

Francisco Xavier Chaves

Interpreter of Indian Languages

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by Frederick C Chabot

The recent discovery of a collection of manuscripts furnishes an abundance of documentary evidence regarding the interesting and important career of Francisco Xavier Chaves, one of the most important interpreters in the service of the Spanish government during the latter part of the 18th and the early part of the 19th Century. The 38 documents, comprising 90 odd pages, are a valuable acquisition for Texas historical archives.

The history of the French and Spanish regimes in Texas and Louisiana is in a large extent the history of an Indian policy, in its various aspects.

When Spain acquired Louisiana, the defenses of Eastern Texas were no longer necessary. On the other hand, it became more urgent to control the northern tribes of Indians. "The obvious plan for Spain to pursue was to put the Red River district in charge of a Frenchman who understood its native inhabitants and to continue the French system of control through the fur trade."

It was Athanase de Mézières above all others, who, "In the capacity of lieutenant-governor of Louisiana, established the Spanish rule in the Red River Valley." He is the only Indian agent and diplomat of the Louisiana Frenchmen of the second half of the 18th Century, who is comparable with St. Denis of the first half of that century.

When De Mézières came to San Antonio for the Indian conferences, he brought with him another Frenchman, Andres Benito Courbiere, who had traded with the Tahaennes and Tancahues Indians and who had learned their languages. Courbiere remained in San Antonio as interpreter, and in 1781 enlisted as a soldier in the company stationed here. He married Feliciana Duran, and their descendants are numerous. A daughter, Antonia, married a son of Prudencio Rodriguez. It is through this connection that Jose Maria Rodriguez, in his Memoirs, considered himself in a position to explain the meaning of Tejas in the Indian language. His father, he said, explained that Tejas were "round silver disc-like metals," which the Tejas Indians wore around their necks to distinguish them from the other tribes.

The importance of a direct route between Santa Fe, New Mexico and San Antonio de Bexar, had been appreciated by the Spaniards of an early date. The intervening Apache and Comanche made such communication impossible. The exploration of De Mézières, however, prepared the way.

In 1786, Pierre Vial, "a Frenchman who was well known to the tribes of Northern Texas, and who evidently had traded between Louisiana and the Taovayas village," was commissioned by Governor Cabello, to explore a direct route from San Antonio to Santa Fe. "Setting out on October 4th, with one companion," says Bolton, "Vial went north, crossed the Llano and reached the Colorado, which he ascended for some distance." He also ascended the Brazos, crossed to the Taovayas villages on Red River, went up the Red River, and reached the Comanche village of Chief Zoquine. With this chief as a guide, he proceeded westward up the Red and Canadian rivers, and arrived at Santa Fe on May 26, 1787. The Comanches in particular, had shown themselves friendly. They asked for a Spanish settlement on the San Saba or the Pedernales River, "as more convenient and safer trading points than San Antonio.

To establish a more direct route, Governor Concha of New Mexico, sent out Corporal Jose Mares. He departed from Santa Fe in July of 1787 and arrived in San Antonio on October 8th, of that year. The return trip, which improved upon the route of Vial, began January, 1788 and ended April 17th, following.

Then, Gov. Concha sent Vial again, to explore a route to Natchitoches, "He was accompanied by Francisco Xavier Fragoso and three Soldiers. Fragoso going as diarist." They reached Natchitoches on August 20, 1788, and finally arrived in San Antonio on Nov. 18, where they were detained seven months by illness. They reached Santa Fe just one year from the day they had entered Natchitoches.

These expeditions of Vial "may be said to close the half century of Texas history after the founding of San Fernando de Bexar, and to bring to an end the first series of readjustments of the Texas frontier resulting directly from the Louisiana cession."

What formerly was tradition, is now real history. The manuscript collection of 90-odd pages, just discovered by the writer, affords an abundance of data for the biography of the interesting and no less important Francisco Xavier Chaves. It was he who accompanied Vial, and who, in all fairness, was most likely responsible for the favorable relations established with the Comanche Nation.

Francisco Xavier Chaves was born in New Mexico in 1768. He was descended from the Conquistador Don Fernando Duran y Chaves.

In early youth he was captured by the Comanche's, and adopted by one of their women, who, according to family tradition, had recently lost her own child. But when this adoptive mother died, the child was sold to the Taovayas. It is no wonder, then that Chaves understood the Indians, and their language.

When in the proximity of Spanish forces he fled the Indian camp, and joined another civilization. He was soon made a distinguished soldier, and Interpreter. In nine campaigns he distinguished himself for bravery and cunning. In one hand-to-hand encounter, he cut off the ear of his antagonist, and presented them with other relics of war, to his superiors. After his many years of faithful service for which there is ample testimony, he was retired from the Spanish army with the rank of lieutenant.

Francisco Xavier Chaves married first, in San Antonio, Juana Padron, daughter of Don Jose Padron and his wife Dona Antonia de Armas (daughter of Maria Robania de Bethencourt by her second husband, Martin Lorenzo de Armas), Their daughter Margarita Chaves, married Juan Jose Menchaca. Their son, Jose Ignacio Chaves, married Maria Leonarda Montes de Oca, whose homestead was where the Robt. E. Lee Hotel now stands. They were the parents of nine children, and from them are descended many of our prominent citizens.

Francisco Xavier Chaves married second Micaela Fragoso, daughter of the Cabo (*corporal*) of Cavalry, Estevan Fragoso, of the Adaes, and his first wife, Ignacia Quiñones. Estevan Fragoso was the son of Francisco Antonio Fragoso and his wife, Micaela Hernandez. The Quiñones were a very early and relatively important military family in San Antonio. Ignacia Quiñones, who married Estevan Fragoso, was the daughter of Jose Gregorio Quiñones and his third wife Juana Maria Leal. Juana Maria Leal with her twin sister, Maria Gertrudis Leal, was baptized in San Fernando on December 4, 1752. She was the daughter of Manuel Leal and his wife Manuela Banul: Manuel Leal being the son of Juan Leal, El Mozo, head of the third family from the Canary Islands.

Jose Chaves, the oldest son of Francisco Xavier Chaves and his second wife, Micaela Fragoso, was the father of 11 children, of whom Francisco was the father of Mrs. McClellan. Pedro Chaves, a younger son of Francisco Xavier Chaves and his second wife, Micaela Fragoso, was the father of nine children, of whom Pedro Luis was the father of Mrs. Saladana.