslaved Indians and waged wars of extermination. But because of the city’s ties with the pastoral economy in its environs, we learn from accounts by local government officials expressing concern regarding raiding or other activities that Indian contacts were largely contained to areas north (and outside) of the city, where cattle raiding – the main complaint by locals – was much more common. As the literature on the Mexican North


7 This turn within the scholarship has taken shape since the 1990s, as ethnohistorical inquiries that do not privilege one perspective, either colonial or native, became progressively richer. Radding Murrieta, Wandering Peoples; Deeds, Defiance and Deference in Mexico’s Colonial North; José Refugio de la Torre Curiel, Twilight of the Mission Frontier: Shifting Interethnic Alliances and Social Organization in Sonora, 1768-1853 (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).
as a whole continues to expand, it is clear that it will benefit from further inquiries into the role of indigenous actors in shaping politics and trade in settlements closer to the Gulf.  

This new emphasis on local experiences has been used recently with good success by historians of the Mexican North. Rich treatments of northern Mexico in the nineteenth century have explored the different intricate and locally specific ways in which residents of this region came to imagine themselves compared with those from other parts of the country. Due to the North’s relatively loose jurisdictions (both state and ecclesiastical) and social fluidity, recent work has documented how residents of Mexico’s far northern borderlands maneuvered their reality of living outside the jurisdictional control of a central Mexican authority and, as a result, came to develop multiple colonial or national identities. In his recent treatment of identity formation in the Northeast, Omar Valerio-Jiménez argues that the regional identities that developed in the villas del norte (northern Tamaulipas and modern-day Rio Grande Valley) inevitably subverted state attempts to control and divide the population. However, the present study takes his argument a step further by providing compelling evidence to argue that the motivating factor for the region’s cross-cultural alliances, including but not limited to U.S. and Mexican commercial relationships and intermarriages, was the potential for trade revenues centered in the port of Matamoros.

Given its rich history, it is surprising that the Northeast has not attracted more attention outside of the Mexican academy. In fact, scholarship on the region remains somewhat insular, produced in large part by Mexican scholars working in institutions in Nuevo León, Tamaulipas, and Coahuila. Very recent new work on the area has begun

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10 Reséndez, Changing National Identities at the Frontier; Valerio-Jiménez, River of Hope; Miguel A. González Quiroga and Mario Cerutti. El norte de México y Texas, 1848-1880 (San Juan: Instituto Mora, 1999); Ramos, Beyond the Alamo.

11 Valerio-Jiménez, River of Hope.

to emerge from within the United States, including Valerio-Jiménez’s recent work and Sean McEnroe’s treatment of the new communities in the Northeast settled in part by Tlaxcalan migrants, both centrally concerned with the development of identity and nationalism. But this study provides the first record of the development of Matamoros and the first sustained treatment of trade networks in the Northeast.\(^\text{13}\)

By focusing on trade, this dissertation naturally puts Matamoros at the center of the story. Much of the limited literature that did exist on the Northeast explored its Texas associations, with very little attention to the ways that residents and settlers looked to Matamoros (and subsequently the Mexican interior) as their economic center.\(^\text{14}\) In addition, given their close proximity to each other, surprisingly little has been done to explore the links between U.S., Texas, and Mexican history before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848.\(^\text{15}\) As a result there is not much on Matamoros specifically,

\(^{13}\) Sean McEnroe, *From Colony to Nationhood in Mexico*; Valerio-Jiménez, *River of Hope*.


even though it was the Northeast’s most dynamic and influential trading entrepôt. A key reason for the Northeast’s absence within the literature is the tendency of scholars to write the landed border backwards in time – that is, to ignore the complex history of the region before much of it was subsumed by the United States. Before the landed border existed, Texas was a part of the hinterland of Matamoros, just as points west and south and even east, to New Orleans, were.

Perhaps most interesting about Matamoros in the years between independence and the beginning of the U.S.-Mexican War is that despite its political status as Mexican, in a practical sense it was equally possible to describe it as American or Texan. That is, the Rio Grande was not yet a political boundary, but demographically a large proportion of its population was non-Spanish and English-speaking, as we will see in much more detail in this dissertation. The literature has been, for the most part, Texas-centric and has failed to give due consideration to the interwoven and transnational histories of the region and of the political factions in the region. Simply stated, as political tensions heightened after the Texas Rebellion and moving toward the U.S.-Mexican War, control of Matamoros was highly contested because multiple groups were invested in its success.

Borderlands

This project, like much of the new borderlands literature, is flexible with regards to geographic terrain, as suggested above. The port city of Matamoros saw a rich mixture of foreigners and domestic traders (and the more permanent society that served their needs, including laundresses, boarding house owners, restaurateurs, etc.) on any given day. As such, it was necessary to push the limits of this regionally focused study to include the maritime connections that were so central to the city’s development, not just politically and economically, but also culturally. Building on Mexican scholar Laura Muñoz’s assertion that the circum-Caribbean was viewed by Mexican officials as their country’s “third border,” an important intervention of this dissertation is its writing of the country’s maritime borders into the borderlands literature, paying particular attention to the movement of people and goods across the Caribbean and taking seriously the far-reaching impacts of Matamoros’ maritime connections. This reevaluation of the concept of “border” expands our geographic conception of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands and acknowledges the role of Mexico’s eastern maritime border in the shaping of local, state, and national history. Long before officials became concerned with the migration of people and goods across the landed U.S.-Mexico border, they struggled with many of the same issues at its sea borders.

Recent scholarly inquiries have expanded the reach of “borderlands” history, both geographically and conceptually. Geographically, we now think of the U.S. southern borderlands as encompassing all of colonial northern New Spain, to include the present-

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16 The scholarship on the economy of other parts of the North from recent years has focused for the most part on a later period, leaving the formative late-Colonial and early National years unanalyzed. This gap is likely the result of a number of factors including but not limited to the lack of adequate source materials.

day northern states of Mexico as well as the U.S. Southwest. Areas close to the present-day border, on either side, have a distinct position within the broader “borderlands” literature, but they no longer define “borderlands.”¹⁸ As Brian DeLay argues, “Borderlands history as it’s emerging is therefore broader than the study of the American Southwest, and deeper than the study of modern state border regions. It is most fundamentally the history of a spatial context: of places where people interacted across multiple, independent political and legal systems.”¹⁹ The term “borderlands” itself has been appropriated by a number of different fields and is used to apply to a variety of geographic contexts. Not just limited to the study of the U.S.-Mexico border region, according to DeLay, even borderlands historians themselves “don’t agree on what the label signifies.”²⁰ Regardless, it is clear from the diversity of new projects that have moved not just beyond the U.S.-Mexico context but also across disciplinary lines to blend political, social, cultural, and economic themes, that the term’s multiple meanings and interpretations have only served to enrich our understanding of historical processes that span nation states and geographic regions.

The field as a whole is expanding, and this project’s inclusion of Mexico’s maritime borders forces us to think even bigger and to assess the significance of trade to the country’s development. In fact, two of the field’s leading scholars, Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett, argue that the expansion of our understanding of borderlands, as well as its recent popularity as a whole, is reflective of its shift from the margins of numerous historiographies to the “mainstream.”²¹ With this shift has come the attempt by scholars to explore the broader significance of regionally focused borderlands histories—requiring borderlands scholars to ask harder questions about their works’ “portability.”²² In other words, the new borderlands scholarship is assessed on the applicability of its concepts to other geographic, political, cultural, and linguistic contexts.

The reconstruction of trade networks that this project undertakes makes it of particular relevance to scholars working on other circum-Caribbean entrepôts. This project’s exploration of Mexico’s “third border” has broad implications for the borderlands historiography. Often overlooked, Mexico’s maritime borders were (and still are) porous, vulnerable spaces that are not easily enforced. Like landed borders, historically there has been frequent movement of people and goods across political

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²⁰ Ibid., 1.


boundaries. In the case of Matamoros the movement came from/to New Orleans. The cross-border social and cultural influences often seen with landed borders, including families straddling the boundaries when a person marries across border lines, are quite evident between New Orleans and Matamoros. Even physical structures—the city’s physical layout and the design of key buildings—betray this kind of socio-cultural proximity found in borderlands areas. One important difference between landed and maritime borders that is especially true with Mexico is that maritime borders “face” multiple locales, though one can point to New Orleans and Havana as the principal ones.

Transnationalism

Closely related to the borderlands literature is a third historiography on transnationalism. Embracing the water border of the Mexican Gulf has required that I examine the transnational dimensions of this region. My work engages with a new wave in the literature that explores the ways that local histories can also be seen as transnational. As Benjamin Johnson has noted, “Transnational history can be local history, but some historians writing after the transnational turn emphasize large-scale perspectives that can obscure local and regional distinctiveness.”23 Those interested in questions that transcend the conceptual and enforced borders of nation states have produced a rich body of work that is transnationally comparative and fluid.24 But the focus on national or global processes sometimes leaves something lacking, and that is what a regionally based study such as this can help to fill, by demonstrating that even absent the landed border in its earlier time, the area was “transnational” in the sense that people, goods and ideas flowed relatively easily across several nations, and they flowed in both directions.

Scholars interested in a number of different temporal, geographic, and thematic contexts have made use of the tools of transnational history. For example, scholars of the Spanish colonial period have benefitted from Atlantic historians’ focus on the study of transnational phenomena such as slave trade, conquest, or commerce.25 As a whole the


transnational literature has analyzed both the international webs and networks within nations and the movement of people, goods, and ideas across boundaries and borders because they cannot be contained solely within the nation-state. This project pays particular attention to the transnational economics of the borderlands. Surprisingly, although port cities are recognized as the lifelines of colonial and post-independence settlements, scholars have struggled with how to contextualize them within the local, national, and global communities. The development of modern-day Matamoros owes much to its transnational port city origins; yet the work on Mexican ports is disappointingly sparse.

Complex economic, political, and cultural forces operating within, outside, and beyond real and putative borders contributed to the construction of a local identity. In fact, Matamoros’ physical layout and architecture owe much to its outside connections, not just economically and politically, but also culturally. Visitors brought with them different tastes and ideas, and the local culture that developed is a complex outcome of the tug and push between the local and foreign influences. This study contributes to the transnational literature by complicating our understanding of the linkages between economics, politics, and culture, illuminating the complexity of these transnational relationships.

My work particularly focuses on the transnational roots of the region’s ties to outside markets and exposes a rich legacy of interconnectedness. Andrés Reséndez’s argument that American expansionism was fueled by ties to the Mexican North is especially relevant. But little has been done to document the quantitative dimensions of these connections – what merchants were trading, where they were choosing to live, and what effect they had on Mexican society. This study views these processes bidirectionally, treating national identification as fluid, often cast aside, which led, in the early part of the nineteenth century at least, to a uniquely diverse, strongly trade-oriented local society. In fact, these ties ran deeper than most have acknowledged, and they extended beyond cultural practices to include the physical construction of the city.

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28 Reséndez, *Changing National Identities at the Frontier*. 
This dissertation adds to the transnational literature by providing a detailed examination of the interconnectedness of the region’s economy both internally and externally, rejecting the idea that cities on the periphery were necessarily dependent on the interior for their sustenance, and building into the study of networks a sense of change over time. The study also borrows from the recent literature on transnationalism an awareness that economic change often also results in cultural and social change. Trade brought people together in Matamoros, and with the confluence of goods, cultures, and people created a unique society unlike any other in Mexico.

Economic History

This work has important implications for our understanding of Mexico’s economy immediately following independence. The scholarly literature has taken a rather simplistic view of the economy of northern Mexico during these formative years. Only a few scholars have focused on sub-regional economies in ways that would allow any subtlety of analysis, and none of these has involved Matamoros. The prevailing assumption has been that in an economic sense the North languished until it was awakened by the war with the United States. This is clearly not the case.

While the scholarly literature on Matamoros during this period is limited, it is clear that the theoretical and methodological questions posed by other historians interested in political economy have problematized the field in ways that have important implications for my work. More specifically, the shift from the somewhat unidirectional theoretical framework of dependency theory to the multidimensional relationships between political institutions and economic development has allowed scholars to incorporate the varied experiences of regional actors into more integrated and complete understandings of national political economies.

The dependency school literature that emerged in the 1960s has since been criticized for its overemphasis on structures as deterministic institutions and because of its lack of attention to local experiences. By the 1990s, historians of political economy


had begun to revisit the conceptual questions posed by their predecessors. The reformulated frameworks sought to account for local contingencies as well as the importance of institutions as dynamic entities worthy of further inquiry, rather than viewing them strictly as reflexes of economic change. The relationship between variables was complicated and led to the exploration of ways that “geography, public policies, and political institutions all mattered in shaping Latin American countries’ long-run economic performance.”

Important monographs using these new frameworks include Jeremy Adelman’s work which explores and weaves the relationships between political ideas, economic shifts, and the daily concerns of Buenos Aires merchants over the long period in which the Argentine economy transitioned from colonial mercantilism to commercial capitalism in the nineteenth century. Surprisingly, until now little has been written that explores the linkages between trade and culture, and that is another contribution of this dissertation project.

Mexican historians since the 1970s also have largely discarded the once-prominent approach of describing wide-sweeping phenomena from a macro-historical, national perspective in favor of scholarly analyses of local dynamics, where topics such as economic growth or decline can be studied with more subtlety. This approach has had the added benefit of uncovering regional experiences that all-encompassing narratives cannot include, but it has also grappled with the larger implications of the data. Most relevant to my own analysis is the debate about whether the Mexican post-independence economy was in a state of depression until the 1880s. John Coatsworth’s work contends that the legacies of inadequate colonial institutions, exemplified by the lack of a transportation infrastructure, prevented nineteenth-century Mexico from advancing economically. While at a macro level it is no doubt true that the structural problems posed by difficult geography and inefficient transportation were not resolved until the arrival of the railroad in the 1880s, this broad, national-level approach left open many questions about regional experience. Beginning in the late 1980s scholars working at the regional level have demonstrated that national level data cannot easily capture the particular dynamics of regional economic activity.

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Historical inquiries into the roots of international capitalism also have emerged as a new and exciting mode of inquiry. A recent New York Times article with the headline, “In History Departments, It’s Up With Capitalism,” brought attention to the new wave of scholarship that explores the economic roots of historical processes.36 Within the field of Latin American history, John Tutino’s recent work on the Bajío and Spanish North America redefines the role of the Americas in early world trade with his focus on “globally linked yet regionally based political institutions, economic organizations, social relations, and cultural conversations.”37 His tracing of the roots of capitalism to the interior of New Spain during the sixteenth century is controversial, but his argument that “production, exchange, and social relations were thoroughly commercial” has implications for further regional studies.38 This present case study of Matamoros is relevant to Tutino’s work because the commodity that fueled most exchanges was silver. There is growing interest among U.S. historians in work on transnational projects that trace the growth of international capitalism during the nineteenth century. Sven Beckert’s global history of cotton trade networks is one such example.39 Because the circum-Caribbean is critical to much of this work, the trade networks that brought New Orleans merchants to Matamoros and vice versa will undoubtedly provide fruitful tools for future researchers interested in tracing the movement of goods and also people in this region.

The aforementioned works speak directly to the issues that my project addresses. The reformulation of the political economy frameworks around the microhistorical case of Matamoros has allowed me to explore the importance of structures while avoiding the pitfalls of a deterministic dependista literature. My focus on how Matamoros’s merchants and political elite maneuvered through local, state, national, and international interests allows us to see both the importance of the structures of international trade and their limits. “Peripheral” communities in the national context might be, as was Matamoros, central in an international context. Matamoros actively and energetically claimed its


38 Ibid., 7.

place at the center of a diverse network of commercial players. In sum, this dissertation provides a more complex and nuanced understanding of the relationship between politics and trade in Mexican history.

Methodology and Organization

The dissertation approaches the relationship between politics and trade from two angles: first, through a reconstruction of the economic activity of the city and its trading partners, and second, by surveying the dynamics of political interactions by local players. The city’s port was the conduit for a vibrant contraband trade during this period, and my dissertation uses various innovative methods (especially the reconstruction of trade networks) and obscure sources to quantify the degree to which this illicit commerce contributed to the growth of Matamoros and the region more broadly.

The dissertation adopts a more or less chronological organizational scheme. Chapters One and Two examine the colonization of Northeastern New Spain. Specifically, Chapter One describes and analyzes the region’s economy before it became strongly connected to maritime trade. I show that the region’s ranching economy was internally oriented, but that colonial settlers such as José de Escandón had high hopes for connecting the far-northern settlements to markets in the colony’s center through experimental projects aimed at establishing maritime connections along Mexico’s Gulf Coast. Overland trade routes and networks are cartographically reconstructed, paying close attention to archival evidence that provides supporting confirmation that by the late eighteenth century these connections were relatively lucrative.

Chapter Two connects the prosperous ranching economy to early openings with New Orleans and the beginnings of an external orientation, albeit one constrained by illicit trade, corruption, warfare, and lack of attention on the part of the Spanish. I argue that the confluence of a complicated geography, Bourbon trade policies, and the lack of official oversight locally created the space for contraband trade to develop in and around the port, and that it paved the way for a strong foreign presence in the region. The chapter ends with the legal recognition of the port of Refugio in 1824.

To examine the contours of trade after the legalization of free trade, I use early-independence trade records to reconstruct the quantity and type of trade activity taking place legally in the port. Chapter Three shows that the legal trade was conducted predominantly with the same New Orleans merchants that had developed illicit ties in the pre-independence period but who were now able to benefit fully from the newly-sanctioned maritime openings. I argue that these new trade routes were externally-oriented, as goods travelled from overseas markets to the port and then overland to

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40 The contemporary issues of illicit smuggling have pushed scholars to begin to trace the historical roots of the borderland’s contraband activity. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the work on the subject looks into later periods. See Elaine Carey and Andrae M. Marak, eds., Smugglers, Brothels, and Twine: Historical Perspectives on Contraband and Vice in North America’s Borderlands (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2011). See also Elena Schneider, “The Occupation of Havana: War, Trade, and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Cuba,” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2011); George T. Díaz, “Contrabandista Communities: States and Smugglers in the Lower Rio Grande Borderlands, 1848-1945,” (Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 2010).
interior and central markets. Both the Mexican and American governments were quick to realize the importance of these economic connections as seen through the establishment of an American consulate and Mexican local and national authorities’ attempts to manage commercial activity.

Chapter Four traces the ways that transnational trade relationships shaped society and culture in the port prior to the U.S.-Mexican War. This chapter serves as a social history of the city, reconstructing the ethnic makeup of its foreign settler population and the businesses that they established. I argue that because of the port’s distance from Mexico City, New Orleans was a more important cultural influence for its population than the capital, which flows from the fact that at times the city was home to more foreigners than nationals. Local architectural landmarks such as the city’s Cathedral were built with imported American materials, and modeled after structures in New Orleans.

The dissertation concludes with an examination of Matamoros and regional politics, which ultimately led to the city’s economic decline. U.S.-Mexican diplomatic relations were shaped by the foreign presence in the port, and the political players’ reactions to disruptions elsewhere remained heavily tied to the city’s economic history. Unlike anywhere else in Mexico, Matamoros’ first United States Consulate, established in 1824, played a complex political and diplomatic role that contributed to the region’s early development. I argue that commerce, at least as much as the expansion of the cotton economy into Texas, was a driving force behind foreign settlement in both Texas and Mexico. As long as commerce was not affected by political events elsewhere, the city was able to weather the political storms that consumed other regions. This chapter ends with a reconstruction of the political stand-off between rebellious Texans and a regional Mexican populace that was driven to fervent nationalist feelings that resulted in the pushing out of a large segment of the port’s American-resident merchant community, the beginning of the end of Matamoros’ golden era. The dissertation’s epilogue carries the narrative into the 1840s, through its examination of the effects of the decade’s watershed event – the U.S.-Mexico War – on the political economy of Matamoros. As is emphasized throughout the dissertation, the city’s relationship with trade has deep implications for our understanding of Mexican political, economic, and cultural history more generally.
Chapter 1

Setting the Stage for Maritime Trade: Colonial Settlement and the Founding of the Villa de Refugio, 1746-1794

This chapter describes the settlement of the area around what eventually became the modern-day city of Matamoros, Mexico. It pays particular attention to the early development of the regional economy, for while settlers came to the area for political reasons, they stayed because they were able to develop relatively lucrative internal trade networks that connected them to interior markets to the west. The main industry around Matamoros, and indeed throughout the Northeast, was livestock, whose products—such as tallow, hides, wool, and salted meat—were sold in Monterrey and Saltillo and used in mines for illumination of dark mining shafts, transport of amalgamated silver, belts and pulleys, and clothing and protein for workers.\(^1\) External trade with foreign powers, whose ships had been crisscrossing the Gulf for decades, was illegal. As a result, overland trade networks were developed by the region’s early settlers around the exchange of livestock products for silver, which as we will see, possessed the potential to expand and connect to external trade networks given the right political openings. They paved the way for the region’s economy to thrive well into the nineteenth century.

There were three linked political reasons for the Crown’s new effort to settle the North in the second half of the eighteenth century: the increasing frequency of Indian attacks within established settlements that bordered territories along the Gulf of Mexico or Seno Mexicano; the need for new sources of revenue in the face of a series of expensive wars in which Spain had been involved; and the need to protect sparsely-populated, strategically-significant regions from encroachment by aggressive foreign powers (See Map 1.1).\(^2\) Accomplishing these goals was extremely difficult and required

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2 French expansion in the Gulf of Mexico in the latter part of the seventeenth century propelled the Spanish government to occupy its own sites in the region. The first occupation of Texas occurred in 1690. This was temporary however, as once French threats dissipated the Spaniards retreated, at least until French activity in Louisiana in the 1710s forced the Spanish to settle Texas more permanently in 1716. Armando C. Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas* (Albuquerque: University of New
strategy and ample planning. One broad revenue-producing strategy, applied to the entire empire, was to reform trade policies, encouraging freer flows of trade within the empire (which would stimulate commerce and production), and clamping down on illegal trade with foreign powers. This strategy of stimulating internal trade, however, could not be applied to the North of Mexico without first populating the region with Hispanic or Hispanicized settlers, a project that intersected with both the need to guard against foreign intrusions and the need to pacify Indian populations in the region.

As we will see, towards the middle of the eighteenth century, after new settlements had been established in the Northeast and strong overland trade routes had been developed, officials living in the region began to experiment with new ways to facilitate the transport of goods and people, including coastal trade. The economically progressive José de Escandón, an experienced Indian fighter and colonist, fought for the opening of a port on the Gulf Coast. Through his efforts, a small-scale schooner trade operated between coastal settlements and New Spain’s only official port of Veracruz. But in 1763, the Crown put an end to his experiment in intra-colony maritime trade, saying that it was too open to abuse. This Escandón-endorsed venture opened the door to foreign merchants who were willing to risk continuing this trade activity after the closure of the ports on the Gulf. Those that partook in this lucrative but illegal trade stood to gain financially, as a French governor from New Orleans described it as reaching upwards of a million pesos annually in 1750.

This chapter argues that the coalescence of new Bourbon policies towards Indian relations, the desire to increase revenues for the Crown, the perceived threat of foreign invasions of unfortified territories on the coast, and the very widely felt threat of indigenous resistance, were all keys factors that influenced the course by which Spaniards chose to settle the Northeastern frontier territories in the mid-eighteenth century. Miners and merchants in territories bordering the Seno Mexicano were the ones who would lose the most if pacification of the nomadic Indians did not succeed. Thus, at all levels there were economic incentives to the development of an inwardly oriented economy in the region.

Map 1.1 Northeastern Colonial Territories and Settlements, pre-1746
Indigenous Presence Prior to Spanish Settlement

There is little consensus among historians about the number of distinct indigenous groups that resided in the Seno Mexicano region prior to colonial settlement. Estimates range from a low of under 100 to a high of almost 200. Regardless of their exact numbers, these groups were nomadic, moving regularly in search of “seasonal wild plants such as mesquite bean pods, prickly pear fruit, maguey root crowns, pecans, acorns, and a variety of tubers and roots.” They sought protein by hunting “game, including deer, armadillo, rabbits, and various species of birds, fish, and snakes.” Because of their nomadic lifestyle, it was extremely difficult for early settlers or missionaries to incorporate them into the colonial framework.

Indigenous groups were attracted to the fertile areas surrounding the area’s winding waterways, and these areas supported their nomadic ways of life. The Seno Mexicano region was rich in riverine systems – with the Río Nueces to the north, Río Bravo, Río Conchos, and Río Soto La Marina towards the center, and the Río Guayalejo furthest south. These rivers facilitated movement throughout the region, connecting interior mountain ranges with the coast, while crisscrossing expansive fertile plains before emptying into the Gulf of Mexico. This was perfect terrain for transient groups of indigenous tribes.

The Indians’ relationship with their natural surroundings changed drastically following the establishment of Spanish mining settlements in Nuevo Reino de León, Coahuila, and Charcas in the late sixteenth century. The presence of even a small number of Spanish settlers in the surrounding areas led to the widespread displacement of natives from their original lands in areas bordering the Seno Mexicano territories. As settlers expanded their reach, indigenous groups fled into neighboring areas in an effort to escape colonization efforts. Many of them actively resisted colonization. This resistance was expressed through their refusal to inhabit the Crown’s missions, the raiding of Spanish towns, and the formation of cross-tribal alliances that allowed for strategic defiance of Spanish colonization efforts. Beginning in the mid-eighteenth century as the Spanish persisted in their pursuit of permanent settlements in their northern frontier territories, and as they continued to move toward the Northeast, indigenous groups were pushed off their lands until they could retreat no further when they reached the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Thus, once the Crown decided to fully pursue a settlement plan for the Seno Mexicano territories, there was already a long history of conflict with indigenous groups.

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5 Ibid.
Ranchers from territories in Nuevo León had conducted preliminary expeditions northward in the 1730s and 1740s in an attempt to expand their ranching lands, but they were met with violent resistance from Indians. While the earlier attempts to establish permanent settlements had been largely unsuccessful, Spanish officials recognized that the eventual settlement of the Gulf Coast region would benefit the Crown, as it would allow for the exploitation of the economic potential of the vast pasturelands which would in turn add revenue to the Royal Treasury. Indian cooperation was essential, as settlement would assign them new roles outside of the mission system and discourage raiding. In addition, settlers’ presence in the area would provide a strategic base from which foreign invasion threats could be warded off. The territory that the Crown hoped to settle (identified in Map 1.2 as the Colonia de Nuevo Santander) made up the present-day southern strip of land in Texas below the Nueces River, the present-day state of Tamaulipas, and a small northeastern portion of the state of Nuevo León, extending as far south as the Río Guayalejo. The geography and natural features of the Colonia de Nuevo Santander set it apart from the rest of the Seno Mexicano; river systems cut through the majority of the region, producing fertile valleys, and the Gulf waters bordering the region on its eastern edge held the potential to connect coastal settlements even further.

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6 Alonzo, Tejano Legacy, 1.
8 Most historians have relied on published primary accounts of Nuevo Santander’s colonization. An essential resource is the two volume Spanish-ordered report on the state of affairs in Escandón’s settlements. See Estado general de las fundaciones hechas por don José de Escandón en la colonia del Nuevo Santander (México: Archivo General de la Nación, 1929); Gabriel Saldívar, Los pueblos de la Sierra en el Siglo XVII (México, 1946); Reconocimiento de la costa del Seno mexicano por José de Escandón (México, 1946); Organización de las misiones 1749-1752 (México, 1946); Estado de las misiones entre 1753-1790 (México, 1946); Descripción de la colonia del Nuevo Santander por Agustín López de la Cámara Alta (México, 1946); Informe Contra Escandón por fray José Joaquín García y los Informes de la General visita practicada en 1768-1769 por Juan Fernando de Palacio y José Osorio y Llamas (México, 1946); Visita a la colonia del Nuevo Santander, hecha por el licenciado don Lino Nepomuceno Gómez, el año 1770, Intro by Enrique A. Cervantes (México, 1942); Informe sobre la colonia del Nuevo Santander y Nuevo Reyno de León. 1795. Presentado por Félix Calleja (Monterrey: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 1978).
Map 1.2: The Colony of Nuevo Santander, 1748
Faced with the task of deciding how to colonize the Seno Mexicano territories without relying on the mission system, Viceroy Revilla Gigedo opted for a radical experiment in settlement that was never to be repeated in Spanish America. Officials drew their inspiration from English territorial expansion, which had used a model of revenue-producing colonies. The hope was to establish settlements throughout the Seno Mexicano, incorporate the nomadic indigenous groups that had been causing trouble in neighboring provinces, and create semi self-sufficient ranching settlements that would produce profits for the colonial treasury.

In anticipation of the rapid economic development of the Seno Mexicano territories, officials deliberately chose to use the term colonia in naming the area in an effort to distinguish it from other territories that had been designated provincias. The new colonia was to be settled by colonists, unlike the previous provincias, which had been initially settled by missionaries and soldiers. The Audiencia de México, headed by the Viceroy, studied competing colonization plans for several years before deciding on this approach in 1746. This was when Captain General Don José de Escandón, already a popular and successful military officer, was placed in charge of the campaign. Perhaps as evidence of his own confidence in his ability to succeed, upon his commission Escandón renamed the Seno Mexicano as the Colonia del Nuevo Santander after the province of his birth in Spain.

Escandón’s experiences elsewhere in New Spain set his plan apart from rival colonization bids. Having previously served as captain general of the Sierra Gorda, a region whose mountains span the modern Mexican states of Querétaro, Hidalgo, and San Luis Potosí, he had acquired a reputation as a veteran Indian fighter. Likewise, Spanish officials admired his entrepreneurial record in his own ranches, textile mills, and merchandising, and felt that his plan for colonization embodied the tenets of enlightened thinking. He proposed to pay soldiers for their military service with land instead of relying on the financially strapped colonial treasury for their salaries, as previous campaigns had done. In turn, the land they received would serve the dual purposes of acting as payment for their military service and sustaining the region by encouraging development. In addition, settlers were enticed with land grants, money to cover transportation costs, and sales tax exemptions for the first ten years after settlement. Costs to the Crown would be minimal.

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9 Weber, Bárbaros, 105.

10 This was not customary, and Mexican historian Patricia Osante argues that the Spanish government chose this special designation because it expected the territory to become not only self-sustaining but also extremely profitable. Regardless, it set the region apart from other territories, both physically and symbolically. Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 116-119; Valerio-Jiménez, “Índios Bárbaros,” 21n20; Jerry D. Thompson, “Historical Survey,” in A Shared Experience, 25-26; Hill, José de Escandón, 56-88; Weber, Bárbaros, 105.

11 Escandón’s actual title was “Knight of the Order of St. James, Regiment Colonel of the city of Querétaro, Lieutenant Captain General of Sierra Gorda, its Missions, Fortresses, and Frontiers, and Lieutenant of his Excellency the Viceroy of New Spain,” A Shared Experience, 25.

12 Weber, Bárbaros, 105.

Colonial officials’ approval of Escandón’s approach was a stark departure from the long-established mission and presidio system used in other parts of the empire. Spanish royal administrators had been facing difficulties in sustaining the mission system throughout their colonies, both financially, because it was extremely costly to maintain these settlements, and strategically, because the pacification of the Indians had proved to be more difficult than anticipated. Thus, the new soldier-settlers recruited by Escandón would serve as front-line vanguards for settlement, while simultaneously serving as religious and moral examples for indigenous populations from the region. Escandón’s fiscally conservative plan almost immediately drew the attention of colonial officials, even though it represented a relative lowering in emphasis of the evangelical goals that had served as the Crown’s primary justification for conquest since the sixteenth century.  

At the time of his selection to lead this campaign on September 3, 1746, Escandón was stationed in Querétaro, roughly 650 miles south of the Río Bravo. His contemporary, the marqués of Altamira and Auditor de Guerra, ordered the cooperation of authorities in Coahua, Nuevo Reino de León, Texas, San Luis Potosí, Valles, Pánuco and Tampico, threatening severe penalties if anyone attempted to impede the colonization efforts. Escandón departed from Querétaro for the new colony in January of 1747, moving north by way of San Luis Potosí, Tula, Juamave and Labradores with ten soldiers, an unspecified number of servants, a captain, and two missionaries. Along the way they were able to recruit at least another 200 men, 50 soldiers, and 30 Indian allies. His original plan called for seven caravans made up of 1,750 soldiers that marched into the region from seven points—three from the south, three from the west, and one from the north. All were instructed to arrive at a camp 12 leguas (leagues) from the mouth of the

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14 While they turned away from the mission and presidio system for their expeditions in the Seno Mexicano, Spanish explorers did not abandon the strategy altogether. They were utilized in Alta California territories again in 1769. Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 102-119; Valerio-Jiménez, “Indios Bárbaros,” 21n20; Pierce, A Brief History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 20; McEnroe shows that authorities in neighboring Nuevo León implemented reforms that organized communities into mission-towns early in the eighteenth century, which later coincided with broader administrative reforms by Bourbon officials later in the century. Sean Francis McEnroe, “Spain’s Tlaxcalan Vassals: Citizenship and State Formation on Mexico’s Northern Frontier,” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2009), 123.


16 Original correspondence pertaining to Escandón’s colonization efforts are reprinted in María del Carmen Velázquez, ed., El marqués de altamira y las provincias internas de nueva españa (México: El Colegio de México, 1976).

17 Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 107-109; Thompson, in A Shared Experience, 25.
Río Bravo no later than February 24, 1747.\textsuperscript{18} During their initial three month expedition, they were charged with the task of documenting their journey, paying close attention to “distances, plains, valleys, ravines, brush, rivers, streams, watersheds, sites for towns, sowings, and pasturelands, the number of indios bárbaros, their families, nations, and other notable features.”\textsuperscript{19} The map and report that were produced as a result of this initial expedition would be used as a guide by Spanish officials interested in Escandón’s colonization plan, and later used as evidence at a trial brought against him (See Map 1.3).

\textsuperscript{18} José Alfredo Rangel Silva, \textit{Capitanes a guerra, linajes de frontera: ascenso y consolidación de las élites en el Oriente de San Luis, 1617-1823} (México: El Colegio de México, 2008), 126; Osante, \textit{Orígenes del Nuevo Santander}, 110; Thompson, \textit{A Shared Experience}, 25.

\textsuperscript{19} “Dictamen del auditor de Guerra y Hacienda, el marqués de Altamira…México, 27 de agosto de 1746,” quoted in María del Carmen Velázquez, \textit{Establishcimiento y pérdida del septentrión de Nueva España} (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1974), 61; Osante, \textit{Orígenes del Nuevo Santander}, 110.
Map 1.3: Escandón’s 1792 Map of the Colony of Nuevo Santander. Likely drafted in the 1750s, shortly after the founding of the settlements depicted on the map. Inaccuracies point to a lack of familiarity with the terrain at the time. (Source: Mapa de la Sierra Gorda, y Costa de el Seno Mexicano desde la Ciudad de Querétaro, situada, cerca de los 21 gs. hasta los 28 en que está, la Bahía de el Espíritu Santo, sus Ríos, Ensenadas, etc., 1792, housed at the Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City).
Escandón recruited a broad sector of the population to take part in these initial expeditions. Families willing to settle in the region were enlisted from the nearby territories of Nuevo León and Coahuila, accompanied by support groups of servants, Indian allies, burden bearers, a military guard, a physician and two missionaries. Escandón and his convoy stopped at future town sites as they made their way throughout the region, leaving some members and picking up new followers in each place. Over the course of less than six months (December 1748 – May 1749), his caravans established thirteen new settlements in the Colonia del Nuevo Santander, followed by five more between August of 1750 and March of 1751, as well as an additional five settlements over the next four years. He designated Santander de los cinco señores (the fourth settlement, which later became known as Villa de Santander, modern-day Santander Jiménez, Tamaulipas) as the capital of the new colony.

Escandón’s colonization project weakened the archetypal mission system in tangible ways. While Franciscans had accompanied the first colonists, Escandón made it next to impossible for them to establish mission communities capable of any measure of success. As David Weber writes, “First, he denied them juridical and economic power over Indians...[and] [s]econd, he obliged the padres to establish missions on the edge of the new Spanish towns rather than apart from them and demanded that the missionaries serve the spiritual needs of the colonists at the same time they ministered to Indians.” Weber concludes that Escandón intended “to rely on markets rather than missions to draw Indians into the Spanish world” - a strong break from past practices. Although markets were to become the chief integrating mechanism, it is clear that the spiritual role of the subordinated missionaries was still valued. As part of his colonization plan, Indians became paid wage laborers and their employers were responsible for ensuring that they pray, attend mass, and listen to their missionary. At the same time that Indians became integrated into the work force, colonists gained peaceful access to indigenous lands by excluding missionaries that had gained a reputation of interfering with colonization efforts. As Weber notes, “A supply of cheap Indian labor for Spanish colonists would also advance the Bourbons’ goal of occupying the Gulf Coast rapidly and

21 Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 122.
22 Weber, Bárbaros, 105.
23 Weber refers to Escandón’s approach as a “new method” as he was inspired by a report of fray Antonio de los Reyes on the missions of the Pimería Alta in which he wrote of the “nuevo método de gobierno spiritual.” Weber argues that Bourbon reformer’s experiment with settlement in the Seno Mexicano territories broke away from the long-standing mission system. Their strategy was to use trade, rather than religious conversion, as the primary means by which to incorporate indigenous groups into the Spanish orbit. Weber, Bárbaros, 104n95, 105; José Alfredo Rangel Silva argues that because of the Crown’s frustrations with Indian attacks, almost any plan to pacify the Indians was welcomed. Silva, Capitanes a guerra, 124.
24 See McEnroe, “Spain’s Tlaxcalan Vassals.”
25 Weber cites Osante’s Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 146-51; He further quotes Escandón’s correspondence to Viceroy Revillagigedo (Dolores, Feb. 8, 1753), that states “los enseñen a rezar, y todos los domingos vayan a misa y reconozcan a su misionero.” Weber, Bárbaros, 105-6, 106n105.
inexpensively." There was a marked shift in the extent to which colonial officials gave priority to the economic activities.

Escandón’s plans for territorial organization were unambiguously motivated by economic considerations. First, the villas (towns) that he established were grouped into four distinct sectors to facilitate communication between towns. In addition to aiding transport of necessary goods and information, this layout also addressed the settlers’ fears and protected against Indian attacks and foreign invasions. Above all, the location of each of the villas was designed to ease the commercial exchange with markets in Nuevo León and the rest of New Spain. His map, likely drafted in the 1750s, specified the locations of each of the settlements, missions, presidios, and churches in relation to river systems and topographical features. Once ranching operations were developed, this network of institutions would facilitate the transport of imports and exports to and from the region.

The towns founded furthest south were tightly connected to neighboring settlements of Spanish immigrants who had resided there for some time. Escandón established another group of villas in the narrowest portion of the Santander colony as a way to ease communication between the towns in Nuevo León and those on the Gulf Coast. His third group was between the mountain ranges of Tamaulipas Vieja and Tamaulipas Nueva—an effort to combat the hostile indigenous populations residing there. The last of his settlement groups, known as the villas del norte (all of which lie in the modern-day Rio Grande Valley), bordered the winding waters of the Río Bravo. This settlement group is the geographic center of this chapter. The initial six settlements there consisted of Reynosa, Santa Rosalia (today Camargo), Mier, Revilla, Dolores, and Laredo. Refugio, which would later be renamed Matamoros, became a part of the group after it was founded by ranchers in the 1780s. In total, estimates point to no fewer than 1,475 families and 144 soldiers residing in the towns first established through Escandón’s expeditions.

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27 He placed the villas in locations that would help intercept any intrusions.

28 Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 93-125.

29 Stockmen from the older frontiers of New Spain had been involved in sheep pasturage in Nuevo León since the 1620s.

30 Their place on the river was important in that it helped to protect the region from foreign invaders who might attempt to enter the colony from the coast. The villas del norte settlements are the geographic center of this chapter. However, because in many cases the primary source materials refer to all of Escandón’s settlements I have found it useful to speak of the region as a whole at times. The historiography has a tendency to use Nuevo Santander as its main unit of analysis chiefly because of the lack of primary source materials locally, until now.


32 These figures date to data at the time of settlement, from 1748 and 1755. Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 122.
Geography and Climate

The lands encompassed by the territories of Nuevo Santander form the main part of the hinterland of the villas del norte. They contain a variety of climates, riverine systems, and mountain ranges. The majority of the land is contained within the Gulf coastal plain, with the region’s southwestern edges running along the Sierra Madre Oriental mountain ranges. A series of volcanic ranges are intercepted by the Río Soto la Marina and Río Conchos to the south of the Río Bravo (or present-day Río Grande). South of the Río Soto la Marina lies the Sierra de Tamaulipas mountain ranges (known in the colonial era as Tamaulipa Vieja or Tamaulipa Oriental), ancestral home to various indigenous populations who sought shelter there. The winding branches of the territory’s collection of rivers run through fertile valleys before ultimately emptying into the waters of the Gulf of Mexico.\(^{33}\)

The terrain of Nuevo Santander is varied. North of the Río Bravo leading up to the Río Nueces there are vast semi-arid plains that were originally sought by Spanish settlers as grass pasturlands ideal for raising livestock. Early names for the region included Sabana Grande (large savannah) and Llanos de los Mesteños, in reference to the wild cattle and horses that roamed there.\(^{34}\) To the southeast is the eastern Sierra Madre mountain range, with its warm valleys and high elevations that peak at over 3,000 meters in height. New Spain’s Northeastern frontier’s climate is predominantly dry and semi-arid, with humid conditions being more prevalent along the coast.

The settlements of the villas del norte followed the winding course of the Río Bravo’s waters. The river’s middle course runs from the El Paso Valley to the present-day Falcón Dam and forms a narrow alluvial valley below the towns of Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras. The wider delta of the river begins to be seen in the vicinities of the present-day cities of Camargo and Río Grande City, Texas.\(^{35}\) Thus, what sets the river apart from others in the region is its expansive inland reach, and its ability to connect interior settlements to the coast from as far west as the modern-day state of Colorado.

Escandón’s first impressions of the ranching potential for the terrain surrounding the villas del norte and Río Bravo were positive. He wrote, “Having left the dock […] to explore the opening of said river in the ocean […] it was noted that] the land [is] flat, except for scattered low hills that are highly suitable for crops and pasturage,” a point echoed by a later American traveler, who wrote that “[the Río Bravo] is throughout a river of pleasant scenery, frequently passing through highly picturesque and broken land; approaching towards its mouth, it courses through a prairie country… The banks are covered with strong wiry grass, most excellent for grazing cattle, interspersed with caparral [sic], and the stunted mosquete [sic] tree. The land on the edge of the river is, in many places, as rich as the imagination can conceive.”\(^{36}\) Escandón maintained that

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33 For more on the natural terrain of the villas del norte see Graf, “Economic History,” 6-10.
34 Alonzo, Tejano Legacy, 18.
35 Ibid., 19.
36 José de Escandón y Helguera, Informe de Escandón para reconocer, pacificar y poblar la Costa del Seno Mexicano en el siglo XVIII (Ciudad Victoria, Mexico: Consejo Estatal para Cultura y las Artes la Tamaulipas, 1998); Thomas Bangs Thorpe, Our Army on the Rio Grande: Being a Short Account of the
“there are a few bogs and estuaries, that I passed, although with a bit of difficulty, and from them and the mentioned lagoons […] one can take as much water as they like to water [crops].” When his caravans reached the mouth of the river, they encountered a series of lagoons that led to the sand bar on the coast. Sand bars are common along the coast in the Gulf of Mexico, and impede the entrance of ships because water depth varies significantly. Although the lagoons initially posed difficulties for Escandón, he notes that they were able to cross “by means of a bridge made of wooden planks.”

Crossing the river at the coast, however, left a lasting impression of the effort required to navigate the river’s curves and natural impediments. Escandón described the perils that he and his entourage encountered while attempting to traverse the lagoons in 1747,

When I was at the middle of the lagoon there was so much water that in some areas the horses were swimming. I then realized that a strong wind from the North was suddenly approaching with great violence […] the muddy areas were so large that it tired the horses. It was necessary to march by foot for nearly four hours, the water in some areas reached our chests, I was able to get out with some officers and 21 soldiers that accompanied me, the only damage were some weapons and clothes that were left behind.

Escandón’s early exploration of the present-day Rio Grande Valley was focused on determining its potential to provide fertile lands for ranching as well as the extent of its access to ample water sources. Droughts were not uncommon despite the various lakes and estuaries surrounding the Río Bravo because the area lacked sufficient irrigation channels. However, those settlements located closest to the Río Bravo experienced fewer difficulties and had almost guaranteed access to drinkable water, though they incurred the risk of flooding during periods of excessive rains.

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37 “Dejando el R(eal), en aquel paraje, salí con 4 oficiales, 35 soldados y el indio Cap(itá)n, Santiago a reconocer el emboque de d(ic)ho río en el mar, donde llegué a las tres de la tarde; es su distancia 12 leguas al este, el terreno llano, a excepción de algunas lomas bajas y de la mejor calidad para siembras y pastos, hay algunas ciénagas y esteros, que se pasaron, aunque con alguna dificultad, y de ellos y las expresadas lagunas, por medio de acequias se puede sacar cuanta agua se quisiere para regar. El río no tiene mas arboleda que algunos sauces, pero hay en su inmediación hasta cerca del mar, razonables cintas de mezquital crecido. Antes de llegar a d(ic)ha. Orilla del mar, como (a) 300 varas, sale un canal del río, que tendrá diez varas de ancho y dos de fondo, el que corre al sur, hasta la primera laguna, p(o)r la que se comunica a todas las demás, hasta cerca de las de la barra, y tiene la corriente según el viento, unas veces del rio para las lagunas, y otras al contrario; pasámosle por medio de un puente que se hizo de palizada.” Escandón y Helguera, Informe de Escandón.

38 “Era tanta la agua que en partes nadaban los caballos, y entonces advertí provenía de que un recio norte que se levantó a la sazón tráía con violencia […] eran tan grandes los atascaderos, que fatigados los caballos, fue menester marchar a pie cerca de cuatro horas, con el agua en partes a los pechos, en cuyo modo salí con algunos oficiales, y 21 soldados que me acompañaban, sin más avería que la de algunas armas y ropa que se quedó en el agua.” Escandón y Helguera, Informe de Escandón.

39 In addition to the ripe pasturelands surrounding the Río Bravo, the naturally formed salt deposits on the coast of the colony of Nuevo Santander at Altamira, Presas (now Aldama), Tampico, and on the north side of the Río Bravo (La Sal Vieja and Sal del Rey) attracted the attention of the region’s first settlers. As
At a very basic level, Escandón’s first impressions of the Río Bravo likely discouraged him from establishing a coastal settlement there. In times of heavy rain it was known to overflow and flood the surrounding areas—a very real risk if houses or other structures were situated nearby.40 As was seen through Escandón’s ordeal on the Río Bravo in 1747, the conditions were unpredictable and dangerous, and that early experience left a lasting impression on him. He summarizes its potential for coastal access, “The depth at the bar is four varas at the most. I suppose small ships could enter the river, but for a distance of more than sixty leagues it offers no protection [for navigators], for the land is too flat and its banks are too low.”41 Notwithstanding the mercantilist policies that prohibited the opening of ports within the colony that could compete with Veracruz, Escandón’s motivations for choosing more interior settlements appear to have been strategic rather than influenced by Crown policy towards maritime trade. The river and its delta were ripe for development, and the fact that navigation near the Río Bravo’s mouth was difficult did not matter much when the goal was development of a ranching economy oriented toward the interior.

In sum, traditional investigations of Escandón’s settlement activities point to two main reasons that he placed his villas del norte settlements on the Río Bravo 100 miles inland.42 First, it is clear that his goal to cultivate the region’s ranching economy was the motivating factor in his development of ripe inland grasslands surrounding the region’s principal water supply. Second, as his writings suggest, the natural impediments that he encountered in his preliminary expeditions to the region dissuaded him from placing settlements any closer to the river’s main entry to the Gulf Coast. Also compelling is his awareness of the potential of using the Río Bravo to facilitate communication, as evidenced by the placement of all the villas along its banks. While it might seem tempting to assume that Escandón established the settlements inland to abide by the principles of mercantilism, it is likely that he was keenly aware of the eventual need for intra-colony commerce and therefore did not establish them at too great a distance from the coast. In other words, despite its lack of utilization, the river provided, theoretically, the means to transport goods from the coast to the interior, and vice versa.

**Indigenous Resistance to Settlement**

The first pobladores, or settlers, immediately recognized the economic potential of the verdant plains that became their home as a result of the Escandón expeditions. However, as noted, the process of transforming the territory into productive pasturelands would require that they come to terms with the region’s native peoples, who were

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41 Reconocimiento de la costa del Seno mexicano por José de Escandón (México, 1946).
42 The closest of the original villas del norte settlements was Reynosa, which had an overland route to the Gulf of roughly 100 miles. If traveling via the zigzagging waters of the Río Bravo, its distance was nearly twice as long.
resistant due in large part to their experiences with Spanish slavery. While Escandón’s settlement plan regarded Indians as wage laborers, even Escandón recognized that some, if not most, would resist being cast in that role. Colonists and military officials would continue to struggle with the detrimental impact of Indian resistance on their efforts to transform the lands in the region into prosperous livestock ranching strongholds. Fueling their determination was the development of a few small, but important, trade networks to the interior because they were critical to the long-term survival of these strongholds.

Escandón’s plan for dealing with non-compliant Indians was unambiguous. Put simply, he felt that those who resisted the wage labor arrangement should be eradicated. His experiences in the Sierra Gorda had shaped his attitude that attempts to pacify hostile Indians were futile. This opinion was supported by the viceroy’s legal counselor, the marqués of Altamira, who wrote that “[i]f only one remains alive, it will be enough to upset all.” While very few records exist to document indigenous experiences firsthand during this time, it is clear from their absorption into Spanish society that many did choose to submit, especially the more sedentary groups like the Huastecos and Pames. Those that resisted either fled to neighboring territories, as they had done previously, or were killed. Population numbers confirm the effects of this strategy, as the number of Indians dropped from thirteen thousand at the time of the Escandón settlement campaign, to less than two thousand by Mexican independence.

As the indigenous population dwindled, settlers eager to become landowners continued to arrive in the region. Families who had up to this point rented lands made up the majority of those that answered the call. The promise of receiving their own lands, at a time when land and wealth were very much intertwined, drew many to the region despite the risks. As a captain from the settlement of Hoyos stated, “unsettled families who had sought shelter on haciendas, paid rent for land or worked for the owners, […] would have left for other provinces if they had not arrived here.” Still, Escandón had his own methods of coercing settlers to stay—he would promise to give the farmers their own grants of land but then threaten to nullify their grants if they did not remain. Also

43 In its original Spanish, “Uno solo que quedase, bastaría para perturbarlo todo.” “Dictamen del auditor de Guerra y Hacienda, sobre el estado general del Nuevo Santander, Mexico, 4 septiembre 1750,” quoted in Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 231.

44 The work of Sean McEnroe explores the ways that Tlaxcalan Indians, brought from central Mexico, formed alliances with “barbaric” Indians that paved the way for the foundation of joint settlements among Northern Chichimecs. The Chichimecs looked upon their Tlaxcalan models as they were absorbed into Hispanic culture. McEnroe, “Spain’s Tlaxcalan Vassals.”

45 The Crown placed the responsibility for treating noncompliant Indians in the hands of colonists for the first time since the sixteenth century. While this practice violated the Royal Orders for New Discoveries and other laws that called for peaceful pacification of Indians into segregated towns (repúblicas de indios), most officials turned a blind eye to violations. According to Weber, “So long as Escandón and other investors paid the bill, settled new lands, and brought in new tax revenues, higher officials lodged no complaints.” Weber, Bárbaros, 106.

46 “Declaración del capitán de la villa de Hoyos, Domingo de Unzaga, a Tienda de Cuervo…Hoyos, 7 de mayo de 1757” in Estado General de las Fundaciones Hechas por D. José de Escandón en la colonia del Nuevo Santander, costa del seno Mexicano, (México, 1929), I: 105, quoted in Valerio-Jiménez, “Neglected Citizens,” 253; Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 155.
noteworthy was the Crown’s promotion of settlement by criminals. Murderers and thieves were granted full pardons for their crimes if they agreed to join the expeditions.\footnote{Valerio-Jiménez, “Neglected Citizens,” 253; Oakah L. Jones, Jr., \textit{Los Paisanos: Spanish Settlers on the Northern Frontier of New Spain} (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 66, 72; Miller, \textit{José de Escandón}, 14, 22; Alonzo, \textit{Tejano Legacy}, 28-29; Osante, \textit{Orígenes del Nuevo Santander}, 136-137, 155-157.} One means of populating the region, however, did not work as well as hoped. Efforts to transform Indians into wage laborers were hampered by continued indigenous resistance. As Sean McEnroe notes “[they] became at least nominal Christian vassals of Spain […] [but] were far from the sedentary subjects that Spanish viceroys long hoped would people the earth.”\footnote{McEnroe, “Spain’s Tlaxcalan Vassals,” 192.} Officials in the established settlements in nearby Nuevo León had pioneered a system of chain incorporation—that is, Hispanicized Indians would be responsible for bridging the gap between “civilized” and “uncivilized” Indians.\footnote{“It borrowed from the Neoleonés system in which Tlaxcalans instructed Chichimecs, and in which Chichimecs, once acculturated, attracted other tribes into the settlements.” Ibid., 199.} In other words, if trade relations were established with select groups, they hoped that the word would spread to others they had been unable to reach and the result would be both pacification and economic growth. This proved to be very difficult in the villas del norte. Nomadic and independent indigenous groups continued to flee, following food supplies, and recognizing only the authority within their own groups.\footnote{Some native societies that did not acquiesce reacted by becoming even more aggressive and resourceful. Many groups reorganized themselves, forming alliances with neighboring tribes or groups in attempts to dominate territories. Warfare intensified between indigenous groups and settlers as they competed for space and resources. In many parts of the frontier indigenous groups became more combative and centralized their forces. In addition to adopting new defense mechanisms, they sought out new ways to survive that centered on developing their own economic activities. Raiding and cattle herding became their chief economic exploits, and vast cross-cultural trade networks— involving different Indian peoples, North Americans, and Spaniards— that concentrated on horses, livestock, slaves, goods, guns, and alcohol developed throughout New Spain’s northern territories.} Spanish residents who became frustrated with Indian attacks and raids in the frontier territories viewed the \textit{indios bárbaros} as being inherently murderous, barbaric, and unworthy of redemption. While their views went directly against the scientific and rational approach adopted by Spanish imperial policymakers, officials did little to resist their efforts to exterminate noncompliant Indians and simply ignored these blatant violations.

\textit{The Formation of Overland Networks}

As Indian extermination and emigration made way for territorial expansion, settlers’ efforts began to focus primarily on ranching activities. Settlers’ ranching pursuits crossed socio-economic levels. Elsewhere in New Spain, wealthy nobles who had been granted lands and had devoted themselves to sheep ranching were able to amass great wealth in an enterprise that had more cachet than farming among the Hispanic elites. At the same time, those from less noble backgrounds viewed it as an excellent economic opportunity because it required very little in startup costs and few materials. Ranching also required little labor, an advantage in a region in which many had tried unsuccessfully...
to convert indigenous peoples into wage workers. What was needed were grasses, fertile lands if possible, and access to water, all of which the colony of Nuevo Santander offered. Settlers did not have to go far to purchase livestock to stock their ranches because ranchers in the neighboring provinces of Nuevo León and Coahuila were more than ready to fill their needs.

Trade was a vital component of colonial settlement activities, as new settlements very much relied on imports and exports for their own survival. The main problem faced by farmers in the villas was how to acquire foodstuffs, especially maíz (corn). Some tried to grow crops, but this proved to not be practical, and grains and other urgent needs were imported into the region. As one official put it,

Even though in past years some corn crops have been attempted in this villa they were not successful due to drought. Because of this he [the declarant] cannot estimate how many bushels can be produced in each crop and therefore it is known that the crops have not been enough and there is no expectation that they will be enough to support this town […] they have always had to buy the corn and bring it in from Nuevo Reino de León […] in exchange for their cattle and goods, especially with salt that they gather from their immediate salt mines.

Reciprocally, the ranching products produced in the villas del norte began to penetrate the interior markets. The northern provinces began to supply Mexico City as well as the Bajío with silver for coinage and large quantities of meat. Central Mexico produced its own variety of goods, from textiles to silverware. In Jalisco and Puebla, soap, tallow, wool, cotton, leather, and suede were extremely important to the emerging textile industry there. These overland trade routes stimulated the economic growth of the region as a whole and paved the way for local officials’ recognition that some degree of trade reform was necessary in order to facilitate the movement of goods in both directions.

Thus with the growth of ranching activities in Nuevo Santander as a whole came an interest in opening alternative routes that would connect them with the interior provinces. Exchange between the villas del norte settlements was aided by their location on the Río Bravo. Looking to testimony collected in 1755, we can extract specific details

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51 This trading relationship was not limited to New Spain, as evidenced by the fact that French settlers at New Orleans, struggling with starvation, came to depend on Veracruz merchants for imports beginning in 1711. In fact, Veracruz merchants shipped flour to New Orleans on a regular schedule between 1708 and 1711. Jackie R. Booker, *Veracruz Merchants, 1770-1829: A Mercantile Elite in Late Bourbon and Early Independent Mexico* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 17.

52 “Que en esta Villa aunque en los años antecedentes se ha procurado hacer algunas siembras de maíz, y con especialidad el declarante, como no han podido lograr ninguna cosecha por motive de las secas que se experimentan, no puede calcular a cuánto podrá producir cada fanega de siembra, y por lo tanto es conocido que no han bastado las cosechas ni hay esperanza de que basten para mantenerse esta población, por lo cual han tenido siempre que comprar el maíz trayéndolo del Nuevo Reino de León, y se ven precisados a seguir lo mismo comprándolo en cambio de sus ganados y bienes y con especialidad con la sal que recogen de sus inmediatas Salinas en los años que logran el que cuaje, pues aunque siempre es permanente, el año pasado y el presente se ha inundado de modo que no se ha podido disfrutar.” *Estado general de las fundaciones*, I: 383.

about the overland routes that had formed throughout the colony. Writing in general terms about the state of the Escandón settlements, officials presented a narrative map of all settlements founded under his leadership, while at the same time giving special attention to the overland roads that connected them.54

The primary networks that connected the villas del norte to the rest of Mexico’s interior markets originated in either Reynosa or Revilla. Reynosa served as the main entrepôt for traffic travelling to and from Monterrey, Saltillo, and other Coahuila Province cities. Apart from the Reynosa—Monterrey—Saltillo traffic (See Figure 1.1), Revilla, another villa del norte settlement, served as an endpoint for traffic originating as far south as San Luis Potosí (See Map 1.4). Goods (and people) would travel from Revilla to San Fernando, west to Juamave, and finally inland to San Luis Potosí. Once in Juamave, it is clear that they could have indirectly made their way to a number of other Santander settlements.55

![Established Overland Trade Routes Originating in Nuevo Santander, 1755](image)

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<thead>
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<td>San Luis Potosí</td>
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Figure 1.1: Established Overland Trade Routes Originating in Nuevo Santander (1755). Colors correspond to those represented in Map 1.4. The triangle in the bottom left corner depicts the network that developed between the settlements of Juamave, Tula, and Horcasitas. (Source: Estado general de las fundaciones, I: 12-38).

54 The report is broken up into individual settlements, providing pertinent information such as date of founding, names of leaders, and distances to other Santander settlements. The settlements discussed are the Villa de Altamira, Ciudad de Horcasitas, Villa de Escandón, Villa de Santa Bárbara, Villa de Llera, Villa de Aguayo, Villa de Hoyos, Villa de Güemes, Villa de Padilla, Villa Capital del Nuevo Santander, Villa de Santillana, Villa Soto la Marina, Hacienda San Juan, Villa de San Fernando, Villa de Burgos, Villa de Reinos, Villa de Camargo, Lugar de Mier, Villa de Revilla, Población de Dolores, and Real de los Infantes. Estado general de las fundaciones, I: 12-38.

55 The discussion that follows draws from Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 195.
Indirect networks towards the south of the colony were especially strong. A route connecting Monterrey to Real de Borbón, then Horcasitas, and finally Altamira cut across the majority of the two provinces. An alternative route from Monterrey to Real de los Infantes and finally Juamave, connected the established northern markets to the cluster of new settlements in southern Santander. Once in Juamave, goods could be transported just about anywhere, and it is documented that a triangle network existed between the settlements of Juamave, Tula and Horcasitas—with Santa Bárbara resting in the middle of all three.

While extremely important in facilitating the movement of people and the transport of goods, the vast majority of communication taking place at this time did not utilize the numerous rivers that cut through the entire region. This is surprising given the fact that the settlements themselves congregate around accessible branches of the colony’s expansive rivers. If anything, it appears that the land routes were adapted from those charted by troops as part of the original Escandón expeditions in the 1740s. Unaware of their natural surroundings, it is likely that their fears were fueled by the experiences of others (such as Escandón himself) who described the rivers as not being fully navigable and at times treacherous. Another reason may have been the fact that the transportation of livestock was much more easily accomplished via overland routes.

