

# Neglected Citizens and Willing Traders: The Villas del Norte (Tamaulipas) in Mexico's Northern Borderlands, 1749–1846

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The political identity of residents of the *villas del norte* (northern villas) underwent a transformation as a result of Mexican Independence. The shift from Spanish subjects to Mexican citizens was accompanied by a corresponding change from racial categories to civic classifications. Despite the egalitarian tone of Mexico's new constitution (1824), economic class remained the basis for the new civic categories and the local elite continued to hold political office. The Mexican government promoted nationalism in the villas del norte through patriotic celebrations, military service, and the discourse of citizenship. Nevertheless, the political schisms between residents of these villas and the national state increased due to trade restrictions, the national government's political neglect, and social isolation. Ultimately, the *vecinos* ignored trade prohibitions and developed trade links with the United States.

La independencia de México transformó la identidad política de los vecinos de las villas del norte. El cambio de sujetos españoles a ciudadanos mexicanos fue acompañado por una conversión de categorías raciales en clasificaciones cívicas. A pesar de las tendencias igualitarias de la Constitución Mexicana (1824), las categorías cívicas continuarían basadas en la clase económica, así que la élite local logró mantener el dominio sobre los puestos políticos. El gobierno mexicano promovió el nacionalismo en las villas del norte a través de las celebraciones patrióticas, el servicio militar y un discurso que el estado desarrolló respeto a la ciudadanía. Sin embargo, la distancia política entre los residentes de estas villas y el estado nacional se aumentó, debido a las restricciones al comercio, la indiferencia política por parte del gobierno nacional y el aislamiento social. En fin, los vecinos desobedecieron las prohibiciones comerciales y desarrollaron vínculos con los Estados Unidos.

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The residents of the *villas del norte*, a group of seven towns established along the Rio Grande (Río Bravo) between 1749 and 1784, gradually drew apart from the central governments of the Spanish colonial and Mexican national states. The rift emerged during the colonial era and grew larger throughout the turbulent period of the nascent Mexican nation. Based primarily on economic and political problems, the disagreements centered on the settlers' perception of Spanish royal authorities and Mexican government officials as unresponsive. Physically isolated from the centers of political power, the residents also felt removed from the concerns of the leaders of the government. The physical distance was only one of many obstacles that the settlers faced in their attempts to explain life on the northern borderlands to their political superiors. Differences between the economic goals of the residents and those of government officials constituted another hurdle. Because the colonial and national states needed civilian support for their military, they attempted to obtain compliance by fostering allegiance among the populace. The financial and personnel costs of a military presence in the north proved too costly for the settlers, however, and created an additional barrier. Ultimately, the colonial and national governments' lack of knowledge of the social and economic reality of the *villas del norte* frayed the weak links that the states sought to strengthen.<sup>1</sup>

### Origins of Villas del Norte

Like others in New Spain's Far North, most of the first settlers of the *villas del norte* had humble but comfortable origins. They formed part of a large stream of settlers from nearby provinces who established eighteen towns in addition to the six *villas* for a total of twenty-four settle-

1. José de Escandón recruited families from Nuevo León and Coahuila for the twenty-three towns he established along Nuevo Santander's rivers between 1748 and 1755. He grouped the towns into four sectors to simplify communication among the *villas* and to provide an effective defense against Indian attacks and a feared foreign invasion. The location of the *villas* also facilitated their commercial exchange with markets in Nuevo León and the rest of New Spain. Other considerations played a role as well. The southernmost group of towns, for example, was located in an area that was easily accessible from neighboring settlements and that already had a small population of earlier Spanish immigrants. Another cluster of towns was established in the narrowest portion of Nuevo Santander in order to facilitate communication between Nuevo León and the Gulf Coast. Escandón placed a third group between the Tamaulipas Vieja and Tamaulipas Nueva mountain ranges in hope of exerting control over the area's indigenous inhabitants. The final settlement cluster, known as the *villas del norte*, lay along the Rio Grande and consisted of Reynosa, Camargo, Mier, Revilla, Dolores, and Laredo. Refugio became part of the *villas del norte* when it was founded in 1784. Patricia Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander, 1748–1772* (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1997), 93–125.

ments in the colony of Nuevo Santander between 1748 and 1756. Royal authorities had to offer incentives to get them to leave their homes for an inhospitable frontier with few known mineral deposits of any value. The attractions consisted of promises of land, money to cover transportation costs, and tax exemptions for the first ten years. These inducements proved especially luring to landless families who had been eking out a living working for owners of large estates or paying high rents to till a small plot of land. Coming for these reasons and in response to another compelling motivation were criminals promised pardons for their crimes of theft, murder, and nonpayment of debts if they joined the venture.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary observers described the original settlers as consisting of “unsettled families who had sought shelter on haciendas, paid rent for land or worked for the owners, and would have left for other provinces if they had not arrived here.”<sup>3</sup> Harsher in his assessment was a visiting government inspector, who described them as “vagabonds and malefactors.”<sup>4</sup>

Drawing on their experiences with stockraising as well as favorable geographic conditions in the villas del norte, the settlers devoted their energies to cattle production. It required small outlays of money and few tools, so even those of moderate means could own herds. The lack of a large indigenous labor force did not hinder their efforts since stockraising, unlike agriculture and mining, required few workers. The main requirements were what they now possessed: grasslands and water. Like others throughout Nuevo Santander, they obtained large yields from the livestock, which they introduced from the nearby provinces of Nuevo León and Coahuila.<sup>5</sup>

By 1757 the population of the twenty-four towns in the colony had

2. Oakah L. Jones, Jr., *Los Paisanos* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 66, 72; Hubert J. Miller, *José de Escandón: Colonizer of Nuevo Santander* (Edinburg, Texas: New Santander Press, 1980), 14, 22; Armando C. Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy: Rancheros and Settlers in South Texas, 1734–1900* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 28–9; Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander*, 136–7, 155–7.

3. Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander*, 155; *Estado General de las Fundaciones Hechas por D. José de Escandón en la colonia del Nuevo Santander, costa del seno Mexicano, I* (Mexico: Talleres Gráficos de la Nación, 1930), 105.

4. David M. Vigness, ed. and trans., “Nuevo Santander in 1795: A Provincial Inspection by Felix Calleja,” *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 75 (April 1972): 477.

5. Ana María Alonso, *Thread of Blood: Colonialism, Revolution, and Gender on Mexico's Northern Frontier* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1995), 23; Sandra L. Myres, “The Ranching Frontier: Spanish Institutional Backgrounds of the Plains Cattle Industry,” in David J. Weber, ed., *New Spain's Far Northern Frontier: Essays on Spain in the American West, 1540–1821* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1979), 88; Armando C. Alonzo, “Tejano Rancheros and Changes in Land Tenure, Hidalgo County, Texas, 1848–1900” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1991), 28.

Table 1. *Population and Livestock in the Villas del Norte, 1757*

Location	Camargo	Dolores	Laredo	Mier	Revilla	Reynosa	Villas del Norte	Nuevo Santander
Population	638	123	85	274	357	290	1,767	8,869
Ganado Menor	71,770	0	9,080	38,659	44,850	12,700	177,059	285,854
Ganado Mayor	10,426	9,050	1,133	4,385	6,374	4,116	35,484	83,443

Source: Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander*, 143, 179.

increased to 8,869 and their livestock to 83,443 head of *ganado mayor* (cattle, horses, and mules) along with 285,854 *ganado menor* (sheep and goats).<sup>6</sup> Among the four sectors of towns in Nuevo Santander, the villas del norte became the most productive livestock region. Although the six villas accounted for only 20 percent of the total population in the settlements, their inhabitants owned over 60 percent of the *ganado menor* and more than 40 percent of *ganado mayor* (see Table 1).

The need for large tracts of pasture as well as dissension between the settlers and missionaries led royal officials to abandon an initial experiment in communal landholding. In 1767, eighteen years after settlement began, authorities fulfilled one of the promises used to attract settlers by appointing a commission to survey and divide property among individuals and missions throughout Nuevo Santander. This marked the first major distribution of private land in the Rio Grande Gulf region.<sup>7</sup>

### Agents and Privileged Subjects

During the eighteenth century the goals of the colonial state and the aspirations of the settlers who founded the towns in Nuevo Santander, including the villas del norte, coincided. To secure its claim to the territory, New Spain established permanent settlements along its far northern frontier, such as the Lower Rio Grande region. In turn, the settlers who moved into this area sought economic opportunity and land. They required the colonial state's support and protection to establish their towns, while royal authorities needed the settlers to develop the land on behalf of the crown. The confluence and interdependence of these goals placed these northern settlers in a favored position. Like other settlers in the northern borderlands, those living in Nuevo Santander were both agents and privileged subjects of the colonial state.<sup>8</sup>

The settlers served as agents of the crown by claiming the territory in the Seno Mexicano (Mexican Gulf) region for Spain. In addition to founding towns and setting up municipal governments, they also had to

6. Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander*, 143, 179.

7. Alonzo, "Tejano Rancheros," 32–3; *Estado General*, I, 39. Vigness, "Nuevo Santander in 1795," 476, n30; Juan Fidel Zorrilla, Maribel Miró Flaquer, Octavio Herrera Pérez, *Tamaulipas: Una Historia Compartida, 1810–1921*, I (Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas: Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, 1993), 24; Miller, *José de Escandón*, 33–4; Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy*, 35–6; Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander*, 158–76.

8. I have borrowed this idea from anthropologist Daniel Nugent. He describes the non-indigenous settlers of Namiquipa, Chihuahua, between 1778 and 1821 as "simultaneously privileged subjects of the (colonial) state and its agents." Daniel Nugent, "Are We Not Civilized Men?" *Journal of Historical Sociology* 2, no. 3 (September 1989): 206–39; Daniel Nugent, *Spent Cartridges of Revolution: An Anthropological History of Namiquipa, Chihuahua* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 50.

“pacify” or “reduce” the indigenous populations of the region. Their actions advanced the interests of the crown because royal authorities wanted to convert “barbarous” Indians who threatened Spanish settlements into proper “conquered” subjects who could contribute economically to Spanish society. Male settlers acted as armed agents of the state by conquering and decimating the region’s native inhabitants through provincial volunteer militias under the leadership of each town’s captain. By integrating the conquered Indians into their society, both male and female colonists not only served the crown but also helped themselves because they used the indigenous subjects as workers and allies to transform the northern frontier into a community of Spanish towns.<sup>9</sup>

The colonial state granted several benefits to the settlers as privileged subjects. It provided crucial military protection from Indian attacks by deploying three “flying squadrons” (*compa ías volantes*) throughout Nuevo Santander. By placing these squadrons in strategic locations in the colony, the royal authorities hoped to respond quickly to calls for military assistance. The inhabitants of the villas del norte, for example, could request help from the troops stationed in Laredo, who were responsible for guarding the northern river towns. The state also assisted the settlers by giving them monetary compensations, supplies, and land as a reward for moving into the region and claiming it for the crown. As an additional inducement, the colonial administration exempted the settlers from the payment of taxes during the first years of colonization and on several occasions thereafter.<sup>10</sup>

The privileges that the colonial state afforded the settlers helped maintain their allegiance to its authorities. As elsewhere on the northern frontier, the establishment of towns in Nuevo Santander developed from the strategic interests of New Spain. The settlers obtained certain advantages precisely because the state needed them. Unlike other areas of the northern borderlands, such as Chihuahua and California, the colonization of Nuevo Santander was more heavily dependent on civilian settlers. Instead of relying principally on presidial soldiers, who were expensive to maintain, the government depended on the settlers who

9. In contrast, Ana María Alonso argues that the Apaches of the Chihuahuan frontier were “never successfully transformed into docile subjects who could be integrated into the dominant society and economy.” Alonso, *Thread of Blood*, 25.

10. Juan Fidel Zorrilla, *El poder colonial en Nuevo Santander* (Mexico: Librería Manuel Porrúa, 1976), 242; Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander*, 257–60; Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 18 (details on removal of exemption in 1767); Florence Johnson Scott, “Spanish Colonization of the Lower Rio Grande, 1747–1767,” in *Essays in Mexican History*, eds. Thomas E. Cotner and Carlos E. Castañeda (Austin: University of Texas, Institute of Latin American Studies, 1958), 17–18.

doubled as livestock producers and volunteer soldiers. The settlers also filled the gap left by the missionaries who failed to convert the indigenous peoples of the area in sufficient numbers. As long as colonial authorities continued to provide land, supplies, tax exemptions, and supplementary military assistance, residents of Nuevo Santander remained loyal subjects, willing to comply with royal directives.<sup>11</sup>

The military's control of Nuevo Santander facilitated this political allegiance. Throughout most of the colonial era, the government of Nuevo Santander was an independent entity except for brief periods (1788–1792 and 1813–1821) when it fell under the jurisdiction of the umbrella government called the Comandancia General de Provincias Internas. On some fiscal matters, however, the Intendancy of San Luis Potosí exercised some control over Nuevo Santander. From the initial colonization in the mid-eighteenth century, José de Escandón instituted a municipal system of government in which military captains functioned as political leaders of each town. He selected military commanders for the civilian militias from among the elite landowners. These captains and their fellow officers reported to Escandón who, in turn, answered directly to the viceroy of New Spain. Through this system of governance, royal authorities maintained rigid control of political matters and ensured a disciplined following among the inhabitants of the colony.<sup>12</sup>

After the viceroy removed Escandón from the office of governor in 1767, the residents of Nuevo Santander enjoyed a brief period during which they exercised some choice over their leaders. For twenty-seven years, colonial authorities allowed male landowners to elect town governments organized as *medios cabildos* (modified ayuntamientos or town councils). The medio cabildo consisted of a *justicia mayor* (chief justice) or *alcalde*, a *síndico procurador* (public attorney), and two *regidores* (aldermen) elected each year. Despite this limited reform, military captains and their subordinates captured most of these elected positions due to their social and political influence in each town.<sup>13</sup> Military men

11. A more detailed analysis of the role of the Spanish conquest and the failure of the Franciscan missionaries is found in the author's dissertation. See Omar S. Valerio-Jiménez, "*Indios Bárbaros, Divorcées, and Flocks of Vampires: Identity and Nation on the Rio Grande, 1749–1892*" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2001).

12. Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 20; For a brief description of the political administration of the northern provinces of New Spain, see Peter Gerhard, *The Northern Frontier of New Spain*, rev. ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), 10–19, 363.

13. Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander*, 257; Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 16; Miller, *José de Escandón*, 14; Juan Fidel Zorrilla, *Estudio de la Legislación en Tamaulipas*, 2a ed., aum. y corregida (Ciudad Victoria: Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1980), 12. According to Gilbert Cruz, the *síndico procurador* served as a public attorney to defend poor citizens unable to pay legal fees. However, the *síndico procurador* also sometimes served as the ayuntamiento's treasurer.

benefited not only from past leadership experience but also from political connections to royal authorities and from social prominence resulting from their large landholdings.

In 1794 the colonial state imposed a more direct form of military rule in Nuevo Santander by eliminating the elective municipal offices. Thereafter, the governor appointed a military captain as the *justicia mayor* (also called the *alcalde primero*), a sergeant as the *síndico procurador*, and *tenientes* or *alferezes* (first or second lieutenants) as *regidores*. As towns grew in population, more officers were added to the *ayuntamiento*. Refugio's town council, for example, had one additional member, an *alcalde segundo* (second *alcalde*), by 1814. To maintain control, Félix Calleja, the governor of Nuevo Santander, appointed municipal officials from among the individuals whose names the previous *alcalde* submitted. This process of selecting candidates for office was evident in an 1819 exchange of letters between the governor and Refugio's *alcalde*. The governor asked him to submit a list of "the subjects of distinction who lived in the villa" from which to select town officials for the next year. The standing *ayuntamiento* chose the following year's councilmen, and thereafter the *alcalde* submitted the list to the governor.<sup>14</sup> Inevitably, the *ayuntamiento* selected other prominent landowners, including family members and friends, for these posts.

By maintaining control of political leadership in municipal government, elite landowners determined each town's political loyalties. The selection process for the *ayuntamiento* ensured a small circle of landowners, self-described as the "*vecinos más principales*" (most prominent community members), of multiple *ayuntamiento* positions year after year.<sup>15</sup> As the beneficiaries of positions of leadership and as the primary

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Gilbert R. Cruz, *Let There Be Towns: Spanish Municipal Origins in the American Southwest, 1610–1810* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1988), 74–5, 150, 164. Hinojosa argues that royal officials designed the elected *alcaldes* or *justicias mayor* as captains. Gilberto M. Hinojosa, *A Borderlands Town in Transition: Laredo, 1755–1870* (College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1983), 13.

14. Zorrilla, *Estudio de la Legislación*, 11–12; Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 21; Gerhard, *The Northern Frontier*, 363; Miguel Ramos Arizpe, "Memoria presentada a las cortes por Don Miguel Ramos Arizpe sobre las Provincias Internas de Oriente, 7 de noviembre de 1811," in Juan Fidel Zorrilla, Maribel Miró Flaquer, Octavio Herrera Pérez, eds., *Tamaulipas: Textos de su Historia, 1810–1921, I*, (Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, 1990), 17–22; Matamoros Ayuntamiento Archives (hereafter, MAA), Volume 16, p 28, 1814 (no month or day indicated); Volume 16, p 38, 12 diciembre 1814; Archivo Histórico de Matamoros (hereafter, AHM), Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 15, 3 septiembre 1819, 13 diciembre 1819.

15. For a list of *alcaldes*, see Andrés F. Cuellar, *De Matamoros a México con sus gobernantes* (Matamoros: Arte Gráfico, 1996), 20. This phrase appears in the following document: MAA, Volume 16, p 35, 23 octubre 1815.

recipients of monetary assistance and large land grants, the elite vecinos had ample reasons to be loyal subjects. Not surprisingly, such men proclaimed their town's allegiance to the Spanish king and referred to him as "our dear monarch." In official communications, they identified one another as a "*buen vasallo*" (good subject) to show their loyalty to the crown.<sup>16</sup> These upper-class men, therefore, constituted the active political body that made its voice more widely known to royal authorities than did non-elite members of society.

Beyond the elite's official proclamations of loyalty lay the political identity of typical colonists. Unlike the municipal leaders, non-elite community members had few opportunities where they were expected to express loyalty to the crown. Far more common was the residents' political identification with the region where they lived. They identified with the larger area known as the villas del norte and with their particular town. Their attachment to neighboring villas was based on social ties to family and friends in those locales and to their continuous cooperation with other towns in defending the region against Indian attacks. Sharing livelihoods and experiencing the same economic difficulties as residents of an isolated northern region also strengthened these bonds. Yet the deepest attachment was more local. For eighteenth-century residents of the villas del norte (like others elsewhere in Mexico's Far North), the strongest sense of political identity remained the town. According to historian David Weber, the political attachment of the vecinos of Mexico's Far North was primarily "loyalty to one's locality, one's *patria chica*, [which] frequently took precedence over loyalty to the patria, or nation as a whole."<sup>17</sup>

The political attachments of the vecinos were not unusual. Like inhabitants of rural towns throughout Latin America and Europe, the ve-

16. AHM, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 15, 27 marzo 1819.

17. The gradual development of a regional identity in response to interactions with enemy Indians is discussed in detail in Chapter One of my dissertation, "*Indios Bárbaros, Divorcées, and Flocks of Vampires*." According to Ramón A. Gutiérrez and David G. Gutiérrez, most residents of Mexico's Far North identified first as Catholics or Christians and second as "members of intricate local networks or kinship association." I agree with their argument, but I would also modify their statement to distinguish social from political identity. When residents of Mexico's northern borderlands identified as Catholics and as members of a kinship association, they were displaying their social identities. Their political identities were their attachments (however weak) to a local community, town, region, or nation. Ramón A. Gutiérrez, "Unraveling America's Hispanic Past: Internal Stratification and Class Boundaries," *Aztlán* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 80–2; David G. Gutiérrez, "Migration, Emergent Ethnicity, and the 'Third Space': The Shifting Politics of Nationalism in Greater Mexico," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (September 1999): 484; David J. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier, 1821–1846: The American Southwest Under Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 240.

cinos of the Lower Rio Grande region expressed their principal political loyalty to their local community. Several scholars have described the gradual territorial identification of European rural society with a concentric circle model. To describe the parochialism of rural life, they have suggested a model in which concentric circles express a villager's loyalty—where the innermost circle symbolizes the village and the outermost circle represents the nation. Applying this model to the villas del norte, the innermost circle represented the town while succeeding circles symbolized a group of towns, followed by a province, and finally the colonial state. In such a model, the residents' political attachment to a geographic area diminished as the spatial distance between the area and their hometown increased. A resident of Camargo, for instance, identified most strongly with Camargo, and then with the villas del norte, Nuevo Santander, the northern provinces, and ultimately with New Spain. Due to this hierarchical progression of allegiance, a typical resident of the Lower Rio Grande region expressed her or his attachment to a local community more often than to any larger region. Residents used the term *vecinos* (or town citizens) to refer to members of the villa and a variety of terms to identify those who were not members. Some scholars believe *vecinos* were the landowners, but others claim the term referred to heads of households. Despite its apparent vagueness, the term *vecino* defined the corporate identity of a town, establishing a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders.<sup>18</sup>

18. Gerald E. Poyo and Gilberto M. Hinojosa, eds., *Tejano Origins in Eighteenth-Century San Antonio* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 140–1; Timothy M. Matovina, *Tejano Religion and Ethnicity: San Antonio, 1821–1860* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 5–6, 9–10; Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 110–11, 146; Gutiérrez, "Unraveling America's Hispanic Past," 80–1. For a discussion of this concentric circle model of identity, see Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 110–11. According to Peter Marzahl, a *vecino* in seventeenth-century Peru was "a vague category in which one might include all those called up in a muster or the heads of households contributing to a levy or making a contribution to the cathedral's construction." Supporting the idea that *vecino* was a term with a vague definition, Oakah Jones states "a *vecino* a citizen or resident of a town, a householder, and might be any sort of person—male, female, married, or single, a widow or widower, a growing young man, or older person without a family." For New Mexico, Ramón Gutiérrez identifies "vecinos" as "citizens with full voting rights in town councils." In his study of colonial San Antonio de Béxar, Jesús de la Teja links full citizenship in the community to landownership. Peter Marzahl, *Town in the Empire: Government, Politics, and Society in Seventeenth-Century Popayán* (Austin: University of Texas, Institute of Latin American Studies, 1978), 37, 63; Jones, *Los Paisanos*, 13, 266; Ramón A. Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500–1846* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); James Lockhart and Stuart B. Schwartz, *Early Latin America: A History of Colonial Spanish America and Brazil* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 96; Jesús F. de la Teja, *San Antonio de Béxar: A*

When the vecinos constructed their corporate identity in relation to foreigners, they were engaging in a process not easily explained by the concentric circle model, which only begins to clarify the manner in which the vecinos expressed their political attachments. As historian Peter Sahlins has argued, this image of encompassing circles fails to consider the oppositional and dynamic characteristics of identities. Relying on models of segmentary organization advanced by anthropologists, Sahlins posits an alternative model of “counter-identities” in which “the social and political expression of loyalties and affiliations is also an expression of difference and distinction.”<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, people construct their identities in opposition to others. Applied to political loyalties, this model explains how people can identify as members of their town in relation to and in opposition to non-members or to residents of another town. The best example of counter-identities during the colonial period is the distinction between “vecinos” and “foráneos”—insiders and outsiders.

The model of counter-identities also explains how the vecinos of the villas del norte gradually began expressing an attachment to the Lower Rio Grande region in opposition to other regions of New Spain and to the colonial government. During the early nineteenth century, the inhabitants of these northern river towns started to construct a regional identity (as did others in Mexico’s Far North), based in part on their geographic isolation as well as on the administrative failures of colonial authorities. The large distances between the villas del norte and other settlements contributed significantly to residents’ feeling of detachment from other groups of villas and from the colonial state. The distance made communication between the Nuevo Santander’s northern towns and its capital difficult and infrequent. Contact with authorities in Mexico City was even more infrequent.<sup>20</sup>

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*Community on New Spain’s Northern Frontier* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 44; Cruz, *Let There Be Towns*, 116, 117, 126, 133. Using data gathered by Ramón A. Gutiérrez, Ross Frank argues that “vecino” meant “one’s Spanish settler neighbor.” The term was used to distinguish Spanish settlers from “naturales,” or “uncivilized” Pueblo Indians in New Mexico at the end of the eighteenth century. Ross Frank, *From Settler to Citizen: New Mexican Economic Development and the Creation of Vecino Society, 1750–1820* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 176–81. In the Pyrenees, historian Peter Sahlins found a similar separation among residents of a village community. Not surprisingly, the French term “veïns,” which referred to community members with full citizenship, meant “neighbors,” as did the Spanish-language word “vecinos.” Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 146.

19. Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 111–13.

20. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 238–241; Gutiérrez, “Unraveling America’s Hispanic Past,” 81–2; Raúl Ramos, “From Norteño to Tejano: The Rise of Borderlands Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Political Identity in Bexar, 1811–1861” (Ph.D. diss., Yale Univer-

Because of this lack of communication, the colony's authorities were often ignorant of the needs of the settlements along the Rio Grande. Although royal officials established mail service during the late eighteenth century, it was very slow due to the harsh conditions of the roads connecting the villas del norte with the interior provinces. Most of the trade between the villas and the commercial capitals of the country's interior depended on itinerant merchants traveling on mules. The river towns' rudimentary means of communications was one of the main impediments to the development of commerce. Adding to the slowness of communications was a geographic divide that made the threat of Indian attacks more serious because the vecinos were often without military aid from royal officials. The necessity of providing their own defenses against Indians shaped the character of the inhabitants of the Lower Rio Grande region as well as the character of other Spanish settlers in the northern borderlands. Several historians have characterized the *norte os* (northerners) as people who were "strong in spirit," not excitable in nature, and "bulwarks of liberal principles" because of their experience living along a frontier. Ultimately, a desire for local autonomy emerged as a result of the vecinos' "relative self-sufficiency"—not unlike similar aspirations in other settlements of the Far North.<sup>21</sup>

### Isolated Northern Borderlands

The economic policies of New Spain's government created one of the first schisms between the colonial state and the communities along the Rio Grande. The mercantile system restricted trade with foreign countries to protect manufactured goods produced within the Spanish empire. Royal authorities in New Spain maintained this protectionism by requiring all outside trade to pass through the official port at Veracruz. The Bourbon reforms of the late eighteenth century expanded commerce, but some restrictions to free trade still existed at the turn of the century. As a result, royal officials continued to require goods to pass

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sity, 2000); Andrés Reséndez, "Caught between Profits and Rituals: Native Contestation in Texas and New Mexico" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1997); Andrés Reséndez, "National Identity on a Shifting Border: Texas and New Mexico in the Age of Transition, 1821–1848," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 2 (September 1999): 690; Joseph B. Wilkinson, *Laredo and the Rio Grande Frontier* (Austin: Jenkins Publishing, 1975), 55–6, 63–4; Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy*, 68–70.

