

Santos Benavides

The following story, written by, Ewell L. Loudermilk was sent to me by a family member. I wish to express my appreciation.

Santos Benavides (Photo at right) was a Confederate Colonel during the American Civil War and was the highest-ranking Tejano soldier in the Confederate military. Benavides was born in November of 1823 to Jose Jesus and Margarita (Ramon) Benavides in Laredo, Texas. He was the Great-Great-Grandson of Tomas Sanchez de la Barrera y Garza, the founder of the city of Laredo. In the civil strife that marked the life of Texas border towns of the 1830's and 40's Benavides sided with the Mexican "Federalists," who desired a Mexican state and local autonomy against the "Centralists" who wanted all power in Mexico to reside in the capital at Mexico City. He joined with and cooperated with the Texas forces under Mirabeau B. Lamar who occupied Laredo during the Mexican-American War (1846–1848). At this time, he was also an active military leader, leading successful expeditions against the Lipan Apache and other tribes that were harassing the outlying ranches near Laredo. During these campaigns he earned a reputation as a strong military leader and courageous soldier. Benavides was also a successful merchant and rancher and in 1856 at the age of 33 he was elected mayor of Laredo and three years later in 1859, shortly before the outbreak of the War Between the States he was elected Chief Justice of Webb County.



Benavides opposed the annexation of the Laredo area by the United States, as called for by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo after the Mexican-American War, because he feared it would compromise the independent character of northern Mexico. So, it isn't surprising that when Texas seceded from the Union, Benavides and his brothers supported the Confederacy, whose States Rights principles were so close to their own beliefs of regional autonomy. Shortly after Texas seceded from the Union on February 1st, 1861, Benavides was commissioned a Captain in the Confederate army and given command of the Texas 33rd Cavalry stationed in Laredo. Two of Santos' brothers, Cristobal and Refugio, were also commissioned as officers in the Confederacy and served under him in the 33rd throughout the war. On May, 22nd of that year Santos successfully repelled an attack into Texas from Northern Mexico by the Union sympathizer Juan Cortina (a.k.a. Red River Baron) at the Battle of Carrizo about 50 miles south of Laredo, near modern day Lake Falcon and Zapata, Texas. Cortina's (Photo at left) troops suffered 18 casualties and never again raided in numbers across the border. In November of 1863 Benavides was promoted to Colonel in the Confederate States Army and authorized to increase the number of the Texas 33rd Cavalry to that of a full regiment. By now this unit was known as "Benavides' Regiment".

During the War Between the States, Laredo was most important to the South as a port. Cotton could be brought by wagon from all over Texas to Laredo, loaded on boats and shipped down the Rio Grande to Brownsville/Los Brazos de Santiago (modern day Matamoras, Mexico, immediately across the Texas border from Brownsville). There the cotton could be transferred to ships bearing the neutral flag of Mexico and sent past the Union blockade of Texas ports to Europe to raise money for the cash strapped Confederacy. A battle ensued on March, 19th, 1864 when Union Colonel Edmund J. Davis (Photo at right) ordered Major Alfred Holt and 200 troopers of the Texas 1st (Union) Cavalry to attack Laredo. Their mission was to destroy five thousand bales of cotton stacked at the San Agustin Plaza in Laredo. Colonel Benavides had only 42 soldiers at his disposal for this battle but on three separate occasions that day the 200 Union Cavalry troopers charged those 42 patriots of “Benavides’ Regiment” at Zacate Creek just north of the Rio Grande on the south side of Laredo. Three times the brave men defending their city repulsed the attack. This defeat forced the Union troops to withdraw all the way to Brownsville. Benavides and his men had secured this vital cotton shipment and the commercial route to the Gulf of Mexico for the Confederacy.

