



Ellis Benson headstones and historical marker in Washington Cemetery, 2911 Washington Ave., Houston, Texas 77077

An Application for an Official Texas Historical Marker for

Ellis Benson, Texas Revolutionary War Veteran (1813 – 1896)

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and presented to the Harris County Historical Commission

CONTEXT

Anglo settlement of the remote region of Mexico that would one day become Texas began in 1821 when Moses Austin was granted permission to establish a colony and bring settlers from the United States. His son Stephen F. Austin successfully carried out his father's plan, other settlers quickly followed, and Texas began looking more like a colony of the United States than a part of Mexico.

When Santa Anna became President of Mexico, he was determined to reestablish military control over Texas. Most Texian settlers opposed Santa Anna's plan and wanted more control as a separate state in Mexico. When the Mexican Army crossed the Rio Grande with the intention of establishing military posts that had been previously abandoned, hostilities soon erupted. Unrest between Mexico and the Texians began when Mexico outlawed immigration from the United States in 1830. The first hostility occurred in Gonzales in October of 1835. Independence was won at San Jacinto on 21 April 1836. Ellis Benson, one of the Americans who responded to calls to come to Texas, arrived in early 1836, just in time for the Revolution.

Ellis Benson's name appears on the bronze plaque inside the San Jacinto monument; however, he was overlooked during the 1936 Centennial project to honor Texian veterans with official state monuments at their gravesites. It is now time, seventy years later, to provide a remedy for that oversight.

OVERVIEW

Ellis Benson was born 8 February 1813 in Vermont.¹ Prior to immigration to Texas, Benson served in the US Army.² He fought in the Black Hawk War against the Sac and Fox Indians in Illinois between 1831 and 1832.³

In November 1835, Captain Amasa Turner was instructed by the General Council of the Provisional government to recruit as many men as possible for the Texas Army. Benson was recruited by Captain Amasa Turner in New Orleans. He arrived in Texas on 28 January 1836 aboard the schooner *Pennsylvania*, landing at Velasco, Texas. He was among 100 men recruited by Turner. At Velasco, these men were organized into two companies, one under the command of Captain Turner as regular army, and the other under the command of Captain John Hart as permanent volunteers.⁴

On 30 January 1836, Benson accepted a bounty of \$24.00 and joined the army for two years or the duration of the war, joining Captain John Hart's company of volunteers, later commanded by Lieutenant Richard Roman.⁵ However, it appears that Benson only served in this company for about two weeks, as several documents in his pension files show him in Captain Turner's company of regulars from February 1836 to October 1837.^{6,7} In an interview given to Mr. A. A. McBryde in June 1893, Ellis Benson relates the events of his service. Benson joined Captain Turner's company, and received orders to march to San Antonio. They boarded the schooner *Tamaulipas* to sail to Corpus Christi and then to march to San Antonio to join the other Texian forces. This was before the fall of the Alamo. This trip was delayed when the ship struck a sand bar and was shipwrecked. After the fall of the Alamo, the company was ordered to join the main army under General Sam Houston at Beason's Ferry on the Colorado, site of the present town of Columbus, Texas. Benson traveled with the main army on the retreat from the Colorado to San Felipe de Austin and then to Groce's plantation. While at Groce's plantation, the Texian Army received as a gift of from the city of Cincinnati, two artillery pieces, called the Twin Sisters. On April 13th, the army began its march to Harrisburg where the Mexicans were assembling. They marched from Groce's plantation to Donoho's place and then to Mathew Burnet's place on Big Cypress. The march continued to the head of Little White Oak Bayou on the 16th of April and on to Harrisburg on the 18th. They crossed to the south side of Buffalo Bayou and to a grove on the edge of the prairie overlooking the spot that was to become the battleground.⁸

Benson served in the Texian Army from 17 February 1836 to 9 October 1837, in Captain Amasa Turner's Company, Colonel Henry Millard's Regiment of Regulars.⁹ During the Battle of San Jacinto on 21 April 1836, he served in the artillery corps under Captain Isaac N. Moreland.¹⁰ Benson cast the leaden shot used in the "Twin Sisters," and handled one of them during the battle.¹¹ Benson gave an affidavit on 7 December 1870 in support of the pension application of L. L. Wheeler, in which he states that they both fought on the battleground at San Jacinto.¹² Being a soldier in the Texian Army was not a high paying job. For service provided from February 1836 to August 1837, Benson filed a Public Debt Claim for \$146.67 for pay. The claim was approved on 17 August 1853.¹³ Following the Battle of San Jacinto, Benson's company was assigned guard duty at the garrison in Galveston where the prisoners of the battle were being held.¹⁴ In December 1836, he was assigned garrison duty at Anahuac in Captain John Smith's Company A of the First Regiment, Regular Infantry.

