Visiting Future Enemies

Mexican Visitors to the United States, 1830s

By David Patrick McKenzie

In 1846, the United States and Mexico went to war. Less than two years later, the United States Army occupied Mexico City, and Mexico relinquished its northern territories to make the Yankees go home.

But meeting in battle was far from the first contact that citizens of the two large North American countries had with each other. They interacted in the border regions of northern Mexico, in places like Texas and California. They also interacted in the cores of each country, as merchants and even prominent officials undertook journeys through each others' nations.

During the 1830s, three Mexican officials—Lorenzo de Zavala, José María Tornel, and Antonio López de Santa Anna—undertook separate journeys through the United States. Their journeys influenced how each man and their countrymen came to view the United States. Zavala and Tornel later published books on their journeys, helping to influence public opinion in both countries. Both U.S. and Mexican newspapers wrote stories about the men and their experiences. They were also, likely, the first Mexicans that many U.S.-Americans met in person—thus giving human faces to contradict (potentially) the stereotypes increasingly seen in U.S. media.

The following pages track these travelers through the United States, giving a view of their country's northern neighbor from their eyes and the view of them through U.S.-Americans' eyes.

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Lorenzo de Zavala: Reinforcing Liberal Ideas

By the time he journeyed to the United States in 1830, Lorenzo de Zavala was a seasoned man of the world. A physician originally from Yucatán, Zavala traveled to Spain in 1821 to serve in the Spanish Cortes. When Mexico declared independence that same year, though, Zavala returned home, helped write the Constitution of 1824, and became one of Mexico's leading Liberals in the 1820s. Even as his fellow Liberals grew disenchanted with the United States during that decade, Zavala continued to admire Mexico's continental neighbor.

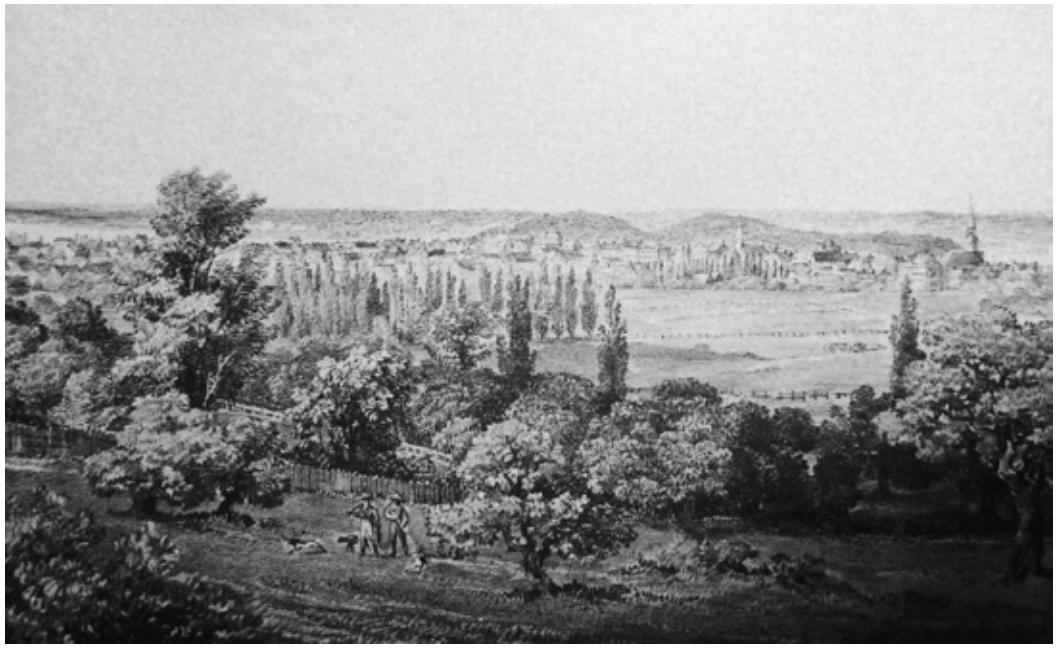
In 1830, after serving in the Cabinet of deposed President Vicente Guerrero, Zavala traveled to the United States, in part to conduct business (he had land investments in Texas). Zavala also desired to write a book, believing "nothing can give more useful lessons in politics to my fellow citizens than the knowledge of the manners, customs, habits and government of the United States, whose institutions they have copied so servilely." The book he published in 1834, *Viage a los Estados-Unidos del Norte de America*, contains Zavala's firsthand observations of the United States--observations he uses to bash his countrymen and offer suggestions for their improvement. This bias is manifest throughout the memoir.

