



# The Alhóndiga de Granaditas

## *In Mexico's War of Independence*

José Reyes Méndez\*

The Alhóndiga de Granaditas is undoubtedly one of the most famous buildings in Mexican history because it was there that the first battle took place between the Spanish Viceroy's forces and the insurgents in their 1810 movement for independence.

The word *alhóndiga*, from the Arabic, means a public storehouse where grain is bought and sold. The *alhóndigas* the Spaniards built in many cities of New Spain, then, were grain warehouses that supplied the population's needs. The name *Granaditas* comes from the Spanish word for pomegranate, *granada*, and was given to the building because one of the houses torn down to put up the storehouse had a garden with pomegranate trees.

Construction began on the Alhóndiga de Granaditas in Guanajuato, the



Photos by Dame Barreira

capital of the Intendancy of Guanajuato<sup>1</sup> in early 1798 and the building was inaugurated in 1809 under the supervision of the intendente, Juan Antonio de Riaño y Bárcena.

The building not only ensured grain supply in the capital of the province he governed,<sup>2</sup> but also testified to his knowledge and good taste in architecture, since it was a spectacular example of the neoclassical style. It began to operate as a warehouse almost immediately.

However, a few months later, the uprising led by Miguel Hidalgo, the parish priest of the neighboring town of Dolores, and his sweeping march to demand

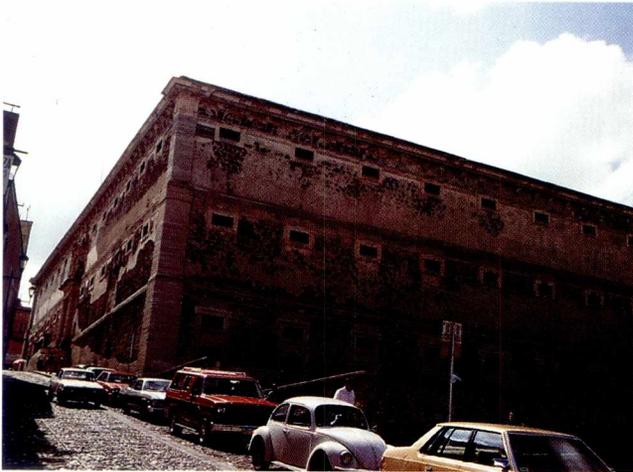
the unconditional surrender of the Guanajuato Intendancy conferred on it an entirely different significance.

When Hidalgo heard the news that the plans for an armed uprising for independence from Spain had been discovered and the conspirators identified, he decided to move up the date for the insurrection. He was supported

by Ignacio Allende and Juan Aldama, both trained soldiers who until then had served as officers to the Spanish Crown.

Hidalgo rose up in arms on September 16, 1810, and made his first goal the occupation of Guanajuato, the provincial capital. On September 18, the intendente received word of the events in Dolores and organized the defense of the city believing that Hidalgo and his men would march directly there without delay. However, the insurgents decided to make a sweep through the countryside before dealing with the capital; during the march, their ranks swelled with recruits, though many were not very well

\* Head of the Educational Services Department of the Alhóndiga de Granaditas-Guanajuato Regional Museum.



armed. On September 20, a false alarm rang through the city and Intendente Riaño y Bárcena feared the townspeople would join Hidalgo's forces. He then decided to entrench, and on September 24 he had all archives and public monies moved to the Alhóndiga; in addition to the corn stored there, great quantities of flour and other supplies were brought in. Some Spaniards and criollos joined the intendente, bringing their families, property and jewels with them. Approximately 500 men and women took shelter in the Alhóndiga bringing with them three million pesos in valuables. (By way of comparison, the warehouse, which had been finished less than a year before, had cost under 220,000 pesos to build.) Three ditches were dug to close the main streets leading to the Alhóndiga and the east door was bricked up with adobe, leaving only the main entrance in use.

The intendente published a decree September 26 abolishing the payment of tribute and requested aid in a letter to the commander of the brigade at San Luis, Félix María Calleja.

[The population] voluntarily joins the insurgents. They already have in Dolores, San Miguel, Celaya, Salamanca,

Irapuato....Here, seduction is winning the day; security has been wanting; confidence has been wanting. I have fortified myself in the best possible place and will fight to the death...come to my aid; I fear an attack at any moment. I will not write any more because I have had no rest nor have I undressed since the seventeenth, and for the last three days I have not slept an hour through.

