

# Palo Alto Battlefield

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Historic Site  
Texas



Battle of Palo Alto, May 8, 1846. Lithograph by Adolphe Jean-Baptiste Bayot after Carl Nebel, 1851. AMON CARTER MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS

## Nations in Conflict: A Fight Over Texas

“The jurisdiction of the United States...has passed the capes of Florida and been peacefully extended to the Del Norte.” That’s how U.S. President James K. Polk, in his December 1845 message to Congress, characterized the recent annexation of Texas by the United States, with a boundary along the Rio Grande (or Rio Bravo del Norte). He had campaigned for the Presidency with a pledge to extend the United States to the Pacific Ocean, and the addition of the Republic of Texas as the 28th state represented a major step toward that goal.

Mexico, however, challenged annexation. Although Texas had severed ties with Mexico in 1836, many Mexican leaders refused to recognize its independence, and they denounced the U.S. move as an attack on Mexico. Even those Mexicans who had accepted the loss of Texas bristled at the claim that the Rio Grande formed the boundary of the new state. Mexico had always mapped Texas as a much smaller region—bounded in part by the Nueces River. Polk’s call for a Rio Grande border placed a huge expanse of territory in dispute (see map).

Polk attempted to force a settlement of the boundary issues. In the summer of 1845, he sent an envoy to Mexico City to negotiate an agreement. He also ordered Gen. Zachary Taylor to lead a 4,000-man army to Corpus Christi, on the Nueces River. Officially, Taylor’s army had moved to defend Texas against threatened Mexican attacks. But the show of force also was designed to convince Mexican leaders to accept the loss of Texas, agree to the Rio Grande boundary, and, perhaps, even sell the New Mexico and California territories.

The tactic failed. In Mexico, hard-line Gen. Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga marched to the capital, seized control of the government, and announced that he would discuss nothing but the return of Texas. Clear battle lines had been drawn.

Polk continued to exert pressure by ordering General Taylor onward to claim the Rio

Grande. In March 1846 Taylor led his troops south, occupied the bank of the river across from the Mexican city of Matamoros and began construction of Fort Texas, an earthen fieldwork that would serve as his base of operations. General Paredes showed equal resolve. He expelled the U.S. envoy from Mexico, sent thousands of troops to Matamoros, and appointed General Mariano Arista to command this Army of the North.

It was Polk who finally hesitated. Many political foes at home challenged his claims to the Rio Grande boundary, and Polk realized that by moving troops to the other side of the Rio Grande or initiating conflict, he risked turning the American public against him. Instead, he ordered Taylor to wait for Mexican forces to cross the Rio Grande, which Polk could portray as an attack on American territory.

He didn’t have long to wait. Arista believed that Taylor’s army had marched hundreds of miles into Mexican territory and, in late April, ordered troops across the Rio Grande to confront the Americans. Taylor heard rumors of this Mexican movement and sent a 63-man scout party, headed by Capt. Seth Thornton, to investigate. Some 28 miles west of Fort Texas, at a tiny settlement called Rancho de Carricitos, Thornton’s party suddenly found itself surrounded by 1,600 Mexican soldiers under the command of Gen. Anastasio Torrejón. In a brief skirmish, 11 U.S. soldiers were killed and most of the rest taken captive.

When President Polk learned of the “Thornton skirmish,” on May 10, 1846, he announced that Mexico had “shed American blood upon... American soil” and demanded action. Although some legislators referred to the coming conflict as “the murder of Mexicans upon their own soil,” on May 13, 1846, Congress responded with a vote to declare war. Less than half a year after Polk had declared the peaceful acquisition of the Rio Grande, the United States and Mexico entered a two-year conflict to decide the matter.



The annexation of Texas by the United States in 1845 was a major cause of the U.S.-Mexican War.



U.S. President James K. Polk relied on a war with Mexico to settle territorial differences and add a vast area to the United States. His tactics, however, raised questions about national honor, the extension of slavery into newly acquired lands, and the role of the military in the United States.

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Mexican President Gen. Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga seized control of the Mexican government to take a strong stand against U.S. territorial claims. By marching his troops to the Mexican capital, however, he ultimately weakened Mexican defenses along the Rio Grande.

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Above: These soldiers, a dragoon and an infantry officer in campaign dress, are typical of those who fought under Taylor in northern Mexico in 1846.