21. Jones, *Los Paisanos*, 250; Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander*, 267; Wilkinson, *Laredo*, 63–4; Vigness, "Nuevo Santander in 1795," 476, 478, 479; Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 27–9; Silvio Zavala, "The Frontiers of Hispanic America," in David J. Weber, ed., *New Spain's Far Northern Frontier: Essays on Spain in the American West, 1540–1821* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1979), 190–1; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 284; Poyo and Hinojosa, *Tejano Origins*, 140–1.

through the port at Veracruz and imposed import duties to protect items manufactured in New Spain. Because of the tight control of trade, duties on imports added significantly to the royal treasury. This restricted trade benefited large merchants in trade capitals, but hurt towns located along New Spain's periphery such as the villas del norte. Not only the villas but the entire northern frontier of New Spain became "an internal colony of merchants farther south." In other words, the central provinces exploited the northern Spanish borderlands. The inhabitants of the villas del norte were forced to use the official port at Veracruz despite the possibility of reducing transportation costs by establishing a harbor near Refugio. This trade requirement made imports expensive and limited the development of the local economy. The lack of currency, poor communications with other provinces in New Spain, and the insecurity of travel throughout the region also limited the growth of the economy on the northern frontier.<sup>22</sup>

In the 1790s, a royal inspector visiting Nuevo Santander and the villas del norte succinctly described the towns' main obstacles to economic development. Indian attacks and the lack of additional ports, noted Félix Calleja, hindered the further development of trade. Calleja offered several concrete recommendations to overcome these obstacles, beginning with the government's adoption of a tougher policy toward Indians. His economic proposals centered on the liberalization of commerce. A local port and two auxiliaries, he maintained, would substantially improve trade by allowing the vecinos to increase the number of exported cattle and livestock products such as meats, waxes, soaps, and hides. Commerce with new markets in the Caribbean would allow the vecinos to obtain triple what they were now receiving for their cattle. The lack of sufficient export revenue, he argued, also prevented the vecinos from importing necessary goods for their subsistence. Despite his sound observations, Calleja failed to convince royal authorities to adopt his recommendations. The villas del norte would have to wait several more years before increased export revenues would stimulate trade with other regions of New Spain and pay for necessary imports. The failure of royal authorities to establish any of the three ports suggested by Calleja reflected the colonial administration's lack of concern for the economic well-being of settlements along New Spain's northern periphery.<sup>23</sup>

The ranchos remained predominantly devoted to livestock through-

22. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 123; Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander*, 267.

23. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 123–4. Three *compaías volantes* (flying squadrons) were stationed throughout Nuevo Santander but only the battalion that was located in Laredo protected the villas del norte. Félix Calleja maintained that the solutions to both obstacles were interrelated because increasing the economic development of the colony would attract more people who would then enlarge the colony's industries and also serve

out the eighteenth century. In the southern part of Nuevo Santander, some settlers engaged in mining but the scarcity of silver, copper, and lead deposits limited the development of this industry. Along the coast, others obtained moderate profits from salt mining. However, stockraising remained the prevailing industry and continued to grow rapidly throughout this period. In the mid-eighteenth century, the settlers of Nuevo Santander were trading with merchants in Nuevo León, the Huasteca, Sierra Gorda, San Luis Potosí, and central New Spain. They exported salt, livestock, and hides while importing corn and other food. Some trade extended as far as Nuevo México, from which merchants in 1775 bought horses from the settlement when a drought severely reduced their stock. Most of the trade by the end of the eighteenth century, however, was with the neighboring provinces of Nuevo León, Coahuila, and Texas. The settlement's exports remained primarily livestock, and its combined herds by 1794 had increased to approximately 800,000. The annual income from cattle and other livestock was close to two-thirds of the total annual revenue for the province. Those earnings were also approximately three times greater than the total return from silver, copper, lead, and salt mining.<sup>24</sup>

The growth of the livestock industry sparked the late-eighteenth-century territorial expansion into the Rio Grande Gulf region as cattle owners sought additional pasturage. After illegally establishing ranches along the coast, vecinos from Camargo and Reynosa undertook two organized expansions by purchasing land or receiving grants from the Spanish crown in the mid-1770s. Most of the property north of the Rio Grande was obtained through royal grants. Residents obtained land on the south side of the river via purchases as fourteen families did in 1784 when they bought 113 *sitios* (500,364 acres) of ganado mayor from the hacienda "El Sauto" and founded the town of Refugio ten years later on part of this property. The newly acquired pasturage allowed livestock to flourish and the villas del norte (which now included Refugio) to remain the most productive region of the colony. In 1794 the river towns contin-

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to diminish the Indian threat. Vigness, "Nuevo Santander in 1795," 467, 477-9, 467, 491-506. Calleja argued against exchanging gifts with Indians in order to secure peace. Instead he favored the pursuit of vigorous war because he believed that the Indians would only respect the enemies whom they feared.

24. Zorrilla, *El poder colonial*, 183; *Estado General*, I, 16; Leroy P. Graf, "The Economic History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, 1820-1875" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1942), 15; Alonzo, "Tejano Rancheros," 31; Elizabeth A. H. John, *Storms Brewed in Other Men's Worlds: The Confrontation of Indians, Spanish, and French in the Southwest, 1540-1795* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1975), 482; Nuevo Santander's 1795 total earnings from cattle and livestock products was 245,500 pesos. The annual production of silver, copper, salt, and lead only totaled 83,900 pesos. Vigness, "Nuevo Santander in 1795," 472, 475, 477-8.

Table 2. *Population and Livestock in the Villas del Norte, 1794*

Area	Population	Livestock
Villas del Norte	5,053	212,153
Nuevo Santander	30,450	799,874

Sources: "Nuevo Santander in 1795," 474–475; Oakah L. Jones, Jr. *Los Paisanos* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), 69; Oscar Rivera Saldaña, *Frontera Heroica*, 69.

ued to account for only one-sixth of the total population of Nuevo Santander, but their inhabitants owned over 26 percent of all livestock and over 50 percent of all sheep in the colony (see Table 2).<sup>25</sup>

Encouraging stock production in the villas were climactic restrictions on alternative enterprises. Insufficient rainfall and inadequate irrigation resulted in only small yields of corn, cane, and beans near the river bottoms that could not meet subsistence needs. Agriculture also fell prey to cycles of drought and flooding made worse by the Rio Grande's unpredictable overflows and changes of course. Under these conditions and with impressive profits from stockraising easier to generate, the villas turned to importing corn, wheat, and other farm products from nearby provinces in exchange for salt and livestock.<sup>26</sup>

In the mid-1810s Refugio's vecinos continued to face many of the same obstacles that Calleja had outlined two decades earlier. The ayuntamiento, in an 1814 report to the governor, complained that despite the good quality of beef, mutton, and wool, trade languished because of the high costs to transport livestock and other products to distant ports. Commerce by land was expensive and time-consuming but became necessary because the royal government outlawed all maritime trade except that through Veracruz. Alternative potential sources of revenue were salt from the mines located near Reynosa, fish available in small lakes and the Gulf, and ebony that grew throughout the region. The salt mines accounted for substantial trade, but fish and ebony met only local needs. Echoing Calleja's earlier suggestions, town officials rec-

25. Alonzo, "Tejano Rancheros," 46–7; Milo Kearney and Antony Knopp, *Boom and Bust: The Historical Cycles of Matamoros and Brownsville* (Austin: Eakin Press, 1991), 13–16. Jones points out that there is a discrepancy in Calleja's report for the total population of the colony. The report gives three different totals: 30,450, 30,318, and 30,435. Jones, *Los Paisanos*, 69, 281 (footnote 13); Oscar Rivera Saldaña, *Frontera Heroica: Tomo I Colonización del Noroeste de México (1748–1821)* (Matamoros, Tamaulipas: Impresiones y Publicaciones, 1984), 47–65, 69.

26. Jones, *Los Paisanos*, 71; Graf, "The Economic History," 427–8, 435–6; Berlandier, 266; Alonzo, "Tejano Rancheros," 66–7; Estado General, I, 16, 105–9, 113, 116, 119.

commended the opening of a nearby port to facilitate bringing in necessary goods from the Mexican interior and to allow the vecinos to export meat, wool, hides, salt, cheese, and ebony. The appeal, like Calleja's years earlier, fell on deaf ears.<sup>27</sup>

Such rejections prompted some residents to resort to smuggling. Illegal trafficking along the sheltered coastline north of Refugio became popular among both vecinos and immigrant newcomers. Such trafficking emerged early, shortly after the establishment of the first towns in the mid-eighteenth century. Contributing to the increase in smuggling were the imposition of the *alcabalas* (sales taxes) in 1767, the limited variety of manufactured goods, and the state's monopoly on certain crops like tobacco. As in other border regions—for example, California and New Mexico—smuggling became a way of life for many norteños who by the 1770s had begun building homes along the gulf coast and at the river's mouth, locations later known as Bagdad and Punta Isabel. Prominent families from Refugio lived alongside newly arrived European-American merchants and joining them were several town officials who became complicit in the clandestine trade by neglecting to enforce trade restrictions and sometimes actively participating in the illicit commerce. Officials ignored smuggling, as a California governor observed, because “necessity makes licit what is not licit by law.”<sup>28</sup>

Authorities in the colony's administrative centers, however, were not lenient. Smugglers caught by the crown's soldiers were jailed and lost their merchandise. In 1805, for example, royal authorities arrested and jailed Juan José Ballí, the military captain of Reynosa, and three other prominent vecinos for smuggling. Despite such examples, the contraband trade became sufficiently widespread that the governor in 1816 loudly complained about the impact on revenue. Such groaning was a clear sign that the economic interests of the vecinos of the villas del norte were sharply diverging from the economic policies of the colo-

27. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 123; MAA, Volume 16, 30 agosto 1814; Volume 2, 15 agosto 1814.

28. Alonzo, *Tejano Legacy*, 68; Wilkinson, *Laredo*, 72; Graf, “The Economic History,” 15, 52–56; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 123, 125; Kearney and Knopp, *Boom and Bust*, 19, 36; Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 129, 140–1; Owen Lattimore, “The Frontier in History,” in Robert A. Manners and David Kaplan, eds., *Theory in Anthropology* (Chicago: Aldine, 1968), 470; Canseco Botello states that local families, such as the De la Garzas and Manzanos, built homes alongside foreigners like the Lombardis and Magniolis. José Raúl Canseco Botello, *Historia de Matamoros*, 2a ed. (Matamoros, Tamaulipas: Tipográficos de Litográfica Jardín, 1981), 71; Kearney and Knopp, *Boom and Bust*, 19, 37. Customhouse officials charged Ramón Lafon, a foreigner, with smuggling liquor and tobacco on numerous occasions. An early arrest is found in AHM, Justicia, Caja 1, Expediente 18, 14 septiembre 1823; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 125.

nial state.<sup>29</sup> Accompanying the towns' growing distance from the royal government was the growth of the villas' economic ties to the United States. Ironically, the royal policy of strict regulation of trade was precisely the reason that the villas del norte drew closer to North American merchants.

The economic goals of the vecinos and of royal authorities had been most similar during the second half of the eighteenth century. The government had provided financial incentives to the settlers—as privileged subjects—because it needed them to establish permanent settlements and claim the region for the crown. As part of these incentives, royal authorities had exempted the settlers from paying duties for the first ten years after the establishment of Nuevo Santander and again in 1774. However, by the last two decades of the eighteenth century, the settlers were once again required to pay taxes and had begun to subvert royal restrictions on commerce. Because customhouse officials were underpaid and ill trained, they often accepted bribes and allowed contraband to enter the country. The economic problems grew worse during the last years before independence as manufactured goods ceased to arrive, soldiers' wages and priests' stipends went unpaid, and cash, in general, stopped flowing throughout the northern borderlands. During the remaining years of royal rule, the vecinos failed to comply with several royal orders designed to collect money for the treasury. In this sense, these residents of the villas del norte behaved like those living elsewhere in New Spain who passively disobeyed those orders that did not advance their interests.<sup>30</sup>

### **Continued Neglect during the Mexican Era**

In addition to New Spain's economic policies, its internal political problems also contributed to widening the rift between the villas del norte and the colonial state. In 1810 rebels launched an eleven-year struggle to gain independence from Spain. Although the insurgency took place mostly outside of Nuevo Santander, the residents of the northern villas region felt the impact of the war. They witnessed a few skirmishes between rebels and royalist soldiers in their towns during the early part of the independence movement. In addition, the vecinos' resistance to the royal government became exacerbated by the state's intensified attempts to collect money and supplies for its soldiers. Those efforts fur-

29. Octavio Herrera Pérez, *Monografía de Reynosa* (Ciudad Victoria: Instituto Tamaulipeco de Cultura, 1989), 50–5; MAA, Volume 16, p 70, 14 agosto 1816.

30. Miller, *José de Escandón*, 14; Osante, *Orígenes del Nuevo Santander*, 259; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 123–5, 149; MAA, Volume 16, p 70, 14 agosto 1816.

ther taxed the northern towns' resources and increased the norte os' political distance from the viceregal government. Throughout this period the vecinos suffered continued neglect as royal officials ignored the norte os' pleas for assistance to combat the Indian threat.<sup>31</sup>

The widespread dissatisfaction with royal policies undoubtedly contributed to the rapid spread of insurrectionary activity in support of independence throughout Nuevo Santander. Although the cabildos in the villas del norte publicly supported the Spanish crown, the insurrection gained popular support during the final months of 1810 and the first half of 1811. Among the prominent local men to support the movement was José Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara, a landowner, blacksmith, and native of Revilla. In addition to helping organize insurgent forces in the northern villas, Gutiérrez de Lara contributed money and served as a liaison between Mexican insurrectionary leaders and the United States government. Upon the arrival of royalist commander Joaquín de Arredondo in the villas del norte in mid-1811, however, insurgent activities began to diminish. Arredondo imposed strict controls over the villas and brought in large numbers of royalist troops. Gutiérrez de Lara's unsuccessful attempt to obtain support for insurgent forces from the North American government nevertheless brought him into contact with North American politicians and helped him recruit volunteers in Texas. Gutiérrez de Lara's efforts to free Texas from Spain's control were temporarily successful in 1813 when he became the first Mexican governor of the short-lived independent Texas (1813).<sup>32</sup>

Unlike their modest success in Texas, the insurgents' actions in the villas del norte were limited. In addition to the insurgent activities among the vecinos, indigenous groups also undertook some insurrectionary activity. The provincial militias of the villas helped rout the first insurgent actions undertaken by a group of local Indians. In 1812 Carrizo Indians in Camargo rebelled and temporarily took over the town. The motivations for this indigenous uprising seem to have been a combination of local grievances against municipal authorities as well as the influence of an Indian insurgent with ties to Dolores, Querétaro, where the independence movement had been launched. Less than two months later, a joint force of royalist soldiers, provincial militia units, and allied Indians defeated the indigenous insurgents and forced them to flee into the in-

31. Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas: Una Historia Compartida, 1810–1921, I*, 51.

32. Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas: Una Historia Compartida, 1810–1921, I*, 47–69; Vito Alessio Robles, *Coahuila y Texas en la época colonial* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1978), 635–6, 655–61; Rie Jarratt, "Gutiérrez de Lara, Mexican-Texan: The Story of a Creole Hero" in *The Mexican Experience in Texas*, ed. Carlos Cortés (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 13–67; James Clark Milligan, "José Bernardo Gutiérrez de Lara, Mexican Frontiersman 1811–1841" (Ph.D. diss., Texas Tech University, 1975): 76–105.

terior of Nuevo Santander. In the aftermath of this rebellion, the brutal repression unleashed against the Indians spurred another indigenous revolt in the villas during the following year. Several Indian groups from the region allied themselves with insurgent forces fleeing from Nuevo León. Within a month of the insurgent mobilization, a large contingent of royalist soldiers decisively defeated the insurgents at their base of operations in Refugio. Thereafter, the villas del norte did not experience any significant armed insurgency for the duration of the independence struggle.<sup>33</sup>

The impact of the insurgency was evident in the royal decrees issued by the viceregal government during the independence struggle. Throughout the colonial period, royal officials sent town officials a variety of instructions—from periodic reminders asking them to submit tax and census information to orders forbidding card games and liquor sales. They also sent pronouncements ordering residents to hold celebrations in honor of the inauguration of a new monarch or the birthdays and weddings of the royal family. The decrees continued to instruct town officials on mundane government operations, but their content after 1810 carried a new sense of urgency to maintain control.<sup>34</sup>

33. The rebellion began on April 3, 1812, and was crushed on May 16, 1812. Led by Julián Canales, the uprising involved Carrizo Indians from the mission in Camargo and possibly some Garza Indians from Mier. Upon taking over Camargo, Canales issued a proclamation denouncing the mistreatment that criollos and Indians received from the authorities. The statement also endorsed the king, New Spain, and Catholicism, and denounced bad government. Several historians have attributed the proclamation's similarities with the call issued by the insurgents in Dolores to the participation of Manuel Salgado, a non-Carrizo Indian from Dolores, in the Camargo rebellion. Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 65–6; Hinojosa, *Borderlands Town*, 26–7; Herrera Pérez, *Monografía de Reynosa*, 52–3; Pedro López Prieto, “Relación de lo acaecido en la Villa de Camargo en la sublevación del indio Julián Canales de esta misión en 3 de abril de 1812,” in Clotilde P. García, *Cartas y documentos del capitán Pedro López Prieto* (Austin: San Felipe Press, 1975), 21–8 reprinted in Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas: Textos de su Historia, 1810–1921*, I, 60–5; “Diario de la persecución emprendida para reprimir la insurrección de los indios Carrizos de la Villa de Camargo,” reprinted in Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas: Textos de su Historia, 1812–1921*, I, 66–8. Former vecinos of the villas del norte had joined the insurgency in Nuevo León and returned to the region to recruit Indians. They obtained the support of several indigenous groups including the Garzas, Ayaguas, and Carrizos. Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 68; Herrera Pérez, *Monografía de Reynosa*, 55; Juan Fermín de Juanicotena, “Noticia sobre la derrota de los enemigos del Refugio,” reprinted in Zorrilla, *Tamaulipas: Textos de su Historia, 1810–1921*, I, 78–81. The goals of the Indians of the villas del norte were similar to those of indigenous rebels elsewhere in Mexico. For a discussion of the reasons given by Indians for joining the independence struggle, see Eric Van Young, *The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence, 1810–1821* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 127–138.

34. Hinojosa, *Borderlands Town*, 23; Cheryl E. Martin, *Governance and Society in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

Faced with insurrection throughout the country, royal authorities stressed to the north as their obligation of allegiance as royal subjects. They ordered local officials to encourage public displays of support for the crown and to honor the martyrs of Spanish liberty. Schools were also to instill loyalty to the monarchy and the Constitution of 1812 through their curriculum. In addition to the customary instruction in reading, writing, and the Catholic Church's catechism, the governor stipulated the teaching of civic responsibility so that children could learn to be "useful to the state." Some local officials obeyed these orders, but the degree of overall compliance is unclear.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, the receipt of such orders in the villas del norte demonstrated the diligence of royal authorities in seeking to win the allegiance of the most remote municipalities of New Spain.

Discouraging insurrections was only one of the royal goals. Decrees were also issued to instill a sense of obligation to the Spanish crown among the vecinos. Nowhere was this goal more apparent than in the royal government's efforts to persuade the inhabitants of the villas del norte to help the royalist forces. An audacious plea, to be sure, because New Spain's officials had decreased military spending for the defense of the northern frontier. The government issued a variety of orders to contain the insurrection, such as requiring all travelers to carry passports, imposing curfews, prohibiting the vecinos from housing strangers, and banning all communication and trade with the insurgents. Furthermore, on several occasions, royal authorities appealed to the "patriotism" of the vecinos when urging them to pay their taxes or provide the military with supplies.<sup>36</sup>

The financial and material support from regions like the villas del norte was crucial to the royal government as war costs escalated in the face of decreasing revenues. At the outbreak of the insurrection, New Spain was saddled with mounting debts incurred as a result of Spain's

35. MAA, Volume 15, p 195, 8 junio 1814; comunicués from the governor of Nuevo Santander in 1814 praised the Spanish king, denounced the liberal 1812 Cadiz Constitution, and ordered each town to erect a monument in its principal plazas to celebrate the "joyous" period under the monarchy's rule. MAA, Volume 16, p 5, 24 septiembre 1814; Volume 15, p 177, 20 julio 1814; Volume 15, p 176, 21 julio 1814; Local authorities did follow an order to establish a primary school. Refugio's officials had inaugurated a primary school in February prior to the governor's reminder to do so. MAA, Volume 16, p 29, 15 febrero 1814.

36. John Jay TePaske, "The Financial Disintegration of the Royal Government of Mexico during the Epoch of Independence," in *The Independence of Mexico and the Creation of the New Nation*, ed. Jaime E. Rodríguez O. (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1989), 71; Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 65; MAA, Volume 2, p 121-3, 23 febrero 1811; Volume 16, p 18, 8 julio 1814; Volume 15, p 195, 8 junio 1814; Volume 16, p 65, 13 noviembre 1816; AHM, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 15, 28 marzo 1819.

war effort in Europe during the previous two decades and as regional treasuries stopped remitting tax revenue to Mexico City. Regional treasuries now used the revenues to pay for increasingly costly local military expenditures. In an effort to generate needed funds, the royal government levied new duties, called *arbitrios de milicias*, on manufactures, food, and commercial transactions. It also increased taxes on property and on individual wealth throughout New Spain, the latter called *contribuciones militares*. These financial burdens affected all classes and persuaded some to side with the insurgency. Although few armed conflicts occurred after Arredondo occupied the villas in 1811, many residents passively resisted New Spain's state-building through noncompliance with government orders, while others angrily voiced their displeasure at its tactics to siphon their resources.<sup>37</sup>

Throughout the war of independence, Nuevo Santander's governor and military officials asked the northern towns for a wide range of supplies, volunteers, and monetary contributions. The supplies most frequently requested were horses and mules, but occasionally the vecinos were asked for firearms and canoes as well.<sup>38</sup> Local officials submitted mandatory lists of the number of cattle and horses owned by each vecino to enable the governor's staff to calculate the proportional amount of each community's contributions. Although cattle contributions depleted the vecinos' livestock reserve and carved into their profits, they were not as detrimental to the population's food supply as were the donations of corn. Unlike the plentiful livestock, corn was not grown in sufficient quantities in the villas del norte so donations to the military were drawn from the stores of imported grains. Military leaders also asked the vecinos to furnish volunteers and threatened local officials with the enactment of forced conscription should the towns not supply enough men. Contributions of human personnel included muleteers and laborers who accompanied the donated cattle and horses. Besides material and personnel contributions, the viceregal government also asked

37. TePaske, "The Financial Disintegration," 63–83; Christon I. Archer, "La Causa Buena: The Counterinsurgency and the Ten Years' War," in *The Independence of Mexico and the Creation of the New Nation*, ed. Jaime E. Rodríguez O. 106–107; by "state-building," I am referring to the collection of taxes to support New Spain's military. I am using Sahlins' definition of a state as "ministers and kings," "provincial authorities," as well as "tax collectors, custom guards, and soldiers." Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 22.

38. Requests for horses and mules are found in AHM, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 13, no date; Expediente 15, 26 marzo 1819; Expediente 18, 21 noviembre 1820. Requests for canoes are found in AHM, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 15, 27 marzo 1819; Expediente 18, 10 agosto 1820. Requests for firearms are found in MAA, Volume 15, p 80, 22 abril 1814; on mandatory lists of cattle and horses, see MAA, Volume 16, p 47, 7 diciembre 1814.

for money from the vecinos by imposing a ten-percent tax on their houses and by forcing them to contribute to loans for the army.<sup>39</sup>

In response to the frequent requests for aid, the vecinos repeatedly complained about the economic strain placed on them. The donations made by the residents of the villas del norte consisted of cattle, horses, mules, sheep, goats, corn, salt, and wood. They also housed and fed some of the soldiers, provided volunteers and muleteers, loaned firearms and tools, and even repaired the military's firearms. As the insurrection dragged on and the requests mounted, the vecinos began to chafe under the weight of the financial burden of continuous contributions. Refugio's residents could not afford the requested supplies, its alcalde stated in response to an 1819 military appeal. At the conclusion of the independence struggle, the resources of many towns were depleted but the requests continued. According to the alcalde, Refugio could not fulfill its monetary contributions because the insurrection had disrupted trade and curtailed the circulation of currency. The vecinos further justified their inability to increase their contributions by citing their heavy livestock losses due to Indian attacks (caused by the royal government's decrease in military aid to the northern frontier) and to a drought, which occurred during the turmoil.<sup>40</sup>

The tension between the military and the vecinos became exacerbated by the military's abuses. Norteños complained to the governor and to military authorities not only about the mandatory contributions but also about the military's theft of their goods and livestock. In March 1814, Matamoros' ayuntamiento sent a letter to the governor protesting what it called "the excesses that some soldiers committed by arbitrarily taking the possessions of the vecinos." The letter was part of a chorus of complaints from other northern towns accusing the military of using force to extract horses, supplies, and volunteers. Several months later, the secretary of the provincial deputation informed the villas that they would be exempt from further contributions because he had confirmed their fulfillment of frequent requests and payment of taxes, as well as the military's arbitrary confiscation of goods and forced enlistment of recruits.<sup>41</sup>

39. AHM, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 15, 28 marzo 1819; Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 18, 28 diciembre 1820; Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 15, 26 marzo 1819, 27 marzo 1819; Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 18, 21 noviembre 1820; MAA, Volume 15, p 127–28, 12 junio 1814; Volume 16, p 30, 17 mayo 1814; Volume 16, p 65, 13 noviembre 1816, p 84, 23 noviembre 1816.

40. MAA, Volume 2, p 136, 18 agosto 1814; Volume 5, p 67, 6 noviembre 1821; "Informe de lo acontecido en la villa de Mier 1811–1815, por orden del supremo bando del 24 de mayo," in Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 84–8; AHM, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 15, 27 marzo 1819.

41. MAA, Volume 16, p 30, 20 marzo 1814; Volume 15, p 127–9, 12 junio 1814.

During the same year, Refugio's ayuntamiento sent a sharp critique to a military leader in charge of troops stationed near the gulf. The letter rebuked the military commander for not controlling his troops who were killing the vecinos' cows. According to local officials, soldiers looked on the town as a desolate region where their actions would have no repercussions. The military should follow proper procedures and make formal requests, argued the ayuntamiento, before taking private property. A few of these actions displayed flagrant arrogance. One military commander, Refugio's ayuntamiento informed the governor, had ordered his troops to forcibly appropriate horses and to physically punish any local official who interfered. Another military leader showed little appreciation for the sacrifices made by Refugio's vecinos to supply his troops with corn. He not only ordered the alcalde to instruct the town's women to cook the donated corn into *vastimientos* (corn biscuits) but also threatened the women with punishment if they did not prepare the meals properly.<sup>42</sup>

The vecinos responded to the military's abuses by defying some of the royal government's orders for additional contributions. To veil their noncompliance, the residents often claimed correctly that their towns lacked materials and finances to fulfill requests. Such was their response to the military's petition for a donation of a canoe to transport troops. A lack of supplies and dire economic straits, the alcalde argued, prevented the town from building the canoe. However, the probable reason lay elsewhere. Residents seemed unwilling to pay for the construction of another canoe because a military leader had appropriated and then destroyed their boats on a previous occasion. Local officials expressed a similar sentiment in a subsequent letter to the governor. Residents refused to provide any more horses, city leaders argued, because the military had misused the town's previous donations and even killed some of the animals. Undoubtedly taxed by repeated requests for contributions, other nearby villas joined Refugio in refusing to comply with the military's requests. That resistance brought an official reprimand to all the villas del norte in 1816 for failing to collect taxes levied on houses and wagons.<sup>43</sup> If these actions of noncompliance to specific requests irritated royal officials, the norte os' daily acts of subversion probably gave them greater cause for concern.

The vecinos engaged in various subterfuges to avoid making the contributions required by colonial authorities. One method they used was

42. MAA, Volume 16, p 31, 13 junio 1814, p 33, 18 agosto 1814; AHM, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 15, 28 marzo 1819.

43. AHM, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 15, 27 marzo 1819; MAA, Volume 5, p 67, 6 noviembre 1821; Volume 16, p 65, 13 noviembre 1816, p 84, 23 noviembre 1816.

to hide from census takers. After Nuevo Santander's governor discovered this practice, he instructed Refugio's *alcalde* to assure residents of the innocuousness of the census. The viceregal state's use of population statistics to demand material contributions and volunteers, however, belied the governor's reassurances. Not surprisingly, some *vecinos* attempted to avoid forced contributions by failing to report the number of livestock they owned or by claiming exemptions from property taxes because they held land in other jurisdictions.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to such individual acts of noncompliance, local officials also joined in subverting collection efforts. For example, royal authorities blamed the towns' *alcaldes* for depleting Nuevo Santander's treasury by failing to cooperate with customhouse and tax officials. Refugio's officials used a technicality to avoid remitting taxes. The town's population was exempt from a ten-percent tax on houses, they argued, because the residents' *jacales* (straw huts) were of little value since they were built of straw and obviously not sturdy. The *villas del norte* were not the only towns in Nuevo Santander guilty of neglecting their duties to the crown but they figured prominently on the list of delinquent towns. In 1816 the governor reprimanded fourteen towns for failing to submit yearly lists of *alcabalas* over a period of four years. Five of the fourteen towns receiving the reprimand were among the *villas del norte*.<sup>45</sup> By this time the *vecinos'* dissatisfaction with royal authorities had become abundantly clear and revealed an unmistakable weakening in their political identification with the crown.