As the grey oblong circles in Map 1.4 illustrate, the trade routes utilized by muleteers were not necessarily direct. Goods were very often bought or sold off the mule trains along the way thereby making them a sort of traveling market, and this in turn extended the routes to areas on either side of the road or trail, which served to expand the reach of the network. In other words, the routes that colonial officials described served broader areas rather than just the settlements on either end of the distant towns. Furthermore, and perhaps most important, is the idea that these networks overlapped, connecting spheres of network influence that facilitated the movement of goods throughout the colony.
Map 1.4: Nuevo Santander Trade Routes prior to the settlement of Refugio. Colors represent distinct and established routes (which correspond to the same colors used in Figure 1.1). Grey shaded areas depict the general areas serviced by the trade routes.
The trade routes from Nuevo Santander connected settlements to commercial trade fairs that served as the lifelines to New Spain’s regional settlements. For example, the commercial fair held annually in Jalapa (roughly 200 miles from Mexico City) that began in 1720 drew merchants from all over New Spain who hoped to acquire goods that had arrived on the fleets. In general the fairs lasted several weeks, with the majority of wholesalers purchasing in bulk. Traders throughout the colony travelled long distances to attend, indirectly connecting all the distant settlements along their paths. The towns in which fairs were held were subsequently transformed by the arrival of such a large number of outsiders, which precipitated the founding of related businesses, such as boarding houses to fuel the needs of visitors. For many, these fairs were their only opportunity to sell and acquire goods for an entire year. One historian describes the effect on Jalapa after the fair ended, “When the harbors had cleared and the last of the pack of mules and caravans of wagons had rumbled out of the town, they lapsed into a tropical stupor until the next fair.”

In northern New Spain, most notably Monterrey and Saltillo, regional fairs served as the main conduit for goods to reach the colony’s expanding northern provinces.

Regionally, the widely attended annual Saltillo trade fair had the strongest ties to the villas del norte settlements. As one historian asserts,

The commerce was extremely intense and the transactions of these exchanges very important. Saltillo, during the entire viceregal era was the emporium and the warehouse for [all] the northwestern provinces.

Ranchers used these fairs as a market for their own goods such as cattle, wool, and cotton, while merchants from as far away as Mexico City sold wares and other goods incapable of being produced in the North. Few accounts survive to describe the inner workings of these exchanges, although one official provides a vivid picture of the connections they fostered:

Every year a fair is held in the last days of September at which not only the inhabitants of Saltillo provision themselves for the entire year, but also those of the Kingdom of Nuevo León, Coahuila, Texas, and a great part of the colony of Santander as well. They come to sell wool, deer skins, salt, mules, and some other products that those places produce, and return with clothes, tanned hides, soap, saddles, and a variety of foodstuffs that come from Michoacán and Nueva Galicia, such as rice, sugar, chickpeas, and other commodities harvested in those lands. As a result, Saltillo has become a sort of warehouse, where the neighboring provinces provision themselves not only at fair time, but where they

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come between-times to stock themselves of those articles that they lack, which are considerable because of the impossibility of preserving them in such hot places.\textsuperscript{59}

This official’s account adds credibility to the suggestion that although these trade fairs officially operated on an annual basis, it was quite probable that they remained open for additional trading at other times of the year. As a result overland ties were strengthened, as they provided the opportunity for muleteers willing to travel the great distances, to visit at any time that they could.

The networks that converged in the trade fair centers are evidence of the strength of the demand for goods that reinforced the use of the overland routes that had formed in Nuevo Santander. The distance that goods travelled was extensive. Foodstuffs transported from Michoacán to Saltillo travelled a distance of roughly 546 miles, while those from El Nuevo Reino de Galicia (which would become the present-day states of Aguascalientes, Colima, Jalisco, Nayarit, and Zacatecas) were carried a minimum of 235 miles to upwards of 567 miles depending on their origin. Given the extent of the trade networks that converged at the city of Saltillo, it is very possible that goods that eventually made their way into the hands of their buyers in the villas had traversed more than 1000 miles of sparsely populated terrain before reaching their final destination.\textsuperscript{60}

As markets became interconnected, new systems of exchange had to be developed to facilitate the interchange of goods. Due to the lack of circulating currency, almost all transactions involved the exchange of goods for other goods.\textsuperscript{61} Because the majority of those who settled in the Nuevo Santander region had migrated from other, more “connected” settlements, they were accustomed to trading for imported goods. This was an issue throughout the New Spain colony, as the great value of silver as an export product made it possible for the colony to afford to purchase most manufactured goods


\textsuperscript{60} These trade connections had far-reaching effects on the city of Saltillo and its development. Reflecting the increased population in the Mexican North (and not just in the Gulf area) and the increasing levels of economic activity there, Saltillo’s population multiplied from roughly 4,200 inhabitants in 1700 to 11,000 in 1793 and a new merchant elite was formed as a direct result of trade activity there. Demographic growth went hand-in-hand with the growth of economic markets and connections, a pattern that would unfold in various parts of the colony of Nuevo Santander. In fact, as Cuello asserts, the economic impact of the Bourbon reforms on Saltillo’s historical trajectory went far beyond the formation of new class structures. He argues that the schisms that occurred because of new economic policies imposed from above ultimately led the town’s merchant-\textit{haciendado} elites to side with those in favor of independence. In other words, the reach of trade connections in both Saltillo and other cities was felt on many different levels by shaping social, political, and economic relations; The 11,000 figure refers to the combined population of Saltillo and San Esteban between 1767 and 1793. By 1813 that figure would double to 22,000. José Cuello, “The Economic Impact of the Bourbon Reforms and the Late Colonial Crisis of Empire at the Local Level: The Case of Saltillo, 1777-1817,” \textit{The Americas} 44, no. 3 (Jan. 1988), 304; For the effects of yearly trade fair on landholding patterns see, Leslie Offutt, “Hispanic Society in the Mexican Northeast: Saltillo at the End of the Colonial Period,” \textit{Journal of the Southwest} 33, no. 3 (1991): 332-344.

\textsuperscript{61} Osante, \textit{Orígenes del Nuevo Santander}, 196.
abroad, and tended to discourage local manufacture. The mercantilist system did not make New Spain entirely dependent on imports, though it did make those imports more expensive than they would have been had they been purchased directly from other colonial powers (such as the British). Instead, the imports were carried to New Spain by Spanish merchants who were essentially middlemen, and they naturally added a middleman’s profit margin to the cost of goods. In the villas del norte, resourceful captains (town officials), such as José Vazquez Borrego and Blas María de la Garza Falcón, capitalized on the population’s desire for European goods by taking charge of driving their cattle to markets in Coahuila and Nuevo Reino de León and returning with imported goods. Others drove cattle to markets at Saltillo to service the silver economy. In exchange they would return with seeds, horses, and manufactured goods that fulfilled the needs of town residents in their native settlements of Dolores and Camargo.

As knowledge and use of these routes spread, the goods produced in the villas del norte that could be traded in other locales became more diverse. The main products of trade were mules, cows, young mares, ewes, and sheep as well as their meat byproducts such as dried jerky. The other product in great demand was salt, which was extracted from mines north of the Río Bravo and traded for corn in the interior and in other areas for flour and other non-perishable items such as iron and steel. In fact, many of the villas shared the profits of the long-standing salt trade, which apart from being extremely useful for ranchers in the preservation of their meats, was in high demand in other colonial markets. Deer skins (known as gamuzas) were also produced in great numbers in Nuevo Santander. According to the account of Félix María Calleja, this trade

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63 Others would transport the byproducts of their ranches, such as hides and salted meats, which were less bulky, and could more easily be shipped to interior markets.


66 There are two interesting cases in which livestock was transported to much more distant markets. After a drought in 1755, the governor of the province of New Mexico requested that 1,500 horses be transported to save his province. His request was granted by the viceroy, but took more than a year to fulfill. The second was of the purchase of 915 mules and horses from Camargo by two citizens of Louisiana in 1801. Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy*, 77.

67 The lands surrounding the Río Bravo, known for their salt deposits, had been frequented by traders in Nuevo León who visited the vast lagoons bordering the Gulf Coast long before Escándon began his settlement campaigns. Vicente de Santa María, *Relación histórica de la Colonia del Nuevo Santander*, ed. Ernesto de la Torre Villar (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1973), 89, 105; Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander*, 197.

68 Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander*, 188.
amounted to more than 8000 skins in 1794, sold at market for six reales a piece.\textsuperscript{69} Although the vast majority of trade was accomplished through overland routes, there was a small market for fish and dried shrimp, transported in lesser quantities between settlements by small canoes along the rivers, a much less cumbersome and cheaper route than the mule trains.\textsuperscript{70} But even as trade goods produced in the Rio Bravo region became somewhat more varied, ranching remained the largest commercial interest in the region.

Settlers’ perceptions of the area started to shift as ranching activities began to prosper. The fear of Indian attacks remained, but as increasing numbers of indigenous became absorbed into Hispanic society while others were exterminated, settlers became better able to utilize the pasturelands. For example, by 1757, less than eight years after the town of Reynosa’s original settlement, Carlos Cantú, a captain, gave testimony regarding the prosperous ranches already in operation.\textsuperscript{71}

\textit{[A]ll the land in this Colony [of Nuevo Santander] is very appropriate for the raising and maintenance of small and large livestock, and […] within the limit of this town there are several ranches of these kinds of livestock already established in which much growth and good progress are being experienced[.]}\textsuperscript{72}

Cantú’s words reveal a broader shift in emphasis towards settlers’ pursuit of economic exploits. His description gives particular emphasis to ranching activities, implying that there was much more land yet to be utilized.

In fact, there was sufficient optimism on the part of Spanish officials for increased trade volume there to motivate officials to attempt to place a sales tax (\textit{alcabala}) on goods in 1757. However, their earlier promise to exempt settlers from taxes for ten years prevented them from acting on these plans until 1767, when the Viceroy appointed a Royal Commission that was charged with assessing taxes to land grant holders. Upon the Commission’s founding, its leader, Juan Fernando de Palacios, reversed the tax incentives, and enacted a set of reforms that were designed to bring increased revenue to the Crown from the ranching activities in Nuevo Santander. Sales taxes were set at four percent in Nuevo Santander, which compared to two to six percent assessed in other provinces.\textsuperscript{73}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{69} Informe sobre la colonia del Nuevo Santander, Chapter 3, p.x; Cattle prices in 1778 brought two and three quarters pesos a head and in 1790, four pesos a head. De la Teja, \textit{San Antonio de Béxar}, 110; McAllen, \textit{I Would Rather Sleep}, 47.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Estado general de las fundaciones, I: 235, 240; Valerio-Jiménez argues that the trade of fish and ebony within the villas “met only local needs.” Valerio-Jiménez, “Neglected Citizens,” 265; Alonzo states that fish was an “important resource” within the trade network of the villas. Alonzo, \textit{Tejano Legacy}, 69.
\item \textsuperscript{71} See Osante, \textit{Orígenes del Nuevo Santander}, 122 (Table 1).
\item \textsuperscript{72} “Que todo el terreno de esta Colonia es muy a propósito para la cria y conservación de ganados mayores y menores, y que en el término de esta Villa hay varios ranchos ya establecidos de estas especies, en los cuales se experimentan muchos aumentos y buenos progresos, pues por lo que toca al terreno de esta población para este fin, tiene por seguro el declarante ser uno de los mejores…” Estado general de las fundaciones, I:383. The responses were made in answer to questions posed by the royal inspector Don José Tienda de Cuervo to town founders and local missionaries.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Alonzo, \textit{Tejano Legacy}, 68-69.
\end{itemize}
As a result of the new tax policies, officials were hired to survey the new lands that would be granted to colonists. The amounts of the land grants varied by location, but for the most part each porción (or strip of land bordering the Río Bravo) consisted of a half-mile to a full mile of riverfront land accompanied by 11 to 16 miles of adjacent land, with all lots arranged at right angles along the river. Commissioners were careful to place the majority of porciones along both sides of the Río Bravo in an attempt to ensure access to water, a necessary staple for ranching operations. The vast number of land grants handed out in the 1780s attest to the interest in developing the region. It is clear that officials recognized that they stood to gain financially from the granting of land, development of ranching, and the subsequent collection of taxes in its Nuevo Santander colony.

While only anecdotal economic data is available for this region and this period of time, we can infer in a general way from population statistics some indication of the pace and rhythm of economic growth. Records reveal that in 1757, the colony of Nuevo Santander had a general population of 8,869 inhabitants, with 24,105 ganado mayor (cattle, horses, mules) as well as 285,854 ganado menor (ewes, sheep and goats). By 1794, Nuevo Santander had a population of 34,029, more than triple its 1757 numbers, and a combined livestock number of 799,874. Not including contraband commerce, which as already noted had been estimated at nearly one million pesos, official estimates place the total revenue from cattle and livestock in Nuevo Santander in 1794 at roughly

74 Graf, “Economic History,” 17; Informes de la general visita practicada en 1768-1769 por Juan Fernando de Palacio y José Osorio Llamas (México, 1946).

75 The first land distributions took place in 1767, with the major beneficiaries being military captains and political leaders who were rewarded based upon their service and length of residence in the colony. Settlers with the longest residence, of over six years, referred to as “primitive settlers,” received two sitios or leagues (roughly 8,856 acres) of land for pasture and twelve caballerías (1,500 acres) for agriculture purposes. Those in residence from two to six years, referred to as “old settlers,” received two leagues for grazing and six caballerías (750 acres) for agriculture. “New settlers” or those who had arrived within the last two years received two leagues for pasture. In addition, those holding the rank of Captain would be given twice as much land as a “primitive settler.” Valerio-Jiménez, “Indios Bárbaros,” 55; Armando C. Alonzo, “Tejano Rancheros and Changes in Land Tenure: Hidalgo County, Texas, 1848-1900,” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1994), 34-35; Alonzo, Tejano Legacy, 55-65; Miller, José de Escandón, 34; By the end of the eighteenth century, the majority of the area in the villas del norte had been allotted to wealthy cattle owners who were in good standing with the Spanish Crown. These were not small tracts of land, as the Espíritu Santo in 1781 (fifty-nine leagues and eleven caballerías), San Juan de Carricitos and the San Salvador del Tule land grants each contained between 250,000 to 500,000 acres. See Graf, “Economic History,” Appendix A for list of Spanish and Mexican land grants in the region.

76 Osante cites 6,350 inhabitants in 1755. Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 143; For an explanation of ganado mayor versus ganado menor see Graf, “Economic History,” 18.

77 In his 1795 report, Calleja separates his population data into the following categories: 30,405 Europeans, 1,434 Christian Indians, and 2,190 “gentiles of both sexes and all ages.” His livestock figures are described as follows, “They possess 92,198 mares, 37,501 horses, 28,800 mules, 8,621 burros, 111,777 head of large livestock, and 530,711 [animals to produce] mohair and wool; the total is 799,874.” David M. Vigness, ed. and trans., “Nuevo Santander in 1795: A Provincial Inspection by Félix Calleja,” The Southwestern Historical Quarterly 75 (Apr. 1972), 474-475.
245,500 pesos, while mining revenues totaled only 83,900 pesos. This was clearly an attractive enough yield to draw others into the business, and consequently, the region.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inhabitants</th>
<th>Camargo</th>
<th>Dolores</th>
<th>Laredo</th>
<th>Mier</th>
<th>Revilla</th>
<th>Reynosa</th>
<th>Villas del Norte</th>
<th>Nuevo Santander</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donkeys</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>1,050</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1,226</td>
<td>1,868</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saddle Horses</td>
<td>968</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>764</td>
<td>316</td>
<td>3,012</td>
<td>9,045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breeding Horses</td>
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<td>3,000</td>
<td>712</td>
<td>2,698</td>
<td>4,284</td>
<td>2,556</td>
<td>19,300</td>
<td>41,892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mules</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>1,600</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>195</td>
<td>445</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>2,948</td>
<td>5,165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oxen</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>1,368</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Table 1.1: Population and Livestock in Nuevo Santander, 1757 (Source: Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 143, 179 – Livestock numbers reproduced from the original Informe de José Tienda de Cuervo al superior gobierno sobre el estado general de las fundaciones de la Colonia del Nuevo Santander, 13 de octubre de 1757)

As a result of the growth of ranching operations, between 1778 and 1786 a substantial legal trade in cattle developed between the provinces. During that period there were sixty-eight legal cattle drives that operated in New Spain. Illegal drives proved to be even more profitable, as wild cattle driven to Coahuila from Nuevo Santander produced such great profits that the risks outweighed the potential liability or lawsuits. In comparison to the other three clusters of settlements within Nuevo Santander, the towns of the villas del norte were the most productive in regards to livestock. While population numbers in the villas del norte amounted to only 20 percent of the total in Nuevo Santander, inhabitants there owned the vast majority of livestock within the colony.

Escandón’s Maritime Policies

As noted, since the era of the conquest, Veracruz had served as the major entrepôt for European manufactured goods to enter the territories. As the lifeline to the colony, merchants and wholesalers depended on the trade activity there to fill markets and

78 Vigness, “Nuevo Santander in 1795,” 477-478; Valerio-Jiménez, “Neglected Citizens,” 264; Valerio-Jiménez, “Indios Bárbaros,” 58-59; Alonzo cites higher figures, “slightly more than 250,000 pesos, considerably more than the 64,000 pesos produced from silver, copper, and lead mining,” Alonzo, Tejano Legacy, 76.

79 McAllen, I Would Rather Sleep, 48; De la Teja, San Antonio de Béxar, 99-111.

80 Valerio-Jiménez’s livestock statistics are misleading as he chose to alter the original categories in his presentation of the data results. This discrepancy only affects his percentage results for ganado mayor, which appears to be closer to 36 percent. Valerio-Jiménez, “Neglected Citizens,” 253-255.
produce profits. At the same time, because imports to New Spain were dependent on the shipment of goods from European markets or trading partners, supply was subject to interruptions caused by the effects of foreign wars. For example, the War of Austrian Succession greatly affected exports from Spain to its colonies between 1740 and 1750. As goods made their way into the colony, wealthy merchants in Mexico City and Veracruz dominated their sale and subsequent distribution, and they held a monopoly over markets and prices. Any change to this system could be seen as, and was, a direct threat to their commercial interests.

Congruently, the growth of ranching throughout Nuevo Santander propelled many of the prominent families initially responsible for the region’s settlement to aspire to expand the villas’ commercial ties even further, even beginning as early as the 1750s. Scholars have argued that as a result of their contact with other regional interests at markets in the interior, such as Monterrey,

The new local businessmen, under the orders of Escandón, acted as a compact and organized group with an economic project of their own […] carry[ing] out a useful land commerce in the Northeast and other adjacent provinces of the region.82

As overland trade routes strengthened, this regional elite’s aspirations shifted to the opening of a port on the Gulf of Mexico in an effort to expand the reach of Nuevo Santander’s commercial transactions. The plan, its supporters, and the trade ideology it represented, were all ahead of their time.

Even before overland routes were fully developed, Escandón had anticipated opening a port on the Gulf Coast. When Escandón presented his original settlement plans to Spanish officials in 1744, he included an outline of his perceptions of the economic potential of the new colony.83 As part of his suggestions he recommended to the Junta General de Guerra y Hacienda in 1747 that a port at Soto La Marina be established. There were multiple reasons for him to select this as the ideal place for the establishment of a new port. First, there was already a natural sand bar in place there, which he felt would help facilitate the landing of war ships, as well as create a means by which light draft ships could participate in commercial relations within the colony of Nuevo Santander at some point in the future. Second, its location was more or less in the center of his colony, making it a central place through which to connect all settlements. Lastly, the river that empties at its mouth (known as Río Blanco in Nuevo León but as Río Soto la Marina as it makes its way to the coast) connected the proposed port directly to Nuevo Reino de León.84 This would be the most direct route to the region’s developed markets.

81 Booker, Veracruz Merchants, 17.
83 Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 194.
84 The site of Soto la Marina is actually inland from the coast, but is directly accessible by a river opening at La Pesca. Soto la Marina is only 68 miles from the present-day capital of Tamaulipas, Ciudad Victoria. Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 199n121.
Escandón’s settlement plans were very specific in their intent to create a commercial network that would facilitate movement between the different towns of Nuevo Santander, and from there to the commercial hubs in the Northeast and central New Spain. Part of these plans involved the recognition that the interests of those involved in the transport and exchange of goods needed to be protected—most especially from Indian raids and attacks. As Osante notes,

They [Escandón and other prominent supporters] tried to facilitate the entrance and exit of products with less risk and more speed, as well as reduce the high costs of transport, with the purpose of stimulating the exchange of interregional goods in the province.  

In fact, Escandón acquired a small schooner, named La Judía, to operate an interterritorial shipping route between Soto la Marina and Veracruz. That ship did not see much ocean travel, but its successor, the schooner La Conquistadora, made many trips. It began making the four-day journey between Soto La Marina and Veracruz in 1752, carrying hides and other animal products from the villas of Hoyos, Santander and Aguayo. In theory, it was supposed to run only between the two coastal ports, but it appears, based on the mention of goods in documents that have survived from throughout the colony, that it likely made stops at other coastal settlements. Trips from Veracruz to Altamira took just 24 hours, and large lanchas (boats) transported regional products of fruit and cotton from there to other parts of Nuevo Santander. It was reported that as part of this maritime activity, Escandón traded

Feed, leather, and wools […] Don Domingo de Unzaga has stated that he has made shipments to Veracruz with Don José de Escandón’s schooner. Annually he buys considerable lots of small livestock though commissions he has from other places. He also has a considerable amount of mules that he gets from the Hacienda de Dolores and Villa de Camargo.

While a businessman himself, Escandón’s motivations for maritime commerce went beyond that of acquiring wealth. Escandón and his supporters promoted the opening of a port on the Gulf in order to combat product shortages and price inflation, and to the

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85 “Pretendían facilitar la entrada y la salida de los productos con menos riesgo y más celeridad, además de reducir los altos costos de los fletes, con el fin de estimular el inercambio mercantil interregional en la provincia.” Ibid., 194.

86 Juan Fidel Zorrilla, El poder colonial, 91; Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 199.

87 The report describes the trade from Hoyos, “Tratando de la villa de Hoyos expresa que empieza ya a tener aquella población algún comercio en sebos, pieles y lanas.” Patricia Osante, ed., Testimonio acerca de la causa formada en la colonia del Nuevo Santander al Coronel Don José de Escandón (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2000), 178. In Altamira and its neighboring settlements, “se reduce a sal, pescado, queso, sebo, vacas, terneras, caballos, mulas,[…] agregándose los cueros de las reses que matan…Que, a más de todo, hay tres vecinos dedicados a la mercancía, y otros forasteros que vienen con géneros comerciando con Veracruz y Campeche.” Testimonio acerca de la causa formada, 177.

88 “Empieza a tener ya esta población algún comercio en cebos, pieles, y lanas y de lo primero ha hecho ya dicho Don Domingo de Unzaga dos remisiones a Veracruz, por la goleta de Don José de Escandón; anualmente hace él mismo, compra de porción considerable de ganado menor por comisiones que tiene de fuera y también de competente número de mulas, que saca de la hacienda de Dolores y Villa de Camargo,” Estado general de las fundaciones, II: 55.
extent possible, to re-route the commercial circuits in order to connect the settlements to Northeastern markets. All trade relations were conducted within the colony of New Spain, and as long as this remained the case, the maritime trade was not technically illegal, though his use of unsanctioned ports along the Seno Mexicano greatly concerned commercial interests and officials in other parts of New Spain.

It is clear that the opening of a new port would be a welcome addition to those residing in the frontier regions of New Spain. Residents in frontier areas were producers of raw materials, especially hides, but all manufactured goods had to be brought in from afar. As Osante notes, “they had to make trips [back and forth] with mules [and travel] an unavoidable distance of 400, and sometimes up to 500 leagues [1,315 miles], as well as pay a high cost for transport fees per load.” The rest of New Spain’s frontier settlements faced similar challenges.

Escandón’s proposal to open intra-colony maritime connections garnered support from local officials who saw the potential of opening the region to coastal trade. Juan Rodríguez de Albuérne, marqués of Altamira, wrote of “the abundance of rich minerals” in Nuevo Santander, which if further connected through maritime trade, would not only “achieve high profits” but also extend the reach of “our sacred religion.” He felt that the beginning of maritime trade in the region was an excellent attraction to support the Crown’s attempts to promote settlement of its distant provinces. Most important was his hope of extending commercial ties to span across the colony’s provinces, thereby facilitating the connection of distant settlements to New Spain’s main port, Veracruz. In fact, he aspired to have legal trade networks that would branch out even further to other Spanish colonies such as Campeche, Havana, Santo Domingo, Guatemala, Honduras, Caracas, and the islands of Sotavento and Barlovento. His vision of broad commercial networks this early, nearly three decades prior to the Bourbon officials’ endorsement of free trade, illustrates the confidence that local businessmen and officials had in the commercial potential of maritime trade networks, and this was after only a very short period there.

There was clearly a gap between the perceptions of officials from Nuevo Santander and those centered in New Spain’s metropole. Nuevo Santander’s prominent businessmen had expansionist dreams. They sought to extend their landholdings and the fruits of their prosperous livestock operations and salt trade to acquire greater profits. This they would accomplish by greatly reducing the distance to the established interior markets by utilizing maritime commerce. Merchants from both the port of Veracruz and Mexico City were not nearly as enthusiastic, for obvious reasons—as things stood they commanded a monopoly on trade, and new trading experiments threatened their control. Fearing the loss of profits from a new competing coastal trade center, almáceres

89 “Tenían que hacer en recuas de mulas un recorrido forzoso de 400 y, a veces, hasta 500 leguas y pagar por ello un alto costo de fletes” Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 193; The Spanish League or legua is equivalent to a distance of 2.63 miles.


91 AGN, Provincias Internas, v. 172, exp.2, f. 13, 14, 22, 23, as cited in Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 200.
(warehouse keepers) in Veracruz, and their agents in Mexico City, began to strongly pressure colonial authorities to close the port of Soto la Marina. As part of their campaign to have the port closed permanently, merchants pushed authorities in 1757 to launch a series of court battles to discredit local officials in the Santander villas, as well as to expose Escandón’s unauthorized maritime activities. Despite their objections, Escandón’s commercial experiment was sustained until 1763, six years after Viceroy Agustín de Ahumada y Villalon, marqués de las Amarillas, joined by other Escandón opponents, ordered a sweeping inspection of Nuevo Santander. The inspection, which was to be completed under the pretext of gaining a better understanding of the state and development of the province, was entrusted to José Tienda de Cuervo, a high-ranking military official with strong ties to Mexico City merchants and their representatives in Veracruz. Needless to say, he defended Veracruz’s trade privileges.

Other outspoken critics also voiced their opposition to trade liberalization. Some questioned Escandón’s maritime openings because they were unsure of what loosening trade restrictions would realistically entail. Don Domingo Valcárcel, a high-ranking oidor (judge), described Escandón’s “commerce [at Soto la Marina as being] noxious and prejudicial, but also extremely useful, necessary and inevitable.” The wavering tone to his words suggest that officials recognized broader economic reforms were necessary, but they were unsure of how they should be accomplished. Others, including Cuervo himself, used the presence of contraband as an excuse to oppose the new port openings. He argued that the maritime commerce represented a grave danger to the well being of the Crown, especially in the ways that it could promote contraband trade. Ironically, as the following chapter will demonstrate, the trade restrictions would have just the opposite effect—as officials clamped down on the use of these new coastal ports, contraband traders stepped in to supply the settlements with increasing frequency.

92 For more on the role of almaceneros in Veracruz and their reaction to the opening of trade see Barbara H. Stein and Stanley J. Stein, Edge of Crisis: War and Trade in the Spanish Atlantic, 1789-1808 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 93, 208.

93 Among the charges were accusations that he had not fulfilled his promises to the Spanish crown, had not created enough settlements in Nuevo Santander, spent too much money in his settlement efforts, as well as having failed to properly inspect lands, cheating soldiers, settlers and Indians. He also came under attack for his treatment of Indians, who officials believed had been subjected to numerous abuses including having their land taken from them to give to missionaries, displacing large communities for the purpose of using them as laborers on his lands, or in many instances having been killed or imprisoned rather than Christianized. Donald E. Chipman and Harriet Denise Joseph, Explorers and Settlers of Spanish Texas (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 147; Albert, El septentrión, 121.

94 Ibid., 122.

95 Estado general de las fundaciones.

96 “No solo fue nocivo sino perjudicial el comercio del señor Escandón en la Colonia, sino que por lo positivo fue utilísimo, necesario e inevitable, como lo convencen las razones expuestas. A ellas, puede agregarse lo que en el citado informe expende el capitán Tienda de Cuervo, quien después de tratar del puerto de Santander y del amarradero de Soto la Marina, donde dice que le asisten para que no se habilite dicho puerto, concluyendo que, para no perjudicar aquel nuevo establecimiento y sí darle el foment que necesita en los principios en que se halla, sufra con los terminus en que está el puerto y puede subsistir la provision que le facilita y la saca de frutos que consigue por la goleta del señor Escandón, limitada su navegación y tráfico al puerto de Veracruz.” Don Domingo Valcárcel, located within Testimonio acerca de la causa formada a José de Escandón, 177.
The officials’ response reveals a sort of vacillating tone to their disapproval of the maritime openings promoted by Escandón. On the one hand, it is clear that the Crown hoped to reinforce Veracruz’s place as the colony’s center for maritime commerce. One official wrote, “His majesty disapproves of the bad idea to open trade along the Seno Mexicano, [particularly at] the Port of Santander [….] and prohibit[s] the dealings of even the smallest vessels with it.” On the other hand, others voiced a more lenient attitude towards Escandón’s activities. First, officials did not directly blame Escandón for the illegal commerce on the Gulf Coast. Second, while Cuervo’s 1757 report sided with the Crown’s official position noting, “that this capital should be conserved as the principal nerve for commerce,” it also recommended that the ship that had established its routes in transporting goods from the Nuevo Santander territories to Veracruz remain in service, just limit its stops at other coastal settlements and only run between Soto la Marina and Veracruz. Despite this suggestion, Escandón’s activities were halted, and all ports (acknowledged or not) were ordered to close. The intent of these rulings was to limit maritime trade activities as they had always been, to the port of Veracruz.

In sum, the reasons for royal officials’ opposition to the opening of a port at Soto la Marina are multifaceted, but above all the chief reason was to continue the mercantilist trade restrictions that originated in the early days of the colony. These restrictions represented an effort to manage the flow of silver back to Spain. One management strategy had been to recognize Veracruz as the colony’s only official gulf port for the import and export of goods—all silver and other exports flowed out through Veracruz, and except for the primarily Asian goods introduced through Acapulco on the Pacific, all imports theoretically came in through Veracruz. In the Bourbon era, the project to stimulate trade within the empire did eventually lead to the opening of many new ports, in Spanish America and Spain. But no additional ports were made legal in Mexico, whose silver exports were deemed too valuable to risk opening new ports on either the

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97 “Desaprobando su majestad la mal fundada idea de abrir el comercio por la costa del Seno Mexicano, por el apellidado puerto de Santander […] y que se prohibiese todo trato de embarcaciones por él, aun las menores de la enunciada costa.” Ibid., 178.

98 The report states, “What we saw however, was that his Majesty was only prohibiting future trade along the coast without blaming Sr. Escandón for the past and not disapproving of his methods in regards to trade with settlers, captains, and soldiers.” In its original Spanish, “Sin embargo, lo que vimos es que solamente prohibía su majestad, para lo sucesivo, el comercio por la costa, sin notar ni culpar al señor Escandón por lo pasado, ni desaprobar su procedimiento en punto de comercio con pobladores, capitanes y soldados.” Ibid.

99 It is likely that they are referring to the established trade route between Veracruz and Mexico City. “Porque en este caso no acudirían a aviarse en esta capital los que proveen las provincias del Nuevo Reino de León, Coahuila, Texas, Nueva Galicia, Guadalcazar, Potosí, Huasteca y tal vez otras; y es consecuente que faltándoles este ramo a sus comerciantes, decácesen sus caudales, y yo concibo señor, que es muy conveniente que en esta capital se conserve el principal nervio del comercio.” Estado general de las fundaciones, 2:21; Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 202-203.

100 The orders to close the port of Soto la Marina were sent in 1763.

101 Testimony asserted the primary place of Veracruz as the chief port of entry, even if the facts were not exactly accurate. One official stated that “Mister Escandón’s schooner solely sailed and traded with the port of Veracruz.” In its original Spanish, “la Goleta del señor Escandón, limitaba su navegación y tráfico al puerto de Veracruz.” Testimonio acerca, 178.
Gulf or the Pacific. Regardless, Escandón would work for most of his time in Nuevo Santander to convince government officials that the economy of the North would not be able to grow at a fast enough pace without the legal opening of a port along the Gulf Coast. Although he died while still on trial in 1770, his experiment in intra-colony maritime trade stands as testament to his convictions. The dynamics of the fight to stop Escandón’s trade experiment foreshadowed the response that colonial officials would get when they began to implement even wider-scale economic reforms in the 1770s.

The Beginnings of Contraband Trade

While officials were clear in their demands that Soto la Marina and all other coastal ports be closed permanently, this did not stop commercial activity from taking place along the Gulf Coast. Spanish ships were forbidden from carrying maritime trade, but other foreign merchants filled the needs of the settlers, and local officials were easily co-opted and accepted bribes, as will be described in more detail in the following chapter. This illicit trade flourished because without the proper infrastructure in place to patrol the coast, ships could slip in and out of the coastal areas without being noticed.

The Bourbon reforms of the 1770s greatly shifted trans-Atlantic commerce. About the same time they had emerged victorious from the Escandón debacle, the Veracruz merchants suddenly found themselves relegated to a secondary role in the import of European goods, when officials named Havana as the main entrepôt for imports coming into New Spain. Worse, Bourbon reformers threatened to discontinue the flota system altogether in 1772. Veracruz’s almaceneros and merchants sent representatives to Spain to vehemently lobby for its survival. With wide-scale political disruptions such as the Seven Years’ War preoccupying colonial officials, the Crown was forced to open up more colonial ports to international trade, to reduce the potential consequences of blockade. To make matters worse, the already problematic illegal trade increased as privateers from all nations sought ways of circumventing the Spanish regulations by trading with merchants throughout New Spain, including Veracruz.102

Based on their continuous presence in the Gulf since the seventeenth century, it is likely that English, French, and Dutch ships were on the receiving end of these commercial exchanges.103 In fact, according to María del Carmen Velázquez, “Towards 1750, the French governor Vaudreuil estimated the annual amount of [contraband] trade

102 Booker, Veracruz Merchants, 19; Herrero finds evidence that a considerable quantity of silver in colonial New Spain was neither taxed nor minted into coins and then circulated and exported in the form of unassayed bars. The Bourbon reforms of the eighteenth century attempted to strip the colonial economy of its autonomy by enacting new economic policies that would bring down the quantity of black-market silver. The prevalence of contraband, and local authority’s preoccupation with it in the villas del norte seems to fit well with the officials there that were hoping to find ways to increase revenue and clamp down on tax-evaders. The vast majority of exports in the North consisted of silver specie, the focus of Bourbon attention. See Pedro Pérez Herrero, Plata y libranzas: La articulación comercial del México borbónico (México: El Colegio de México, 1988); Pedro Pérez Herrero, Comercio y mercados en América Latina colonial (Madrid: Mapfre América, 1992); Pedro Pérez Herrero, Los mercados regionales de América Latina: Siglos XVI, XVII y XVIII (México: El Colegio de México, 1995).

103 Booker, Veracruz Merchants, 17; Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 204.
between New Orleans and points along the Mexican Gulf at one million pesos.”

Officials expressed concern over the prevalence of contraband activity. For example, one official asked that he make “keen observance of any deal or illicit commerce that takes place not only on these coasts, but [also] by Pánuco and Tampico.” Officials were particularly concerned because they had received news that cows had been shipped from Tamiahua (in northern Veracruz) to some Englishmen who lived in Pensacola. Although there are no trade receipts from this time period to corroborate the French governor’s report, it is clear from officials’ concern with extralegal trade, as well as from the “sudden” appearance of numerous foreign merchants shortly after independence, that it was extremely common.

The Crown’s frustration with these practices continued in the years after Soto la Marina’s official closure, prompting Charles III in 1767 to send a note complaining of the port’s noncompliance and re-issuing direct orders for its closure. Officials in Mexico City were never able to present sufficient clear evidence to substantiate the claim that contraband trade was occurring in the Santander colony, yet it is evident that the illicit commerce continued until the legalization of maritime trade in the nineteenth century. The same could be said for other coastal areas, including settlements in close proximity to the Río Bravo.

The Founding of Refugio

As the region’s ranching operations grew, so had their thirst for fertile land. Spanish officials had begun issuing land grants north of the Río Bravo in the mid-1770s, but as we have seen they had concentrated their efforts around settlements further inland from the Gulf Coast. In 1774, however, a group of fourteen families from two of the villa del norte settlements, Camargo and Reynosa, relying on almost 40 years of experience in the area, ventured east to purchase additional land. Their settlement was named Congregación San Juan de los Esteros Hermosos. In 1784 their efforts were made official, when they purchased a total of 113 sitios (500,364 acres) from Escandón’s expansive “El Sauto” land grant. Within twelve years, in 1794, San Juan would be

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105 “Muy a la observancia de cualquier trato o comercio ilícito que intenten no solo por esas costas, sino por las […] de Pánuco y Tampico,” porque se tenía noticia de que por esa parte se habían sacado reses de Tamiahua para los ingleses que habitaban en Panzacola.” Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 204.

106 The port at Refugio was legally opened in 1826, although a steady stream of ships appear in the records starting in 1825. The establishment of a U.S. consulate at the port in 1823 further suggests that trade activities were common well before the legal opening of the port by officials in Mexico City. See also Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 204.

renamed *Nuestra Señora del Refugio de los Esteros*, although its inhabitants commonly referred to it as “El Refugio” or “Villa de Refugio.” While some before them had already established illegal ranches on untitled lands along the coast, the legal recognition of their settlement as a villa would pave the way for further economic growth.  

Already accustomed to the interior trade routes developed since colonization in the mid-eighteenth century, livestock ranchers in Refugio became keenly aware of the ways that a settlement accessible by sea could participate in trade with outsiders. Located only 25 miles by land from the Río Bravo’s opening to the Gulf, Refugio’s residents understood that maritime trade would facilitate their access to new markets, particularly in the new United States of America. Although restrictionist Spanish policies controlled their commercial maneuverings prior to Mexican Independence, the free market policies of the Mexican state would dictate their economic role in the years ahead.

If settlers farther south and farther inland had longed for a cheaper way to transport and import goods, the settlers in Refugio, closer to the Gulf coast than any of the other northern settlements, found the prospect of maritime commerce especially tantalizing. At the same time, the distance from colonial overseers in Mexico City made it difficult for officials to enforce and stop the contraband activity in the town. As the next chapter will illustrate, illicit trade flourished in Refugio, as American and European merchants swooped into the area from New Orleans to conduct their business. In less than 20 years, the Villa de Refugio would lead the region’s economic development. Trade connections would begin to look outward, replacing the internal economy that had thrived there since settlement. Once connected, there was no turning back.

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Chapter 2

Contraband in the (Unofficial) Port of Refugio, 1794-1824

Contraband activity, and official concerns regarding its prevalence, permeated life in colonial Refugio. This chapter examines the maritime activities in and around the city of Refugio prior to the legal opening of its port. As we saw in Chapter 1, the Spanish crown strictly prohibited maritime commerce in New Spain outside of the port of Veracruz, but the efforts of José de Escandón to open trade relations in the colony’s northern provinces paved the way for a shift in the manner that local residents and select officials viewed the Crown’s trade policies. Despite his lack of success in convincing royal officials that coastal trade was a feasible means of stimulating the Northeast’s economy, the formation of strong overland trade networks that connected the villas del norte to established interior markets and trade fairs had a lasting impact on the region’s economic development. As a result of these connections, residents’ appetites for imported goods had been whetted. Their eyes now turned to the waters of the Gulf coast as they searched for cheaper and more direct ways to both sell and acquire goods.

Refugio’s inhabitants surely had at least a casual awareness of the region’s potential for externally oriented trade relations at the time of its legal recognition in 1794. As we have seen, accounts hint of the existence of a vibrant contraband trade in the northern Gulf beginning in the 1750s, run by foreign merchants who secretly landed at settlements along the coast. Their presence exposed local residents to previously hard-to-find imported finery and wares, at cheaper prices than those purchased at one of the big trade fairs and transported overland, thereby demonstrating the advantages of having open coastal trade relations closer to the region. Both foreign merchants and local buyers saw opportunity due to the lax enforcement of trade restrictions, which contributed to the success of these informal connections. Not only did the contraband goods serve to supply the demand for imported goods in Spain’s Northeastern settlements, they also impacted the region’s overall economic development, exposing residents to the benefits of free trade liberalization and enhancing its economic development well into the nineteenth century. As a result, the new externally oriented economy flourished, albeit constrained by its illegality until the port’s official opening in 1824.

The new maritime commerce placed New Orleans at one end of the Northeast province’s trade networks and the trade fairs in the interior at the other. Previously, Refugio was situated at the end of a network of interwoven overland routes that originated at fairs as far away as Mexico City, whose products made their way to northern New Spain by muleback. On the return-trips, those same mules would carry locally produced items, including hides, wool, and meat which could subsequently be traded for luxury items like corn, textiles, and specie. In fact, by the turn of the century, mule trains were regularly travelling in both directions, connecting the distant villas del

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The term contraband is used throughout to denote goods that reached their intended markets illegally, either because the product itself was prohibited or the seller hoped to avoid paying taxes on their merchandise.
norte to interior fairs in Monterrey and Saltillo. As this chapter will explore, New Orleans merchants slowly inserted themselves into these trading exchanges, disregarding the national policies of Mexico City or Madrid. Their motivation was their desire to acquire the valuable commodity of silver specie, and as will be argued, this trade dynamic dramatically and irreversibly reoriented the trade networks in the region. As a result of these changes Refugio became an important entrepôt that supplied not only the Northeastern settlements with hard-to-obtain supplies, but also became a chief player in the economic prosperity of merchants from New Orleans eager to establish commercial relations with new foreign markets. This chapter unpacks the ways that these extralegal clandestine exchanges gave rise to Refugio’s lucrative trade relationship with New Orleans prior to the port’s legalization, a relationship that continued to flourish given the openings that Mexican independence delivered.

Louisiana’s Contrasting Experiences with Trade Development

Before turning to the development of the maritime trade networks of which Refugio/Matamoros was a part, it is important to survey briefly the conditions that gave rise to New Orleans’ supremacy in the Gulf trading circuits. Louisiana’s territories required the same attention to agricultural, and subsequently economic, transformations as those pursued by Escandón in Nuevo Santander.² Canadian-French colonists had founded the colony of Louisiana in 1718, but the scarcity of locally harvested foodstuffs resulted in a period of widespread starvation during its early years.³ While the settlers initially struggled to sustain themselves, the appointment of Governor Pierre Francois de Rigaud, the Marquis de Vaudreuil, set the stage for the region’s economic transformation. As governor, Rigaud focused his efforts on economic development and growth in an effort to combat insufficient yields from subsistence farming. Cut off from the British colonies in the Northeast, he immediately recognized that the colony’s survival depended on the development of external markets and the establishment of a shipping enterprise. His hope was to encourage the region’s original settlers to increase their farms’ production, which would in turn result in a surplus of goods that could be sold or traded at market for profit.⁴ The production of indigo, a blue dye used in textiles, was the chief


³ The Louisiana territories would remain a French colony until it was ceded to Spain in 1763 as a stipulation of the Treaty of Paris.

focus of these development efforts. The markets with which he aspired to connect are what make his efforts particularly relevant here.

European powers had been eyeing Spanish markets for some time. As part of the Treaty of Utrecht, signed at the conclusion of the War of Spanish Succession in 1713, Great Britain was granted a 30-year asiento (or contract) to supply an unlimited number of slaves and up to 500 tons of goods per year to the Spanish colonies. As a result of their presence in Spanish America, many British merchants found themselves entangled in frequent clashes with Spanish guarda costas (coast guards) as ships were seized, shipments confiscated, and merchants arrested for supposedly smuggling goods into Spanish America. Complaints of abuse ran rampant, and the issue came to a head when Robert Jenkins, the captain of a British merchant ship, appeared before Parliament to present the remains of his severed ear. He testified to Parliament that his ear had been cut off by Spanish guarda costas in 1731. The conflict that ensued, later named The War of Jenkins’ Ear, lasted from 1739 to 1748, although it was subsumed as part of the much larger and widespread War of Austrian Succession in 1742. These wars involved most of the European powers and dramatically revealed Spanish trade weakness, specifically their inability to supply their colonies by way of the flota system.5

French notarial records suggest that smuggling activity by merchants from New Orleans began almost immediately following its founding. Many small-time smugglers ignored Spanish trading restrictions by providing excuses such as “bad weather” when caught by officials in closed ports.6 Although only a handful of smuggling cases are documented in Louisiana’s Superior Council records, those suggest some of the strategies of the contrabandists. Jean Béranger, for example, wrote in 1724 that he recommended befriending the port captain at Veracruz, as “he comes to Louisiana with cash and fears no confiscation upon his return since the very ones who could confiscate [his imports] benefit from this trade.”7 As a result of the wartime pressures, Spanish officials agreed to

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consider Rigaud’s proposal to allow goods furnished by New Orleans merchants to enter the colony, as long as Spanish royal fleets transported them.

The underpinning of Rigaud’s policies was the belief that the solution to Louisiana’s economic stagnation lay in its potential to gain access to markets in the neighboring Spanish colonies of Cuba and Mexico. This was an ambitious solution, given that Spanish mercantilist policies prohibited free trade with its colonial territories. His efforts saw great successes, even during times when France and England were at war. In the 1730s Louisiana’s maritime trade began to thrive just as the first native-born (creole) generation began to come into inheritances and positions of influence. Rigaud further experimented with an open-port policy from 1743 to 1744 during King George’s War. Although the crown officially declined to adopt his experiment during peacetime, it unofficially encouraged free trade throughout his tenure (1743-53). As a result, by 1744, a coastal settlement at the mouth of the Mississippi river, La Balize, had become an important entrepôt where goods imported to or produced near New Orleans were picked up by Spanish ships for trans-shipment to colonial ports in Havana, Santo Domingo, and Veracruz. Trade flourished, and between 1742 and 1744, Rigaud estimated the value of this trade to have reached 750,000 livres (French pounds). In fact, the trade was so lucrative that one New Orleans resident remarked that from 1745 to 1750,

Our commerce had prospered by the circulation of Spanish money. Our people lived contented and the colony was in honor abroad. Many vessels came in from various ports to share in the benefits of commerce.8

This circa-Caribbean trade remained strong for years to come, fueling merchants’ desires to expand trade networks regardless of their legality.9

Rigaud’s development efforts directly impacted New Orleans’ economic growth overall. Between 1743 and 1750, for example, indigo prices doubled, and the product was in such demand overseas that British trading partners, unable to fill the demand just from suppliers in Louisiana, began offering incentives to subsidize its production in the British colony of South Carolina. Louisiana traders found creative ways to insert themselves in the process, as they began to sell their indigo to producers in Charleston at a markup, and they in turn would collect the British subsidy before reselling the dye at even greater prices. Other items with lesser margins of profit, including timber, pitch, tar,

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turpentine, tobacco, rice, and hides, were also being produced in large numbers locally in Louisiana. As demand for these items overseas increased, trade grew exponentially, and in the year 1750 alone 100 ships were documented as conducting business in the port of La Balize. Ships from the French and Spanish West Indies, Mexico, and France dominated the city’s registers and by the end of Rigaud’s term as governor in 1753, the amount of exports originating from Louisiana amounted to two million livres, twice the amount recorded in 1751.  

Local accounts reinforced the perception that a vibrant trade with Mexico was inevitable. Despite it being illegal, Johnathas Darby wrote in 1753,

We are excellently situated for the commerce with Spain. Communications exist between Pensacola and Mobile; between Natchitoches, through the Adyayes and Mexico, between New Orleans and Mexico by vessels from Veracruz, Campeche and Havana.  

Darby’s optimism illustrates how New Orleans merchants openly challenged the limits of mercantilism. In fact, the goal of Spanish mercantilism was to control not only goods, but people. Their movement was supposed to move in a relatively straight line from the Spanish metropole to its colonies and back again. Over time, local officials and merchants ignored this mandate.

New Orleans’ trading policies changed dramatically after its absorption as a Spanish colonial territory. Upon the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Spain lost control of Florida to the British, but in return received part of New Orleans and the Louisiana Territories west of the Mississippi River from the French. The economic policies that Rigaud promoted were suddenly voided and replaced by Spanish mercantilism. The imposition of these policies in the Louisiana territories was troublesome, as Louisiana traders were actively pursuing the formation of new trade networks, legal or not.

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10 Dawd, Building the Devil’s Empire, 118-122
11 Ibid., 107.
12 The expansion of legal, and the condoning of illicit trade networks were accompanied by rapid demographic growth in Louisiana. Beginning in 1764, Anglo-Saxon settlers made their way into the city from the British colonies and Europe. As a result, census figures show that for the parish of New Orleans alone the population grew from 3,190 people in 1769 to 27,176 in 1820. With the demographic growth came increased opportunities for jobs, many of which focused on the vibrant and expanding maritime commerce. By the 1790s, when landholders surrounding Refugio were expanding their ranches and drawing new settlers, New Orleans’ traders were eager to satisfy their thirst for imported goods. With the demographic growth came increased opportunities for jobs, many of which focused on the vibrant and expanding maritime commerce. By 1840, New Orleans would be home to roughly 102,000 inhabitants, making it not only the wealthiest but also the third most populated city in the United States. The population growth was in part a result of the vibrant slave trade headquartered in the city, as well as the ancillary economy such as boardinghouses and other city staples centered on serving the increasing population. See Johnson, Soul by Soul, 6; Peirce F. Lewis, New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape (Cambridge: Ballinger, 1976), 175; Clark, New Orleans, 1718-1812, 275; Campbell Gibson, "Population Of The 100 Largest Cities And Other Urban Places In The United States: 1790 To 1990," Population Division, U.S. Bureau of the Census, June 1998.
Unfortunately for Spanish officials, the transition to mercantilism was far from smooth. While official policy promoted a closed economic model, it is clear that those in charge locally continued to condone the illicit trading relationships with unopened Spanish ports. For example, when Luis Unzaga y Amezaga was appointed by the Spanish Crown as governor of Louisiana in 1770, it was common knowledge that his administration as well as other local officials openly condoned merchants’ trading of contraband. Like Rigaud, he recognized that the revenues that such trade relations brought to the port and city were too important to cut off abruptly after the colony changed hands. In addition, the Spanish governor saw the contraband trade with British settlers in French Louisiana east of the Mississippi River as an opportunity to weaken Great Britain’s influence over its holdings in the region. Revenue from contraband transactions, especially along the Mississippi River, was viewed as contributing to a trade deficit for the British, and in the long run weakening their ability to invade any Spanish territories. In other words, officials did little to discourage, and in fact practically encouraged New Orleans merchants to pursue and partake in illicit trade.

While colonial officials never officially condoned New Orleans merchants’ illicit maritime activities, efforts by progressive figures such as Escandón point to the ways that the northern settlements’ participation in illicit trade was predicated on necessity. Escandón’s efforts to convince Bourbon officials to permit the opening of a port along the Seno Mexicano had failed in the mid 1760s, and this compelled coastal settlements in Nuevo Santander to look towards New Orleans to obtain cheaper and steadier subsistence imports. The added benefit was that these were new markets for locally produced items, such as hides, wool, and meat, which could be traded for mercantile goods. Schooner trade offered a much more cost efficient and speedy alternative to the long overland trade routes that had been supplying the region. Yet, the accidental and at best occasional appearances of foreign merchants on their shores were not frequent enough to satisfy these consumers, whose settlements were in dire need of imported products, no matter the cost.

Northerners felt the impact of mercantilist policies mostly through the crown’s newly strengthened monopolies over tobacco and gunpowder. The production, manufacture, and sale of these goods were strictly controlled throughout the colony, thereby leaving residents in the North reliant on muleteers to carry them to the region from markets in Saltillo. Transportation costs were hefty, and the markup of goods, once

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15 In exchange ranchers would trade in salt, meat and hides. See Chapter 1.

16 Osante, Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 204. Miller argues that “During the first decades of the 1800s, New Orleans served as a key economic market for goods and supplies from Mexico, either clandestine or otherwise.” Miller, New Orleans and the Texas Revolution, 26.
they reached buyers in the North, was exorbitant. In short, the new Bourbon trade policies may have benefited the large merchants in the empire’s trade capitals of Veracruz and Mexico City, but they disadvantaged greatly those who lived on the periphery, and residents were eager to find more cost effective means to obtain necessary imports.

The existence of these illicit exchanges was confirmed officially as early as 1754. Spanish officials had suspected that Louisiana traders were eager to trade in cattle and their by-products when the Frenchman, Joseph Blancpain, along with two assistants and two black slaves, were captured in the region surrounding the lower Neches (near Beaumont, Texas), Trinity (near Dallas), and Brazos (near Houston) rivers in Spanish Texas. Fittingly, after Blancpain’s arrest and extradition to Mexico City, it was revealed that the governor of New Orleans had personally signed his passport and given him specific orders to bring back beef to the port city. As further evidence that officials encouraged traders to participate in contraband activity, Blancpain and his men’s subsequent depositions include accounts of substantial trading operations with the Bidais and Orcoquizas Indians, French traders, and even Spanish officials.

The illicit cattle trading activities reached even further into Spanish territories, including the vicinity of the Rio Bravo. By 1778, the commandant general of the Provincias Internas del Norte, Teodoro de Croix, had received reports that a trade alliance in cattle between northern indigenous tribes and the Karankawa Indians (native to the coastal lands surrounding the Rio Bravo) had been established. According to his report, the tribes stole cattle from ranchers and traded them to the Karankawa Indians, who subsequently sold them to markets in Louisiana. Responding to complaints from ranchers, many of whom were men of means, Croix recognized an opportunity to control these clandestine exchanges while also increasing revenue to the royal treasury. He issued a decree in 1778 that ordered New Spain’s stockowners to gather and brand all cattle within a four-month period. If officials encountered any unbranded cattle, they would immediately become property of the Crown and their owners would be assessed a

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17 In Spanish New Mexico it is known that a variety of raw materials were commonly shipped to factories in the interior where they were manufactured and the finished product sent back again for sale. David J. Weber, The Mexican Frontier, 1821-1846: The American Southwest Under Mexico (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 124. See also Klooster, Illicit Riches.


19 Prior to his capture, a clandestine trade had been operating between personal agents of Spanish governor Jacinto de Barrios y Jáuregui and Bidais Indians in East Texas. Beginning in 1751, agents would regularly carry and trade tobacco, knives and firearms that they had received from French traders at Natchitoches. In exchange, they would return with corn, hides, and horses, which it is almost certain were stolen by Indians from other Spanish settlements. In fact, “smuggling and illegal trade had long been a way of life in East Texas.” Donald E. Chipman, Spanish Texas: 1519-1821 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 164.

20 Spanish knowledge of these activities prompted further settlement of the region. In late 1755, the Marqués de las Amarillas issued a decree ordering the establishment of a villa populated by fifty families there, a garrison of thirty soldiers and a supporting mission to be headed by two Franciscan friars from Zacatecas. The villa was never established. Ibid., 164-165.
hefty fine. In addition, cattle would be allowed to be transported within the colony only if traders paid an export fee of two pesos per head.\textsuperscript{21} Unfortunately, these reforms only served to strengthen the market for contraband cattle to Louisiana traders, as ranchers deliberately sought to avoid the new tax levee in an effort to save money and increase profits.\textsuperscript{22} One outspoken official directly blamed the persistence of contraband activity in horses on the mercantilist policies that promoted a monopoly for trade in Veracruz, and “which every day leaves the rest of the fertile and rich provinces without life and without direct trade.”\textsuperscript{23}

The founding of ranches near Refugio’s coastal areas coincides with a similar record of illicit activity in the region. French pirates reportedly settled the area surrounding Punta de Isabel (modern-day Port Isabel), close to the Brazos de Santiago entry point, beginning in 1775.\textsuperscript{24} Speculation continues to this day about whether a fresh water well constructed at the embarkation point was financed by Jean Lafitte, a known pirate and privateer with strong ties to New Orleans.\textsuperscript{25} This development gains in significance with the fact that Captain José de la Garza, a native of Nuevo León, established his ranch, El Falconeño, that same year in the immediate vicinity of the Brazos de Santiago entry point on the Gulf of Mexico.\textsuperscript{26} De la Garza was not alone in his interest to settle the isolated area surrounding the Río Bravo’s entry points, as he was joined by the Manzano family in 1777 who also settled nearby at the Boca del Río opening of the Río Bravo.\textsuperscript{27} Without any local infrastructure, it seemed an extremely unlikely location to establish ranching operations. Flooding was common, and in addition, the coastal lands bordering the Río Bravo were completely undeveloped and

\textsuperscript{21} This refers to the fees assessed if cattle were driven out of the province. Ibid., 203.

\textsuperscript{22} This decree was immensely unpopular, and settlers and missionaries vehemently protested its permanent adoption. It was revoked by royal officials in 1786, although officials in Mexico City would be forced to address the exoneration of debts owed to the crown as late as 1795. Mary Margaret McAllen Amberson, James A. McAllen, and Margaret H. McAllen, \textit{I Would Rather Sleep in Texas: A History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley \\& the People of the Santa Ana Land Grant} (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2003), 46n51; Jesús F de la Teja, \textit{San Antonio de Béxar: A Community on New Spain’s Northern Frontier} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 106; Chipman, \textit{Spanish Texas}, 165, 203; Terry G. Jordan-Bychkov, \textit{North American Cattle Raising Frontiers: Origins, Diffusion, and Differentiation} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 138, 153.

\textsuperscript{23} “La Confederación Americana, con quien se hace un gran contrabando de caballos, que cada día aumentará mientras aquellas fértiles y ricas provincias permanezcan sin vida y sin comercio directo, reducidas al monopolio de Veracruz.” Ortiz de Ayala, \textit{Resumen de la estadística del Imperio Mexicano} (México, 1822), 81.

\textsuperscript{24} McAllen et al, \textit{I Would Rather Sleep in Texas}, 46n51.

\textsuperscript{25} It is known that by 1805 Lafitte was operating a warehouse in New Orleans to help disperse goods to be smuggled by his brother, Pierre. See William C. Davis, \textit{The Pirates Laffite: The Treacherous World of the Corsairs of the Gulf} (Orlando: Harcourt, 2005); Jack C. Ramsay, \textit{Jean Laffite: Prince of Pirates} (Austin: Eakin Press, 1996).


\textsuperscript{27} José Raúl Canseco Botello, \textit{Historia de Matamoros} (Matamoros: Litográfica Jardín, 1981), 71.
extremely far removed from any of the other villa del norte settlements further inland. Thus, it is likely that both families recognized the entrepreneurial advantages those locations provided, especially given that their properties were on the periphery of local officials’ direct control. Should they be involved in illicit commerce, perhaps with pirates or New Orleans merchants, no one would have to know. In fact, within thirty years, the isolated area would be well documented as the primary location for contraband exchanges.

**Ideal Conditions for a Contraband Trade**

The ultimate success of the new trade networks with New Orleans can be partly attributed to the existence of the overland trade routes established through Escandón’s colonization efforts. Previously, northerners obtained imported goods from the interior. Now, with the introduction of New Orleans merchants, goods entering the unofficial port could be bought and carried back along the same overland routes by traders willing to risk transporting these illicit goods to other settlements. In fact, mules had previously been used to carry goods in both directions: carrying imported goods from interior markets to the north, and on the return carrying cattle products to fairs in the interior. The overland routes that transported imports from Veracruz to markets in the interior and then to Refugio covered more than 1,000 total miles, resulting in high mark-ups. The new entrepreneurial traders, however, reversed these flows in a certain sense. The imported goods that used to have to come from Veracruz now came from New Orleans, and were transported (illegally, of course) inland, in exchange for silver specie. Not only did Refugio’s initial dependence on interior markets for imported goods begin to diminish because foreign goods were now available to them directly at much lower prices, but goods that entered through Refugio began to alter the whole scope of internal trade networks, stimulating the (illegal) drainage of silver northward, to pay for (illegal) imports.

Beyond these market forces, the contraband networks in Refugio owed their success to the intersection between geography (which gave Refugio a privileged position near the mouth of the Río Bravo at the same time that it remained isolated from the centers of Spanish power) and particular economic and political factors that ignored the region’s needs. It is clear that many local officials in Refugio charged with regulating and enforcing the trade policies became permissive in the face of the growing contraband trade networks from which they themselves profited. Without a strong military presence or local government infrastructure to facilitate enforcement, there was little to stop the illicit trade. Late in the eighteenth century the Spanish state did attempt to loosen trade restrictions in an effort to stimulate production and the circulation of that production via legal trade. The *comercio libre* (free trade) Bourbon reforms of 1789 freed some restrictions on trade in the port of Veracruz. Misleading in name, the law did not in fact permit free trade, but rather merely opened up all Spanish ports to trade with approved

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28 The main beneficiary of this reform was the Río de la Plata area, which in 1776 was opened to trade with the rest of the Indies as a result. By 1790, Buenos Aires was exporting nearly a million and a half hides annually. See Jeremy Adelman, *Republic of Capital: Buenos Aires and the Legal Transformation of the Atlantic World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 25, 123.
ports in Spanish America. In Spain, the number of legal ports through which commerce could move was increased from two to thirteen. In Mexico, however, the number of legal ports remained the same, thus disregarding the calls of local officials who pushed for the opening of ports along Mexico’s Gulf Coast.