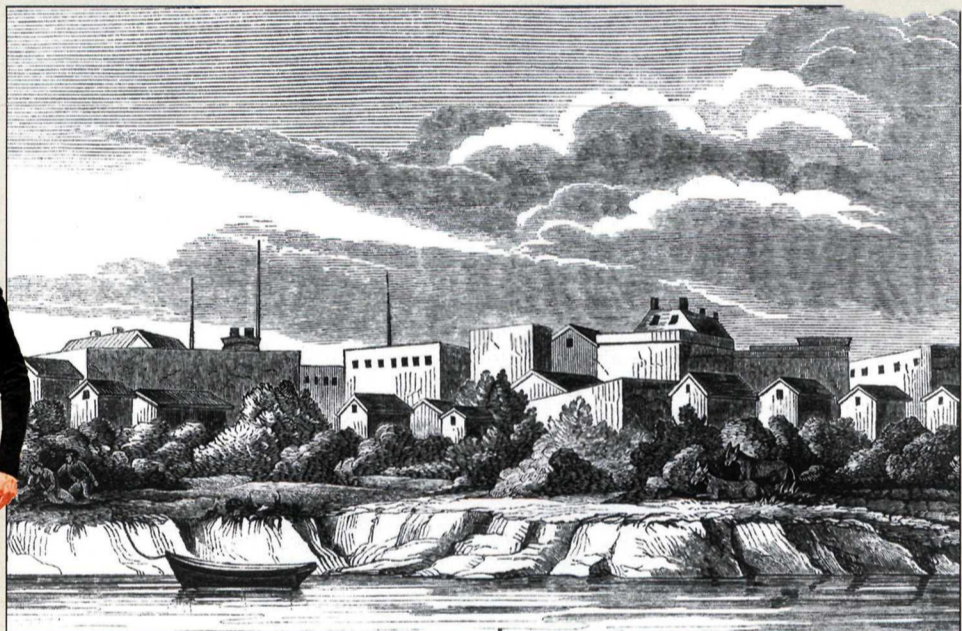
FROM A PAINTING BY H. CHARLES MCBARRON, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE U.S. ARMY

Left: A captain of the 1st Line Regiment of Mexico, which formed part of Arista’s Army of the North.

FROM A PAINTING BY G. A. EMBLETON, ©OSPREY PUBLISHING LTD.

Some 4,000 U.S. troops occupied Corpus Christi, just within territory under dispute with Mexico. When Mexico refused to bow to this display of power, the army marched toward a confrontation on the Rio Grande. Lithograph by Charles R. Parsons, 1847.

AMON CARTER MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS



The Mexican city of Matamoros (above) found itself at the center of conflict along the Rio Grande. Positioned on the Rio Grande near the Gulf of Mexico, it became a target for a U.S. army that wanted to “show the flag” along the river while remaining close to naval supply lines. The city also became a

staging area for Mexican troops marching to the Rio Grande. Following the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, Mexican troops abandoned Matamoros. U.S. troops occupied the city on May 18, 1846. For the next two years Matamoros would serve as a base for U.S. operations in Mexico.

