

# Cinco de Mayo

## CLACS Resource Packet for Educators

Cinco de Mayo is not Mexican Independence Day.  
It is connected to slavery and the US Civil War.

Mexico declared its independence from Spain on September 16, 1810 and gained its sovereignty almost 11 years later.

The Battle of Puebla was May 5, 1862 between Mexico and France. This resource packet provides some context for educators looking to incorporate Cinco de Mayo into a lesson.

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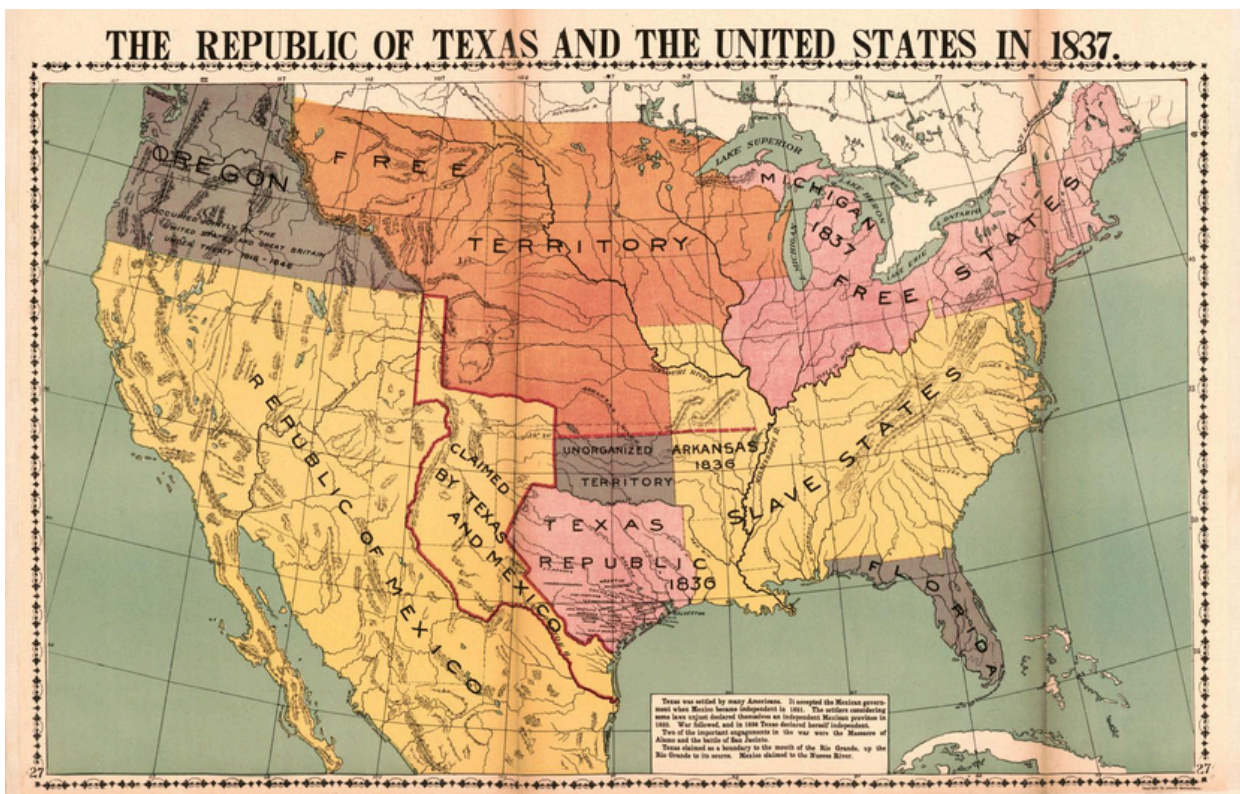
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## Slavery

Mexico had abolished slavery in 1829 shortly after gaining its independence from Spain in 1821. The government fully outlawed it in 1837 but systemic forced labor persisted.

At the time, Mexico included what is currently the state of Texas. It was the northern part of the territory with the majority population consisting of Apache and Comanche indigenous people. Not many Mexicans wanted to relocate there so the Mexican government encouraged Anglo-Americans to migrate and settle there. Even though slavery was illegal, immigrant slave owners were allowed to continue using enslaved labor.



Mexicans played a key role in helping those who had fled enslavers in the United States to reach freedom in Mexico. In the northern United States, there was the Underground Railroad. Similarly, in the south, there were networks including Mexican laborers working in Texas who often served as guides for the enslaved and helped them escape southbound.

As the non-Mexican population grew, so did tensions among the different groups. In 1836, what is now the state of Texas won independence from Mexico in 1836. Shortly after, the effort of Texas to become part of the US began which culminated with annexation by the US in 1845, which infuriated the Mexican government and led to a dispute about the size of the territory. Texas was admitted as a slave state at the end of 1845.

[NPR Flight of Runaway  
Slaves to Mexico](#)





The territory disputes didn't end, leading to the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 fueled by US President James Polk's manifest destiny. Abolitionists worried that the war was a means for slave states to increase their power. Rep. Dave Wilmot from Pennsylvania attempted to ban slavery in any new states acquired from Mexican territory. It never passed. At the end, Mexico ceded over half of its territory to the US in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Mexicans who lived in what is currently California, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, most of Arizona, Colorado and parts of Oklahoma, Kansas and Wyoming woke up and learned they now lived in the US. They didn't choose to migrate to the US. The US swallowed them and the land they lived on.

The war brought the issue of slavery and statehood back to the forefront. As part of a compromise, California was admitted as a free state in 1850.