Political Factors and Corruption

As a result of the high prices they had to pay for these imports, residents in Refugio had an especially tumultuous relationship with taxes. As we have seen, the region’s original inhabitants had been granted tax exemptions as officials hoped to lure them to settle the area in the 1740s. But these incentives were short-lived as royal officials scrambled to increase revenues to support the royal treasury, restoring sales taxes in 1754. The removal of the tax exemptions was not received well by locals, who voiced strong disapproval. As a result, their exemptions were extended until 1767, when sales taxes were made permanent for all residents throughout Nuevo Santander. But in Refugio, as elsewhere, these national-level tax reforms were accompanied by lukewarm enforcement at the local level. Many officials were lax in their collection efforts, while others became involved in the commerce of contraband. When caught, officials would argue that necessity was what pushed them to ignore the reforms. In Texas, for example, one Spanish official placed in charge of rigorously enforcing Croix’s cattle branding decree from the 1780s seized large numbers of unbranded cattle and was very unpopular with local ranchers. After numerous complaints were launched, some even coming from missionaries, it was learned that his rigorous enforcement of the law was part of a scheme to sell the unbranded cattle in Louisiana. Upon his exposure he defended his actions by claiming that because the Gulf of Mexico “was about to become a theater of war with the British,” shortages of beef were going to be a big issue in Louisiana and he was merely helping them in a time of need. In fact, he was not entirely wrong, as the scarcity of cattle in Louisiana was in many ways the driving force behind these initial illicit trade interactions. It was extremely profitable for ranchers, or as in Domingo Cabello’s case, for corrupt Spanish officials, to sell their unbranded cattle there.

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31 In fact, this would become a motivating factor for Anglo settlement in Texas who took advantage of official’s leniency in regards to Spanish tax regulations.
Officials in the villas del norte were equally arbitrary in their enforcement of trade policies. By 1801, and probably earlier, royal administrators in Reynosa had pleaded with the governor of Nuevo Santander to help subsidize the hefty costs of transporting goods to the area. Limited by the Crown’s restrictive trade policies, city officials turned to illicit means to help area residents meet their needs.\textsuperscript{32} Aware of contraband activity taking place in another villa del norte settlement, royal officials appointed the military captain Juan José Ballí as justicia mayor of Refugio to oversee the Crown’s subjects there and to enforce the trade restrictions, but shortly after his appointment it was revealed that he and three other officials were also involved in contraband activities.\textsuperscript{33} The central royal administrators in Nuevo Santander took their enforcement responsibilities seriously, and despite the Ballí family’s political influence, he was jailed and brought to trial in the Nuevo Santander capital of San Carlos.\textsuperscript{34} Clearly, there was a pattern of officials at the local level bending the rules to suit their own and residents’ needs.

Authorities in New Spain’s colonial centers were decidedly less complacent. There, it was understood that anyone caught smuggling goods would be jailed and their merchandise confiscated. Royal decrees reinforced this policy. But it was the isolation of the northern cities that created the perfect opportunity for illicit commerce to blossom. Spanish Texas, Refugio, and other Seno Mexicano settlements were each located for all intents and purposes out of the reach of royal administrators. While the military was a presence there, its influence was minimal. In addition, because colonization of Nuevo Santander was still relatively new, it was hard to regulate lands that were sparsely settled and still threatened by Indian raids. Royal administrators made it clear through the trials of high-level officials that violators would be prosecuted, but in reality they lacked the local infrastructure to ensure the day-to-day enforcement of trade policies, and local officials had relative autonomy in the conduct of their offices.

Ship Design and Geography

Another geographical feature also facilitated contraband: the ability to hide ship landings along the coast. Ironically, what many, including Escandón himself, considered geographic barriers to maritime commerce, traders from New Orleans used to their advantage. The sand bars at entry points along the coast prohibited the passage of larger vessels on the river, and the smaller schooners (known as goletas) were needed to navigate the shallow waters of the region.\textsuperscript{35} Characterized by their two masts, these

\textsuperscript{32}\ Valerio-Jiménez, “Neglected Citizens and Willing Traders,” 266.
\textsuperscript{33}\ Octavio Herrera Pérez, Monografía de Reynosa: Investigación histórica e iconográfica (Tamaulipas: Instituto Tamaulipeco de Cultura, 1989), 50-55.
\textsuperscript{34}\ Ballí died in the Altamira prison in 1804, despite his family having paid for his costly defense. Scholars have argued that the family’s concern was likely related to their worry over his vast estate. McAllen et al., I Would Rather Sleep in Texas, 52; Herrera Pérez, Monografía de Reynosa, 50-55; Rivera, Diccionario, 36.
\textsuperscript{35}\ The depth of the river’s waters was of particular concern to officials even after the port’s legitimization. The United States consul in Matamoros took note of the port’s entrance in 1834. “The depth of water on the bar of the Brazo de Santiago varies from 6 ½ to 10 ½ feet; that on the bar at the mouth of the Rio Grande del Norte from 3 to 8 feet, and the direction of each channel is sometimes entirely changed
sailing ships were lighter and traveled faster than other vessels from that time, and they were able to make the trip from New Orleans to Refugio in just two to eight days. In other words, the ships’ design was uniquely well suited to contraband trade.

The Spanish fleets would take months to navigate the same distance, and they were not authorized to service the northern provinces. Thus, the Río Bravo had the potential of opening up the northern Mexican territory for development, just as the Mississippi River had facilitated the development of U.S. settlements, first into Kentucky and Tennessee and, then, further up along the Mississippi River in the 1780s. The geography of the area made it possible for New Orleans traders to slip into and out of the Río Bravo region undetected. This was not a large-scale operation, and the necessity to use small schooners meant that entrepreneurs, as opposed to large shipping companies, were the chief agents for this commerce. The implications of this fact will be explored in much more detail in Chapter 4.

![Figure 2.1: Double-masted goleta (schooner), as was used by maritime merchants during the early 19th century. The earliest schooners had two masts, but the most popular designs had three or four. (Source: Brewer Yacht Designs, http://www.tedbrewer.com/sail_steel/corten.htm, accessed 3 February 2010)](image)

by the ebb and flow of the sea.” “D.W. Smith to Louis McClean,” January 1, 1834. Despatches from United States Consuls in Mexico City, 1822-1906 (Microfilm, 15 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

Despite their favorable geographical location and isolation, accessing the villas del norte settlements by sea was tricky for first time visitors. The lack of official presence was a mixed blessing for some; a wrong turn for those unfamiliar with the sand bars or multiple entry points could cost them their ships. At the same time, for those familiar with the region’s geography and whose intent was to try to evade Spanish military officials, Refugio could be accessed through three openings on the Gulf Coast (See Map 2.1). The Brazos de Santiago entry, located between the Island of Padre Ballí (present-day South Padre Island) and Brazos Island, was the northernmost entry point. If the ship chose to pass through the Brazos de Santiago it would enter a large bay that separated the mainland from the land barrier created by the narrow Island of Padre Ballí.

On the other side of the Brazos de Santiago pass is Brazos Island, a slightly larger landmass that at its southern tip borders the Gulf’s second entry point, Boca Chica. Beginning in the 1820s, arriving goods were dropped off at Brazos Island further north near the Brazos de Santiago opening. From there they were transported overland by mules and carts until they reached Boca Chica, where goods were transferred to a chalán (barge), crossed the river, and finally loaded onto mules headed to Refugio. The third entry point was the literal mouth of the Río Bravo, known as Boca del Río Bravo. This direct opening to the Río Bravo required the smallest of all ships in order to access it. Because of the shallow waters there, most boats could not enter, or they did so with much difficulty. It was realized early on that only light-draft vessels with experienced captains could successfully navigate across the sand bar at the mouth of the river in hopes of accessing settlements further inland. In addition, the depth of the water changed constantly, which made navigation very difficult, even for experienced mariners.

Furthermore, Brazos Island would be home to only a handful of scattered huts as it served as a way station for merchants transporting goods to the river or overland as they sought access to eager customers at settlement sites inland.

The river itself varies in depth, making it difficult to navigate by ship, and which has been a topic of concern amongst travelers since they first started arriving in large numbers during the early nineteenth century. According to the American consul resident there, “The depth of water on the bar of the Brazo de Santiago varies from 6 ½ to 10 ½ feet; that on the bar at the mouth of the Río Grande del Norte from 3 to 8 feet, and the direction of each channel is sometimes entirely changed by the ebb and flow of the sea.” “D.W. Smith to Louis McClean,” January 1, 1834. Despatches from United States Consuls in Mexico City, 1822-1906 (Microfilm, 15 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

The river’s depth got a lot of attention during the Mexican-American War, when American military troops invaded areas along its banks. The map of Henry Austin dating to the 1820s, traced and reprinted in the memoirs of Lt. Bowman in 1846, 3rd Infantry is an excellent example. Austin’s original noted the depth of each turn of the river – noting “snags” and “foul bends” along the way. “Chart of the Río Bravo del Norte. Traced from a Survey Made by Henry Austin, July 25, 1846,” in A Shared Experience: The History, Architecture, and Historic Designations of the Lower Río Grande Heritage Corridor (Austin: Los Caminos del Río Heritage Project and the Texas Historical Commission, 1994), 243.
According to the French scientist, Jean Louis Berlandier, who traveled extensively in the region and throughout Mexico beginning in 1826 and eventually chose to settle in the city of Matamoros in 1829, the Gulf entry to the Rio Bravo was only about 55 yards wide.\(^{40}\) In other words, the most direct water route to inland settlements could only be reached by passing through an opening 165 feet across, roughly the width of a modern-day football field. If able to make it through the tight opening and sand bar, a ship that entered this way had to further zigzag along the river’s natural course for more than 80 miles – a route that compared with a mere 25 miles by land that was the actual direct distance between the coast and the “port.”\(^{41}\) Berlandier offers a glimpse of the river’s attributes,

Its waters, flowing through low-lying lands without any slope, have traced an extremely winding course where the force of the current is lost, as can be noted in all rivers when they reach the coasts[.]. Few rivers in Mexico can be so variable in their courses and so dangerous to dwellings as the Río Bravo del Norte, which is constant neither in its direction nor in its rises.\(^{42}\)

\(^{40}\) Jean Louis Berlandier, *Journey to Mexico During the Years 1826 to 1834, Volume V* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association with the Center for Studies in Texas History, University of Texas at Austin, 1980), 205.

\(^{41}\) Port is somewhat of a misnomer, as it was located so far inland. However, all official and unofficial correspondence would refer to it as the Puerto de Matamoros.

\(^{42}\) Berlandier, *Journey to Mexico*, V: 442.
Thus, very early in the nineteenth century Brazos de Santiago became the main point of entry, as it had the advantage of being more forgiving to larger vessels, in addition to providing access to a more direct overland route into inland settlements. Perhaps most important was that the Brazos entry provided good cover for those hoping to evade customs duties to unload merchandise unseen by officials.\(^{43}\)

The confusion over the three entry points resulted in many misfortunes for maritime merchants unfamiliar with these routes and their pleas for assistance are well documented in both the American and Mexican source materials. *Naufragos* (shipwrecks) were common at all entry points, although the shallower waters of the Boca del Río made it the most dangerous of the three. The earliest documented case of a shipwreck occurred in 1824 when the brig Inteligencia, whose master was a New Orleans merchant named Benjamin Godfrey, fell victim to the sand bar at the Brazos de Santiago. Godfrey met with customs officials in Refugio to have his damages assessed, and a report was transmitted to the town of Padilla.\(^{44}\) Interestingly, the port had yet to open officially to foreign commerce at that time, but already it was recognized that access to inland settlements through the Río Bravo was not practical, leading most ships to offload their merchandise at the Brazos de Santiago entry.

*The Independence Wars*

As noted, the mercantilist policies of New Spain’s government created the first schisms between the colonial state and the communities along the Río Bravo, especially Refugio. Eager to connect to foreign markets and suppliers, the local settlers’ desires for freer trade were intensified even further when the wars for independence placed them at the end of a very long chain of settlements whose needs could not be met. This politicized the population, and it is worth noting that Nuevo Santander was the first of all the Mexican provinces to openly declare itself in support of Mexican independence after the Grito de Dolores.\(^{45}\) In fact, in 1811 the people of Nuevo Santander wrote a manifesto expressing their discontent with the existing government.\(^{46}\) Their chief complaint was the need to appoint new government officials, and there was no specific mention of trade, likely due to their fear of retribution for their outspokenness.

With the onset of the independence wars, local northern officials recognized an opportunity, and they once again took up calls for the loosening of trade restrictions. Aware of the impact that fighting would have on the North, Miguel Ramos Arizpe, a priest and politician from Coahuila, urged royal administrators to open the port at Refugio. He wrote in 1811,


\(^{44}\) The brig’s name was named by Mexican officials as Inteligencia, but likely called Intelligence, as most English names were Hispanicized. Archivo del Ayuntamiento de Matamoros (hereafter MAA), Volume 9, 101-102.

\(^{45}\) Kearney and Knopp, *Boom and Bust*, 23.

\(^{46}\) Eliseo Paredes Manzano, *Homenaje a los fundadores de la heróica, leal e invicta Matamoros en el sesquicentenario de su nuevo nombre* (Matamoros: Impresos Alfa, 1976), 92. The original un-signed decree is dated 14 May 1811.
The Port of Brazos de Santiago or the Rio Grande del Norte opening has inherent in its location the most attractive advantages. Luckily the cargos can be introduced via water, well into the provinces, avoiding considerable freight costs, and the cargo, that has an actual cost of 40 strong pesos from Veracruz to Saltillo from this port would only cost 10.

The interior provinces increasingly looked to imports as the lifeline of their economic networks.

Royal officials made every effort to curry support from residents, but largely in vain. While the cabildos in the villas del norte all publicly sided with the Spanish crown, many locals were not so loyal. One such figure was José Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara, a prominent landowner, blacksmith, and native of Revilla. He was responsible for organizing opposition forces in the North and served as a liaison between insurgent forces in New Spain and the United States government. His writings provide a glimpse of the ways he believed independence would benefit the colony’s economy. While his efforts were quickly repelled by the arrival of royalist forces in 1811, they were temporarily bolstered in 1813 when he became the first Mexican governor of the short-lived independent Texas.

Speaking to the motivations behind Texas’ independence from Mexico he affirmed, “The trade of New Spain will no longer be confined to one or two powers, but the whole universe will enjoy some of its untold wealth. Veracruz will stop being the only port through which the provinces will be supplied by foreign trade.”

Looking forward to the benefits of free trade liberalization, Gutiérrez went on to say,

The industrious patriots will acclaim with ecstasy and delight the slow movement of the ship that gently glides over the waters. All the bays and ports of the Gulf

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47 “El Puerto del Brazo de Santiago o desembocadura del río Grande del Norte tiene por si y su localidad las ventajas mas apetecible[.] De esta suerte que pueden introducirse por agua los cargamentos, ahorrando mucho costo de fletes hasta muy adentro de las provincias, y la carga, que solo por conducción de Varacruz al Saltillo cuesta hoy 40 pesos Fuertes, costará desde este puerto solo diez.” “Memoria presentada a las cortes por Don Miguel Ramos Arizpe sobre las provincias internas de oriente, 7 de noviembre de 1811” in Enrique Florescano and Isabel Gil Sánchez, Descripciones económicas regionales de Nueva España. Provincias del norte, 1790-1814, (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1976), 152-200.


49 “El comercio de la Nueva España no estará por mas tiempo limitado a una o dos Potencias, sino que todo el Universo gozará de parte de sus riquezas desconocidas. Veracruz dejará de ser el único puerto por el cual las Provincias serán abastecidas por el comercio extranjero.” Briscoe Center for American History (hereafter CAH), University of Texas at Austin, “Clippings – Independence of Texas.” 2Q235, p. 4, Julio 4 de 1813.
of Mexico and California will soon be open to trade with all trading nations. The riches of Potosí will be divided among those that deserve to enjoy them.  

It is clear that his supporters viewed the opening of trade in the Gulf of Mexico as the answer to the economic stagnation that settlements in the periphery experienced as a result of the wartime political disturbances.

Refugio’s Ballí family were the town’s earliest supporters of the independence movement. In the years leading up to independence, they supported trade reforms, led by Captain Juan José Ballí, who served as mayor of the town beginning in 1802 and was the first in a long line of Ballí men involved in the city’s politics. Captain Ballí’s younger brother followed him as mayor in 1804, and yet another relative held the post in 1805, 1806, and 1807. The Ballí who had the greatest impact on local history is Padre José Nicolás Ballí, for whom present-day South Padre Island is named. As head of the parish in Refugio he was responsible for building a small mission for the Karankawa Indians (infamous for their illicit trade of unbranded cattle) on South Padre Island as well as for constructing the Templo de Nuestra Señora del Refugio, which later became a cathedral, in the city’s center.  

In response to the family’s support of the independence movement, the government officials in Nuevo León sought ways to check the Ballí influence before the rebellion could spread, and Captain Ballí was jailed for contraband abuses in 1804. A few years later in 1812, Spanish officials hoped to send a message by demoting Padre Ballí in rank.  

Settlers in Camargo, unlike those in Refugio, however, were known for their pro-Spanish sympathies, and by 1809 officials in San Carlos began to try to reshape Refugio politics by naming José de Jesús Solís, a member of one of the original founding families of Camargo, mayor. The significance of this change in command is immense, and even though the inhabitants of the area surrounding Refugio supported Padre Hidalgo’s independence efforts, the Solís-led town government succeeded in squelching any public

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50 His comments are reminiscent to those of pro-Independence leaders in other Spanish colonial cities, including Buenos Aires, Caracas, and the Caribbean that chafed under the metropole’s restrictive trade regulations. “Los patriotas industriosos aclamarán con éxtasis y regocijo el lento movimiento del buque que suavemente se desliza sobre las aguas[,] Todas las Bahías y puertos del Golfo de México y California pronto quedarán abiertos al comercio de todas las Potencias comerciales. Las riquezas del Potosí serán divididas entre aquéllos que merezcan disfrutar de sus riquezas.” CAH, “Clippings – Independence of Texas.” 2Q235, p. 4. Julio 4 de 1813.

51 Interestingly, Padre Ballí was a secular priest, and not of Franciscan, Dominican or Jesuit orders. After Viceroy Guemes y Horcasitas ordered the complete secularization of San Antonio de Valero in 1793, and in the following year the same for all Texas missions in existence for ten years or more, priests were no longer limited to the mission form of service. Many of the missions closed permanently. Padre Ballí was from this new generation of priests – answering the call to complete more productive work. The church received the blessing of the Bishop of Monterrey in 1800. Padre Ballí established the city’s first school and was responsible for the city’s first census in 1820. McAllen et al, I Would Rather Sleep in Texas, 50.

52 Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 23.

53 Canseco Botello, Historia de Matamoros, 20-21; Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 23.
displays of sympathy toward the rebellion. Historians have argued that it is owing to Solís’ administration that the fighting never spread to the villas del norte.\textsuperscript{54}

The economic impact of the independence wars was felt throughout New Spain, of course. Mining and textile industries languished when employees left to fight in battle or when the Spanish owners fled or were killed. Crops went unplanted and unharvested due to similar disruptions; over the years, abandonment of farms and ranches took a toll on outbuildings, irrigation systems, tools and equipment. Commerce, a significant part of which had been run by peninsular Spaniards, came to a near-standstill. The mineshafts flooded, making the revival of the silver economy exceedingly difficult. With the country in disarray, looting was commonplace. As elsewhere in Mexico, then, Refugio felt the impact of the revolution through its impact on the local economy.

The ranching economy was severely challenged when Spanish officials responded with policies that hit the northern economies even harder. In an effort to support the royal military’s labors, residents were required to provide money and supplies. The Crown imposed duties, known as arbitrios de milicias, which where levied on manufactured goods, food, and commercial transactions. All revenues were used to maintain the costly campaigns of the military. As a result of the increased difficulty in maintaining control of the colony’s distant territories, officials in Mexico City began efforts to improve their communication with their tierras de afuera by increasing the level of written correspondence they maintained with royal officials stationed there.\textsuperscript{55} The communications not only served to monitor political movements throughout the colony, but also to curb the depletion of resources and money.

The communications came from wide and near, arriving from as far away as Mexico City or from as close as the neighboring villa del norte settlements. A new

\textsuperscript{54} Nevertheless, the independence struggle complicated matters for frontier residents. As the fighting worsened in other parts of the colony, the Crown was unable to maintain a military presence in the region. Residents had depended on the military to protect them from Indian attacks, which increased as indigenous groups utilized the openings created by the unrest. For example, in 1812 a group of Carrizo Indians overtook the villa de Camargo. Discontent with municipal authorities had been brewing, and it is known that at least one of the indigenous insurgents had ties to Guanajuato, confirming the reach of independence sympathies. However, the indigenous insurrections were short lived. Less than two months later, a joint force of royalist soldiers, provincial militia units, and allied Indians defeated the insurgents and forced them to flee into the interior of Nuevo Santander. Brutal repression of all indigenous groups followed, and the indigenous insurgents were defeated in Refugio, which had acted as the center for their operations. Some Indians, who had become integrated into colonial society as laborers, fled their ranches. Although military and local officials had been successful in quelling the rebellion, their efforts to protect ranches from raiding activities were less effective. Valerio-Jiménez, “Neglected Citizens,” 268; MAA, Volume 15, 6 November 1813; Graf, “The Economic History,” 20.

\textsuperscript{55} During the colonial period, royal officials would send local towns periodic instructions asking them to submit census information, taxes, and to abide by laws such as liquor sales. Residents were ordered to celebrate the birthdays of monarchs. But after 1810, they began to carry “a new sense of urgency” as royal administrators began to stress the importance of maintaining allegiance to the crown. One order of particular importance was the new requirement that all travelers carry passports. MAA, Volume 15, p. 167, 14 July 1814; In a communication from the governor of Nuevo Santander, he praised the king and denounced the 1812 Cadiz Constitution, ordering each town to erect a monument in its principal plaza to celebrate the monarchy’s rule, MAA, Volume 16, p.5, 24 September 1814; MAA Volume 15, p.177, 20 July 1814; MAA, Volume 15, p.176, 21 July 1814.
attention to the presence of foreigners is demonstrated through communications with the northern settlements regarding the requirement of cartas de seguridad (passports).\textsuperscript{56} The original purpose of their increased efforts to keep track of foreigners was the fear of foreign invasion or infiltration. Correspondences speak of visitors “that pass through the Spanish provinces exhibiting signs of ill-will towards the Spanish government.”\textsuperscript{57}

Although this was before the advent of photography, the cartas provided enough detail so that officials in the interior provinces could verify the foreigners’ identity based on their descriptions. Listed were the traveller’s name, place of origin, marital status, hair and eye color, weight, and age, as well as verification that they had registered with the proper authorities upon entry into the country.

In addition to a new system of documentation, locals were asked to provide provisions to military officials throughout Nuevo Santander. The requests ranged from horses and mules to canoes and food.\textsuperscript{58} When it was suspected that settlers were withholding accurate details, local officials were required to submit lists totaling the number of cattle and horses owned by ranch owners, in an effort to aid officials’ calculation of the proportional amount of the contributions owed to the Crown.\textsuperscript{59} Based on their knowledge of the vast ranching estates in the area, officials issued orders for the enumeration of landholdings, so that property taxes to support the war effort could be levied properly.\textsuperscript{60} Evidence of officials’ preoccupation with revenues can be seen in many of the policies from this time. State and national officials kept track of the price of goods such as tobacco, in an effort to establish the proper sales taxes.\textsuperscript{61} Military officials sought the service of men who were experienced laborers in order to handle the livestock that had been provided.\textsuperscript{62} Finally, the communications were used to advertise delinquent

\textsuperscript{56} In correspondence from 1814, attention is given to the “villas del márgen” and the need for passports for foreigners. MAA, Volume 15, p. 195, 8 June 1814; Officials appear to have been enforcing the law, and communicated with Refugio when soliciting passports for foreigners. MAA, Volume 15, pp.111-112, 3 May 1814; MAA, Volume 15, p. 195, 8 June 1814; MAA, Volume 16, p. 69, 11 September 1816; MAA, Volume 16, p. 91, 26 August 1820; MAA, Volume 9, p. 66, 4 February 1824; MAA, Volume 9, p.65, 9 February 1824.

\textsuperscript{57} MAA, Volume 15, p. 195, 8 June 1814.

\textsuperscript{58} Requests for canoes, Archivo Municipal de Matamoros (hereafter Casamata), Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 15, 27 March 1819; Casamata, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 18, 10 August 1820.

\textsuperscript{59} A response to requests for the number of mules and horses in Refugio yielded lists such as the following from officials in Refugio from December 1814: “Mulas de cargo” – 275, “Mulas de silla” – 56, “Caballos” – 540. MAA, Volume 16 p. 47, 7 December 1814; Casamata, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 13, undated; Casamata, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 15, 26 marzo 1819; Casamata, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 18, 21 November 1820.

\textsuperscript{60} Asking for the status of landholdings, MAA, Volume 15, p. 128, 12 June 1814; MAA, Volume 2, p. 132, 15 August 1814.

\textsuperscript{61} MAA, Volume 15, p. 121, 3 May 1814; MAA, Volume 16, p. 70, 14 August, 1816.

\textsuperscript{62} MAA, Volume 15, p. 38, 12 February 1813; MAA, Volume 15, p.133, 30 April 1814; MAA, Volume 15, p. 151, 30 April 1814; MAA, Volume 16, p. 53, 4 October 1814; MAA, Volume 16, p. 23, 12 October 1814; MAA Volume 2, p. 136, 7 December 1814; MAA, Volume 16, p. 100, 7 October 1816.
towns and personas ociosas (non-compliant persons). In other words, military officials sought participation by any and all means possible.

These demands hit Refugio especially hard, despite its established role within the region’s ranching economy and trade networks. The raising of livestock had been the principal productive economic activity in the region up to then, and when operations became paralyzed as a result of the military demands, ranchers felt its impact. The change is most visible through livestock ownership patterns. As noted, by 1757, the villas del norte region was reported to have 24,105 ganado mayor, which included cattle, horses and mules. By 1794 those numbers had grown substantially, with a total livestock count of nearly 800,000. Yet, when officials conducted a census of Refugio’s cattle numbers in 1814, it became clear that the settlement’s ranchers were suffering. Numbers of mulas de carga (cargo mules) and mulas de silla (saddle mules), the region’s most valuable livestock, were depressingly small. The ranch of San Juan de Carricitos, for example, reported a mere 25 horses and no mules, despite being one of the Northeast’s most expansive landholdings. Overall numbers for the region were also small, with a total count of just 275 cargo mules, 96 riding mules, and 94 horses. The military would not have conducted the census had they not suspected that residents were attempting to evade taxes. It is likely that the contraband networks became strengthened as the ranchers looked for cheaper ways to buy and sell their goods.

The forced donation of cattle by Refugio’s ranchers cut away from profits but did not result in as many complaints as the requirement that residents turn over their most treasured and scarce foodstuff, which was corn. Since the early days of the settlement, corn needed to be imported from interior markets because local production was meager, due to lack of irrigation systems and small annual rainfall amounts, and it did not meet subsistence needs. The forced donation of this commodity angered local residents, and their anger was exacerbated by the manner in which the military imposed its orders. In one documented case from Refugio, a military leader complained that residents were resisting the requests to donate corn, and in response he ordered the alcalde (mayor) to

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63 Particular attention was given to “personas ociosas,” or those who did not comply with donation requests: MAA, Volume 16, pp. 53-56, 13 October 1814; MAA, Volume 16, p. 46, 29 October 1814; MAA, Volume 16, p. 47, 7 December 1814. Lists of towns who were not in compliance with contributions were sent to all towns: MAA, Volume 16, p. 84, 23 November 1816.

64 For more detailed livestock statistics, see Chapter 1, Table 1.1.

65 Price lists for livestock in the villa de Refugio are nonexistent for this period, but figures for another villas del norte settlement upriver, San Agustín de Laredo, point to the comparative value of mules. Figures for the year 1805 list their values (all in pesos): Mares - 3, mules with harness - 35, mules (not broken) - 15, 2 year-old bulls - 6, calves - 9, horses (broken) - 10, donkeys - 18, sheep - 4, cows - 7, heifers - 6, colts - 4, and stallions - 10. Laredo Archives, St. Mary’s University, San Antonio, Texas; John A. Adams, Jr., Conflict and Commerce on the Rio Grande: Laredo, 1775-1955 (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 2008), 36 (Table 2.1).

66 MAA, Volume 16, pp. 47-51, 29 Dec. 1814. Interestingly, the report notes a total of 128 livestock owners for the settlement, which when compared to census numbers in 1820 (which list 2,320 inhabitants) which suggests that either people were able to escape notation in these reports. Casamata, Presidencia Epoca Colonial 1803-1822, Carpeta Estadistica, 1820.

67 MAA, Volume 16, p. 47. 29 Dec. 1814.
force resident women to cook the donated corn into vastimientos (corn biscuits), and if they were not prepared to their standards, officials had the authority to see that they were duly punished.\textsuperscript{68} Other settlers housed military officials or loaned them firearms and tools. But as the independence wars dragged on, and complaints of abuse by military officials increased, Refugio’s residents could simply not afford to comply with the military’s demands.\textsuperscript{69}

In addition to these forced donations, royal officials imposed new taxes in an effort to increase revenues for the royal treasury. Nuevo Santander residents had historically taken issue with the imposition of taxes, and once again when a new ten percent tax on houses was assessed in 1814, local residents found ways to avoid paying it. The president of the Northern villas del margen, Estanislas Domínguez, complained in his assessment that many tried to circumvent the tax by declaring that they did not own property in Nuevo Santander and were merely visiting the area.\textsuperscript{70} As local officials recognized the strain caused by these requests on their residents, at least one tried to defend their interests. Francisco López, an official in Aguayo, twisted the rules and argued that the villas’ populations should be exempt from paying the ten-percent tax since the houses there were actually jacales (shacks) and of little value because they were not sturdy.\textsuperscript{71}

Once again, local officials argued for relief from the high cost of transporting goods to Refugio. One administrator emphasized that in order for locals to supply the requests for arms, the government would have to address the need for more “open commerce.”\textsuperscript{72} Among those supporting the call for trade reforms was Don Melchior Nuñez de Esquinal, who in 1814 petitioned the royal administrators to open the ports of Refugio and Soto la Marina. He argued that by opening these ports, trade relations with Havana would help to minimize the economic decline of the region, and in Cuba, where he predicted the majority of goods would be sold, ranching products could be traded for much greater profits.\textsuperscript{73} It is important to note that his claim did not ask for commerce to

\textsuperscript{68} MAA, Volume 16, p. 31, 13 June 1814; MAA, Volume 16, p. 33, 18 August 1814; Casamata, Presidencia Epoca Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 13, 27 March 1819. See also Valerio-Jiménez, “Neglected Citizens,” 273.

\textsuperscript{69} Non-compliance became so commonplace that one can infer that local officials had no other choice but to ignore threats, MAA, Volume 16, p. 30, 20 March 1814; MAA, Volume 15, pp. 127-129, 12 June 1814.

\textsuperscript{70} MAA, Volume 15, pp. 127-128, 12 June 1814. The villas del márgen was interchangeably used by colonial officials to encompass the villas del norte as well as other settlements in Nuevo Santander such as San Carlos, San Nicolás, and Burgos. Adams, Conflict and Commerce, 37.

\textsuperscript{71} MAA, Volume 16, p. 1, 3 September 1814. Residents in other outlying Spanish territories also turned to exterior markets to fill their needs. In Spanish Texas, for example, rancheros’ cattle networks with American Louisiana became even stronger. In California, Franciscan missionaries collaborated with smugglers who paid in cash or in merchandise for their cowhides and sea otter skins. Government officials justified their lack of enforcement of import restrictions, which amounted to the tacit endorsement of the smuggling activities, by using arguments such as that given by the California Governor José Dario Argüello’s in a public announcement in 1813, “Necessity makes licit what is not licit by law.” Weber, The Mexican Frontier, 125.

\textsuperscript{72} MAA, Volume 15, pp. 122-125, 9 February 1814.

\textsuperscript{73} El Libro de Tamaulipas (México, 1820), 252-253.
be opened completely, but rather for the new ports to be allowed to trade freely with the other Spanish colonies. Joaquin Arredondo y Meoño, governor of the interior provinces of the east, also pushed for the opening of the ports on the Gulf Coast. He maintained that by giving official sanction to trade through the ports of Brazos de Santiago (and the landing at Punta de Isabel), Boca del Río, or at Soto la Marina the misery of the towns would be alleviated.\textsuperscript{74}

Perhaps anticipating that change was imminent, even more foreigners began to stake claims to lands that were close to the coastal entry points. In 1817, the pirate Jean Lafitte decided to make the Punta de Isabel landing near the entry to the Río Bravo one of his regular ports of call. The shallow waters of the Laguna Madre there allowed him to hide from ships on the Gulf behind the sand dunes of Padre Island. His shallow-draft ships also sought refuge from military vessels that patrolled the Gulf. In establishing his presence in the area, he reportedly dug a 15-foot fresh-water well (which can still be seen) and buried his treasure on the shores of the laguna. He and his men raided merchant ships and transported the stolen goods to Cuba and other ports.\textsuperscript{75} In addition to Lafitte, others also staked claim to lands bordering the coast, which strategically positioned them to access the maritime exchanges.

As the independence wars continued, locals had no other means of exporting their products except by sea, and despite promises to the contrary by local officials, the sale of meat, hides, wool, salt, cheese, and ebony wood was severely restricted.\textsuperscript{76} Officials and residents alike complained that the solution to the town’s problems was the legitimization of maritime commerce and that due to the economic effects of the independence movements, officials had no other choice but to unofficially condone the opening of coastal ports for commercial activity.

\textit{Post-Independence Calls for Reform in Refugio}

Although documentation for the period 1816-24 is very thin, no doubt owing to the disruptions of the era, two things seem clear. First, Refugio and the other northern settlements may have remained relatively untouched by the fighting, but, as we have seen, the impact of the independence wars on their economies was great, and in the aftermath of the wars their economic situation did not improve immediately. Overland trade routes remained disrupted, and as a result imports became scarce, since in light of the depletion of their herds during the wars, locals had less to trade for them. Second, locals were united in their view that true free trade—and especially the ability to trade legally with New Orleans—was the solution to the problems brought on by the disruptions of the wars for independence. Although their pleas were slow to be answered, the dynamics of trade networks were adapting to address needs locally.

\textsuperscript{74} Graf, “The Economic History,” 23. 
\textsuperscript{76} MAA, Volume 16, 30 August 1814; MAA, Volume 2, 15 August 1814.
The orientation of the region’s trade networks was shifting once again. Prior to the start of the wars, as we have seen, illegal silver flows through Refugio to pay for increasing contraband imports had grown, reversing the earlier flows in which interior trading hubs, and especially trade fairs, sent imported goods north to the new settlements. After the fighting began, however, the relationship of Refugio to this network shifted again, as silver production in mines from Zacatecas was shut down, and the supply of goods going to trade fairs became severely disrupted. This widened the opening for New Orleans merchants to more fully supply the region. Even if they could not be paid in their preferred method, specie, they would trade their imported manufactures for domestically produced goods, and it is clear that their imports met a real need in the North. After receiving the smuggled items, local entrepreneurs transported them up into the interior using the same networks that had previously serviced them. In other words, the region’s trade networks adapted to suit the needs of the population as political circumstances disrupted previous patterns.

Top-down relief from the trade restrictions actually began before independence. In November of 1820, before the wars had concluded, King Ferdinand VII recognized the concerns of locals and issued orders to open five Gulf Coast ports—Refugio (accessed through the entry point at Boca del Río Bravo), Tlacotalpan (Veracruz), Matagorda, Soto la Marina, and Pueblo Viejo de Tampico (See Map 2.2). However, the order did not arrive in Refugio until February 24, 1821, and two years later the port was still closed to foreign trade because the provisional junta that governed Mexico after its declaration of independence became extremely cautious about executing an about-face in trade regulations. On December 15, 1821 the junta enacted laws that would impose the country’s first tariffs and established prohibitions for the import of certain goods. They rationalized the prohibition of certain items as an effort to encourage domestic manufacture and production of those goods. The earliest lists of prohibited items included tobacco, raw cotton goods, and various foodstuffs. Later, grains, including wheat and corn, rice, sugar, coffee, as well as ready made clothes, shoes, bricks, tiles, carriages, and similar items were added to the list. These policies were particularly naïve for a country that had been depleted of its supplies during wartime, but the prohibitions would last during the entire nineteenth century. These prohibitions, even more than the tariffs, encouraged smuggling.

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77 M. Lerdo de Tejada, *Comercio exterior de Mexico desde la conquista hasta hoy* (Mexico, 1853).
78 de Ayala, *Resumen de la estadística del Imperio Mexicano*, 79.
79 Pablo Macedo, *La evolución mercantil, Comunicaciones y obras públicas, La Hacienda pública: tres monografías que dan idea de una parte de la evolución económica de México* (México: J. Ballescá, 1905), 51.
Northerners and others familiar with the cause for loosening trade restrictions once again took up the call for more liberal trade policies. For example, Simón Tadeo Ortiz de Ayala, in a review of imperial statistics commissioned in 1822, urged officials to open the port at Refugio in order to improve the internal movement of goods. He was a friend of Gutiérrez de Lara, the outspoken landowner and supporter of trade liberalization, and is most known for his participation in military activities that sought Texas’s independence from Spain in the years 1811-13. Like his friend, Ortiz de Ayala regarded trade policies directed towards internal markets as unproductive, as they distracted “hundreds of men” from engaging in “productive enterprise” because of the labor and time involved in transporting goods all the way from the interior. His proposal called for opening the Gulf ports to direct trade with Europe and the United States, which would have allowed imports to enter at their nearest point of consumption and exports to exit much closer to their source of production. He argued that the economy would rebound, as new competition would stimulate foreign commerce vying for access to Mexico’s markets.


81 de Ayala, Resumen, 79-80.
The report speaks to the vibrancy of the interior trade networks. He addresses the relationship between the silver mines, interior markets, and those that supplied them. In his words, “The interior market of the empire would not be so active without the large consumption of the mineral regions.” He argued that this movement of goods could only be improved by the “opening of a direct trade with Europe, via the northern coast,” including the Río Bravo […] destined to be a barrier of the [Spanish] Empire with the United States, as well as an emporium of a great commerce. They did not only want to build large cities, but also expand them and settle those regions that would make the [Mexican] State richer in all regards.

Efficiency was extremely important for Ortiz de Ayala as he argued for these reforms. Therefore, not only would this development help to encourage the increased production of goods, as the muleteers could focus their efforts on agricultural or industrial pursuits instead of on transporting goods overland, but also, he argued, the wealth and self-sufficiency of the nation as a whole would increase.

Ortiz de Ayala’s report also addresses the issue of contraband. He noted that if gulf ports were opened, the northern province’s inhabitants would turn away from contraband trade in horses with the United States and focus on producing provisions that could be traded legally. He saw hides (cueros), fodder (cebos), grains (granos), small amounts of wine produced in Texas (un poco de vino) and silver bars (barras de plata) as the most likely candidates, as there was great demand for these products in the Antilles. Supporters of free trade recognized the mutual benefits of open commerce. In fact, necessity had already resulted in the conduct of this type of commerce, albeit illegally.

Official Recognition of the Port of Refugio

The process by which Refugio was officially opened is as confusing to contemporary historians as it likely was to those who lived through it. First, the delayed orders of King Ferdinand VII, issued in 1820, were ignored, even after independence had been achieved. Then, a decree by Emperor Agustin de Iturbide on January 28, 1823 to officially name the Congregación del Refugio a puerto de altura, was not received until after his removal and exile. Afterwards, when the city finally received Iturbide’s orders in January of 1824, its official opening was delayed by further political disruptions. The ex-Emperor, in an attempt to regain power, landed on the Gulf Coast with his troops, but

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82 Ibid., 79.
83 Ibid., 80-81.
84 Ibid., 79-80. While he is not specific as to the exact origins of these items, it is likely that the wine would have originated in Texas. To this day there are still a small number of wineries located in the hill country between San Antonio and Austin. There are undertones of Adam Smith’s “The Wealth of Nations” (1776) in de Ayala’s description of productivity. Some Bourbon reformers, eager for the extraction of revenue to support the flailing royal treasury, may not have recognized the eventual economic potential of opening free trade (which was a slower process). Enlightened officials who did support it, located far away from the periphery, may not have realized the concerns of local officials who did not have the governmental apparatus to collect taxes and regulate trade.
he was defeated and shot in Padilla. Officials in Refugio, worried that the presence of Spanish ships off the coast signaled a large-scale invasion, purchased 50 small muskets for seven pesos each and made preparations to defend themselves. The attack never occurred, but the port remained officially closed until affairs at the national level had stabilized. In Iturbide’s 1823 orders, the Port of Refugio (as accessed through the Boca del Río and Brazos de Santiago entry points) was designated as a subdivision of the customs district of the port of Soto la Marina. Soto la Marina was a coastal settlement halfway between Tampico and Refugio and the closest to the future state capital of Ciudad Victoria. However, within two years of the opening of both ports, Refugio became the receiving office for money collected at both locations. This was explained in 1825 when officials made a case to reverse the original arrangement by arguing that the harbor at Brazos Santiago was much more accessible than the relatively small port of Soto la Marina. The official account failed to acknowledge that Refugio was closer to New Orleans, which was their chief trading partner, and the geographic features of the entry points on the Gulf attracted many merchants who wished to slip by and avoid detection by Mexican officials. In other words, the success of Refugio continued to come from its ties to contraband activities and New Orleans markets.

Before the port had opened formally, officials struggled to find ways of balancing the presence of illegal vessels with the growing demand for the imported goods they supplied. Records from as far away as Aguayo, another Nuevo Santander settlement further south, describe these concerns. For example, in January of 1823 the customs official Juan Echeandia sent orders to the Ayuntamiento del Refugio concerning the schooner Isabela that had entered the river. Interestingly, Echeandia noted that “for considerations I have already presented to you” the boat should be allowed to “unload unprohibited cargo.” The motivations for his desire to allow the Isabela’s cargo to enter is not explained, but it is probable that the demand for the goods in question in his view outweighed the legal issues. In other words, without ancillary offices to enforce the nation’s policies, it was hard for officials to deal with the illicit market place’s intense pressure to disregard national policy.

85 “J.B. Gutiérrez de Lara to Ayuntamiento de Laredo,” 16 September 1824, Laredo Archives.

86 An 1825 correspondence provides further details of the decree, although with a different date, “The law of September 6, 1823 precisely states that our enabled ports, river openings and borders of our Federation have free trade with all friendly Foreign Nations.” “La ley de 6 de Septiembre de 1823 afirma muy circumstanceadamente el que en los Puertos habilitados, Riadas, y Fronteras de Nuestra Federacion sea libre el comercio con todas las naciones extrangeras nuestras amigas.” MAA, Volume 14, p. 39, 30 July 1825. I have been unable to locate the meaning of the term “riadas” although it seems likely, based on the definition given in the Real Academia Española dictionary of 1803 that it may be a term used to convey “river openings on the coast.”

87 José Ignacio Esteva, Memoria sobre el estado de la Hacienda Pública, leída en la Cámara de Diputados y en la de Senadores por el Ministro del Ramo. En cumplimiento del Artículo 120 de la Constitución federal de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos a 4 de enero de 1825 (México: Imp. del Supremo Gob. De los E.U.M., 1825), 16.

88 MAA, Volume 10, p. 34.
After officials received the orders to open the port in January of 1824, they immediately began to take measures to comply with the new trade policies. The city’s status was also addressed by the order, which upgraded it from a “departamento” to a “provincia.” Various officials were charged with the responsibility to impose duties and monitor the introduction of foreigners and their merchandise. Unfortunately, in naming Boca del Río the designated port of entry, officials had failed to take into account the fact that its sand bar was two feet shallower than the one at Brazos de Santiago, and furthermore that, as has been noted, the Boca del Río entry required vessels to wind their way up the river’s many bends. For these reasons, the Brazos de Santiago entry was favored over Boca del Río, the 25-mile overland route being a much better option for merchants. But the distance between Brazos de Santiago and the city’s center, where the officials were stationed, made it difficult for them to regulate the incoming trade, especially in the first year of the port’s opening. Naturally, smugglers seized on the opportunity that these geographic factors presented.

According to the existing records, the port remained closed to foreign commerce as much as six months later, in mid-July of 1824. This led to much confusion on the part of foreign merchants, who likely got word that trade policies were finally changing. U.S. merchant Thomas Smith, in a letter addressing the officers of the customs house, wrote to say that the reason Mexican officials had caught him with contraband cargo was that by the time he had realized that the port of Refugio was not legally open to foreign visitors it was already too late for him and his crew to turn back. In his words,

Gentlemen, Enclosed is an order for the tonnage money on schooner Sarah Ann, It not my intention to defraud you, but when found it doubtful w[h]ether [sic] you would admit of a Port Entry and considering the great expense the vessel was at, and a probability of her being seized I was compelled to take these steps for her safety and reputation.

He defended his actions by stressing that this was the first he had heard of such regulations because “in all ports in the United States and Great Britain port entries are allowed.” In a somewhat desperate move he then began to offer further excuses for having been caught with undeclared cargo,

When in New Orleans I was sick and could not attend to the vessel and the mate which I then had was discharged for drunk[e]ness [sic] and the first mate was shipped at the point of jailing and neither of us knew the amount of cargo on board.

The contents of his manifest reveal that his schooner was carrying 95 bales and 6 bundles of tobacco, and ten trunks plus eight boxes of “merchandise.” Smith alludes to the fact

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89 Manuel Humberto González Ramos, Historia del Puerto de Bagdad (Matamoros, 2006), 17.
90 The sand bar at Brazos de Santiago was 8 feet deep, and at Boca del Río only 6. Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 30.
91 MAA. Volume 7, pp. 84-85, 28 July 1824. The entire case spans MAA, Volume 7, pp. 72-128.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
that laws were changing rapidly, and this led to variations between local practice and nationally-mandated reforms. While his issues appear to be less about treatment and more about why he had broken the rules, many foreigners believed customs officials mistreated them when they really were not.  

The archives do not reveal the year in which the aduana (customs house) in Refugio was actually established. After Mexican authorities recognized that traders were not entering through the official port at Boca del Río, they issued orders in 1825 to open a customs office at the Brazos de Santiago. Joaquín Quijano was commissioned to build a fort at a strategic point near the Brazos de Santiago entry point, accompanied by an official aduana outpost. However, because mention of an aduana in Refugio first appears in 1813, it is hard to be sure at what point the office was actually established or if one was even constructed. Regardless, beginning in 1825, the city’s official aduana records increase exponentially and include numerous cases of contraband, duty receipts, and other customs documents.

A Growing Foreign Presence

During the colonial period merchants would arrive from abroad to trade with locals and quickly return to the United States or elsewhere to avoid getting caught. With Mexican independence, however, followed by the opening of the legal port at Refugio, came a rapid influx of American and European-American merchants hoping to establish longstanding commercial ties with the new republic. Many set up shops, constructed homes, and stayed docked at the port for long periods of time. The city’s founders, mostly Spaniards, and their descendants found themselves living alongside the newly arrived European-American merchants. At the same time that residents were looking for more cost effective ways to receive and sell their goods, New Orleans traders were

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95 At the beginning of January in 1823, officials in Aguayo sent orders for the naming of D. Antonio Vega and D. Rafael Lopez as administrador and contador of customs in Refugio. MAA, Volume 10, p. 73, 1 January 1823.
96 As will be discussed in the chapter that follows, the renaming ceremony for the city was combined with a ceremony celebrating the port’s official opening in 1826. There is debate over the exact date of this ceremony, with some listing January and others April (McAllen). McAllen et al., I Would Rather Sleep in Texas, 62. The offices changed hands many times during the period leading up to 1825, likely a result of unaccountability and incompetence. MAA, Volume 9, 16 October 1824.
98 MAA, Volume 8, p. 143, 13 March 1813.
99 It is important to note that Louisiana had been purchased by the United States in 1803, and with its acquisition came a rapid influx of American merchants to the city of New Orleans in search of new opportunities.
100 Canseco Botello states that the local families, such as the De la Garzas and Manzanos, built homes alongside foreigners like the Lombardis and Magniolis. Canseco, Historia de Matamoros, 71; Valerio-Jiménez, “Neglected Citizens,” 266.
looking for new ways to expand their markets. ¹⁰¹ For decades, as we have seen, foreign merchants had built and expanded contraband trade networks by dealing with northern Mexican muleteers and ranchers. These merchants were well aware of the landing spots that were out of the reach of town officials, which served them well even after the trade policies changed. At the other end of the new maritime trade network, contraband trade had the tacit approval of French, later Spanish, and finally American officials in New Orleans. Given all these factors, merchants saw great opportunity in Refugio, and its location at the mouth of a major river no doubt conjured up images of another New Orleans in the minds of some early entrepreneurs.

Foreigners found creative ways to become integrated into Mexican society. It was no secret that New Orleans’ support of Mexican independence was motivated by the desire to deepen its economic ties with Mexico. In 1815, two organized groups of merchants known as the New Orleans Association and the Committee on Texas Affairs in New Orleans became involved in financing parts of the Hidalgo revolution. Their agenda was to influence political changes in the region that would favor their interests in speculation and commercial exploitation. ¹⁰² Others found alternate means to develop social and political ties to the country. For example, Ramón Lafon, a French merchant from New Orleans, arrived in Refugio either shortly before or after independence intent on establishing commercial ties in the city. ¹⁰³ As part of his strategy, Lafon married a Mexican national named María de los Ángeles García in 1824. ¹⁰⁴ María was the daughter of José Rafael García Hinojosa, a merchant and rancher whose parents were among the 13 original founding families of Refugio. Interestingly, his other daughter, Felipa, also married a Frenchman, Emilio Manautou, in 1827. ¹⁰⁵ Such connections provided foreigners with access to figures with intimate knowledge of the legal system, who could come to their aid when and if they were brought before local tribunals. While it is unknown if Lafon’s wife had such connections, at a minimum her family’s stature as well as her fluency in both languages was of assistance during her husband’s run-ins with the law. As a result, few of these contraband merchants ever remained in prison.

Bribery was another means used by smugglers to avoid the confiscation of their contraband goods. Many officials in New Mexico, California, and Tamaulipas were accused of fraud and dismissed from their posts, and it was common for foreigners to make private deals to avoid imprisonment. ¹⁰⁶ In Refugio, T.B. Thorpe made the observation that one customs official, “took bribes from those who exported goods from the country; took bribes from those who imported goods into the country; took bribes for

¹⁰³ MAA, Volume 10, 18 June 1823.
¹⁰⁴ Saldaña, *Diccionario*, 325.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 218-219.
not exposing his victims.” While the bribery most likely went in both directions, it was more prevalent with smuggled imports than with illegal exports because the tariffs were higher on goods entering than on those leaving the country.

An examination of the detailed ship manifests gives us a clearer idea of the kind of goods that northern markets craved. On May 4, 1822 the master of the schooner, Little Sally presented his papers to the officers of the Customs House in New Orleans, having just completed a run to Refugio. The ship was the first to officially register its arrival from the Rio Bravo. Its master, John Quéré, owned the majority of the cargo, which included 30 pounds of cochineal in cakes, 20 raw hides, 1 parrot, 1 sheep, and 3 goats, a “gold epaulette,” and perhaps most important, “a quantity of specie [silver] in bags” which belonged not to the master, but to “sundry persons.”

As soon as two days later, a clearance was entered for the first documented ship bound for Refugio from New Orleans. The schooner Jealous, along with four New Orleans merchants (Armand Guilbert, A. Woll, Louis Couverti, and André Durand), were bound for Mexico. André Durand originally noted that his goods were bound for Veracruz, but then changed his destination to Rio Bravo. The cargo consisted mostly of dry goods, apparel, hardware, crockery and glassware, tobacco and provisions. The New Orleans records separate their cargo according to its first place of origin, either “foreign” for items produced outside the United States or “domestic” for those made within the country. Tobacco outweighs the domestically produced exports. In addition to tobacco it appears that the United States was able to supply Refugio’s need for iron, nails, rum, flour, hats, and rice. Although not an insignificant amount, items originating from the United States accounted for roughly one fourth of the schooner’s cargo at $842.36.

Purchased foreign goods far outnumbered the rest of the Jealous’ cargo. The cargo ranged from merchandise, toys, iron pots, and textiles, to costume jewelry and gunflints. Totaling $4,605.03, it is probable that it would fetch at least twice that amount once at market in Mexico. Given the quantities of these items, it is highly probable that after limited sale locally, they were intended for transport inland to be sold to buyers from all over the Mexican North and even central Mexico.

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111 Ship manifests for vessels returning from Refugio to New Orleans are noticeably scarce. Unlike other port cities, New Orleans’ trade records are not organized by their origins, making it extremely difficult for the researcher to extract this information from the excess of records.
As noted, New Orleans during this period experienced its own success as a trading entrepôt. Warehouses filled the city, as foreigners and merchantmen bought and sold goods to be exported to a number of places, including domestically to other Mississippi river settlements and internationally to Mexican and Caribbean ports. At the same time, New Orleans was receiving the vast majority of its goods from Europe, where they were produced and shipped to the port. As a result, New Orleans lay at the center of external trading networks. In other words, New Orleans occupied the same position that Refugio was in the process of acquiring. The two ports have more in common than some may realize, most notably, that in both cases their connections to illegal and clandestine trade led to their emergence as important legal entrepôts.

The Process and Cost of Getting Caught

The presence of foreigners in the country presented a new set of problems for Mexican officials. Americans in particular, unaccustomed to local cultural practices or the Mexican legal system, found themselves enmeshed in brawls with local officials over the assessment of fees and their treatment of ranked officials. For example, one Monday afternoon in 1822 an Anglo-American merchant, as the Mexican authorities described him, violently threatened the life of a Mexican military official in Refugio.112 The merchant, Thomas Michel, had arrived in Refugio by boat from New Orleans presumably to establish commercial ties with the city.113 It is important to note that his presence predated the official recognition of the port, so this case strongly suggests that he was involved in contraband trade.

Shortly after Michel’s arrival, he and his crew should have registered with local officials as required. As noted, this regulation had been enacted due to fears of foreign invasion immediately after the outbreak of the wars for independence. The intent was for all foreigners to remain in plain sight of officials, who were charged with issuing passports to keep track of them. Unaware of these regulations, Michel and his crew were questioned by the Comandante Don Jesús García, and asked if they had registered. According to the record of the legal file, a fight ensued, likely due to language problems since the records imply that Michel did not speak any Spanish. Later that day, Michel showed up at the commander’s home with two pistols and threatened to shoot him. Angered by Michel’s threats, the official ordered the “rascal’s” compliance in front of at least three witnesses. Michel retreated and was apprehended, but the case against him was dropped because officials could not find an interpreter to work the case. In turn, Michel was asked to return to his home country.114 The case is typical of relations at that time between Mexican officials and the recently arrived foreign merchants in the city. Mexican government officials were in an impossible position. While the foreigners’ presence in the city was allowed, their trading activities were not.

112 Casamata, Justicia, Caja 10, 28 May 1822.
113 Documents named the vessel, “Bergantín Goleta” so it is unclear whether it was a brig or a schooner. Ibid.
114 Ibid.
In fact, the position was so impossible that most Mexican officials seem to have given in, tacitly approving and even directly participating in the smuggling. For example, the head of the customs office for the city, Feliciano Quintero, was publicly exposed for partaking in contraband exchanges. After an investigation confirmed the presence of contraband on the goleta Sally Ann, officials discovered that Quintero had been an accomplice in the ship’s illegal activities. The charges against him are explained in a follow-up report written on December 5, 1826, in which another customs official informed Matamoros’ alcaldes, José María Villareal, that Quintero confessed to having aided smugglers while working in the aduana. It is the first open admission that a handful of local officials were participants in the clandestine trade that higher-level officials had been complaining about for some time.

Far from being just one isolated incident, the investigation into Quintero’s involvement unraveled a much more extensive pattern of illicit activity. After he was exposed, other disgruntled merchants came forward with additional information about his corrupt dealings, including the owner of the schooner Fair American, who informed the mayor that Quintero had caused an uproar in the offices of the aduana regarding the ship’s approved manifest. The ship’s owner strongly suggested that city officials take another look at all the cargo lists that Quintero and his employees had previously approved. Quintero was subsequently removed from office when he admitted guilt, telling officials that he had known about the Sally Ann’s crimes all along, but chose not to disclose the information. One of the more publicly discussed cases, the Quintero affair exposes the ways that high-level and low-level officials involved themselves in contraband activity. Although he was caught, it is clear, based on complaints from foreigners and other officials, that many others were not.

Quintero’s testimony sheds light on the manner in which contraband traders operated in the areas surrounding the city. He notes that traders would set anchor at the mouth of the Brazo entry point, where “you will easily recognize the ruinous hoaxes and tricks known to occur in the Brazos de Santiago.” He continues his discourse in somewhat dramatic prose,

Now that the lie is exposed, I have only to unravel the mystery; and what do you think it is? Ha! It is regrettable to say it, being such an unjustifiable thing, but [...] as soon as a merchant ship arrives at the head of the Brazo it unloads a launch for the captain to reach land in order to reach an agreement; once the deal is made he reboards the ship and navigates it toward the Brazo and unloads either at the entrance to Santa Isabel or some other point all of its best and most valuable cargo, so that when it enters the Brazo it now is left with the rest of its cargo that it declares to Customs.

He also describes the purchasers of the smuggled cargo:

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115 Villareal was mayor of Matamoros in 1826 and 1831. He was an insurgent who fought in Texas at the order of Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara (the first mayor of Matamoros). Saldaña, Diccionario, 528; MAA, Volume 13, pp. 66-67, 5 December 1826.

116 MAA, Volume 13, pp. 66-67, 5 December 1826.

117 MAA, Volume 11, pp. 141, 146.
Three or four days before the expected boat arrives the interested parties begin to run up to the Brazo de Santiago, and with what motive? I leave it to you to figure this out, having exposed for you to comprehend this, in order for you to see if there may be a political remedy for these offenses, given that I am at a loss to find any other possible remedy.\textsuperscript{118}

As this case illustrates, the authorities were well aware of the illicit trade, and Quintero admits to knowing that at least some of the Sally Ann’s cargo had been traded prior to its entry into the city, where it would have been declared.

The reach of contraband activity implicated more than just the merchants who sold the imports. If intended for interior markets, goods would need to travel by mule to those locations. Because officials were on the lookout for contraband activity, buyers had to wait for the right opportunity to transport the goods, often stockpiling them until the optimal time had arrived. One such buyer was the owner of the Rancho de San Juan de los Carricitos, Francisco de la Mejia. Located roughly 25 miles from Refugio’s city center, this was one of the ranches whose cattle had been donated to aid the military campaigns in 1814, and Mejia was a Mexican national with strong ties to the region through his participation in ranching operations. A group of four citizens turned him in to customs authorities when they learned of his illicit activity. The authorities discovered “a large quantity” of clandestinely imported shoes and tobacco on his property.\textsuperscript{119} His betayers claimed that they turned him in to “expose the frauds” of such “repulsive” activity.\textsuperscript{120} It is uncertain whether this was part of a larger operation, but it is highly unlikely that Mejia was planning on personally using all of those shoes.

\textsuperscript{118} “Acompaño á U.E. el oficio original que con fecha 26 de este me ha transcrito el Señor Comandante de este Resguardo, del segundo Don José Gabriel de Zalueta en que dice: que la Goleta mercante Sally-Ann de 20 toneladas, no había podido entrar al Brazo de Santiago por estar la marca baja, y que en esta virtud había dispuesto marchar mas afuera, á donde se hallaba anclada por no retardar las noticias correspondientes. Pasando U.E. la atención en el contenido de este parte, vendrá con facilidad á conocer los estratagemaspatrañas y embustes de que se valen en el Brazo de Santiago para cometer desordenes mas claro: la Boca del Brazo mantiene siempre de catorce á quince pies de agua de luente, que pueden entrar en el hasta fragatas; y cuando baja la marca viene quedando sobre diez á doce pies, que es muy suficiente para que entrarse, no digo una Goleta bien pegaría como la Sally-Ann, sino buques de mayor porte. Descubierta ya la mentira, me falta ahora que descubrir el misterio; ¿y que le parece á U.E. que es éste? ¡há! Es sensible el decirlo, por ser una cosa unjustificable en virtud de obliga que hay formada en esta villa no obstante en obrequio de la confianza, que se me tiene hecho me hallo en la dura presicion de descubrirlo privadamente á U.E. protestando que no soy capaz de meterme en una justificacion tan grande como esta por la razon y expuesta: es el caso que luego que llega al frente del Brazo un buque mercante se hecha el bote al agua, el capitan se vá á tierra á celebrar su composicion; celebrada esta se vuelve abordo y se mantiene el buque boltearse sobre el Brazo y hechando en tierra y a sea en el Frontón de Santa Isabel ó en cualquiera otro punto, todo lo mejor y mas lucido del cargamento cueste, que quando entrar en el referido Brazo, yá solo lleva a su bordo el resto del cargamento que se di mone presentar a la Aduana. Tres o cuatro dias antes de que llegue el buque que se aguarda se comienzan á marchar los interezados al Brazo de Santiago ¿y con que objeto? Lo dejo á la alta penetracion de U.E., habiendo puesto todo expuesto á su superior conocimiento con el fin de ver, si se remedia con politica estas males, pues estoy perdido, que de otro modo es imposible remediarlos.” MAA, Volume 2, pp. 149-151.

\textsuperscript{119} MAA, Volume 5, p. 49, 23 July 1824.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., p. 51.
The records document other types of legal problems experienced by foreigners. Benjamin Godfrey and William Moore, both merchants from New Orleans, were met by officials when they arrived on the Bergantín Inteligencia in 1823. Their boat was too large to navigate the shallow sand bar at Brazos de Santiago, and their shipwrecked vessel was spotted and the crew apprehended by local officials. Upon their entry into the city, the men requested that officials grant them permission to sell the merchandise, the majority of which was considered contraband. As noted earlier, the Mexican government issued lists of prohibited items, mainly to promote their production in Mexico, but unfortunately for foreign visitors, these lists changed constantly and communication of the changes was inconsistent and slow. The merchants asked to be granted an exception claiming that the 77.5 barrels of tobacco, 9 barrels of sugar, and 4 trunks of puros (cigars) that they were carrying from Havana were in fact intended for markets at another port, and Refugio was not their final destination. Their case was sent to state officials in the interior city of Aguayo, where they were charged the alcabala (sales tax) and their goods sold.\footnote{121} The reason for the granting of the exception is not explained in the records, which suggests that some degree of corruption may have been involved.