Through their acts of noncompliance, the *vecinos* of the river towns were, in effect, rebelling against the royal government. Their rebellion was not an armed resistance but, rather, small acts of defiance, or what political scientist James Scott has labeled "everyday forms of resistance." Peasants, slaves, and other oppressed people, according to Scott, have traditionally used such "weapons of the weak." Such tactics, however, can be—and were—employed by elite groups (such as municipal officials) because these actions are informal and covert, do not draw much attention, and are difficult to document. They are also more adaptable than organized struggles involving many participants. Unlike large-scale rebellions that assume a momentum that makes them difficult to direct, informal actions can be changed to accommodate shifting responses from authorities.<sup>46</sup> Although the *villas del norte* did not fight directly

44. AHM, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 18, 10 octubre 1820; Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 8, 21 febrero 1815.

45. MAA, Volume 16, p 1, 3 septiembre 1814; Volume 15, p 77, 19 julio 1816; Volume 16, p 71, 2 septiembre 1816.

46. I am well aware of Scott's reference to the daily acts of resistance of peasants. He acknowledges, however, that peasants did not have "a monopoly on these weapons,

against royalist forces after 1811, they did contribute to the opposition by failing to aid royal soldiers and authorities. After Mexico won its independence, residents of the villas expected better relations with the new nation's leaders, but the vecinos soon discovered that they were as insensitive as the royal authorities.

Mexico's leaders introduced a new political language and promoted novel cultural practices in order to foster a national identification among the country's disparate regions. Such action was necessary, according to historian Enrique Krauze, because Mexico was "not yet a nation" but, rather, "an assemblage of villages, settlements, and provinces isolated from one another, without any conception of politics, even less of nationality, and controlled by the strong men of each locality." In their attempts to forge a nation, the new political elite used newspapers, education, rituals, and symbols to spread nationalist sentiment among its dispersed population. The introduction of the press allowed political leaders to create an imagined community among readers. Throughout Mexico, newspapers and political broadsides blossomed from the mid-nineteenth century onward. In Tamaulipas, newspapers began appearing in the 1820s, and in Matamoros alone, at least twelve gazettes appeared during the 1830s and 1840s.<sup>47</sup> Most focused on political issues as factions sought to gain adherents during the turbulent period after independence.

The political elites also used education as a means of reaching a wide audience with their nationalist messages. Tamaulipas state officials began establishing public schools in 1828, but political instability hindered the development of these institutions there and elsewhere. Another obstacle was the lack of funds for a public education system with the result that large portions of the population remained unable to read and write. In response, politicians turned to symbols and rituals as more effective channels to communicate the budding nationalism.<sup>48</sup>

Not surprisingly, language became an important vehicle for the transmission of nationalist symbols. The new administration changed the

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as anyone can easily attest who has observed officials and landlords resisting and disrupting state policies that are to their disadvantage." James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 28–37.

47. Enrique Krauze, *Mexico, Biography of Power: A History of Modern Mexico, 1810–1996* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1997), 132; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 44–6, 61–5; Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 138–9.

48. Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 139; Reséndez, "Caught Between Profits and Rituals," 55–7; Reséndez, "National Identity on a Shifting Border," 691; Stanley C. Green, *The Mexican Republic: The First Decade 1823–1832* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), 99–11.

place names of provinces and towns to reflect the transformation from a colonial to a national state. The word *imperial* gave way to *national* and the “crowns that had embellished public buildings and carriages were mercilessly erased.” The colony of Nuevo Santander, named after a region in Spain, became the state of Tamaulipas, an indigenous name derived from the Huasteca word identifying two of the local mountain ranges. To underscore the newly acquired freedom, officials referred to the state as the *estado libre de* (free state of) Tamaulipas. Similarly, the town of Refugio in 1826 became Matamoros, the name of a fallen hero of Mexican independence.<sup>49</sup>

The transformation also affected daily language used throughout Mexico. The colony of New Spain became the republic of Mexico. The writers of newspapers and political directives used such terms as *patria* (fatherland) instead of *provincias* (provinces) and *ciudadano* (citizen) in place of *subditos* (subjects). These terms spread even to remote regions like the villas del norte. Soon after independence, official documents from these towns were signed by alcaldes who now referred to themselves and their constituents as *ciudadanos* and who no longer addressed high government officials as “your majesty” but rather as fellow *ciudadanos*. Local leaders also joined national and state politicians in attaching special significance to a new nationalist calendar that, in official documents, identified the year 1824, for example, as the “third year of our independence.”<sup>50</sup>

In addition, new days of celebration spread throughout the country. Rather than commemorating Spain’s royal family and heroes, towns honored the heroes of Mexican independence and staged elaborate In-

49. Reséndez, “Caught Between Profits and Rituals,” 57; the name “Tamaulipas” derives from the Huasteca-language word “Tamaholipan” with several meanings including “place with high mountains” and “place where much prayer occurs.” Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 90; “Constitución política del estado libre de las Tamaulipas, 1825” reprinted in Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas: Textos de su Historia*, I, 162; Cuellar, *De Matamoros a México*, 9, 29; Joaquín Meade, *Etimologías toponimicas indígenas del estado de Tamaulipas* (Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas: Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, 1977), 29; Juan Fidel Zorrilla, *Tamulipas—Tamabolipa* (Ciudad Victoria, Tamaulipas: Universidad Autónoma de Tamaulipas, 1973), 7–8, 49 (footnote 1); MAA, Volume 9, p 158, 23 marzo 1824; Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 90; Zorrilla, *Estudio de la Legislación*, 15; the town was named after the priest Mariano Matamoros, who was José María Morelos y Pavón’s closest lieutenant. Canseco Botello, *Historia de Matamoros*, 23–4; Eliseo Paredes Manzano, *Homenaje a los Fundadores de la Heroica, Leal e Invicta Matamoros en el Sequicentenario de su Nuevo Nombre* (Matamoros, Tamaulipas: no publisher, 1976), 64; Krauze, *Mexico: Biography of Power*, 85.

50. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 22; Green, *The Mexican Republic*, 3–4; MAA, Volume 16, p 5, 24 septiembre 1814; Volume 9, p 76, 17 abril 1824; Volume 14, p 128–9, 25 febrero 1825; Volume 21, p 51–2, 7 enero 1830; Volume 16, p 132, 1823; Volume 16, p 139, 4 marzo 1823.

dependence Day celebrations. In Matamoros, municipal and military authorities organized patriotic juntas to coordinate these celebrations. Other rituals reminded citizens of their allegiance to the nation. For example, in taking possession of land citizens had to shout, "Long live the president and the Mexican nation." The government also affixed the emblem of the new nation (an eagle atop a cactus eating a snake) on official items sent to local municipalities. Other reminders included coins, flags, and holidays commemorating the deaths and birthdays of heroes of independence.<sup>51</sup>

The new national discourse also imparted status distinctions and individual political identities. In 1821 the Mexican government eliminated racial categories from official documents. The 1824 Constitution further eliminated distinctions, in theory, by removing property and literacy requirements for citizenship. In practice, however, the previous racial designations became civic classifications. In the villas del norte, for example, a resident's social class was used to determine her or his civic status. The colonial era's multiple racial labels were replaced with two civic categories: *ciudadano* and *paisano* (countryman).<sup>52</sup> Thereafter, norte os referred to upper-class men as *ciudadanos* and to the poor as *paisanos*.

Despite the egalitarian intentions of the new constitution, residents in the villas del norte, as elsewhere, continued to observe status distinctions. Membership in a community remained an important identity at the local level. Town residents weighed several factors, including length of residence and community service, to determine if an individual was a member of the community. They defined a community identity by separating insiders, or *vecinos*, from outsiders. However, only the elite male members of the community exercised the full rights of local citizenship. These rights included holding political and judicial positions as well as voting for elective office. By contrast, local officials excluded poor members from political participation (they could neither vote nor hold elective office) but allowed the indigent to freely use the courts,

51. MAA, Volume 16, p 4–5, 4 marzo 1823; Volume 21, p 197, 8 agosto 1830; Volume 21, p 196, 5 agosto 1830; Volume 21, p 168–9, 14 septiembre 1830; Reséndez, "National Identity on a Shifting Border," 691–2.

52. Jaime E. Rodríguez O., "From Royal Subject to Republican Citizen," in *The Independence of Mexico and the Creation of the New Nation*, ed. Jaime E. Rodríguez O., 40; Ramón Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came*, 194; Jaime E. Rodríguez O., "Introduction," in *The Evolution of the Mexican Political System*, ed. Jaime E. Rodríguez O. (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1993), 6; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 22. The term *paisano* was used prior to 1821 but it became almost exclusively attached to poor residents after 1821. An example of the pre-1821 usage of *paisano* is found in MAA, Volume 16, p 70, 14 agosto 1816. Ramón Gutiérrez found a similar, but not equal, shift in the meaning of the *calidad* (social status) labels from those denoting a person's race to others indicating an individual's nationality after Mexican independence. Ramón Gutiérrez, *When Jesus Came*, 190–4.

own property, and enter into contracts. Thus, *ciudadanos* in Matamoros held political and civil rights, while *paisanos* retained only civil rights.<sup>53</sup> Non-community members, such as immigrants and Indian residents, held limited civil rights and very restricted political rights.

Nationalist rhetoric transformed everyday forms of formal address throughout the nation. Legal documents and political directives illustrated the change as *ciudadano* replaced the honorific title *Don*. In 1819, for example, a letter to the mayor was addressed to “Se or Alcalde Don José María Girón,” while in 1832 a letter to the same man, who was again serving as mayor, was addressed to “Se or Alcalde primero Ciudadano José María Girón.” The new terms reflected a shared identity as equal citizens and conveyed a more intimate association among fellow residents than the meaning derived from the term royal subjects.<sup>54</sup>

National authorities specifically singled out Spanish immigrants for exclusion and expulsion during the 1820s. Mexico’s independence increased suspicion about the loyalty of foreigners of Spanish descent because they had made up a large part of the royalist corps in the colonial government. The discovery of an 1827 Spanish plot to reconquer Mexico and a failed invasion of Tamaulipas in 1829 by royalist supporters living in Cuba increased the xenophobia against peninsular Spaniards (those born in Spain).<sup>55</sup> The national government ordered local officials and military commanders to monitor the movements of resident peninsular Spaniards and to require immigrants arriving in ports to carry proper passports. In 1828 national legislation expelled peninsular Spaniards from the country.

Not all foreigners were excluded, since the *vecinos* accepted some as members of their community if they met certain criteria. A lengthy residence or intermarriage, for example, with a native-born person helped immigrants become *vecinos*. Even peninsular Spaniards could establish deep roots in Matamoros and obtain insider membership in the community. The Matamoros *alcalde*, in 1828, asked the governor not to enforce the expulsion law against six peninsular Spaniards who lived in the town because several had married “*hijas de México*” (daughters of Mexico),

53. Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 146; AHM, Presidencia, Caja 1, Expediente 16, 14 diciembre 1828; Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 19, 8 diciembre 1822. For a discussion of the three stages of citizenship consisting of civil, political, and social rights, see T. H. Marshall and Tom Bottomore, *Citizenship and Social Class* (Concord, MA: Pluto Press, 1992).

54. AHM, Colonial, Caja 1, Expediente 15, 21 enero 1819; Presidencia, Caja 2, Expediente 1, 21 enero 1832. For a brief discussion of the progression of political discourse and the increasing documentation influenced by nationalist rhetoric, see Jaime E. Rodríguez O., “The Constitution of 1824 and the Formation of the Mexican State,” in Jaime E. Rodríguez O., ed., *The Evolution of the Mexican Political System*, 80–1.

55. Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas*, I, 125–6.

had lived within the republic for ten to thirty years, were considered citizens, and had held several local political posts, including that of *alcalde*.<sup>56</sup>

De jure and de facto practices hindered the fulfillment of the egalitarian goals of the constitution. National citizenship was inscribed with gender and class distinctions. The new constitution conferred citizenship only on men. Women were not allowed to vote or hold office regardless of their social class. Additionally, despite the constitution's rhetoric, not all men were considered equal citizens in daily practice, since land ownership was a requirement for *ciudadano* status.<sup>57</sup> This requirement effectively maintained the separation between the elite and the poor in the *villas del norte*. The community conferred *ciudadano* status on upper-class men and granted them local political power while continuing to marginalize the poor. The residents known as *paisanos*, who were invariably workers, did not vote or hold elected office. Full participation in the political and legal life of a community—the right to vote, run for public office, and serve as *hombres buenos*—was granted only to *ciudadanos*.

An individual's ethnicity also determined her or his rights as a citizen. The conquered Indians who lived among the Spanish-Mexican population were too poor to own land and thus were excluded from voting and holding office. The *vecinos* of Matamoros viewed enemy Indians as uncivilized people who lived outside the bounds of their community. Elsewhere this issue was frequently subject to debate. "Should they [Indians] be considered as children of the great Mexican family, or as enemies to be driven beyond the boundaries of this state?" asked military commanders and local politicians in California and Chihuahua. Some authorities in Mexico City, such as President Antonio López de Santa Anna, believed enemy Indians were Mexican citizens so long as they had been born and lived in the Republic. Other administrators and politicians in central Mexico shared the *norteños* view of enemy Indians as non-citizens. An inspector from Mexico City sent to the northern frontier in 1834 characterized the "barbarian" Indians as part of "the extended Mexican family," who might qualify for citizenship, but only if they pledged allegiance to the government, adopted Catholicism, and joined settled communities.<sup>58</sup> In Mexico's Far North, groups like the Comanches and Lipan Apaches were generally not accorded political rights. In 1838 a

56. AHM, Presidencia, Caja 1, Expediente 17, 12 febrero 1828; Presidencia, Caja 6, Expediente 16, *La Gaceta*, Tomo 3, número 48, 8 diciembre 1842. *Peninsulares* held several political posts including *alcalde* in 1814 (Felipe Roque de la Portilla) and members of the mercantile tribunals in 1842 (Leonardo Manso and Nicolas Grisanti). Cuellar, *De Matamoros a México*, 32.

