

THE VALENZUELA COLLECTION  
IN THE BIBLIOTECA NACIONAL  
DE GUATEMALA \*

*Todd Little-Siebold*  
*Tulane University*

The principal facts that direct the historic life of a country lie in the rulers who have served during different political eras. One can be sure that they are the protagonists of history because each of them creates with his or her actions chapters that will be recounted in many volumes through the years.

Gilberto Valenzuela González

While many researchers who have worked in Guatemala in the past decade would take issue with the perspective on the past reflected in Gilberto Valenzuela's statement, few would deny the importance of the collection of documents he began. In an era when history was the history of kings and battles, presidents and laws, one family's tradition of collecting any and all documents on Guatemala gave rise to a remarkable collection. The Sección Valenzuela of the Biblioteca Nacional de Guatemala offers today the basis for an in-depth reconstruction of Guatemalan history during the last century and a half.

One reason why scholars lack such a reconstruction is limited access to the sources required to explore thoroughly a world known in only the barest outlines. Many scholars have drawn on the massive documentation contained in Guatemala's Archivo General de Centro América, but that depository often presents insuperable barriers to sustained research in its overall lack of catalogs and finding aids for most of the documents warehoused there. The use of historical collections outside the Archivo General is even more limited due to the fact that many of these collections are not publicized, are difficult to access, and often lack any kind of organizational tools for searching them easily. This research note seeks to introduce researchers to a

\*Research for this work was made possible by a grant from the Mellon Foundation administered by the Roger Thayer Stone Center for Latin American Studies at Tulane University and by a Fulbright research grant.

remarkable collection and remove a few of the barriers to research in one of the major public repositories of historical documents in Guatemala.

The Sección Valenzuela of the Biblioteca Nacional de Guatemala is a rich and eclectic hoard of documents collected over generations by Guatemalan scholar and bibliophile Gilberto Valenzuela González, his son Gilberto Valenzuela Reyna, and their forebears. Their collection rivals the much larger Archivo General de Centro América in certain areas because of the large quantity of printed ephemera, brochures, and pamphlets preserved and organized by the Valenzuelas. Their collection even outshines its host institution in the kinds of secondary works gathered for the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For interdisciplinary work on Guatemalan history, this collection is a key depository for researchers interested in the social, political, economic, cultural, and intellectual development of Central America as a whole and Guatemala in particular. The materials in the Sección Valenzuela may also be one of the best sources of certain types of imprints for the other Central American republics.

Formation of this collection was begun by the Valenzuela dynasty in the mid-nineteenth century, when members of several generations served as functionaries in Liberal and Conservative governments starting in the 1850s. Document collection probably began with Consejero de Estado José Valenzuela, who served under President Rafael Carrera in the late 1850s.<sup>1</sup> His son Salvador became an important government functionary under the Liberal presidents from the 1880s on and presumably continued to collect documents.

The real amassing, analysis, and publication of the materials began with Gilberto Valenzuela González in the 1930s and continued until he died in 1955. A Liberal functionary like his father, he served in the Oficina de Estadística, the Registro de Propiedad Inmueble, and the Tesorería de la Casa de Beneficencia. During these years, he pursued his avocation of continuing and organizing his father's and grandfather's personal collections of official and nongovernmental printed ephemera and expanding the collection of secondary works he had inherited. Ninety percent of the Sección Valenzuela shows the marks of his sustained interest in the collection in his careful indices and the beautiful bindings he insisted on for the collection. His bibliophilic pursuits also involved him in the monumental bibliographic endeavors of Chilean scholar José Toribio Medina. One result was that Gilberto Valenzuela González published an initial union list of Guatemalan imprints from independence to 1830.<sup>2</sup> This

1. This information was supplied by the surviving descendant of the Valenzuela family, Doña Carmen Valenzuela de Garay, director of the Biblioteca César Brañas in Guatemala City, interview on 10 Aug. 1993.