The impact of Zavala's book was limited. At the time he published it, he was serving as President Antonio López de Santa Anna's ambassador to France. He soon resigned due to Santa Anna's switch from liberalism to conservatism. But Zavala's admiration of the United States, partially acquired during his journey, brought him to join the largely U.S.-American dominated Texas Revolution. He was one of three Mexican-born signers of the Texas Declaration of Independence and served as the first vice president of the Republic of Texas before his untimely death in 1836.

Zavala's family remained in Texas after his death. His granddaughter, Adina, was one of the two women responsible for saving the Alamo Long Barrack building in the early 20th century. *Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, via Wikimedia Commons.*

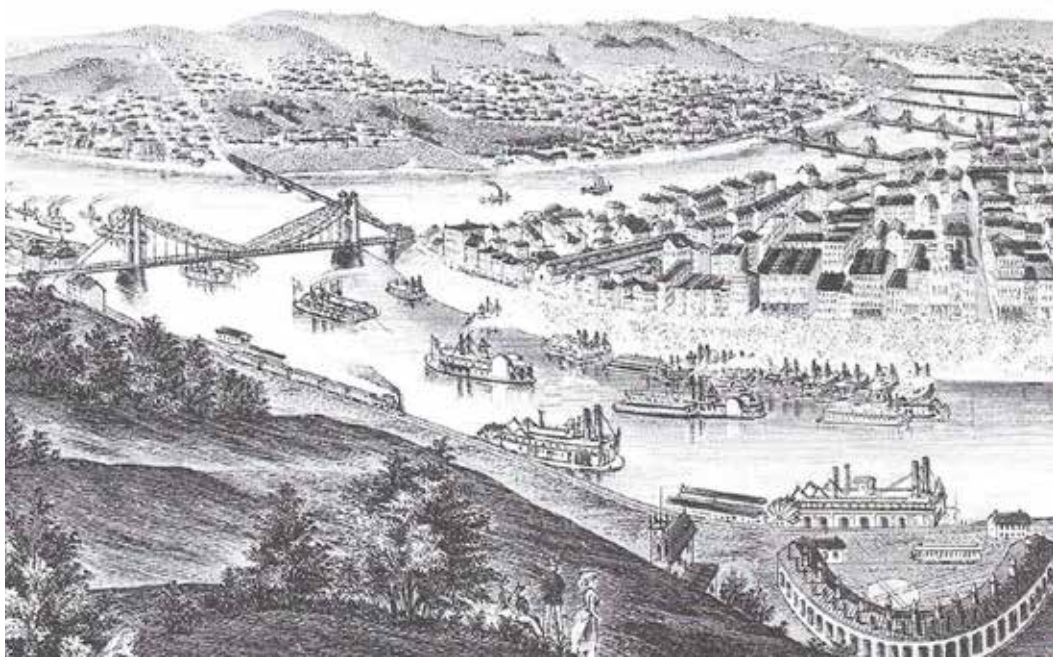
New Orleans, Louisiana: Arrived June 10, 1830

"The location of New Orleans is ideal for a commercial city. [...] There are two distinct cities divided not by some river, or district, or other similar object, but by the type of buildings, customs, language and class of society. [...] Napoleon sold it to the United States for ten million dollars, and from that time dates the rapid progress of Louisiana. Hence the diversity of customs and manner of living in that city is one of the peculiar characteristics of its population." *1830 view of New Orleans via Wikimedia Commons.*



Montreal, Québec

"Montreal, a city of 25,000 to 30,000 inhabitants, is located on the left bank of the St. Lawrence River, on a high bluff and surrounded by fertile hills that are well cultivated and give a pretty view. There is a considerable coming and going of Indians, most of whom are savages that come to trade their beaver, nutria, deer, panther and other skins and hides for foreign merchandise such as glass, crystal, clothing, brandy, powder, lead, etc. [...] The people are strangely dressed; they speak a mixed French which scarcely resembles the speech of Paris. Most of the merchants and large landowners are English." *1832 view of Montreal uploaded to Flickr by user DubyDub2009; public domain image.*



Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

"In Pittsburg ocean-going vessels are built, and it seems as something out of a fairy tale to see such things being done at such a distance. Perhaps the day will come when our own Rio Grande of the North will see steamships coming down to carry the products of Chihuahua to London or Bordeaux. [...] There are Germans, English, French, Irish, Scots, in short all that wish to live by the fruits of their industry." *Pittsburgh in 1830, via Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.*

New York, New York

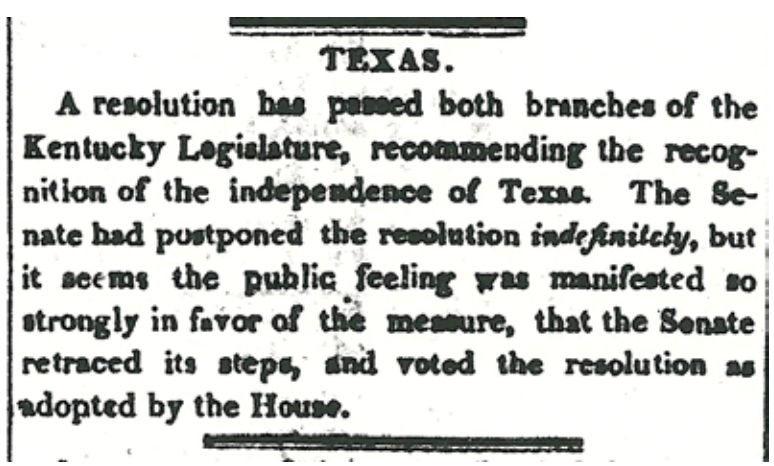
"The city is irregular in form, and the streets are generally crooked. There are some, however, that can compare with the best of London or Paris. Such are Broadway, [...] made beautiful by quite handsome buildings, stores, shops, and all the brilliant things that there are in New York. [...] Broadway is the place where all the best-dressed people promenade—ladies, young sports, strangers; it is at one and the same time a park, a street, and a promenade. More crowded than Regent Street in London, cleaner and more beautiful than the Boulevards of Paris, straighter and longer than Alcalá Street in Madrid." *Broadway, 1834, via Wikimedia Commons.*

Antonio López de Santa Anna: Traveling as a Prisoner?

Antonio López de Santa Anna traveled to the United States in 1836-37 having reached, and fallen from, the pinnacle of power. Born near Vera Cruz in 1794, Santa Anna rose through the ranks of the Spanish, then Mexican, military. He then rose to the presidency at age 39, in 1833. As a general turned president, he personally attempted to suppress rebellions against his increasingly authoritarian rule. He was successful in Zacatecas but unsuccessful in Texas, where a band of rebels captured him after the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836.

After months of debate on Santa Anna's fate, the Texas Republic government made the decision to send the Mexican leader to the United States with a diplomatic delegation. For two months, from November 1836 to January 1837, Santa Anna traveled with three Republic of Texas diplomats and his translator, Colonel Juan Almonte—himself educated in the United States. U.S. public opinion had condemned Santa Anna for his brutality in attempting to suppress the Texas Revolution. Surprisingly, however, as the travelers journeyed through the United States, they aroused more curiosity than anything else. Newspapers reported extensively on their journey. When they came to Washington, Santa Anna and Almonte met with President Andrew Jackson. After a week in Washington, Santa Anna and Almonte returned home on a U.S. Navy frigate.

