

## **Laredo Under Seven Flags**

*A short history of Laredo compiled for the Laredo Historical Society, Mary H. Cook, 1970*

We all know the story of the six flags that have flown over Texas--Spanish, French, Mexican, Republic of Texas, Confederate, and the United States of America. The story of the seventh flag, which flew over Laredo, is not so well known. It is the flag of the short-lived Republic of the Rio Grande, of which Laredo was the capital. This organization lasted about a year and a half.

When Christopher Columbus reached the shores of the American Continents in the late years of the 15th century, he claimed that vast territory for the Spanish crown. Later, in the 16th century, a group of Frenchmen, searching for the mouth of the Mississippi, landed on what is now the Texas Gulf Coast, and planted the flag of France. The French, however, never had a strong hold in this area, and were driven out by Spaniards and hostile Indians.

In 1746, Don Jose Escandon, a high-ranking officer of the Royal Spanish Army of Mexico, was given the title of "Conde de La Sierra Gorda and Governor of the Province of Nuevo Santander" by the King of Spain. Don Jose de Escandon was an efficient colonizer and intrepid leader, who directed the exploration and settlement of the area between Tampico, Mexico, and the San Antonio River in Texas. It was during this period that the Villa San Agustin de Laredo was founded and settled by Don Tomas Sanches, on May 15, 1755. Don Tomas had been given permission by Don Jose de Escandon to settle on the north bank of the Rio Grande River. San Augustin Plaza is the original site of the city of Laredo. Clustered around the plaza and along the nearby streets are historic San Augustine Church and many homes still occupied by descendants of the early Spanish settlers, who built them over a century ago. The plaza has been witness to momentous occasions. During her early days, Laredo was frequently harassed by hostile Indians. After one such attack, the Indians celebrated with a war dance on the plaza. Across this plaza was also seen the frequent comings and goings of Royal Spanish troops, and later Mexican soldiers. In 1885, the plaza was the scene of a post-election battle between rival political groups, Las Botas and Los Guaraches.

Mexico gained her independence from Spain in 1821, and the Mexican flag flew over Laredo. During this period, Mexico allowed non-Mexican colonists to settle in Texas. Thousands of families from the United States and from Europe came to make their homes in Texas. In 1822, one of the great colonizers of Texas, Stephen F. Austin, visited in Laredo on his way to Mexico City, where he obtained permission to bring settlers into Texas.

In 1836, Texas gained her independence from Mexico, and became the Republic of Texas. In theory, because of its location on the north bank of the Rio Grande, Laredo became part of the Republic of Texas. Mexico, however, claimed that the border between Mexico and Texas was located on the Nueces River, 75 miles further north. Effectively,

the area continued under Mexican control until 1848, when the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo settled the boundary along the course of the Rio Grande.

During the unsettled years after the Texas revolution, southwest Texas became the scene of hostilities and attacks by lawless elements -- Indians, smugglers, brigands and fortune seekers. In response to the need for authority and order in the area, as well as resentment against the despotic rule of General Santa Ana, leaders from both sides of the Rio Grande met and formed the Republic of the Rio Grande, and named Laredo as its capital. Although the Republic of the Rio Grande lasted only from early 1839 until the late summer of 1840, its capital building still stands. Facing north across San Augustin Plaza, the old capital building, now a museum, is a lasting memorial to the brave men who dreamed and fought for an independence, which was not to be.

In the thirty years from 1836 to 1866, Texas was to experience great changes. Laredo, of course, felt these changes too -- Independence from Mexico, formation of the Republic of the Rio Grande, the admission of Texas as the 28th state in the Union of the United States of America, the war between the states when Texas entered the Confederacy, and the re-entry of Texas into the Union of the United States.

With the passing of the years, Laredo has known great growth and development, but although Laredo is now a bustling city, she still retains a distinctive charm and warmth -- a blend of a unique heritage with the new and modern.

There is an old saying here in Laredo -- "Once you have tasted the waters of the Rio Grande, your steps will bring you back." We hope you feel this urge and will return. Laredo welcomes you!

#### Bibliography

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