57. De la Teja, *San Antonio de Béxar*, 44.

58. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 103, 175–6; Juan N. Almonte quoted in Reséndez, "National Identity on a Shifting Border," 4; Green, *The Mexican Republic*, 60–4.

Matamoros newspaper used the Comanches as an example of a people who could not claim citizenship. According to *El Ancla*:

Not all who have been born within the territory of the republic are Mexicans, but only those who live under its pact. Neither the Comanche barbarians, nor the traitors, who have violated the faith that they owe this pact and government, violating the national honor, deserve this name.<sup>59</sup>

Neither were immigrants eligible for full citizenship rights. A few long-term foreign merchants received political privileges, such as serving as *hombres buenos* in trials involving fellow immigrants, but most foreigners could not hold judicial office or participate in the political system. Only a few immigrants obtained minor positions in local governments after years of providing some service to the community or government. Jean Berlandier presents an exceptional case of a foreigner who managed to hold a lower-level public office. The Swiss scientist settled in Matamoros after working as a botanist and zoologist on the Mexican Boundary Commission during 1827 and 1828. Berlandier married a Mexican woman and worked as a pharmacist, physician, and surveyor until his death in 1851. During his residence in Matamoros, he held the post of *síndico procurador* and served numerous times as an *hombre bueno*.<sup>60</sup> Due to his community service and marriage to a local woman, Berlandier became an insider after a long residence in Matamoros.

### Opening the Port of Matamoros

Accompanying the changes in the residents' political identity and the region's demography was an economic transformation, which increasingly tied the area to the United States. The economic engine of the villas del norte shifted dramatically after Mexican independence. Following the trend initiated by the royal authorities during the Bourbon

59. AHM, Presidencia, Caja 5, Expediente 22, *El Ancla*, Tomo 1, Numero 36, 8 junio 1838.

60. John C. Ewers, "Introduction," in Jean Louis Berlandier, *The Indians of Texas in 1830*, (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1969), 2–11, 18. According to Ewers, the Commission was responsible for more than determining the boundary between the United States and Mexico. The group, headed by Brigadier General Manuel Mier y Terán, collected scientific data on the geography and indigenous populations of Texas and northern Mexico. While accompanying Mier y Terán, Berlandier administered smallpox vaccine to soldiers and residents in Matamoros. Kearney and Knopp, *Boom and Bust*, 40; C. H. Muller, "Introduction," in Jean Louis Berlandier, *Journey to Mexico during the Years 1826 to 1834* (Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1980), xxxiv; AHM, Presidencia, Caja 6, Expediente 3, 9 marzo 1841; Presidencia, Caja 6, Expediente 9, 22 enero 1841; Berlandier also served on the city's mercantile tribunal in 1842. AHM, Presidencia, Caja 6, Expediente 16, *La Gaceta*, Tomo 3, número 48, 8 diciembre 1842.

reforms, the national government further relaxed trade restrictions. The impact of the liberalization of trade in the Rio Grande region was the long-awaited establishment of a port at Matamoros in 1823. This action legalized direct trade between New Orleans, already the main trading partner for merchants in Matamoros because of smuggling activities, and the northeastern region of Mexico. The consumption trends of residents in the villas del norte and nearby northeastern commercial capitals had also stimulated a surge in the quantity of manufactured imports from the United States. These northern consumers, like others along Mexico's northern frontier, had developed a taste for items formerly acquired as contraband. The legalization of this previously underground trade greatly expanded commercial ties with the United States and the Caribbean.<sup>61</sup> The opening of Matamoros and other ports created a timely economic boost for an area that had suffered eleven years of turmoil during the war for independence.

Along with the port's opening, the national government established a customhouse at Matamoros to regulate the increased trade. The *aduana* (customhouse) collected much-needed revenue for the Mexican government via import and export duties. This income was crucial for the national government because it had assumed debts incurred by royal authorities during the late period of Spanish rule and because the independence struggle had devastated its economy. The revenue collected at Matamoros from duties on the voluminous trade became an extremely significant part of the national treasury. When the revenue was combined with the money obtained at Tampico's customhouse, it completely financed the daily needs of the military in northeastern Mexico. For fifty years after Mexican independence, the federal government obtained an estimated eighty to ninety percent of its income from duties on imports and exports. The majority of the aduana revenue came from import duties, which the national government kept high to pay for its debts.<sup>62</sup> Although the import taxes brought in an important source of money for the government, they also became an incentive for continued smuggling.

Like other inhabitants of Mexico, the residents of the villas del norte

61. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 122; Andrés Reséndez, "National Identity on a Shifting Border," 694.

62. The archives do not indicate the year in which the aduana in Matamoros was established. Presumably, officials established the aduana when they opened the port in 1824. The archives, MAA, however, contain various documents indicating that there was an aduana in Matamoros as early as 1813. MAA, Volume 8, p 143, 13 marzo 1813; Jaime E. Rodríguez O., "Down from Colonialism: Mexico's Nineteenth-Century Crisis," in Jaime E. Rodríguez O., ed., *The Mexican and Mexican American Experience in the 19th Century* (Tempe: Bilingual Press, 1989), 11–23; Graf, "The Economic History," 51–2, 131; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 149.

avoided import taxes by pursuing contraband trade with the United States. Such traffic permitted merchants not only to avoid duties but also to introduce prohibited items into the country. Smuggled imports outnumbered illegal exports because tariffs were higher on goods entering than on those leaving the country. Contraband items consisted of manufactured goods as well as raw materials. Among the most popular manufactured imports were clothing, shoes, liquor, and tiles acquired from North American merchants. As the royal government had previously done, the national government prohibited the introduction of foreign manufactures as a way to promote their local production. Smuggling flourished not only because many sought to avoid duties but also because Mexico's industries could not meet the vast needs of the nation's residents.<sup>63</sup>

Smuggled raw materials included corn, rice, flour, coffee, sugar, tobacco, and cotton. Tobacco was one of the most profitable contraband imports because of the large disparity between its foreign and domestic value. The government's monopoly on tobacco (from harvesting to finished product) and the availability of better quality tobacco on the black market further encouraged smuggling. An estimate of the smugglers' immense profits can be gauged by the difference in the price of one popular item of contraband. Smugglers purchased tobacco in New Orleans for \$1 to \$1.50 cwt (hundredweight) and sold the contraband in Mexico for \$50 to \$75 cwt. Silver bullion was the predominant item smuggled out of the country. The main reason for the contraband in bullion was to pay for smuggled imports, but smugglers also exported silver to avoid the export tax. *Contrabandistas* (smugglers) also transported hides, wool, and other animal by-products out of the country but these items made up only a small portion of total exports because of their bulk and low cost relative to silver.<sup>64</sup>

Merchants employed a variety of means to transport contraband items. They smuggled some items by stashing the contraband underneath legal trade goods on which they paid taxes. Customhouse officials in Matamoros found contraband items below ships' hulls, in secret compartments, and disguised as legitimate goods. Smugglers evaded officials by transferring goods from cargo boats to lighter craft that could dock in secluded regions of the gulf or navigate undetected along the Rio Grande. *Contrabandistas* also avoided the customhouse altogether by docking at unofficial ports. They brought in contraband through Corpus Christi, approximately 120 miles north of Brazos Santiago (the harbor at the mouth of the Rio Grande), and then transported it overland to Matamoros. Smugglers increasingly used Corpus Christi after 1828 when the Mexican Con-

63. Graf, "The Economic History," 551; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 52, 148.

64. Graf, "The Economic History," 53-5.

gress decreed that all vessels transporting goods into the country's ports had to be Mexican owned. Since most Mexican ships traveled between New Orleans and the nation's ports, legal trade between Texas and Mexico effectively ended due to a shortage of legal transportation vessels.<sup>65</sup>

The lucrative contraband trade involved both foreigners and Mexican nationals. Many of the smugglers were immigrants who had long-standing ties to New Orleans merchants. The captains and crews of the contraband ships owned by American and European smugglers were also mostly foreigners. Some had established residence in Matamoros during the colonial era when they began to ply their illicit trade. Others became part of *vecino* society by marrying into prominent Mexican families. Their social relationships with Mexican citizens and intimate knowledge of the legal system gave them some advantages when authorities arrested and prosecuted them in local tribunals. Few remained in prison for any length of time because they were skilled at convincing authorities of their innocence. Other smugglers resorted to bribery of customhouse officials to avoid confiscation of their contraband. North Americans and Europeans owned the majority of the ships used in the contraband trade and the captains of these ships were mostly foreigners. As graft and smuggling increased, a liberal Mexican politician estimated what many suspected: approximately two-thirds of the nation's imports were contraband.<sup>66</sup>

The native-born community was complicit in smuggling through its direct participation and its refusal to disapprove of the practice. Several *vecinos*, for example, owned the boats used in the contraband trade. Mexicans also served as captains and crew of large ocean-going ships and riverboats carrying smuggled goods while others worked as muleteers transporting contraband. Landowning *vecinos* cooperated with smugglers by hiding the contraband on their ranches. Local citizens also profited from the contraband trade as distributors and consumers of the smuggled goods. Far from being scorned as an occupation, smuggling became a respected trade. The *villas del norte* were similar to other regions of Mexico's northern borderlands where citizens and municipal

65. In 1824 customhouse officials apprehended Don Eufenio de Teran for attempting to smuggle more silver coins than he had declared. MAA, Volume 16, p 192, 21 marzo 1824. Other smugglers attempted to stash tobacco behind wine and steel pots. MAA, Volume 21, p 23, 28 abril 1830. Contrabandistas throughout Mexico's Far North used similar tactics to evade authorities. According to Weber, smugglers in California, Texas, and New Mexico "falsified trade manifests, or hid goods in the false lining of a ship or the hollowed axletree of a wagon." Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 151; Graf, "The Economic History," 52, 110–11, 117.

66. MAA, Volume 9, p 141, 16 agosto 1824; Volume 10, p 99, 12 mayo 1825; Volume 14, p 57, 24 mayo 1825; Volume 14, p 90, 18 noviembre 1825; Volume 9, p 126, 26 enero 1824; AHM, Justicia, Caja 1, Expediente 18, 14 septiembre 1823; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 149–51; Graf, "The Economic History," 53.

officials “colluded with foreigners” and often ignored laws that limited their freedom of trade.<sup>67</sup>

Efforts by the national government to stop the clandestine trade by appealing to its citizens’ nationalism fell on deaf ears because the profits were too great. The federal government’s enforcement power was woefully inadequate; it faced the overwhelming task of patrolling its extensive northern border with relatively few and underpaid troops. The government’s decision to allow citizens to keep part of the smuggled goods as compensation for assisting authorities had some success, but ultimately failed to stop the practice. The lucrative profits from contraband persisted and smuggling through Matamoros became so widespread that the national government threatened to close the port in 1835 and again in 1842. The closure never materialized because the government depended heavily on the revenue from legal trade. By the mid-1840s, the villas had become dependent on North American supplies and trade. In the course of two decades, these river towns (along with communities in California and New Mexico) had “broken loose from the grasp of Spanish mercantilism,” according to historian David Weber, “only to be embraced by [North] American capitalism.”<sup>68</sup>

In addition to increasing the government’s revenues, the port enhanced communication and lessened the region’s isolation. Mexican independence transformed the political rhetoric and identities of residents of the villas del norte, but it did not change their social character as quickly. In 1821 the region lacked the variety of institutions, such as schools and hospitals, found in the nation’s capital. Visitors often complained about the lack of culture in the villas because the towns remained socially isolated from other regions of the country. For instance, few newspapers reached the area and popular cultural activities were limited to local productions. Professionals avoided the villas because of their geographic isolation. Furthermore, the region’s economy remained predominantly based on husbandry and luxury items remained scarce. The opening of the port at Matamoros not only reduced the social and cul-

67. MAA, Volume 9, p 105–7, 16 diciembre 1824; Volume 21, p 23, 28 abril 1830; Volume 16, p 187, 8 abril 1824, p 181, 3 abril 1824; Volume 16, p 192, 21 marzo 1824; AHM, Justicia, Caja 1, Expediente 18, 14 septiembre 1823; Judicial, Caja 2, Expediente 39, 7 septiembre 1831; Justicia, Caja 1, Expediente 1, 3 febrero 1806. Smuggling has a long history of becoming a respected occupation along international borders. For an example, see Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 129; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 150–3.

68. “Iniciativa del Congreso Tamaulipeco a las Cámaras de la Unión, para impedir el cierre del puerto de Matamoros al comercio extranjero,” reprinted in *Tamaulipas: Textos de su Historia, 1810–1921, I*, 210–15; AHM, Presidencia, Caja 6, Expediente 16, *Gaceta del Gobierno de Tamaulipas*, Tomo 3, Número 15, 21 abril 1842; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 122, 146, 150–1.

tural isolation of the region but also transformed the economy as trade blossomed and livestock production declined in relative financial value. The burgeoning economy attracted newcomers who, in turn, altered the social and cultural life as doctors, lawyers, teachers, and traveling entertainment groups invigorated the community.<sup>69</sup>

The opening of the port strengthened ties between Matamoros and the state and national governments as communications increased and the city assumed a larger role in the governments' financial and military plans. Indications of the city's growing importance were evident in the dramatic rise in the number of newspapers and official pronouncements received in Matamoros after 1824. By the mid-1830s, residents of the city could choose among eight or more local, state, and national newspapers to keep abreast of current events. State and national officials, in turn, became more interested in the economy of Matamoros because their governments grew dependent on the tariffs collected at the aduana.<sup>70</sup> Financial reports and official orders exchanged between the customhouse staff and state and government authorities figured significantly in the increase in communication. Also contributing were the edicts and letters sent to military commanders and soldiers stationed in Matamoros to guard the customhouse. For example, the 1828 expulsion of Spaniards through Matamoros led to a flurry of government correspondence with the city.