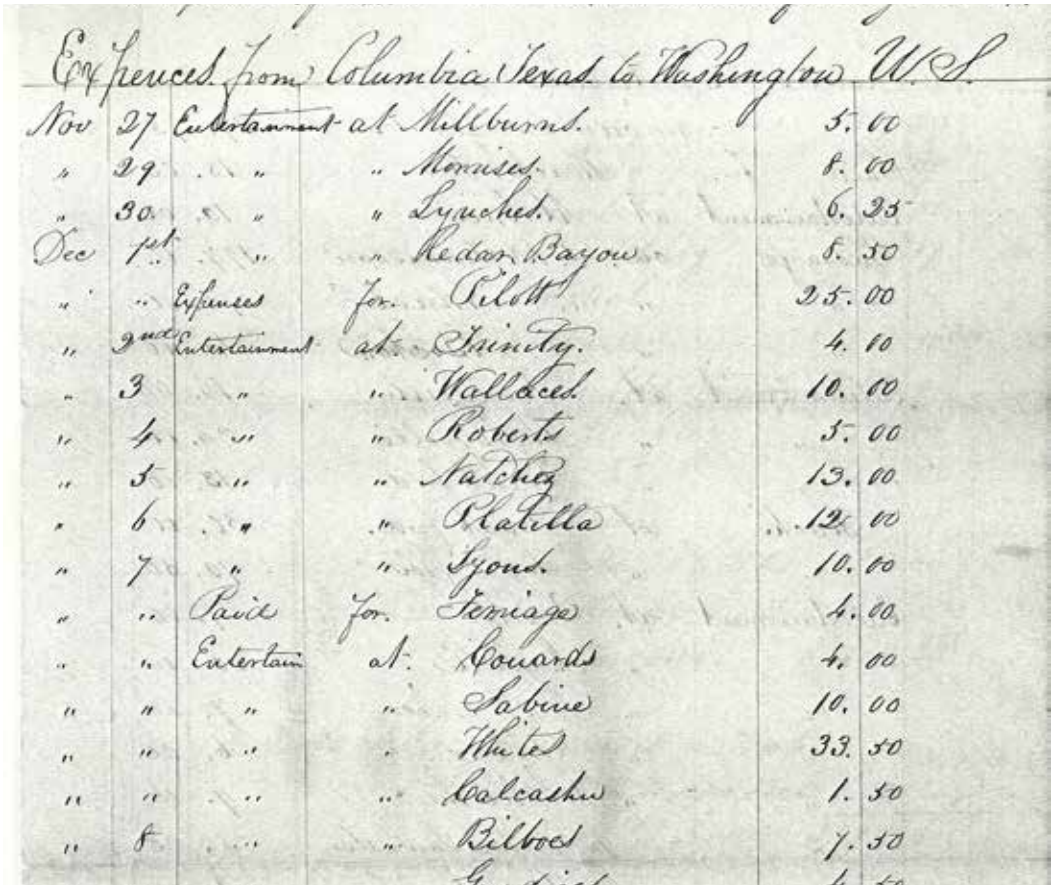
Santa Anna, who had taken a leave of absence from the presidency when he left for Texas, was not allowed to resume his former post. But after losing his leg to a French cannonball in 1838, Santa Anna returned to the presidency several more times—and several occasions of exile. He died in Mexico City in 1876.



TEXAS.

A resolution has passed both branches of the Kentucky Legislature, recommending the recognition of the independence of Texas. The Senate had postponed the resolution *indefinitely*, but it seems the public feeling was manifested so strongly in favor of the measure, that the Senate retraced its steps, and voted the resolution as adopted by the House.

Might one of Santa Anna's visits have backfired? Some reports indicate that Santa Anna visited the Kentucky state legislature in late December 1836. No record is known of Santa Anna's interactions with the lawmakers, but this appeared in the *Washington Globe* on January 21, 1837—an event that would have infuriated the Mexican leader. *Washingtoniana Division, DC Public Library.*