Tobacco was by far the most profitable contraband import because of the large difference between its value at its origin and its re-sale value in Mexico. The government’s monopoly on tobacco (from harvesting to finished product) and the availability of better quality imported tobacco from the United States and Havana promoted an increase in the smuggling of this product.\footnote{122} The scope of the smugglers’ immense profits from importing tobacco into Mexico can be grasped by comparing the cost to purchase the product in New Orleans, $1.00 and $1.50 per cwt, with the price they were able to charge in Mexico, $50 and $75.00 per cwt.\footnote{123} Smugglers were paid in silver specie, hides, wool, and other animal by-products, and they attempted to conserve as much of their profits as possible by avoiding paying export taxes on silver on their return to New Orleans. The other exports were not taxed. A travel account from 1827 sheds light on the silver trade,

There being no mint at San Luis, the greatest part of these bars are transmitted to Zacatecas, and coined in the mint there; but many are sent direct to Refugio, at the

\footnote{121}“Instancia presentada por Don Benjamin Godfrey y Don William Moore solicitando permiso para vender efectos procedentes de Orleans (1823)” Casamata, Caja 2, Epoca Independiente 1822-1831, Expediente 8.

\footnote{122}Casamata contraband tobacco cases: “Criminal contra el extranjero Arturo Fernandez por una puñelada que infirió a Ramón Lafón” Casamata, Justicia 1822-1831, Expediente 6-A, 1824; “ Expediente promovido contra Don Juan Longoria de la Garza sobre contrabando de 16 tercios o quintales de tabaco,” Casamata, Justicia 1822-1831, Expediente 19, 1825; “ Expediente promovido contra Ramón Lafón sobre contrabando de 5 quintales de tabaco,” Casamata, Justicia 1806-1831, Expediente 18, 1825; MAA, Volume 10, p. 78, 16 January 1823; MAA, Volume 10, p. 34, 19 January 1823; MAA, Volume 10, p. 91, 22 May 1823; MAA, Volume 9, p. 91, 27 January 1824; MAA, Volume 9, p. 105, 16 December 1824; MAA Volume 17, pp. 51-54; MAA Volume 17, p. 79; MAA, Volume 17, p. 84, MAA, Volume 17, pp. 95-109; MAA, Volume 16, pp. 158-199.

\footnote{123}Tobacco prices are from The American Flag, (August 29, 1846), Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection (hereafter Benson), University of Texas at Austin.
mouth of the river Bravo, where they are exchanged for contraband goods from New Orleans and Havana.\textsuperscript{124}

Refugio’s place within the internal trade networks had shifted a third time—rather than lying at the end of overland roads that supplied the northern provinces with imports, it was now one of the primary ports of entry, supplying inland mining settlements such as Zacatecas and all the cities in between.

Apart from their attempts to remain undetected by Mexican officials, the smugglers employed other strategies to hide and transport their contraband items. The schooner Oscár was caught by aduana officials at the Brazos de Santiago with contraband tobacco hidden underneath legal shipments of wine and steel pots.\textsuperscript{125} Historians have noted other examples of creative activity, much like the tactics employed by modern-day drug traffickers attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border, including concealing hidden cargos in the hulls or other secret compartments of their ships.\textsuperscript{126} As Quintero’s testimony revealed, some would unload goods onto smaller ships that could navigate the shallow and winding waters of the Río Grande without being detected. Still others found alternative landing sites, from where they could transport the goods overland to Refugio.\textsuperscript{127}

The case of the schooner Sally Ann provides a detailed account of how one merchant attempted to avoid notice. When caught by officials in the Brazos landing in 1826, Quintero pretended to be investigating the ship’s illegal activities. He exposed the fraudes (deceptions) of the Sally Ann,

The 20-ton Goleta Sally Ann could not have entered the Brazo de Santiago because of a low tide, and because of this it had decided to move farther out and set anchor, which is where we approached it so as not to delay the corresponding notices.\textsuperscript{128}

The documents confirm that authorities who inspected the boat found two barrels of ginebra (gin) and one barrel of cane brandy (aguardiente de caña) on board the ship, liquors that were prohibited because they had not been declared to customs and were not listed on the ship’s manifest.\textsuperscript{129} The Sally Ann’s troubles intensified when the ship’s crew was implicated in the illicit conduct. The author of another document from the

\textsuperscript{124} It is likely that Ward’s use of the term contraband in this case refers to prohibited goods such as tobacco. H.G. Ward, \textit{Mexico: His Majesty’s Charge d’affaires in that Country During the Years 1825, 1826, and in Part of 1827} (London: H. Colburn, 1829), 252.

\textsuperscript{125} MAA, Volume 21, pp. 21, 23, 28 April 1830.

\textsuperscript{126} Weber, \textit{The Mexican Frontier}, 151

\textsuperscript{127} While not closely studied, there appears to have been a vibrant contraband trade through the port at Corpus Christi, 120 miles north of Refugio. In an attempt to regulate illicit activity the Mexican Congress briefly decreed in 1828 that all vessels transporting goods into the country’s ports must be nationally owned. As the chapter that follows will show, it does not appear to have had any effect on the port’s trade activity. Valerio-Jiménez, “Neglected Citizens,” 283.

\textsuperscript{128} MAA, Volume 2, pgs. 149-151.

\textsuperscript{129} Concealing items by omission was a common practice of which authorities complained. MAA, Volume 5, p. 137, 23 September 1826.
Aduana Maritima addresses a letter to government officials, informing them that they had been deceived by the ship’s crew and noting that there was no doubt about the crew’s culpability.  

Whenever customs agents discovered contraband or false registers, they imposed hefty fines. The case of Richard Pearse from 1825 provides an example of what was at stake for smugglers caught by local officials unwilling to accept bribes. Pearse arrived in Refugio from Massachusetts via New Orleans in 1821, at which time he opened a boardinghouse that catered to the growing foreign population. He did not remain permanently in the city to manage the boardinghouse, as it is clear that he made periodic trips back to New Orleans to purchase goods to sell locally. In August of 1825 Pearse was caught by Mexican officials with 2,000 pesos and a large “quantity of merchandise from New Orleans.” Supporting documents suggest that the amount of pesos actually was closer to 4,000, and although his schooner, Ocho de Enero (8th of January) was confiscated and signed over to overwriters, its contents were quite valuable. The ship contained:

- 1 bale of French tunics ($328.50)
- 112 bales of unknown clothes ($946.45)
- 1 case of velvet fabric ($502.10)
- 20 cases of indigo ($1500)
- 20 boxes of Silesian linen (8 pieces/box)
- 24 cases of English coffee ($110.50)
- 8 cases of French coffee ($128)
- Bleached shirtings ($4387)
- Brown shirtings ($2544)
- English calicos ($90)
- French calicos ($96)
- 21 dozen silk stockings ($462)
- Silk ribbons ($1600)

According to the ship’s manifest, the total value of the merchandise was $12,774.55. After the goods had been confiscated, city officials inventoried and sold the goods at

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130 “En el de estar persuadido de que no es hombre de bien, aquel que abua [sic] de la confianza que se le hice.” MAA, Volume 11, p. 139.

131 “Cometieron los desordenes mas escandolosos, pues no me queda la menor duda, de que la mayor parte de su cargamento segun me he informado, se ha pasado p. alto [?] como lo acreditan los ajustes que con esta misma dirijo al Sr. Comisario General.” Ibid.


133 “ Expediente promovido por la aduana maritima con Don Ricardo Pearse en cobro de pesos.” Casamata, Justicia, Expediente 20, 1826.

134 This was not Pearse’s first run-in with authorities, he had been caught with contraband tobacco in July of the previous year. MAA, Volume 5, pp. 8-51, 20 July 1824.

135 “Expediente promovido por la aduana maritima con Don Ricardo Pearse en cobro de pesos.” Casamata, Justicia, Expediente 20, 1826. Other documents pertaining to Pearse are found in: MAA, Volume 14, pp. 63-101.
auction for slightly over $4650 pesos. The auction was held within the city, and it can be presumed that local residents came to purchase the goods for resale. The testimony of Pearse reveals that he was enaged by his almost $13,000 loss, although it does not appear to have deterred him from continuing with his shipping business and other commercial ventures in the city. He will emerge in a later chapter as a key player in an unsuccessful attempt to have the United States’ first consul, Daniel Smith, removed from office in the 1830s.

The majority of Pearse’s goods would likely have been transported for sale to inland settlements. Much of the shipment was extremely high-end and produced in Europe. French products, including coffee, were more valuable than their English competition, likely because of their quality and perceived value. It is hard to believe that the city of Matamoros would have had a demand for $1600 worth of ribbons, which leads one to believe that much of it would likely have been transported for sale to markets in Saltillo. The silk ribbons would have been purchased by pilgrims at the trade fairs there, transported back to Mexico City, Zacatecas, or San Luis Potosi where they were used decoratively, for fashion, or perhaps in adornment of churches. Residents’ taste for high-end foreign imports had been established during the colonial period, and resourceful merchants like Pearse were more than willing to satisfy this demand.

The costs of getting caught were substantial, and compliant Mexican officials were thorough in their notation of contraband goods. Their detailed records can be used to provide a glimpse of the costs incurred by traders even when their merchandise was imported through legal channels. The charges related to Pearse’s cases are listed as follows: duties paid at custom house $2558.56, freight for bill of lading $602.86, laborers and storage of the goods $89, castage and mulage from the Brazos de Santiago to Refugio $124.25, ferrage across the Brazos, Boca Chica, and Rio Grande $34, 1 barrel of beef for the men employed on the beach $10, and a deduction allowed to an auction attendee, F. Perez, when he complained that the trunk of ribbons he was sold had less than what was advertised and was refunded $212.24. Two additional items, gratuity to customs officers and seamen of $279.75 and a “10% commission” of $1650 raise red flags regarding officials’ handling of the money.137 The amount that officials spent on the processing of this case supposedly exceeded the amount that the auction yielded, and the local governments felt the strain of these costs. But the smugglers also risked large sums of money. In fact, it is now apparent why, less than ten years later, Pearse would go into a tirade demanding the American consul’s removal as protector of American interests. The confiscation of his goods resulted in steep financial losses for him.

The smugglers often slipped by the customs officials undetected, but when they were caught, officials were vocal in exposing the illicit behavior. Pearse was not the only person upset with the treatment he received from Mexican officials. In fact, the infamous contrabandista Ramón Lafón voiced his anger very publicly about his run-ins with the law. In October of 1824, Lafón became infuriated when he was required to pay “a certain

136 Because of the large discrepancy between declared values and those obtained at auction, it is probable that local officials may have illegally profited from the seizure of foreign goods.

137 “Expediente promovido por la aduana maritima con Don Ricardo Pearse en cobro de pesos.” Casamata, Justicia, Expediente 20, 1826.
quantity” (776 pesos and 6 reales and 9 granos) that he owed to Francisco Flores, a Mexican customs official. In turn, he openly insulted the customs officer, who noted in his testimony that Lafón continued with his abusive behavior while denying the allegations. Flores took particular offense to this “lack of respect.” In an investigation of the case, Mexican officials took the testimony of American residents Daniel Willard Smith (the American consul resident in the port) and Benjamin Godfrey (a business associate), who claimed that Lafón had informed them that despite his irrational behavior, he had every intention of paying the 700 pesos quota but had been unable to find Flores. They claimed that after the incident he had promptly gone to the office to turn in the money but only found a female assistant, Doña Caela. Smith and Godfrey said that after claiming to have placed the money “on top of the table” in front of her, Flores did not sign the register book confirming the payment, and then Lafón openly insulted her.

While the case is among many concerning the mistreatment of city officials by foreigners and vice-versa, the management of customs duties was difficult even when they involved officials who were not corrupt. Lafón’s case was closed after he repaid the fees, and he was eventually cleared of all charges.

Despite the benefits that many received from the contraband activities, local and state officials would continue to address problems with smuggling as they hoped to reduce its prevalence. The top-down perception was that foreigners were the sole benefactors of these exchanges, although as we have seen, this was clearly not the case. People at all levels were involved, from the merchants to the muleteers, and all stood to gain handsomely from these activities. The mayor of Refugio complained to the state governor in 1823 as part of a meeting called to address the growing contraband problems that, “the maritime customs administrator of this port, presents […] the scandalous fraud and illegal procedures that foreigners commit with impunity because of the lack of efficient help [by Mexican officials] to avoid it.” Indeed his frustrations were in many cases misplaced.

The complaints continued, as an official in Refugio wrote to state officials in 1825, stressing that they had been “humble and obedient” of the laws to open the port to foreign commerce, but that certain issues remained that needed to be addressed. He stated that the assessment of alcabalas was commonly misunderstood by foreigners, who are unable

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138 “Sumaria formada contra el extranjero Ramón Lafón por haber insultado de palabra y en asiento de servicio, al administrador de esta aduana, nación maritima y en la propia oficina publica.” Casamata, Justicia 1822-1831, Expediente 12, 1824.

139 Ibid.

140 His was not the only case involving “respect,” two European merchants, Eugenio Terón and Vicente Bitin were tried for having lacked respect for Don Juan Longa in 1824. “Demanda penal en contra de los europeos Eugenio Teron y Vicente Bitin por haberles faltado el respeto a D. Juan Longa,” Casamata, Justicia 1822-1831, Expediente 9-A, 1824.

141 Ironically, later that same year, Lafón was stabbed by another foreigner named Arturo Fernández, because he was upset his handling of the contraband cargo on board the ship 8 de enero. “Criminal contra el extranjero Arturo Fernandez por una puñelada que infirió a Ramón Lafón,” Casamata, Justicia 1822-1831, Expediente 6-A, 1824.

142 “Los escandolos atentados y fraudes impuniente cometen los extranjeros por no tener los auxilios deficientes para evitarlos.” MAA, Volume 10, p. 95, 13 June 1823.
“to see our sort of liberty” which had freed them from a 15-year “menacing war that brought us out of slavery and oppression under the Spanish government.”

He asked,  

“Should we allow ourselves to be defrauded through the disorganized trade that our own friends [foreigners] introduce? It is necessary that we get their attention and make them see with prudent reflection that we are governing ourselves with the highest prudence and benevolence and that our generosity is without comparison and they should follow the law.”

Despite their efforts to combat these activities, officials struggled to devise ways to discourage smuggling. One official, Feliciano Quijano argued passionately in a written correspondence to state officials in 1825 that the Mexican government needed to provide “armed smaller boats” entrusted with transporting all imported merchandise to the customs house. The reason for this suggestion was that he felt that there was lots of room for corruption and deception during the time it took for merchants to transport their goods overland from their landing at Brazos Island. The increased involvement of local officials in more stringently regulating the activity would solve the problems, he asserted, as the port would “generate profit because of the obedience and the subordination of captain and sailors’ to the authorities […] without any excuse such as greed.”

What officials failed to recognize is that Refugio’s inland location, and the lack of an organized official presence at the Gulf Coast’s openings, created a trade network that left plenty of room for deceit and corruption. As much as the mayor and customs officers attempted to counter this activity with official directives or decrees, it would persist as long as people could continue to avoid detection by customs officers.

_A Troubled Transition to Legal Maritime Trade_

By 1825 the city had the institutions in place and the capacity, at least publicly, to collect customs taxes. The enforcement efforts do not appear, however, to have been very successful. As the foregoing discussion suggests, this was due to corruption, blatant disregard for trade laws by both foreigners and nationals, and a failure by officials to recognize that the geographic location of the city inhibited their ability to effectively regulate the activities of merchants who would unload merchandise many miles away. Their frustrations remain as part of the historical record.

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143 “Y solo la única que tienen sobre sí es satisfacer los derechos que por la ley están impuestos en la Renta de Alcabalas; con Dios que sirben de muralla para el sosten de nuestra libertad, únicos derechos en que daremos fincar las esperanzas para construirnos libres al cabo de quince años de una guerra devoladora, a que nos condujo la exclavitud y opresión en que nos tenía el gobierno Español.” MAA, Volume 14, p. 40, 30 July 1825.

144 “Y será possible, ilustre corporación, que estos unicos derechos que han de garantir y renunciar con beneficios tanta sangre que tenemos regada en nuestros campos; hayamos de permitir que se nos defraude por medio del desordenado comercio que introducen nuestros propios amigos? Es necesario llamar la atencion y hacerles ver con reflexiones prudentes, ue nos estamos gobernando con la mas alta prudencia y magnamidad, que nuestra generosidad es sin comparado y que ellos deben en fuerza de la ley cumplir inevitablemente con la percepcion de ella.” MAA, Volume 14, p. 40, 30 July 1825.

145 Ibid., p. 41.
Debates over policy did not accomplish much because the central government lacked the means to enforce its own legislation. The entire nation suffered from a woefully small number of customs houses, many of which were staffed by inexperienced, ill-trained, and underpaid customs officials who would often accept bribes as a necessary supplement to their meager incomes. The navy and military were unable to protect the coast from smugglers because the country had only five vessels to guard 10,000 miles of coastline in 1826. The most logical solution would have been to increase the number of customs houses, but such measures would cost money. Although 80 to 90 percent of the nation’s income came from import and export duties in the first half of the nineteenth century, collections were insufficient to cover the rising expenditures. The government’s inability to adequately manage the collection of customs duties was part of a much broader problem, namely that they lacked the resources necessary to govern. Officials were therefore caught in a bind—since they were unable to make customs collections more efficient, the only way they could increase revenues was to increase tariff prices. Yet, as the case of Refugio demonstrates, the higher tariffs served to encourage an increase in smuggling because the merchants sought to avoid paying them.

As the new country began the slow process of rebuilding itself at the national level, the city of Refugio had no choice but to tolerate continued contraband and evasion of taxes. The territories on its periphery depended on the importation of goods to survive, and foreign merchants were more than willing to meet this need. Thus, the success of New Orleans traders was due to their ability to offer the inhabitants of Refugio, and perhaps those in other northern New Spain settlements, their tax-free foreign manufactures directly and at much lower prices (assuming they did not get caught—and even if they did, bribes might provide a way to rescue much of their cargo). For consumers, purchasing goods from contraband traders not only saved them time, but also large sums of money. And the sellers, specifically foreign merchants who accompanied their cargos to the interior personally as we will see in Chapter 3, were eager to receive their silver specie. Anxious to have access to new markets, independent traders gained access to previously untapped networks. As a result, Refugio became a kind of funnel through which merchandise from New Orleans entered before it fanned out into all of Mexico’s interior markets.

As we have seen, Refugio’s position within the region’s trade networks underwent three important shifts leading up to the formal legalization of the port. First, Escandón’s establishment of the first trade routes that connected the geographically isolated villas del norte to interior trade fairs placed Refugio at the end of an expansive overland network. Working within the confines of Spanish mercantilist policies, Refugio’s residents began to produce surplus ranching goods that could be transported back to the interior in exchange for much-needed imports, including corn and textiles.

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147 Weber, The Mexican Frontier, 149.

The second shift in Refugio’s trade relations occurred when New Orleans merchants, empowered by their own local officials who sought to expand overseas trade, began searching for new markets. This resulted in the dramatic reorientation of trade relations in the town, as goods were now being brought directly from overseas to the northern settlements. These new imports were then transported along the same roads into the interior, thereby reversing the flow of imports between Refugio and Saltillo. The third shift came when Refugio/Matamoros was no longer simply the endpoint of overland trade routes, but rather assumed the role as a primary port of entry for supplies that were much in demand in the northern mining settlements as well as the cities in between. Importantly, these shifts all occurred under the radar of disapproving Spanish officials.

Most significant here is the fact that the presence of contraband activity within the port in the period leading up to its legal opening changed the axis of the longstanding trade networks. No longer located at the end of overland trade routes, Refugio was now claiming its place at the center, a change few saw coming. Escandón and others had acknowledged the importance of internal coastal trading in the North, but certainly not to the degree that Refugio experienced when New Orleans merchants entered the picture. Interior markets welcomed the diversity of goods that foreign merchants could provide, as did New Orleans’ merchants who sought the hefty profits inherent in exchanging goods for Mexican silver. This reorientation of trade networks explains the almost immediate influx of maritime activity beginning in 1825, when legal trade records were first produced. In the end, the unique situation that these early trading relationships fostered would change the course of the region’s economic ties for decades to come. The impetus for the development of these relationships was simple: as northerners broke free from the constraints of Spanish mercantilism, American markets quickly embraced them.
Chapter 3

A Land of Merchantmen and Murder Crosses: Legal Trading Networks in Matamoros

There being no mint at San Luis [Potosí], the greatest part of [silver] bars are transmitted to Zacatecas, and coined in the mint there; but many are sent direct to Refugio [Matamoros], at the mouth of the river Bravo, where they are exchanged for contraband goods from New Orleans and the [port of] Havana, with which [Real de] Catorce is better supplied than any other place in the Federation. Almost every house in the town is a shop, and you may find in them French and Spanish wines, Virginia and Havana tobacco, Catalan paper in abundance, (all articles most strictly prohibited,) with European linens, cottons, and hard-ware, mantas, and even furniture from the United States, which are introduced through Refugio, where the duties are never very burdensome, even in cases where their payment is not entirely evaded. The goods are landed upon the coast by small American schooners, and afterwards conveyed into the Interior by a sort of mixed breed of French, Spaniards, and Italians, who are perfectly acquainted with the country and the wants of the different towns, and time their remittances accordingly.  

-H.G. Ward, 1829

Published in 1829, the words of British chargé d’affaires, H.G. Ward paint a colorful picture of trade relations centering in and around the port of Refugio, later renamed Matamoros, shortly after Mexican independence. This chapter challenges previous assumptions that post-independence Matamoros was an economically stagnant settlement by using trade and customs records to uncover and quantify the port’s vibrant economic activity in the period leading up to the Mexican-American War. As we have seen, the trade networks developed during the port’s contraband period were vibrant, as merchants transported imported goods to interior markets and fairs in the Mexican interior, returning with exports such as silver specie, hides, and cattle by-products. It will be argued that this ebb and flow of goods and people made the port of Matamoros the region’s most important entrepôt during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Regulating commerce in the port remained a problem even after its legalization. The national government’s lifting of maritime restrictions in 1824 was a direct acknowledgement of what had been in practice locally since the late eighteenth century. Regardless, the port’s official opening further cemented the city’s orientation facing east, out into its connections with the Gulf of Mexico and expanding circum-Caribbean markets. While national-level officials hoped that the legalization of free trade would solve the country’s issues with contraband trade, in practice this was far from the case. The domination of New Orleans merchants within the official registers was almost immediate, but this did not translate into an absence of contraband confiscations or

1 H.G. Ward, Mexico: His Majesty’s Charge d’affaires in that Country During the Years 1825, 1826, and in Part of 1827 (London: H.Colburn, 1829), 252-253.
scandal. Trade records indicate that merchants and locals alike continued to pursue ways to introduce and/or export goods illicitly, not because their presence was prohibited, but rather in an effort to avoid the taxes imposed by the economically strapped national government in Mexico City. As a result, customs officials charged with enforcing the law in the port were forced to maneuver local, state, and national trade regulations in an effort to document the extent of commerce coming into the port. They soon discovered that Matamoros was among the most profitable ports in the country in terms of export values (even considering uncollected duties from the contraband trade), placing it in direct competition with larger southern trade centers such as Tampico and Veracruz.

Despite its reputation as a haven for smugglers, it is clear that a local market economy developed, fueled and dominated by the growth in legal commerce. Although the margin of profit was high for the foreign goods, it is evident that Matamoros benefitted from this commerce through the creation of jobs, new city landmarks, and bureaucratic institutions. By the late 1840s, the city stood apart from the rest of the country not only because of its transnational trading connections and foreign residents, but also because of the growth that it experienced during what many have described as a period of economic declension throughout the republic. Trade between the two coastal port cities was profitable for both sides, and the sheer scale of the trade, combined with the city’s expansive demographic growth, both the subjects of this chapter, cemented the

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2 The literature has taken a rather simplistic view of the economy of Northern Mexico during these formative years. First, only a few scholars have focused on sub-regional economies in ways that would allow any subtlety of analysis, and none of these have involved Matamoros. The prevailing assumption has been that in an economic sense “the North” languished until it was awakened by the war with the United States. This is clearly not the case. Second, the scholarship on the economy of other parts of the North that has been produced in recent years focuses for the most part on a later period, leaving the formative late Colonial and early National years unanalyzed. Margaret Chowning argues that at least in Michoacán, the long-held notion that the period after independence was one of stagnancy was not the case for Michoacán. It had been assumed that the depression lasted well into the middle of the nineteenth century. National-level statistics cannot reflect the economic potential of contraband (unaccounted for in most official records). Margaret Chowning, “The Contours of the Post 1810 Depression in Mexico: A Reappraisal from a Regional Perspective,” *Latin American Research Review* 27, no. 2 (1992): 119-150. See also John Coatsworth, “Obstacles to Economic Growth in Nineteenth-Century Mexico,” *American Historical Review* 83 (1978): 8-100; Barbara Tenenbaum, *The Politics of Penury: Debts and Taxes in Mexico, 1821-1856* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986); Donald F. Stevens, *Origins of Instability in Early Republican Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); Stuart F. Voss, *On the Periphery of Nineteenth-Century Mexico: Sonora and Sinaloa, 1810-1877* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1982); Sergio Canedo Gamboa, *Merchants and Family Business in San Luis Potosí, México: The Signs of an Economic Upsurge, 1820-1846* (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2011). Other scholars interested in the Northeast (of which there are few) have argued that the region’s boom only comes after the conclusion of the Mexican-American War, although they recognize that its growth owes much to this early period because they built on the commercial networks in place before then. See Mario Cerutti, *Burguesía, capitales e industria en el norte de México: Monterrey y su ámbito regional, 1850-1910* (Monterrey: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 1989); Mario Cerutti, *Propietarios, empresarios y empresa en el norte de México* (México: Siglo Veintiuno, 2000). There is a growing literature that explores the relationship of the region to the formation of American capitalism. See John Tutino, *Making a New World: Founding Capitalism in the Bajío and Spanish North America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Andrés Reséndez, *Changing National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 93-123. For more on the importance of the U.S.-Mexican War to this region see Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).
city’s and region’s central place within not only national but also transnational trading networks.

The Making of a Trade-Oriented City

Perhaps most important to understanding the context in which Matamoros came into being in the early 1820s are the ways that the national policy of free trade liberalization was felt and experienced there. The Constitution of 1824, which established Mexico as a federation of Mexican states, made the Congregación de Refugio part of the newly defined state of Tamaulipas. The town was renamed and reclassified as a villa (town) by state government officials in Ciudad Victoria on January 30, 1826 in honor of Padre Mariano Matamoros, a priest who had fought and died in the name of Mexican Independence.³ Locals celebrated the change of name in April of 1826 as part of an official ceremony that publicly commemorated the opening of a port there, although as we saw in Chapter 2, it had been receiving foreign shipping well before that. The sanctioned dismissal of trade restrictions that had been in place since the founding of the colony represented an important shift in the official discourse regarding foreign trade.

The scale of growth that the port experienced after trade was legalized pushed its residents towards exterior markets. Though opportunities for exchange were significant internally, as seen through the growth of trade fairs, the majority of profits for merchants came from those whose business ties integrated overseas trade networks. While the silver that was often used as the primary mode of exchange had value within Mexico, it is clear that its worth was even more lucrative overseas, especially in growing American port cities such as New Orleans and New York. Most significant is that while the region as a whole had suffered much from its insularly oriented economy during the colonial period, geography placed it “tantalizingly close to the dynamic American markets.”⁴ American entrepreneurs and merchants, fueled by the economic potential from tapping virgin markets abroad, made any and all efforts to pursue economic opportunities in other parts of the world. Trade records suggest that Matamoros stood at the forefront of this growth during this period, setting it apart from other parts of the country in terms of economic growth. In other words, places like Matamoros “prospered in the midst of a generally stagnant Mexican economy largely because [they] gravitated toward the orbit of the

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³ Authorities disagree on the exact date on which the Congregación de Nuestra Señora del Refugio was officially renamed the Villa de Matamoros. According to one source, status and name were changed when the port was opened to foreign commerce on January 28, 1826. Alejandro Prieto, Historia, geografía y estadística del estado de Tamaulipas (México, 1873), 217; LeRoy P. Graf, “The Economic History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 1820-1875,” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1942), 29. It appears that some officials referred to the place as Matamoros prior to the January date, but the state government did not authorize the official name change until the 30th of January 1826. The official decree, issued by the Governor of the State of Tamaulipas states that the change was implemented to honor the memory of one of the nation’s independence martyrs. It reads: “El Congreso Constitucional del Estado Libre de las Tamaulipas, deseando fomentar la población y para perpetuar la memoria de uno de los martires de la patria.” Archivo Municipal de Matamoros (hearafter Casamata), Caja Presidencia, Epoca Independiente: 1824-1828, 30 January 1826.

⁴ Reséndez, Changing National Identities, 94.
expanding American economy.”⁵ The city literally stood at the borderlands of a vibrant network of overlapping internal and external trading systems.

The Role of Geography in the Movement of Goods to the City

Matamoros’ development owes much to the concurrent growth of its chief trading partner, New Orleans. By the 1820s New Orleans had established itself as a rapidly growing commercial center. New residents were flocking to the city from overseas and adjacent territories. Much like Matamoros, the port city was located along the banks of a navigable river (the Mississippi), which officials recognized as the link connecting the Midwestern United States to the world. Hundreds of ships cleared the port annually, and by 1840, the Port of New Orleans had secured its place as the fourth largest port in the world, with the volume of its commerce exceeded only by London, Liverpool and New York.⁶ The bustling port saw traffic from all parts of the world, and its inhabitants, city structures, and culture all reflected this diverse mix. Accounts paint a colorful picture of the port’s character,

There [on the levee] the true international flavor of New Orleans made itself felt: people of every language and every nation mingled on the levee, while from the ships was unloaded merchandise from every corner of the earth. To some dazzled visitors the levee was the main street of the world.⁷

While many chose to settle within the growing city, others used it as a hub from which they could depart in search of commercial opportunities.

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⁵ He notes, “The economies of Mexico and the United States were as different as night and day during the first half of the nineteenth century. Between 1800 and 1860, Mexico’s total income declined 10.5 percent, whereas that of the United States skyrocketed 1,270.4 percent […] in that half century, Mexico’s total population hovered around 6 million, while that of the United States grew dramatically from 5 to 32 million.” Ibid., 93.


The growth of Matamoros appears to have coincided with that of the Port of New Orleans. New Orleans, and the steamboat commerce that had flourished there since at least a decade before trade relations were opened in Matamoros, was at the center of the Mississippi Valley trade network. Goods that made their way to the port came chiefly from the surrounding areas, Europe and New York. Commerce there boomed, as annual ship tonnage departing the port of New Orleans grew from 142,179 tons in 1824 to 401,500 by 1837. The opening of a port in Matamoros allowed New Orleans merchants to legally expand their reach and their networks in significant ways—something they had clearly begun to do through illicit trade in the years prior to the change in Mexican policy that validated free trade.

The voyage from New Orleans to Matamoros, while relatively short in distance and time travelled, could prove particularly challenging to foreign visitors. The landing was tricky, even at times when weather conditions were at their best. Records suggest that one of the biggest risks for visitors was their unfamiliarity with the geography of the Mexican Gulf Coast, which led to many cases of shipwreck and resulted in damages for maritime merchants. The voyage from New Orleans became shorter over time, with the majority of ships able to make the trip in less than eight days, though one is reported to have made it in two days. Ships from New York took as long as 20 to 30 days to reach Matamoros, Philadelphia 30 to 33, Liverpool 54, and London (with a stop in New Orleans) 39 days. One would think that New York merchants would have abandoned the

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idea of maintaining regular trade relations with Matamoros because of the length of the voyage, but in fact they remained a steady presence well into the 1840s.\footnote{See Graf, “Economic History,” 35 - his data, from the Archivo Historico de Hacienda at the Archivo General de la Nación (Legajo 168, numero 3) do not match the numbers in the American consular records. Graf counts 30 vessels coming from New Orleans between 1829 and 1830, whereas the consular records show more than 80. The multiple entry routes into the port and the uneven enforcement of regulations may account for the differences. Still, the records cited by Graf in Mexico City document the travel time for the individual vessels, which is what is relevant here.}

Notarial records recount the troubles encountered by New Orleans merchants attempting to make passage to Matamoros. For example, the schooner “the 8\textsuperscript{th} of January” and its master John Queré departed the coastal city of La Balize near the mouth of the Mississippi River on April 23, 1825. Bound for the “Brazos de Santiago,” almost immediately after entering the waters of the Gulf the ship and its crew encountered bad weather and rough sea conditions. Although they reported that the ship “sprung a leak” that necessitated pumping water out of the vessel every ten minutes, the crew was able to make its way to the vicinity of Matamoros in less than a week.\footnote{New Orleans Notarial Archives. Notary: Boswell, Vol.1, 1825, Act 323-328.} It is ironic to note that many of the New Orleans ships that are found in the historical record are there because their captains chose to file insurance claims for losses in the United States after their cargos were confiscated for possessing contraband by Matamoros officials.

Beyond the menacing weather, Queré recalls his crew’s difficulty in accessing the port through its coastal openings. He recollects that his crew struggled an entire day to make anchor at the mouth of the bay. Interestingly, upon entering the area they “discovered the wreck of the schooner Advocate, and the Schooner Chase lying at anchor.”\footnote{Ibid.} Apparently they were not alone. The crew continued to attempt entry well into the night, but they eventually gave up and instead decided to try launching a small paddleboat to access the nearby dry land. They “commenced discharging the cargo,” which to their misfortune, proved to be difficult, so they enlisted the help of other merchants who were present there, and after several failed attempts by paddleboat all participants began “carrying [cargo] by hand to the shore.”\footnote{Ibid.} In the process many pieces became “saturated with water” and were “too heavy” so much of the cargo was lost in the waters altogether.\footnote{Ibid.} While the documents fail to state the contents of the salvaged or lost cargo, the crew went to great lengths to save what they could of it, a sign that it carried considerable value. Resilient merchants such as those on the 8\textsuperscript{th} of January demonstrate that deterrents like bad weather and accessibility did not impede maritime activity from thriving within the port.

If captains were lucky enough to avoid treacherous weather conditions, it is clear that there were other risks once they arrived in the city.\footnote{There are multiple notarial cases that describe issues encountered by sailors at sea headed for Matamoros within the New Orleans Notarial Archives (New Orleans, Louisiana). The most cases were found within the files of the notary named Boswell.} Laws were constantly changing,
and city officials struggled as much with their enforcement as with keeping up with the shifting regulations. As foreigners began interacting with customs officials for the first time, they often voiced their frustration with their treatment. The schooner, William A. Turner of New Orleans, which departed New Orleans on July 8, 1826, “bound directly to the port of Matamoras [sic] and arrived in the harbor of the Brazos de Santiago on the 17th of the same month,” provides an example of the sometimes unexpected ordeals experienced by American merchants travelling there.\textsuperscript{15} After arriving at the Mexican port the ship had “obtained the necessary permits and discharged cargo according to Law” but on July 23 the commandante de las armas reportedly sent a party of armed men on board to take possession of it.\textsuperscript{16} After three consecutive weeks of legal troubles in Mexico, the ship’s captain finally, “having bonded the vessel in the sum of twelve hundred dollars” was able to “instruct the mate to get all ready to receive cargo for New York.”\textsuperscript{17} Two days later they were cleared at the Customs House and “commenced taking in cargo of wool, hides, et cetera.”\textsuperscript{18} But the master encountered even further legal problems and, with the schooner loaded, was instructed to take it to Matamoros instead of proceeding to New York, during which time the vessel drifted into a lagoon until it crashed into the shore. As a result, his cargo of hides got wet and his crew deserted him. His legal troubles continued well into the following year although he does eventually arrive back in New Orleans by securing passage to Havana on a Mexican schooner.\textsuperscript{19} Obviously this was an extreme case, but the account demonstrates that in spite of the relatively short distance from New Orleans to Matamoros the journey was not always easy.\textsuperscript{20}

The cumbersome requirements for introducing goods through legal channels explains in part why merchants would continue to engage in contraband. Despite the country’s weak governmental infrastructure, Mexico had an over-abundance of bureaucracy. Upon anchorage at any Mexican port, the captain was required to deliver three copies of the ship’s manifest in Spanish, signed by the master, to the customs house. If this was not done, the ship was subject to confiscation, which was also the case if the customs officials discovered an “omission of a bale or other parcel” in the manifest. Fines could be hefty, usually the total value of the goods omitted, “and if the omission exceed[ed] six packages, the vessel [was] liable to seizure and condemnation.”\textsuperscript{21} In addition to the general manifest, another manifest had to be presented in triplicate at the

\textsuperscript{15} This is one of a few cases contained in the notary records. These notarized statements were used for multiple purposes within the legal system. New Orleans Notarial Archives, Notary: Boswell, vol. 50, Act. no 1282.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} There are many more documents that discuss “goletas naufragadas” (shipwrecked schooners). Some, like the one cited, read like depositions, complaining about treatment by Mexican officials, and others document the ship’s contents, likely for insurance purposes.
\textsuperscript{21} Smith also notes “Prohibited articles should be particularly avoided.” “Smith to McLean,” January 1, 1834. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
time of importation, signed by the exporter. Every vessel was required to report to the boarding officer in writing the number of passengers, their names, sex, places of birth, object of visit, occupation and place of embarkation before they could disembark. Fines for false testimony started at 100 pesos. Spaniards, still unwelcome after the bitter wars for independence and the Spanish attempt to re-conquer Mexico in 1829, were prohibited from entering the country, and all other foreigners were required to obtain cartas de seguridad (passports) from the Mexican government, renewable every year. Trading between coastal ports in imported goods was prohibited at times, in an effort to ensure that native Mexicans rather than foreigners dominated the internal transport of goods.

In the beginning, goods were unloaded using small boats and piled directly on the sand, and almost immediately after the goods were on shore they would be transferred to carts and transported to Matamoros. There was literally no port infrastructure there—docks, wharves, and such—and no place to store the goods. The reasons for this are debatable, but it was likely because merchants recognized that the goods were transient and would soon be transported further inland. The compressed sand on the beach provided a natural road for transport, and the carts were drawn by oxen. Goods were carted this way until they reached Boca Chica where they were unloaded and placed on chalanes (flat boats) in order to cross the water opening between Brazos Island and the banks of the Río Bravo. These chalanes were later used to cross from one side of the border to the other at Brownsville, Texas, and they continue to be used in modern times at Los Ebanos, Texas (Figure 3.2). Brazos Island remained the chief place where goods were unloaded and transferred by road to Matamoros until the start of the Mexican-American War. Due to the lack of settlements on the long stretch of Brazos Island, some merchants hoping to evade taxes attempted to unload their goods at various points along

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22 Wording is inconsistent within the documentation. Sometimes American officials would refer to exchanges in dollars, when it is clear that Mexican nationals were not trading in such a currency. For the purpose of clarity, I will refer to all exchanges in pesos, as the documents mostly do. Wikipedia, which I think is right on this, says that the US dollar was pegged to the peso. So when the Americans say “dollar” they mean “peso.” They are interchangeable in this period, in other words.


24 Also probable was the prevalence of flooding, which would eradicate any attempts at settlements in the area.


26 “La posición de este desembarcadero, no es mala para los buques, una vez ya dentro. Pero las mercancías, aunque en tierra, no están aun al abrigo de las aguas; pues que á cuatro millas de distancia del puerto, se necesita descargar las carretas para pasar el pequeño brazo de mar llamado Boca Chica. En este punto hay malos chalanes para el servicio del paso; y todas las veces que el mar está agitado, se interrumpen las comunicaciones con la isla donde está el puerto. En fin, después de un camino intransitable en tiempo de lluvias, ó cuando el río ha desbordado, se tienen que descargar de nuevo las carretas para pasar el río, en el rancho de la Burrita: de esta manera se esponen las mercancías á perderse en las aguas después de desembarcadas.” Jean Luis Berlandier, Rafael Covel, and Manuel Mier y Terán, Diario de viaje de la comisión de límites que puso el Gobierno de la República, bajo la dirección del Exmo. Sr. Gral. de División D. Manuel de Mier y Terán (México: Juan R. Navarro, 1850), 149-153.
the Gulf.\textsuperscript{27} Despite the incredible inconvenience and laborious processes involved in the conduct of legal and contraband commerce, Matamoros was regarded as the trading metropolis of the region. 

By 1829, a road was already in place that connected Matamoros to the port opening at Brazos de Santiago. Jean Louis Berlandier described two routes from Matamoros to the Brazos de Santiago—“13 leagues by way of La Burrita, or eleven by following the road on the left bank of the Río Bravo.”\textsuperscript{28} Once at Brazos de Santiago, the distance to Boca Chica was roughly five miles, and two roads connected the entries from the Gulf, “one behind the dunes, which is very sandy, and another along the beach, which is more frequented at low tide because of the firmness of the terrain.”\textsuperscript{29} Berlandier states that the population actually residing at Brazos de Santiago was made up of “some employees of the customshouse and the garrison, as well as a very small number of private citizens.”\textsuperscript{30} In fact, by 1830 several merchants in Matamoros, likely reacting to

\textsuperscript{27}“Refugio. Pedro José García al alcalde. Relativo a la queja de un extranjero por tener que pagar alcavala de los efectos que traía.” Archivo del Ayuntamiento de Matamoros (hereafter MAA), Volume 9, p. 130, 21 January 1824.

\textsuperscript{28}Jean Louis Berlandier, Journey to Mexico during the years 1826 to 1834 (Austin: Texas State Historical Association in cooperation with the Center for Studies in Texas History, University of Texas at Austin, 1980), 439.

\textsuperscript{29}Ibid., 441

\textsuperscript{30}Ibid.
their initial successes in the region, had begun planning to change the course of the river to flow more directly to the city. They hoped to concentrate the landing of ships at Brazos de Santiago and to have Matamoros serve as a “depot.” Political disputes resulted in the abandonment of the project by the Matamoros merchants, which as Berlandier notes, “would have had its advantages, as the bar at Brazos de Santiago is covered with a little more water than that of the river.”

The Nature of Imports

Trade deepened and diversified the nature of commerce within the city in tangible ways. Given the right political climate, foreign and domestic merchants involved in commerce were directly responsible for the exponential growth of the city, not just spatially as we have seen, but also economically, cementing its importance to the growth of the Mexican national economy generally. While Matamoros’ role in Mexico’s economic development is absent in the historiography, the trade records examined for this chapter, coupled with foreign accounts that quantify the city’s commercial activities,

31 Ibid.

Map 3.1: Map of Matamoros by Jean-Louis Berlandier in 1846. Map created for use during the Mexican-American War. Circled locations on the Gulf are the three openings used by merchants to import and export merchandise to Matamoros. Most frequent was the Brazos Island entrance. Notice the network of roads from throughout this area that converge in Matamoros. (Source: R.S. Ripley, *The War with Mexico* (New York: Harper & Bros, 1849))
point to a much richer picture of the role of the Mexican Northeast, and Matamoros specifically, in the growth of transnational trading systems during the first half of the nineteenth century.

Now that we have explored the means by which imported items would reach the city and the demand for those goods, our discussion will turn to the goods themselves, the contours of which were directly responsible for the economic upsurge that the port experienced after its legalization. As noted, goods that entered the port of Matamoros had one of two destinations: local shop owners who carried a wide variety of imported merchandise, and markets in the country’s interior. The Ward quote that began this chapter paints a vivid portrait of the city’s shops stocking anything from “French and Spanish wines” to “Virginia and Havana tobacco” and “furniture from the United States.”

Based on existing trade records, it is clear that his account only skims the surface in conveying not only the variety, but also the quantity, of foreign imports that entered the port beginning in the 1820s. This section provides a close examination of imports that were carried into the city from foreign ships. A later section will deal with the process by which goods were transported from city outposts to markets in the interior.

Overall Trends

Less than a year following the port’s official opening, the word had spread to merchants in New Orleans, New York, Hartford, and Baltimore that a new (and legal) market had opened up in northern Mexico (Table 3.1). There are conflicting data in the official Mexican and American records about the number of ships that participated in commerce in the port during the first few “legal” years. For example, the Mexican maritime records indicate that 25 ships entered the port in 1825, 21 of which were from New Orleans, two from New York, and one each from Hartford and Baltimore.

The American records do not acknowledge as many American vessels, but interestingly do account for an additional seven ships arriving from “Other Ports.” This inconsistency in counts is likely due to the continued prevalence of contraband trade, or perhaps ships that had conflicting foreign origins because their crews or captain were acting as agents for their owners. Despite Matamoros’ newfound legal status, the sheer number of ships entering the port adds further credibility to the fact that trade networks were already well established prior to the port’s inauguration.

32 Ward, His Majesty’s Charge d’affaires, 252-253.
33 Balanza general del comercio exterior de la republica Mexicana, 1825-1828 (México, 1828).
34 Consular return lists 12 American vessels for 1825. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
35 “Consular returns,” July 1, 1826. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
Table 3.1: Quantity and origin of vessels entering the Port of Matamoros, 1825-1846. The overwhelming majority of vessels came from New Orleans. This data does not account for illicit trade that was being conducted in the port during this period. (Source: Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1)

Within a couple of years, Matamoros’ economy expanded rapidly, with trade serving as the main catalyst for its growth. The American Consul notes in 1829, “The town is in a state of rapid improvement[,] the acknowledged advantage it possesses over Tampico or Vera Cruz in time will make it at no distant day a place important to the [U.S.] government,” underscoring to American administrators that, “the trade is exclusively confined to N[ew] Orleans.” Other accounts place the value of imports unloaded at Brazos de Santiago reaching $10 million “and sometimes $14,000,000 a year” – accentuating the unprecedented growth that the port experienced in its first years of existence.

Trade statistics show that almost immediately following the port’s opening the value of imports increased exponentially, suggesting the vibrancy of commerce there. Official Mexican records denote that the year 1825 saw a total value of imports at $225,623 pesos, while the following year numbers were reported at $494,861. In general, maritime merchants would purchase the goods at their ports of origin, mostly New Orleans, and resell them in Matamoros. Interestingly, ship manifests demonstrate

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36 “Smith to Van Buren,” July 1, 1829. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.


38 In what appears to be an anomaly, the value of imports plummeted to $195,017 in 1828. The explanation could be political clashes that occurred during that year, poor documentation or increased contraband trade. *Balanza general del comercio exterior.*
that most of the dry goods imported into Matamoros during this period originated in ports outside of the United States. Ward notes, “The exports of cotton goods and provisions to Mexico in 1835 were put at one million dollars worth, while an immense profit was said to be derived upon the re-shipment from New Orleans of European imports.” There was still a substantial profit to be made from the resale of purchased goods, as seen in the manifest for the schooner “8th of January,” which departed from New Orleans and listed its acquired foreign dry goods to be valued at $23,453.13 ¼ as compared to a mere $3,128.41 ¼ for the rest of its cargo.

As soon as trade was opened, officials developed a system to impose taxes on foreign imports into Mexico. Cargo was taxed at the rate of 17 reales per ton, of which 2 reales were ceded to the state government. It remains unclear what portion of this (if any) would be sent to the national government. How fees would have been remitted to the interior is equally vague. However, complaints from foreigners regarding the manner in which cargo was measured emerged immediately, as foreign merchants argued that “American vessels are sometimes reported to measure less and at other times much more than their [departing] tonnage.” Consulate officials reinforce this point:

The measurement of American vessels in this port [Matamoros] seems to be governed by no particular rule. Where there is an established rule uniformity is always expected; and, I have constantly endeavoured [sic] to check the abuse, but without success. The evil still exists, and continues to be a fruitful source of much dissatisfaction and complaint on the part of the masters of American vessels.

In order to obtain clearance papers, all merchants were required to furnish Mexican customs house officials with “stamp paper of $6.25, upon which [a] permit is written out.” There were additional fees assessed, including a harbor fee of eight pesos for entering the port, and three pesos per foot of any boat or vessel that it may be drawing. As we can see, legally partaking in trade relations with the port required liquid capital to be invested, a likely reason that many chose to circumvent licit channels altogether.

Recognizing the importance of imports to their newly independent nation, Mexican consular officials residing at the Port of New Orleans approved tax rebates in trade with Matamoros in February of 1824. Referred to as “duty drawbacks,” these incentives granted New Orleans merchants a return on tariffs or duties paid to Mexican officials when importing their goods. Generally, the drawbacks were granted if the

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42 Ibid.
43 Unclear whether Smith is referring to dollars or reales here because he goes back and forth.
44 All of above is adapted from “Smith to Louis McClean,” January 1, 1834. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
imported goods (usually raw materials such as cotton) were used within Mexico to manufacture new goods, and subsequently encourage Mexican self-sufficiency. The idea was to encourage merchants to import goods that would promote internal industrial growth. In fact, the Port of Matamoros was the closest port in the republic to the United States that was granted this trade advantage. This regulation preceded the establishment of the Banco de Avío, and is a perplexing law in light of the free trade orientation of liberals in the Federal Republic.

Throughout the 1820s, ships’ cargo consisted mostly of “merchandise,” goods such as nails, earthenware, and hardware that had been manufactured abroad and were ready for use upon arrival at their destination. Other frequently-imported items included medicines and cooking supplies like iron pots, which travelled by ship from New Orleans or New York, were unloaded at Brazos Island, and carted by mules to Matamoros by a cadre of native and foreign muleteers. As we will see in a later chapter on merchant society, the merchants who relied on lenient tax laws and covert exchanges became extremely wealthy during the first half of the nineteenth century.

While dependent on imports, Mexican trade policies were cognizant of the need to stimulate the country’s industries from within. The importation of raw items such as cotton and tobacco, was prohibited because the Mexican government wanted to encourage their domestic production. But regardless of whether ranchers were capable of producing adequate crop yields, the “small number” of textile factories in Mexico were located far from Matamoros, and were, as American consul Daniel Willard Smith put it, “conducted upon a small scale without the advantages of modern improvement,” and were thus “not of sufficient importance to affect foreign importations.” In other words, even with the importation of raw materials, the country lacked the infrastructure to process and manufacture items to suit the needs of the growing population. Regionally isolated locales such as Matamoros were hungry for these items, especially because any political disturbances largely cut them off from interior markets. As a result, textiles, or ready-to-sell manufactures produced overseas, constituted a significant proportion of imports in the 1820s.

45 Discussion of the need for an American official resident at the port to validate bonds was a topic within Customs House records in 1824. “J. Anderson to B. Chew,” 31 May 1824. New Orleans Customs House Records – Outward, New Orleans Public Library, VI, 1823-1824.

46 For more on Mexico’s early economy see Tenenbaum, The Politics of Penury; Stevens, Origins of Instability; Voss, On the Periphery of Nineteenth-Century Mexico.

47 A report from 1834 states that, “The inhabitants of Texas are beginning to supply them with cotton; and it is said, that the soil and climate of that Province is equally congenial to the growth of this crop with our own, and with proper attention to the cultivation of it capable of supplying abundantly all the manufactories in Mexico.” “D.W. Smith to Louis McLean,” January 1, 1834. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

While the trade records kept by local officials in Matamoros were much less specific as to the contents of individual ships over time, the recorded cargo of the shipments carried in 1822 by the schooner Jealous underscores the overwhelming demand for imported foreign goods otherwise unavailable to local residents. Despite the fact that the port at Refugio had yet to be legally opened, one representative manifest from May values the total “Domestic Produce or Merchandise” at $842.36, while the value of foreign goods was set at $4,605.03.49 This suggests that New Orleans merchants saw greater opportunity in reselling acquired goods, where profit margins were clearly much higher. Not nearly as expensive as shipments only a couple of years later, it is possible that this clandestine visit was a test run for future trading relationships. The New Orleans schooner was carrying four separate shippers’ loads, each attributed to a different person, likely of French origin. Cotton and linen goods appear to have been the most valuable cargo, and likely the most in demand. Hardware and nails were used for construction, which as we have seen was fueling the city’s expansion to suit the needs of the port’s new transient visitors.

We begin to see lumber being imported in small quantities in 1827, to be used by locals in the building of houses and other city structures.50 Its importation peaks in 1829, with seven separate inbound cargos during the six-month period beginning in January and ending in June. This construction was likely spurred by the prosperity of trade relations in the preceding years and is consistent with the demographic growth of the city, which according to Smith now had more than 10,000 inhabitants.51 Smith commented that “the increase of wealth and population [in future years] is supposed to be considerable.”52 While imports made their way to the port from various channels, Matamoros stood at the center of all of these networks.53


50 The 1827 census records 586 straw houses and 3 brick. By the early 1830s that number would increase exponentially. “Estado y manifestacion que forma el Ayuntamiento de la Villa del Refugio con el numero de casas que tiene, oficiales, peones, semovientes, labores, y tierras de agostadero con lo demas que demuestran las casillas y notas,” Casamata, Senso Estadistico, 1827.

51 “In July 1831, it contained 10,567 inhabitants and the increase of wealth and population since that is supposed to be considerable. It is believed that there are more American citizens residing here than at any other town in the republic.” “Smith to Louis McClain,” January 1, 1834. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

52 Ibid.

The 1820s and 1830s were a period of transition, as merchants tested the viability of expanding these trade networks and began diversifying imports. New York merchants attempted to enter the market, despite the laborious effort required to travel to Matamoros. Vessels from other gulf ports became prevalent during 1831, 1832, and 1833. The majority of this traffic came from Mobile, Alabama, which was supplying lumber for the extensive construction being undertaken in Matamoros. Reports provide generalized descriptions of the imported materials in 1834,
The imports consist of every description of cotton and linen goods of British and German manufacture shipped from the United States entitled to debenture; and of American brown and bleached shirtings and sheetings, lumber, furniture, etc.\(^{54}\)

As we will see in Chapter 5, political disturbances in Mexico’s Texas territories were responsible for the city’s overall decline in visitors during the middle of the 1830s, as American residents became the subject of widespread backlash by Mexican officials. Regardless of this decline, it should be noted that it was never really a huge deterrent for merchants, as the number of ships legally reported remained above 40 per year (well above the average for the port’s first years in existence) throughout the conflict.\(^{55}\) Machinery first appears in the second half of 1837, beginning a trend that would continue in small numbers into the 1840s.\(^{56}\)

In general, the category of “merchandise” dominated the shipments. In 1829, 22 separate cargoes arrived in the port between January and June, and an additional 20 shipments arrived between July and December, making a total of 42 declared shipments for the year. Because goods were becoming so diversified, and were beginning to include anything from tomahawks to prunes, officials began to simplify their record keeping by categorizing the vast majority of items under the labels of “Merchandise” or “Dry Goods” as opposed to listing them separately as had been done in the early reports. It is clear, however, that this label does rarely includes liquor, furniture or machinery. While the term is not especially descriptive, official statistics, confiscated cargoes, and aduana records provide further detail as to what was being traded.

The Goods Themselves

Mexican accounts give us a better sense of the types of merchandise being imported, which included items as arcane as a full body mirror to as common as olive oil and cotton.\(^{57}\) While only a few ship’s manifests remain in existence today, the limited printings of the *Balanza general del comercio marítimo* provide detailed lists of imports by port of entry. The goods were not limited to foodstuffs or other items necessary for subsistence, but rather had a rather luxurious flavor to them. Food items ranged from grape brandy, bottled beer, almonds (with and without the peel), bacalao (salted cod native to Portugal), chocolate, cinnamon, pepper, raisins, syrup, tea, vinegar, and wine.

\(^{54}\) Debenture is defined as being an unsecured loan certificate issued by a company, backed by general credit rather than by specified assets; “Smith to Secretary of State Louis McLean,” January 1, 1834. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

\(^{55}\) See Chapter 3, Table 3.1. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

\(^{56}\) Only six vessels entered the port with ballast, meaning that they arrived empty and were more interested in exports. These ships served two purposes – transporting people or arriving just with the intent of exporting goods from the region. It was less common for ships to enter the port with ballast in the 1820s, with only four such arrivals between 1825 and 1829. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

\(^{57}\) *Balanza general del comercio marítimo por los puertos de la república Mexicana en el año de 1826* (México, 1828).
Textiles were clearly in the greatest demand with various unusual types of material being imported in great numbers including fleeces, felt to cover billiards and card tables, dimity, cashmere, corduroy, cheesecloth, serge fabric, flannel, taffeta blankets, and loincloth. Goods labeled as mercería (haberdashery) included buttons, ribbons, zippers, and other sewing items used by a man’s tailor. Eleven large mirrors appeared in the port in 1826, accompanied by 101 dozen pocket mirrors. Women’s items in high demand included medias (stockings) with 78.5 dozen silk, 140 dozen cotton, and 14 dozen wool shipments arriving that year alone.58

While it is likely that many of these goods were destined for markets further inland, there were a variety of goods that would have been difficult to transport by mule or carts. Large mirrors, furniture, a distilling machine, 100 pounds of paint, steel, tar, and a billiards table likely remained in the port city. We can tell by the quantity of goods, such as pants, that many were intended to be transported to other places. 8,330 mahones azules de la India (a thick cotton fabric similar to denim) from India were imported in 1826, along with another 12,959 pants of other varieties. As the population grew, so too did the demand for items such as pañuelos (handkerchiefs), 4,074 dozen of which were imported in silk, and 1,979 dozen in cotton. Perhaps these goods made their way to the interior on the eleven carts that were imported. It is unclear where other, more arcane goods, such as a nutsedge plant, spermaceti for candles, 16 dozen false pearl items, horn combs, a seed drill for farming (labeled a “tull”), and 174 saber swords were ultimately destined.59

By the end of the 1830s goods were becoming much more diversified. As these markets became accustomed to the availability of these cheaper imports, entrepreneurial merchants mostly from New Orleans seized the opportunity to furnish them. According to the American consular returns, shipments of merchandise quintupled from 50 in the 1820s to 273 in the 1830s.60 Imports as unusual as leeches and pectoral paste tell us that consumers became accustomed to a wide variety of “luxury” items that foreigners, such as Doctor de la Ferriere, introduced to the city.61

By the 1840s Mexican import data demonstrates that despite the previously mentioned early attempts to limit the importation of cotton, it dominated legal trade at the port. This is not surprising, given that cotton was the nation’s best-developed and fastest-growing industry.62 In the twelve years leading up to 1843, the republic had invested

58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
62 Government officials were keenly aware of the importance of this industry to economic growth more broadly and were quick to adopt legislation that would help encourage its production within the country. Scholars of the textile industry in Mexico have stressed the importance of the law of May 23, 1837 as representative of official frustration with the preponderance of imported textiles as opposed to those produced within Mexico’s borders. Puebla had historically served as the center of textile production beginning in the late eighteenth century, but the new legislation that extended a previous ordinance that granted tax exemptions to internally produced textiles as long it stayed within the federal district. The 1837
heavily in its growth, including subsidization monies that came from loans granted by the government-sponsored Banco de Avío, which existed from 1830 to 1842. As early as the 1830’s cotton textile manufacturing in Mexico was taking place in a factory setting, and by 1843 the country had 59 cotton textile factories, the majority of which were located in the states of México and Puebla and producing for the Mexico City market. The success of this industry in the nation’s central areas provides insight into the reasons why this was such a highly sought after import commodity in Matamoros.

Officials went as far as to develop a system that was specific to Matamoros to discourage the importation of cotton. If cotton goods had arrived in Matamoros, for example, they would immediately be inspected and assessed fees. Local producers were also affected, as they were required to report to the alcabala collector of their districts the exact number of looms and spindles in their possession, as well as the specific types and amounts of goods produced. Officials were to be granted access to their facilities periodically to verify the reported information. Most importantly, all cotton imports were to bear the stamp of their manufacturer and counterstamped by the alcabala collector in order to circulate without the payment of duties in all areas of the republic. It is clear, as demonstrated by the import data for the port of Matamoros and from general accounts, that these regulations did not prevent the fraudulent circulation of foreign yields disguised as native ones. There are reports of domestic manufacturers who “nationalized” imported goods with their own stamps for a fee, as well as others who just stamped their merchandise with the seal of a nonexistent factory.

Restricted imports were not just limited to cotton. The earliest lists of prohibited articles included tobacco and some foodstuffs. Later, grains, including wheat and corn, rice, sugar, coffee, ready-made clothes, shoes, bricks, tiles, and carriages were added to the list. Merchants willing to risk importing goods illegally knew that even if the majority of their shipments were confiscated and declared a total loss, one successful contraband shipment would still produce extraordinary profits. Many times officials turned a blind eye to such activity, as one visitor described the ease by which smugglers could conduct trade, “Offices in Mexico are like shops, where people hasten to make as

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63 Haber, “Assessing the Obstacles,” 33.
64 Cotton has become the subject of a growing literature by Americanist scholars interested in the roots of American capitalism. Its importance (and prevalence) locally adds a new dimension to this work, suggesting that cotton networks prior to the U.S. Civil War were more important than previously assumed. See Johnson, River of Dark Dreams; Beckert, The Empire of Cotton; David Montejano, “Mexican Merchants and Teamsters on the Texas Cotton Road, 1862-1865,” in Mexico and Mexicans in the Making of the United States, ed. John Tutino (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012): 141-170.
65 Henry Austin had tried to create a business revolving around the importation of cotton to the interior, but failed due to protectionist restrictions imposed by the Mexican government. Henry Austin Papers, Briscoe Center for American History (hereafter CAH), The University of Texas at Austin. Austin, Texas.
66 Potash, Mexican Government and Industrial Development, 127.
much money as they can” and where smuggling was “practiced as smoothly as the most regular trade in the world.”

Others noted that officials, such as Don Rodriguez, stationed at the mouth of the Rio Bravo, “was a man who took bribes from those who exported goods from the country; took bribes from those who imported goods into the country; took bribes for not exposing his victims.” Mexican officials hoped that prohibiting the importation of certain goods would encourage internal production, but it merely fueled contrabandistas’ efforts to access clandestine channels in search of extremely lucrative profits.

