



Battlefield Trail Guide

In the early afternoon of May 8, 1846, 2,300 U.S. troops, escorting 300 wagons full of supplies, marched out of thickets of thorny brush and onto the broad prairie known as Palo Alto. Across the field, where the road toward Matamoros once again entered the chaparral, some 3,200 Mexican soldiers lined up to block the way.

Within minutes, the peaceful coastal prairie—named for the “tall trees” that ringed the field—erupted with the rumble of artillery fire. For five hours the two armies engaged in a fierce battle, the first of a 2-year-long war.

Much has been written about Palo Alto, the men who fought in the battle, and the strategies and tactics they employed. Nothing, however, can substitute for the experience of walking upon the ground where history took place and viewing the surroundings that soldiers encountered more than 160 years ago.

This guide is designed to assist you as you take that walk; to orient you to the site and facilities, explain the surroundings, and help keep you safe during your stay.

We hope that you enjoy your visit.

The Battle Setting

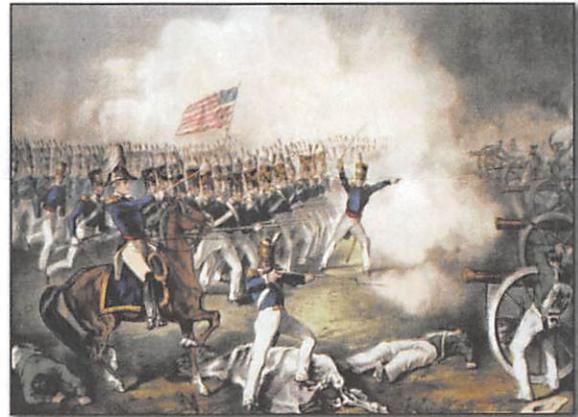
United States General Zachary Taylor led his troops onto the prairie from the north and immediately spotted the Mexican troops on the southern end of the field. The U.S. soldiers advanced until they reached a position about 600 yards from the Mexican forces and then deployed into their own battle lines.

Mexican General Mariano Arista had positioned his men in a long line of infantry and artillery with cavalry units on the extreme right and left. He hoped to lure the U.S. troops into an attack on his line and then engulf them with charges by the cavalry.

Taylor, however, opted to remain in a defensive formation to protect his wagon train. Instead of a charge, he relied on cannon to shower the Mexican line with a variety of artillery shot.

Arista attempted a flanking maneuver on the unmoving American line but failed. Cavalry charges on the U.S. right and left flanks were turned back by blistering fire of the U.S. light artillery.

During the five hour battle, the opposing lines shifted slightly, but neither army made a significant advance. United States troops suffered relatively few losses in the cannon exchange while Mexican casualties numbered in the hundreds. This set the stage for a Mexican withdrawal from the field and a U.S. victory the following day at Resaca de la Palma.



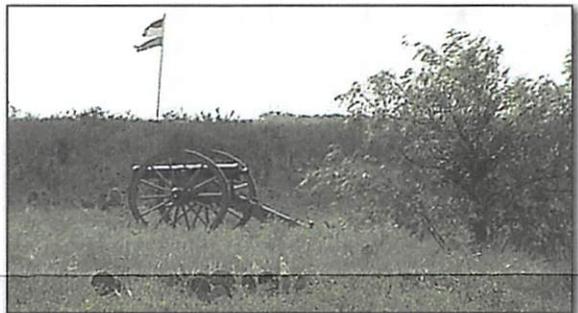
The Natural Setting

As you walk along the battlefield trail and view the field from the overlook, you will see a landscape similar to the scenery viewed by soldiers in 1846.

Much of the low-lying vegetation is typical of a traditional south Texas coastal prairie. Wildflowers that tolerate salt and heat thrive on the field, as do plants like Gulf Cordgrass, a thick grass with razor-sharp points that caught the attention of soldiers in 1846.

Other vegetation has begun to encroach on the field. Development in the lower Río Grande Valley has drained much of the water from a once marshy prairie. On this dry soil, mesquite and cactus thrive,

in many cases waging their own territorial battle with the original prairie plants that occupied the site.