#### THE TAKING OF THE ALHÓNDIGA DE GRANADITAS

On Friday, September 28, before nine in the morning, insurgents Mariano Abasolo and Ignacio Camargo presented themselves at the ditch on Belén Street and sent two documents from Don Miguel Hidalgo to the defenders of the Alhóndiga demanding their surrender, one official and another private. In the first document, Hidalgo wrote:

General Headquarters, Burras Hacienda, September 28, 1810. The large army I command has elected me its Captain General and protector of the Nation in the fields of Celaya...whereby Your Excellency is duly informed that I am legitimately authorized by my Nation to carry out those beneficial projects which I deem necessary in its

favor. Said projects are equally useful and favorable to both Americans and Europeans who have decided to reside in this Kingdom....I do not see the Europeans as enemies, but only as an obstacle which encumbers the good offices of our enterprise. Your Excellency will be so good as to manifest these ideas to the Europeans who have sequestered themselves in the Alhóndiga so they may decide if they declare themselves enemies or they prefer to be made prisoner, in which case they will receive benign and humane treatment...If they do not accede to this request, I will apply all the forces and stratagems at my disposal to destroy them...God keep Your Excellency for many years, as is the desire of your faithful servant, Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla. Captain General of America.

But the intendente, after consulting the occupants of the fortress, decided to reject the offer and wrote:

I recognize no other authority, nor to my knowledge has any other been established, nor do I recognize that any other Captain General in the Kingdom of New Spain exists, than His Excellency Don Francisco Xavier de Venegas, Viceroy of this land, nor do I recognize any other legitimate reforms than those agreed upon by the entire Nation in the

session of its Cortes Generales [still] to be held. My duty is to fight like a soldier and that noble sentiment motivates all those around me. Juan Antonio de Riaño.

The second letter was confidential and addressed to the intendente personally, for whom Hidalgo felt great respect and friendship:

My dear Sir, the regard in which I have always held you is sincere and I believe it due to the great virtues of which you are possessed. The difference in our ways of thinking should not diminish that. You will do what you think most just and prudent without prejudice to your family. We will fight like enemies if that is decided. This offer is not born of fear, but of the sensibility of which I cannot divest myself....Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla.

And the intendente answered, “My dear Sir: The exercise of arms is not incompatible with sensibility, which demands of my heart the due gratitude to your expressions in benefit to my family, whose fate does not perturb me on this occasion. Juan Antonio de Riaño.”

Riaño also sent his last communication to Calleja, saying, “I am going to fight because I am to be attacked at this very instant; I will resist as much as possible because I am an honorable man. May Your Excellency fly to my aid...to my aid (Guanajuato, September 28, 11 o'clock of the a.m.).”

The intendente distributed his troops to meet the enemy, with one part of the battalion and countrymen on the roof of the Alhóndiga and the rest in the trenches. Near noon, the small organized force and the confused, unarmed crowd that made up Hidalgo’s army

—about 20,000 men—presented itself. The soldiers from Celaya occupied the houses near Granadas and the crowd climbed the hills that dominated the building. The intendente, noting that the largest enemy force was striking the northeast trench, thought he should go out to reinforce it with 20 men. As he returned, walking up the steps to the Alhóndiga entrance he was struck by a rifle shot in the eye and died instantaneously. The death of the intendente sowed confusion among the building’s defenders; they all wanted to command and, except the soldiers, who continued to follow their superiors’ orders, no one wanted to obey. The crowd on Cuarto Hill began to hand throw and sling stones down on the Alhóndiga, a rain of rocks heavier than any hailstorm. So heavy was the barrage that the Alhón-

diga roof rose a full hand more than its normal height.

With the intendente dead, the cavalry outside the building pushed back and the defenders driven off the roof, the garrison began to weaken. Meanwhile, an avalanche of people surrounded the building right up to its walls, even though they were countered by a rain of improvised missiles. Gilberto, the intendente’s son, a lieutenant, used mercury containers to make grenades<sup>3</sup> and inflicted grave losses to the insurgent army. Those closest to the door headed by a miner nicknamed “Pípila”<sup>4</sup> brought great pieces of torch-pine and set fire to them, rapidly burning down the door. Pushed by those behind them, the crowd surged forward through the flames and, though it was met by firing at point-blank range, rushed into the Alhóndiga patio. It was five in the afternoon. The battle was over.

This was the first encounter between insurgents and royalists; the first blood had been shed in the fight for independence.

#### FINAL COMMENTS

On November 25, 1810, royalist forces commanded by Félix María Calleja retook the city of Guanajuato. The next day, Calleja ordered that the upper class prisoners be put to death. They were shot in the back like traitors in the Alhóndiga patio, facing the east entrance that had been walled up.