Following the Texas Revolution, unrest continued between Mexico and the new Republic of Texas. From June to December 1839, Benson served under Captain Reuben Ross. This company was organized to patrol between San Antonio and the Rio Grande.¹⁵ Mexico struggled with civil war, sometimes known as the Federalist Wars. The Texian troops, sometimes referred to as the Gonzales Company or Frontier Guards, joined forces with the Mexican Federalists along the Rio Grande. They engaged the Mexican Centralist troops in the Battle of Alcantra, near Mier, Mexico on the 3rd and 4th of October 1839.¹⁶ According to an affidavit of F. F. Martin, Benson was wounded in the battle.¹⁷

Benson filed for a pension with the State of Texas on 23 September 1870.¹⁸ In his pension application, he claimed service in Captain A. Turner's Company, Colonel Millard's 1st Regiment (of Regulars). Samuel Paschal and A. Turner both gave affidavits that Ellis Benson was a soldier in the Army of Texas in 1836 and until late in 1837. A pension was granted on 7 October 1870 entitling Benson to \$250.00 annually for his natural life.

Benson received several land grants because he arrived in Texas before independence and for service in the Texas military. On 8 January 1838, he received one third of a league of land as a single man who arrived before 2 March 1836. Affidavits of John F. Lind claim he knew Ellis Benson when he arrived in the Country in January 1836 and Samuel Paschal says that he came on the same vessel with Benson and he had served in the Army with him previous to the Declaration of Independence.¹⁹ This right was transferred to H. Trott and filed in Harris County

on 29 April 1842.²⁰ On 28 December 1838, the Republic of Texas awarded Benson a land grant (file number 723) of 640 acres for service in the Texas Revolution, which he later sold to George H. Bringham for \$150.00 on 18 July 1839.²¹

After his military service, Ellis Benson returned to Harris County and settled in Houston, Texas. About 25 November 1848, he was married to Mrs. Elizabeth Ritchie at Spring Creek, Harris County, Texas by Stephen Richardson, JP.²² Elizabeth was born 24 June 1819 in Hesse-Darmstadt, Germany. She married Mr. Ritchie in Germany and had one daughter, Mary, born about 1844 in Hesse-Kassel, Germany.²³ Ellis and Elizabeth had one daughter, Elizabeth Benson, born about 1857 in Texas, probably in Harris County.²⁴ Ellis Benson engaged in the carpentry trade following his military service.²⁵ He also held several political positions in Harris County. On 2 August 1858, he was elected constable of Harris County.²⁶ Benson was elected twice to the position of County Coroner. The first election was held 6 August 1860²⁷ and the second was on 4 August 1862.²⁸

During the War Between the States, Benson served in the Army for a final time. He enlisted on 9 April 1863 at Houston as a private in Co. K, 20th Texas Infantry (Elmore's Regiment), a unit largely comprised of older men. His skills as a carpenter were soon put to good use. In June 1863, he was detailed to work on the Texas and New Orleans railroad bridge in Liberty. While there he became ill, and was sent home to recuperate. When well enough to work, he was exchanged for a more able-bodied man to work on the bridge, and Benson was transferred to the railroad repair shops in Houston, where he remained from November 1863 until the end of the war. A letter in his Compiled Service Record notes, "he is rather advanced in years & in a very feeble state of health, & should he return to his Co, would not be able to stand the Exposure of Camp life." Another letter refers to his multiple erroneous arrests for desertion by an overzealous officer who was seemingly unaware that Benson had been detailed to the railroad shops and was working as directed. The writer goes on to express his frustration with having his good mechanics unjustly arrested and harassed, making it hard to get the work done.