The imposition of these trade restrictions stunted the growth that the port had been experiencing up until that point. Trade numbers decreased and Mexican and American merchants alike became entangled in the political system as outspoken critics of reforms in an effort to preserve their own special interests. Officials from Saltillo sent several communications to customs officers in Matamoros demanding the enforcement of greater restrictions. This led to the publication of a book in 1841 that presented a defense of the main customs official from Matamoros, Manuel Piña y Cuevas. Documents written by officials in Matamoros, Saltillo, and the national government are cited in this publication. The subject of the charges that went back and forth was the continued inflow of contraband goods entering by foreign ships. The formal ban on these efectos prohibidos was part of the larger campaign by the Mexican government to promote internal industrialization. Any system that allowed foreigners to monopolize the market, illicit or not, would hinder the promotion of Mexico’s capacity to produce its own versions of these goods. This back-and-forth caused much confusion, in part because in many cases word of the enactment of new laws would not reach merchants and the officials until someone had already been charged with an offense.

The success of the regulations appears to have waned substantially by the 1840s. Thirty percent of imports in 1842 consisted of cotton, and that number grew to 38 percent the following year. Mexican officials attempted to prohibit its importation, but despite heavy tariffs, merchants continued to pursue this import. One must keep this in proper context, however, as the exchange of manufactured “merchandise,” despite higher imports of cotton, continued to dominate the import market. The published financial records for the city of Matamoros list the total import amounts of merchandise for 1842 at $411,550.86 on a total of 27 ships and for 1843 at $603,973.42 on 32 ships. These are strong numbers for a port that was yet to celebrate its twentieth birthday.

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70 Manuel Piña y Cuevas, *Satisfacción al público del administrador de la aduana maritima de Matamoros* (Matamoros: Impreso por V. de la Parra, 1841).

71 For more on the nature and origins of contraband activity, see Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

72 Balanza mercantil de la Plaza de Matamoros correspondiente al año de 1843 formada y publicada por la Junta de Fomento (Matamoros: Impreso por Martín Salazar, 1844).

73 Ibid.
As a whole, political factors influenced commerce significantly. Political tensions in Texas, as well as the problems that occurred with France in 1838 left a lasting impact on the commerce that entered Mexico through Matamoros. The outbreak of the Mexican-American War dramatically affected the number of arriving shipments. At the same time, merchants actively sought to find ways to make the port more accessible, suggesting ways to facilitate the interior transport of goods such as by steamship. While trade throughout the 1840s did not come to a complete halt, the trade numbers (both Mexican and American) show decreases in the flow of goods passing through the port. Fortunately, the inroads made by the early merchants would prove to be useful once again in the years following the American Civil War, when contraband cotton exports from Matamoros (arriving from Confederate farms in the United States, thereby avoiding Union blockades) reached an all-time high.  

The nature of the imports from 1843 demonstrate the continuing importance of textiles, but there was a growing diversification of these goods. Mexican data separates the type of textile: *linos* (linens), *algodones* (cottons), *lanas* (wools), and *sedas* (silks). Reported imports for these categories ranged from wool socks to silk gloves and for that year $378,395.10 fell within these categories. The other imports consisted of *abarrotes* (lamp oils, spices, toy cars for children, alcohol, etc) and amounted to over $50,000. A new category was *viveres* or foodstuffs, which totaled $64,431.06. These were generally items that could not be produced with much ease locally such as rice, sugar, coffee, flour, maize, apples, potatoes, and lard. Roundi ng out the imports were “various effects,” including 8 boxes of sardines, 2 horses, and 2 dozen packets of curry powder, *mercería* (haberdashery), medicines, machinery (which is listed as having consisted of 961 boxes pertaining to the establishment of manufactures and a cotton press), *muebles* (furniture), wood, and *librería* (stationery).

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74 For more on this trade see James A. Irby, *Backdoor at Bagdad: The Civil War on the Rio Grande* (El Paso: The University of Texas at El Paso, 1977); Montejano, “Mexican Merchants and Teamsters on the Texas Cotton Road.”

75 *Balanza mercantil de la Plaza de Matamoros correspondiente al año de 1843 formada y publicada por la Junta de Fomento* (Matamoros: Impreso por Martín Salazar, 1844).
In sum, the trade activity in imports thrived because northern Mexico not only needed, but also wanted, manufactured goods from America and Europe. Buyers could obtain them most economically through this new route. Berlandier describes the reaction of local merchants to the arrival of merchandise.

When inhabitants of the villages situated on the banks of the river saw ships arriving at Matamoros, settlers arrived from Camargo, Reynosa, and several points in Nuevo León. Mingling with foreign merchants of various nations, in a few years they raised a city of about ten thousand inhabitants. A large number of Americans, Irishmen, Frenchmen, Italians, etc., are found there, carrying on a small trade or living from their industry.

Considering the labor involved in transporting goods from foreign ports to Matamoros and later the interior, the success of this industry is astounding.

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77 Berlandier, Journey to Mexico, 433. Berlandier’s comment about ethnic diversity is corroborated by periodical data from as early as the 1830s. One departures announcement in the local newspaper, El Mercurio de Matamoros reproduced the manifest of one schooner headed back to New Orleans from Matamoros on May 1, 1826: “SALIDAS. Mayo 1. De la Boca del Rio, bergantina goleta Americana, Henrique, su capitán Bredall, para N. Orleans, su cargamento 46,800 pesos, plata acuñada. Pasageros, Juan Barbote, italiano; Manuel Campos, mejicano; Marcos Bouriguez, francés; E.M. Neil, americana; Amelia Miller y familia, americana; Mrs. Ashby, americana; Mr. Capkin; el Cura de la colonia de San Patricio, irlandes, comun criado de la misma nacion; Mr. McGl oin, irlandes; Dr. Biron, francés; Antonio Fouquier y su familia.” MAA, Volume 1, p. 91, Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros, 27 May 1836.
A Road Filled with Murder Crosses: The Internal Movement of Imported Goods

Reuben Marmaduke Potter, an American citizen born in Woodbridge, New Jersey and an early resident of Matamoros, described his experiences transporting goods from Matamoros to interior trade fairs as a “pilgrimage.” In fact, in many ways it was—for the distance in which goods travelled from their departure point to their final destination was lengthy and often times strenuous. In Potter’s words, “[the terrain was] very thinly inhabited, and generally a very stoney [sic] & barren country” and “from our style of travelling, [I] could almost imagine [myself] in Asia or Africa.” The chronicling of his experiences transporting goods shed light upon how imported goods travelled to their interior trade centers or markets after departing the port of Matamoros.

As we have seen, during the first years of colonial settlement when royal officials strictly prohibited maritime activities, most merchandise made its way to the region via overland trading routes from the south that traversed the entire colony of Nuevo Santander. Then, as ports were opened, cheaper imported goods began to move in the opposite direction, from north to south. Matamoros’s position as the regional entrepôt for the internal transport of these goods was solidified, and from being one among several final northern destinations for goods transported from the interior, it took its place at the center of the diverse web of internal and external trade networks.

Colonial practices had made Monterrey the closest destination for Matamoros’ imported goods, but as numerous travel accounts demonstrate, it was often not the final destination. Berlandier describes the movement of goods,

The maritime trade of the inhabitants of Matamoros is principally with Louisiana. Some ships come from other ports of the United States and a very small number from Europe. The merchandise is transported in the interior to Nuevo León, to the fairs in Saltillo, and even to those of San Juan de los Lagos. In certain circumstances merchandise is furnished to Chihuahua, Durango, Zacatecas, and even San Luis Potosí.

The goods that entered the port did not all remain in Matamoros. It was common for imported goods that landed in Matamoros to be transported to interior fairs, thereby appropriating the use of overland trade networks to incorporate foreign imports. While merchant records accounting for the actual goods traded at these fairs do not exist, there is sufficient evidence that Saltillo and Monterrey were the chief markets. In fact, communication between the two cities was common, and the municipal archive of Matamoros contains a number of correspondences between local officials in Saltillo and Matamoros, discussing matters of shared interest such as trade restrictions, changes to local ordinances, or political disturbances. One example is a hand-signed letter from the

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79 Ibid., 60-61.
80 Berlandier, Journey to Mexico, 438.
Presidente del Ayuntamiento de Saltillo, dated 1849, with an attachment of four announcements to be publicized locally advertising reduced fees on national goods introduced at the fair there. These trade fairs become somewhat of a tourist attraction by the mid nineteenth century, with city officials expending quite a bit of effort to advertise the bullfights and religious ceremonies associated with them. Newspapers throughout the Republic would run advertisements in the hopes of attracting visitors to their city and stimulate the local economy.

The Branching Out of Overland Transportation Networks

The restructuring of interior trade networks to serve the movement of goods from the exterior to the interior served as a catalyst for the development of the road infrastructure in the Northeast. Cartographers depicted the intricate network of roads throughout the coastal region converge on Matamoros and as they wind their way farther south they eventually reach Monterrey (Map 3.1). The course of these roads was based in part on their accessibility to water—a necessity given the arid conditions of the Northeast. In 1830 Berlandier described two possible routes between Matamoros and Monterrey—one that went through Camargo, which connected the populated settlements and was suitable for carriages, and the other was a more direct route that was not as well maintained or populated.

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82 “Los efectos nacionales que se introduzcan y espendan desde el 8 de Septiembre al 8 de Octubre, pagarán la mitad de los derechos que causan en los demás meses del año según está concedido por una ley; en la inteligencia que los que hoy satisfacen estos efectos, según el reglamento nuevamente formado por el Supremo Gobierno en virtud de Decreto del H. Congreso del Estado, son los mas bajos entre los impuestos por las leyes centrales y federales.” “Aviso Al Publico, Saltillo, Julio 5 de 1849,” Casamata, Ayuntamiento 1849-1850, Carpeta Oficio del ayuntamiento de Saltillo adjuntando ejemplares de los avisos por los cuales se anuncia la feria que actualmente se celebra en aquella ciudad.

83 Potter’s colorful description is an excellent example. Karras, “First Impression of Mexico,” 67.

As traffic increased, so too did the development of roads to the interior. Aimed to ease travel, by the mid 1840s American merchant T.J. Farnham described three separate routes to travel between Matamoros and Monterrey—the first passed through Reynosa and, later, China (a small interior city) and covered about 275 miles; the second went through Camargo and was about 300 miles in length; and the third went through Mier and Seralvo, with a total distance of about 350 miles.\(^85\) Arrieros (muleteers) and their mules were gaining in importance in the region because of the necessity to use mules to transport goods along these routes, and American merchants expressed surprise when the market price of mules rose to double the price of horses.\(^86\) Roads branching out from Matamoros to the interior were essentially filling in and making denser the networks that were somewhat tenuous in the colonial era. With increased traffic, new roads that had the potential to connect more places along the way sprung up, despite efforts to maintain and reinforce the Republic’s main trade centers of Monterrey and Saltillo. In other words,


\(^86\) Graf, “Economic History,” 60. Although less important to residents of Matamoros, horses had been the target of Indian raids throughout the Mexican borderlands. See also Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts.*
the residual effects of the movement of goods from Matamoros to the interior (and the connections between towns that resulted) had a long lasting impact on the development of Mexico’s northern borderlands as a whole.

Indian raids presented a very real challenge to the movement of goods to the interior. Merchants used mule trains to carry imports through the desolate terrain. They would also hire muleteers to assist with the transport, with the added benefit of providing increased manpower should their caravans come under attack by raiding parties. Indian raids in the immediate vicinity of Matamoros reached unprecedented levels in the 1830s, with the effect of creating what one scholar has termed a “desert” in the North. As a result, many of these mule trains departed Matamoros heavily-guarded, making their way through the disputed Indian territory to settled populations in the interior well aware of the risks. Potter’s account from 1828 does not mention contemporary skirmishes but does allude to conflicts with indigenous populations as being a contributing factor to the heavy presence of wooden “murder crosses.” He writes in a footnote to his letter,

The number of those crosses in certain localities is liable to create a wrong impression of local danger, which has recently left its mark. In some cases the group of signals has perhaps been accruing for some generations, & may go back to the period of early Indian wars. They may refer to casualties which occurred some distance from the road; & I am not certain that they always refer to death by violence.

Losing one’s life in the pursuit of economic opportunity was clearly a very real danger.

Potter notes that the murder crosses were erected in the hopes that the passerby would say a prayer “for the soul of the defunct.” Referring to the large number of crosses, Potter notes that “These crosses often stand so ominously thick that had I complied with all the petitions thereon inscribed, I must in some places have been praying half the time.” I have not been able to document this level of violence against muleteers or merchants, but there is at least one court case brought against a man for robbing a Matamoros muleteer who was headed to San Luis Potosi. In fact, as early as 1827 the San Luis Potosi court was trying robbery cases of Matamoros merchants in their city.

Despite the settlement of new outposts along the way, the terrain itself was extremely desolate as a result of the banditry. Merchants came prepared to defend their shipments. Potter writes that he regularly travelled “with a caravan of loaded mules, in charge of half a dozen muleteers” in a land that he described as being extremely

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87 Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts*.
88 Karras, “First Impression of Mexico,” 63.
89 Ibid.
90 Ibid.
91 He goes on to note that “In many places, where the road led through thickets, the lightening showed a murder cross at about every hundred yards. In short it was the very time & place for ghosts & thieves to walk about and annoy poor travellers.” Ibid., 63, 65.
92 Casamata, Justicia 1835, Caja 5.
dangerous as they “had almost as good a chance of having our heads broken by banditti as if we had been in Turkey or Arabia.”93 While dramatic in his choice of words, it is clear that he and his caravan took their own safety seriously. Potter describes his attire during the pilgrimage,

If you wish to imagine a likeness of myself, when on the road, you have only to suppose me mounted on a swift pacing mule, with all the apparatus above described, and add thereto a Mexican riding dress, a double barreled gun, a pair of pistols, and a goodly long sword. My servant, as well as the muleteers were armed, though not so completely.94

Much like the merchants themselves, it is evident that bandits raided in the hopes of extracting silver. Interestingly, as Potter notes, “It is very rare that a caravan with merchandise is attacked, goods not being so convenient to carry off as specie. It is also rare that Americans are attacked on the road, as they always go well armed.”95

Rather than entrust the shipments to third party carriers, foreigners like Potter accompanied their shipments to their destinations and back. The muleteers were also accompanied by locally employed clerks, and in Potter’s case this was Don Manuel Márquez, a nineteen-year-old native Mexican employed by the company Lovell Toler & Company whom he considered “no less intelligent and noble minded [than any American].”96 Referred to as coches, mule trains traversed the majority of the Mexican North as they served interior consumers and markets. Evidence exists that they would depart the port city with some frequency, and often times, in large numbers. For example, in his report to the Minesterio de Hacienda, the Administrador de la Aduana de Matamoros references foreign goods that had made their way to the outskirts of Saltillo, “transported by thirteen carts from the Port of Matamoros.”97 Potter describes the process,

In Mexico the owner of a train of 30 or 40 pack mules, called an ataja, under the direction of six or eight arrieros or muleteers, usually takes the freight of a single merchant, who often accompanies the train, or sends an employee or two, for its safety.98

The ethnic makeup of those enlisted to transport the goods was noteworthy to Ward, who writes,

93 Karras, “First Impression of Mexico,” 61.
94 Ibid.
96 Interestingly, Daniel J. Toller, also a native of New Jersey and resident in Matamoros, later became postmaster general of Texas. Karras, “First Impression of Mexico,” 61, 61n15.
97 Manuel Piña y Cuevas, Satisfacción al público del administrador de la aduana marítima de Matamoros (Matamoros: Impreso por V. de la Parra, 1841).
98 Karras, “First Impression of Mexico,” 62.
The goods are landed upon the coast by small American schooners, and afterwards conveyed into the Interior by a sort of mixed breed of French, Spaniards, and Italians, who are perfectly acquainted with the country and the wants of the different towns, and time their remittances accordingly. 99

Travel to the interior was slow. Potter reveals that with “loaded mules, unless when loaded with money, it is customary to travel but fifteen or twenty miles a day.” 100 As the muletrains made their way across the North they developed ways to protect shipments along the way. For example,

At night the bales and boxes are piled up in the form of a wall; and, if there is a prospect of rain, a tent is made over them, by stretching several oblong strips of grass cloth across the top of the pile and staking down the end corners on each side, which leaves room enough for men to sleep between the lading & the tent pins. 101

As soon as they perceived that they had made it halfway to their destination (in Potter’s case, Monterrey) an employee would be dispatched “ahead to secure a store.” 102 Merchants had contacts in various interior cities that they would contact when shipments became available. Depending on the types of goods that they were carrying they would make arrangements with established storekeepers who would have had a need for their items. In other words, merchants travelling from as far away as New Orleans were aware of the needs and wants of businesses well into the Mexican interior.

Anyone and everyone was aware that the majority of imports were going to make their way to the interior through these overland networks. In fact, according to American officials, the costs were well defined and a somewhat standardized system of transport in place. The city’s American consul (but also a prominent merchant) spelled out fees to his superiors in Washington:

Foreign merchandise is transported from this place in every direction upon mules and occasionally in wagons, which also furnish the means of conveying the specie and native productions of the interior to the port. A mule load of goods [consists of] 300lbs [which in] specie [amounts to] $3,500. Freight to Durango $18. To Chihuahua $28 per cargo, and to other parts of the interior in proportion – the comparative goodness of the roads facilitate the communication. The internal trade however, is considerably embarrassed by international duties and the different state laws regulating the same, which undergo such frequent alterations that no reliance can be placed in the duration of any particular system. 103

99 Ward, His Majesty’s Charge d’affaires, 253.
100 Karras, “First Impression of Mexico,” 62.
101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
103 “Smith to McLean,” January 1, 1834. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
In fact, far from the earlier situation in which it was difficult to arrange transport, by the mid-1830s we see advertisements offering mule transport such as this one placed in the local newspaper *Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros* in 1836:

READY to leave is a caravan with sufficient provisions of good mules to head to whichever destination, from Durango to Mexico City. He who needs our services may present themselves to D. Pedro Echeverría, by whom they may inquire at the Maritime Customs office.104

There was clearly an organized network of muleteers willing to transport items to interior markets.

It should be noted that by the 1830s movement was not just confined to saleable goods. Along these same paths, mail was being carried to the interior states, likely in the same manner as the commercial goods. A newspaper article from 1835 describes the movement of mail from the city/port,

MAIL. ARRIVALS: Monday and Friday – at 8 o’clock in the morning from Mexico City and the Southern populations, from Soto la Marina. Tuesday and Saturday – at 3 in the afternoon from the interior, from Nuevo León. Every other Wednesday – at 3 in the afternoon from Bejar and the Colonies of Texas. Tuesday – at 8 o’clock from the Brazo del Santiago and Boca del Río Bravo. DEPARTURES: Monday and Friday – at ten o’clock in the evening to Mexico and the Southern populations, via Soto la Marina. Monday and Friday – at the same hour as arrivals from Nuevo León. Every third Saturday – at three in the afternoon to Bexar and the Texas colonies. Sunday – at eight o’clock in the morning for Brazo del Santiago and Boca del Río.105

An organized schedule of departure days and times was public knowledge. Merchants may have used these channels to transmit remittances, inform employees of upcoming shipments, or ask for information regarding potential trade fairs. Communication enhanced this vibrant trade network.

Once the goods arrived at a destination, merchants would undertake the task of ensuring their sale in local markets. Again, this was not an unorganized process, in fact, as accounts demonstrate, there were often foreigners residing in these interior cities to oversee commerce. H.G. Ward wrote that

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A very large proportion of the British manufactures at present consumed in Mexico passes entirely through the hands of North Americans; and after being landed by American ships at Tampico, Soto La Marina, and Refugio, is disposed of by American merchants at San Luis Potosi and Saltillo, where they have formed establishments and are in almost exclusive possession of trade of the country.\(^{106}\)

In fact, Potter found one of his “stray cousins,” now named Juan Edgar, residing in the small town of Cadereyta, about thirty miles south east of Monterrey, and an American from Arkansas in Saltillo.\(^{107}\)

The trade fairs were the chief market for merchants’ goods. Traveling merchants would visit cities for as long as they felt necessary to finalize the sale of their goods. Potter’s team remained in Monterrey for roughly two weeks, during which time a fair was held and he “sold a few goods; after which [they] proceeded to Saltillo, about 25 leagues farther west, where we remained a considerable time longer, a fair being held there also. Those towns are about the size of Elizabeth Town, New York.”\(^{108}\) The fairs awakened these interior cities, whose “business was dull” at other times of the year.\(^{109}\) They typically lasted about a week, and the profits were large. Potter notes, “During that of Saltillo, we sold from 2 to 300 dollars a day, nearly all at retail.”\(^{110}\) It is apparent that the trade fairs that he is describing would have differed significantly from those during the colonial period, when there was limited legal access to seaports. The presence of foreigners at the early post-independence trade fairs reinforces the ways that the lifting of trade restrictions increased access to these markets, both for products and for people.

\(^{106}\) Ward, *His Majesty’s Charge d’affaires*, 252.

\(^{107}\) Karras, “First Impression of Mexico,” 63, 67.

\(^{108}\) Ibid., 66.

\(^{109}\) Ibid.

\(^{110}\) Ibid., 67.
Interior towns relied upon this traffic for their own survival. Potter describes the process:

After a fair is over, there is a general clearing out. The foreign merchants go off in a body, with their mule loads of money, and the immense concourse of natives, who have come from the Lord knows where, to see the bull fights, & to buy, to sell, and to steal, shrink away and disappear like a snow in March.  

They would travel through the same towns that they passed on their way there, with extreme caution of their surroundings in order to protect their cargo. In fact, the picture that Potter paints is one of a great exodus of merchantmen, all retreating back to their ports in the hopes of leaving the country with the profits they had acquired. He tells us that his cohort of “about a dozen foreigners, mostly Frenchmen […] each one transporting a considerable sum, the whole amount of specie in our caravan was sixty or seventy thousand dollars.” Advertisements announced the departure of schooners back to New Orleans, should they require it (Figure 3.3).

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111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
While much less common, the local population of Matamoros also traded in the interior market for goods that they needed to maintain their livelihoods. Smith described the system,

The attention of the natives [Mexicans] is chiefly directed to the raising of mules, horses and cattle. They receive their supplies of corn, beans, flour and potatoes from the interior. From Campeché and Tobasco [sic] they receive coffee, cocoa, rice, lard, soap and brandy.113

An announcement in a local newspaper, *Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros* alerts the public of one store’s goods,

NOTICE TO THE PUBLIC. For sale is the finest quality of flour from Puebla, coffee, backpacks, bags, soap from Toluca and black beans from Veracruz; in the small shop of the cart drivers, 1st Street and Morelos, ANTONIO MAZZOLA.114

As noted, trade networks were bi-directional—merchants transported their imported goods to the interior markets, but they also brought some goods produced further inland back to supply the needs of the local population in the North. Matamoros, and the Mexican North more generally, stood at the crossroads of an extensive network of international commercial trade.

Profits drove this trade, and merchants were unrelenting in their further pursuit of business ventures with Matamoros and its connected cities. For example, the suggestion to introduce steamboat travel on the Río Bravo resurfaced in 1841 (it had first been considered in the early 1830s), and a serious effort was mounted to reassess its potential for the transport of goods from the Gulf Coast inland to Matamoros and further up the Río Bravo. Such an expansion would have branched the interior networks even further, connecting Matamoros to the Mexican Northwest, potentially as far inland as the modern-day state of Colorado. Cognizant of the geographic barrier that the city’s position 25 miles inland provided, merchants were persistent in their attempts to convince locals that new transportation infrastructures may be an asset to the local economy. An article in the local newspaper, *El Ancla*, led with a banner headline that read, “PROYECTO INTERESANTÍSIMO” (very interesting project) and detailed the plans for

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113 Smith does not mention quantities, but official records for 1828 provide a glimpse of the quantity of goods being exported. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

a *buque de vapor* (steamship) to be constructed in the United States for the purpose of transporting goods and people from the sand bar at Brazos Island directly to the Port and City of Matamoros. The plan was to form a company by selling 50 shares of stock, each costing 500 pesos. At the time of its publication on August 30, 1841, the steamship’s promoters had already sold 19 of the total shares, with John Treanor in charge of sales locally in Matamoros. The venture was being pursued despite the implementation of new import-export laws in that year, suggesting that the entrepreneurial merchant community was eager to do whatever it took to improve on the commercial routes that led to the Mexican interior.

In sum, in addition to the transit routes being in place, a segment of the local population dedicated itself to servicing them. While the majority of the owners of the imports were foreigners, those that bore the real burden of transporting merchandise were locals. At least some of the roads they frequented were the same ones used by Escandón’s men in the mid-eighteenth century, and which up until only a few years prior were responsible for furnishing all the northern settlements with subsistence foodstuffs and manufactured goods, though it is also clear that new roads and routes were being constructed, and that old ones were being improved. In fact, the changes in the ways that imported goods made their way into the interior in the post-1825 periods are much more dramatic than the similarities with the colonial period. Disruptions to this trade were a concern, but for the most part, the region’s networks were resilient to, among other challenges, Indian raids, banditry, the federalist uprisings of the 30s and 40s, and new trade regulations attending the frequent changes in government during this era. Goods travelled in the opposite direction than they had during the colonial period, and Matamoros’ place in the trade dynamic was now completely reversed.

*Exports and the Overpowering Importance of Silver*

Exports from the Mexican North were considerably less diverse than imports. The reason for this was that what merchants most sought in exchange for their merchandise was specie, or coined silver. Compared to the merchandise they transported to markets, silver was easier to carry home and it paid a huge dividend. While it was a target for raiders to steal, in the end it provided the greatest financial rewards abroad. John Tutino argues that American merchants’ quest for Mexican silver was essential to early globalization, and was subsequently responsible for the transformation of Atlantic world economies and global capitalism in the period between 1770 and 1830. The

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116 Ibid., pp. 2-6.

117 John Tutino argues that the Mexican region known as the Bajío played a pivotal role in the development of global capitalism beginning in the mid-sixteenth century. The reason for this is that merchants were in search of silver, which had taken on added significance around 1550 when China’s Ming Empire required that all taxes be paid in currency derived from the precious metal. He argues that silver mining and production in the region was led by intensely entrepreneurial men who privileged profits over other colonial preoccupations that scholars have stressed, such as honor or social standing. His research has greater implications for my research, as he further argues that capitalism emerged precisely in the Bajío because as part of the northern regions where state control was more difficult and local relations along multiethnic populations more fluid, it was, in effect a sort of tabula rasa onto which capitalism could be
importance of the precious metal to Matamoros’ own economic development appears to underscore his claim that silver was the motivating commodity in economic markets globally. On a regional level, foreigners’ quest to obtain more and more silver was directly responsible for the increased diversity of Matamoros’ imports, and subsequently, its economy’s growth as a whole.

Silver dominated Matamoros’ exchange economy. One historian has demonstrated that for the year 1835 alone the trade in silver bullion arriving in New Orleans from Mexico was “reckoned at upwards of nine million [dollars],” an incredible sum for the time.\textsuperscript{118} Berlandier further confirms that silver was the most common and most desired product of exchange, but notes that northerners have begun to sell hides to the Anglo-Americans, and, if they should begin to furnish them with dried meat and cotton, they would retain amongst themselves at least half of the minted money which is currently withdrawn in exchange for imported goods.\textsuperscript{119}

And indeed, wool, hides, and mules were traded in increasing amounts. The earliest record of exported hides is from 1823, when more than 800 tanned hides arrived in two shipments to New Orleans from the port of Refugio.\textsuperscript{120} Still, specie is what drew merchants to the area, as it would easily cover the amounts they may have borrowed in New Orleans or elsewhere to purchase the imports they sold in Mexico.

Accounts of the dangers that foreigners have left as part of the historical record underscore the lengths to which merchants would go to acquire the precious metal. Reuben Marmaduke Potter’s writings—including the dramatic image of murder crosses flooding the desolate terrain—revolved around the transport of the region’s most sought after export, specie. For most, the “march” back to port was well worth the risk.\textsuperscript{121} Unfortunately, the existing records do not explicitly identify the mines where the merchants’ bullion originated. But the web of interior trade networks, as well the accounts of first hand travellers, point to their probable origins.

Accounts suggest that silver traveled from as far away as Zacatecas, roughly 500 miles southwest of Matamoros. As was noted previously Ward explains the reasons why, There being no mint at San Luis [Potosi], the greatest part of these bars are transmitted to Zacatecas, and coined in the mint there; but many are sent direct to Refugio, at the mouth of the river Bravo, where they are exchanged for

\textsuperscript{119} Berlandier, \textit{Journey to Mexico}, 438.
\textsuperscript{121} These are Potter’s words. Karras, “First Impression of Mexico,” 68.
contraband goods from New Orleans and the Havana, with which Catorce is better supplied than any other place in the Federation.122

The trade fairs of Saltillo that so many merchants frequented placed them roughly halfway between Matamoros and Zacatecas. Although the Saltillo mine’s silver output had been affected by the independence wars, the importance of the trade fair there, coupled with the bullion produced and traded there accentuates the way in which exchange revolved around the precious metal.123 It is no surprise, then, that the merchants would spend the majority of their time there in the hopes of acquiring as much silver as possible.

Specie dominated outbound shipments from Matamoros during the 1830s, up until the American records stop recording these data. Unfortunately, beginning in July of 1833 the American consul terminated his practice of recording outbound cargo shipments from the port. However, during the period from 1830 to 1833, 95 ships left the port with large cargos of specie. In just one six-month period from July to December 1833, Smith notes that $547,413 in specie was traded.124 There was also a substantial amount of wool being traded (250,000 lbs), 4,307 hides, and 40 mules.125 Yet, other ships were beginning to leave merely with ballast, which suggests that silver supplies may have either been waning or they found ways to conceal outbound shipments of the precious metal. In other cases the owners of the cargo that these vessels carried on entry remained in Matamoros or other parts of Mexico and the profits from their sale remained in the local economy. One can only imagine that had wool, hides, and mules been taxed, no one would bother to purchase them.

122 Ward, His Majesty’s Charge d’affaires, 252-253.


124 “Smith to Secretary of State Louis McLean,” January 1, 1834. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

125 Ibid.
Despite the fact that it could be more easily smuggled out of the country, silver dominates official export figures. Official records of exports have not survived for all years, but those dating from just the three-year period between 1825 and 1828 suggest that thanks to silver, exports were growing at an astonishing rate. For instance, the value of exports in 1825 totaled $174,314 pesos but just three years later had grown to $625,515. It is difficult to know how much of this increase was due to the fact that items exported illegally before 1825 were now being counted (and for all exports except silver, there was no tax, so there was almost no incentive to sneak wool, hides, or other non-silver exports out of Matamoros), and how much is the result of “real” increases in exports. But given the rate of increase, and the fact that there was still some incentive to try to hide silver exports (silver being taxed at 3 ½%), we can conclude that much of the increase in official statistics does reflect a real increase in exports. These numbers would continue to rise well into the middle of the nineteenth century.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXPORTS</th>
<th>1825</th>
<th>1826</th>
<th>1827</th>
<th>1828</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cattle horns</td>
<td>$172</td>
<td>$30</td>
<td>$45</td>
<td>$38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cattle hides</td>
<td>5,430</td>
<td>633</td>
<td>4,357</td>
<td>3,945</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaguar hides</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otter skins</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horses</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wool</td>
<td>5,500</td>
<td>2,207</td>
<td>2,797</td>
<td>2,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mules</td>
<td>2,160</td>
<td>720</td>
<td>2,502</td>
<td>3,060</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lead in plates</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coined silver</td>
<td>161,052</td>
<td>334,800</td>
<td>418,171</td>
<td>547,201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worked silver</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>368</td>
<td>2,960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver bullion</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>66,110</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL EXPORTS</strong></td>
<td><strong>$174,314</strong></td>
<td><strong>$338,576</strong></td>
<td><strong>$429,171</strong></td>
<td><strong>$625,515</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL IMPORTS</strong></td>
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<td><strong>$494,861</strong></td>
<td><strong>$413,897</strong></td>
<td><strong>$195,017</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4: Imports and Exports to/from Matamoros, 1825-1828. An anomaly within the export data, it is unclear where the jaguar hides exported would have been purchased although otter skins were native to Alta California. (Source: Compiled from data contained in Balanza general del comercio exterior de la republica Mexicana, 1825-1828. Government Publication. (Mexico City: 1828) and reproduced in Graf, “Economic History,” 55)

126 Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
There are a number of examples of goods not indigenous to northern Mexico appearing within the trade records. One such item, indigo, was exported solely in 1828. A dye used since the colonial period, mainly in textiles and printing, indigo was a much sought after commodity in Europe. It is possible that indigenous communities further west may have traded it at market for foreign imports. Another possible explanation is that it was being returned to New Orleans after merchants realized there was not sufficient demand for it in Mexico. Still, manifests show that at least four separate shipments were recorded that year, along with quantities of cocoa and coffee. These goods were not readily available in northern Mexico, suggesting that the trade networks already established in the interior of Mexico would have been their place of origin.

Foreign buyers were at times very particular in what they would purchase for export. Exported wool came from three distinct regions of Mexico. According to Smith, the wool produced near Matamoros was “of a very inferior quality” so the businessmen favored the “mountain wool in the interior” which was “much finer and cleaner than that raised in the low lands” and sold at a much higher price. According to Smith, “Since the admission of coarse wools into the United States free of duty, several advantageous shipments have been made from this port.” Another example are the mules raised on ranches in the nearby vicinity, which are described as being of “superior quality.”

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128 “Smith to McLean, 1834.” Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

129 Ibid.

130 Ibid.
Although many of the mules were taken to the United States in “droves” along an overland route through Texas, they were on occasion shipped back to the United States or the West Indies through the port of Matamoros.\textsuperscript{131}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
\textbf{Export} & \textbf{Selling Price} \\
\hline
Wool (lowest quality) & 10-12 reales/arroba \\
Hides & 16-18 reales/arroba \\
Mules & $25-30$ US Dollars \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Prices attained for exports, 1834. Arrobas amount to roughly 25 pounds. 1 real amounted to almost 8 pesos. (Source: “Smith to McLean,” January 1, 1834. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.)}
\end{table}

Although the consular dispatches stopped documenting the outbound cargos of ships in 1833, official Mexican sources provide a glimpse of the pattern of exports into the 1840s. Goods appear to have remained consistent with previous years, that is, silver dominated as the chief export, with wool, hides, and gold exiting in much smaller numbers. Total exports for the year 1842 totaled $481,277.77 with $378,514 (79\%) of that being silver exports. 1843 saw an even greater amount of silver exports, $438,806 out of a grand total of $591,185.04, but this amounted to a smaller percentage of total goods (75\%).\textsuperscript{132} The total imports for these two years were about equal to the exports, which provides some evidence for a stable balance of trade revenues moving through Matamoros.

Although exports were dominated by shipments of silver, their increase in density points to economic growth in the city as a whole. Because of the desire of foreign merchants to obtain the precious metal, for which they were willing to go through the ordeals outlined in the discussion of imports, the local exchange economy became heavily reliant on its trading. The profits that could be made by foreign entrepreneurs fueled their own active participation in trade well into the interior, despite the risk of robbery or even death. On the other hand, the interest in these exchanges was not one-sided—that is, Mexican markets were just as hungry for foreign imported goods as the merchants were for silver. Had merchants not been able to trade for silver we may have

\textsuperscript{131} This suggests that mules were an important commodity, it was just more common for buyers to have them shipped to the United States over land, rather than by sea. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{132} While this data was transmitted and produced to officials in Mexico City, it is interesting to note that upon its publication it was circulated to multiple agencies in the city – first to the Vice Consul of France and then to the American consul who subsequently remitted it to officials in Washington. In other words, foreign agencies were interested in export figures, as it reflected the potential of nurturing further ties with the port, and even the nation. “Thomas W. Simons to Secretary of State James Buchanan, 1844.” Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
seen a very different course of economic development not only in Matamoros but well into the interior.

**Conclusion**

It is apparent from the sheer quantity of goods entering the Port of Matamoros that official trade statistics do not account for items that slipped through the cracks. Illicit trading flourished through the port even after the trade restrictions were lifted. In fact, the local government unofficially condoned the smuggling of goods into and out of Matamoros because the official system did not direct sufficient profits to the state or local governments. Although local officials were in charge of collecting taxes, all revenues belonged to the nation. Increased revenues, therefore, did not result in a better standard of living for those most closely tied to commerce. Because of this, local officials themselves were deeply implicated in the illicit trade, in many instances turning a blind eye when accusations were made and at times even profiting themselves from this activity. Smith complains of these practices in an 1829 dispatch:

> The report is not as specific or comprehensive as I would wish, in consequence of certain irregularities which have crept into the trade with this country, and however repugnant it may be to the feelings of those friendly to an honest commerce, yet it is a fact that the defective administration of the Revenue Laws of this government affords such faculties to an illicit and contraband trade […] The corrective is deposited in the hands of the authorities here[.]

Himself a merchant under the firm Stillman & Smith, he points to the inefficiencies of the local administrators as the main cause of these occurrences. Merchants stood to gain by avoiding taxation on imports, and the city’s location miles inland from where boats anchored made the risks all the more palatable for foreigners. Ironically, it was likely that previous experience with illicit commerce by American and foreign merchants fueled their pursuit of further profits, the growth of the local economy, and the continued prevalence of contraband activity despite free trade legalization. Little did anyone realize that the city’s reputation for contraband commerce would remain a constant well into the present-day.

Indeed, Matamoros developed several identities as a commercial center during this period, yet no single identity ever eclipsed the others. The most sensational of these identities was its colorful reputation as a smugglers’ cove, with all of the attendant trappings, including piracy, bribery, and more serious crimes including murder. But it also became a legitimate port with enough legal commerce to support a growing population, and that generated sufficient profits to enable resourceful merchants to become very rich. Its location at the mouth of a major river no doubt conjured up images of another New Orleans for some of the early entrepreneurs, but it was two other features about its location that were probably the main reasons for its rapid growth in popularity:

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133 See Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts*.

134 “D.W. Smith to Secretary of State Martin Van Buren,” July 1, 1829. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
its remoteness from the Mexican capital and its proximity both to the established markets of Monterrey and Saltillo and the thriving commercial port of New Orleans. The lawlessness that transpired was possible only because the city was just beyond the reach of the established governmental institutions of both Mexico and the U.S., and the initially lax import-export controls were due to its remoteness from the country’s governmental center. Such factors created an attractive business climate for seasoned traders eager to supply the markets of the northern Mexican territories. These were ideal conditions for a rough-and-tumble frontier outpost, which is how the Matamoros of the 1820s, 1830s, and early 1840s can be aptly described.

As the markets expanded and the population grew after the independence wars, goods entering Mexico through Matamoros filled a very real void in the interior. The ships’ cargo mostly consisted of goods that had been manufactured abroad and were ready to use. Other items that were necessary to sustain any type of population, including medicines and iron pots, travelled by boat from New Orleans or New York and were unloaded at Brazos Island, carted to Matamoros by a cadre of native and foreign muleteers, and finally transported on land by mule to Monterrey and the interior. By 1844, the city census reflected the growth that came from this bustling trade, as by then the city boasted 22 clothing shops, 22 shoe shops, 17 carpentry shops (carpinterías), 11 blacksmiths (herrerías), 2 bakeries, 17 grocery stores (pulperías), 19 general stores (tendajos), 2 cafés, and 5 laundries (javonerías), among other local businesses.135 As we will see in a later chapter, many merchants took advantage of the lax trade laws and extralegal exchanges to become very wealthy over this period of time.136

The trade networks operated simultaneously in numerous directions by the middle of the 1840s. Regular routes that led to their intended markets had been established. Most importantly, consumers now depended on these goods, and the trade records reflect this in the consistency and frequency of the ships arriving in the Port of Matamoros. A typical year saw an average of about forty ships, the overwhelming majority of which claimed to originate in New Orleans. The city served as an entrepôt, where goods could be stored in local businesses prior to being transported further inland. The infrastructure to meet the needs of the city’s transient population developed as a result of the prosperous economy that evolved there. In other words, people had the potential to become wealthy not just from the import and export of goods but also from servicing the needs of those involved in that commerce.

Issues of taxation in part affected the development of trade networks connected with the port. Merchants seized the opportunity to avoid costs whenever possible. In fact,


136 Revisionist interpretations elicited by the findings for Matamoros calls into question our general understanding of regional economies during this period. Although national-level economic data tells us that the country was struggling, it is clear that regional actors were resourceful in their adapting to new policies. Most recently, the work of Sergio Canedo Gamboa does the same for San Luis Potosí, a known destination for Matamoros merchants, whom he argues experienced a regional upsurge during this period. Work that uses trade records to examine other regional trade centers will likely shed fruitful light on the diversity of Mexico’s regional economies in the first half of the nineteenth century. See Sergio Canedo Gamboa, “Merchants and Family Business in San Luis Potosí, México: The Signs of an Economic Upsurge, 1820-1846,” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego, 2011).
whether the trade in question was legal or not, the low levels of enforcement of import and export duties is what drew merchants to the port. Foreigners were not strangers to the Mexican legal system, and they brought forth claims and demanded reparations if trade conditions or their assets were threatened. As we will see later, issues of taxation also played out in contentious ways politically, when those with a lot at stake financially were forced to use political channels to protect their own economic interests. In other words, the debates over local political affairs were very much entangled in the economic interests of those who were connected to the trade networks outlined in this chapter.
Chapter 4

The People Who Carried the Goods: Foreigners, Their Businesses and the City They Helped Build

When inhabitants of the villages situated on the banks of the river saw ships arriving at Matamoros, settlers arrived from Camargo, Reynosa, and several points in Nuevo León. Mingling with foreign merchants of various nations, in a few years they raised a city of about ten thousand inhabitants. A large number of Americans, Irishmen, Frenchmen, Italians, etc., are found there, carrying on a small trade or living from their industry.¹

- Jean Louis Berlandier, 1826

Commerce was the driving force behind the growth and physical development of the city of Matamoros. Merchants from near and far converged in the port hoping to buy and sell goods that were otherwise unavailable to them, placing Matamoros at the center of a vast network of internal and external trade networks beginning in the early nineteenth century. It follows from the discussion of trade records explored in previous chapters that an internationally diverse collection of New Orleans merchants predominated in the city, chiefly because of geographic proximity and economic opportunity. This chapter describes the lasting social influence of this diversity.

As we will see, the vast majority of foreigners took passage by ship through New Orleans and brought with them supplies that could be resold at market either in Matamoros proper or in the interior in exchange for Mexican silver. As we saw in Chapter 3, the margin of profit for these items was high due to the demand and taste for foreign imports, and while not all of the profits stayed in Matamoros, the city prospered from this commerce in tangible ways. Concurrent with the demographic growth of the city was the growth of the port’s infrastructure, including landmark buildings and businesses that were meant to cater to the diverse assortment of the city’s inhabitants.

Most importantly, by the late 1840s, the city stood apart from the rest of the colony not only because of its transnational trading connections and its foreign residents, but also because of the rapid economic growth that it experienced, leading up to this period.

While the pursuit of economic opportunity and the discovery of new markets may have been their main goal, foreigners had deep impacts on the style in which the city was constructed. It makes sense that those most responsible for the growth of the city would

¹ Jean Louis Berlandier, Journey to Mexico during the Years 1826 to 1834 (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1980), Volume 4, 433. Despite having one of the most extensive travel accounts of the region for this period there is surprisingly little written on Berlandier and his travels. See Samuel Wood Geiser, Naturalists of the Frontier (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1937); John Francis McDermott, Travelers on the Western Frontier (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970); James Kaye, Berlandier: A French Naturalist on the Texas Frontier (Bloomington: Trafford Publishing, 2010); Russell M. Lawon, Frontier Naturalist: Jean Louis Berlandier and the Exploration of Northern Mexico and Texas (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2012).
bring with them the tastes, cultural practices, and even architectural styles with which they were most familiar. This chapter uses city census, judicial, and property records to demonstrate the residents’ intimate connections to the melting pot of eighteenth and nineteenth century New Orleans. The result was that the city of Matamoros took on a distinctly American air both demographically and spatially.

**Matamoros: Destination Settlement for North Americans**

Colonial officials had grappled for some time with the presence of foreign schooners participating in contraband maritime trade along the colony’s gulf settlements, voicing complaints against and assigning blame to the *extranjeros* (foreigners) who frequented the port illicitly. When caught, excuses ranged from navigation difficulties to “accidental” detours, both of which failed to account for their possession of goods that were obviously intended for sale in the region. The majority of those participating in this illicit activity were of European ancestry and, almost exclusively, they were residents of New Orleans. In fact, prior to the official opening of the port, local officers often complained to their superiors in Ciudad Victoria about the “scandals and frauds committed by foreigners,” but the term “foreigner” was synonymous with New Orleanian, the overwhelmingly dominant foreign national group in the city.

The presumption by Mexican officials that most foreigners were from New Orleans was an over-simplification that ignored the relevant facts. Port cities by definition are magnets for hybridity—reflecting the diverse interplay of people, goods, and cultures. New Orleans was an ethnic mélange during this period, drawing visitors and residents from throughout the United States, the circum-Caribbean, and Europe. Last names on ship and merchant registers reflect the city’s multicultural make-up—one could find names with origins ranging from Spanish and French to German and Irish, and their owners may have chosen to identify themselves as American or some other nationality. The cultural fabric of the city of New Orleans reflected this mixture, with the French and Spanish Quarters remaining as the most revealing visual examples of how the city’s international political history influenced its unique development. Despite the multicultural origins of New Orleanians, however, when they arrived in Matamoros they mostly chose to identify as American citizens, claiming U.S. citizenship on immigration and trade documents.

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2 See Chapter 3, Table 3.1 for a breakdown of vessel origins from 1825-1846. “José Antonio Florescal, Alcalde, Sobre vigilancia de extranjeros.” Archivo del Ayuntamiento de Matamoros (hereafter MAA), Volumes 10, pp. 36, 40, 22 January 22 1823; “Relativa a la conducta observada por dos europeos,” MAA, Volume 10, p. 104, 20 February 1823; “Noticia de los escandolos y fraudes que cometen los extranjeros,” MAA, Volume 10, p. 95, 13 June 1823); “Relación de extranjeros arrivados en el puerto de Matamoros,” MAA, Volume 17, pp. 112 – 115, 31 August 1824.

3 “Noticia de los escandolos y fraudes que cometen los extranjeros,” MAA, Volume 10, p. 95, 13 June 1823.

4 More work needs to be done on this topic for Latin America, but recent conferences underline the importance for scholars to draw connections to the work for other regions, given the connectedness of these histories. The recent conference, *Port City Lives* (University of Liverpool, 2012) is one such example. A forthcoming panel organized by the author at the Latin American Studies Association Conference (Washington DC, 2013) will explore the linkages of port cities in Latin America.
Mexican independence drastically altered the country’s foreign immigration policies. Unphased by whether free trade and the opening of Mexican ports was officially realized, foreign merchants flocked to the city, likely spurred by the lax local official oversight and market demands. When the established New Orleans merchant Ramón Lafón (also referred to within the historical records as Lafont or Lafonne) first arrived in Matamoros in the early 1820s it is possible that his motives were to establish roots and develop commercial ties to the Mexican interior. A seasoned navigator, his cargo loads consisted exclusively of tobacco and dry goods, which he acquired through his business contacts in New Orleans. One of his schooners, the Isabel, was involved in various investigations over the years, beginning when local officials caught him attempting to unload and smuggle his merchandise close to one of the river openings along the coast. Official concern about his suspect commercial dealings would continue until his death in 1832. Regardless, many foreigners who were no longer under-the-radar, like Lafón, continued to choose Matamoros as their preferred home and commercial base.

Other foreigners settled deeper into the interior. Many brought with them marketable and specialized skills, such as shoemaking, masonry or silversmithing. Samuel Bangs, a printer, first travelled to Mexico as part of the independence expedition of Francis Xavier Mina in 1816. Following a circuitous route to the then-Spanish colony, he had joined Mina in Baltimore before heading to Florida, New Orleans, Spanish Texas, Matamoros, and finally, the port of Soto la Marina. He was recruited because of his expertise in publishing, having worked as an apprentice of a relative in Baltimore, and he eventually invested in a portable printing press that he acquired from England. He published songs and proclamations for the independence insurgents until Spanish Royalists captured him, sparing his life only because he knew how to operate the press. After independence he set up his own business in Monterrey, working for the new government and other contractors. Even officials in Ciudad Victoria used his services. Interestingly, following the tide of immigrants pursuing business ventures near the Río Bravo, he later moved to Matamoros to open a hotel with his wife.

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5 Matamoros City Baptisms, Marriage and Death Records reveal that he was originally from Cestas, France, the son of Antonio Lafón and Catarina Barbarron. Lafón disappears from the records in 1832, the year of his death.

6 MAA, Volume 10, pgs. 67-84, 15 January 1823; MAA, Volume 9, p. 105, 16 December 1824; While it is unclear whether they may have known each other or been accomplices, John (Juan) Roy’s ship was also caught smuggling tobacco that year: MAA, Volume 10, p. 91, 22 April 1823.

7 The one exception were peninsular Spaniards, with whom the new Mexican government made clear were not welcome to visit the country in fear that they would try to overthrow the new independent government.

8 It is clear that he visited the Río Bravo from the patriotic song, “The Río Bravo Proclamation,” composed by Joaquin Infante (the expedition’s auditor) that he published in honor of the expedition. Joseph Milton Nance, "BANGS, SAMUEL," Handbook of Texas Online (http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fba55), accessed December 17, 2012. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

Foreign-owned businesses were opened immediately following the conclusion of Mexico’s independence wars. American businessman and merchant, Richard Pearse, arrived in the city in 1821, having already worked as a merchant in the port of New Orleans. A Freemason and native of Boston, Massachusetts, Pearse was one of many foreigners to capitalize on locals’ needs by quickly establishing Matamoros’ first boarding house and billiard room. He even obtained 200 free copies of Spanish bibles from the American Bible Society, which he was authorized to sell at one of his stores. His boarding house catered to visiting and curious merchants who had yet to establish roots in the city, and the billiard room provided a means of recreation for new arrivals. These were profitable businesses and he travelled back and forth between New Orleans and the city, acquiring luxury items that included English and French calicos, coffee, and wines, all of which were used or sold in his Matamoros businesses. Other Americans, such as Charles Mayer, opened dry goods stores stocked with foreign imports acquired through their maritime shipping businesses (Figure 4.1). Foreign entrepreneurs such as Lafon, Bangs, Pearse, and Mayer were catering to the tastes of the city’s diverse and expanding populace.

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10 “John Blair et al to Edward Livingston,” April 7, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

11 During Benjamin Lundy’s visit to Matamoros in 1835 he made note that he “paid my friend Richard Pearce a visit, and obtained from him a letter of introduction and recommendation to the government printer at Victoria, whose name is Samuel Bangs. He is a native of Boston, but has resided long in this country, and is said to enjoy, in a high degree, the confidence of the Mexicans. I also got a handsome letter of introduction to the governor, from the ‘political chief’ at Matamoros.” Benjamin Lundy, The Life, Travels, and Opinions of Benjamin Lundy (Philadelphia: William D. Parrish, 1847), 155.


13 John L. Haynes Papers, Box 2.325/D1A, Briscoe Center for American History (hereafter CAH), University of Texas, Austin.
The documented colorful anecdotes of foreigners enmeshed in local skirmishes paint a vibrant picture of their established presence in the city, but official data are incomplete with regards to their exact numbers at any given time during the first half of the nineteenth century. In fact, as early as 1823, the alcalde of Matamoros complained that his city’s population fluctuated constantly because of transient immigrants that stayed in the city only for a few months. However, through a compilation of aggregate data—available census figures, passport records (known at the time as cartas de seguridad) and firsthand accounts, we can conclude that the majority of foreigners residing in the port were American because of their direct connection to commercial operations in the port of New Orleans. Furthermore, Berlandier’s words from the beginning of this chapter underscore that their numbers were significant: “A large number of Americans, Irishmen, Frenchmen, Italians, etc., are found [living] there [in Matamoros], carrying on a small trade or living from their industry.”

Population statistics suggest that the majority of new immigrants were upwardly mobile men between the ages of 20 and 40. By 1826, just two years into the port’s legal status, foreigners dominated the skilled trades within the city (Table 4.1), and only two of the city’s twelve merchants were Mexicans. Actually, their numbers were likely much higher because immigration policy excluded merchants or craftsmen as established residents until they had lived in Matamoros at least four years. By the following year

14 “Noticia de los escandolos y fraudes que cometen los extranjeros,” MAA, Volume 10, p. 95, 13 June 1823.

15 Emphasis added. Berlandier, Journey to Mexico, 433; Passport request made for Irishman Santiago McKinney, MAA, Volume 8, p. 68, 4 May 4 1827.

16 Although it appears that city officials intended to transmit regular reports of census data to the state capital of Ciudad Victoria, their reports were remarkably inconsistent. The means by which the data were collected, presented and transmitted varied inexplicably. Archivo Municipal de Matamoros (hereafter Casamata), Presidencia, Caja 1, Expediente 6, 10 June 1826.
almost 100 new people between the age of 20 and 40 had settled in the city, with only two merchants listed as *hijos de la villa* (or, originally from the city).¹⁷ Again, because foreigners were counted only after four years of residency, their numbers were much higher.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Merchants</th>
<th>Carpenters</th>
<th>Silversmiths</th>
<th>Tailors</th>
<th>Brickmasons</th>
<th>Butchers</th>
<th>Tanners</th>
<th>Shoemakers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1: Matamoros Skilled Occupations, 1826 (Source: Casamata, Presidencia, Caja 1, Expediente 6, 10 June 1826)

Word quickly spread overseas of the profit potential from establishing connections with Mexico, specifically in Matamoros. Evidence of this is found in published guides that were distributed to interested settlers overseas, and these guides provided recommended itineraries and detailed instructions on how to properly access the port. Pamphlets, such as the one published by the American Quaker abolitionist and New Jersey native, Benjamin Lundy, emphasize that by the mid-1830’s Matamoros served as the main port of entry for transient and permanent resident Americans wishing to establish roots in Mexico’s northern cities. Lundy notes that even those wishing to settle in Texas could easily arrive in Matamoros, since it was developed and had the resources available to foreigners living abroad for the first time.¹⁸

The influx of foreign merchants and visitors was underscored by the port’s geographic proximity to American port cities. Visitors knew that that they could “sail from New York [to] Matamoras [sic], with fair wind, in twelve or fifteen days; and from New Orleans, in three or four.”¹⁹ The ease with which foreigners could travel back and forth between the two trading centers is what facilitated the fluidity as well as strength of their interactions. In this sense merchants could more easily cater to the wants and needs of their customers—fulfilling requests for specific items—than if the time and distance travelled had been more burdensome.

Ship registers of arriving vessels provide additional evidence of the citizenship of the port’s foreigners. Immigration law required that they provide the name of their


¹⁹ Benjamin Lundy, *A circular, addressed to agriculturalists, manufacturers, mechanics, &c. on the subject of Mexican colonization: with a general statement respecting Lundy’s grant, in the state of Tamaulipas: accompanied by a geographical description, &c. of that interesting portion of the Mexican Republic* (Philadelphia, 1835), 5; There is not a shortage of commemorative material on Lundy. Merton Lynn Dillon, *Benjamin Lundy and the Struggle for Negro Freedom* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1966); William C. Armstrong, *The Lundy Family and their Descendants of Whatsoever Surname, with a Biographical Sketch of Benjamin Lundy* (New Brunswick: J. Heidingsfeld, 1902); Lundy Memorial Committee “A Memorial to Benjamin Lundy: Pioneer Quaker Abolitionist 1789-1839” (Illinois, 1939).
recommender, implying that most came with established connections. One representative sample of arriving immigrants were passengers on the schooner *Oscar*, which transmitted its arrival information to customs officials in 1828 (Table 4.2). In this case the entire manifest consisted of single American men between the ages of 21 and 38, more than half of whom were merchants, and the rest skilled tradesmen including carpenters and doctors. All listed their final destination as Matamoros.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Citizenship</th>
<th>Embarkation City</th>
<th>Destination</th>
<th>Purpose of Trip</th>
<th>Recommender</th>
<th>Profession by which to subsist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>Matamoros</td>
<td>Captain</td>
<td>D. Ramón Lafón</td>
<td>To be determined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>Matamoros</td>
<td>Carpenter</td>
<td>Without</td>
<td>Carpenter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>Charleston</td>
<td>Matamoros</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Consul</td>
<td>Private Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>Baltimore</td>
<td>Matamoros</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>Dn. Tomás Grin</td>
<td>Commerce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>Matamoros</td>
<td>Matamoros</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Commerce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>N. Orleans</td>
<td>Matamoros</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>Consul</td>
<td>Carpenter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>N. York</td>
<td>Matamoros</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>Dn. Bretania</td>
<td>Commerce</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2: Reproduced crew list as submitted by the Schooner Oscar in Compliance with Passport Laws (Source: Casamata, Presidencia Epoca Independiente, 1824-1828, Oficios de la aduana maritima, 1828)

Those without surplus capital to invest could travel to Matamoros for very low costs. By 1835, speculators advertised the settlement of the area surrounding Matamoros, stressing the investment value for the potential settler. Lundy outlined the costs of travel based on one’s point of departure: “the rates of passage [from New York],” Lundy wrote, “will not, in all probability, exceed fifteen dollars [while from New Orleans] … eight or ten.” The equivalent of around 25 dollars in today’s currency, this was not an exorbitant investment for new entrepreneurs. Lundy subtly suggested that New Orleans was the ideal point of departure, noting that direct maritime passage to Matamoros would

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1829; MAA, Volume 2, p. 160, 1828; MAA, Volume 19, pp. 91-117, 1829; MAA, Volume 20, p. 37, 1829; MAA, Volume 21, pp. 39-63, 1830. In one case, a letter was requested from officials at the University of Pennsylvania, attesting to the good standing of D. Knight, MAA, Volume 37, pp. 89-91, 15 April 1841.


22 For historical dollar values see Scott Derks and Tony Smith, *The Value of a Dollar: Colonial Era to the Civil War, 1600-1865* (Millerton: Grey House Publishing, 2005).
be “much more convenient and expeditious … [and] less expensive” than overland routes. 23

Matamoros was not the only port in Mexico to attract foreigners. The country’s main port, Veracruz, was concurrently receiving large numbers of foreign-born immigrants, and the official records for that port are markedly more complete. Official census counts for the port of Veracruz in 1830 document a population of 377 foreign immigrants, including but not limited to residents with French, English, West Indian, Swiss, German, and Portuguese backgrounds. 24

Despite being smaller and with a much younger history, Matamoros was not far behind. It should be noted that given the wind conditions along the coast, it was often easier for a traveler destined for other Mexican ports to travel first from Matamoros to New Orleans and then to Veracruz rather than directly between the two cities. 25 In fact, one American resident wrote that “It is believed that there are more American citizens residing here than at any other town in the republic […] it assumes] preference as a place of residence to either Tampico or Vera Cruz.” 26

Even though customs and merchant records reveal the overwhelming dominance of New Orleans as port of origin among American ports (Table 3.1), New York merchants also began to see opportunities in the region, as they remained constant players in the trade there for much of the decade. New York vessels dealt predominantly in merchandise such as shoes and clothing, and provisions like wine, coffee, and flour. In fact, the records suggest that even after making Matamoros their permanent home, established merchants such as José San Román maintained an interest in New York, as their surviving merchant records contain original copies of the publication The New York Commercial Bulletin, first published in 1827 by schooner owner-operators, Arthur Tappan and Samuel Morse. 27

23 While the vast majority of visitors were adult males, children between the ages of two and twelve would travel at half price (4 to 5 dollars from New Orleans), while infants were free. It is unclear how many merchants brought their families with them at first entry and how many sent for them after having settled. Lundy, A Circular Addressed, 4-5.

24 Official census counts for Veracruz for 1830 include 99 French, 75 English, 53 Americans, 51 Germans, 13 Italians, 9 West Indians, 7 Swiss, 5 Central Americans, 2 Colombians, 2 Portuguese, 1 Hungarian, 1 Savoyard (a region of France), and 59 people of unknown origin. Carl Wilhelm Koppe, Mexicanische zustände aus den jahren 1830 bis 1832. Vom verfasser der “Briefe in die hiemath, geschrieben zwischen October 1829 und märz 1830, während einer reise über Frankreich England und die Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerica nach Mexico…” (Cotta: Stuttgart und Augsburg, 1837), Volume 1, 154; See also Alfred H. Siemens, Between the Summit and the Sea: Central Veracruz in the Nineteenth Century (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990), 3.

25 “Aun hay otra dificultad que todo navegante sabe; y es, que sin viento norte, nadie ha podido llegar de Matamoros a Veracruz antes de veinte días; y por esta causa tienen que arribar hasta Orleans, como punto de escala, para llegar a Veracruz en menos tiempo.” MAA, Volume 1, 20 May 1836.


27 José San Román Papers, 1823-1934. CAH; Alice Pearl Raphael Papers, 1812-1960. CAH; James J. Lynch Papers. CAH; The publication is still in existence today, although its name has since been changed to The Journal of Commerce. “About Us.” The Journal of Commerce (http://www.joc.com/about-us),
Much smaller numbers of American schooners arrived from ports in the American South. Although few in number, merchants from Mobile, Alabama were also consistent trading partners. The city was well situated for trade, because like Matamoros, it was located on a river system that connected it inland with the rest of Alabama and a large part of the state of Mississippi. Cargo from Alabama consisted mostly of lumber, which was integral to the construction of homes and businesses. Mobile was a small port city of only 2,800 in 1822, considerably smaller than New Orleans’ 27,176 inhabitants of 1820.

