

## Colonel Santos Benavides— Confederate Freedom Fighter



Santos Benavides of Laredo, Texas, was the most exceptional of the many Hispanic-Americans who fought for the Confederate States of America (CSA). Benavides commanded the 33<sup>rd</sup> Texas Cavalry, which came to be known as Benavides Regiment. Because of the reputation he earned, as military leader and fighter, he was authorized to raise his own regiment of Partisan Rangers and promoted to the rank of colonel.

Benavides was one about 13,000 Hispanic Americans civilians who fought for the (CSA), after the United States invaded the new organized Confederacy, in 1861. He eventually became the highest-ranking Confederate officer of Mexican-American origin.

Benavides was born in Laredo, Texas, on November 1, 1823, and was a great-great-grandson of Tomas Sanchez de la Barrera y Garza who founded Laredo. As a political and military leader in Laredo his efforts brought the isolated region closer to Texas politics, even though he protected local independence. He was elected Laredo's mayor in 1856 and the chief justice of Webb County, Texas, in 1859. He won further distinction, leading several campaigns against Lipan Apaches and other Indians.

Under both Mexican and U.S. rule, he favored federalism and a large amount of local governmental control and opposed a large centralized government that dictated what states and local authorities could do. When Texas seceded from the U.S., Benavides and his brothers supported the Confederacy, whose state's rights principles were close to theirs.

He was commissioned a captain in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Texas Cavalry and assigned to the Rio Grande Military District, where he quickly won accolades as a fighter. His men, led by him, drove Juan Cortina back into Mexico, in the battle of Carrizo, on May 22, 1861, and quelled local revolts against Confederate authority. In November 1863, Benavides was promoted to colonel and authorized to raise his own regiment of Partisan Rangers. His most noteworthy military victory was the defense of Laredo, on March 19, 1864, with 42 troopers against 200 U.S. soldiers. (The commander of the U.S. soldiers had once offered Benavides a generalship in the U.S. army.)

Benavides's most significant contribution to the CSA's survival probably happened, in 1864, when he arranged safe passage for Texas cotton from the Rio Grande area to Matamoros, Mexico, while U.S. soldiers occupied Brownsville, Texas.

Nearly every Hispanic (and Indian) that took part in Lincoln's War fought for the Confederacy. These men served with the same bravery, dedication, and honor, as did their neighbors.

Lincoln's War ended in 1865 with the former Confederacy in ruins. The U.S. had been unable to defeat Confederate armies, so it had destroyed the civil society, which supported the armies. This included burning homes, farms, crops, and everything else its armies did not steal. (Lincoln's War is also known, in the South, as the War for Southern Independence, and, in the North, as the *Civil War* or War Between the States.)

After the war, U.S. armies occupied the former Confederate states and installed governments ruled by Northerners and former slaves. Through legislation, most of what Southerners had left of wealth and property was taken through taxation. School history books and books published in the northern U.S. call this period "Reconstruction."

(Before Lincoln's War, the South paid 74% of all taxes collected by the U.S. government. Lincoln began the war to prevent losing those taxes. In doing so, he totally disregarded the states' rights to withdraw from the U.S. union they had voluntarily, and with reservations for their sovereignty, entered in 1787 [upon ratifying the U.S. Constitution].)

During the U.S. military occupation, Benavides continued his mercantile and ranching activities with his brother, Cristobal Benavides, and remained active in politics. After it, he served three times in the Texas legislature, from 1879 to 1884, and twice as an alderman, in Laredo. He was instrumental in forming the Guarache, or Sandals party, in southern Texas, to represent average citizens. The Guaraches were a faction within the Democratic Party of Texas that opposed a faction called the Botas, or Boots, which represented wealthy citizens. His leadership built support for the Democratic Party amongst Hispanics and contributed to the eclipse of the Republican Party in the region.

Benavides's friendship with the followers of Benito Juárez and his kinship ties to Manuel Gonzales prompted Porfirio Díaz to select him as an envoy to the United States during the reciprocity controversy in 1880. In recognition of his political achievement, he was appointed Texas delegate to the World Cotton Exposition in 1884. Benavides died at his home in Laredo on November 9, 1891.



Suggested reading (available at public libraries and in book stores):

- **Forced into Glory: Abraham Lincoln's White Dream**, by Lerone Bennett Jr.
- **The Real Lincoln: A New Look at Abraham Lincoln, His Agenda, and an Unnecessary War**, by Thomas J. DiLorenzo
- **When in the Course of Human Events: Arguing the Case for Southern Secession**, by Charles Adams