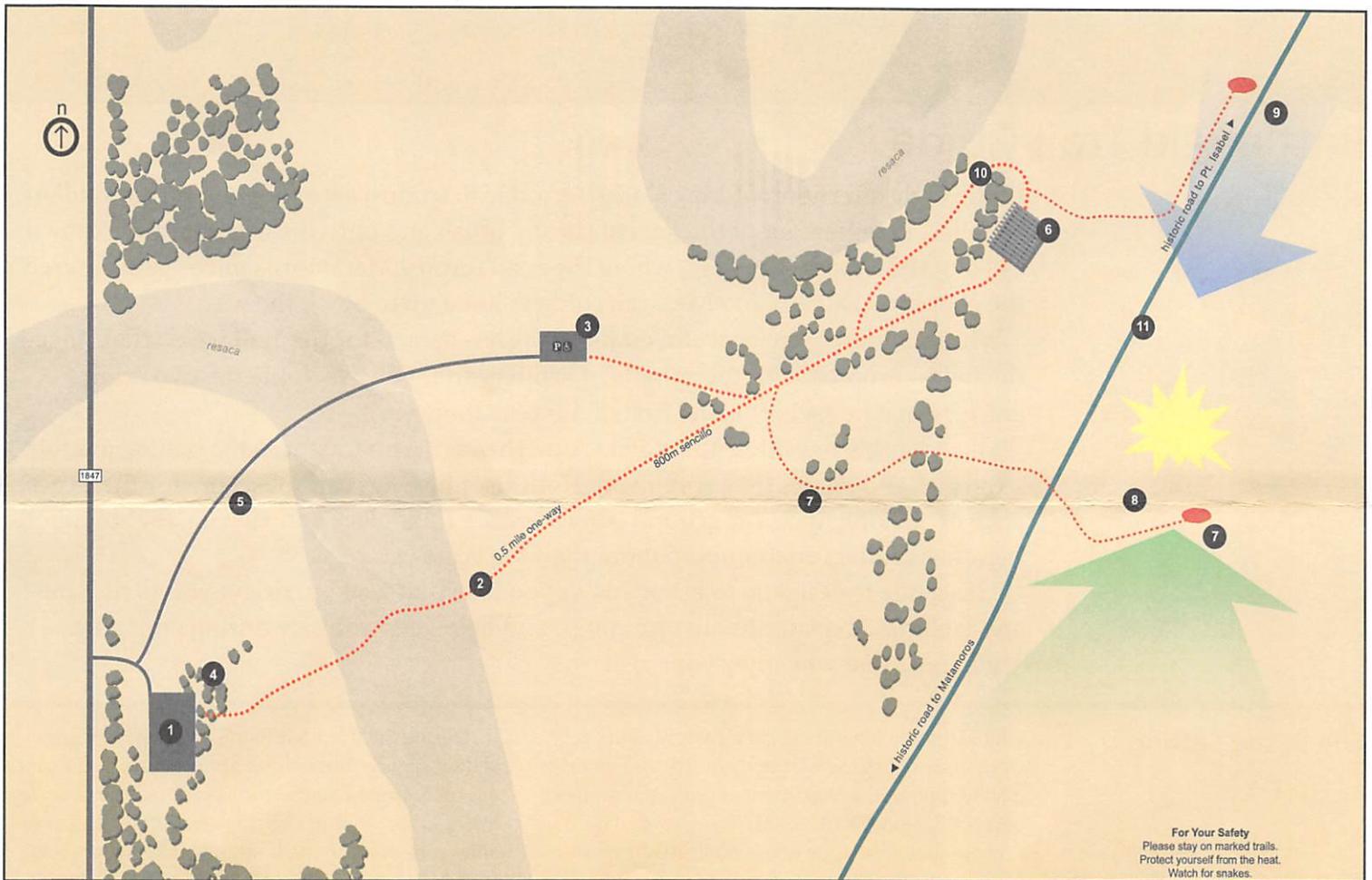
Hallowed Ground

In 1850, Melinda Rankin, a visitor to Palo Alto Battlefield, described the site as deserving of remembrance and respect. “The soil which has been wet with human blood,” she wrote, “has become too deeply hallowed to be soon regarded with careless indifference.”