The succession of the confederate states, including Texas, and the subsequent Union blockade around those states affected global trade. Union ships prevented the export of cotton from the confederate states to Europe. The decline in the supply of raw cotton caused the price to increase, greatly affecting the French textile industry. While the limited supply also affected the British industry, Britain banned the slave trade in 1807 in its empire and pressured other countries to do the same. In an effort to enforce the ban, Britain's ships intercepted slave trading ships.

While the French official position was neutrality, the French still considered recognizing the southern confederacy as a separate nation. European efforts to mediate a cessation of the US Civil War failed. France's Emperor Napoleon III pursued imperial expansion in Mexico and Central America, which may have been to acquire cotton-rich areas around the Gulf of Mexico.

The relatively new Mexican President Benito Juárez issued a two-year moratorium on repayment of European loans. Debts had been mounting since the 1830's and the end of the Franco-Mexican war. With the onset of a civil war plus the crippling debts, Juárez suspended payment plans with European powers. France suspended diplomatic relations and began plans for invading the country with the goal to take Mexico City. It would also help form a Confederate-friendly country neighboring the US southern states



## The Road to Mexico City goes through Puebla

To get to Mexico City, the better-equipped French army went through Puebla where there were twice as many French soldiers. General Ignacio Zaragoza Seguin originally served as Secretary of War under President Benito Juárez but resigned to lead the army against the invading Europeans. The odds were against him. His soldiers had little military experience. Many civilians with no training joined the effort. Civilian women who had no formal training served as nurses. Zaragoza and his forces held a favorable defensive position outside the city. The French, having lost twice as many men, retreated to Orizaba. The French were not invincible.

The victory greatly boosted the morale of the Mexican army as well as Latinos in California who only lived in the United States because the US acquired the land from Mexico.

California was a free state and the Latinos living there did not like the idea of a Confederate friendly country at their southern border. Major Jose Ramon Pico, who came from an African-Mexican family, organized Spanish-speaking cavalries to fight with the Union army.



President Benito Juárez



“By the time [Latinos in California] heard about the news of the battle, they began to raise money for the Mexican troops and they formed a really important network of patriotic organizations,” says Jose Alamillo, a professor of Chicano studies at California State University Channel Islands. “They had to kind of make the case for fighting for freedom and democracy and they were able to link the struggle of Mexico to the struggle of the Civil War, so there were simultaneous fights for democracy.”

Time Magazine Cinco de Mayo

The first Cinco de Mayo celebration was May 27, 1862 as news of the Mexican victory over the French spread through the country. However, France returned the following year and ultimately captured Mexico City and installed Emperor Maximilian I.

In 1866, the US Civil War being over, the US provided political and military assistance that helped expel the French. Maximilian I was executed.

Cinco de Mayo is not a federal holiday in Mexico but there are festivals with music, dancing and mole poblano in Puebla.



In 2005, the US Congress officially declared observance of Cinco de Mayo to honor and celebrate Mexican culture in the US. This stemmed from the efforts of the Chicano Movement in the 1950s-70s to highlight achievements, contributions and culture of Mexican Americans.

Chicano refers to people of Mexican descent born in the United States. It illustrates the unique cultural and societal background of Mexican-Americans that differs from US and Mexican cultures. While the term used to have negative connotations, the Mexican-American community adopted it as a symbol of pride in the 1960s as a response to discrimination and oppression they faced in the US society.

Since General Zaragoza was born in present-day Texas, he is seen as the first Chicano hero. The movement also sought to empower communities and combat discrimination. The story of Cinco de Mayo is inspirational. It is one of a small group resisting a European power to defend their community and secure its freedom against oppressors. In the 1970s-90s, corporate America looked for opportunities to sell alcohol and other consumable products.



Self Determination - Mexican forces fought for their right to be an independent country

Resistance - The Mexican people resisted the French occupation, defending their culture and national identity

Resilience- Even with the odds against them, Mexican forces stood up to the much stronger French army

Sovereignty - The goal of the Battle of Puebla was for Mexico to maintain their right to self governance



Battle of Puebla Monument in Puebla



- [Cinco de Mayo: The Truth Behind the National Holiday](#)
- [Smithsonian: The Real History of Cinco de Mayo](#)
- National Geographic
  - [National Geographic Kids: Cinco de Mayo](#)
  - [Cinco de Mayo: Fiesta Fun!](#)
  - [Cinco de Mayo: How a Mexican Holiday Became a Party in the USA](#)
- [How Cinco de Mayo Works](#)
- [History.com Cinco de Mayo](#)
- [Time: Cinco de Mayo: The True History](#)
- [Teacher Guide to Cinco de Mayo](#)
- [Cinco de Mayo Celebrations and the Influence of Mexican Culture in the US](#)
- [Mexican Patriots, the Chicano Movement and Cinco de Mayo](#)
- [Ignacio Zaragoza Seguin: My Story of Cinco de Mayo](#)
- [Rethinking Cinco de Mayo](#)



- Videos
  - [Puebla's 150th Cinco de Mayo Celebration Highlights](#)
  - [Batalla de Puebla para niños](#)
- Napoleon Foundation
  - [The Second Empire and the American Civil War](#)
  - [The Mexican Campaign 1852-1857](#)
  - [Ignacio Zaragoza Seguín](#)
- [Britannica: Texas Independence](#)
- [Early Texas Statehood](#)
- [General Ignacio Zaragoza: Cinco de Mayo Hero](#)
- [Library of Congress: The Roots of Cinco de Mayo](#)
- Battle of Puebla
  - ["Viva El Cinco de Mayo" The Battle of Puebla](#)
  - [Cinco de Mayo and the Battle of Puebla](#)
- [Cinco de Mayo: A History of Celebration](#)
- Resources in Spanish
  - [Gobierno de Mexico](#)
  - [Univision El 5 de Mayo](#)
- [NPR](#)
- [Chicano](#)
- [Britannica Chicano](#)



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