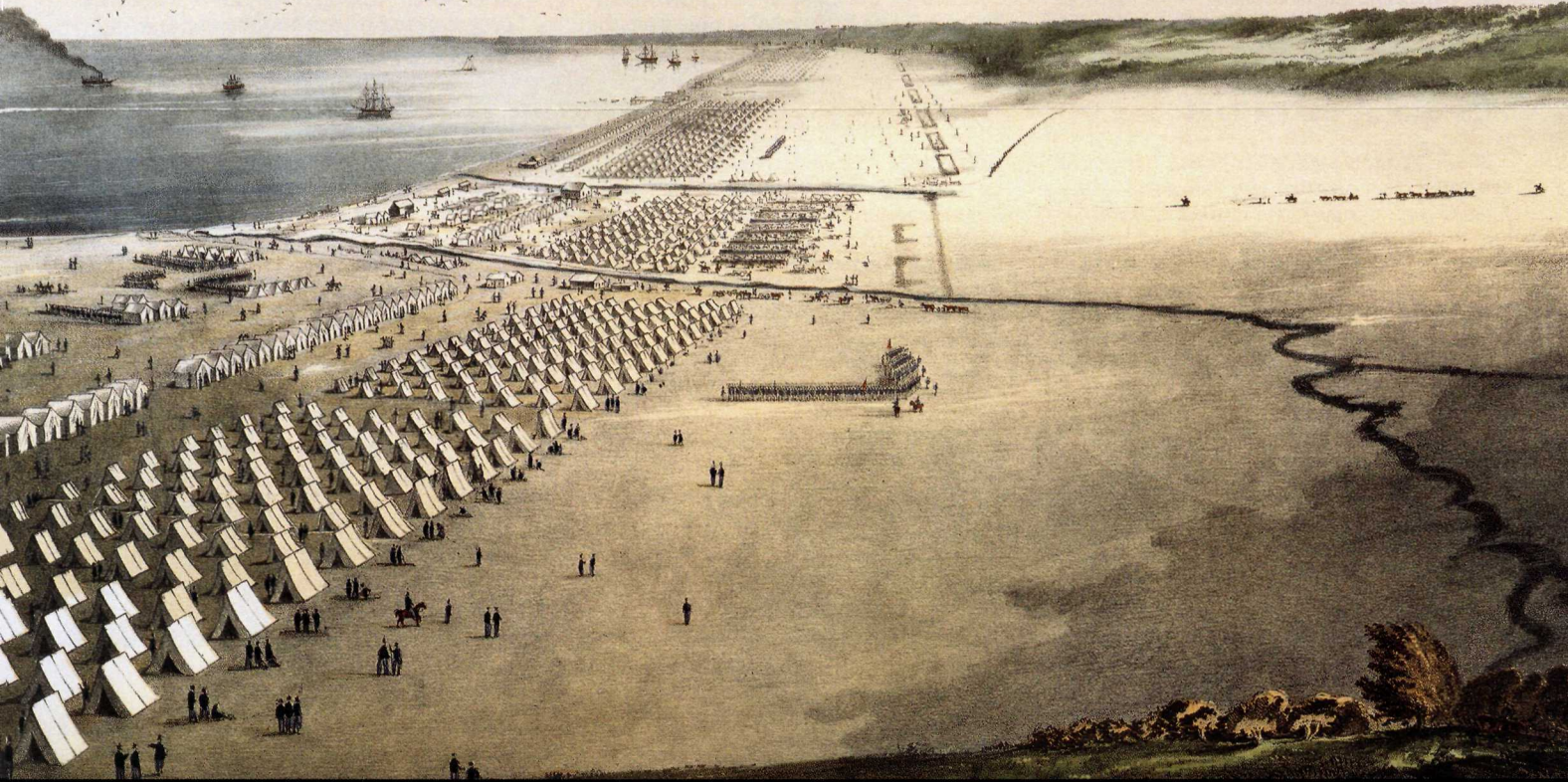
## The Opposing Forces

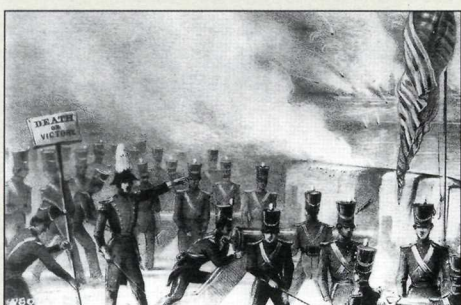
The two armies that faced each other on the Rio Grande were as different as the nations they represented. Mexico’s army was larger than the U.S. army of 1846, and more Mexican troops marched to the Rio Grande. Mexican officers also had seen battle on numerous occasions, including clashes of the Texas Revolution of 1835-36. Many of the young U.S. officers had never faced the heat of battle but, as graduates of the military academy at West Point, had received training that would allow them to distinguish themselves in combat.

Gen. Mariano Arista’s army relied heavily on cavalry—especially the fast-moving lancers who could charge across a field to engulf an enemy. Taylor’s army had only a small force of dragoons, or mounted infantrymen, and relied more on infantry, or foot soldiers. Arista’s troops carried a larger number of cannons in-

to the field, but Taylor’s guns were newer, had greater range, and fired a variety of multiple-shot projectiles. The U.S. forces also included well-trained regiments of “Flying Artillery”—lightweight guns that could be rapidly repositioned and fired. These units provided a defense against the Mexican cavalry.

Each army relied on smoothbore muskets, but the U.S. forces had recently forged guns, while Mexican troops received older, often-faulty weapons. The men carrying these guns in the American ranks were often European immigrants—primarily of Irish and German origin—who had volunteered in the hopes of earning a place in U.S. society. Indians formed part of the Mexican army, including many who had been drafted into service. Despite these differences, troops of both countries received broad praise for their loyalty and bravery in battle.





During the six-day siege, American defenders of Fort Texas withstood a heavy Mexican bombardment with limited casualties. One of those killed was Maj. Jacob Brown, for whom the post was renamed. The city of Brownsville, Texas, grew up around it.



Gen. Mariano Arista expected the open prairie of Palo Alto to favor his larger army and his cavalry. Instead, the power and mobility of U.S. artillery placed him at a disadvantage.



The battle of Resaca de la Palma was primarily an infantry clash in dense thickets. A cavalry charge by Capt. Charles May's dragoons, however, captured both Mexican Gen. Rómulo Díaz de la Vega and the American imagination.