Benson was paroled at Houston on 22 June 1865, signing the parole as "Ellis Benson, Private, Co. K, 20th Tex. Infantry."²⁹

Ellis and Elizabeth resided south of Liberty Road in Houston. In 1860, Ellis and Elizabeth were living in the 2nd Ward of Houston.³⁰ The value of his real estate was \$1,000.

They moved to 26 Bremond about 1882 which was later re-addressed as 812 Bremond where they remained for the balance of their lives.³¹

Financial hardship fell on Ellis Benson in his later years. He received a \$250.00 annual pension, granted on 7 October 1870. He applied for pensions as new pension laws were enacted but they appear to replace previous pensions. Benson applied for a pension under the act of 28 July 1876 on 4 September 1876, claiming that his occupation was a carpenter, but because of failing eyesight, he was no longer able to pursue his occupation.³² This pension was granted. Benson is also listed on the 1880 census as being blind and not working for the last 12 months.³³ He received a similar pension for service to the Republic under the pension act passed 25 March 1885.³⁴ On 3 June 1887, Henry E. McCulloch published an open letter in the *Galveston Daily News* to the citizens of Texas calling attention to the financial situation of Ellis Benson, a veteran of the Battle of San Jacinto, and his wife, and requesting donations be sent to Colonel W. D. Cleveland of Houston for their benefit. This letter states that Benson was receiving a pension of \$37.50 every quarter.³⁵

Benson received a Texas Donation Land Grant of 640 acres from the state of Texas on 16 August 1879 for service in the Texas Revolution.³⁶ Ellis certified that he did not own any real estate over the value of five hundred dollars, that he has not sold any property within the last twelve months, and that he is indigent and unable to support himself. The act was later amended to increase the amount of eligible land and Benson received a second Donation Land Grant for an additional 640 acres on 25 July 1881 for service in the Battle of San Jacinto.³⁷

His wife, Elizabeth, died 1 February 1894 at 812 Bremond in Houston, Texas. She was buried at Washington Cemetery, Houston, Texas, on the east half of lot B-113.³⁸ Her obituary in the *Galveston Daily News* says that Ellis Benson was the last surviving San Jacinto veteran in Harris County.³⁹

Ellis Benson died 26 October 1896 at 812 Bremond in Houston, Texas. He was buried at Washington Cemetery on lot B-113, next to his wife Elizabeth.⁴⁰

SIGNIFICANCE

Ellis Benson contributed – by settlement, militarily, occupationally, and politically – to the development of three nations. He lived under four of the six flags of Texas, and was a veteran of three wars.

Born in Vermont in 1813, Ellis Benson fought in the American Indian wars in Illinois in 1831-32. He was recruited in New Orleans in 1835 by Captain Amasa Turner for service in Texas, and arrived at Velasco, Texas on 28 January 1836 aboard the schooner *Pennsylvania*. For the next 20 months, he served under Captain Turner in Company B, First Regiment of Regular Infantry, Colonel Henry Millard commanding. The unit marched toward San Antonio, but was reassigned at Beason's Ferry (present day Columbus) to General Sam Houston's forces on the eastward march. While at Groce's plantation, the Texian Army received the cannons known as the "Twin Sisters." Benson continued with the forces to Donoho's place, Burnet's place, the Little White Oak Bayou, Harrisburg, and on to the plains of San Jacinto. During the Battle of San Jacinto on 21 April 1836, Benson served in the artillery corps under Captain Isaac Moreland and handled one of the "Twin Sisters." Benson also cast some of the leaden shot used in the "Twin Sisters."

After the battle Benson served with his company on guard duty at the prisoners' garrison in Galveston. His garrison duty continued in December 1836 at Anahuac in Captain John Smith's Company A of the First Regiment, Regular Infantry. In 1839, Benson served under Captain Reuben Ross, whose company patrolled between San Antonio and the Rio Grande. Mexico struggled with civil war, sometimes known as the Federalist Wars. Benson joined other Texian troops who joined forces with the Mexican Federalists along the Rio Grande. He participated in and was wounded at the Battle of Alcantra in October 1839.