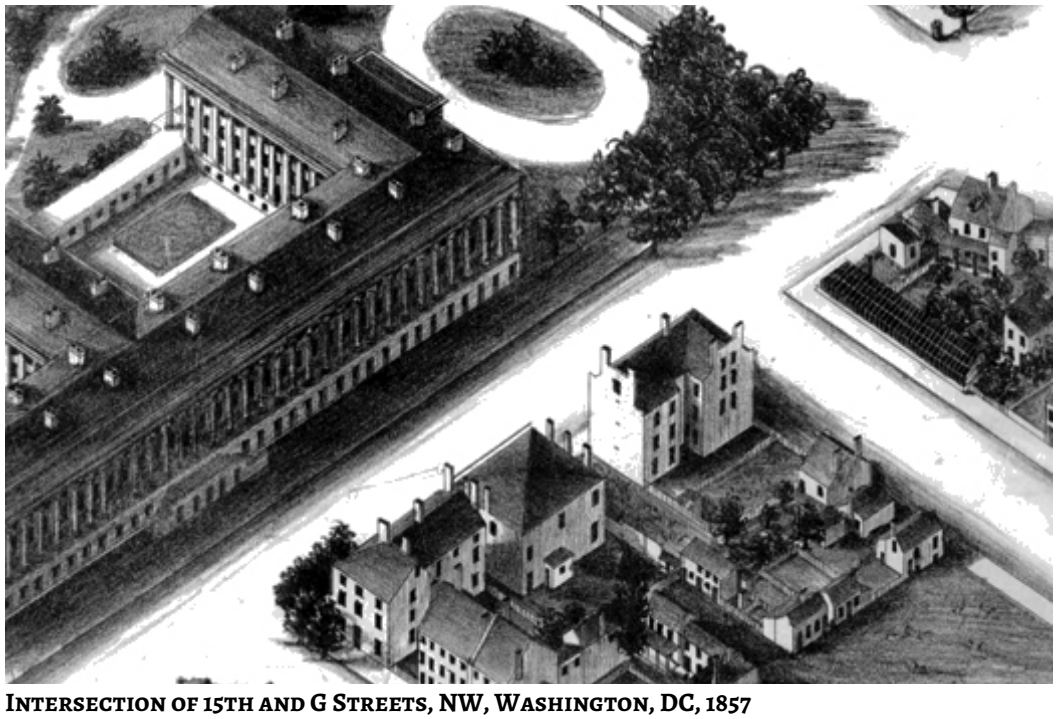


Expences from Columbia Texas to Washington U.S.

Nov	27	Entertainment	at Millburns.	5. 00
"	29	"	" Monises.	8. 00
"	30	"	" Lynches.	6. 25
Dec	1st	"	" Redan Bayou	5. 50
"	"	Expences	for Pilott	25. 00
"	2nd	Entertainment	at Trinity.	4. 10
"	3	"	" Wallaces.	10. 00
"	4	"	" Roberts	5. 00
"	5	"	" Natchez	13. 00
"	6	"	" Platilla	12. 00
"	7	"	" Lyons.	10. 00
"	"	Paid	for Ferriage	4. 00
"	"	Entertain	at Gouards	4. 00
"	"	"	" Sabine	10. 00
"	"	"	" White	33. 50
"	"	"	" Calcasieu	1. 50
"	8	"	" Bilboes	7. 50

Diary of Juan Nepomuceno Almonte, page 1

Almonte--a fluent English speaker--kept a simple diary recounting expenses undertaken on the journey to Washington. This diary provided the basis for Margaret Swett Henson, a late scholar of Texas history, to find significantly more detail about the journey, including lodgings. *Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.*