## War Begins on the Rio Grande

The outbreak of hostilities at Rancho de Carricitos led to more military activity along the Rio Grande, centered around the U.S. outpost of Fort Texas. General Arista immediately began moving additional troops across the river in an effort to surround the isolated earthwork. In response, General Taylor marched most of his army to a coastal supply base at Point Isabel on the Gulf of Mexico, where he waited for ships carrying supplies needed to withstand a prolonged siege. He left behind some 550 men under the command of Maj. Jacob Brown to defend the post until his return. Unable to prevent Taylor's departure, Arista arrayed his soldiers around the fort on both sides of the Rio Grande and on May 3 ordered his artillery to open fire.

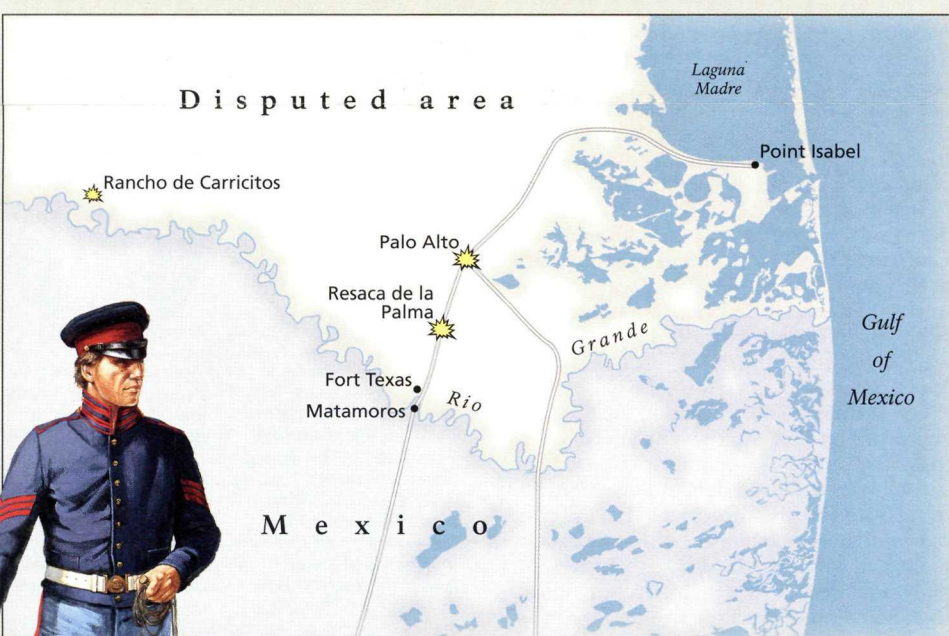
Aware that their compatriots were under attack, Taylor's troops improved their defenses at Point Isabel, gathered supplies and ammunition, then set out on May 7 with 2,300 troops and 200 supply wagons on the 25-mile march to break the siege. General Arista watched this advance closely and on the morning of May 8, 1846, in an effort to maintain his blockade of Fort Texas, positioned 3,200 troops on

the halfway point of the Matamoras-Point Isabel Road, where it crossed the broad plain of Palo Alto. That afternoon the two forces engaged in a fierce four-hour artillery duel on the prairie. Although Arista held an advantage in troop numbers, Taylor's 18-pounder siege cannon dominated the battle, pounding Arista's lines with exploding shot and decimating the Mexican ranks. Mexican efforts to mount cavalry charges were turned back by the maneuverable and quick-firing "Flying Artillery" of Maj. Samuel Ringgold and Capt. James Duncan. Mexican soldiers held their ground, but with a toll of 100 dead and 125 wounded. Taylor's force counted only 9 killed and 17 wounded by comparison.

The following morning, Arista withdrew his battle-weary soldiers five miles to Resaca de la Palma (also known as Resaca de la Guerrero), a brush covered ravine astride the road to Matamoras, three miles north of the Rio Grande. He hoped to use the dense chaparral along the bank of this old river bed to shelter his troops from the potent U.S. cannon fire. Taylor's troops pursued the Mexicans and, on the afternoon of May 9, engaged Arista's sol-

diers in hand-to-hand combat in the thickets. Skilled at such fighting, the American army quickly overran the Mexican lines. A cavalry charge into the heart of the Mexican position then broke resistance and forced Arista's troops into a disorganized retreat across the Rio Grande that ended the siege of Fort Texas. Mexican losses in the battle were 160 killed, 228 wounded, and 159 missing, including many who drowned trying to cross the river.