As commercial and business ties strengthened, so too did perceptions of the city’s economic potential. Americans, such as the merchant and future consul, D.W. Smith, wrote to contacts in the United States with news of the city’s economic potential. Smith was among the many that chose to make the port his residence even before it was open to free trade—establishing business connections with Mexican merchants and encouraging others to follow in his footsteps. After being appointed by the American government as the city’s first resident-foreign consul in 1826, it is evident that he used his connections with local businessmen, both foreign and Mexican, to mediate conflicts, report to political officers in Washington on local affairs, all the while running his own merchant trade business with fellow Matamoros businessman Francis Stillman. In an 1829 consular dispatch he boasted of Matamoros’ rank to then-United States Secretary of State and future President, Martin Van Buren:

> The town is in a state of rapid improvement [and] the acknowledged advantage which it possesses over Tampico or Vera Cruz in point of health will make it at no distant day, a place of much importance to this government. Its local situation and contiguity to the United States, make it of equal commercial importance to ourselves. The great tide of American commerce will necessarily flow in this direction.

Smith and other American merchants were keenly aware that it was the economic opportunity that Matamoros provided that was drawing foreigners, a sign of the growth that the United States was experiencing at the time.

Population figures highlight the role of foreigners in the demographic growth of the city and region. Jean Louis Berlandier asserted that

> The population of Matamoros has grown continually since its founding. The political chief of the department of the North told me that, in the census which he

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28 See Chapter 3, Table 3.1.


30 Evidence of this is seen through his consistent appearance as a reference to new immigrants.

31 “D.W. Smith to Secretary of State Martin Van Buren,” July 1, 1829. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
had made at the beginning of 1829, it was found that there were in the town 6,700 inhabitants and about 10,000 in the entire municipality.\textsuperscript{32}

This is a large increase from the 2,320 reported in 1820.\textsuperscript{33}

Men continued to dominate foreign presence in the port between the years 1830 and 1844. Passenger arrival records show that more than half of all the men who entered the port were under 30, and three-fourths were under 35 years of age.\textsuperscript{34} In addition, according to the \textit{Movimiento Marítimo} (Maritime Affairs) records housed at the Mexican National Archives, over three-fourths of all the men who entered the port arrived unmarried, suggesting that they were in search of new economic endeavors, some choosing to wait before sending for their families and others with little to draw them back to their home countries.\textsuperscript{35} Roughly two-thirds of them listed their occupation as \textit{comerciante} (merchant), which could refer to anything from independent entrepreneurs (store keepers, shoemakers, silversmiths) to those seeking apprentice work with established vendors.\textsuperscript{36} Others may have come to work in the service sector, in trades that required special training and expertise and that were necessary for a growing city and population. Among those that fit this category would have been doctors, carpenters, mechanics, jewelers, hatters, and carriage builders. For the most part, those who arrived were skilled in some trade, allowing them to fill a need locally and to establish business connections with their city’s residents.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{32} Berlandier, \textit{Journey to Mexico}, 434.

\textsuperscript{33} Casamata, \textit{Presidencia Epoca Colonial 1803-1822}, Carpeta Estadistica, 1820.

\textsuperscript{34} Archivo General de la Nación (hereafter AGN), \textit{Movimiento Marítimo}, GD 129, Volumes 1-20. Data is incomplete for the years 1830-1844, however that which is available does provide information regarding nationality, age, occupation and marital status. See also Graf, “Economic History,” Table IV.

\textsuperscript{35} AGN, \textit{Movimiento Marítimo}, GD 129, Volumes 1-20.

\textsuperscript{36} Frank Byrne argues that a “merchant class” formed during the 1820-1865 period in the Southern United States, although the majority were not foreigners, but rather natives of the home state in which they conducted business. Further work for the port cities such as New Orleans is needed. Frank Byrne, \textit{Becoming Bourgeois: Merchant Culture in the South, 1820-1865} (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 25; See also John G. Clark, \textit{New Orleans 1718-1812: An Economic History} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970).

The city’s growth provided urban workers with more jobs and greater economic autonomy than their rural counterparts. As commerce increased, trade-related jobs opened for store clerks, coopers, coachmen, painters, and coheteros (makers of fireworks and gunpowder). At the same time there was a great need for transportation workers, such as freight carriers, muleteers, and stevedores.\(^{38}\) Locals now were able to leave agricultural work behind and become urban workers such as cartmen and bricklayers. Trinidad Soleman worked as a ranch foreman in one of Matamoros’ outlying ranches until the 1820s, when he migrated to the city, and by 1831, he had become a bricklayer with enough acquired capital to hire his own servant.\(^{39}\) Some used their newfound careers as entrepreneurs to become independent property owners. Many used their homes for the dual purpose of business and residence, and by 1831 there were several small businesses selling tortillas and offering ironing services running out of people’s homes, which also often doubled as boardinghouses for unmarried men.\(^{40}\)

Not all foreigners came with the intention of becoming merchants. Many came specifically in search of land, and as such, were strongly encouraged by those who came before them to bring as many items to sell as they could carry. Because the region was lacking in manufactures, those interested in establishing themselves in specific trades would need to bring all their trade tools with them. Mexican customs laws ensured that goods intended for personal use would be admitted free of duty. Clothing, “provisions” (food), and working tools were strongly recommended, as were more mundane items such as a “barrel of flour, or some corn; half a barrel of salt pork; and a keg of butter or lard.”\(^{41}\) Immigrants were encouraged to bring a “good rifle or shot gun” because it would


\(^{39}\) Casamata, Justicia, Caja 3, Exp. 45, 24 February 1831.

\(^{40}\) Casamata, Justicia, Caja 2, Exp. 35, 13 March 1831; Valerio-Jiménez, “Indios Bárbaros,” 74.

\(^{41}\) Lundy, A Circular Addressed, 5.
allow them to hunt for fresh meat as well as provide protection.\textsuperscript{42} Circulars advised that foreigners would be wise not to take anything for granted because it was much easier for them to bring what they would need rather than risk not finding items after their arrival.

Not all visitors chose to set up permanent residence in the city. Travel accounts such as that by the German travel writer, Eduard Ludecus—who travelled extensively in the Mexican interior throughout Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Texas in the late 1820s and 1830s—pronounce the dominating presence of North Americans throughout boarding house establishments. Despite having travelled throughout the Mexican interior, Ludecus was put off by the heavy presence of Americans residing in the country, with whom he would have to interact in boarding houses on a regular basis. He quipped that he was not keen on their demeanor as a whole, writing that in general the North Americans kept to themselves, did not bring their families, and did not marry Mexicans.\textsuperscript{43} His perceptions stand in stark contrast to Matamoros, where Americans were deeply connected not only to commerce but also to local politics.

Although the passport records from Matamoros housed at the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City go back only to 1832, that year at least 64 Americans requested cartas de seguridad, along with 11 French visitors.\textsuperscript{44} The American consulate wrote to officials in Washington about the demographic growth of the city:

In July, 1831, [Matamoros] contained 10,567 inhabitants and the increase of wealth and population since that time [meaning by 1834 when the report was actually transmitted] is supposed to be considerable.\textsuperscript{45}

It is reasonable to presume that foreign, most especially American immigrants to the city, fueled the city’s population increase.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citizenship</th>
<th>1832</th>
<th>1833</th>
<th>1834</th>
<th>1835</th>
<th>1836</th>
<th>1838</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prussia</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.3: Nationality Distribution of Foreigners Soliciting Immigration Documents, 1832-1838. Based on surviving Cartas de Seguridad. (Source: Compiled from data in AGN, Cartas de Seguridad, Volumes 3, 6, 8, 9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 36, 37, 41, 42, 67)

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{44} The memoir of Charles Stillman cites the following demographic data for 1832, “By August 1832 there were three hundred foreign residents in Matamoros, most of them citizens of the United States.” Chauncey Devereux Stillman, H. Minot Pitman, and Winifred Lovering Holman, Charles Stillman: 1810-1875 (New York: C.D. Stillman, 1956), 6.

The number of passport requests became more diversified with an increase in Europeans into the 1840s. The records that survive (housed in Mexico City) do not reflect actual amounts, most likely because many were lost in the long distance from Matamoros to the capital. Even the shorter distance to the state capital of Ciudad Victoria was risky, as seen in a communication from 1838. Americans dominated the official records in the early years of the 1830s, accounting for more than 80 percent of those who officially registered and requested immigration paperwork. Some 38 Spaniards requested their travel documents in 1840, along with 44 British, and ten Prussian merchants. Spaniards had been prohibited from entering Mexico prior to that year. The following year the city saw at least one Belgian and Swiss visitor, in addition to 22 British, 20 Spanish, and 13 French. The records suggest a gradual decline in American applications after 1834, likely due to the growing hostilities the group experienced as a result of the heated political events taking place in Texas.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citizenship</th>
<th>1839</th>
<th>1840</th>
<th>1841</th>
<th>1843</th>
<th>1844</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.A.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great Britain</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prussia</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.4: Nationality Distribution of Foreigners Soliciting Immigration Documents, 1839-1844. There is no available data for the year 1842. (Source: AGN, Cartas de Seguridad, Volumes 3, 6, 8, 9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 19, 20, 21, 36, 37, 41, 42, 67)

Census records reveal that the majority of foreigners who came to Matamoros stayed. As families were formed and as they established roots in the city, their offspring contributed to the significant population growth in second-generation residents. For example, of the city’s confirmed 10,633 inhabitants in 1844, roughly 4,923 were minors under the age of sixteen, almost equally split between girls and boys (Table 4.5). It was not unusual for foreigners to migrate at a young age, as was the case with Connecticut native Francis Stillman, who started his illustrious career as a ship owner trading with the gulf ports of Mobile and New Orleans and “thence to the interior of Mexico.”

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46 A request was made for a census of foreigners in 1838, but the results are lost: MAA, Volume 29, p. 87, 6 March 1838.

47 A vice-consul for Prussia was named by state officials in Ciudad Victoria in 1835: MAA, Volume 23, p. 51, 21 December 1835. Local officials in Matamoros responded favorably the following year: MAA, Volume 26, p. 149, 21 January 1836.

48 The Texas Republic is well documented within the historiography, but mostly by Texas historians. While the land grants are praised by Texans as an integral part of their own state’s history, historians of Mexico have looked back on such events as a mistake. See William Ransom Hogan, The Texas Republic: A Social and Economic History (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1946); Stanley Siegel, A Political History of the Texas Republic: 1836-1845 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1956); David Montejano, Anglos and Mexicans in the Making of Texas, 1836-1986 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987).

age of seventeen he was in charge of a goods store in Durango, where he learned Spanish and business practices that he would later utilize in his business partnership with D.W. Smith in Matamoros. The majority of married men and women fell between the ages of 25 and 40, which besides minors made up the highest numbers within the city. Perhaps a sign of low life expectancy, the numbers appear to taper off for residents over the age of 40, whose numbers were 1,627.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Single Men</th>
<th>Single Women</th>
<th>Married Men</th>
<th>Married Women</th>
<th>Widowed Men</th>
<th>Widowed Women</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>1224</td>
<td>1219</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7-16</td>
<td>1184</td>
<td>1126</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2480</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-25</td>
<td>587</td>
<td>664</td>
<td>357</td>
<td>465</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1694</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-40</td>
<td>587</td>
<td>318</td>
<td>723</td>
<td>735</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>914</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50+</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>713</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>10,633</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.5: City of Matamoros Census Data, 1844. (Source: Compiled from data in Casamata, I. Ayuntamiento, 1844-1845, Carpeta Estadística, 1844)

Another indicator that foreigners tended to stay was that they married into Mexican families with some frequency.  

Scholars have emphasized the economic underpinnings of these unions. As noted earlier, the notorious contrabandista and French navigator Don Ramón Lafón, originally a native of Cestas (a coastal city in Southwestern France) arrived in Matamoros in the early 1820s intent on finding new markets for his tobacco and dry goods business. Not long after his arrival, on March 1, 1824 he married María de los Ángeles García, daughter of Rafael García Hinojosa and Guadalupe Cisneros Salinas, original members of the founding families of the villas del norte in the late eighteenth century (Figure 4.3). According to baptismal records they had at least six children between 1825 and 1832, and one of their sons, Anastasio Ramón Lafón García, would become an integral political figure in Monterrey in the late 1860s as well as the administrator of a factory in San Luis Potosí. Another example is the case of Henry Clay Davis, who visited the city of Camargo (about 50 miles up the river from Matamoros), fell in love with Hilaria Garza, and in order to gain her parents’ permission to marry, agreed to permanently settle on the northern side of the Río Bravo, today Río Grande City, Texas. His six children and wife all lived on a ranch that he established...

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50 Casamata, I. Ayuntamiento, 1844-1845, Carpeta Estadística, 1844.
53 Oscar Rivera Saldaña, Diccionario biográfico de la heróica Matamoros (Matamoros: Librería Española, 2001), 325.
there, operating a trading post business that dealt regularly with the Mexican population of the region.55

Figure 4.3: María de los Ángeles García, widow of Ramón Lafón, c. 1840 (Source: Photo courtesy of Daniel J. Maxwell and Family)

There appears to have been a network of foreigners who arrived from overseas and married into elite families. Emilio Manatou (also Manoutou) arrived in the same years as Lafón, and married María del los Ángeles García’s sister, Felipa in 1827. He developed business ties with a Mr. Forega and eventually sold a property in 1833 to another foreign businessman, William M. Maerts. In fact, notary records from that same year attest to the intercultural nature of the city’s business and real estate transactions, which include documents notarized for the following individuals: Mauritius Hebeneistrain, Joaquin Lopez Duque de Estrada, Luis Marchou, Charles Bork, Agustin Benaben, Charles Douglas, Richard Blosman, Joana Keneely, Zenon Germain, Peter Blanchan, William F. Vigers, John Jewett, James M. Thompson, and Bretania M. Cutter, Samuel W. Davis.56


56 Most names are Hispanized within the records (for example William is spelled Guillermo). “Inventario de los protocolos que existen en el archive de este ayuntamiento y que se saga a fin de
Not all cross-cultural marriages revolved around elite connections. Although less accounted for in the records, unskilled workers, many of whom immigrated with their employers, came to the city in search of work, where they served as independent artisans or as clerks in trade houses. Only a few were domestic servants and the vast majority were from the United States. Much smaller numbers arrived from Spain, Ireland, or France. Individuals from all social strata, including mule cart operators and wealthy ranchers, were required, at one point or another, to interact with each other as part of their mutual commercial interests. In fact, although they may have had lesser economic means, some used their distinction as “Americans” to assert their rights within the judicial system.

Henry Viudy (Enrique within the records), an African American barber from New York, was charged in 1832 with shooting and killing his brother-in-law, José Jorge Orr, also African American. Both men were married to non-elite Mexican women, although several witnesses claim that Orr had a pattern of assaulting his wife, María de Jesús Franco, who had separated from him several times as a result. After accusing Viudy of hiding her in his home during a recent separation, Orr went on a rampage, showing up at Viudy’s house and cursing at him in French, all the while threatening to drive a knife into his stomach. Utilizing his rights as an American citizen, Viudy appealed to American consul D.W. Smith, who testified on his behalf by affirming that he was a man “who always has a moderate and peaceful conduct, and is dedicated mainly to his job and family.” Other fellow merchants appeared as supportive witnesses, arguing that there was no other explanation than self-defense since Orr was “a provocative drunk who loved engaging in disagreements and fights.” It is clear from the Viudy example that intermarriages occurred at all levels of the social ladder.

Others who came ended up settling further inland since they were actively involved with the transportation of goods to markets in the interior. One such settler was Henry C. Connelly, who emigrated from Kentucky via Matamoros to Chihuahua, Mexico, where he became a merchant and freighter. Aware that settlers in Texas needed imported goods, he made it his life’s goal to connect Chihuahua’s overland trade routes to central Texas. In 1839, he and two other merchants purchased seven wagons, enlisted about 100 guards, 50 of whom were Mexicans, and used more than 700 mules to carry an undisclosed amount of silver to the United States with the intent of returning with manufactured goods that they could sell to the eager markets in northern Mexico. When Connelly returned he was at the head of 60 to 80 wagons that carried about 200 people,

58 Casamata, Justicia, Caja 2, Exp. 3, 12 October 1832.
59 Casamata, Justicia, Caja 2, Exp. 3, 4 September 1832; Casamata, Justicia, Caja 2, Exp. 3, 12 October 1832; Casamata, Justicia, Caja 1, Exp. 25, 12 March 1827; See also Omar Valerio-Jiménez, River of Hope: Forging Identity and Nation in the Rio Grande Borderlands (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 72-73.
even including a circus. While the venture eventually failed, it provides a context with which to understand the lengths that American traders were willing to go in order to service untapped markets. Matamoros may have been their point of arrival, but it was not necessarily the final destination for many immigrants.

While many chose to marry Mexicans, others relied on their ties back in the United States to find their partners. Francis Stillman and Daniel Willard Smith both arrived to the port without families but later sent back for them. Stillman’s son, Charles, arrived in the port via New Orleans in 1828 at the age of 17—having spent the majority of his life in Wethersfield, Connecticut. The purpose of his move was to join his father in business, and he acquired a great deal of money doing so. He lived in Matamoros until immediately after the Mexican-American War, when he crossed the river and founded the city of Brownsville, Texas. He could have easily chosen to marry a woman from one of the elite ranching families in pursuit of greater upward social mobility, but instead he chose to send for and marry Elizabeth Pamela Goodrich Stillman, daughter of Deacon Joshua Goodrich and Clarissa Francis, who was born in the same Connecticut town as he. Aside from language barriers, one suspects that their reasons may have been religious, which prohibited the marriage of any Mexican to a non-Catholic.

Regardless, Stillman was less reluctant to join with Mexicans in his business partnerships. His business interests in Mexico mirrored the deep reach of overland trade networks. One of his business partners, José Morell, established retail outlets and founded one of the first textile factories in Monterrey. Stillman had a number of mercantile and industrial enterprises, including a cotton brokerage and real estate firms, silver mines in Nuevo León and Tamaulipas, merchandise outlets, and a shipping company that carried passengers and goods along the Río Bravo as far inland as Río Grande City. In addition, he owned an off-loading, warehousing, and transportation company that carried goods to the Mexican interior as far as Guadalajara. In fact, Stillman’s Vallecillo mines, located between Laredo and Monterrey, produced more than $4 million in silver and lead during the 1850s, and he sold their stock on the New York Stock Exchange.

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63 John Mason Hart, "STILLMAN, CHARLES"

Mexican officials kept a close eye on American marriage arrangements. Barely three weeks into his new role as consul, Mexican officials filed a legal case against Smith that claimed that his marriage earlier that year had not followed Mexican law. The paper trail went as far south as Mexico City, where the case documents can be found in the national archive, including a letter written on August 18, 1826 by José León Lobo, the Minister of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs in Monterrey to the President of the Republic. The case against Smith, as summarized by Lobo, was justified “by the manner in which his marriage was celebrated, in the style of his country, causing the biggest scandal for the residents of this town [Matamoros].”

Other evidence describes the details of an investigation into his marriage that called for the annulment of his marriage under Mexican law. The facts behind the case were that Smith, a Catholic, had married the sister of Ricardo Piars (Richard Pearse), a Presbyterian and a foreigner, and the wedding had taken place in his house and had been performed by a Catholic priest. The central issue was that they had not received the proper civil approvals and the Mexican authorities were intent on “separating Smith from his false and null matrimony.”

It is unclear whether Smith’s marriage was actually annulled or whether he was permitted to

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66 Ibid.
obtain the necessary civil approvals after the fact. As we will see in the chapter that follows, he remained a prominent local figure well into the 1840s.

Interrmarriage was a resourceful way for immigrant merchants to better their social status and political connections. Many became experienced at using local courts to protect their property; however, they remained at a huge disadvantage because they were mostly ignorant of Mexican laws and unable to speak Spanish. Unless they married into native families, they would need to rely on a smaller network of friends and family members to assist them in pursuing litigation. According to reports, some faced harsher treatment by Mexican officials who favored citizens over immigrants in judicial cases.\(^\text{67}\) For example, complaints by American citizens residing in the port and unable to maneuver the Mexican legal system overwhelm the records of the American consulate, which was charged with protecting their interests while abroad.\(^\text{68}\) But this is not to say that they were not resourceful. Many hired interpreters from among their business contacts to assist with judicial matters, while those that had intermarried used their family connections. Language barriers were not inconsequential, as Thomas Michel had his case against Comandante Don Jesús García dismissed on procedural grounds because an interpreter was not available.\(^\text{69}\) But by 1836, there were at least three official Public Interpreters—Ambrocio Aparicio (English), Juan Martínez and Fernando de la Peña (French).\(^\text{70}\) Foreigners had at their disposal an additional tool not available to Mexicans, which is that they could call on consular officials for legal assistance. Able to exert their power as non-citizens and secure relatively fast resolutions, consuls like Peter Schatzell (originally from Germany), were able to file suits within the legal system for cases against other foreigners such as John Wilbur for the mishandling of the transport of goods from the Brazo de Santiago to the city center in 1835.\(^\text{71}\)

With foreign settlement came a shift in how the Mexican judicial system was used to handle disputes. Anxious to ensure that their interests were protected, foreign resident complaints flooded the court records. Disputes over land and cattle shifted to issues involving business affairs such as the settlement of debts or the failed delivery of merchandise. The case of Francisco Arjona versus Don Nicolás Druet in 1834 is one such example. Arjona was a native-born merchant who brought suit against the foreign businessman Druet for payment of the delivery of 300,000 bricks.\(^\text{72}\) Arjona’s employee, Domingo Martínez, claimed that Druet had not paid the correct amount for his services. Druet claims that had he known that they wished to charge him more, he would have bought “less inferior bricks.”\(^\text{73}\) The import-export economy shaped contract disputes

\(^{68}\) Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
\(^{69}\) Casamata, Justicia, Caja 10, 28 May 1822.
\(^{70}\) Jaime Erick Paredes Cisneros, Matamoros Property Owned By Foreigners. Unpublished Table.
\(^{71}\) “Don Pedro Schatzell reclamando el fallo promovido por el juez de Paz Don Tomas de la Garza en el juicio de conciliación que contra el intento D. Juan Wilbur” Casamata, Justicia 1822-1850, Caja 6, 1835.
\(^{72}\) Casamata, Justicia, Caja 2, Exp. 26, 10 November 1834.
\(^{73}\) Ibid.
between merchants and redefined what courts spent the majority of their time adjudicating. Merchants found their right to litigate over property (and unpaid monies) crucial to maintaining their business interests, and ultimately, their wealth.

Ultimately, foreigners learned that in order to be successful in their trade interactions they needed to find ways to negotiate without the hindrance of political, linguistic, or national barriers. The travelling mule train markets described in Chapter 3 underscore the idea that foreigners on any given pilgrimage could encounter indigenous traders, Mexican nationals, or even distant cousins from Arkansas. Henry L. Kinney, founder of Corpus Christi, confirms the necessity for merchants to cater to diverse groups of people:

When Mr. Mexican came, I treated him with a great deal of politeness, particularly if he had me in his power; when Mr. American came, I did the same with him; and when Mr. Indian came, I was also very frequently disposed to make a compromise with him. These types of negotiated commercial exchanges were essential to a merchant’s success. Although many exchanges were informal (meaning no records were kept), it is likely that they occurred with enough frequency to make the risk worth the gain. Protecting the economic interests of all parties was challenging, especially because most foreigners stood to lose a considerable amount.

The thriving commercial ties that they developed were extremely lucrative. The cross-cultural business relationships that merchants forged were what accounted for their economic success. In order to subsist locally, American (or other foreign) merchants had to form ties with locals who could help transport their goods or oversee different aspects of their businesses. Winston notes that,

It is not improbable that these vessels were built in Mexico, manned by those of that nationality, but of American ownership. For the twenty months ending January 15, 1836, it was estimated that the export to Mexico ports from New Orleans amounted to eight million dollars, of which some three and a half million consisted of domestic manufactures, the balance being principally English imported goods."

74 Prior to the 1820s many court cases involved cattle disputes. Casamata, Justicia, Caja 1, Exp. 3, 14 December 1810; Casamata, Colonial, Exp. 7, 9 July 1814; Casamata, Colonial, Exp. 3, 23 April 1810; Valerio-Jiménez, “Indios Bárbaros,” 80.


77 “A thriving and lucrative trade was carried on between New Orleans and Mexico. Nearly a dozen merchantmen plied regularly between the city and the Mexican ports of Tampico, Matamoras [sic], Brazoria, Tuxpan, and the Galveston Bay region; the vessels were small, of 100 to 150 tons burden. It is not improbable that these vessels were built in Mexico, manned by those of that nationality, but of American ownership. For the twenty months ending January 15, 1836, it was estimated that the export to Mexico ports from New Orleans amounted to eight million dollars, of which some three and a half million consisted of domestic manufactures, the balance being principally English imported goods.” J.E. Winston, “Notes on
The suggestion is that in order for these business arrangements to succeed, merchants of different backgrounds had to find ways to work together for the benefit of all parties, regardless of race, nationality or creed.

In summary, the port and city of Matamoros became the region’s hub for foreign residents in the years following its legal opening. The majority of its residents were of American origin—either with original ties to Northeastern cities such as Boston or New York or with more recent ties to the city or the thriving commercial port of New Orleans. Regardless, these extranjeros (foreigners) as Mexican officials chose to refer to them, made an active effort to insert themselves into local culture either through marriage or new business relationships. As their presence became more established, so too did their influence on local culture, which is where we turn next.

City Businesses and Consumer Tastes as Seen through Matamoros Print Culture

The previous section demonstrates that the vast majority of foreigners who made Matamoros their home came with the intent of opening businesses that catered to the needs of a growing city. As their numbers solidified by the 1830s, so too did their presence in the local print culture, best evidenced through advertisements that catered to them. Almost exclusively, these announcements offered the sale of imported luxury items from abroad. The demand for these items and the commercial connections required to supply them were what fueled the city’s economic growth into the 1840s.

The United States was also experiencing dramatic economic growth in the early 1820s, and along with that came a swarm of new newspapers throughout the nation.\footnote{78} Referred to by scholars as the “print revolution,” by the 1820s new periodicals “started mushrooming in frontier towns like Louisville, Mobile, Natches, San Felipe de Austin, and Galveston.”\footnote{79} Compared to the publications of established news organizations like the New York Herald, these local newspapers may have seemed small-scale. However, their editorial strategy involved the liberal plagiarism of other newspapers, with the addition of local affairs and commentary. Ethics aside, they fulfilled a legitimate need for information about local happenings for their readership.

Relatively few copies of the Matamoros newspapers from the period leading up to the Mexican-American War have been preserved. \textit{The American Flag}, a publication printed during the American occupation of the city (1846-1848) is the only complete file of a local newspaper available today. While a handful of Spanish-language publications have survived, their articles suggest that the readership consisted of the established (and


educated) local residents, as their content generally dealt with local and national political affairs. Thirteen locally produced periodicals from that period were located, although it is impossible to determine how representative they may be of the actual number of print materials circulating at the time. Among ones that were not found are the personal publications of Samuel Bangs in Monterrey. Surviving American consular records contain excerpts of many Spanish and English language publications of the day, in addition to a few of the papers published in Mexico City, as they were often included as attachments to the consular dispatches. Apart from containing periodicals such as the Bangs papers that were not preserved, they offer insights into what American diplomats considered significant enough to transmit to officials in Washington.

As we have seen, foreigners permeated local society both through intermarriage and their strategic business alliances. It seems unlikely that one could visit the town without running into or interacting with foreign residents. The background of one of Matamoros’ prominent newspaper publishers reveals the strong ties between foreigners and local print culture. George (commonly referred to as Jorge) Fisher, was born in 1795 in Székesfehérvár, Hungary, and travelled to Mexico in the early 1820s after having first landed in Philadelphia. In 1825, he helped found the first York Rite Masonic Lodge in Mexico City and shortly thereafter in 1829 became a naturalized Mexican citizen. After settling in Matamoros, he was named an official Public Interpreter and translator of foreign languages at the behest of the foreign and native merchants and the foreign consuls who lived there. The state government of Tamaulipas confirmed his appointment in 1833. Fisher is said to have been fluent in eight languages, making his profession as an interpreter lucrative. In 1834, he began the first run of his provisional newspaper, Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros, a bilingual publication that published...
political commentary (he was particularly opposed to the efforts of General Santa Anna), special interest pieces, and advertisements catering to the port’s foreign and local residents.  

He was careful to make his publication pertinent and accessible to both locals and foreigners. Santa Anna’s supporters found his political leanings subversive and ordered his expulsion from the country in the late 1830s. Fisher ended up in San Francisco, where he served as consul to Greece until his death in 1873.

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Figure 4.5: George Fisher, Interpreter, Publisher, and Matamoros Business Owner c. 1843 (Source: http://www.tamu.edu/faculty/ccbn/dewitt/fishergeorge.htm)

In general, newspaper advertisements catered to the city’s foreign residents’ tastes. As noted, the majority of ads are not for farm or transportation equipment, but rather for foreign imports such as tobacco and liquor. We get a flavor of consumers’ tastes through these advertisements, often run in English and Spanish and placed by business owners to inform the locals of the city’s newest establishments, latest shipments, and services. The names listed reveal the diversity of local business owners’ ethnic backgrounds, including French, German, Spanish, and English. It is apparent that locals took inspiration from the French, as many businesses, including Julio Merle’s café bordering the main plaza, were advertised as being “por el estilo de los de Paris” (in the

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85 The publication was also against Texas efforts for succession. MAA, Volumes 1 and 24, (multiple dates); Reséndez, Changing National Identities, 230.


87 First mention of a liquor store, “Al alcalde, sobre la pendencia de un individuo con un extranjero en una tienda de licores,” MAA, Volume 21, p.161, 19 October 1830.
Parisian style).

Although the city was residence to all social classes, the advertisements mostly touted fine imported wines and superior quality merchandise.

Figure 4.6: Badger’s tobacco shop, playfully attracted their reader’s attention through lively prose. (Source: The American Flag, 1 October 1846)

These advertisements illustrate the variety of goods that would have appealed to the city’s multicultural residents. A.G. Mayers, who owned a store on the main plaza, advertised in English and Spanish for “Calicoes, Domestic, Shirts, hose and half-hose, silk and cotton handkerchiefs; Champagne, Claret, Port, Madeira, Sherry and Barsac Wines, Brandy Fruits, etc.”

Partners Dolf and Mackay advertised their “Wholesale and Retail Store’s” reasonably priced, “Dry goods, Clothing, Shoes, Boots, Wines of all descriptions, Tobacco, Cigars, Medicines, etc, etc [all of] the very best quality, which they will always be ready to dispose of for CASH.”

Mrs. Foyle’s new store on Commercial Street listed her assortment of items,

Where ladies and gentlemen can see a select assortment of Silks, Calicoes, Domestic, shirts, handkerchiefs, cravats, braces, hose and half-hose, Clothing of various descriptions, boots and shoes, hats, ribbons, gloves, shawls, laces, capes, children’s caps, and other fancy goods too numerous to particularise in an advertisement – all of which will be sold cheap for cash. Call and examine for yourselves.

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88 “Julio Merle’s café,” Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros, Casamata, Tesoreria Histórica, 15 January 1836.
89 Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros, Casamata, Tesoreria Histórica, 23 September 1836.
90 Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros, Casamata, Tesoreria Histórica, 4 September 1836.
91 Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros, Casamata, Tesoreria Histórica, 23 August 1836.
New imports were also featured in these ads. The schooner “Mary Emer” listed nearly its entire manifest for readers to examine. All the items were fine quality imports:

Bordeaux claret of a superior quality, 10 casks; Haut, Sauterne, and Barsac, white French wines in quarter casks; Claret wines, St. Julien Medoc, etc. in boxes; Madeira, London particular; Absynth and Kirschwasser, Swiss, Anisette, etc; cordials, sweet oil, and catsup.

Also, Chewing Tobacco and Havanna Segars, of the best brands; 20 jars of Snuff; Hardware, tin and glass ware, bar fixings, etc; Crockery and Sadlery; casting of all sorts and sizes; 3 blacksmith’s vices; Ohio Cheese, a superior quality; spades, shovels, hoes, nail hammers, saws, files, faucets, locks, plane bits, screws, tacks, etc.; Boots and Shoes; Stirrups, solid brass; port-bitts, and other articles too numerous to mention. F. Helmuller. 92

Besides luxury imports the ads included some odd and eccentric items, such as Dr. R de la Ferriere’s notice of having “received an assortment of the finest species of Leeches, also a supply of the celebrated Pectoral Paste.” 93 It is possible that the local doctor specialized in these alternative treatments, as the ad goes on to note, “His vapor, sulphuric, tepid, and medicinal Baths are yet at the service of the Public, at his house, Doctor Cos Street, near the Lake.” 94 Dr. Cheek advertised his “SALUTARUS” which was able to cure a number of ailments, including “cancers, king’s evil, white swellings, and ulcers of every description.” 95 According to Reséndez, the region and time period were notorious for quackery, and it is impossible to verify the credentials of Ferriere and Cheek. 96 Curiously, no mention was made of treatments for common ailments or illnesses such as smallpox, yellow fever or cholera. 97

The advertisements indicate that women ran a number of independent businesses in the city. For instance, Eliza Proctor, operated a city hotel, and Mrs. Foyle (the extent of the name listed), owned her own general store. 98 Susana O’Docharty ran a school for girls that catered to foreign residents. In fact, her printed advertisements tell of offerings ranging from Castilian Spanish and English to Math (Arithmetic, Geometry, Trigonometry), Science (Geography, Natural Philosophy), and Sewing (both for domestic purposes and ornamental). 99 Departure information also tells us that women sometimes

92 Ibid.
93 El Mercurio de Matamoros, Casamata, Tesoreria Histórica, 14 October 1836.
94 Ibid.
95 Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros, Matamoros, Tesoreria Histórica, 9 September 1836.
97 There are cases of foreign doctors being called to question by local officials. MAA, Volume 37, p. 126, 25 August 1841; MAA, Volume 38, p. 28, 20 October 20 1841.
98 El Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros, Casamata, Tesoreria Historica, 4 March 1836.
99 Saldaña, Diccionario, 405.
travelled alone—such as Mrs. Ashby and Amelia Miller (and family) who both departed the port without their husbands on a schooner headed for New Orleans.  

Other businesses besides Merle’s Parisian style café took inspiration from the French. Indeed, the advertisements hint that readers’ tastes leaned towards fine imported wines and superior quality merchandise. Bagatay Simon’s French restaurant, located on the city’s main square (Plaza Hidalgo) advertised being able to supply both “the citizens and strangers in Matamoros” with “every delicacy that the market or city affords.” Interestingly, the establishment was opened in the upper story of Colonel Lew P. Cook’s dry goods store, a common practice of the time.

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FRENCH RESTAURA[N]T.

THE CITIZENS and STRANGERS in Matamoros are most respectfully notified, that the undersigned has opened a large and commodious RESTAURA[N]T, in the upper story of the building occupied by Col. Lew P. Cook’s store, on the corner of Calle Terran and the Public Square, where he will be at all times happy to meet his friends and acquaintances, and serve them at his Tables with every delicacy that the market or city affords. From his past experience in this business, he flatters himself that he will be able to please the most fastidious that may honor him with a call.

N.B. Active and the best waiters are secured, and no attention shall be lacking on his part.

FINE WINES furnished at the most reasonable prices.

BAGATAY SIMON

Matamoros, Sept. 5, 1846

Figure 4.7: Simon’s French Restaurant located on the Plaza Hidalgo catered to the city’s foreign population (Source: MAA, Volume 1, The American Flag, 5 September 1846)

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101 Julio Merle’s café, El Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros, Casamata, 15 January 1836; Eliza Proctor’s hotel, El Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros, Casamata, 4 March 1836.

102 The American Flag, MAA, Volume 1, 5 September 1846.
The value placed on the ability to communicate in different languages is evident in the following notice published in *El Mercurio* and which announces a solicitor’s language and math school in the city, both subjects potentially of benefit to local merchants.

A French ecclesiastic with a Master’s degree, and who has been a professor of modern languages at one of the best schools in the North, offers to establish a school in this city for the teaching of Spanish, French, and English. It will also provide an excellent math program, if demand is high. People who by reason of their social class do not wish to enroll in a public course can receive private lessons. He lives in the house that forms the corner of the main plaza Hidalgo and Liceaga Street, for references please see Mr. Rodríguez and Don Francisco Pichon.103

The ability to communicate with merchants of varying linguistic backgrounds was essential to their ability to forge new connections. *Venduteros* (auctioneers) advertised their ability to cater to the city’s multilingual populace. Juan N. Henriques placed three ads in a single publication, proclaiming that “Sales will be cried in the Spanish, English, and French languages.”104 Those that travelled to the interior were less likely to encounter people who spoke English. As noted in Potter’s account in Chapter 3, many chose to travel in large entourages with natives (presumably some of whom were bilingual). In addition, the French ecclesiastic’s call for mathematics instruction suggests

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103 *El Mercurio de Matamoros*, MAA, Volume 1, 4 November 1836.
104 *El Mercurio de Matamoros*, MAA, Volume 1, 23 September 1836.
an appeal to the merchant community. These were valued commodities at this time, enough so that the solicitor made allowances for those of higher social class.

The periodicals also appealed to the newly arrived, extolling the advantages of settling in Matamoros. One local Mexican official published a pamphlet that argued that the port was “relatively as cheap as Mexico City.” He then went on to list the city’s available commercial goods—clearly one of the city’s main draws. In his words:

Excellent wines, good meats, a variety of pickles, goods from the United States, and a normal and well appointed house, are all available at comfortable prices that one could not want for anything.

Descriptions such as this underscore the ways that city residents and officials embraced its transnational connections publicly. Rather than emphasize the ranching economy of the region that brought settlers there in the first place, the city, in its first years of legal existence became a trading center—drawing people and goods from around the world.

Ads for established boarding houses, often run by foreigners, appeared regularly in both English and Spanish (Figure 4.9). Boarding houses were integral meeting places for newly arrived immigrants looking to settle in the city. The local papers made it easy for readers to locate these establishments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BOARDING HOUSE.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boarders can be accommodated at the United States House, on Commercial Street, second block from the Square, in a manner unsurpassed by any house in the city. Boarders will be taken by the day or week, and every attention will be paid to keeping the table well supplied. The charges are moderate, and the proprietors flatter themselves the House is too well known to need further recommendation. Attached to the Boarding House is a BAKERY, where steamboats and families can at all times be supplied in any quantities they may desire. Also, a BAR, where the choicest Liquors are to be had.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MR. &amp; MRS. BROWN, Proprietors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.9: The United States House boarded visitors and was run by the Browns, who also owned one of two local bakeries. (Source: The American Flag, 16 September 1846, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin)

Newspapers also advertised ship arrival and departure data. Although most erred on the side of brevity, announcing only the name and origin or destination of an arriving or departing ship, others gave detailed information about their contents. One such printing (Figure 4.10) informs residents that the schooner Henrique departed the port from the mouth of the Rio Bravo entrance to the port with $46,800 in coined silver. Its passenger list reflects the city’s transnational connections—“italiano,” “mejicano,” “americana,” “irlandés,” and “francés.” All were headed to New Orleans, some with

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107 *El Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros*, MAA, Volume 1, 27 May 1836.
their families. It is likely that many of those mentioned in the advertisement were repeat visitors, with direct ties to the local economy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SALIDAS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mayo 1. De la Boca del Río, bergantina goleta Americana, Henriques, su capitan Bredall, para N. Orleans, su cargamento 46,800 pesos, plata acuñada. Pasageros, Juan Barbote, italiano; Manuel Campos, mejicano; Marcos Bouriguez, francés; E.M. Neil, Americana; Amelia Miller y familia, Americana; Mrs. Ashby, Americana; Mr. Capkin; el Cura de la colonia de San Patricio, irlandés, comun criado de la misma nacion; Mr. McGloin, irlandés; Dr. Biron, francés; Antonio Fouquier y su familia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DEPARTURES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mayo 1. From the mouth of the river, American brigantine schooner Henry, its captain Bredall, for N. Orleans, its cargo 46,800 pesos, coined silver. Passengers, Juan Barbote, Italian; Manuel Campos, Mexican; Marcos Bouriguez, French; E.M. Neil, American; Amelia Miller and family, American; Mrs. Ashby, American; Mr. Capkin; Priest of the Colony of San Patricio, Irish, common servant of the same nation; Mr. McGloin, Irish; Dr. Biron, French; Antonio Fouquier and family.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4.10: Departures Advertisement. Translation by author (Source: MAA, Volume 1, *Mercurio del Puerto de Matamoros*, 27 May 1836)

While announcements directed to the general public appeared with much lesser frequency in the Spanish-language periodicals, they do underscore the ways that business permeated local affairs. Real estate ads in Spanish-language newspapers were common, targeting both local and foreign readers. One example is the Henry Gaines ad in the *Mercurio de Matamoros*:

An opportunity for a good Bargain. The Lot of Ground and Buildings, situate[d] at the S.W. corner of Durango and Michoacan Streets, will be sold cheap if quick application be made, as the owner wishes to move his family from this place to settle in the city of Mexico.\(^{108}\)

Gaines was proprietor to multiple properties and businesses within the city, including the Union Coffee House. Coffee houses were common gathering places at the end of the day for foreigners within the city.\(^{109}\) Other commercial matters as they related to business affairs such as retirement were announced in the papers. Many even used these announcements as a means to publicly announce their calling of debts (Figure 4.11).

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\(^{108}\) *El Mercurio de Matamoros*, MAA, Volume 1, 9 September 1836.

\(^{109}\) Ludecus, *Reise durch die mexikanischen*, 336.
AVISO.
Queriendome retirar del comercio ofresco vender la casa y
csistentencias que tiene el tendajo del REGUILETE, sobre
algunas condiciones que serán muy a favor del comprador:
con tal motivo suplico a todas las personas que adeuden a
dicha casa tengan la bondad de venirle a satisfacer sus
compromisos sin que sea necesario otras providencias
quedandoles agradecido de su buen comportamiento.
Matamoros Julio 6 de 1838. – GERONIMO GAZANO.

NOTICE.
Wanting to retire from commerce I offer to sell the house and
inventory of the store REGUILETE, with some beneficial
conditions in favor of the buyer. Due to this I beg to anyone
that has a loan with the said house be so kind as to comply
with your commitment without anything further. Thanking
you for your understanding.
Matamoros July 6, 1838. – GERONIMO GAZANO.

Advertisements in Matamoros’ newspapers underscore the city’s commercial
identity. Businesses touted their ability to service the luxurious tastes of the city’s
residents, emphasizing the international flavor of goods that made their way into the city.
The demand for these items is clear from the volume of ads as well as from the published
contents of the ships’ registers. Given the city’s roots in agriculture and ranching, it is
significant that this shift took place during this period. Perhaps most important is that it
is apparent that the residents of Matamoros not only had the desire, but also the means to
purchase these goods.

The Shaping of a Noticeably American-Influenced Mexican City

British Charge d’affaires H.G. Ward, wrote about Matamoros’ commercial milieu
as early as 1829. His assertion that “[a]lmost every house in the town is a shop”
underscores the physical growth that the city experienced as a result of its expanding
economy.110 In fact, the growth in population that Matamoros experienced as a result of
foreign, albeit predominantly American, immigration during this period had long lasting
effects on the physical development of the city as a whole. The same foreigners that
made Matamoros their home during this period established businesses with the hopes of
prospering from the market demands of a newly independent nation. Used to certain
architectural styles and standards, foreign residents were active in the construction of
homes, buildings, and city landmarks that reflected their points of origin. Shops lined the
central plaza, filled with merchandise that could only be obtained overseas. Because the
incoming ships spent at minimum two weeks docked at the port, a number of saloons and
restaurants were established to cater to their recreational needs. Furthermore, those that
chose to develop land within the city center imposed their own aesthetic tastes and styles,
and this gave the city a distinctly foreign character that set it apart from other commercial
centers in Mexico. Because the majority of business owners came from New Orleans, it

110 H.G. Ward, Mexico: His Majesty’s Charge d’affaires in that Country During the Years 1825, 1826,
is not surprising that the city began to emulate New Orleans physically. Many of the buildings were influenced by the style of the French Quarter in New Orleans, whose architectural style reflects the port city’s mix of Spanish, French, Creole and American roots.¹¹¹

As evidenced by its New Orleans connections, Matamoros soon took on a variety of uniquely hybrid architectural styles, reflecting the background of each building’s owner. Private houses were made almost entirely of brick, a stark contrast to the straw huts indigenous to the region. Berlandier took notice of the differences: “As in Louisiana, private houses are made of brick, and they present a very special contrast because of the diverse tastes of those who had them built.”¹¹² Not surprisingly, the newly-arrived American-descent developers were the most active builders. As Graf notes, “[Buildings] belonging to foreigners were built in an American style so that even at this early date the city had a distinctly American air.”¹¹³ In addition, unlike many colonial-era towns, Matamoros was laid out and developed over a comparatively large area, with vacant spaces and lots that gave it a much more “diffuse, sprawling appearance.”¹¹⁴ Usually a sign of underdevelopment, this difference may have also been strategic, underscored by merchants’ desires to conduct business transactions unnoticed, especially if they had known ties to contraband activity. As was noted in Chapter 2, some ranches on the outskirts of the city were known for smuggling activity.

The region’s natural terrain was quickly transformed to suit the needs of the city’s new inhabitants. Officials began construction in 1823 of a parish church, which later became the city’s cathedral, located on the east side of the main plaza. It is adjacent to the customs house and opposite the city’s main municipal government offices (today referred to as the Presidencia). The plaza was likewise lined with the businesses and houses of the city’s most affluent citizens, many of whom were immigrants. Almost all had connections to foreign trade.


¹¹² Berlandier, Journey to Mexico, Volume 5, 434.


¹¹⁴ Ibid.
Although city structures took on a character of their own, the city’s first planners strictly adhered to the Spanish grid town plan that had been in place since the adoption of the Laws of the Indies. The town was surveyed and ejidos appropriated in 1826.\textsuperscript{115} Colonial ordinances noted that all Spanish colonial towns were to have a central plaza surrounded by important buildings, from which the town’s principal streets would begin. Matamoros followed this model and adapted to the growth of the city by establishing new plazas that catered to the commercial activity taking place there.

Berlandier’s 1836 map of the city provides clues to the spatial growth of the city (Map 4.1).\textsuperscript{116} He makes note of many of the city blocks in varas (roughly yards), likely with the intention of delimiting the properties of the city’s inhabitants. According to his grid the city underwent significant growth in its first years of existence. More

\textsuperscript{115}Ibid, 30.

specifically, he has notated four plazas, two of which had been named to reflect their intended economic purpose. The *Plaza de los Arrieros* (Muleteer’s Plaza) was the furthest removed from the city center—where mules would park before either departing to interior markets loaded with goods imported through the port or upon arriving with exports such as silver and hides. The second plaza, *Plaza del Mercado* (Market Plaza) was surrounded by four large buildings (presumably home to various shops and outposts), each of which occupied an entire city block.

![Figure 4.14: Berlandier’s rough sketch of the city prior to its development. Notice that the signature two-story brick buildings that would later dominate the landscape appear nonexistent. (Source: Jean Louis Berlandier, *Diario del viaje*, 1828)](image)
Merchant connections were integral to the construction of city buildings in the new port. The city cathedral, built in 1823, was designed in the same renaissance and Spanish colonial style as St. Louis Cathedral, which faces the famous Jackson Square in New Orleans. Mexican church records indicate that they were both designed and built by the same architect and bricklayers, evidence of which is seen by the striking resemblance of the two structures (Figures 4.16 and 4.17). The original structures each contained two polygonal towers, punctuated by arched window openings, though the Matamoros church’s towers are 4 stories in height while New Orleans’ only three. They both have central one-story buildings that stand between the towers, with columns surrounding their main entrances, and each has a clock, though in Matamoros it was placed on the left tower as opposed to the center placement in New Orleans. St. Louis’ Cathedral was completed in 1794, having been funded entirely by a wealthy Andalusian merchant, Don Andrés Almonaster y Roxas. Both churches have since been remodeled, but they stand as material reminders of the ties between the two cities.

Figure 4.16: Matamoros’ Main Cathedral, Customs House, and Plaza Hidalgo. (Source: “La Grande Place de Matamoros Eglise Cathedral,” in *Mexique L’Univers Illustre*, Number 596, 12 August 1866)

Figure 4.17: St. Louis’ Cathedral, New Orleans, Louisiana, 1794. (Source: Henry C. Castellanos and George F. Reinecke, *New Orleans As It Was: Episodes of Louisiana Life* (Baton Rouge: Published for the Louisiana American Revolution Bicentennial Commission by the Louisiana State University Press, 1978), p. 144)
Running parallel to the city cathedral was its most active street, known then as the *Calle de Comercio Vive*, today identified as Calle González (Map 4.2). Located on the main plaza, and running perpendicular to the city’s cathedral, many foreigners owned property and set up their shops and personal homes on this street. The French merchant, Santiago Chaleron, who first arrived in the port in 1825, purchased land for his expanding dry goods business on the Calle de Comercio in 1832. The street saw a lot of activity, and was home to businesses and dwellings of a sundry group of local players including French doctor Juan Bernardo Fougar from Bordeaux and the artisan Peter Cottais, as well as the Mexican business owners Francisco Serda, Antonio García, Marcos Gómez, and Cecilia Delgado.

Given their central location to city landmarks such as the Cathedral, Municipal Government, and Customs House it can be assumed that properties lining the central plaza would have been more expensive than those that did not. Those interested in purchasing a lot in the town would have first taken residence and then applied directly to the alcalde for the land, at which point a notice of intent to declare possession was posted on their door. If no objections were voiced for thirty days, the person occupying the property was deemed as holding good title to it. Those without the means to purchase land in the immediate vicinity of the plaza did not have to go far, including female business and property owners such as Susana O’Docharty, who opened a school for

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119 Compiled from property records housed within the Casamata Archive.
young girls on *Calle Guerrero* in March of 1836.\textsuperscript{121} Two blocks south of the *Calle de Comercio Vive*, she still had affluent neighbors, including the vice-consul of Prussia, Pedro Schatzell, whose personal residence was just across the street.\textsuperscript{122}

![Figure 4.18: Matamoros Cathedral and Customs House. Both were located adjacent to the main plaza and underwent construction in the early 1820s. (Source: Private Postcard Collection of Author)\textsuperscript{123}]

Much like their experience with subsistence items such as food and clothing, the city’s foreign residents needed to import the construction materials for their homes and businesses by boat from New Orleans. Certain types of wood were strictly prohibited for import, due to the government’s promotion of its own internal products.\textsuperscript{123} In fact, the infamous Ramon Lafón was cited in 1826 with the “scandalous” importation of more than one thousand pieces of *madera* (wood) to be used for construction purposes.\textsuperscript{125} When apprehended, he claimed that he had been contracted by the city government to build a customs house building at the river opening, but upon further investigation it became evident that the lumber was intended for the building of homes not only for

\begin{footnotes}
\item[121] Saldaña, *Diccionario*, 405.
\item[122] Ibid.
\item[123] Many of the images used for this chapter come from the author’s original collection of Robert Runyon postcards. During his lifetime Runyon was responsible for printing more than 500 real photographic postcards of the lower Río Grande border region. Many of his images depict the turbulent times of the Mexican Revolution, but he was especially interested in the cultural life of Matamoros, Mexico – shooting prints of local points of interest, including the local city cemetery, the main cathedral, and the customs house. The original negatives and prints from his collection are now housed at the Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.
\item[124] MAA, Volume 16, 30 August 1814; MAA, Volume 2, 15 August 1814.
\end{footnotes}
himself, but for at least two other individuals, including Santiago McCews (who was found to be harboring more wood and construction materials in his house) and the city accountant, Don Rafael López.\textsuperscript{126}

Bricks were critical to the construction of city buildings. Initially imported in small quantities by merchants, they were cumbersome to transport. As a result, Matamoros became the center of brick production beginning in the 1820s—servicing the cities of the Río Bravo.\textsuperscript{127} City officials were keen on the vitality of brick production partially because the chief ingredient lodo (mud) was readily available in the area surrounding the river and coast. New Orleans immigrants, including an African American brickmaker named Nicholas Druct, brought with them specialized manufacturing knowledge, thus widely popularizing its production in the 1820s and 1830s. A government owned ladrillera (brick factory), titled Ladrillera de la Nación, appears on city maps in 1836 (Map 4.1). Records indicate that brick production was not only essential to the further construction of public works projects, but it also served as a source of revenue for the city, as bricks could be sold to eager buyers for a profit.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{cross-family-home-matamoros-mexico.jpg}
\caption{Cross Family Home, Matamoros, Mexico. The architectural style of the home reflects its original owner, Juan S. Cross’s New Orleans and South Carolina roots. (Photo by Author)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.

Real estate values for buildings increased as construction improved and greater numbers of luxurious furnishings became available. For example, Francisco Lojero, a local merchant, purchased a home in 1832 on the Plaza Hidalgo from the Mexico City-based merchant Don Mauricio Hebeinsteinreit for what seems an exorbitant amount, $20,000.\textsuperscript{128} In contrast, workers and less affluent citizens resided in huts (chozas or jacales) made of reeds that were valued at less than 50 pesos and located in areas notorious for river flooding.\textsuperscript{129} In 1833, Matamoros’ mayor commissioned a painter to inscribe street names throughout the downtown corridor.\textsuperscript{130} The signature cast iron balconies of New Orleans were also replicated in Matamoros, where even today they pepper the downtown landscape.

![Figure 4.20: Matamoros postcard depicting the two-story brick buildings first erected during the 1820s. Many of the wrought iron balconies shown in this scene still exist today. (Source: Private Postcard Collection of Author)](image)

Location was important for foreigners wishing to break into local society. Many of them established social links with upper-class natives by purchasing property in the city’s center. After only three months in residence within the city, New Orleans native and merchant Pedro Asit Susanou purchased a house from established residents Don José Marcelino Longoria and his wife, Doña Margarita de la Garza, close to the main plaza for 1000 pesos.\textsuperscript{131} His new neighbors were other merchants and established Mexican families.\textsuperscript{132} Others chose to reside close to recognized business contacts, such as Juan

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{128} Casamata, Justicia, Caja 2, Exp. 7, 27 April 1832.
\bibitem{129} Casamata, Presidencia, Caja 4, Exp. 1, 6 January 1836; Casamata, Presidencia, Caja 4, Exp. 1, 27 December 1835.
\bibitem{130} MAA, Volume 22, pp. 158-159, 25 February 1833.
\bibitem{131} Casamata, Presidencia Epoca Independiente, 1824-1828, Caja 1, 18 May 1826.
\bibitem{132} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
(John) McMolen, who purchased a piece of property from Juan Antonio Cantú in 1826 for 500 pesos. It was situated next door to another well-known foreign merchant, Santiago McCews, a business associate and friend of Ramon Lafón. The low real estate prices may have been a draw in attracting merchants to settle within the city in the first place, cementing foreigners’ presence downtown and furthering business relationships both locally and into the interior.\footnote{Casamata, Presidencia Epoca Independiente, 1824-1828, Caja 1, 17 December 1826.}

One of the reasons for Matamoros’ success in drawing foreigners was its ability to accommodate the extended families of its visitors. Boarding houses served as springboards for entrepreneurs looking to set up shop either within the city or in the interior. As has been noted, it was not uncommon for foreigners to use Matamoros as a base from which to access a variety of interior settlements, and boarding houses were key to their ability to do so. Firsthand accounts by Americans looking to settle in the Mexican North mention that depending on their final destinations in Mexico, it was recommended that family members be left in nearby settlements until it was clear that their newly acquired land in the interior could support them. Matamoros’ appeal was due to the fact that “houses can be obtained at low rents, and families may be supported, for a time as aforesaid [in boarding houses], upon reasonable terms.”\footnote{Ibid.}

\footnote{For a closer examination of the city’s native-born elites and workers see Valerio-Jiménez, “Neglected Citizens,” 87-93.}

\footnote{Lundy, \textit{A Circular Addressed}, 5.}

\footnote{\textit{The American Flag}, MAA, Volume 1, 16 September 1846. Holdings of original newspapers begin in the 1830s. The majority were printed in Spanish, with select advertisements in English. The Casamata archive’s collection consists mostly of Spanish-language publications: \textit{Atalaya} (1835, 1836, 1837), \textit{Diario del Gobierno} (1840), \textit{El Ancla} (1838-1839), \textit{El Restaurador} (1833), \textit{El Telescopio} (1837), \textit{Gaceta del Gobierno de Tamaulipas} (1840), \textit{La Concordia} (1838, 1839), \textit{Mercurio de Matamoros} (1835-1837), \textit{Defensor de Tamaulipas} (1847), \textit{Gaceta del Gobierno de Tamaulipas} (1842-1845), \textit{El Latigo de Texas} (1844), \textit{Eco del Norte de Tamaulipas} (1845-1846), \textit{La Voz} (1845), \textit{Gaceta del Gobierno de Tamaulipas} (1841, 1844), \textit{El Correo Nacional} (1848), \textit{El Defensor de Tamaulipas} (1850), \textit{La República} (1849), \textit{El Constitucional} (1850), \textit{La Palomqueta} (1850), and \textit{El Organo Oficial del Supremo Gobierno de Nuevo León} (1850). Casamata, Hermeroteca Historica, Caja 1833-1840; Casamata, Hermeroteca Historica, Caja 1841-1850.}

It was not difficult for migrants to locate housing once they arrived in the city. Evidently, boarding houses and available lots were plentiful, and visitors were keenly aware of this. It appears from the published advertisements that boarding houses were owned either by families or by women.\footnote{\textit{The American Flag}, MAA, Volume 1, 16 September 1846. Holdings of original newspapers begin in the 1830s. The majority were printed in Spanish, with select advertisements in English. The Casamata archive’s collection consists mostly of Spanish-language publications: \textit{Atalaya} (1835, 1836, 1837), \textit{Diario del Gobierno} (1840), \textit{El Ancla} (1838-1839), \textit{El Restaurador} (1833), \textit{El Telescopio} (1837), \textit{Gaceta del Gobierno de Tamaulipas} (1840), \textit{La Concordia} (1838, 1839), \textit{Mercurio de Matamoros} (1835-1837), \textit{Defensor de Tamaulipas} (1847), \textit{Gaceta del Gobierno de Tamaulipas} (1842-1845), \textit{El Latigo de Texas} (1844), \textit{Eco del Norte de Tamaulipas} (1845-1846), \textit{La Voz} (1845), \textit{Gaceta del Gobierno de Tamaulipas} (1841, 1844), \textit{El Correo Nacional} (1848), \textit{El Defensor de Tamaulipas} (1850), \textit{La República} (1849), \textit{El Constitucional} (1850), \textit{La Palomqueta} (1850), and \textit{El Organo Oficial del Supremo Gobierno de Nuevo León} (1850). Casamata, Hermeroteca Historica, Caja 1833-1840; Casamata, Hermeroteca Historica, Caja 1841-1850.} The Brown house described in Figure 4.9 provided baked goods for its tenants, as its owners also had a bakery and an attached bar. It was located on the bustling Calle de Comercio. In many ways these were full-service establishments, providing the resources for foreign visitors to establish contacts with locals, while at the same time making their transition to the local environment less cumbersome. They provided the means for visitors new to the city, region, or country to arrive without any prior knowledge of the customs or language.
By the mid-1840s, the population and the city was continuing to grow, and Matamoros served as a business center, albeit one that stood apart from others in Mexico. A local politician wrote in 1844, “the streets, houses, landscape, including local customs are different from other towns in the center of the Republic.” The permanence of foreign influences in the city is best evidenced by the importation of New Orleans burial practices to Matamoros, including aboveground crypt and mausoleum-like graves (Figure 4.23). The reason for this was that New Orleans and Matamoros were both built in areas prone to flooding, and traditional burial plots are shallow because the water table is very high. The structures seen today in Matamoros’ camposantos (cemeteries) often house multiple generations of family members in a single tomb. Their style and form resemble the famous cemeteries, referred to as Cities of the Dead, of New Orleans (Figure 4.22).

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This chapter has contextualized Matamoros’ foreign presence during the first 20 years of Mexican Independence. The voluntary migration of a diverse cohort of eager merchants contributed to the development of a prospering city, albeit one that did not fit the mold of any other city in Mexico. While the architectural influences of French New
Orleans also reached other Mexican port cities, most notably Tampico and Veracruz, the extent to which the Matamoros city structures emulated those of New Orleans is much more apparent than it is in other Mexican port cities. Furthermore, these connections ran deep within Matamoros society—as the two cities’ geographic proximity made it much more convenient to import raw materials, labor, and architectural styles, and this meant that city planners relied much less on colonial models from the interior. As noted, the majority of foreigners were American, and they brought with them new tastes, traditions, and experiences. Their presence during the city’s first years as an “open port” played an important role in shaping its identity, and its reputation as a place friendly to foreigners held strong abroad.

Despite its jurisdiction as a Mexican territory, in a practical sense it was equally possible to describe Matamoros as American, Texan, or Mexican. By the early 1820s, it would have been hard not to cross paths with American citizens who had settled there. As we have seen, even the architectural landscape of the city reinforced its hybrid nature. Simply stated, Matamoros became significant immediately after independence precisely because a diverse body of residents became invested in it. Thus, the port’s position in time and place made it extremely influential for all of its stakeholders.

Economic opportunities fueled their desire to settle there, but as the following chapter demonstrates, the reconciling of the interests of multiple ethnic and linguistic groups proved to be challenging for all. The formation of the U.S. consular office in the city attests to this. New immigration policies required specific documentation from all residents and visitors, and these policies institutionalized the consulates’ role in Mexico. Mexican officials did not ignore the importance of regulating foreign traffic, especially at times when foreign invasion was a real threat to the new nation. Yet, the preceding examination of foreigners residing in the port suggests that the merchant and Mexican communities in Matamoros made a conscious effort to set aside political differences for the mutual benefit of promoting trade. These ties covered all interactions and aspects of society, including marriage.