The military became a stronger presence in the port city after 1824 because troops were needed to protect the villas del norte against Apache and Comanche Indians driven to the Rio Grande by Anglo-American colonization in Texas. The national government also stationed troops in Matamoros to combat Texas rebels in 1836 and the North American army during the U.S.-Mexican War. Moreover, between 1827 and 1829 the military was deployed in the port city to guard against a feared Spanish invasion.

### **Military Despots in the National Period**

Despite the improved communications between the national government and the villas del norte, the norteños continued to complain about

69. Graf, "The Economic History," Table IV, Chapter 2. See Chapter 2 of my dissertation for more details on the economic transformation of Matamoros after the port's opening.

70. The following newspapers are found in the MAA (the year indicates the earliest copy available in the archives): *El Argos* (Matamoros), 1833; *El Demócrata* (Matamoros), 1833; *Mercurio* (Matamoros), 1836; *El Restaurador* (Ciudad Victoria), *El Telescopio de Tamaulipas* (Ciudad Victoria), 1837; 1833; *Atalaya* (Ciudad Victoria), 1836; *La Columna de la Constitución Federal de la República Mexicana* (Ciudad de México), 1833; *El Telégrafo* (Ciudad de México), 1833; Graf, "The Economic History," 131-3.

the national authorities' neglect of their economic and military needs. The fractious interactions between residents and the government in Mexico City had existed during the Spanish colonial period. However, the animosity grew worse after Mexican independence because of the increased financial and defensive role of Matamoros. As before, troubles arose because the national government continued asking residents for contributions. The military's need for assistance remained after independence because the insurgency had left the nation's economy in ruins. Additionally, the government's instability during the period of anarchy after 1821 exacerbated its economic problems.<sup>71</sup> This period of chaos witnessed multiple presidents at the reins of national power as a result of the political battles between federalists and centralists. The political turbulence frequently led to revolts. The norteños' experience during the Texas Revolution (1836), which gave Texas its independence from Mexico, and the federalist uprising in the villas del norte (1838–1840) further alienated them from the national state.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the government's attempt to suppress these rebellions and the persistent need to defend the northern towns against Indian attacks made financial support for the military crucial.

Like the Spanish Monarchy before it, the Mexican nation appealed to the citizens' loyalty in its requests for contributions. Instead of reminding the population of its obligation to the king, however, the national government used nationalist language to educate residents in their duties as citizens. "The fatherland is always deserving of our sacrifices," the governor wrote in an 1825 reminder to the inhabitants of the villas del norte, "[and] to defend [the fatherland] all citizens are obligated to lend their help."<sup>73</sup> According to the governor, patriotism was the willingness to defend the nation by accepting military duty. The state government continued to link military service with citizenship duties in subsequent requests and gave infantry companies the name *voluntarios de la patria* (volunteers of the fatherland). Similarly, requests for supplies urged all citizens to comply without exception to provide the "best service to the fatherland." Military commanders also appealed to patriotism in encouraging citizens to apprehend army deserters. Residents of the villas del norte, as noted earlier, witnessed an increased military presence in the region after 1824 because the federal government stationed soldiers in Matamoros to protect the money collected at the aduana and

71. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 39, 124–5; Rodríguez, "Down from Colonialism," 11–17; Nugent, "Are We Not Civilized Men?," 218.

72. For a fuller discussion on the federalist uprising in the villas del norte, see Josefina Z. Vázquez, "La supuesta república del Río Grande," *Historia Mexicana* 36, no. 1 (julio-septiembre 1986): 49–80.

73. MAA, Volume 14, p 125, 4 febrero 1825.

to stem the flow of contraband. The national government also sent troops to the city to guard against a feared Spanish invasion between 1827 and 1829; to fight the insurgents in central Texas in the mid-1830s; and to suppress the federalist rebels in 1838.<sup>74</sup>

Although the national government attempted to obtain the allegiance of the region's residents through the language of nationalism, its efforts, like those of the royal government, failed and for similar reasons: residents tired of the frequency of the requests; the contributions taxed their resources; and, most important, residents had little motivation to honor the government's requests because they saw few benefits resulting from their contributions. Admittedly, the military supplied some services to towns, such as providing doctors and medicine for the indigent, but the disadvantages of the troops' presence far outweighed the advantages.<sup>75</sup>

Between 1821 and 1836 the military requested mostly livestock and volunteers. Military commanders repeatedly asked the residents of Matamoros to furnish horses and cattle to their troops. The residents grumbled about fulfilling the military's requests, but they usually provided some livestock to the soldiers. As the petitions mounted and became more frequent, however, the vecinos began complaining about the quantity of livestock required of them. In response to citizens' complaints, municipal officials wrote angry letters to military commanders accusing the army of extortion because it forced the vecinos to contribute more and more supplies.<sup>76</sup>

An 1823 response to a request from the governor was typical of the vecinos' disgruntled obedience. According to the alcalde, the residents of Matamoros had fulfilled all previous military requests for horses. In response to the latest request, however, the inhabitants informed officials of their decision to refuse to comply with any future petitions because the assistance had become a heavy burden and because relations with the military and with government bureaucrats had deteriorated. In one particularly glaring example, the chief customhouse official (a non-resident appointed by officials in Mexico City) appropriated horses and jailed residents without the consent of civil authorities. He also overstepped his authority by forcing the alcalde to sign indictments against

74. MAA, Volume 22, p 142-3, 17 noviembre 1835; Volume 22, p 131-2, 8 diciembre 1835; Volume 26, p 144-8, 4 enero 1836; Volume 26, p 149, 21 enero 1836; Volume 23, p 53-4, 28 diciembre 1835; Volume 14, p 31, 21 julio 1825; Volume 10, p 121, 17 abril 1823; Graf, "The Economic History," 133 (footnote 69); Canseco Botello, *Historia de Matamoros*, 26; Paul Horgan, *Great River: The Rio Grande in North American History* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Wilson, 1954), 492-3.

75. MAA, Volume 22, p 27-8, 16 junio 1830.

76. MAA, Volume 10, p 108, 21 agosto 1823; p 106, 24 junio 1823; Volume 23, p 53-4, 28 diciembre 1835; Volume 10, p 115, 13 febrero 1823; Volume 10, p 121, 17 abril 1823.

suspected smugglers. Likewise, friction between civilians and soldiers had increased after troops appropriated the residents' canoes and boats to transport personnel across the river. Because of the military's abuse and since the soldiers were paid professional troops, the vecinos argued, the armed forces should supply their own horses. The residents, stated the alcalde, "in essence refused to provide [the aid] and the few who help do so with great animosity."<sup>77</sup>

Similarly, officials in Matamoros initially complied with the military's petition for recruits. According to the governor, the state needed additional volunteers to patrol the port for contraband, to defend the town against Indian attacks, and to fill the ranks of the national army. A draft would not be needed to obtain soldiers for the provincial militias, the alcalde claimed in response, because the town's inhabitants were "pleased" to volunteer. The military's dearth of supplies forced the federal government to ask recruits to provide their own firearms and horses. Because the government's requests for volunteers continued unabated, the city's residents and its officials grew weary. They subsequently complied with an 1825 request, but the ayuntamiento sent the governor a letter strongly protesting the quantity of recruits required of the town. The city council diplomatically began its letter by pledging the city's allegiance to the nation and by reiterating its willingness to endure the necessary sacrifices as a demonstration of the population's patriotism. The sacrifices, the ayuntamiento argued, should be proportional to the town's population. Unfortunately, the government had asked Matamoros to contribute more men than it had asked of other towns with similar populations.<sup>78</sup>

As they had done during the colonial era, civilians responded to this abuse by subverting the government's efforts to collect taxes for support for the military. In response, aduana officials appealed to the alcalde of Matamoros to compel citizens to remit their taxes. City officials, however, sided with the population by passively disobeying particular government instructions. The villas del norte were not alone in their insubordination because the practice of ignoring laws, which were not beneficial to local interests, occurred throughout Mexico's northern borderlands. Municipal authorities also repeatedly failed to remit demographic and property statistics to the Tamaulipas state government because officials were suspected of using these figures to calculate a city's tax contributions.<sup>79</sup>

The problems arising from the military presence in Matamoros grad-

77. MAA, Volume 16, p 141, 1 abril 1823; Volume 16, p 133, 31 enero 1823.

78. MAA, Volume 10, p 121, 17 abril 1823; Volume 16, p140, 9 marzo 1823; Volume 9, p 67, 16 enero 1824; Volume 12, p 118–119, 8 junio 1825; AHM, Presidencia, Caja 1, Expediente 2, 31 mayo 1825.

79. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 153–5; MAA, Volume 9, p 116, 4 marzo 1824; Volume 9, p 174, 17 marzo 1824.

ually increased the political rift between the city and the national government. The outbreak of hostilities between rebels in Texas and the national government further intensified the weight of this burden. The military used the port at Matamoros to land troops recruited in Veracruz and Tampico before sending the soldiers overland to Texas. The city became a way station for battalions traveling to quell the rebellion that erupted in the mid-1830s. The increased army presence along with the proximity of the rebellion created an explosive situation. As the military's requests for assistance increased and its abuse reached greater levels, the citizens' complaints grew louder and further distanced the town from the national government at a time when the country most needed popular support in order to put down the Texas rebellion.

The constant arrival in Matamoros of battalions on their way to the Texas battlefields produced a continuous stream of requests for assistance. The military asked for the usual provisions of livestock, volunteers, financial assistance, and food supplies as well as personnel to transport the supplies. Moreover, the national government warned citizens not to aid the Texas rebels in any way. The population of Matamoros initially complied with several government petitions for aid to battle the rebels and won official recognition as a "patriotic community."<sup>80</sup>

Physical confrontations between soldiers and *nortecos* exacerbated tensions between the military and civilians. Because the army had difficulty filling its ranks, its officers often conscripted less than exemplary individuals. Vagabonds, criminals, and Indian peasants were more likely to fill the ranks of the military than elite *vecinos* who could purchase an exemption. Compounding the problem was the national government's inability to feed, clothe, and equip the soldiers whose morale dropped significantly. According to town officials, soldiers engaged in "excesses" (probably referring to drunkenness, brawling, and soliciting prostitutes) during public games and entertainment provided for the army. Non-festive interactions were not immune from conflict as troops sometimes stole property or became involved in fights with civilians and foreign merchants. Altercations developed after soldiers robbed local residents or became unruly after becoming intoxicated. Civilians were just as likely to initiate physical confrontations with soldiers over the affections of women or to engage in petty disagreements in bars. Civil disputes over property raised tensions even further. Residents sued soldiers and their wives, who accompanied them while the military was stationed in Mata-

80. AHM, Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 6, 22 junio 1836, 15 julio 1836; MAA, Volume 22, p 131–2, 8 diciembre 1835; Volume 26, p 58, 21 junio 1836; Volume 26, p 185–6, 14 julio 1836; Volume 26, p 150, 21 enero 1836; Volume 26, p 152–3, 25 enero 1836; Volume 26, p 174, 7 abril 1836; Volume 26, p 58, 21 julio 1836.

moros, over stolen property such as clothes and over unpaid rent on land and houses.<sup>81</sup>

Despite the population's widespread tension with the army, the antagonism was not uniform. Class differences account for some alternative views. For example, workers occasionally used the military to escape from disadvantageous employment. Male workers could leave jobs as indebted servants if they joined the military. Enlistment did not absolve their debts as they continued making payments from their earnings as soldiers. However, military service did offer them more freedom because they could avoid mistreatment from their employers and they had more economic opportunities. Female domestic servants used a similar avenue by establishing romantic liaisons with visiting soldiers. If they succeeded in forming a long-term relationship, they could accompany their partners when the army left town. Fearing this possibility, their employers often sought legal means to prevent soldiers from courting or marrying their domestic servants.<sup>82</sup> The loss of their workers to the army added to the resentment of elite vecinos already angry because they bore the brunt of taxes and forced contributions for the military.

Disputes between soldiers and *norteos* also heightened tensions. Civil magistrates frequently could not prosecute soldiers for their crimes because army personnel cited their *fuero* (privilege) to be tried in military courts. To improve the chances of a conviction, municipal officials had to submit written complaints to commanders. Only in rare instances did officers permit civilian authorities to prosecute members of the army. Wives and children of soldiers, who became involved in criminal or civil disputes, could also claim exemption under the military's *fuero*. Officers even permitted muleteers and gunsmiths who worked for the army to claim the *fuero*. The conflict over jurisdiction often became aggravated as a result of physical disputes between city constables and soldiers resisting arrest.<sup>83</sup>

81. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 110; AHM, Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 6, 27 mayo 1836; Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 3, 14 enero 1836; MAA, Volume 21, p 194–5, 8 julio 1830; Volume 29, p 20–1, 13 agosto 1838; Volume 21, p 86–7, 8 julio 1830; Volume 29, p 183–4, 13 diciembre 1839; Volume 27, p 85, 10 octubre 1838; Volume 29, p 56–7, 8 febrero 1838; Volume 26, p 14–15, 7 diciembre 1836; Volume 21, p 86–7, 8 julio 1830; p 132–5, 16 julio 1830; Volume 29, p 38–9, 16 enero 1838; Volume 21, p 92, 3 julio 1830; Volume 22, p 39–41, 5 julio 1830.

82. Class differences also influenced how Cerdans reacted to the presence of royal troops of Castile during the revolt of the Catalans between 1640 and 1652. Sahllins, *Boundaries*, 108; MAA, Volume 21, p 189–90, 2 agosto 1830; Volume 21, p 186–7, 3 agosto 1830; Volume 27, p 20–3, no date; Volume 29, p 195–6, 1 mayo 1839; AHM, Presidencia, Caja 2, Expediente 4, 7 junio 1832; Justicia, Caja 2, Expediente 3, 29 octubre 1832.