U.S. losses at Resaca de la Palma were 45 killed and 97 wounded, but the American army now firmly held the land north of the Rio Grande and would never face another effective Mexican challenge in that sector. Still, it would be months—only after Mexican forces suffered more disastrous defeats and their capital city fell to the army of Gen. Winfield Scott—before the two nations signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ending the war. Mexico's leaders then faced the painful task of renouncing claims to Texas, accepting the Rio Grande as the boundary, and selling vast stretches of other territory to the United States. The end of the battles on the Rio Grande was only the beginning of the bloodshed over land.



Light artilleryman, Ringgold's "Flying Artillery" battery.



One of the most respected generals in the Mexican army prior to the war, Mariano Arista saw his reputation tarnished by the defeats on the Rio Grande. Removed from command following the battles, he eventually recovered to become Mexico's Secretary of War in 1848 and President of the Republic in 1851.



The battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma thrust Zachary Taylor into a national spotlight. Additional victories at Monterey and Buena Vista solidified "Old Rough and Ready's" status as a hero. By war's end he was so popular that he was elected President despite his lack of political experience.



Gen. Pedro de Ampudia, second in command on the Rio Grande, urged Arista's removal after his defeat. Ampudia himself suffered a similar fate, losing his command after Taylor defeated him at Monterey.



Maj. Samuel Ringgold devoted years to developing the "Flying Artillery" that served so well at Palo Alto. In his moment of triumph, however, he was fatally wounded by a Mexican cannon ball.



Capt. James Duncan's daring use of light artillery turned back the final Mexican cavalry charge at Palo Alto, and allowed Capt. Charles May to make a dramatic charge at Resaca de la Palma.



Gen. Rómulo Díaz de la Vega fought at Palo Alto and fell captive at Resaca de la Palma, where his determination to stand his ground earned him the admiration of soldiers in both armies.



Lt. Ulysses S. Grant played a minor role in the battles on the Rio Grande. Like many young U.S. officers, he remained unknown in the war with Mexico but rose to prominence in the Civil War.



## Palo Alto Battlefield Today

On May 8, 1993, the National Park Service formally dedicated the Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site. This park was created to preserve and interpret the site of the first major battle of the U.S.-Mexican War. The park has also been given a broad mandate to discuss the war in its entirety, including the broad story of the causes and consequences of this important conflict.

The centerpiece of this effort is the Palo Alto Battlefield. This 3,400-acre expanse of coastal prairie and dense chaparral is recognized as one of the best-preserved battle sites in the nation. Efforts to restore the battlefield to its 1846 appearance are currently underway, and the park continues to develop trails, facilities, and visitor services at the site. The park is located at 7200 Paredes Line Road (FM 1847)

in Brownsville—just north of the intersection of FM 511. It is open daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Plans are also underway to preserve and interpret the Resaca de la Palma and Fort Brown sites, both listed as national historic landmarks. Today the Resaca de la Palma battlefield lies on Paredes Line Road in the heart of Brownsville, Texas. Although much of the original scene has been overtaken by the growing border city, a 38-acre portion of the site, the waterway, and traces of the chaparral have survived. The site is currently owned by a private foundation that is working with the National Park Service to protect it and open it to the public.

Fort Brown, the namesake of Brownsville, Texas, has also suffered over time from the effects of erosion and levee construction on

the Rio Grande. Earthen mounds marking the remains of the fort can be seen adjacent to the Fort Brown Golf Course. Palo Alto Battlefield is cooperating with a number of private and public partners to preserve this site and make it available for public enjoyment and education.

**For More Information**  
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Palo Alto Battlefield is one of more than 380 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities, visit [www.nps.gov](http://www.nps.gov).

## It's Still A Battlefield . . . .

When Mexican and United States troops confronted each other on the Palo Alto battlefield, cannon blasts and musket fire were not their only concerns. They also faced hazards from poisonous snakes and insects, prickly plants, and the harsh environment of the field. Today the dangers of war are gone, but the natural hazards remain and make the site a potentially dangerous area. Please minimize

your risk by following these guidelines: Stay on marked paths and in designated areas; do not wander onto the prairie or into the brush. Be alert for snakes, thorny plants, stinging insects, and other plant and animal threats. Drink plenty of water and guard against heat and sun stroke. Report any perceived dangers to a park ranger.

**Help us protect this special place.** Please respect the battlefield and the memory of the men who fought and died here. Do not remove plants, animals, or artifacts. Avoid harm to any living or historical objects. Be aware that hunting is prohibited and carrying weapons on federal property is a crime. Metal detectors and digging are also prohibited on the battlefield. Please place any litter in trash cans.

Palo Alto Battlefield is home to a large variety of plants, animals, birds, and reptiles common to the Lower Rio Grande Valley. A few are pictured here; check at the visitor center for additional information.

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