Finally, Matamoros served as a point of convergence for a variety of different political interests, all of which were forced to negotiate with one another. Foreign businessmen as well as Mexican merchants worked together in the hopes of capitalizing on the potential of what many envisioned would become the next Veracruz. Political figures did the same. Most importantly, the porosity of Mexico’s territories throughout the early 1820’s and leading into the 1840’s facilitated the entrepreneurial possibilities made available to all parties willing to acknowledge and deal with the risks inherent in a fluid border. How these interests influenced local, state, and national-level policies is where we will turn next.
Chapter 5

Politics, Consular Diplomacy, and U.S.-Mexican Relations in Matamoros, 1824-1838

The large number of American traders living and/or working in the port city negotiated their economic relationships directly with Mexican traders, as we have seen, but they also had to protect their positions by negotiating with the local city government, and with the state and national governments. The uniquely fluid political atmosphere that emerged in the years leading up to the U.S.-Mexican War suggests that the political allegiances of Matamoros—a city of significant importance to Mexico with a long history of settlement linked to central Mexico, but also a city of foreigners—were much less predictable than scholars, who have rarely questioned its primary allegiance to Mexico, have previously thought. Matamoros was far from Mexico City, and much closer to its Texas neighbors who constantly sought more direct economic ties to the maritime networks that converged there. Mexican officials at the local level were also deeply embedded in those networks, which they wished above all to protect, while state and national level officials valued the trade revenues produced in Matamoros, which were a vital source of income for the nation as a whole. As a result, Matamoros meant many things to many people, and these diverse economic roles helped to shape relations between Mexico and the United States prior to the establishment of the U.S.-Mexico border in 1848.

The interplay of foreign and Mexican political interests is especially evident in the records of the region’s first foreign consulate. Initially charged with protecting American commercial interests, the U.S. consular office in Matamoros played a complex role that involved, on the one hand, mediating policy differences between the U.S. and Mexican legal systems, and on the other hand, maintaining control over a diverse set of constituents, each seeking to protect a personal or political interest. In the early part of the nineteenth century this meant that on any given day the consulate might act to ensure the rights of the small but ambitious group of entrepreneurial American businessmen who had settled there, or simply document the steady stream of transient maritime merchants who came to exploit the relatively lax governmental controls in the port of Matamoros. The consulate also sought to hold at bay the invited settlers of Mexico’s Texas territories who were intent on laying claim to as much land as Mexican governmental officials would concede. Although Mexico strove to maintain good will and friendly relations with the United States during this period, the political rumblings stirring in Mexico’s Texas territories greatly complicated this task.

The story of the establishment of the diplomatic outpost in Matamoros illustrates that even a city far removed from the national capital was able to exert a level of economic influence that can result in broad regional, and even national, consequences. Many of the nascent republic’s newest laws were felt weakly by the Mexican populace in the nation’s periphery, and that made it possible for Matamoros at times to follow its own
unique course of development. In other words, what was taking place in the center of the Mexican national state, unless it pertained to commerce or foreigners, could be viewed as comparatively inconsequential by Matamoros residents. On the other hand, when trade reforms did directly impact established trade practices, it held the potential to politicize the population like never before.

The recognition by Mexican officials that Matamoros was the best place to permit the U.S. to establish a foreign consular post underscores its perceived importance. The city was among a larger cohort of consular posts founded throughout Latin America. The regional diplomatic interactions described in this chapter document the multi-dimensional U.S-Mexican relationships that were established in Matamoros and which were an integral part of the new nation’s first relations with other nations. Local circumstances necessitated that American and Mexican officials negotiate between a complex set of parties that included Mexican legislators at the local, state, and national levels, Anglo Texas settlers, American officials in Washington, and foreign residents (heavily dominated by Americans) that arrived in the port from all over the world. The city’s political contours come to life through these interactions, and they contribute to our understanding of the vulnerability of Mexico’s northern territories during the period leading up to and during the significant social experiment that encouraged Americans to settle in Texas.

Public displays of power reveal what tensions were present and what was at stake for Americans and Mexicans interacting in the port. Unlike interior settlements where foreign presence was more scattered and there was no consular office, the American consulate had a physical presence within Matamoros that enabled it to assert its power. The U.S. consul was not shy about emphasizing this in his correspondences to Mexico City. As a result, the political instability caused by the liberal and conservative struggles for power that affected other cities throughout the republic did not affect Matamoros in the same way, chiefly because as long as the port’s economy continued to boom, and local officials remained flexible in their enforcement of trade, the majority of Matamoros residents chose not to vocalize their discontent.


On the early Mexican Republic see, David J. Weber, The Mexican Frontier 1821-1846: The American Southwest Under Mexico (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982); Timothy E. Anna, Forging Mexico: 1821-1835 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Stanley C. Green, The Mexican Republic: The First Decade, 1823-1832 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987). While his chronological focus is on the period after the conclusion of the U.S.-Mexican War, the works of Mario Cerutti are especially comprehensive. Mario Cerutti and Miguel A. González Quiroga, El norte de México y Texas: 1848-1880 (San Juan: Instituto Mora, 1999); Mario Cerutti, Burguesía, capitales e industria en el norte de México: Monterrey y su ámbito regional: 1850-1910 (Monterrey: Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León, 1989); Mario Cerutti and Oscar Flores, Españoles en el norte de México: Propietarios, empresarios y diplomacia: 1850-1920 (Monterrey: Universidad de Monterrey, 1997); Mario Cerutti, Propietarios, empresarios y empresas en el norte de México (México: Siglo Veintiuno, 2000).
And for their part, American merchants and consular officials who made Matamoros their home in the early 1820s did not so much fit the mold of American imperialists eager to expand the United States frontier than they did that of American capitalists looking to keep commercial activity running smoothly and undeterred by political disturbances occurring in other parts of the new Republic. Even later, when expansion became a rallying cry for the Polk campaign, trade continued to dominate the political discourse in Matamoros. Thus although, as we will see, there were frequent disputes between foreigners and Mexican nationals, at bottom both sought to protect and promote the international trade that flowed through Matamoros, making this a city where economic interests were especially important in shaping politics.

This chapter will primarily use the consular records for Matamoros to show how U.S.-Mexican political relations leading up to the Mexican-American War played out there. I will combine these extensive records where appropriate with surviving Mexican records. The American records remain an invaluable source, as the majority of the original Mexican documents pertaining to Texas have been stolen from the archives and sold to private collectors.3

The Establishment of the Foreign Consular Service in Mexico

The decade of the 1820s was a formative period for the U.S. consular service in Mexico. The timing of Mexico’s independence from Spain made things difficult; United States diplomats were cautious of their perception by Spanish authorities because of the possibility that it could jeopardize the United States’ ability to expand its territories, especially into Florida. In addition, even the smallest of actions could be interpreted as an act of aggression.4 The Louisiana Purchase of 1804 left the Florida territories under Spain, but U.S. politicians hoped that would change eventually. U.S. officials did not exactly exercise a “hands-off” policy with regards to Mexico, but as one historian notes, “The only real interest the United States had in Latin America, other than fostering democracy, was developing commerce.”5

This motivation is reflected in the first diplomatic interactions between the two countries. Chiefly concerned with protecting the commercial interests of foreign citizens conducting business in Mexico, the United States began negotiation on a treaty of amity, commerce, and navigation in 1824. Although it was signed by both nations in Mexico City in July of 1826, it was never officially adopted because the Mexican Congress refused to consider it, on the grounds that it failed to renew the boundary provisions of

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3 Because the vast majority of these documents contained correspondence between early figures in Texas history (Sam Houston, Stephen F. Austin, etc) and Mexican officials, it has been noted that unsecured archives have had many original documents stolen and sold on the black market.


5 Kennedy, The American Consul, 52.
the Adams-Onís Treaty between Spain and the United States in 1819. A similar treaty was introduced in 1828 and it too failed. In fact, the first commercial treaty between the two nations was not ratified until April of 1831.

The Treaty of 1831 was intended to establish the evaluation of import and export duties between the United States and Mexico (Figure 5.1). As we saw in Chapter 4, assessment and collection of taxes was an issue for Matamoros merchants throughout the 1820s. Under this treaty, the security of a person, his property, and his right to conduct business were all protected. If a war were to result between the two nations, merchants residing in port cities of Mexico or the United States would be given six months to vacate, and those residing in the interior would have one year. Articles V and VI of the Treaty required ships from both nations to pay the same fees and import duties on goods whether they had arrived on Mexican or American ships. Another article provided American vessels a six-year break on certain duties. The treaty, which included a most-favored nation clause (de la nación mas favorecida), would become the model for all future commercial accords with Mexico.

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10 Adams, Jr., Conflict and Commerce, 51.
The United States of America and the United Mexican States, designing to take for the basis of their agreement the most perfect equality and reciprocity, engage mutually not to grant any particular favor to other nations in respect of commerce and navigation, which shall not immediately become common to the other party, who shall enjoy the same freely, if the concession was freely made, or upon the same conditions, if the concession was conditional.

The citizens of the two countries respectively, shall have liberty, freely and securely, to come with their vessels and cargos to all such places, ports, and rivers of the United States of America and of the United Mexican States, to which other foreigners are permitted to come, to enter to the same, and to remain and reside in any port of the said territories respectively; also, to hire and occupy houses and warehouses for the purposes of their commerce, and to trade therein, in all sorts of produce, manufactures, and merchandise; and generally, the merchants and traders of each nation shall enjoy the most complete protection and security for their commerce.

And they shall not pay higher or other duties, imposts, or fees whatsoever, than those which the most favored nations are or may be obliged to pay; and shall enjoy all the rights, privileges, and exemptions, with respect to navigation and commerce, which the citizens of the most favored nations do or may enjoy; but subject always to the laws, usages, and statutes of the two countries respectively.

Figure 5.1: Excerpts from the Treaty of 1831 otherwise referred to as “A Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation,” effective April 5, 1831. (Source: Treaties with Mexico (Washington D.C., 1832))

It is not surprising that upon the port’s opening to foreign commerce in 1824, American merchants immediately pushed for the establishment of a consular post there to protect their interests. Prior to Mexico’s independence, the Spanish crown had been steadfast in prohibiting foreign consular posts within their Latin American territories, except for Cuba, where according to Kennedy, “they were barely tolerated.” Despite the fact that Matamoros unofficially welcomed the development of a vibrant illicit trade network, as we have seen, most contraband traders had no legal authority to defend their actions if they were caught. Still, even without a consul to represent them, the political risks were minimal, because Spain, involved in European wars and then in trying to hold onto its American colonies, was not in a position to enforce trade restrictions that had been flaunted since the 1780s.

Free trade liberalization changed everything. Now legally authorized to engage in foreign trade, both native and foreign Matamoros merchants wasted no time in connecting with the circum-Caribbean economies and trade networks centered in New Orleans. It is not surprising, then, that the need for foreign consuls to protect the interests of American citizens residing abroad was immediately recognized by the United States as well as by other nations. However, the U.S. did have an ulterior motive for cultivating friendly relations with Mexico, especially in the early years of Mexican independence. The Americans recognized the competition from British merchants as a threat to their own potential economic dominance in Mexico and the Caribbean. For this reason they

11 Kennedy, The American Consul, 52.

12 Barbara Tenenbaum’s article on British merchants and consuls is particularly useful in this regard. Barbara A. Tenenbaum, “Merchants, Money and Mischief, The British in Mexico: 1821-1862,” The
wanted to make sure that they were the first to develop official commercial relations with Mexico, for strategic reasons.\textsuperscript{13} 

Surprisingly, Mexico was one of the last Latin American countries to open itself to the establishment of consular posts in the country. The newly formed country’s instability led both Mexican officials and foreign governments to question whether its independence from Spain would last. But in the end the desire to develop commerce drove foreign governments to put those reservations aside. The first United States consular posts were initially titled “commercial agents,” in reference to the local businessmen who occupied them, but their title was soon changed to “consul.” William Taylor, sent in 1822 from Virginia to the port city of Veracruz, was the first such agent named.\textsuperscript{14} Subsequent appointments were made for Mexico City (James Smith Wilcocks in July 1822) and Tampico (Nathaniel G. Ingraham, Jr. in 1824).\textsuperscript{15} It was extremely common for local businessmen and merchants to be named to these posts, since they already had strong ties to local officials and trading networks. As John French notes, “[C]onsular posts were invariably held by merchants in the nineteenth century. Merchants, for example, comprised 78.5% of all U.S. consular appointees in Mexico and Central America prior to 1861.”\textsuperscript{16} By the end of the first decade of Mexican independence, ten consular officials were working throughout Mexico, from Chihuahua and Matamoros in the north, to Acapulco and Campeche further south.\textsuperscript{17} 

As was true elsewhere, Matamoros’ first consul had strong ties to the local economy even before its official opening. As early as April of 1824, 34 New Orleans shipping firms wrote to President Monroe about the naming of a consular agent in the Port of Refugio, identifying Daniel Willard Smith as their preferred choice to hold the post.\textsuperscript{18} In their correspondence they lauded the demographic growth of the city, emphasizing that the majority of foreign residents there were from the United States and needed a representative who could protect their interests. While they noted the growth of trade and possibilities for exchange with markets in the Mexican interior, their main


\textsuperscript{13} Kennedy, \textit{The American Consul}, 52.

\textsuperscript{14} Despatches from United States Consuls in Veracruz, 1822-1906 (Microfilm, 18 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{17} Kennedy, \textit{The American Consul}, 59.

concern was the collection of drawbacks (essentially a waiver or deferral of customs duties upon importation). In order for merchants to collect these import duties a consular agent in Matamoros would need to certify the arrival of goods. Their pleas were answered sometime between then and July 24, 1826, when D.W. Smith’s first communication was sent to then-Secretary of State Henry Clay.\footnote{It appears that attempts to have him named consul began as early as 1823, when a report was sent from Ciudad Victoria to the mayor of Matamoros prohibiting his appointment. “Prohibiendo a Daniel Smith ejercer como Consul de los Estados Unidos del Norte de America,” Archivo del Ayuntamiento de Matamoros (hereafter MAA), Volume 10, p. 7, 23 August 1823; “D.W. Smith to Henry Clay,” July 24, 1826. Despatches from United States Consuls in Mexico City, 1822-1906 (Microfilm, 15 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.}

Smith had moved to Matamoros in 1821 as part of a wave of American settlers who were drawn there by the perceived economic opportunity that came with Mexican independence. Although he was a native of Connecticut, he was attracted to the port for its business potential. Little is known about his business interests there, except that he was a business partner of Francis Stillman, a Hartford, Connecticut merchant who operated a regular line of trade ships that shuttled between Matamoros, New York City and New Orleans.\footnote{Chauncey Devereux Stillman, H. Minot Pitman, and Winifred Lovering Holman, \textit{Charles Stillman: 1810-1875} (New York: C.D. Stillman, 1956), 3; Milo Kearney and Anthony K. Knopp, \textit{Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville} (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991), 33.} Thus, the United States’ first representative already enjoyed strong ties to the local American community by the time he was assigned to the consular post. Because of his background, Smith was able to use his existing local connections to foster favorable U.S.-Mexican relations.

While Smith prided himself on several occasions on being neutral, the very presence of an American official organizing trade in Matamoros was offensive to some Mexicans. In 1823, for example, a state official in Ciudad Victoria wrote to the Matamoros mayor to insist that Smith not be allowed to serve as American consul in the port. Camilo Suárez wrote to the Matamoros alcalde that “only national authorities should attend to the enforcement of any of the [country’s] laws.”\footnote{MAA, Volume 10, p. 7-9, 23 August 1823.} Officials remained skeptical of foreigners and obviously were digging for ways to control them. This tug and push between officials’ attitudes towards an official American presence in Matamoros underlines the complicated juggling act that Smith had to play in order to maintain friendly diplomatic relations. For the sake of his own business and those of other American citizens, it served him well to remain friendly with Mexican officials—or at least this is how Smith saw his role. As we will see, there was another model of dealing with Mexican officials that was more confrontational and less trusting than Smith’s, one that did not try to brush under the rug all conflict in the name of preserving trade.

The consul’s first report in 1826 recounts the difficulties in dealing with the local Matamoros authorities. Although he lacked experience as a government representative, Smith was no stranger to Matamoros society or politics. He had operated a business there since before the port was legally open to foreign commerce, and he had learned Spanish to a degree that allowed him to communicate fluently with local officials. Regardless, it
took him some time to feel comfortable in his new role, and he was not hesitant to recount his preliminary frustrations with the post:

Much difficulty and trouble is always the consequence when officers are not acquainted with their duty or Laws of their Country, this is the case with the Authority of this place, and they act from prejudice more than justice with all foreigners, but as this place is daily growing to importance the government no doubt will take more notice of it […] I hope the evil will be soon remedied.\(^{22}\)

Smith’s frustration with local Mexican officials was a function not only of their lack of knowledge of their own country’s laws, but also with the fact that those laws were in flux. While American citizens like Smith may have viewed them as prejudicial, it is clear that Mexican lawmakers were in a process of setting boundaries for American economic expansion within the country. Smith himself was hopeful that when the economic value of trade with the U.S. was recognized, the restrictions placed on foreign merchants would be reassessed. This remained Smith’s major policy goal throughout his tenure.

Advocating for loosening the restraints on foreign trade was an important part of Smith’s job, and the one most relevant here, but there were specific duties that consuls were expected to carry out. They were responsible for transmitting information concerning every American ship that arrived in the port: date of arrival, classification of vessels, name of ship, length, captain, number of Americans and other foreigners working as crew members, where it originated, where it was registered, the contents of its inward cargo, if known, the value of the inward cargo, the outward cargo and its value, the number of Americans and other foreigners on the outward crew, and their date of departure.\(^{23}\) This information enabled the consulate to track patterns and observe whether the “American crew in” matched that of “American crew out.” Besides painting a picture of the port’s economic and immigration activity for U.S. officials, this information was also useful to Mexican officials when dealing with contraband accusations made against American citizens.\(^{24}\)

There was also a financial aspect to the running of the office. The consulate was responsible for the collection of fees for services rendered, and these fees supported the office’s salaries. In addition, they were also responsible for the handling of deceased Americans’ estates.\(^{25}\) In cases where no surviving relatives were present at the port (which applied to all except permanent residents), it was the consulate’s duty to liquidate the remaining assets and attempt to locate the deceased’s next of kin abroad. The consul


\(^{23}\) “D.W. Smith to John Forsyth,” January 1, 1838. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

\(^{24}\) Depending on what was declared to consular officials, Mexican customs officers could determine whether or not fraudulent declarations had been made.

was not expected to act alone; a team of assessors was hired to inventory such goods.\textsuperscript{26} The quality and quantity of goods varied, ranging anywhere from “small tables” and “box[es] of teeth cleaning instruments” to “pantaloons” and “bundles of letters and receipts.”\textsuperscript{27} In fact, Smith was particularly meticulous with his reporting on these matters, in many cases writing numerous updates to state department officials about the settlement of estates until matters were resolved.

Lastly, it was the consul’s responsibility to intervene if an American citizen was detained and to ensure that U.S. laws were respected with regard to their treatment. These were the most difficult interactions, as they required a stern response from consular officials to represent the accused regardless of the strength of the claims. The Mexican judicial records examined for previous chapters shed light on these diplomatic maneuverings, many of which contain handwritten correspondences (in both English and Spanish) prepared by the consul. Sometimes these cases were fraught with the potential for diplomatic disaster. One example is when American merchant Jonathan Walker was murdered while attempting to gain entrance to the port. The testimony of his crew describes him as having been slaughtered by “Mexican pirates” who stormed their ship in 1836. In the process of defending his cargo and crew, Walker was stabbed to death, at which point his crewmen jumped into the water, swam to shore, and appealed to the American consulate for help in handling the case. A letter was immediately sent to the mayor of Matamoros,

I communicate [this letter] to you, with the hope, that you will relay, take prompt and efficient measures to apprehend the perpetrators of the outrage and cause them to be punished according to the atrocity of the crime of which they are guilty.\textsuperscript{28}

Walker’s murder, which followed Texas independence, had the potential to stir much larger grievances should local residents or Mexican authorities feel that affairs were not handled properly.

By far the most important official functions of the consulate were to maintain a flow of information about the region to Washington, and to foster local goodwill. Although not always reported in his twice-yearly dispatches to Washington, Smith (who held the office for 16 years, until his death in 1842) communicated semi-regularly with local aduana officials concerning commercial issues, and with the alcalde on issues related to law enforcement or government actions.\textsuperscript{29} One example is when the American Agustin Capron brought a claim against Smith that he had been overcharged in his

\textsuperscript{26}In most cases it appears by the surnames that the people hired were Mexican citizens. Where property was stored or how it was exactly handled is unclear. In rare cases the family asked that the property be liquidated locally and the proceeds transmitted back to them.

\textsuperscript{27}The articles used for this example come from: “Inventory of the Effects belonging to the estate of Phineas Ranney,” April 9, 1836. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

\textsuperscript{28}MAA, Volume 4, pp. 82-83, 1836.

\textsuperscript{29}Smith occasionally chose to include copies of letters written by him to Mexican officials in his semi-annual dispatches to Washington. He also references other letters written and transmitted to authorities, however only a handful of those letters have survived within the Mexican municipal archives.
collection of consular fees. The judicial case file contains testimony by a handful of Mexican officials and witnesses who vouched for his “responsibility” and “character.”

Over time, he began to include copies of his letters (in Spanish) to local officials in his consular returns to Washington. These letters show that during his time as consul, Smith was praised by locals for his expertise in safeguarding two sets of competing interests—those of the local American merchants, and those of local Mexicans.

*The American Consulate’s Role in the Development of Matamoros*

While almost all foreign consular posts are charged with facilitating interactions between nations, Matamoros was unique because of both its geography and the diversity of political interests that the consulate needed to balance. The American consulate in Matamoros was responsible for protecting not only the U.S. citizens who lived there, but all American residents throughout the Mexican North, including American settlers who had begun populating Mexico’s Texas territories immediately following Mexican independence and the transient entrepreneurial businessmen who used Matamoros as their port of entry.

Protecting American interests was not simply a matter of following national loyalties. In fact, what makes the American consulate in Matamoros so fundamental to our understanding of the politics of the port city in this period is the fact that its physical presence in the city enabled consul officials to mediate disputes on the local level so as to prevent the further escalation of tensions between nations.

Other cities throughout the Northeast, including those within Mexico’s Texas territories, had no such representatives and thus interacted with the Mexican and American states in different, and often more contentious, ways.

Commerce and the open promotion of trade dominated the consulate’s agenda well into the 1840s. Fellow American business owner and arch-rival, Richard Pearse, who will be described later as playing a high-profile role in an unsuccessful campaign to replace Smith as consul, wrote numerous letters to Washington claiming that Smith had failed in his responsibility to protect the financial interests of American citizens in Matamoros. As we will see, this campaign polarized American citizens between those that shared Pearse’s expansionist goals and those who sided with the more politically...

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30 “Expediente promovido por la representación de D. Agustín Capron contra Daniel Smith en cobro de pesos,” Archivo Municipal de Matamoros (hereafter Casamata), Justicia, 1841, Expediente 15.

31 One example is when Smith made it a habit to have the Matamoros notary vouch for the validity of testimony transmitted to Washington. The officials, Francisco Cisneros, Joaquín Barragán, and Francisco Mayorga appended a statement with their signatures throughout the 1832 returns. “Francisco Cisneros, Joaquín Barragán, and Francisco Mayorga,” October 9, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1; “Francisco Cisneros, Joaquín Barragán, and Francisco Mayorga,” December 9, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

neutral Smith (with whom the vast majority of Mexican merchants chose to ally themselves). Pearse’s fellow “countrymen” further north in Texas, including Sam Houston, weighed in on his side, and this led to the armed revolution that erupted at the end of the autonomous (and infamous) Texas settlement experiment. Mediating between, and sometimes for, both sides of complex American interests was a challenge for American diplomats during this volatile period, even more so if they had business ties worth protecting for themselves.

Besides being charged with serving the interests of fellow Americans, the consul also served as the United States’ front-line representative in dealings with local Mexican officials. The most common interactions between American and Mexican officials occurred when foreign citizens were detained (most often for contraband offenses) or had their property seized. Consuls were responsible for ensuring that foreign citizens were treated fairly. Matamoros may have established itself as a thriving legal port during the 1820s, but local Mexican enforcement of trade laws was uneven, as we have seen. Furthermore, the shaky national political struggle between the Mexican centralists and federalists, especially with regards to tariff policies, played itself out in a very real way on the streets of Matamoros. The conduct of Mexican politics was a regular topic in messages back to Washington D.C., which often included newspaper clippings describing new laws enacted by the state or national government that could affect American commercial interests. Despite these struggles, for the most part it appears that the interactions between American and Mexican officials (both locally and at the state level) leading up to 1832 were mutually positive and professional, in keeping with the

33 In fact, many foreigners caught smuggling goods or committed crimes demanded that their foreign consulate fight for their proper treatment and justice, regardless of their culpability. There are a number of examples of pleas to the Matamoros consul by local merchants who were trying to no avail to have their confiscated cargoes released or a murder avenged.

consulate’s diplomatic policy of promoting the most prosperous economic climate possible.

Having painted with broad strokes the outlines of the political landscape between the two countries, the next section goes more in depth into some of the issues in a Matamoros-centered politics carried out by both Americans and Mexicans. It examines the surviving American consular dispatches, paired with relevant Mexican responses, for insights about the multi-faceted (if low-level) diplomacy that was carried out throughout the 1830s. Because of Matamoros’ newfound place at the center of the region’s overland trade networks, the records themselves shed light on the crucial role that the American consulate in Matamoros played in mediating the port’s competing interests.

We see this Matamoros-specific diplomacy unfold in two distinct phases. During the first phase, a period of significant economic boom for the city as a whole, we see a concerted effort by American and Mexican officials to maintain open commercial relations above all else. Market conditions and political developments in Mexico’s Texas territories led to disgruntlement of some of the port’s most vocal merchants, but as long as business continued to run smoothly, both local Mexican officials and the American consul remained optimistic that the port would remain fairly stable. The second phase, as seen through the lens of the Pearse-Smith feud, sheds light on the ways that changes to trade policies mandated from the capital radicalized a segment of the Matamoros merchant community. Their outspoken rejection of centralist tariffs made the city a springboard for bigger political movements such as Texas’ unofficial move toward autonomy from Mexican oversight and the military campaigns of General Antonio López de Santa Anna. These larger issues pushed city officials to abandon their neutral stance in favor of a more vocal strategy to protect the city’s political and economic autonomy. Although officials tried hard to shelter the city from the political instability playing out in the rest of the country, these episodes suggest that the city’s allegiance to Mexico was much more volatile than scholars have previously assumed.

**Planting the Seeds of a Problem in Mexican Texas**

The issue of open maritime trade was an integral part of the Texas Rebellion. Largely overshadowed in the literature by his political and territorial ambitions, Texas empresario Stephen F. Austin’s economic plans made Matamoros central to his colony’s trading networks. This Texas-Matamoros trade, had it been successful, had the potential to compete significantly with the New Orleans-Matamoros trade networks already discussed. Fundamental to his plan was the linking of northern Mexican and Texas markets via coastal maritime routes.\(^{35}\) One of the main reasons for this plan was that the Comanche and Apache Indians routinely blocked the overland transport of saleable goods in the territories north of Matamoros. Historian Brian DeLay’s argument that indigenous presence in northern Mexico inhibited American expansionism and trade relations is supported by Mexican traders’ attempts to establish overland routes with Texas.\(^{36}\)

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the routes never became popular, likely due to the risks inherent in transporting goods through hostile Indian territory. Austin took note in 1832 that “this interior trade had never been carried on from Brazoria or Galveston [both Texas ports]—it is a losing business at best, and I hope for the future our merchants will let it alone.”37 As a result, Texan settlers were eager to find alternative ways to gain access to the lucrative and established overland routes and trade fairs explored in previous chapters.

Reminiscent of Escandón’s maritime experiment in the mid 1750s, Austin and his fellow settlers recognized the economic benefits possible by Texas farmers selling their foodstuffs to Matamoros and other points south. The corn, lard, vegetables, and cotton produced in Texas could fetch high prices in Matamoros, which had been forced to look to New Orleans imports to fill needs for these items. Austin recognized as early as 1824 that a direct coastal maritime trade with other Mexican ports would be mutually beneficial. He wrote, “[E]veryone who has any knowledge in regard to the commerce of Texas must know that the Mexican markets are the best in the world for the products of Texas.”38 Austin worked vehemently throughout the 1820s to see Mexican tariff regulations revised and opened to Texan products.39 But despite his efforts to convince Mexican officials that Texan goods should not be taxed as foreign imports, the trade was far out-paced by the more consistent and lucrative New Orleans-Matamoros trading connections.

There were economic motives to the Mexican government’s pursuit of populating its northern territories. Indeed, part of the Mexican officials’ interest in populating the Tamaulipas lands in the first place was their desire to better regulate customs revenues being produced there.40 Still a Spanish colony, foreign immigration into New Spain’s

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38 “Explanation to the Public Concerning the Affairs of Texas by Citizen Stephen F. Austin,” Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association 8 (1905), 234.
40 Foreign immigration into Mexico’s Texas territories had begun in 1821, when Stephen Fuller Austin, a native Virginian who resided in Missouri founded new communities at the mouths of both the Brazos and Colorado rivers. His father, Moses had first been given a Spanish colonial land grant in 1820, which Stephen oversaw after his death in 1821. It is clear that he saw this as a great opportunity, travelling to Mexico City on horseback to meet with Emperor Agustín I for the purpose of reconfirming his title to the land despite the change in government. Austin was successful in salvaging his land claim following the passage of the Mexican Imperial Colonization Law in January 1823. The decree granted an area of land to him that was more than 13,000 square miles, and allowed him to establish a colony and to recruit families that would be given one sitio (site) of 4,428 acres apiece, where they were to engage in livestock. Unlike previous colonial legislation that required the land to be held in common amongst the settlers, these grants were intended to benefit individual families. They would be charged a fee of twelve cents per acre, an affordable sum for that time. Although the overthrow of Iturbide in 1823 resulted in the official cancellation of the Colonization Act, Austin was still able to retain his title to the land that by 1825 had a population of about 1,800 inhabitants. Interestingly, while en route to the capital he and his party were captured by a band of about fifty Comanches in the immediate vicinity of the Río Bravo (near modern-day Laredo), but they were released when they identified themselves as “Americans.” Robert S. Gray, A Visit to Texas: Being the Journal of a Traveller Through Those Parts Most Interesting to American Settlers, with Descriptions of Scenery, Habits, Etc. (New York: Goodrich and Wiley, 1834), Volume 1, 264; Adams, Jr.,
Texas territories had begun in 1821 as local officials began voicing concerns to administrators in Mexico City over the vulnerability of the country’s unsettled lands. In response, the eastern division of the Provincias Internas granted Moses Austin and 300 other families a legal permit to settle in Texas in January 1821, but following independence later that year, Mexico’s new provisional government overturned it. The issue remained important in the years afterward and Mexico City legislators passed the Imperial Colonization Law in 1823, followed by a similar law passed by the state legislature of Coahuila and Texas in 1825, and the state of Tamaulipas’ version in 1826. Tamaulipas legislators aimed to encourage settlement, “native or foreign” of the state’s vacant lands. At the national and local levels the colonization laws were meant to encourage foreign settlement, which Mexican officials recognized was a vital component in being able to regulate trade. Officials argued that without a more established presence in and around cities such as Matamoros, contraband trade would increase, leaving the considerable trade revenues uncollected because of a lack of bureaucratic infrastructure.

The concerns of Matamoros officials with regards to tariff collection were not limited to that port city alone. In fact, Mexican General Mier y Terán (also Military Commander and Inspector of the Internal States of the East) urged Tamaulipas officials to restrict the port of Corpus Christi in 1830. Only 150 miles north up the coast from Matamoros, he complained about a considerable (but much less documented) smuggling operation taking place there. Terán wanted the government to allow only the


42 Ibid.

43 “Decreto de 15 de Diciembre de 1826 de la Legislatura de Tamaulipas, para la colonización de extranjeros en aquel Estado,” in Francisco F. De la Maza, Código de colonización y terrenos baldíos de la República Mexicana, formado por Francisco F. De la Maza y Publicado Según el Acuerdo del Presidente de la República, por conducta de la Secretaría de Estado y del Despacho de Fomento, Años de 1451 a 1892 (México: Oficina Tipográfica de la Secretaría de Fomento, 1893), 212-218; Simón Tadeo Ortiz de Ayala, Resumen de la estadística del Imperio Mexicano: 1822 (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1991), 92.


45 “Manuel de Mier y Terán to Governor of Tamaulipas,” November 18, 1830. AGN, Fomento Colonización, Legajo 6, Expediente 45, 1830.
importation of wood (desperately needed for construction) and supplies. Ironically, his proposed solution to the contraband issues in Corpus Christi was to have the agents from the Customs House at Matamoros (notorious for their own corruption) supervise the newly appointed officials.\textsuperscript{46} This plan never took place.

Mexican maritime and tariff laws had created much discontent among Texas settlers since the mid-1820s. Austin urged centralist General Mier y Terán to ease trade restrictions, which he agreed to do nominally in 1830.\textsuperscript{47} Previously, Mexican law prohibited intra-Mexican coastal trading with ships that were not “Mexican,” or in other words, not made in Mexico. This policy was meant to promote internal commercial growth amongst Mexican nationals, which Austin and other Texas settlers assumed that they were. Austin and others had become Mexican citizens and Catholics as a prerequisite to settle in Texas, but still their ships were considered American (since they were built in the United States), thereby making them ineligible to participate in this trade. Local American merchants could theoretically trade with Texas merchants who arrived at the port, but they would be assessed a hefty tariff of \$2.12 ½ per ton as per the Tariff Law of 1827.\textsuperscript{48} As one economic historian has noted, once import duties were assessed on items in Matamoros they became exorbitantly expensive—\$125 on chairs, and “American domestics [fabric] which cost 7 cents to 9 cents in the United States had to pay a duty of 20 ¼ cents per yard to enter the Republic of Mexico.”\textsuperscript{49} Had Texas merchants been allowed to trade within the same country without being considered foreigners, duties would remain low and profits high.

But the story was not just about opening Texas ports such as Corpus Christi or Galveston to the outside world. What Austin and others were after was the ability to connect with other Mexican ports outside Texas such as Matamoros, where strong trade networks had already been established and the demand for goods was high. In order for any of Austin’s colonists to pursue these markets they were obliged to send their items first to New Orleans, pay the duties levied on foreign goods there, and then trans-ship them back to cities such as Matamoros.\textsuperscript{50} Many, faced with no other choice, chose to forego the transshipment to Matamoros and sell exclusively to New Orleans although they felt the sting of such regulations—corn that would sell for five dollars a barrel in Matamoros was worth less than one dollar in New Orleans.\textsuperscript{51} In a creative maneuvering of the system, Austin appears to have successfully nationalized (that is, converted to

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{47} Mier y Terán’s nominal easing of restrictions were coupled with his increased regulation as noted in the previous section. While Texan ports were opened, it did nothing to help ease the tariff restrictions that angered many settlers. Terán’s subordinate, George Fisher was charged with collecting tonnage fees at the Texas port of Brazoria, insisting that all vessels entering or leaving the port have signed clearance papers. Richard V. Francaviglia, From Sail to Steam: Four Centuries of Texas Maritime History, 1500-1900 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 105.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{49} Graf, “Economic History,” 114.

\textsuperscript{50} For more on the New Orleans-Texas connection see Edward L. Miller, New Orleans and the Texas Revolution (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 203-204.

\textsuperscript{51} Graf, “Economic History,” 114.
Mexican nationality) at least two American ships by 1829—the Eclipse and Marcia. The Eclipse made trips to Matamoros, where it registered with customs agents as having carried corn, and returning with wool and meat.52

There was a real economic advantage in establishing closer commercial ties with the Texas territories, so it is surprising that a more vocal campaign to open coastal trade with them did not emerge from within Matamoros. Aware of its significance, Henry Austin described his goal of partaking in this maritime trade, and benefiting from the commercial revenue it would bring, as a goose that lays “golden eggs.”53 One explanation for Matamoros’ resistance could be that the city’s New Orleans-origin merchants, many of whom had settled permanently in the city and developed ties well into the interior, did not welcome the competition. They had been capitalizing on the profits of this trade since the port’s opening and new merchant actors would have threatened their “monopoly.” Another is that although trading for silver made these transactions worthwhile for most merchants, the metal was much more important to traders who had established ties at trading hubs overseas, where its value was at its highest.54 What is clear is that Texas settlers, despite their proximity, were not easily able to access American or Mexican markets. At the heart of Texas settlers’ disgruntlement with the Mexican government were the same issues that had been at play within Nuevo Santander in the mid 1750s—finding ways to facilitate trade to ensure that goods could be obtained and traded at reasonable prices. One could argue that this discontent played a much more significant role in building support for the Texas Rebellion in 1835 than has been previously recognized.55

Forced to React: The Pearse-Smith Tax Feud Pushes Matamoros to the Front Lines

The port of Matamoros had been open to foreign commerce for eight years and the consulate was in existence for six when a heated controversy arose over Smith’s ability to perform his duties. Dismissible as a feud between competing merchants by the common observer, what made their feud gain in significance was that the disagreement revolved around the impact of national tax reforms on Matamoros merchants. Richard Pearse, who as noted in Chapter 4 ran a rather lucrative import-export business and boarding house in the city, went to extraordinary means in his attempts to recall Smith

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54 For the importance of Mexican silver in global markets in an earlier period, see John Tutino, Making a New World: Founding Capitalism in the Bajío and Spanish North America (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

55 For more on Texans’ concerns over taxes and tariff exemptions see Adams, Jr., Conflict and Commerce, 53; Miller, New Orleans, 129-151; Reséndez, Changing National Identities, 166-70; William Ransom Hogan, The Texas Republic: A Social and Economic History (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1946), 81-109.
from office.\textsuperscript{56} He had arrived in Matamoros in 1822, only a year after Smith, and well before the port’s legal opening.\textsuperscript{57} When he “solicited a recall” of the American consul and “appointed himself to the office,” the main issue he initially cited was the imposition of a Mexican tariff law in 1830. The trade policy was handed down from officials in Mexico City, and contained a one-percent tax on the property of all foreign merchants, a law that caused a stir amongst the city’s foreign community but officials, including Smith, were duty-bound to enforce.\textsuperscript{58}

The Pearse-Smith debacle brought the issue of Texas independence to the fore. Matamoros’ economy was booming in 1831, the year Pearse’s campaign to remove Smith as consul was launched. There was a lot at stake financially for foreign residents in the port, and Texas settlers looked to Matamoros not only as an important point of entry into Mexico, but also as the future of commercial opportunities for their colony. Thus, it is not surprising that prominent Texas politicians, including the future Republic’s twice president, Sam Houston, weighed in on the matter.\textsuperscript{59} He had spent time in the city, and recognized that its economic advantages placed it at the cusp of significant growth. As we have seen, his, and other Texas settlers’ involvement, underscores the importance of Matamoros not just for the Mexican and American governments but also for Texan political interests which were gaining momentum in support of Texas becoming an independent republic.

There were deep issues at stake if Matamoros were to align with the Texan cause. United States officials, while remaining open to the settlement that was taking place in Texas, were concerned with the issue of slavery, which was itself causing internal divisions within the new Texas government. Mexican laws officially abolished slavery in 1829 as part of the Guerrero Decree, allowing African Americans such as the barber Henry Viudy to own businesses in Matamoros.\textsuperscript{60} While the Guerrero Decree did little to redefine Texas settlers’ original colonization rights to their “persons and property” it did instill a general feeling of anxiety amongst Texas settlers whose businesses relied on the institution of slavery.

Not all Americans shared the Texans’ sentiments towards slavery. Benjamin Lundy published a detailed guide for settlement in the region, in which he underscored

\textsuperscript{56}“John Blair et al to Edward Livingston,” April 7, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

\textsuperscript{57}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{58}“Local Businessmen to Edward Livingston, June 4, 1832.” Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1; “Local Businessmen to Edward Livingston,” June 4, 1832 Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1; Receipts of revenue by Mexican officials MAA, Volume 20, pp. 196-200, 17 April 1830; MAA, Volume 21, pp. 4-10, 27 April 1830; MAA, Volume 22, pp. 71-72, 27 April 1830; MAA, Volume 20, pp. 149-160, 1830.

\textsuperscript{59}“Sam Houston to Edward Livingston,” April 10, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906, roll 1.

\textsuperscript{60}Casamata, Justicia, Caja 1, Exp. 25, 12 March 1827; Robert Bruce Blake, "GUERRERO DECREE," Handbook of Texas Online (http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/ngg01), accessed March 7, 2013. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.
Matamoros’ central place for both Texas settlers and those interested in travelling to the interior. He planned to establish a colony of African American immigrants in Mexico, where slavery would not be permitted by law and where issues pertaining to race were completely ignored.61 He made arrangements with the official government printer in Victoria, Samuel Bangs, to provide the startup money for the colony. It was to be located about 100 miles west of Matamoros, between the original villas del norte settlements of Camargo and Revilla.62 He publicized the venture abroad, but he strategically softened the racial goals of the settlement. In its limited coverage, he wrote that “equality of privilege, social, as well as political, will be required for all, without distinction of color.”63 The project, irrevocably disrupted by the Texas Rebellion, failed to materialize.

By the time of the Smith-Pearse crisis, Americans living in Matamoros were feeling some anxiety about their position in the city. Stephen F. Austin’s cousin and Matamoros resident, Henry Austin, expressed concern as early as 1830 after he overheard Mexican General Mier y Terán talking to a friend in the city that foreigners could soon become targets for Mexican retaliation against land hungry foreigners. According to Austin the general said “that he viewed the foreigners in this part of the country as the most dangerous enemies […] particularly the North Americans whose sole object was to wrest from the Mexicans so much of their territory as they could get.”64 Such statements would lead the American resident community in Matamoros to believe that the city’s favorable reputation towards foreigners, and the economic prosperity that accompanied such a climate, might be short-lived.

In fact, Terán’s perceptions were not far off. The situation for Americans in Texas had been mostly positive up to now. The Mexican Constitution of 1824 had ensured that most American settlers who made their way to Texas in the early 1820’s—motivated by a hunger for land, and stimulated in large part by the Panic of 1819 in the United States and the depression that followed—would be protected under Mexican national laws.65 Throughout the centralist-federalist battles of the 1830s, Texas settlers

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62 Apparently Lundy was also a friend of Richard Pearse, who provided him with a letter of introduction and recommendation to Bangs in Victoria. Benjamin Lundy, A circular, addressed to agriculturalists, manufacturers, mechanics, &c. on the subject of Mexican colonization: with a general statement respecting Lundy's grant, in the state of Tamaulipas: accompanied by a geographical description, &c. of that interesting portion of the Mexican Republic (Philadelphia, 1835), 154.

63 Ibid., 3.

64 “H. Austin to S.F. Austin,” June 3, 1830. The Austin Papers (Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1919), II: 407. Terán had been commissioned by the Mexican government to conduct an inspection tour of Texas in 1828 and 1829. During his travels he discovered a Texas that, due to the flood of immigrants, had become increasingly Americanized. Mier y Terán, Texas by Terán, 178.

65 This panic had devastating effects on the United States economy, with many people losing their lands to bankruptcy and foreclosure. It is for this reason that American settlers would find the cheap land and opportunity available to them in Texas so alluring. Stanley J. Siegel, A Political History of the Texas Republic, 1836-1845 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1956), 6.
were aligned with the Mexican Federalist forces because of the open U.S. foreign immigration and trade laws they agreed to defend.

But it wasn’t all easy, as Siegel notes: “Difficulties over land matters also plagued the settlers in their relations with the Mexican government.”66 A large-scale rebellion (known as the Fredonian Rebellion) by Texas settlers attempting to secede from Mexico occurred in Nacogdoches in 1826, and although Mexican authorities were quick to suppress the uprising it highlighted the possibility of betrayal.67 From that point on, the Mexican government became extremely apprehensive about immigration from the United States into their Texas territories, increasing the regulation and enforcement of their carta de seguridad system.68

Locally, however, Matamoros officials and residents had been insulated from much of this growing tension; for them, continuity was prized. They had been experiencing economic growth under the Federal Constitution of 1824, which had granted the city a level of autonomy that fostered a favorable economic climate for foreign and national merchants alike. In fact, the first clear signs of tension within Matamoros came from the high-profile feud between Smith and Pearse over the nationally-mandated implementation of the new foreign property tax. Smith, while sympathetic to American interests, made it clear that he had no choice but to enforce the laws as they were relayed to him, regardless of public disapproval. This stance pushed Pearse, who had close Texas ties, over the edge, and politicized at least some members of the population.

Pearse responded to the new property tax by evoking American residents’ rights and writing to officials in Washington that he had unsuccessfully “recommended [that Smith] oppose the law as unjust and unconstitutional.”69 Pearse’s reference to this as a threat to American commercial interests represents an important rhetorical shift for the region’s foreign residents. No longer content with lying low, he became extremely vocal in his correspondences to State Department officials, informing them that Smith’s “countrymen were astonished to hear that he had deserted them.”70 In reality, maneuvering among the heated and sometimes conflicting opinions of local merchants was a difficult task. Smith responded by doing what all American citizens had done up until that point—remaining neutral. At the same time, he continued documenting and conveying the substance of the discontent to local and state officials.

66 Ibid., 10.
67 Ibid., 11; Reséndez, Changing National Identities, 45; DeLay, War of a Thousand Deserts, 5-6, 19; Miller, New Orleans, 45.
68 The references to Mexican correspondence pertaining to passport enforcement are too numerous to cite here. Correspondence between local authorities and state officials in which they transmit documentation are commonplace. As mentioned, new regulations that required foreigners to register with local officials prior to their departure was one way they attempted to stop the spread of information about Mexican military movements to Texas.
70 Ibid.
In a twelve-page vitriolic letter sent to officials in Washington, it becomes clear that Pearse’s ambitions ran much deeper than his opposition to new tax laws. After realizing that his case to have Smith removed was not strong, he explicitly outlined for officials his bigger goal: to have Matamoros acquired by the United States. This expansionist twist, which had remained unstated in local official correspondences until Pearse’s letter appeared, brought American territorial goals for the region to the foreground of local politics for the first time.

Pearse gave five reasons in support of the acquisition of Matamoros. He began by invoking the need to protect American citizens, writing that, “(1) - It is necessary for their physical security.” Next, he stated that it would offer “commercial advantages.” It is likely that he believed that the duties he so vigorously opposed would no longer be an issue, thus increasing potential profits for American merchants. Incredibly, his third reason was that the acquisition was “necessary in order to prevent our country [the United States] from being drained of its population.” A clear sign of the preponderance and steady population growth of American residents within the port, it is hard to believe his implication that it was anything reminiscent of an exodus. His fourth reason was that the potential revenue from trade would be beneficial to the American government. (4) Well aware of its significance to American officials, there were economic undertones in almost every appeal.

Pearse’s fifth and last plea, aimed at igniting flames in Washington, claimed that the city was American territory and should be returned. Clearly, Matamoros may have had a large American resident community, but it certainly had not ever belonged to the United States. The city’s strategic position and proximity to Texas, as described by Smith himself in his correspondences, highlighted the ways that the port could function as a hub not only for international exchange but, should it be acquired, for intra-American commerce. In Pearse’s appeal, he referred to Matamoros as a “beautiful territory” and “one of [the country’s] fairest jewels” before writing that,

When you succeed in bringing back to this fold of the good old U. States, this fair portion of country, if you will not have reclaimed a sinner, you will, at least, have hidden a multitude of sins, for many did he commit, who caused it to be lost.

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72 Ibid.
75 Ibid. The numbers within the quotes are his; “D.W. Smith to Edward Livingston,” August 21, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1. Examples of Pearse’s skirmishes with local authorities, “Expediente promovido por la aduana maritima con Don Ricardo Pearse en cobro de pesos.” Casamata, Justicia, Expediente 20, 1826; MAA, Volume 5, pp. 8-51 20 July 1824; MAA, Volume 14, pp. 63-101; “Expediente promovido por Don Pedro Fortine contra Don Ricardo Pearse,” Casamata, Justicia 1822-1850, Caja Justicia
Pearse’s loss argument is reminiscent of the one used by President James K. Polk in 1844—that Texas rightfully belonged to the United States under the Louisiana Purchase but had been given to Spain in 1819 as part of the Adams-Onís Treaty. While there is no documented evidence that Washington ever sought to acquire Matamoros, it is undeniable that the U.S. was eager to expand its territories. As we saw in Chapter 4, Pearse was not well liked by Mexican officials. An avid contrabandista, his behavior became radicalized during the Smith feud, likely the result of his commercial success in the years before 1830. Although the records suggest that Pearse did have alliances with other residents (especially with settlers in Texas), the U.S. government did not respond to his rallying cries for American expansion, at least for the moment.

Smith was able to weather this storm in part because of his local popularity, and in part because his positive, trade-first attitude was shared by many. People trusted his judgment and voiced their support for his actions as consul in numerous letters to the State Department. While much more diplomatic in his response to the allegations brought against him than Pearse was in his accusations, he made the case in his own defense that Americans and Mexican officials respected his efforts, which created a favorable climate for commercial relations to develop. He gathered letters in his support, one notably penned by his business partner Francis Stillman, who wrote

He [Pearse] may have asserted [...] that Mr. Smith is unfriendly to the present administration, if so, it is a direct violation of truth, as we all know, that our consul has been as uniformly its friend as Pearse has been its enemy and traducer.

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76 Ernesto Chávez, The U.S. War with Mexico: A Brief History with Documents (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2008), 12.

77 President Andrew Jackson was committed to acquiring Texas after his election in 1828. He appointed Anthony Butler to replace the controversial ambassador to Mexico, Joel Poinsett. Poinsett, a Freemason, had polarized many in Mexico City with his affiliations to the yorkino federalists. Butler had a working relationship with Mexican Foreign Minister Lucas Alamán, but historians have argued that his conflict of interests – serving simultaneously as ambassador for the United States and an agent for land companies – led to his downfall. Miller, New Orleans, 44-45; Andreas V. Reichstein, Rise of the Lone Star: The Making of Texas (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1989), 96-97.


79 “E. Gregory et al to Edward Livingston,” June 4, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
In general, Smith’s supporters emphasized his ability to mediate between competing interests and Mexican officials.

As a matter of fact, one of his most fervent letters of support came from three prominent Matamoros officials, Francisco Cisneros, Joaquín Barragán, and Francisco Mayorga. They attested to his honesty and integrity, and went as far as offering to provide signed affirmations of the validity of Smith’s communications. He took them up on that offer, and those signed statements (in Spanish) were annexed to every document that Smith sent to officials in Washington over the next few months.

Pearse pursued the recall attempt relentlessly, flooding the Secretary of State’s office with over 200 letters and personal references that detailed the incompetence of Smith and that touted his own ability to serve as consul. His feelings were so strong that he even travelled to Washington D.C. in 1832, where he attempted to persuade government officials that the tax issue was more about Smith’s incompetence than about his responsibility to enforce Mexican trade policies. But his deviousness was revealed when a business associate informed officials that the real motive for Pearse’s trip to Washington was actually to find a business partner willing to invest in a commercial venture that would have them obtain a grant from the Mexican government for the exclusive privilege of navigating the Río Bravo with steamboats. His participation in the partnership was to be kept secret, but once appointed consul he would be able to use his position to persuade Mexican authorities that such an agreement was mutually beneficial. In other words, Pearse’s recall campaign appears to have been motivated by personal financial interests. It is unclear whether Pearse and Smith were business rivals as well (although Smith was married to Pearse’s sister), but it would not be surprising. What is clear is that Pearse used the tax law issue as a cover for his bigger economic and political ambitions. Nonetheless, it is also clear that he represented a growing faction within Matamoros that sought conflict, in the form of a war that would make Matamoros a part of Texas, in opposition to the group that supported Smith’s benign, sunny, cooperative posture toward Mexico.

The Smith-Pearse crisis was quelled and Smith was officially reconfirmed by the American State Department on November 23, 1832. But the feud drew lines between segments of the foreign resident community, and brought to the forefront American aspirations for Mexico. What started off as a taxation issue had escalated to a debate about territorial expansion. Meanwhile, Texas settlers who had unofficially declared their independence from the Mexican government only one month earlier now had the

83 Ibid.
84 AGN, GD 8, Archivo Histórico de Hacienda, Vol. 92, Exp. 23, 1826.
attention of Mexico City officials. This suggests that had Pearse’s campaign to remove Smith and expand American territory succeeded, events in Texas and Matamoros may have played out very differently. While trade and commercial growth may have trumped politics for the resident merchant community of Matamoros prior to the Pearse-Smith feud, they no longer had the choice of ignoring the polarizing political aspirations of their northern neighbors. Neutrality was no longer an option.

National Politics Arrive in Matamoros

The Pearse-Smith feud brought the national-level struggles for power between centralists and federalists to the streets of Matamoros for the first time. At the crux of national political debates was whether governmental control should remain in the hands of (centralist) conservatives in Mexico City, who consisted mostly of clergy, criollos, landowners, and the military, or whether it should go to (federalist) liberals who had stronger ties to their regional leaders at the state levels. Cities on the periphery, such as Matamoros, had far closer ties to regional leaders than they did to the national government in Mexico City. Battles for power played out throughout the country during the turbulent years from 1824 to 1846, with presidential power changing hands numerous times. Political leaders at the state level, including those in Ciudad Victoria (Tamaulipas) joined states from around the Republic in expressing their discontent with centralist policies emanating from Mexico City. American settler Austin and other Tejano leaders allied themselves with the federalist cause, endorsing the federalist constitution of 1824 and opposing the centralization of political power in Mexico City. Regional autonomy was the core political issue for Matamoros residents, whether foreign or national.

The tariff feud that played out between Matamoros merchants and local officials in 1832 pushed Matamoros to do what officials had tried so arduously to avoid. The city became embroiled in national political tensions. Even more significant was that instabilities elsewhere—including the insurgent activity of Mexican caudillo Antonio López de Santa Anna—coupled with the growing unrest over the tax law that had been stirred by Pearse, caused Americans and Mexicans alike to question the resilience of the port’s economic prosperity.

This is first seen through local Mexican officials’ responses to state and nationally mandated policies. While city officials, including Americans like Smith, were accustomed to adhering to official decrees sent to them from the state capital in Victoria, by 1832 they began to voice their concerns over policies that affected the city’s economic vitality. At the top of local officials’ priority list was the desire to protect the economic

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interests of the port and to keep it open to foreign commerce.\textsuperscript{87} Heated debates played out at the state level as to whether they would side with centralist conservatives in Mexico City or the regionally centered liberals. Historically, the state of Tamaulipas had adopted a neutral stance, preferring to remain outside the reach of contentious political debates.\textsuperscript{88} But Tamaulipas legislators were angered by the Mexican Congress’ order to close the port of Matamoros to foreign commerce in February 1832.\textsuperscript{89} In direct response to that order, state politicians in Ciudad Victoria passed legislation that forbade customs collectors (clearly directed at the state’s most lucrative post in Matamoros) from making payments or deposits of customs funds into the federal government’s coffers.

When word of the Tamaulipas legislators’ rebellious action reached officials in Matamoros, they refused to comply with the new order. A clear indication of the city’s influence, the state legislature quickly repealed the decree and reaffirmed its support of the federalist government.\textsuperscript{90} This reversal kept the city out of the contentious struggles for power that were rapidly spreading throughout the country. From local officials’ perspectives, the city had no reason to concern itself with the administration of customs revenues since their system of dealing with them already insured that everyone stood to benefit from them, whether licit or not. In other words, keeping with the system that had ensured their prosperity and autonomy was what was most important.

The politicization of local officials carried over to other residents who had interests to protect within the port. Prior to Pearse’s explosive challenge to his post, Smith followed the state’s lead by exercising what he believed to be the most mutually beneficial diplomatic strategy: to remain neutral. He followed the state’s strategy of neutrality by urging residents throughout the North to ride out the uprisings of 1832, reinforced in a correspondence to officials in Washington, “the citizens of the [S]tate are encouraged to remain neutral in the context.”\textsuperscript{91} Such neutrality earned him the praise of many locals (Mexican and foreign), as the following excerpt from a resident attests,

We firmly believe that his long experience and good natural abilities together with the high estimation in which he is held both by native and foreigners enable him to discharge the duties of his office in a manner more beneficial to our interests than could be done by most others.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{87} There are not many surviving Mexican records for 1832. We are able to gather information about their actions from later correspondences and the consular records from that year. “Acta del I. Ayuntamiento, Empleados de Hacienda y del Estado” Casamata, Ayuntamiento 1832-1851, Caja R. Ayuntamiento 1832-1834, Expediente 20.

\textsuperscript{88} Octavio Herrera Pérez, El norte de Tamaulipas y la conformación de la frontera México-Estados Unidos, 1835-1855 (Ciudad Victoria: El Colegio de Tamaulipas, 2003); Graf, “Economic History,” 90.

\textsuperscript{89} “D.W. Smith to E. Livingston,” June 30, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

\textsuperscript{90} Graf, “Economic History,” 90-91.

\textsuperscript{91} “D.W. Smith to Edward Livingston,” March 27, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

\textsuperscript{92} “E. Gregory et al to Edward Livingston,” June 4, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
This suggests that Matamoros’ commercial success among foreigners during this period in many ways was enhanced by the local officials’ decision to remain below the radar of contentious national debates. Local residents’ willingness to oppose the Tamaulipas legislators on the tariff revenue issue underscores the importance of commercial stability to local residents. As long as merchants and residents remained off the radar of political legislation, trade would not be threatened. Much more significant is that this focus on protecting economic interests likely prevented the spread of even greater political discord and greatly facilitated the expansion of transnational commercial networks explored in earlier chapters. Had Matamoros become radicalized from the outset, it is likely that our narrative of the 1830s and 1840s would have played out very differently.

Regardless of the neutrality strategy, foreigners living throughout the Mexican North were well aware that the American consulate in Matamoros was their closest ally. Many Texas settlers knew Smith personally, including future Texas Republic politician, Sam Houston. When Houston made the choice to move to Texas from Arkansas in 1832, like most early settlers, he interacted with Smith in the port of Matamoros. However, Houston was a friend of Pearse, and he supported the campaign to remove Smith by measure of “his intemperance of habit, and as [being] totally regardless of the rights of American citizens.”93 News about the treatment of Americans spread quickly, and it appears that Houston became enraged when he learned about American treatment in the city, stating that “Americans have sustained great injury within the influence of the Consulate,” a claim unsupported by other examples in his correspondence.94 Reading between the lines, Houston’s allegiance to Pearse suggests that they may have shared similar territorial ambitions, which makes sense given the eagerness of Texas traders to find ways to connect to Matamoros, both overland and through maritime networks. Houston’s participation in Matamoros’ current affairs reinforces the city’s reach in influence, not just east into circum-Caribbean trade networks, but also north, into the reach of expansionist land speculators.

It is clear that national Mexican officials did recognize that the city was well worth protecting. Local officials may have avoided all attempts to attract an active military presence in the port, but officials on both sides of the centralist-federalist paradigm were quick to acknowledge that Matamoros’s economic potential was worth protecting. Perhaps in part because of the city’s influence in reversing the short-lived federalist uprising of the Tamaulipas state legislature, conservatives recognized the importance of keeping Matamoros within their fold. As a result, in June of 1832 Antonio López de Santa Anna sent troops, led by Colonel José Antonio Mexía, to occupy the city via the Brazos de Santiago opening to the Río Bravo.95 He was able to take control of

93 “Sam Houston to Edward Livingston,” April 10, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
94 Ibid.
95 Mexia has an interesting background. By his own account he was born in Jalapa in 1800, but contemporary Mexican historians allege he was actually born in Cuba. He sought refuge from the Mexican wars of independence in the United States, where he became so proficient in English that he was named an official interpreter in 1822. C. Alan Hutchinson, "General José Antonio Mexia and his Texas Interests," The Southwestern Historical Quarterly 82, no. 2 (Oct. 1978): 117-142; Raymond Estep, "MEXIA, JOSE
the city with little difficulty, a clear reflection that locals hoped to maintain the port’s open economic climate without being dragged into military campaigns.

This is reflected in the local response to the change in government. Smith observed that despite the occupation, “The merchants kept their shops open as usual, nor has there been as yet any material change in the ordinary transactions of business, other than a change of men and rulers.”\(^96\) His account is reinforced by Stephen F. Austin, who was in residence at the port at the time, and also commented on the resilience of local commerce:

> I have never seen anything conducted with so much good order – one party quietly marched in and took up quarters in the barracks. The ordinary business of the merchants was not interrupted one hour – not one cent of private property has been touched – not one act of confusion nor even of disorder has occurred since Mexía arrived.\(^97\)

As long as commerce remained unaffected, there was little reason for local residents to be concerned. But this delicate balance between neutrality and economic stability was volatile and held the potential to push local officials and residents alike to a more politicized stance should it be threatened.

In fact, that is exactly what happened. According to the consular reports, when Mexía’s occupation resulted in the temporary suspension of free trade, Smith and other resident merchants were quick to take a stand against these actions. He immediately wrote to the Secretary of State to ask for military reinforcements, a clear sign that he viewed the protection of citizens’ business interests as imperative. American officials responded to the consulate’s call immediately.\(^98\) At stake was not only the port’s ability to maintain free trade but also the flow of silver exports going back to the United States. After the U.S. war schooner *Grampus* arrived and anchored itself off the Brazos de Santiago opening, Mexía was forced to allow merchant ships like the *American*, which was anchored and stranded in the port with $250,000 in specie on board, to clear customs and sail back to the United States unscathed.\(^99\) The Grampus episode served as a physical reminder to American merchants that their interests would be defended should local conditions necessitate it.

