

Tales of the Texas Navy

Perhaps I'm a hopeless romantic, but there's something about the sight of a Tall Ship that stirs the imagination. Paging through covers with nostalgic and heady drawings of the great old Tall Ships, I can feel the crashing of the waves against the bow, the breeze in my face, and the smell of the ocean. "Hard to port! Man the guns! Look lively there!"

...*That* could have been a Texan speaking, and that could have been a Texas ship. How many people today, I wonder, realize that at one time Texas actually did have its very own navy? Two, in fact!

The Republic of Texas initially put together a modest little navy consisting of four small warships, most of which were sloops. These were all eventually destroyed by storms or enemy action between 1835 and 1837. The second navy, under the brilliant leadership of Commodore Edwin Moore, was made up of eight ships, and those lasted from 1838 until 1843.

Those twelve ships left behind a remarkable record, especially considering the short time frame they operated within. The early ships harassed Santa Ana's supply line, capturing several merchant ships and sending their cargo of arms and supplies to General Sam Houston and greatly contributing to his victory at the Battle of San Jacinto.

Notable, for example, was Texas's Zavala. The Zavala started out life as the Charleston, a 569 ton side-wheel steamer with a length of 201 feet and a 24-foot beam, propelled by two walking-beam engines fired by two boilers and a smaller auxiliary. She was built in Philadelphia in 1836. A fast ship for her day, she could make 16 knots.

After being battered, but miraculously surviving, a huge storm in 1837, the Charleston was purchased by the Republic of Texas in the following year and renamed Zavala, in honor of the first Vice President of the Republic. She had her deckhouses removed and replaced with an open gun deck, mounting four twelve-pounder medium cannon and one long nine-pounder. Her cargo holds were converted to crew's quarters.

Predating any self-propelled vessels built by the U.S. Navy, Zavala thus became the first armed warship in North America. She was commissioned just in time. Mexico had proclaimed a blockade of Texas ports, and an invasion of Texas was expected. At the same time, there was a revolt of rebels in the Yucatan Peninsula against Santa Ana. Texas sent its new fleet to help the rebels and thereby draw the Mexican Navy away from the Texas coast. On June 24, 1840, the Zavala, accompanied by Commodore Moore's flagship, the sloop-of-war Austin, and three armed schooners, slipped out of Galveston Bay and headed for the rebels.

The fleet began patrolling up and down the Yucatan coast, and it soon became apparent that the strategy was working. No Mexican invasion army was headed for Texas, and the ports were left open. Although Zavala never fought a battle with an enemy ship during the mission, she proved invaluable for a bold expedition that Commodore Moore carried out in the fall of 1840. Zavala towed Moore's flagship and the armed sloop San Bernard ninety miles up the San Juan Batista River to the provincial capital of Tabasco, which was under Mexican control. With his ships' guns pointed at the city, Commodore Moore and a small shore party boldly marched into the center of the town square and shouted for the town's leaders. With the entire city as hostage, Moore extorted \$25,000 in silver from the mayor and promptly left!

In early February of 1841, the fleet returned to Galveston for repairs and provisions. *continued on p.7*