83. MAA, Volume 21, p 82–4, 17 junio 1830; Volume 27, p 77, 1 septiembre 1837; Volume 27, p 90, 12 octubre 1838; Volume 27, p 84, 22 octubre 1838; Volume 21, p 93–4,

The problems between the military and civilians became much greater during the Texas rebellion than in previous years. Disputes increased because the concentration of soldiers in Matamoros grew rapidly as the national government sent more and more troops to battle the Texas separatists. In the vecinos' view, the interpersonal conflicts paled in comparison to the organized institutional mistreatment inflicted by the entire army. In February 1836, for example, the military engaged in widespread theft despite receiving civilian donations of horses, mules, oxen, muleteers, and carts to carry their provisions on their trip to fight rebels in Goliad, Texas. The troops were stealing horses and livestock, complained the vecinos, and committing "thousands of disorders and violent actions" as they traveled through the ranches of the area leaving disgruntled residents in their wake.<sup>84</sup>

Unlike their replies prior to 1836, local officials' responses to calls for contributions during the Texas rebellion were more brazen and their resistance more damaging to the national government's cause. In contrast to previous moderate complaints, the ayuntamiento of Matamoros fired off a letter to the governor harshly critical of the soldiers and strongly condemning them as "military despots" who did not have the least consideration for the sacrifices of the residents. In addition to berating the army, the city council asked the governor for indemnification for the "harms suffered by its citizens." Aware of the possibility for abuse, the leaders of the national army had ordered towns to obtain payment before supplying the military. These instructions were impossible to follow, the ayuntamiento observed, because military commanders routinely ignored complaints, forcefully appropriated supplies, and defiantly justified their actions by emphasizing the exigencies of war. The military's outrages had suspended trade between Matamoros and neighboring towns, the alcalde vociferously complained in a subsequent letter, because residents were too frightened of the military to travel. As a result of the interruption of trade the vecinos had suffered shortages of basic staples.<sup>85</sup>

The military's rationale for requests no longer swayed the citizens of Matamoros after months of daily assistance to the visiting troops. The vecinos had heard similar excuses during the colonial period and in the years (1821–1836) between independence and the outbreak of the Texas Revolution. Unlike past responses when they had acquiesced to the

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21 agosto 1830; Volume 16, p 141, 1 abril 1823; AHM, Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 3, 14 enero 1836; AHM, Presidencia, Caja 2, Expediente 14, 2 junio 1833.

84. AHM, Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 7, 2 marzo 1836; MAA, Volume 26, p 14, 7 diciembre 1836; Volume 27, p 92, 25 noviembre 1838, 10 octubre 1838; Volume 29, p 184, 13 diciembre 1839; Volume 26, p 167–70, 2 marzo 1836; Volume 26, p 163–4, 27 febrero 1836.

85. MAA, Volume 26, p 163–4, 27 febrero 1836; Volume 26, p 167–70, 2 marzo 1836.

army's demands, residents—as well as municipal authorities—in 1836 expressed their grievances more forcefully and in larger numbers. For the past three months, complained the Matamoros city council, the inhabitants had suffered from daily requests for aid from the military and now could provide no more assistance since the community “had been reduced to misery because everyone had contributed” all they possibly could. Other towns should be asked to contribute their fair share before calling on Matamoros.<sup>86</sup>

By pointing out the uneven contributions by the other villas, the municipal leaders of Matamoros were asserting their town's separate identity. The villas del norte were not alone in resenting militia service and obligatory contributions to the army as these were unpopular throughout Mexico. The reluctance to join the army was not surprising because those who joined had to abandon their families and were absent during the time of the harvests, plantings, and brandings. Armed defense, however, figured prominently in shaping the community identity of the river towns. When enemy Indians had threatened the villas in the past, residents of Matamoros had cooperated willingly with inhabitants in other river towns. However, as the exigencies of war increased the pressure on Matamoros' inhabitants, they forged a collective identity counter to the interests and needs of the population of the neighboring towns.<sup>87</sup>

When their sharp criticism failed to sway national leaders, the residents of Matamoros actively sought to hinder the army's efforts to quash the rebellion in Texas. They did not directly aid the rebels, but their daily acts of resistance indirectly helped the rebels repel the Mexican government's efforts to reestablish control. Early in 1836, local officials attempted to persuade the governor to reduce the number of recruits required of the city. Despite a population of some 10,000 to 12,000 inhabitants, the ayuntamiento argued, many residents of the city were transient merchants and thus ineligible for military service; others were too elderly or too critically needed as workers. In response to a need for additional soldiers and the refusal of towns across the country to meet their quotas, the national government instituted a compulsory draft. In order to avoid forced recruitment, several inhabitants of the river towns emigrated while others hid in the countryside. Part of the residents' motivation for hiding, according to local officials, was to avoid serving in the infantry. In a decision exemplifying the army's lack of concern for local interests, federal officers had ignored the suggestions of Matamoros'

86. MAA, Volume 26, p 171, 24 marzo 1836.

87. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 118–19. On “counter-identities,” see Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 111–13.

ayuntamiento to place the recruits in the cavalry instead of in the infantry because the norte os were accustomed to riding horses.<sup>88</sup> The residents were undoubtedly also motivated to hide because they felt little obligation to serve in a military that constantly mistreated them.

Unlike the colonial era when individual resistance was common, the refusal to comply with orders became more widespread and often included entire towns and groups of municipalities. The whole population of Matamoros, for example, declined outright to help the army on several occasions and began to ignore government orders to donate money, horses, and other supplies. Their refusal was not surprising because the military had failed to pay civilians for multiple loans despite repeated requests. Only after complaining to the governor did some citizens obtain payment for items taken by the military. Because the military repeatedly took advantage of the population's hospitality, norte os also began to refuse to provide housing for visiting army commanders and troops. Several elite residents had rented their additional residences to the military, but they soon grew weary of their tenants. Local citizens became angry because soldiers refused to vacate their houses after their leases expired and others neglected to pay the rent. In response to an army's request for a house to place a temporary hospital, the alcalde described the residents' negative mood. "The best houses of the population are occupied by the military," he argued, so it is "impossible to remove" the citizens who live in the few remaining structures because they refuse to lose additional money.<sup>89</sup>

Norte os ignored the military's orders to help capture numerous deserters and, in fact, aided the runaways. The government's threat to punish those who helped deserters failed to have the desired effect because individuals and ayuntamientos continued to aid runaway soldiers. Undoubtedly, the vecinos of the villas del norte—like elsewhere on Mexico's Far North—sided with frontier soldiers who deserted because

88. MAA, Volume 26, p 161, 27 febrero 1836; Volume 26, p 165–6, 2 marzo 1836; Volume 26, p 174–5, 7 abril 1836; Volume 26, p 144–8, 4 enero 1836; AHM, Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 6, 28 enero 1836.

89. AHM, Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 20, 4 marzo 1837; Presidencia, Caja 8, Expediente 14, *Eco del Norte de Tamaulipas*, Tomo 1, Numero 53, 1 septiembre 1845; Presidencia, Caja 6, Expediente 10, 13 abril 1841; Presidencia, Caja 6, Expediente 17, 6 enero 1842; Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 6, 4 junio 1836; Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 20, 22 marzo 1837; Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 6, 21 julio 1836; Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 20, 20 febrero 1837; Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 6, 21 julio 1836; Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 20, 11 febrero 1837; MAA, Volume 26, p 74, 4 marzo 1836; Volume 26, p 60–70, 26 marzo 1836; Volume 26, p 187, 29 julio 1836; Volume 26, p 180, 8 julio 1836; Volume 29, p 85–6, 24 febrero 1838; Volume 29, p 20–1, 13 agosto 1838; Volume 26, p 14, 7 diciembre 1836; Volume 27, p 92, 25 noviembre 1838; Volume 25, p 68–71, 25 mayo 1837; Volume 27, p 9–11, 2 diciembre 1836; Hinojosa, *Borderlands Town*, 53.

the troops were constantly underpaid and chronically suffered from shortages of weapons, food, and clothing.<sup>90</sup>

The immediate concern of the inhabitants of the river towns was not the distant rebellion but rather obtaining protection from Indian attacks. Their regional concerns and identity were stronger than their national identity, the more so because enemy Indians took advantage of the military's preoccupation with the Texas rebels to renew their attacks on the villas. When their own military not only refused to protect them but also removed the military garrison at Laredo, the villas del norte were left wide open to attacks from Comanches and Lipan Apaches. The Indian incursions devastated the livestock of the region and forced stockraisers to abandon their land on the north side of the river for safety on the south side. Towns from Laredo to Matamoros organized their own defense, but these patrols were poorly equipped because the military had taken many of the residents' firearms and horses.<sup>91</sup>

Residents were further disillusioned with the army because the increased Indian attacks and the military's efforts to suppress the Texas rebellion hampered the economy of Matamoros. Trade profits were flourishing prior to the outbreak of the Texas insurrection, but Indian incursions greatly curtailed inland trade beginning in 1836. The lack of military protection permitted robbers to prey upon overland caravans. Moreover, Texas rebels began seizing Mexican ships early the same year and threatened to confiscate North American vessels engaged in trade with Mexico. During July and August 1836, the government of Texas enforced a blockade of Matamoros. As a result Mexicans' antagonism toward North American merchants increased and ultimately motivated the traders to leave the country in large numbers. At the conclusion of the Texas Revolution, the villas del norte were in financial ruin. Maritime trade resumed, but at lower levels than previous ones due to the departure of most North American merchants and the loss of confidence in secure commerce among the remaining traders.<sup>92</sup>

The rebellion's end did not alleviate matters because government

90. MAA, Volume 26, p180, 8 julio 1836; Volume 22, p 146, 20 octubre 1836; Volume 26, p 30-1, 11 octubre 1836; Volume 26, p 10, 17 noviembre 1836; Volume 26, p 157, 6 febrero 1836; Volume 26, p 30-1, 11 octubre 1836; Volume 22, p 135, 16 enero 1836; AHM, Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 20, 6 junio 1837; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 110-12.

91. Population pressures and military aid from Texas settlers further encouraged these Indians to move southward from the central regions of Texas. AHM, Presidencia, Caja 4, Expediente 6, 15 julio 1836; Hinojosa, *Borderlands Town*, 50; Graf, "The Economic History," 122-3; David M. Vigness, "Indian Raids on the Lower Rio Grande, 1836-1837," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (July 1955): 21.

92. By November 1837 North Americans owned only three commercial houses in Matamoros. Graf, "The Economic History," 122-3, 125-9, 136.

officials proceeded to ask for more supplies and recruits and the army continued its mistreatment of civilians. Not surprisingly, the *norte os* refused to obey the government's prohibitions against pursuing commercial relations with colonists in Texas. By this time, the *vecinos* had become dependent on smuggled North American goods because official trade channels did not provide the quantity and quality of supplies needed. Citizens from Laredo, for example, ignored the military's threats and traveled to Texas to exchange their cattle for supplies. Military commanders angrily accused residents of treason because "forgetting the label of *mexicanos*, they continued trading with the enemies of the nation, protecting them with clandestine commerce . . . and in fact, recognizing the independence of Texas." An individual *vecino* in nineteenth-century northern Tamaulipas shared sentiments with Owen Lattimore's frontier dweller, whose "political loyalty to his own country may in this way be emphatically modified by his economic self-interest."<sup>93</sup>

The inhabitants of the *villas del norte* emerged from their experience during the Texas Revolution politically and emotionally distant from the national government at best; they had lived under the jurisdiction of the Mexican national government for more than fifteen years. During this brief period, legal and illegal trade had flourished but the government's repeated petitions for assistance had curtailed the economic prosperity of the towns. As the region emerged from the economic devastation of the war, its inhabitants continued ignoring the orders of the centralist government that demanded their support but did little for their benefit. The *norte os* followed the pattern of other frontier people who have had "ambivalent loyalties" because they "inevitably set up their own nexus of social contact and joint interest" with other frontier dwellers (not necessarily citizens of the same nation). The *vecinos* certainly had "ambivalent loyalties," as did others living in Mexico's northern borderlands whose wavering sentiments were intensified by "the neglect of the central government, extreme distance from the nation's core, and by virulent regionalism."<sup>94</sup>

## Conclusion

The inhabitants of the *villas del norte* confronted significant political changes during the first half of the nineteenth century. Mexico's war of independence transformed them from subjects of the Spanish Crown into citizens of the Mexican nation. As the national government attempted to

93. AHM, Presidencia, Caja 8, Expediente 5, *Eco del Norte de Tamaulipas*, Tomo 2, Numero 106, 23 mayo 1844; Lattimore, "The Frontier in History," 470.

94. Lattimore, "The Frontier in History," 470; Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 240; Sahllins, *Boundaries*, 107–8, 140.

incorporate the northern borderlands into the nation, it introduced economic and political changes that influenced the entire community. Its goals were partially frustrated because the residents of the villas did not develop a strong national allegiance. Rather, they held onto a regional identity that had developed gradually under the royal administration. Like other citizens living in Mexico's Far North, the vecinos of the villas developed a heightened sense of regionalism as they became alienated from the nation because of the national government's neglect and the large physical distances from the country's administrative authorities.<sup>95</sup> Ironically, the Mexican state's actions enlarged the existing schism between the vecinos of the villas and national leaders. The national government's policies alienated norteros who grew increasingly frustrated with its failures to address the region's economic concerns, protect the towns from Indian attacks, and stop the civilians' mistreatment by the military.

Residents of the villas resisted various state-building efforts during the early nineteenth century. When the burden of New Spain's counterinsurgency program—during the 1810s—proved too heavy, the vecinos resisted and indirectly hindered the royal state's effort to prevent Mexico's independence. The new Mexican government's attempts to foster nationalist sentiment produced mixed results. It was hampered by Mexico's prolonged political instability. Through various acts of non-compliance, the norteros also resisted Mexico's efforts at state building. Residents of the villas del norte adopted the new discourse of nationalism but their political identification with their region remained unchanged. Indeed, it intensified as the national government, like the royal government earlier, placed its interests above those of the people living on the northern periphery. In response, the villas del norte and other communities engaged in daily acts of resistance that hindered Mexico's attempts to maintain control of Texas. Caught between the state-building goals of Texas and Mexico, the norteros reluctantly chose Mexico but their sense of regional identity and alienation from the national government persisted. As the middle of the nineteenth century approached, the vecinos remained neglected citizens of Mexico and willing trade partners with merchants in the United States.<sup>96</sup>

95. Zorrilla et al., *Tamaulipas: Una Historia Compartida, 1810–1921*, I, 115, 240.

96. The notion that residents engaged in daily acts of resistance to state building through noncompliance to the state's regulations is adapted from ideas presented by James Scott and Peter Sahlins. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; Sahlins, *Boundaries*, 127–132.