Local officials viewed these episodes as isolated incidents, reinforced by the fact that Matamoros remained incredibly stable during the period leading up to the Texas Rebellion. As long as restrictive tariff policies were avoided and trade flowed freely

\(^{96}\) “D.W. Smith to E. Livingston,” June 30, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.


across state lines, interior and exterior trade thrived much like it had before. After the Mexía and Grampus episodes had passed, Smith boasted of the city’s stability to officials in August of 1832,

> Whatever civil commotions may have agitated other sections of this country and retarded their prosperity, they have had but little bearing on this place, which has notwithstanding continued to flourish and is now in a state of rapid improvement.\(^{100}\)

This resilience gave Matamoros the upper hand economically. In fact, despite the political stirrings elsewhere, the port saw a steady stream of foreign vessels, a record number of 61, more than any other year of its existence.\(^{101}\)

Other Mexican states were not so lucky. Embroiled in its own struggles for power, Tamaulipas’ neighboring state of Nuevo León bravely announced in late 1832 that it would begin collecting the “full duties imposed by the general tariff” upon all specie or foreign merchandise entering their state.\(^{102}\) This was a significant move on their part because it meant that Matamoros merchants who had already legally declared their shipments in the port and paid import duties would now be double-taxed if their cargo crossed into Nuevo León. Such legislation would have affected the overland transport of imports from the port because many of the goods travelling to settlements in the interior had to pass through Monterrey. Fortunately for Matamoros (and for consumers and merchants in Monterrey), responding to protests by Matamoros merchants, Nuevo León officials rescinded the order almost immediately.\(^{103}\)

This pattern of locals resisting outsider attempts to infringe on their turf was now spreading to other settings. In Texas, American delegates met at San Felipe de Austin for the Convention of 1832, where they drafted retaliatory petitions addressed to the Mexican Congress. Settlers demanded the annulment of Article 11 of the Mexican Colonization Law of 1830, which had prohibited foreign settlement in Texas and had imposed new customs reforms, the recognition of squatters as valid immigrants, and most importantly, Mexico’s recognition of Texas as a separate Mexican state. As word of these demands reached Matamoros (as they did quickly), Smith reported on what was taking place there but he also expressed his opinion, which he had not done previously in his consular returns,

> The people of Texas in a few years will be enabled to carry on a very lucrative trade, not only with the Southern ports in the Gulf, but with foreign countries

\(^{100}\) “D.W. Smith to E. Livingston,” August 21, 1832. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1

\(^{101}\) See Chapter 3, Table 3.1.

\(^{102}\) El Restaurador de Tamaulipas 2:42, MAA, Volume 3, p. 25, 1 January 1833. For more on Nuevo León’s role in the fight for Texas independence see Miguel Ángel González Quiroga, “Nuevo León durante la independencia de Texas (1835-1836),” Historia Mexicana 56, no. 2 (Oct-Dec. 2006): 427-470.

\(^{103}\) “D.W. Smith to E. Livingston,” January 1, 1833. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1; “D.W. Smith to E. Livingston,” January 14, 1833. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1
which will yield an important revenue to the Mexican nation; and it is to be hoped that such obvious advantages will not be sacrificed by jealousy or misguided ambition.  

Interestingly, his remarks reinforce the economic platform of the Texas settlers, in essence by urging them to remain patient. One wonders whether this stance was a direct result of the threat to Matamoros’ monopoly over the northern Gulf Coast. Regardless, he urged patience, recognizing that the national government’s desire to generate more revenue would inevitably move Mexico to reassess trade restrictions as they applied to Texas. In Smith’s view, drastic measures, such as the territorial expansion that Pearse recommended the year before, would only serve to undermine the economic growth that all parties hoped to accomplish. Should they act too soon, all parties, but most especially Matamoros, would suffer the economic consequences.

As political disturbances reached the port, city officials were forced to defend their local economy and autonomy. Smith wrote to his superiors in Washington to complain that national trade policies intended at tapping revenues “throw every obstacle in the way of commerce.” But because of the strong pushback from Matamoros residents, officials at the state and national levels (well aware of the importance of collecting customs revenues from the port in financing the government), sided with the priorities of local residents. As a result, the city was able to avoid the contentious military battles that occurred in other parts of the country, spearheaded by the sporadic campaigns of Santa Anna who served as president no less than four times between 1833 and 1835 alone. Remarkably, the local economy continued to operate at a steady pace, with maritime activity mirroring levels seen prior to the political disruptions. One notable example was the second half of 1833, which according to official registers saw legal exports of specie totaling more than half a million dollars. This statistic is reinforced by the number of New Orleans merchants who continued to visit the port, consistently over 40 per year leading up to 1837, when the events of the Texas Rebellion dramatically changed the way that foreigners, despite their rooted presence in the port since the early 1820s, were perceived from within.

After the 1834 collapse of the Federal Republic, caudillo General Santa Anna dominated national politics. The enactment of his Siete Leyes (Seven Laws), also known as the Constitution of 1836, transformed Mexico into a centralist regime, and power became concentrated in the hands of the president and his cabinet. The states of the former republic were reorganized as military districts administered by regional caudillos appointed by the president. This new centralist regime soon brought it into conflict with Mexico’s northern frontier, where Santa Anna’s efforts to exert central authority over foreign English-speaking settlements was met with strong opposition.

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106 “Smith to Secretary of State Louis McLean,” January 1, 1834. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

107 See Chapter 3, Table 3.1.
The Texas Rebellion and its Impact on Matamoros Society

Due to the city’s push to remain below the fray of political instability, on the eve of the Texas Rebellion, business in Matamoros was booming. Its economic importance is exemplified by the fact that customs revenues collected in Matamoros were almost single-handedly responsible for sustaining not just the local, but also the state government. As a result, most, if not all, American and foreign merchants fought hard to stay below the radar of contentious political debates.

Mexican authorities could have taken a more severe stance with regard to commercial laws during this period, but they were unable to do so because of their need for customs revenue. Officials appointed at the national level made it their business to ensure that duties were collected in the country’s three most active ports: Matamoros, Tampico and Veracruz. As we have seen, this had been recognized as early as 1830, when General Mier y Terán ordered his troops to serve as customs house officers in Matamoros, a clear sign that customs duties from the port were a crucial source of revenue.

But the actions of Texas empresarios further north would drastically alter how the foreign residents in the port were treated. As we have seen, the port was frequented by a steady stream of Texas settlers, but the city was never used as a battleground for the battles of the Texas Rebellion. The foreign consular service may have weathered the Pearse-Smith storm and the legislative pushback regarding trade policy, but the climate that emerged from the Texas Rebellion was turbulent. Above all, when Texas settlers rebelled against the Mexican state in 1835 it came as a surprise to Mexican politicians, who as some scholars have argued were proud of the friendly relations that existed between the Texas colonists and the central government. In fact, Stephen F. Austin himself was known for his comparatively guarded approach to diplomatic relations with the Mexican government. The armed conflict, which resulted in the establishment of the Republic of Texas in 1836, would be directly responsible for altering the social landscape of the particularly American port city.

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108 Without taking into account contraband trade, official statistics state that 187,176 of the total 235,404 pesos collected in customs duties in Matamoros were paid to Mexican troops charged with guarding the frontier. Graf, “Economic History,” 131.

109 It is widely believed that by the end of the American Civil War (1865), Matamoros was Mexico’s third largest port, behind Veracruz and Tampico. For an examination of the confederate cotton trade networks that ran through the port see David Montejano, “Mexican Merchants and Teamsters on the Texas Cotton Road, 1862-1865,” in Mexico & Mexicans in the Making of the United States, ed. John Tutino (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012): 141-170.


112 Ramos, Beyond the Alamo, 137.
The military action taking place in Texas and its potential threat to the safety of the port’s American residents pushed Smith to urge Washington officials to send American military reinforcements. He could sense that matters were going to deteriorate further, writing the Secretary of State in June of 1835 (four months before the first military battle erupted) that,

I have frequently suggested to the Department the propriety of an occasional visit of one of our small armed vessels off this port. The prospect of an open rupture with Texas and the present unsettled state of affairs throughout this country have excited apprehensions, which, it is confidently expected, will not escape the observation of our government.\(^\text{113}\)

When the Department of State sent Smith an up-to-date list of consular posts that mislisted his residence as Texas, he clarified the error to his superiors immediately, stating, “The place of my residence is designated as being in Texas. This is a mistake […] The town of Matamoros is situated within the state of Tamaulipas.”\(^\text{114}\) He wanted to make it clear that the city and its citizens were not in alliance with the Texas cause, which could have severely jeopardized their safety and brought open warfare to the city. On the other hand, the efforts of Texas revolutionaries further north angered locals in Matamoros, who had fought vehemently to maintain open trade relations. Should they be perceived as aligning with the rebels, Mexican retaliation would have disastrous effects on the economic prosperity they fought so hard to build. Unfortunately, American resident’s attempts to convince Mexican officials otherwise were largely unsuccessful.

While some had chosen to ride out the political instabilities of the early 1830s, matters took an even more dramatic turn for foreigners in 1835 when the Mexican government attempted to implement a forced loan program designed to extract funds from Matamoros residents, presumably to fund their war efforts in Texas. Official reports referred to Americans as “traitors,” and a number of attempts by local officials were launched to push them out of the city.\(^\text{115}\) The reason for the backlash was that because of the large numbers of American residents in the port, native Mexicans had a hard time distinguishing between those that sympathized with the Texas cause and those that did not. In reality it appears that most Americans in Matamoros wanted little to do with the land speculating goals of Texas, but because of their shared heritage, they were viewed by Mexican officials as one and the same. Things got worse when the Mexican government implemented the forced loan program that required citizens to pay a 100 peso “donation” to help subsidize the army’s guarding of Texas prisoners being housed in the city’s prison.\(^\text{116}\) Merchants were already skeptical, especially because Santa Anna’s troops had once again seized control of the port that year, overtaking the customs house.


\(^{114}\) “D.W. Smith to John Forsyth,” July 18, 1835. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

\(^{115}\) MAA, Volume 4, pp. 2-5, 1835; MAA, Volume 4, p. 32, 1835; MAA, Volume 4, p. 40, 1836.

\(^{116}\) MAA, Volume 3, pp. 166-172, 1835; MAA, Volume 4, p. 77, 1836.
and forcibly removing its manager in 1836. Smith, representing the American community, made it clear to officials that he staunchly opposed the loan program, noting, “Should an attempt of the kind be enforced on any American citizen, I will fearlessly protest against the measure.” But the fissure between resident Americans and local Mexicans had officially begun, and Matamoros’ mayor made a formal retaliatory demand on Americans in Matamoros to contribute their quota, and he was relentless in its enforcement.

Texas rebels recognized the importance of the Matamoros maritime trade and announced their intent to shut it down. It was announced that any American vessels caught trading with Mexico in the Gulf would be subject to seizure as lawful prizes by the Texas government. In addition, American ships were detained not only in order to levy fees and tariffs, but also to prevent the spread of information regarding Mexican military preparations against Texas. Mexican officials retaliated by imposing stricter immigration requirements, proclaiming that all Mexicans and foreigners were forbidden from leaving the port without a passport signed by the city’s military commander. The purpose of this regulation was to ensure that Texas rebels were unable to flee the country and send news of local military campaigns to informants elsewhere. The paranoia was not unfounded, exemplified by the case of Americans William Howell (a wool buyer) and his friend Reuben Marmaduke Potter. They were apprehended by Mexican officials when they attempted to send their Texas cronies secret dispatches hidden in the handle of a leather whip. But it must be noted that they were not acting on behalf of the majority of the foreign residents of the port. Regardless, as noted, Mexican officials looked to all non-citizens as potential traitors, thereby altering the friendly climate that had made Matamoros popular among foreigners throughout the 1820s.

In addition to the immigration regulations, the 1836 centralist constitution imposed new commercial laws that directly affected the local economy. Merchants were

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118 “D.W. Smith to John Forsyth,” July 1, 1836. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.

119 MAA, Volume 16, pp. 21, 58, 186-187, 1836.

120 This would have scared American merchants, since the majority of commercial traffic was to the port of Matamoros. AGN, Guerra y Marina, 2 January 1836; Graf, “Economic History,” 125.


enraged when they heard that the national government had enacted a new tariff law to regulate commerce and navigation, and which directly impacted the duties of imports to the city.\textsuperscript{124} While the goal of the law was to increase federal revenue, it resulted in a reduction in import trade, which the Mexican government needed to fund its army. Desperate for supplies and revenue, government officials relented by loosening tariffs on provisions imported through Matamoros on July 16, 1836, a recognition that imports were vital to sustaining war efforts in the North. The legislation, which lowered the amount of import duties to 40 percent, was followed just three months later with an even bigger decrease, lowering the tariffs to 20 percent.\textsuperscript{125} The number of vessels arriving to the port increased from the year before, a sign that merchants were eager to capitalize on the market demands.\textsuperscript{126} But New Orleans insurance companies were less optimistic, refusing to insure Mexican vessels due to the danger.\textsuperscript{127}

Trade had become the target of the Texas cause, even though Matamoros merchants had attempted to separate themselves from their political agenda. Texas independence signaled the start of a downward spiral of events. Merchants’ perceptions of the viability of continuing to conduct business in Matamoros became severely challenged. Even Smith, the ineterate Matamoros booster, wrote candidly and pessimistically about the situation,

Most of the American merchants engaged in this trade are minding their affairs with the intention of leaving the country. The recent occurrences in Texas have rendered the foreigners generally unpopular throughout the interior, especially our countrymen, who are in some instances, unjustly identified with the Texas cause, and subjected to repeated insult and oppression.\textsuperscript{128}

New Orleans insurance companies appealed to the United States government, requesting that ships be accompanied between Tampico, Veracruz, Matamoros and New Orleans to transport the specie they had on board and protect commerce.\textsuperscript{129}

Americans soon became the target of military raids. The hostilities escalated to the point that even diplomatic immunity could not save Smith from having his home ransacked by soldiers.\textsuperscript{130} The incident had started when two young men, one of whom was Smith’s stepson, were arrested in Matamoros on “suspicion” that they were about to leave for Texas. After being put in prison, military officials arrived at Smith’s residence,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{124} MAA, Volume 16, p. 122, 1836.
\item \textsuperscript{125} Ibid; “D.W. Smith to J. Forsyth,” July 28, 1836. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
\item \textsuperscript{126} See Chapter 3, Table 3.1.
\item \textsuperscript{127} “D.W. Smith to J. Forsyth,” November 10, 1836. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
\item \textsuperscript{128} “D.W. Smith to Francisco Vital Fernandez,” February 17, 1836. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
\item \textsuperscript{129} George Pierce Garrison, \textit{Diplomatic Correspondence of the Republic of Texas} (Washington: American Historical Association, 1908-1911), I: 88-89, 9 May 1836.
\item \textsuperscript{130} “D.W. Smith to Francisco Vital Fernandez,” February 17, 1836. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.
\end{itemize}
confiscated a mare and two mules, and searched his home for subversive materials. Five days later the property was returned to Smith and the men released, but no official apologies were ever made.\textsuperscript{131} The incident revealed that anyone and everyone could be considered a target.

Nonviolent arrests soon turned to outright pandemonium, as local officials sought revenge for the Texas betrayal. Aside from episodes of local vigilantism, it was reported that President Santa Anna ordered the execution by firing squad of 412 Texas supporters in Goliad who were previously being held as political prisoners in Matamoros.\textsuperscript{132} The violence spread to the streets of the city, where according to Smith “even women have been butchered in the street in the most shocking manner.”\textsuperscript{133} These public acts of brutality and retaliation added to the Americans’ sense that Matamoros was no longer friendly to foreigners.

Americans did appear to abandon their investments and leave the port both during and after the military conflict. By the end of June, 1836, Smith wrote that

\begin{quote}
[American] merchants, being unwilling to risk their persons or properties in the country, have disposed of their effects at a considerable sacrifice with a determination to abandon the trade altogether.\textsuperscript{134}
\end{quote}

Interestingly, as noted, the government’s loosening of tariff laws to encourage imports meant that the number of maritime merchants visiting the port remained high. But those with other ventures—such as boarding houses, dry goods stores, or restaurants—had chosen to leave due to their poor treatment. In fact, according to Smith, the hostilities towards Americans continued, well into 1838 when he wrote,

\begin{quote}
It would seem that the civil and military authorities of Mexico, seize every opportunity with avidity, to create an invidious destruction to the prejudice of citizens of the United States, who are generally looked upon as enemies in disguise […] This feeling towards our countrymen, as unmerited as it is unjust, commenced with the hostilities in Texas.\textsuperscript{135}
\end{quote}

It was hard for Mexican officials to disassociate American residents in Matamoros with Americans in Texas even though they had minimal direct ties to the happenings there. The open and friendly atmosphere that commerce had fostered in Matamoros had been

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{131}{“D.W. Smith to J. Forsyth,” February 20, 1836. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1; “D.W. Smith to J. Forsyth,” April 11, 1836. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.}

\footnotetext{132}{The testimony states “their bodies [were] burnt the same day.” The correspondence outlines the imprisonment and execution of many others within the port of Matamoros. The episode is also referred to as the Goliad Massacre. “D.W. Smith to John Forsyth,” April 11, 1836. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.}

\footnotetext{133}{“D.W. Smith to John Forsyth,” July 1, 1836. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.}

\footnotetext{134}{Ibid.}

\footnotetext{135}{“D.W. Smith to John Forsyth,” November 30, 1837. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.}
\end{footnotes}
severely challenged by political circumstances elsewhere. The end result was the departure of U.S. citizens from the country, city, and port, with Smith sending notice to New Orleans customs houses discouraging further trade since the climate for foreigners was hostile.  

Texas Independence irrevocably altered the port’s commercial and social life. Hostile treatment was reinforced by short-lived legislative embargoes on shipping, which further interrupted the flow of goods and merchandise. Smith summed up the dismal situation deftly: “The commercial transactions at this place [are] trifling in comparison with former times.” In 1837, Mexican officials seized all American ships and cargoes in the harbor of the Brazos de Santiago, and their crews were threatened. Smith had nowhere to turn but to ask his colleagues in Mexico City for help in making sense of the chaos that was ensuing. He wrote to his superiors,

The remote situation of this port from the capital, the frequent alteration of the laws, and the peculiar manner in which they are promulgated – would render my best exertions unavailing, without the constant aid and cooperation of our Agent in the city of Mexico.

In this instance, Matamoros’ geography worked to its disadvantage; neighbors with the Texas rebels, it was hard for Mexican officials to differentiate between the city’s loyal American residents and Texas supporters. This confusion had a devastating effect on the socio-political climate of the city.

The hostile climate for foreigners was exacerbated by the Mexican government’s loosening of military protection from hostile indigenous groups in Matamoros’ environs after the Texas Rebellion. As DeLay has shown for all of northern Mexico, without the manpower (or revenue) to more effectively protect northern Mexican cities from hostile Indian attacks, trade routes were severely interrupted. According to government

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137 Insurgents decided that if they could not control Matamoros entirely, they could at least profit from the trade that passed through it. In May 1839 one half of all merchandise duties was to be confiscated. This did allow for some commerce to continue, although much less than the city had seen in the years before. “D.W. Smith to J. Forsyth,” June 1, 1839. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1; “D.W. Smith to J. Forsyth,” November 10, 1839. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1; “D.W. Smith to J. Forsyth,” December 24, 1839. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.


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accounts, before the war Indians generally stayed to the north of the Río Bravo, which conveniently put them at a distance from the established trade routes that connected Matamoros with the interior south and west. After the outbreak of the Texas insurrection, the Comanches seized the opportunity to make repeated incursions into the frontier settlements on the Río Bravo. In the immediate vicinity of Matamoros they were able to kill ranchers and raid large herds of horses, mules, and cattle. The situation deteriorated to the point that in 1837 many Mexican ranchers abandoned their farms and moved to the city center of Matamoros, where they felt they would be better protected. Little did they know that conditions there were also dangerous. DeLay has argued that the effect of this rampant indigenous raiding on northern Mexico resulted in man-made “deserts,” creating a changed political atmosphere in the U.S. that in time justified the United States government’s actions in the 1846-48 war that resulted in the seizure of the divided and war-torn Mexican North.

The hostile climate was underscored by legislation that discouraged American merchants from visiting the country. Neighboring states such as Nuevo León passed discriminatory laws to restrict Americans from reaching their cities. The Nuevo León law, passed in 1837, forbade foreign merchants from selling their imports within the state. Only one or two British traders were exempted, and this meant that any Americans residing in Nuevo León, or more specifically, Monterrey, could import their goods only if they intended to sell them to Mexican business owners at a fraction of the retail price. Merchants who had worked to establish these commercial connections with Monterrey had few if any ties to the Texas cause, but they felt the impact of Mexican retaliation most deeply—through retaliatory legislation and public displays of violence—which forced merchants to think critically about whether the financial gain was really worth the risk.

Matamoros did manage to rebound from the exodus of American residents and subsequent economic downturn caused by Texas Independence. But the city’s autonomy and friendly climate for American residents would never be what it had been in the 1820s. Officials at all levels recognized the importance of the port’s trade revenues, as evidenced by its repeated military occupations. At the same time, Matamoros merchants were remarkably resilient. Immigrants continued to come to Mexico via Matamoros, willing to service the region’s demand for imports. This trend would continue up until the eve of

(Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1; “D.W. Smith to J. Forsyth,” January 6, 1837. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.


144 DeLay, War of a Thousand Deserts.


146 The Mexican Decree of September 23, 1843 retaliated by prohibiting foreigners from selling merchandise unless they resided in Mexico with their families. Fortunate to American merchants, it was observed that permits were issued to circumvent the measure, and were issued to all who applied for them.
the U.S.-Mexican War.\textsuperscript{147} New Orleans merchants continued to make Matamoros their preferred port of call, and the city responded to changes that affected its lifeblood—commerce—by insisting that local officials defend the city’s commercial rights. But as we saw, the seeds of suspicion had already been planted. The city and country would never again see the same friendly climate towards Americans that it did the decades before.

\textit{Matamoros Fever?}

Foreign businessmen as well as Mexican merchants had worked together in the 1820s and early 1830s in hopes of capitalizing on the potential of what many saw as the next New Orleans. The porosity of Mexico’s maritime borders throughout this period facilitated the entrepreneurial ambitions of all parties willing to acknowledge and deal with the risks inherent in a fluid border. Henry Austin’s assertion that regulating trade revenue within the port of Matamoros was like chasing a goose that lays “golden eggs” reminds us of how wealthy the city had become by 1830.\textsuperscript{148} It also (and Austin no doubt meant to imply this) reminds us that its commerce was fragile. Officials in Mexico City and Ciudad Victoria learned that overtaxing imports to fund military campaigns against federalist rebels or Indians, was threatening to the goose. If they pushed residents too far, the scales would be tipped, with Matamoros holding the upper hand due to the revenues it produced. Americans were integral to this balance—as they were intimately invested in the production of these trade revenues and fought vehemently to protect their economic rights. Local strategies to construct them as “enemies” as a result of Texas political strife would prove especially damaging. Both American and Mexican officials tried hard to ignore the political instabilities in Texas and central Mexico as long as possible, but they soon realized that the Texas Rebellion threatened to undermine their entire system.

Indeed the political events of the 1830s irreversibly changed the way that state, national, and even international figures used the city as a stage for greater political causes.\textsuperscript{149} Matamoros’ reputation as a lucrative and valuable source of revenue for the

\textsuperscript{147} 1842’s legal exports amounted to $481,277 and the following year it grew to $591,185. \textit{Balanza mercantil de la Plaza de Matamoros correspondiente al año de 1843 formada y publicada por la Junta de Fomento} (Matamoros: Impreso por Martín Salazar, 1844).


government reached as far inland as the trade networks it served. It should come as no surprise then that Texas rebels, including Sam Houston, used the city’s name as a way to describe their contemporaries’ thirst for tapping the customs revenues produced there. In other words, this “Matamoros fever” as Houston termed it, represents the pursuit by political officials, both within Mexico and in its Texas territories, to exploit revenues generated by successful transnational trading networks and the imports they brought.  

Matamoros’ political history is significant not just because of the city’s economic prosperity, but also because of its position as a city caught in the middle of a larger struggle. Not yet a border city, Americans’ domination of trade there, their demographic majority, and their outright rejection of centralist tariffs underscore the ways that Matamoros could have easily ended up on the other side of our modern-day border had Pearse’s campaign gathered more steam. As we saw, before the Texas revolt the fact that it was a city with a large American population was secondary to locals’ emphasis on nurturing trade relationships. But the Texas Rebellion significantly altered Mexican officials’ viewpoints towards trade. They were now more ambivalent about it even though it was still the primary means for them to finance their cash-strapped government.

It is evident that the reason that the majority of Americans chose not to ally with Texas is that they had too much to lose economically. Even without a large number of Mexicans living there (which indeed there were), Americans in Matamoros would still have chosen not to ally with Texas. The overland routes that facilitated their trade for silver specie led deep into the Mexican interior, and nurturing those connections required that Americans remain on as friendly political terms as possible with natives at all levels (local, state, and national). This dynamic tilted the public opinion among American residents in favor of a Mexican alliance. Had this not been the case and had the U.S. government taken up the cause in support of the American citizens who resided there, the U.S.-Mexico border as we know it might have been drawn very differently.

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150 Craig H. Roell, "MATAMOROS EXPEDITION OF 1835-36," Handbook of Texas Online (http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/qdm01), accessed March 7, 2013. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.
Epilogue

Tilting the Balance: Matamoros Takes Center Stage

Live proud and heroic Tamaulipas,
The region that slumbers on the banks of the river.
The blood pounding in my chest,
The glorious memory of their heroes and honor.
Long live the beloved land Tamaulipas
That in dire times gave their blood and lives.
Sing a song of love and loyalty
And all Tamaulipas vibrates to the voice of freedom.

-Chorus to the state anthem of Tamaulipas

The 1840s changed everything for Matamoros, both politically and economically. The watershed event of the century—the U.S.-Mexico War—and the treaty that established a physical, landed boundary between the two nations at the Río Bravo severely restricted the fluidity that had in some ways been at the heart of Matamoros’s success as an entrepôt between Mexico and New Orleans, and even between Mexico and independent Texas.¹ Foreign resident Americans had felt the impact of Mexican backlash following Texas Independence, but the invasion, and later cession of over half of Mexico’s landmass undermined the close personal and business connections upon which transnational commerce had been built. The northern borderlands would never be the same.

While the maritime and overland trade networks explored throughout this dissertation deepened and lengthened Matamoros’ connections to the broader world, the city’s distance from the political capital of Mexico City continued to be a major factor in

both the city’s economy and its politics. This gap was felt most during times of political and economic crisis, which were precisely the times when the Mexican federal government depended on Matamoros the most. Commerce may have made independent merchants wealthy, but the cash-strapped Mexican government relied on the port’s trade revenues to finance its government. Officials at all levels (local, state, and national) longed for and actively pursued the “golden eggs” of the Mexican Northeast—Matamoros’ customs revenues—but as historian David Weber argues, Mexico City officials did not reciprocate with the autonomy that they sought, and in effect “could not deliver the goods.”

As we have seen, conflict in Texas and the imposition of trade and tariff laws from above radicalized the local Matamoros population and pushed them even further towards their trading partners across the Gulf, especially in New Orleans. Fortunately for Mexican officials, leading up to the U.S.-Mexico War, the economic incentives that kept Matamoros residents and merchants under their fold—such as lax customs enforcement and high profits—also kept them loyal to Mexico. But the city’s allegiance, which was dependent on its favorable economic climate, was fragile.

The centralist-federalist debates of the 1830s did not bring much armed conflict to Matamoros, but they did sharpen this divide between the port city and its weak central government. Indeed, Matamoros’ history as a prosperous port with ongoing potential now placed it at the center of internal discord between Mexican political factions. Federalist secessionists, taking cues from Texas’ independence in 1836, made steps towards forming an independent colony in northern Mexico in the late 1830s, later to be called the Republic of the Río Grande. The movement’s leaders recognized that tapping Matamoros’ customs revenues, despite the challenge of overcoming a strong Mexican military presence within the city, would ensure fiscal success for their new colony.

Understanding its importance, and the effect it would have on Mexico’s government, the commander-in-chief of the rebel army, General Antonio Canales, proposed striking an alliance with Texas. In fact, he wrote to Texas president Mirabeau Lamar in December 1838, and asked for his support (both financial and military) of their cause. Lamar made it known to his fellow Texans that one of his main goals in support of this alliance was to promote trade, and he seized the opportunity, however brief it was, to capitalize on the lifting of trade restrictions with Matamoros as an indication of their agreement. He issued his “Proclamation Opening a Trade with the Mexican Citizens on the Río Grande” on February 21, 1839, which called for the use of any “practicable road” between the Republic of Texas and the Río Grande. Canales next tried but failed to capture the city of Matamoros, but despite his failure he managed to devise a way to profit (indirectly at least) from the trade there. Since the federalist rebels were more successful in controlling the territories further into the interior, beginning in May 1839 their officials began

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4 Smither, The Papers of Mirabeau Buonaparte Lamar, V: 223.

collecting on behalf of their cause half of the normal internal duties imposed on all merchandise passing between Matamoros and the interior. This enabled the movement to gain a little bit of traction, and Canales, along with his cronies from within the Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo León, and Coahuila, officially proclaimed the establishment of the Republic of the Río Grande from their headquarters in Laredo in January 1840.

While hopes for the Republic’s existence lasted less than the calendar year of 1840, its sympathizers viewed the colony, centered along the banks of the Río Grande River, as a means to revitalize the local economy. Although Canales’ military campaign had gained some momentum in Texas and Tamaulipas, as they marched deeper into the interior they were severely outnumbered by Mexican counterinsurgency troops. A formal convention was called between rebel General Canales and Mexican General Mariano Arista in November 1840. As a concession for his abandonment of the rebellion, Canales was offered the position of Brigadier General in the Mexican army, and his supporters were granted immunity. Recognizing that his cause had little chance of success he accepted, and the dream of a Río Grande Republic was officially dissolved.

Matamoros’ central role in this insurgency offers yet another testament to the perceived importance of the city’s political leanings.

Matamoros city officials, caught in the middle of the deteriorating political relations between Mexico and the United States, as well as the city being perceived as the

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6 “D. W. Smith to J. Forsyth,” June 1, 1839. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1.


8 Brian DeLay seconds Vázquez’s argument that the Republic was a fiction, in part because the records between Mexican officials regarding secession are extant. Brian DeLay, War of a Thousand Deserts, 165-193. Milo Kearney and Anthony Knopp, Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991), 51.


10 Ibid., 370-373.
coveted prize of federalist rebels, tried everything to promote the revitalization of trade after the failed 1840 rebellion. First, they opted to declare the Boca del Río entry point (as opposed to the Brazos de Santiago) as the official port of entry in 1840. This was significant because Texan land claims for the river claimed that the original Brazos de Santiago should be in American hands. With national tariff laws at their highest levels, local officials hoped that an increased presence there might help offset the port’s contraband activity, which according to local records was also at a high point due to Americans’ attempts to avoid taxation. Efforts to reduce the contraband activity were largely unsuccessful, and Mexican officials soon ordered that all rafts, canoes, and boats found on the right bank (modern-day Brownsville) of the Río Bravo be destroyed, stretching as far as the town’s authority extended. Unable to catch a break, Matamoros’ financial woes were exacerbated after a severe smallpox epidemic took over the city in early 1840 followed by a yellow-fever-like outbreak in 1841. In addition, Comanche raiding was at the highest level the city had seen in 1840, so much so that Mexican authorities in Matamoros wrote of plans to form a military alliance with the raiders. Smart profiteers targeted the city’s interior trade routes and drove up the price of food in Matamoros by intercepting farmers’ shipments of staples like corn and beans, buying the produce and transporting it for resale at inflated prices in town. According to reports, not even the roads from the Brazos entry point to the city were safe anymore.

In reality, Canales’ dreams of a Río Grande Republic only served to heighten public awareness of Matamoros’ importance. All sides, regardless of political allegiance or nationality, recognized that access to trade in northern Mexico was centered in Matamoros. The Texas trade that had briefly opened up during the rebellion once again became illegal, and Texas President Lamar was quick to pick up his campaign to open it up again in 1841. Mexican political figures, including General Mariano Arista, made it clear that commercial relations with Texas, apart from serving as a means of support for the traitors, stood to diminish the government’s revenues from the Matamoros customs

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11 Archivo del Ayuntamiento de Matamoros (hereafter MAA), Volume 34, p. 164, 21 January 1840; Orders were sent that various ports (including Campeche) were to be shut down to commerce, but Matamoros remained open. MAA, Volume 34, pp. 63, 64, 71, 110, 112, 127 (various dates from 1840).

12 MAA, Volume 34, p. 64, 17 May 1840.

13 MAA, Volume 33, p. 124, 12 October 1840; See also Kearney and Knopp, Boom and Bust, 51; David M. Vigness, “The Lower Río Grande Valley, 1836-1846,” (M.A. Thesis, University of Texas, Austin, 1948), 33.

14 “D.W. Smith to D. Webster,” May 12, 1841. Despatches from United States Consuls in Matamoros, 1826-1906 (Microfilm, 12 reels, National Archives Microfilm Publications), roll 1. It appears that Smith died as a result of the latter of the two outbreaks.


16 Vigness, “The Lower Río Grande,” 34.

house and therefore would not be supported.\textsuperscript{18} Lamar defended his proposal by claiming that Matamoros “up to that time had been a flourishing and improving city [but now was] dwind[ling] away to almost nothing [because] little more than one-fourth of the revenue formerly accruing from the Customhouse at that place could now be obtained.”\textsuperscript{19}

Furthermore, there was a storm of discriminatory backlash against resident American citizens which, combined with tariff laws that they experienced as not just high but punitive, spurred many American commercial firms with headquarters in Matamoros to close their doors permanently, feeding the downward spiral.\textsuperscript{20}

Indeed, Matamoros had already seen its boom years in the 1820s and early 1830s undermined by political tensions between Mexico and the now-independent Republic of Texas. Coupled with national officials’ sustained enforcement of stringent tariff laws, the port’s economic position post-1836 had deteriorated. Military battles between Mexican forces and Texans continued into the 1840s and worsened even further when Texan representatives rallied around their legal claim to the entire northern half of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Most significant in this proposition was that it would extend their Republic’s southern border from the Nueces River (close to modern-day San Antonio) down to the Río Bravo. There was no way that Matamoros would not be drawn into the fray.

Access to the Río Bravo, and more specifically control of the Brazos de Santiago port of entry on the coast, colored the politics of the 1840s. The river had long been looked upon by merchants and officials as the region’s biggest asset, as it made possible connections between Matamoros and interior settlements as far west as the modern-day state of Colorado. Its waters sustained the population and made agriculture viable. But Texan claims to the river threatened to disrupt the fragile balance on which the city’s economic success rested. Texan politicians argued legal claim to the land with General Santa Anna’s signing of the Treaties of Velasco in 1836, where he conceded Mexico’s loss of the Texas Rebellion with the retreat of Mexican troops who were then stationed in Texas to below the Río Grande.\textsuperscript{21} The treaties (one public and one secret) required that the Mexican government and its military abandon its cause against Texas, including the release of prisoners and the relocation of Mexican troops to south of the Río Bravo. Should the terms of the public treaty’s ten articles be met, it was agreed that a “secret treaty” would then be released to the public, within which it was agreed that Texas’ territorial claims would not extend beyond the Río Grande.\textsuperscript{22} Texan officials characterized this measure as Mexico’s official concession of the territory above the river,

\textsuperscript{18} Arista’s refusal to open Matamoros to the Texas trade was also related to his personal economic interests. He was secretly engaged in smuggling operation with Texas Colonel Henry Kinney out of Corpus Christi Bay. Vigness, “The Lower Río Grande,” 34; Graf, “The Economic History,” 144.

\textsuperscript{19} Graf, “The Economic History,” 145. Graf consulted the original diplomatic correspondences of the Texan government.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 124, 127; Kearney and Knopp, \textit{Boom and Bust}, 48.

\textsuperscript{21} “Treaty of Velasco, May 14, 1836,” Reproduced for the program of the 71\textsuperscript{st} annual meeting of the Texas State Historical Association, March 1967. Baylor University Library, Waco, Texas.

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
despite Mexican politicians’ fervent denial of this claim (arguing that General Santa Anna had agreed to the terms under coercion as a prisoner of war).

Directly affected by the boundary dispute, even more troubling to Matamoros officials was Texas politicians’ refusal to back down on their claims to the Rio Grande. As the political dispute intensified, it became clear that the underlying objective of the Texans was to gain control of the Brazos de Santiago opening to the port of Matamoros. In fact, Texas control of the opening was included in its boundary demands to the Mexican government in 1841, despite the recognition by Texas officials that Mexico would never concede because the port was “so essential to the existence of all commercial advantages which she may expect to derive from the Navigation of the Rio Grande.”23 In effect, if successful, Texan control of the Brazos opening would transform the historical maritime port of entry into Matamoros from Mexican to American territory.

It should be noted that in addition to the internal political discord plaguing most of Mexico during this time, Matamoros also faced the pressures of American expansionism. Officials throughout Mexico were aware of this American movement, and the backlash from Texas independence led to even more intensified attacks on the city’s foreign resident community.24 Further north in Mexico’s northern borderlands, the land-hungry Americans invaded Texas as part of the Mier Expedition in late 1842, and by 1843, Mexican politicians in Tamaulipas were publishing and distributing newspaper editorials denouncing the American policy:

Is it a new way of thinking in the United States to extend their territorial possessions any which way? Surely not for those who have observed their actions since they were in the cradle of their independence; because it was back then that they started their Machiavellian scheme of shoving their neighbors aside […] in a most unjust way.25

One of the goals of this media campaign was to encourage Americans to leave the country, which was reinforced by a September 23, 1843 decree that prohibited foreigners from selling merchandise unless they resided in Mexico with their families.26 Indeed, pushing Americans out of the city only served to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs since they were so crucial to trade within the city. But as with most of the country’s policies pertaining to trade during this period, the anti-American movement was most fervent in areas outside Matamoros, in cities such as Ciudad Victoria and Mexico City. This is not to say that local Mexican officials did not share in these feelings. But as we have seen with the city’s reaction to new tariff policies, officials in Mexico City failed to understand that restrictionist policies would undermine the delicate balance between

23 Quoted in Graf, “The Economic History,” 146.
24 See Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of backlash against Americans in Matamoros.
25 El Aguila del Norte, 18 February 1846 (I:5), Archivo Municipal de Matamoros (hereafter Casamata), Hemeroteca Historica 1841-1850.
economic stability and national loyalty, and this would radicalize the local Matamoros population, which ultimately would inhibit the collection of customs revenues that all levels of government needed in order to fund the country’s military campaigns.

Meanwhile in the United States, the 1844 United States presidential election catapulted the question of Texas annexation onto the national stage. Democratic candidate James K. Polk ran on a platform of Texas reannexation, based on the claim that Texas had rightfully belonged to the United States under the Louisiana Purchase but had been given to Spain in 1819 under the “blunder” of the Adams-Onís Treaty.27 When word of this claim reached the city of Matamoros, commerce came to a near standstill.28 Then, a devastating hurricane hit the city on August 6, 1844, killing 70 people in addition to destroying the city’s town hall, parts of the Cathedral, and a number of the city’s New Orleans-style brick buildings.29 Part of the port’s landing facilities were destroyed, and incoming vessels dropped in numbers from more than thirty in 1843 to less than five in 1844.30 City demographics, on a steady decline since the start of the Texas Rebellion, mirrored this trend, with the population of Matamoros dropping from 16,372 in 1837 to 10,633 in 1844.31 To make matters worse, yet another restrictionist law prohibiting the importation of American goods was introduced in late 1845.32 Despite the recognition that the revenue from Matamoros was essential to the country fiscally, once again the government’s policy did little to support the growth of commerce there.

With the threat of American occupation looming, Matamoros officials responded with preemptory measures aimed at the American resident community. All remaining American merchants were ordered to leave the city on April 12, 1846. With less than 24 hours to evacuate, they were escorted by soldiers to the state capital of Ciudad Victoria and then transported to the Port of Tampico, where they could secure safe maritime passage back to the United States.33 Some Americans who expressed loyalty to Mexico were allowed to seek refuge on agricultural ranches on the outskirts of Matamoros, but the local military forces prohibited any Americans in Matamoros from crossing the river to join the American forces stationed at Fort Brown.34 American merchant Charles Stillman fled his Mexican military escort on the road to Victoria, went into hiding in the woods, and according to his accounts, local Mexicans (who had known him from his

28 See Chapter 3, Table 3.1.
29 MAA, Volume 44, pp. 176-201 (various 1844 dates); MAA, Volume 45, pp. 35-74 (various 1844 dates).
30 See Chapter 3, Table 3.1.
31 José Raúl Canseco Botello, *Historia de Matamoros* (Matamoros: Litográfica Jardín, 1981), 71. See also Chapter 4, Table 4.5.
34 Fort Brown is now home to the University of Texas at Brownsville. It was established prior to the foundation of Brownsville by American merchants from Matamoros in 1848.
previous friendly business dealings with them) provided him asylum until he could return to Matamoros five weeks later. Obviously, American business losses were substantial.

Polk made the expansion of the U.S. economy, and more specifically gaining access to Mexico’s maritime ports, a priority of his presidential term. With the annexation of Texas by the United States complete in 1845, Polk turned his attention to California and pushed America’s expansionist agenda to its main coastal port (San Francisco). Well aware that it was a good access point for trade with Asia, he sent Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary John Slidell to Mexico City to negotiate the purchase of California and New Mexico. The Texans’ boundary claims came up once again. Polk instructed General Zachary Taylor to station himself within the disputed territory between the Rio Grande and Nueces rivers and positioned American troops less than 150 miles up the coast at Corpus Christi Bay. When Mexico City officials refused to meet with Slidell, Polk formally declared war against Mexico in February 1846, and ordered Taylor to officially invade Mexico through the port and city of Matamoros in May of that same year.

By mid-1846, the city and region that had steadfastly avoided conflict found itself at the center of a major war. The first battle of the U.S.-Mexican War took place across the river from Matamoros at Palo Alto, and control of the Mexican Northeast, long neglected by Mexican officials, was the main objective of the armed battles that followed. Taylor’s decision to have American troops permanently occupy Matamoros and blockade its port of entry underlined his desire to cut off customs revenues and tap into the import trade networks, which would curb the flow of supplies to the Mexican troops. Taylor immediately erected a small supply depot, Fort Polk, close to the modern-day Port Isabel coastal landing. The small town of Frontón emerged in its immediate environs, which served as a trans-shipment center (receiving goods from New Orleans and sending them in two-wheeled ox-carts to Matamoros).

As this dissertation has uncovered, American merchants ran lucrative businesses in the city. After their official expulsion from Matamoros, twelve American businessmen stepped forward to claim protection from Mexican authorities, the majority of whom were merchants (Table 6.1). Charles Stillman, the son of the late U.S. consul’s business

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36 Matamoros merchants wiling to risk apprehension by Mexican troops capitalized on their presence there, transporting supplies. General Taylor took advantage of these visitors to send word back to Mexican officials that should the region become part of the United States, he would ensure their personal security. Richard Bruce Winders, Mr. Polk’s Army: American Military Experience in the Mexican War (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1997), 52.

37 Ibid.

38 Original testimony about the city, known as Frontón is contained within Thomas Bangs Thorpe, Our Army on the Rio Grande: Being a Short Account of the Important Events Transpiring from the Time of the Removal of the “Army of Occupation” from Corpus Christi, to the Surrender of Matamoros (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1846), 46.

39 Table is adapted from Graf, “The Economic History,” 160n10. Data is complied from the testimony of J.P. Schatzell, as part of the U.S.-Mexican Claims Commission of 1848.
partner Francis, estimated his annual income as an importer prior to the start of the war at roughly $80,000. The Americans who claimed protection in 1845 were only a fraction of the Americans who had been there in the 1830s, but it is likely that they chose to remain in the city despite the harsh political climate because the potential profits were so attractive. John P. Schatzell, of German descent but a naturalized American citizen and resident American consul in Matamoros, claimed that his annual income as a merchant amounted to $250,000. Other merchants’ annual income ranged anywhere from $15,000 to $50,000 per calendar year, a small fortune at that time. Despite the city’s troubled political climate post-1836, it is clear that trade, and the profits one could gain by practicing it, continued to drive the local economy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Where From</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Annual Business</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simeon Romer</td>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>30-40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Stevens</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>Grocery merchant</td>
<td>25-30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joachim Fox</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>Carpenter and trader</td>
<td>15-20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Stillman</td>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>Importer of goods</td>
<td>75-80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Miller</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Trader</td>
<td>8-10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanforth Kidder</td>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>Boarding House (his property alone was valued at $20-30,000)</td>
<td>3-4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolpf Seuzeneau</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>Bricklayer</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emelie Seuzeneau</td>
<td>Louisiana</td>
<td>Bricklayer</td>
<td>---</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>French Strother</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Gisner</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Established a comb manufactury</td>
<td>1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry Breese</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>Importing Merchant</td>
<td>50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John P. Schatzell</td>
<td>German</td>
<td>Merchant</td>
<td>200-250,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The most significant effects of the U.S.-Mexico War on Matamoros came as a result of the nearly two-year American occupation of the city. With the city’s officials pushed out of the city, Mexican records from this period are almost nonexistent, as are the previously detailed American consular returns. Mexican periodicals (produced mostly in Ciudad Victoria) exclusively covered the military and political affairs as they related to war activities and today shed little light on how Matamoros’ economic climate was altered as a result of the war. As a result, very little has been written on how the city was affected by the American occupation. Based on American diplomatic records and periodicals, Graf argues that the war actually served as an economic stimulus—as it promoted trade between merchants in the interior who serviced the city, relaxed (and almost eliminated) the imposition of Mexican tariffs that had angered foreign merchants.

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40 This would amount to nearly 7 million dollars in contemporary times. Inflation Calculator (http://www.westegg.com/inflation/infl.cgi), accessed 10 May 2013. Schatzell was among a handful of U.S. merchants in Matamoros that alleged that the Mexican government owed them for unpaid claims prior to the start of the war.

41 *Eco del norte de Tamaulipas* (1846), *Defensor de Tamaulipas* (1847), *El Correo Nacional* (1848), Casamata, Hermeroteca Historica 1841-1850.
in the years before the war, and introduced systematically for the first time the use of steamboat commerce on the Río Bravo.42

While it is evident that the city’s economy did continue, the records suggest that Matamoros commerce was severely restricted as a result of merchants’ difficulty in transporting goods to the interior. The reach of American merchants’ commercial ties was inhibited by the Mexican military’s steadfast campaigns to recapture their northern territories. While Graf may have documented an upsurge in local commercial activity amongst American merchants using unofficial periodical coverage, his analysis does not account for the overall effects of the American occupation of the city on the native Mexican residents who were pushed out, nor does it trace the economic impacts on interior markets in addition to those that once serviced the interior roads. Regardless, the American occupation redefined the city’s landscape by its encouragement of new American merchants to migrate to Matamoros. According to accounts, new merchants arrived daily to open stores in Matamoros, “so great the stock that the older part of town was completely occupied and the newcomers were obliged to resort to new streets, like Ohio Street, to find store space.”43 One merchant whose pen name was “Connecticut” wrote in August 1846 that he had spoken to a man who had been in business in Matamoros for 16 years who assured him that “the old [merchant] houses were doing as well as formerly, and their trade is mainly confined to the people of the interior.”44 He ended his editorial with the statement, “the merchants in Matamoros are making money and will continue to make it.”45 Since most of the new merchants were Americans, and since the city officials were now also Americans, the city that for some time had carried the physical appearance of an American city had now actually become one.

But once American merchants arrived they had trouble competing.46 The transfer of the port to U.S. hands during the occupation stunted the port’s trade activity, and the financial dividends that many Americans hoped for, now that tariffs were reduced to almost nothing and import restrictions were lifted under U.S. control, did not materialize. Fighting interrupted the transport of goods on interior roads, making it expensive and perilous. Goods had to first pass through the Point Isabel (Fort Polk) landing at the coast, then be transported to the mouth of the Río Bravo, and from there moved either by ship or mule train to Matamoros.47 Raiding by the Mexican military and indigenous tribes was commonplace.

Yet for a while, American merchants remained optimistic. It helped that merchants were no longer charged import tariffs, since American officials were not

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42 Graf, “The Economic History,” 152-211.

43 The American Flag, 30 December 1847, Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection (hereafter Benson), University of Texas at Austin; See also Graf, “The Economic History,” 186.

44 The American Flag, 26 August 1846, Benson.

45 Ibid.

46 The American Flag, 1 May 1847, Benson.

47 The American Flag, 26 August 1846, Benson.
collecting the roughly 50,000 pesos per month in customs revenues.\textsuperscript{48} As a result, tax-
free goods flooded the city’s markets and merchants hoped to capitalize on their
newfound tax freedom.\textsuperscript{49} But the result was exactly the opposite from what most
merchants had hoped—the lack of trade controls drove down prices, which diminished
profits. The benefits from the free trade conditions applied to all merchants, including
the other foreigners who had remained in the city. The U.S. government, now in very
much the same position as its Mexican counterpart, quickly realized that some sort of
trade reform was necessary in order to regulate and capitalize on the port’s trade activities.

American officials in Washington responded on March 31, 1847 by enacting the
Walker Tariff. The tariff implemented the duty system, but significantly lowered the
amounts levied on imports (more than 50 percent less than before).\textsuperscript{50} In addition, the tax
replaced the cumbersome port duties with a universal tax of one dollar per ton, levied
equally on foreign and American vessels.\textsuperscript{51} In theory, this reform was meant to
encourage commerce and produce revenue, but local Americans were enraged that even
though the city was in U.S. hands, they were not given an advantage over their
competition.\textsuperscript{52} Their concerns were well-founded, as foreign merchant houses had strong
affiliations with New Orleans houses of credit and were less affected by the tariffs than
small-time entrepreneurs (which Americans more often than not were). American
merchants complained that buyers preferred the goods sold by Europeans.

The tariff provisions were restricted to ports in Mexican territory, which angered
Matamoros Americans because the Brazos de Santiago was located on land that the U.S.
was claiming as part of Texas. They did not feel that they should have to pay import
duties within their own country.\textsuperscript{53} Because the duties were collected only after the goods
had made their way into the city, smuggling activity resumed. This resulted in a number
of small towns being created—including one named Bagdad, located on the Mexican side
of the river near the river’s opening, where its inhabitants, mostly American merchants,
smuggled large quantities of goods.\textsuperscript{54} In other words, these resourceful merchants
bypassed the tariff by avoiding Matamoros altogether. In another assault on the city’s

\textsuperscript{48} Manuel Payno, \textit{Reseña sobre el estado de los principales ramos de la hacienda pública} (México,

\textsuperscript{49} The American Flag, 23 August 1846, Benson.

\textsuperscript{50} The military was originally responsible for its collection, but after General Taylor complained that
such a duty was too cumbersome, American officials stationed an official customs collector within the city
of Matamoros. Cynthia Clark Northrup and Elaine C. Prange Turney, \textit{Encyclopedia of Tariffs and Trade in
U.S. History: The Encyclopedia, Volume I} (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 368-369;
Resources, 2001), 46-47.

\textsuperscript{51} Northrup and Turney, \textit{Encyclopedia of Tariffs}, 368-369

\textsuperscript{52} The American Flag, 14 October 1846, Benson; \textit{The American Flag} 26 May 1847, Benson.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{54} Manuel Humberto González Ramos, \textit{Historia del Puerto de Bagdad} (Matamoros, 2006).
commerce, Mexican officials in the interior responded by confiscating any and all goods that had been assessed the American tariff.\(^{55}\)

The city’s periodical reveals varied accounts of life in Matamoros during the occupation. It seems clear that the city’s culture was overrun by the American military presence. With no previous ties to the city, many military men made drinking their biggest diversion, so much so that General Taylor issued a mandate that prohibited the consumption and importation of any alcoholic beverages.\(^{56}\) Drinking undoubtedly continued, but a number of former bars were converted into restaurants and boarding houses.\(^ {57}\) Crime also increased. William Foyle, owner of one coffee house and bar on the vibrant Calle de Comercio Vive, was shot by a store clerk from his wife’s dry goods business.\(^{58}\) The reported motive for the crime was that the accused had a “lack of something else to shoot at.”\(^ {59}\) The shooter was sent to New Orleans, which the writer described as “a Botany Bay for convicts from this country.”\(^ {60}\)

Wartime conditions did little to offset the need for imports in Mexico’s northern territories, and the need for goods and supplies in the interior strengthened Matamoros’ ties to Monterrey. Matamoros became its main supply source, especially following its capture by American forces in 1846.\(^ {61}\) Undeterred by the fighting, merchants seized the opportunity to sell their imports to needy buyers in the interior. In fact, the American government provided the added incentive of allowing private merchants to attach themselves to government wagon trains for protection.\(^ {62}\) In theory, military mule trains would be less likely to be attacked, but in fact they became the targets of the Mexican military. Therefore, General Taylor discontinued providing this protection in late 1847.\(^ {63}\) Some merchants chose to just bypass the whole system by paying willing Mexicans (viewed by the American military as the enemy) along the way to safely conduct their goods to Monterrey. American General Wool countered in early January of 1848 that such actions would be considered “treasonable acts.”\(^ {64}\)

One lasting impact of the occupation was that the military and merchants alike experimented with ways to facilitate the transport of goods to Matamoros and the interior.


\(^{56}\) *The American Flag*, 6 August 1846, Benson; *The American Flag*, 9 August 1846, Benson; See also Graf, “The Economic History,” 171.

\(^{57}\) *The American Flag*, 6 August 1846, Benson; *The American Flag*, 9 August 9, 1846, Benson.

\(^{58}\) *The American Flag*, 14 October 1846, Benson.

\(^{59}\) Ibid.

\(^{60}\) Ibid.

\(^{61}\) *The American Flag* 1 October 1846, Benson; *The American Flag*, 17 October 1846, Benson; *The American Flag*, 24 October 1846, Benson; *The American Flag*, 28 October 1846, Benson; *The American Flag*, 31 October 1846, Benson; *The American Flag*, 7 November 1846, Benson; *The American Flag* 21 November 1846, Benson.

\(^{62}\) *The American Flag*, 9 October 1847, Benson.

\(^{63}\) Ibid.

\(^{64}\) *The American Flag*, 31 January 1848, Benson.
American generals and private merchants brought steamboats to the river, in the hopes that they could carry supplies and goods from the mouth of the Río Bravo to Matamoros in less time. In fact, their introduction also made it possible for merchants to avoid paying the Walker Tariff, because if goods were unloaded in areas prior to reaching Matamoros they could then be smuggled illegally to markets outside the city. Some military steamers rented space to private merchants who took advantage of the low-priced freight space. After American officials realized what was taking place, they responded by imposing the fees at the mouth of the river. The steamboats greatly facilitated the movement of goods along the river and one privately owned ship, The Brownsville, advertised that it was able to make the trip from the mouth of the river to Matamoros in only 9 hours.

After more than two years of fighting, the war came to an end. The Walker Tariff was repealed in November of 1847, and as fighting concluded elsewhere in the country, resident American businessmen approached the situation with profits in mind. Recognizing that the right bank of the river (including Matamoros) was likely going to be given back to Mexico, many business owners began stockpiling their tax-free goods in warehouses in Matamoros in an effort to dodge the reinstatement of tariffs against foreigners. Speculative editorials ran in the local paper as to when the Mexican duties would be reinstated, and merchants demanded that ample warnings be given. The editors of The American Flag wrote that they suspected that despite the speculative gossip surrounding the tariffs, all residents should be prepared for their immediate reinstatement.

Apart from setting the new international boundary line separating the United States and Mexico at the Río Bravo, the conclusion of the U.S.-Mexico War changed the trade dynamics in Matamoros permanently. Most significant, control of the Brazos de Santiago opening to the Río Bravo was transferred to the United States. As a result, new American cities were immediately formed on the American side of the river, and many American merchants with roots in Matamoros since the 1820s (including the runaway Charles Stillman) chose to cross the river and establish the city of Brownsville in what was now “officially” American Texas. He was accompanied by soldiers released from duty, who had witnessed the region’s economic activity throughout the occupation and had chosen to stay at the conclusion of the war. The new city of Brownsville bordered the still active Fort Brown, whose soldiers ensured that traders would continue to have a steady supply of business. Although they now lived on the other side of the river, these


66 Apparently some of the Texas merchants were not pleased about this new proviso as it discouraged the facilitated transport of goods to their settlements. They called a meeting at Fort Polk in late 1847. The American Flag, 27 November 1847, Benson; Graf, “The Economic History,” 183.

67 The American Flag, 26 September 1846, Benson.


69 The American Flag, 1 April 1848, Benson.

70 Ibid.

71 Marcum, “Fort Brown, Texas,” 46.
new Brownsville residents took with them their knowledge and experience in making Matamoros the trade capital that it was by the 1840s.

Despite the formation of a new American city across the river, Matamoros’ economic vitality was resilient. Ironically, the new physical border made it easier to smuggle goods into Mexico without paying tariffs. On the one hand, the new “border” eased the controversial import tariffs on American merchants, but it did little to discourage smuggling activities. This time around, Brownsville-based merchants imported their goods through the now-American Brazos opening, transported them first to Brownsville, and then smuggled their merchandise into Mexico from the small border towns that were established on the American bank of the Río Bravo (See Figure 6.1).72

While the establishment of Brownsville on the other side of the river held the potential to undermine Matamoros’ economic importance, this did not occur because businessmen and traders continued to look to the northern Mexican markets as their chief trading partners. In fact, the greater ease of smuggling that was possible with Americans in control of the Brazos entry only served to bolster merchants’ profit seeking opportunities in the interior of Mexico. Once again, the allure of the quick profits that come from smuggling fueled the resilient commercial activity in Matamoros, as it had through much of the port’s history.

Figure 6.1: Smugglers crossing the Río Bravo into Mexico from Brownsville, Texas (Source: Octavio Herrera, El norte de Tamaulipas, 122)

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This dissertation has highlighted the historical reasons why Matamoros would be viewed in the post U.S.-Mexico war period as one of Mexico’s most important commercial centers. While the city’s early economic history has been underestimated within the historiography, we have seen that the city was responsible for influencing national-level settlement strategies, trade reforms, and even international politics.

Chapters 1 and 2 explored how the city, although far removed from the centers of colonial authority, became part of a bigger effort led by entrepreneurial settlers such as José de Escandón to develop it as Mexico’s northeasternmost port. But the Spanish state resisted these efforts and maintained prohibitions on maritime trade from Matamoros. Working both within and outside the confines of mercantilism, merchants focused on developing the markets in the interior settlements, but those markets could only be satisfied by expanding the contraband trade. As part of this process, lucrative overland trade networks were developed, and Matamoros stood as a major port of entry for goods that were imported illegally and transported to trade fairs and cities far into Mexico’s interior.

Feeling the pressure to contain the port’s illicit activities following Mexican Independence, officials decided to ease trade restrictions and open additional ports. This led to the development of a very lucrative legal maritime economy, discussed in Chapter 3, which cemented the region’s trade orientation to the east, into the Gulf of Mexico. The contours of these maritime trade relations formed the triangle that connected Cuba and the Caribbean (and thus Europe), New Orleans (and thus the Mississippi interior and other parts of the United States), and Matamoros (and thus northern Mexican cities and even Mexico City). Not yet a “border” city during this period, the legal trade that this dissertation documents provides the context with which to understand how the port became integral to the fluid movement of people and goods throughout Mexico’s northern borderlands, setting it apart from other parts of the country.

Because of the city’s eastward orientation, Matamoros looked more to New Orleans than to Mexico City in forming its character. Expanding the political economy framework to include culture and identity, Chapter 4 traced the development of the city’s identity as being distinctly hybrid, with a strong North American component, such that even Matamoros landmarks (such as the Cathedral of Nuestra Señora del Refugio) and buildings were built on a foreign model. The heavy presence of foreigners within the city meant that officials had the added responsibility of juggling many different interests, which during the politically turbulent 1830s and 1840s was no easy task.

The role of Matamoros residents, both Mexican and North American, in helping to shape and expand the nation’s international trade, stands at the center of this project. Recovering from various political disturbances, merchants and residents alike were resourceful. At the same time this international trade widened their distance from Mexico’s central government and drew them closer to their American trading partners. As is shown in Chapter 5, when formal war was declared between Texas settlers and Mexico, these circumstances forced local officials and residents alike to choose between their own political allegiances and their trade alliances. The decision for Matamoros residents to abandon the trading connections that they had worked so tirelessly to build was costly. More significantly, the trade relationships that they were now abandoning were what had fueled the local economy.
The conclusion of the U.S.-Mexico War in 1848, which resulted in the formation of a new physical landed border, may have separated the two nations, but it did little to contain the city’s maritime connections explored throughout this dissertation. The gun battles, raids, and drug seizures that flood our media today are familiar reminders of the attempts to cap the flow of regulated commodities from Mexico into the United States. The city’s role within the development of the greater Mexican economy is a story that local residents, now enmeshed in border violence, look to with great enthusiasm and pride. It is hard to identify a time when Matamoros was the center of attention for positive reasons. But as we have seen, Matamoros was once a thriving city, full of economic potential, and viewed both within the country and abroad as quite possibly the next New Orleans. Despite the contemporary reversal of the flow of people and goods, and the media’s emphasis on illegal drug cartel activities taking place there, the Matamoros of today continues to reflect the city’s deep historical connections to trade. The city’s rich history does much to explain why Matamoros continues to serve as one of Mexico’s most important ports of entry, even if it is for the wrong reasons.
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