Ship Hunters Find Texas Navy Boat

While steaming back to Galveston in February of 1841, the Texas Navy ship Zavala hit a terrible storm and suffered extreme damage. Limping back to Galveston, the ship was left to rot in the spot where it landed. Long forgotten, the ship was found in a parking lot in 1986, buried under 12 feet of asphalt and fill material, by author Clive Cussler and other members of the non-profit National Underwater and Marine Agency.

Though it suffered a less-than-glorious demise, the Zavala offered Texas Navy sailors a thrilling ride. In 1840, Commodore Edwin Moore led three warships, including the Zavala, up the San Juan Bautista River to the Mexican capital of Tabasco. With guns pointed in the direction of the city, Moore demanded $25,000 to spare Tabasco. The Mexicans relented, and the Texas Navy ships sailed away with the money. Apparently this was not the first time that Moore resorted to creative means to pay his sailors and keep his ships in sailing shape.

Choose and write a word in the thought-cloud that encapsulates Sam Houston’s viewpoint about piracy. Draw an object under the cloud that best symbolizes Edwin Ward Moore.

Is it ironic to symbolize Edwin Moore thinking like Sam Houston in regards to piracy?

YES  NO
In January 1836 Captain Charles Edward Hawkins, an experienced military seaman, began patrolling the coast in the Texas Navy ship Independence (formerly the United States revenue cutter Ingham). At roughly the same time, the former privateer William Robbins (re-christened Liberty) also took to the sea as a member of the incipient Texas Navy. The Texan captains proved to be able seamen, capturing and destroying a number of vessels carrying Mexican contraband. They were also successful in keeping vital supply lines open between Texas and New Orleans. By the spring of 1836 it was apparent that the Texans’ naval strategy was working. Although the Alamo and Goliad garrisons had fallen, and General Sam Houston’s army was in retreat, the Texans were winning the war at sea.

In March 1836 Hawkins was promoted to the rank of commodore of the Texas Navy, a fleet that now included two additional ships, Invincible and Brutus. General Houston’s victory over the forces of Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna at San Jacinto on April 21 did not bring an end to the war on the part of the Texas Navy. It became the navy’s task to preserve coastal security. Immediately, however, the navy’s future came into question. Maintaining a fleet, even a modest one, was an expensive proposition. Liberty was sold off at New Orleans in July 1836 for non-payment of repair bills. Brutus and Invincible were nearly lost in a like manner while in New York for a refit in September.

The death of Commodore Hawkins from smallpox while in New Orleans for refit in February 1837 put the navy into disarray. Further, the presence of a standing navy became a matter of internal Texas politics following the ascendancy of Sam Houston to the presidency of the newly minted Republic. From the outset, Houston was hostile to the notion of a far-ranging naval fleet. By mid-1837 the first Texas Navy was no more. The Liberty had been sold, the Mexican fleet captured Independence after the death of Hawkins, Invincible was sunk in battle, and Brutus was lost at sea. Between September 1837 and March 1839 Texas had no ships in service save the brig Potomac, the receiving ship at the Galveston navy base.

Despite legislation in October and November 1836 designed to acquire additional ships for the fleet, it was not until the passage of the November 4, 1837, naval appropriations bill that binding action was taken. Samuel May Williams was authorized to contract the construction of six new ships at a cost of $280,000. Frederick Dawson, of Baltimore, took the contract to build the ships that would make up the core of the second Texas Navy. In addition to the Dawson contract, an additional ship, the steam packet Charleston, re-christened Zavala, was also acquired. By April 1840 the new Texas Navy was complete and in port at Galveston. In addition to Zavala this fresh fleet consisted of the 170-ton schooners San Jacinto, San Antonio, and San Bernard, the 400-ton brigs Wharton and Archer, and the 600-ton sloop-of-war Austin, the navy’s flagship.

President Mirabeau B. Lamar recruited a 29-year old Virginian, Edwin Ward Moore, to serve as commodore of the fleet. Moore, a lieutenant in the United States Navy, used his last months of federal service as a means of recruiting seamen and officers for the Texas Navy. This action, although effective, was illegal, proving to be a harbinger of Moore’s style as commodore.

Moore resigned from the U.S. Navy on July 8, 1839, arriving in Galveston on October 4. He went to work immediately, even without his full component of ships in port. In June 1840 Moore was able to put the fleet to sea, sailing as the maritime defender of the Republic of Texas.

Texas was remarkably lucky during its years without a navy. In spite of the victory at San Jacinto and the subsequent Treaty of Velasco, Mexico remained reticent about giving up its designs on Texas. The panic of 1837, the revolts in northern Mexico, and the loss of much of the Mexican fleet at Veracruz to the French were all obstacles to launching a maritime offensive against Texas. However, by the time Moore put to sea, conditions were changing. As negotiations for recognition between Texas and Mexico collapsed, Commodore Moore was ordered to open relations with the rebellious state of Yucatan. Ultimately Yucatan agreed to hire the services of the Texas Navy for $8,000 per month.

On December 13, 1841, Moore, in the flagship Austin, accompanied by San Bernard and San Antonio, set sail for Yucatan under orders from President Lamar. Sam Houston, who succeeded Lamar the very day Moore sailed, immedi-
Draw your own rendition of a Texas Naval Ship below.

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The adventure writer and finder of lost ships, Clive Cussler, who discovered the remains of Zavala in 1986, has written, "regretfully, the day may never come when Texas naval heroes such as Moore, Hurst, and Hawkins are as familiar as Travis, Bowie, and Fannin."3 No doubt this is the case. However, it is important to remember that the Texas seacoast has, indeed, played a role in the development of our history, including the revolution that paved the way for Texas to become a part of the United States. That road to independence and, finally, annexation might have been all the more difficult without the Lone Star's "wooden walls"—the ships and sailors of the Texas Navy.

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1Richard V. Francaviglia, From Sail to Steam: Four Centuries of Texas Maritime History, 1500-1900 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), xii-xiv.