2. Gilberto Valenzuela González, *Bibliografía guatemalteca: catálogo de obras, folletos, etc. publicado en Guatemala desde la independencia hasta el año 1850 (1821-1830)* (Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación, 1933).

work was later released in a second edition in 1961 as the third volume of a ten-volume collection commemorating three centuries of publishing in Guatemala. Posthumous republication of Valenzuela González's work in three volumes covering 1821 to 1860 and its continuation by his son Gilberto Valenzuela Reyna to cover the years 1860 to 1960 led to establishment of the collection currently housed in the Biblioteca Nacional de Guatemala. Thus by consulting the ten published volumes and the inventory available in the Biblioteca, scholars can review the collection carefully and reap the fruits of the efforts of five generations of Valenzuela bibliophiles.<sup>3</sup>

### *The Holdings of the Collection*

Housed on the eighth floor of the Biblioteca Nacional, the Sección Valenzuela was donated by the family in the 1960s. Any scholar may consult the collection with the permission of the director of the Biblioteca Nacional. Permission is routinely granted to researchers who send a letter of introduction to the director prior to arrival in Guatemala explaining their project, research interests, and estimated duration of investigation.<sup>4</sup>

The Sección Valenzuela contains approximately sixty-two hundred inventoried items. Among them are individual volumes of broadsides and *hojas sueltas* that contain more than three hundred items, hence the number of pieces included in the collection far exceeds the number listed on the inventory. The collection is organized by a relatively arbitrary numbering system from 1 to 6,257, in which each volume was assigned a reference number. The numbering system exhibits no internal logic except that it is sequential according to each book's position on the shelf (the order on the shelves is random because the books were simply put back on the shelves after the earthquake of 1976 and assigned sequential numbers). Even so, certain series remain relatively complete and chronologically ordered. Access to the ordered as well as the disordered items is facilitated by the fact that the accounting office of the Biblioteca has a copy of the library's inventory of the collection that researchers can consult in that office.

Fully four-fifths of the volumes are secondary works with publication dates ranging from 1650 to 1945. The vast majority of the works, however, date from the mid-nineteenth century onward. Geographical coverage is broad, with works from around the globe. Most are Gua-

3. The ten volumes published by the Valenzuelas offer item-by-item descriptions of the vast majority of the collection. Individual items can usually be located in the collection with the help of the appended lists and the complete inventory available in the Oficina de Contaduría of the Biblioteca.

4. All correspondence should be directed to the director of the Biblioteca Nacional de Guatemala, 5 Avenida 7-26, Zona 1, Ciudad Guatemala, Guatemala, Centro América. The director can also be reached by telephone at 011-502-2-22443 and by fax at 011-502-2-539071. The current director is Licenciado Víctor Castillo López.

temalan imprints, many of which may not be held in any other single collection in the country that is as readily accessible. An important subset of the imprints came from other Central American republics, including many printed discourses, treatises, and debates vital to reconstructing the sociocultural history of the region. The secondary works also include an array of Guatemalan works ranging from major historiographical contributions to government *Memorias* and theses completed at the Universidad de San Carlos to important but little known political tracts. Careful revision and analysis of this collection could provide crucial insights into the richness of public discourse on a variety of topics over time in Guatemala.

The most valuable primary documents are scattered throughout the collection but are grouped together in three classes entitled *hojas sueltas*, *folletos*, and *miscelánea*. These collections are similar in the types of documents they contain, and the differences between them appeared on my cursory inspection to be organizational rather than substantive.

### *Hojas Sueltas*

Probably the richest and easiest to use parts of the collection are the roughly seventy *legajos* (bundles) of printed ephemera called *hojas sueltas*.<sup>5</sup> These documents are the broadsides, “throwaways,” and other official and unofficial imprints. The *legajos* are grouped by year from 1797 to 1945 and contain an estimated ten to fifteen thousand items. I surveyed the first ten *legajos* and found items ranging from Inquisition documents and *ordenanzas* issued by the Consejo de Las Indias to decrees by Guatemala’s last captain general, Gabino Gainza, and Archbishop Ramón Casaus y Torres. The documents for the later period provide a neat yet diverse compilation of voices largely unfamiliar to investigators because they were not preserved in the official sources. These documents thus expand considerably scholars’ ability to assemble a social history of Guatemala in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Due to its sheer size, this vital historical collection has merely been scratched by researchers.