Rankin’s words capture the feelings of many visitors to the site. While observing the historical markers and the natural environment of the modern field, it is important to remember that the ground also holds the memory of gallant deeds, loyal service, and spilled blood. Though the exact location of their graves is unknown, a number of Mexican and U.S. soldiers were buried on the field.

As you walk, we encourage you to remember the sacrifices made by U.S. and Mexican soldiers, to learn about their experiences, and to act in a way that shows respect for their service.





Visitor Opportunities

USE THE MAP ABOVE TO LOCATE VISITOR OPPORTUNITIES IN THE PARK.

- 1** THE PALO ALTO VISITOR CENTER serves as the primary orientation point for the park, offering exhibits and audiovisuals about the battle of Palo Alto and the U.S.–Mexican War. The visitor center also houses the only restrooms and water fountains in the park.
- 2** THE BATTLEFIELD TRAIL extends $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from the visitor center to the battlefield overlook. A number of exhibits along the way provide battle details and soldiers' perspectives of the events of May 8, 1846.
- 3** THE AUXILIARY PARKING AREA provides easier access to the battlefield overlook. From this point visitors can reach the overlook with a 350-yard walk. Visitors using this shorter path can view the same exhibits as on the longer battlefield trail.
- 4** THE PICNIC AREA has handicap accessible tables. Visitors are encouraged to use this area. Please dispose of any waste properly.
- 5** THE LIVING HISTORY AREA is used for demonstrations and special events. Please speak with park staff for information about upcoming programs.
- 6** THE BATTLEFIELD OVERLOOK is positioned at a point between the opposing battle lines at the western edge of the battlefield. In 1846, an observer from this point would have experienced cannonballs bouncing along the ground and whizzing over head. Today, interpretive panels at this point provide a general overview of the battle and its maneuvers.

Battlefield Orientation

THE PARK HAS INSTALLED VARIOUS MARKERS TO HELP VISITORS UNDERSTAND WHAT OCCURRED ON THE BATTLEFIELD IN 1846. USING THE NUMBERS ON THE ABOVE MAP, YOU CAN LEARN WHAT THESE MARKERS SIGNIFY.

- 7** THE MEXICAN LINE trail runs for several hundred yards along the southern portion of the battlefield. Flags along this route mark the position of the Mexican army at the start of the battle. That line extended for more than a mile on an east-west orientation. Interpretive exhibits along this trail present the battle of Palo Alto from the perspective of the Mexican troops who fought there.
- 8** THE CANNON on the Mexican line trail is a replica of an 8-pound artillery piece. The distinctive "Prussian Blue" color is an accurate color for Mexican artillery of this period. Mexican forces at Palo Alto had 12 cannon, compared to 10 on the U.S. line, but the Mexican guns were older and of smaller caliber than the American pieces.
- 9** THE U.S. LINE trail extends for 300 yards to the point where the initial U.S. battle line crossed the Matamoros to Point Isabel road. A row of flags at the end of this trail marks the battle line itself. Cannon—on the traditional U.S. Army olive green carriages—mark the position of U.S. light artillery at the start of the clash. U.S. heavy artillery used in the battle would have been located near the vantage point at the end of this trail. Interpretive panels present events of the battle as seen through the eyes of the American soldiers who were positioned there.
- 10** THE BOARDWALK OVERLOOK provides a view of the Palo Alto Resaca, which is believed to be the site of "Torrejon's Charge," one of the most notable maneuvers of the battle. United States light artillery repelled charging Mexican cavalrymen, demonstrating the versatility of U.S. cannons and rendering the strongest arm of the Mexican army ineffective.
- 11** THE MATAMOROS-POINT ISABEL ROAD was a primary feature of the 1846 battlefield. United States troops used it to enter the prairie from the north. Mexican troops blocked the road on the south end of the field. Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site is currently searching for traces of the route, now obscured by vegetation, and seeking ways to mark its course.