In the first months of 1811, the insurgent commanders were taken prisoner in Acatita de Baján, Coahuila. Transported to Chihuahua for trial,



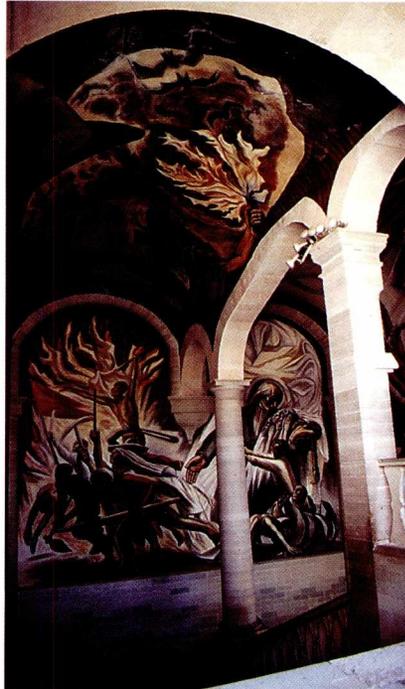
Replica of the Dolores churchbell used by Father Hidalgo to call the people to insurrection.

they were condemned to death. Calleja ordered that the heads of Hidalgo, Allende, Aldama and Jiménez be taken to Guanajuato, where they arrived in October 1811. Put in cages, they were hung on the corners of the Alhóndiga with the following inscription:

The heads of Miguel Hidalgo, Ignacio Allende, Juan Aldama and Mariano Jiménez, famous criminals and leaders of the revolution, who pillaged and stole goods from God and the royal treasury. Nailed here by order of the King's Brigadier Félix María Calleja.

The heads of the four patriots were displayed there until March 28, 1821, when, after independence, Anastasio Bustamante and Luis de Cortázar ordered they be brought down and interred.

Over the years, the Alhóndiga served different purposes: it was a warehouse and a school, a dwelling and a barracks. Not until 1864 was it again given a lasting function when Maximilian of Hapsburg visited the city as emperor and



ordered that it be made a jail. Several of the building's columns and railings still bear the inscriptions carved into them during the 84 years it was used to house prisoners. Almost 100 years later, in 1958, the Alhóndiga finally became a regional museum. **VVM**

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Between 1786 and 1812, new Spain was divided into 12 intendancies, an administrative district or province; each intendancy was headed up by an intendente, the chief administrative official, like a governor, who also controlled the district treasury. [Editor's Note.]
- <sup>2</sup>Because the city of Guanajuato suffered from constant flooding, grain kept in warehouses built on low ground was often lost.
- <sup>3</sup>The vials were iron cylinders about one foot high and six inches in diameter with a narrow neck that screwed shut; they were filled with grapeshot and gunpowder through a small hole in which a fuse was then inserted.
- <sup>4</sup>Pípila is a controversial figure about whom there are conflicting accounts. The best known story makes him a hero who set fire to the door single-handed. Several historians, however, question this version, given their doubt that he acted alone. Despite this, the great statue of Pípila on the heights of Guanajuato is one of the city's emblems.

## FURTHER READING

Alamán, Lucas, *Antología de la historia de Mejico*, selection Lourdes Quintanilla, Autores de Guanajuato Series (Guanajuato, Mexico: Guanajuato State Government, 1989).

*Diccionario Porrúa de historia biográfica y geográfica*, vol. 14 (Mexico City: Porrúa Editores, 1976).

Marmolejo, Lucio, *Efemérides guanajuatenses*, vol. II and III, (Guanajuato, Mexico: University of Guanajuato, 1967-1974).

## The Alhóndiga de Granaditas Regional Museum

In 1958 the Alhóndiga de Granaditas became a regional museum where the visitor can roam through our history and admire two murals by Guanajuato-born painter José Chávez Morado, *The Abolition of Slavery* (1955) and *Song to Guanajuato* (1966). The museum's collections are organized into four basic sections:

**Archeology:** Collections of pre-Hispanic seals, Mesoamerican art and ceramics from Chupicuaro.

**History:** This section covers from 1750, the approximate date when the Viceroyalty divided the country into regions, to 1917, when Mexico's current Constitution was written, establishing the contemporary state of Guanajuato.

**Art:** The Hermenegildo Bustos Room offers the visitor paintings and the Romualdo García Room exhibits photography.

**Ethnography:** The Guanajuato Arts and Traditions Room covers this topic.

**Museum Hours:** Tuesday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. to 6 p.m.; Sunday, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.