### *Folletos and Miscelánea*

The two subsections of the collection rivaling the *hojas sueltas* in importance are the *folletos* and *miscelánea*. The *folletos* are bound chronologically in eighteen volumes of documents covering the years 1820 to 1880. This group of documents can be reviewed easily because each volume has an index on its frontispiece.<sup>6</sup> The collection is interesting for the range of short published works that treat issues of the day from civil and religious disputes and political rivalries to plans for stimulating agricul-

5. See list 1 in the appendix for folder reference number by year.

6. For reference numbers, see list 2 of the appendix, which shows *folletos* by volume.

ture. Their chronological ordering allows the investigator to obtain an overview of the debates and concerns year by year.

The last major category of printed ephemera contained in the collection is made up of the roughly one hundred volumes of miscelánea. Although more disordered than the other subsections, they probably offer the greatest potential reward. As suggested by the name, this subsection is a conglomeration of a little of everything. Gilberto Valenzuela González's difficulty in distinguishing this material from the folletos and hojas sueltas is evidenced by identical items turning up in two categories. Most of these documents cover the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In the appendix to this research note, the miscelánea have been separated into various series to facilitate systematic research, according to internal evidence, physical similarity, and location.

The first series includes fifty-two numbered volumes covering the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Although several volumes are missing, the surviving ones represent the most complete set of contemporary commentary on the period that I have seen to date. They include treatises on the expulsion of religious orders in 1872, commentary on the internal political struggles within the Liberal party, tracts on agricultural methods, and every conceivable kind of political and social commentary of the day.

The second series of miscelánea consists of thirty-one packets of mixed documentation covering the period from 1841 to 1934, with the most important part dealing with the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century. Their contribution results from the fact that less documentation was generated by the state in this period than either before or after, and thus indirect sources provide a crucial supplement to the skimpy collection on the era in the Archivo General de Centro América. Particularly interesting in this collection are a number of folletos advocating the transformation of Guatemalan agriculture around 1840 and recommending the introduction of coffee as a new crop to drive the economy.

The last two series of miscelánea are smaller and more disorganized, covering a longer period spanning the Bourbon years of the late colonial period into the twentieth century. Series 3 consists entirely of five surviving volumes that parallel the contents of the first two series. The early imprints collected in the first volumes are a treasure trove of late colonial and early republican treatises and discourses. The fourth and last series is by far the most mixed of the miscelánea. Covering a period of almost two centuries (1747–1928), this series represents the remnants of several collections that exist only in fragmentary form today. Colonial imprints and decrees dating from World War I are thrown together in rich packets that require patience and systematic work to explore.

The Valenzuela collection is only one example of the kinds of collections open to the public in Guatemala that are rarely used and even

more rarely mined thoroughly for their riches. It is to be hoped that this brief description will enable more researchers to use the collection to expand scholarly understanding of the past. If so, Gilberto Valenzuela González's decades of work building the collection will bear fruit in new works on Guatemala's historical and contemporary experience.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

VALENZUELA GONZALEZ, GILBERTO

- 1933 *Bibliografía guatemalteca: catálogo de obras, folletos, etc. publicado en Guatemala desde la independencia hasta el año 1850 (1821-1830)*. Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación.
- 1961a *Bibliografía guatemalteca: catálogo general de libros, folletos, periódicos, revistas, etc., 1821-1830*. Volume 2. Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública.
- 1961b *Bibliografía guatemalteca: catálogo general de libros, folletos, periódicos, revistas, etc., 1831-1840*. Volume 4. Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública.
- 1961c *Bibliografía guatemalteca: catálogo general de libros, folletos, periódicos, revistas, etc., 1841-1860*. Volume 5. Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública.