Later, Ellis Benson settled in Houston, and became a carpenter. In 1848, he married Mrs. Elizabeth Ritchie, a native of Germany, and they had one daughter, Elizabeth Benson. He was elected in 1858 as Harris County Constable and in 1860 and 1862 as Harris County Coroner.

During the War Between the States, Benson served from April 1863 until June 1865 as a private in Company K, 20th Texas Infantry, a unit largely comprised of older men. His skills as a carpenter were put to good use maintaining railroad equipment vital to the war effort.

His wife, Elizabeth, died 1 February 1894 and Benson followed on 26 October 1896. They were buried at Washington Cemetery, then known as the German Society Cemetery.

DOCUMENTATION

¹ Headstone inscription for Ellis Benson, Washington Cemetery, Houston, Texas, east half, lot B-113. The headstone is chipped and the year is no longer legible. Based on the census of 1860, the census of 1880, and his death certificate, his year of birth would be 1812. The census record of 1870 would calculate a birth date of 1809. The headstone also says he was a veteran in three wars; Black Hawk War, 183?² (stone is chipped): Battle of San Jacinto, 1836; and the Civil War, 1861. A search of the database of men who fought in the Black Hawk War on the Illinois State Archives website did not locate a service record for Ellis Benson.

This headstone was recorded by Lorine Brinley in a typescript that is now at Clayton Library, titled "Washington Cemetery, 2911 Washington Avenue, Houston Texas, (Formerly called The German Association Cemetery). Recorded in 1957-1958." Presumably the marker was legible at that time. She writes, "BENSON, Ellis, B. 8 Feb. 1813, a native of Vermont, d. 26 Oct. 1896. A veteran of Black Hawk-1832, San Jacinto-1836, Confederate-1861. [BENSON,] Mrs. E. b. 14 June 1819, a native of Germany, d. 1 Feb. 1894."

Obit in the Galveston Daily News, Thursday, October 29, 1896, page 3, column 1, states: "Death of Veteran Benson. The burial of old man Ellis Benson, laid beneath the sod yesterday the last of the older set of Texas veterans in this county. He died at his home on Bremond Street, No. 810 [sic], in the Fifth ward, in the 84th year of his age, and was buried in the German cemetery on Washington Street."

² "Interview with Ellis Benson by A. A. McBryde," 10 June 1893, Louis Wiltz Kemp Papers, 1819-1956, original in Texas State Library and Archives, recorded in the Kemp papers, Center for American History, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas

³ Headstone inscription for Ellis Benson.

⁴ "Colonel Amasa Turner," Louis Wiltz Kemp Papers, 1819-1956, original in Texas State Library and Archives, recorded in the Kemp papers, Center for American History, The University of Texas, Austin, Texas.

⁵ Ron Tyler, ed., The New Handbook of Texas, (Austin, Texas: Texas State Historical Association and The University of Texas, 1996), page 493.

⁶ Pension Claim Application File, Ellis Benson, Texas Comptroller's Office, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas, reel 202, frame 628 and reel 137, frame 179-181.

⁷ Public Debt Claim, Capt. Amasa Turner, claim #863 (crossed out; changed to #405), total bounty of \$1565 approved Sep. 6, 1836, for Benson and 65 others, most at \$24 each. Texas Comptroller's Office, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas, reel 106, frames 651 – 656.

⁸ "Interview with Ellis Benson, June 1893."

⁹ Pension Claim Application File, Ellis Benson, Texas Comptroller's Office, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas, reel 202, frame 626 – 683. Twelfth Legislature of the State of Texas entitled, "an act granting pensions to the surviving veterans of the Revolution which separated Texas from Mexico."

¹⁰ Donation Land Grant, Ellis Benson, Texas General Land Office, Austin, Texas, File 429.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Pension of Samuel L. Wheeler, file #174, Texas State Library and Archives, Austin, Texas, reel 245, frames 171-174.

¹³ Public Debt Claim, Ellis Benson, claim #1982, Texas Comptroller's Office, Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas, reel 137, frames 177-184.

¹⁴ Ron Tyler, ed., The New Handbook of Texas, (Austin, Texas: Texas State Historical Association and The University of Texas, 1996), page 493.