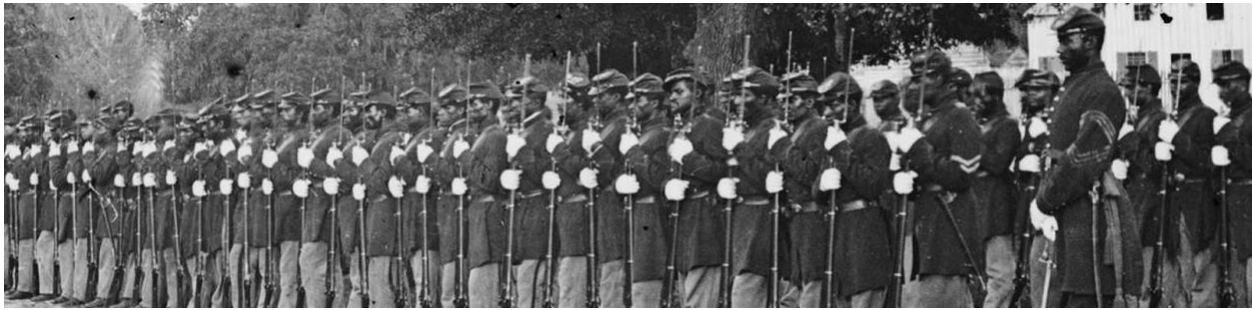


On May 13th, 1865 Benavides and his men of the 33rd Texas Cavalry would fight in one last engagement for the Confederacy at the Battle of Palmito Ranch just east of Brownsville on the banks of the Rio Grande. Word had not yet reached south Texas that General Robert E. Lee had surrendered on April, 9th or that President Jefferson Davis had been captured and imprisoned just a couple of days before on May, 10th. As far as the brave soldiers of “Benavides’ Regiment” knew the War Between the States was still going on and so they would participate whole heartedly in this engagement, considered the last battle of the horrific war. The Battle of Palmito Ranch is rich with anecdote and legend. There was no real reason for the battle and rumors abound as to why the Union forces broke the gentlemen’s truce that had existed there at the tip of Texas throughout most of the war. But break it they did, and they left their fortifications and marched on Brownsville. There are also rumors that French Foreign Legion troops and artillery aided the Confederates and that Mexican Royalist troops also participated.



Those rumors aside, this much we know for fact about the battle. The Union forces under Lieutenant Colonel David Branson consisted of about 500 troops from the 2nd Texas Dismounted (Union) Cavalry, the 34th Indiana Veteran Volunteer Infantry and the 62nd Regiment U.S. Colored Troops (U.S.C.T.) (Photo below). They faced approximately 300 Confederates under Colonel John “Rip” Ford (Photo at left) of the 2nd Texas (Confederate) Cavalry along with elements of Colonels’ Anderson, Benavides and Giddings Cavalry Regiments. The Union troops advance was stopped by the Confederates with the Union forces suffering the loss of 115 of their 500 men, with 105 of these being prisoners taken by the Confederates.

The South lost only 3 or 4 men slightly wounded. Colonel Benavides and his men were in the center of the line that stopped this last Union advance of the war.



U.S. Colored Troops (U.S.C.T.)

Santos Benavides went on to serve three terms in the Texas State legislature from 1879 to 1885, ably representing the wishes of the people of Laredo and Webb County. He was also appointed as a delegate to the United States during the reciprocity controversy of 1880. He was elected as one of the Texas delegates to the World Cotton Exposition of 1884. There is a historical marker (Photo below), placed in 1995 by the Texas Historical Commission in the Catholic cemetery near where Santos Benavides is buried on Saunders Street in Laredo that honors this great Texan's life and achievements. He died in his home on November 9th, 1891 leaving his family, his beloved Laredo and the state of Texas "Una Herencia de Honor" (A Heritage of Honor).



Ewell L. Loudermilk has been active in Confederate Heritage groups for 20 years and is an avid reenactor with the 7th Texas Confederate Infantry. He is a founder and currently Adjutant of the "Major John Loudermilk" Chapter 264 of the MOS&B.