VALENZUELA REYNA, GILBERTO

- 1961a *Bibliografía guatemalteca: catálogo general de libros, folletos, periódicos, revistas, etc., 1861-1900*. Volume 1. Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública.
- 1961b *Bibliografía guatemalteca, catálogo general de libros, folletos, periódicos, revistas, etc., 1901-1930*. Volume 7. Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública.
- 1961c *Bibliografía guatemalteca: catálogo general de libros, folletos, periódicos, revistas, etc., 1931-1940*. Volume 8. Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública.
- 1961d *Bibliografía guatemalteca: catálogo general de libros, folletos, periódicos, revistas, etc., 1941-1950*. Volume 9. Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública.
- 1961e *Bibliografía guatemalteca: catálogo general de libros, folletos, periódicos, revistas, etc., 1951-1960*. Volume 10. Guatemala City: Ministerio de Educación Pública.

APPENDIX FINDING GUIDE TO PRINTED EPHEMERA IN THE SECCION VALENZUELA

List 1 Hojas Sueltas, 1813-1945

Reference Number	Year	Reference Number	Year
1945	1820	1960	1840
1946	1821-1823	1961	1841
1947	1824	1962	1842
1948	1825	1963	1843
1949	1826	1964	1844
1950	1827	1965	1845
1951	1828-1829	1966	1846-1847
1952	1829	1967	1848
1953	1830	1968	1849
1954	1831	1969	1850
1955	1832-1833	1970	1851
1956	1834-1836	1971	1852-1855
1957	1837	1972	1855-1856
1958	1838	1973	1856
1959	1839	1974	1857-1859

## APPENDIX (continued)

*List 1 Hojas Sueltas, 1813–1945 (continued)*

<i>Reference Number</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Reference Number</i>	<i>Year</i>
1975	1860–1862	1996	1906
1976	1863–1864	1997	1907
1977	1865–1867	1998	1908
1978	1868–1870	1999	1909
1979	1871	2000	1910
1980	1876–1877	2001	1911
1981	1877–1878	2002	1919
1982	1879–1880	2003	1920
1983	1881–1884	2004	1921
1984	1885	2005	1922–1925
1985	1886–1888	2006	1927–1929
1986	1889–1890	2007	1930–1931
1987	1891	2008	1932–1934
1988	1894–1896	2009	1935–1937
1989	1897	2010	1938–1943
1990	1898	2011	1945
1991	1901	2196a	1813–1921
1992	1902	2197	1918
1993	1903	2198	1822, 1813, 1814, 1918–1921
1994	1904		
1995	1905		

*List 2 Reference Numbers for Folleto Volumes, Bound by Year, 1823–1880*

<i>Reference Number</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Reference Number</i>	<i>Year</i>
1927	1823	1936	1840
1928	1824	1937	1853–1855
1929	1825	1938	1859–1860
1930	1826	1939	1861–1862
1931	1827–1828	1940	1863
1932	1829	1941	1866–1870
1933	1830	1942	1879
1934	1834	1943	1879
1935	1835–1837	1944	1880

APPENDIX (continued)

*List 3 Miscelánea, Series 1: Bound Volumes Numbered 1 to 52, 1845–1900 (Volumes 46–50 missing), Each Volume with an Index*