¹⁵ Edmund Felder, Public Debt Claim, claim #124 and #159, Texas Comptroller's Office. Archives and Information Services Division, Texas State Library and Archives Commission, Austin, Texas.

¹⁶ *Handbook of Texas Online*, <http://www.tsha.utexas.edu/handbook/online/articles/AA/qfa2.html>, (accessed October 9, 2007). Taken from: Joseph Milton Nance, *After San Jacinto: The Texas Mexican Frontier, 1836-1841*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963).

¹⁷ Affidavit of F. F. Martin, Pension Claim Application File of Ellis Benson, reel 202, frame 634. Benson claims to have been wounded in November 1839; however, the battle was fought on 3 and 4 October 1839. The pension affidavit was made about 30 years after the fact, and it is very probable that he was confused about the exact date.

¹⁸ Pension Claim Application File, Ellis Benson.

¹⁹ Gifford White, compiler, *Land Certificates of Harris County, Texas, 1838 Class 1, Volume 1*, page 10.; Texas General Land Office, First Class file #153.

²⁰ "Headright Certificate of One Third League to Ellis Benson," 1 February 1838 (recorded 29 April 1842), Harris County, Texas, Deed Book H, page 42.

²¹ "Deed from Ellis Benson to G. H. Bringhurst," 18 July 1839 (recorded 7 December 1857) Harris County, Texas, Deed Book T, page 438.

²² "Marriage License of Ellis Benson and Mrs. Elizabeth Ritchie," Harris County Marriage Certificates, Harris County Texas County Clerk, Houston, Harris County, Texas, volume B, page 121. The marriage license was issued on 25 November 1848 and returned on 9 April 1849.

²³ 1860 Federal Population Census, Household of J. Ellis Benson, Harris County, Texas, National Archives microfilm M653, roll 1296, page 113.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, and 1870 Federal Population Census, Household of Ellis Benson, 5th Ward, Harris County, Texas, National Archives microfilm M593, roll 1589, page 634, dwelling 172, family 178.

²⁶ "Ellis Benson Bond for Election as Constable," 27 August 1858, Harris County, Texas, Deed Book U, page 374.

²⁷ "Ellis Benson Bond for Election as Coroner," 18 August 1860, Harris County, Texas, Deed Book X, page 333.

²⁸ "Ellis Benson Bond for Election as Coroner," 16 August 1862, Harris County, Texas, Deed Book Z, page 516.

- ²⁹ Compiled Service Record, M323-400-180, E. Benson, Private, Co K, 20 Texas Infantry.
- ³⁰ Houston City Directory, 1866 to 1871, (Dallas, Texas: R. L. Polk and Co., 1866 to 1871).
- ³¹ Ibid. 1880 to 1896.
- ³² Pension Claim Application File, Ellis Benson.
- ³³ 1880 Federal Population Census, Household of Ellis Benson, 5th Ward, Harris County, Texas, National Archives microfilm T9, roll 1308, ED 273, page 51, line 47.
- ³⁴ Pension Claim Application File, Ellis Benson.
- ³⁵ “The Galveston Daily News, “A San Jacinto Veteran in Need”, (Galveston, Texas) Friday, June 3, 1887, page 5.
- ³⁶ Texas Donation Land Grants, Donation File #19, recorded 21 August 1879, Texas General Land Office, Austin, Texas
- ³⁷ Texas Donation Land Grants, Donation File #429, recorded 21 July 1881, Texas General Land Office, Austin, Texas.
- ³⁸ Concerned Citizens for Washington Cemetery Care, Inc. *Washington Cemetery Centennial Book, A History of the German Society Cemetery of Houston, Texas*, (1988, Privately Published, Houston, Texas), page 117; and Mrs. E. Benson, transcribed City of Houston Death record, City of Houston Vital Statistics Department, Houston, Texas, registered February 1894, page 294; and Headstone, Washington Cemetery, Houston, Texas, lot B-113.
- ³⁹ Galveston Daily News, Saturday, February 3, 1894, page 3, column 2.
- ⁴⁰ Headstone of Ellis Benson; and Ibid. registered October 1896, page 57. The headstone and newspaper obituary both report a date of death as October 26. The transcribed City of Houston death record reports a date of death as October 27.

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