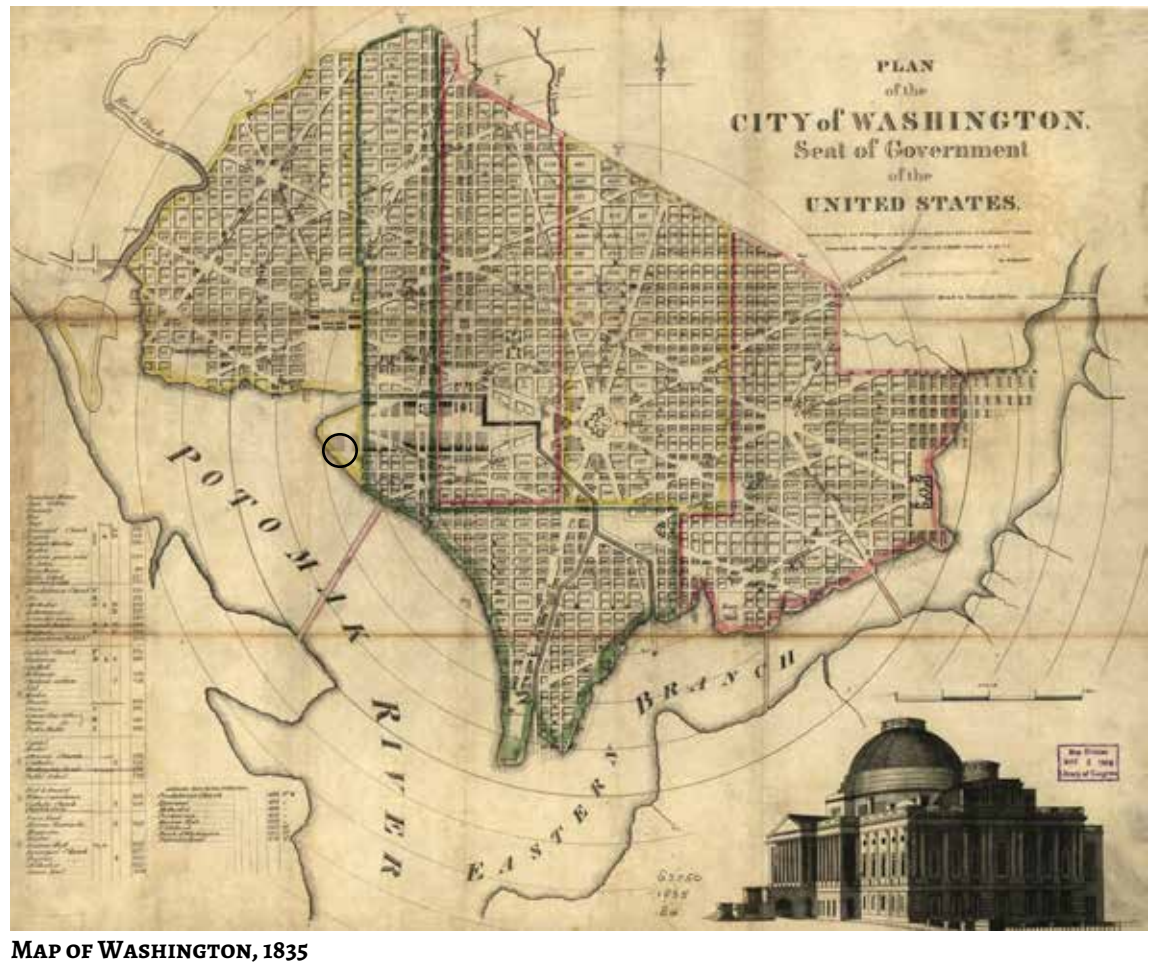


Intersection of 15th and G Streets, NW, Washington, DC, 1857

When Santa Anna arrived in Washington, he rented a room in the boardinghouse of Hannah Ulrich, a widow originally from Pennsylvania. Her boardinghouse, according to Washington city directories, sat at the southeast corner of 15th and G Streets, NW. This 1857 birdseye view of Lafayette Park shows Ulrich's house, where we would live until her death in 1863. *Library of Congress.*

Madeira Hotel, Chillicothe, Ohio

Based on Almonte's diary, Henson determined that the travelers stayed in the Madeira Hotel when they passed through Chillicothe, Ohio. *1835 view of the Madeira Hotel uploaded to Flickr by user Christopher Busta-Peck, from the 1896 book* Che-le-co-the, Glimpses of Yesterday, *digitized by the Internet Archive.*



Map of Washington, 1835

This map is somewhat deceptive, as it shows Washington's street plan as envisioned in 1791. The capital city in 1837, when Santa Anna and Almonte visited, did not come close to filling the street grid. Almonte and Santa Anna encountered a city with dirt streets that turned into mud during rains, and few public buildings. It must have struck the travelers as a stark contrast with the much-older Mexico City. *Library of Congress.*

José María Tornel: Ambassador without portfolio

José María Tornel journeyed to the United States in 1830 to serve as Mexico's minister plenipotentary (ambassador) to the country's neighbor to the north. Tornel brought impressive credentials to the job; during the 1820s he had been one of the leading intellectuals and politicians of independent Mexico.

But soon after Tornel arrived at his post—Mexican ministers at that time set up shop in Baltimore—he found himself in a difficult situation. President Vicente Guerrero had appointed him in 1829. But Guerrero's Vice President, Anastasio Bustamante, took power in a coup in 1830. Bustamante believed he could not remove Tornel without serious political repercussions—so instead he cut off Tornel's pay, hoping the minister would resign. Tornel refused to take the bait, refusing to resign and instead remaining in Baltimore for 18 months, mingling with the city's high society and recording his observations.

After he returned in 1831, Tornel published those observations. His time in the United States soured him toward that country. He continually heard talk of annexing Texas and other Mexican territory. His mistrust of U.S. intentions later led him to pursue a hard line against the United States, particularly during the Texas Revolution, when, as Mexico's Minister of War, he published a decree branding the mostly U.S.-born rebels as pirates instead of soldiers--thus subject to capital punishment. This decree helped bolster U.S. support for the ultimately successful Texan rebels. Tornel, after serving in several Mexican governments, particularly those led by his close friend Santa Anna, died in Mexico City in 1853.

Tornel marveled at Baltimore's industry, including its extensive gas lighting system. While this view is fanciful, it gives a sense of the awe Tornel felt about the city. *View of Baltimore, by William H. Bartlett, via Wikimedia Commons.*