<i>Reference Number</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Contents</i>
2104	1877–1887	27 items (Volume 1)
2105	1871–1882	18 items (Volume 2)
2106	1880–1883	11 items (Volume 3)
2107	1872–1887	30 items (Volume 4)
2108	1865–1886	23 items (Volume 5)
2109	1880–1886	22 items (Volume 6)
2110	1887	12 items (Volume 7)
2111	1878–1886	15 items (Volume 8)
2112	1878–1886	31 items (Volume 9)
2113	1879–1888	22 items (Volume 10)
2114	1872–1888	27 items (Volume 11)
2115	1879–1888	33 items (Volume 12)
2116	1883–1891	22 items (Volume 13)
2117	1897–1898	15 items (Volume 14)
2118	1897–1898	15 items (Volume 15)
2119	1888–1898	23 items (Volume 16)
2120	1845–1898	19 items (Volume 17)
2121	1894–1897	15 items (Volume 18)
2122	1896	16 items (Volume 19)
2123	1858–1878	26 items (Volume 20)
2124	1877–1884	19 items (Volume 21)
2125	1889–1891	33 items (Volume 22)
2126	1889–1891	17 items (Volume 23)
2127	1890–1891	21 items (Volume 24)
2128	1837–1887	20 items (Volume 25)
2129	1867–1873	12 items (Volume 26)
2130	1876	28 items (Volume 27)
2131	1879–1899	21 items (Volume 28)
2132	1877–1893	15 items (Volume 29)
2133	1881–1900	14 items (Volume 30)
2134	1891–1900	22 items (Volume 31)
2135	1893–1896	13 items (Volume 32)
2136	1892–1898	13 items (Volume 33)
2137	1858–1899	14 items (Volume 34)
2138	1857–1869	31 items (Volume 35)
2139	1899	32 items (Volume 36)
2140	1896–1899	25 items (Volume 37)
2141	1897–1899	33 items (Volume 38)
2142	1892–1896	34 items (Volume 39)
2143	1888–1898	27 items (Volume 40)



## APPENDIX (continued)

*List 3 Miscelánea, Series 1: (continued)*

<i>Reference Number</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Contents</i>
2144	1897–1899	33 items (Volume 41)
2145	1894–1896	18 items (Volume 42)
2146	1892–1893	24 items (Volume 43)
2147	1895–1896	28 items (Volume 44)
2148	1893–1898	without numbers (Volume 45)
2149	1892–1900	8 items (Volume 51)
2150	1854–1868	without numbers (Volume 52)

*List 4 Miscelánea Series 2: Packets of Folletos Ordered Chronologically, 1841–1934, Each Packet with an Index*

<i>Reference Number</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Contents</i>	<i>Reference Number</i>	<i>Year</i>
2243	1776–1793	devocionarios	2260	1889
2244	1805–1826	devocionarios	2261	1890
2245	1841		2262	1891
2246	1842		2263	1892
2247	1843		2264	1894
2248	1843–1866	novenas	2265	1894
2249	1844–1845		2266	1895
2250	1847		2267	1896
2251	1848		2268	1896
2252	1849		2269	1897
2253	1850		2270	1899
2254	1851–1852		2271	1900
2255	1856–1858		2272	1900
2256	1871–1875		2273	1908
2257	1882		2274	1908
2258	1885		2275	1911
2259	1888		2276	1934

APPENDIX (continued)

*List 5 Miscelánea Series 3: Bound Volumes Numbered 1 to 7, 1765–1871 (Volumes 4 for 1860–1865 and 6 for 1870 Missing), Each Volume with an Index*

---

<i>Reference Number</i>	<i>Contents</i>	<i>Year</i>
2155	Vol. 1	(1765–1842)
2156	Vol. 2	(1844–1849)
2151	Vol. 3	(1850–1859)
2161	Vol. 5	(1866–1869)
2162	Vol. 7	(1870–1871)

*List 6 Miscelánea Series 4: Bound Volumes of Various Incomplete Series (1773–1934), Most Volumes with an Index*

---

<i>Reference Number</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Contents</i>
916	1773–1821	documentos históricos
2152	1909–1913	6 items
2154	1928	8 items
2160	1923	79 items
2163	1871–1873	without number (Volume 6) hojas sueltas
2164	1874–1876	12 items (Volume 7)
2165	1892–1893	31 items (Volume 15)
2166	1899	18 items (Volume 19)
2196	1877–1878	16 folletos
2194	1782–1821	impresos de Guatemala
2242	1747–1927	37 folletos
4450	1885	folletos del año