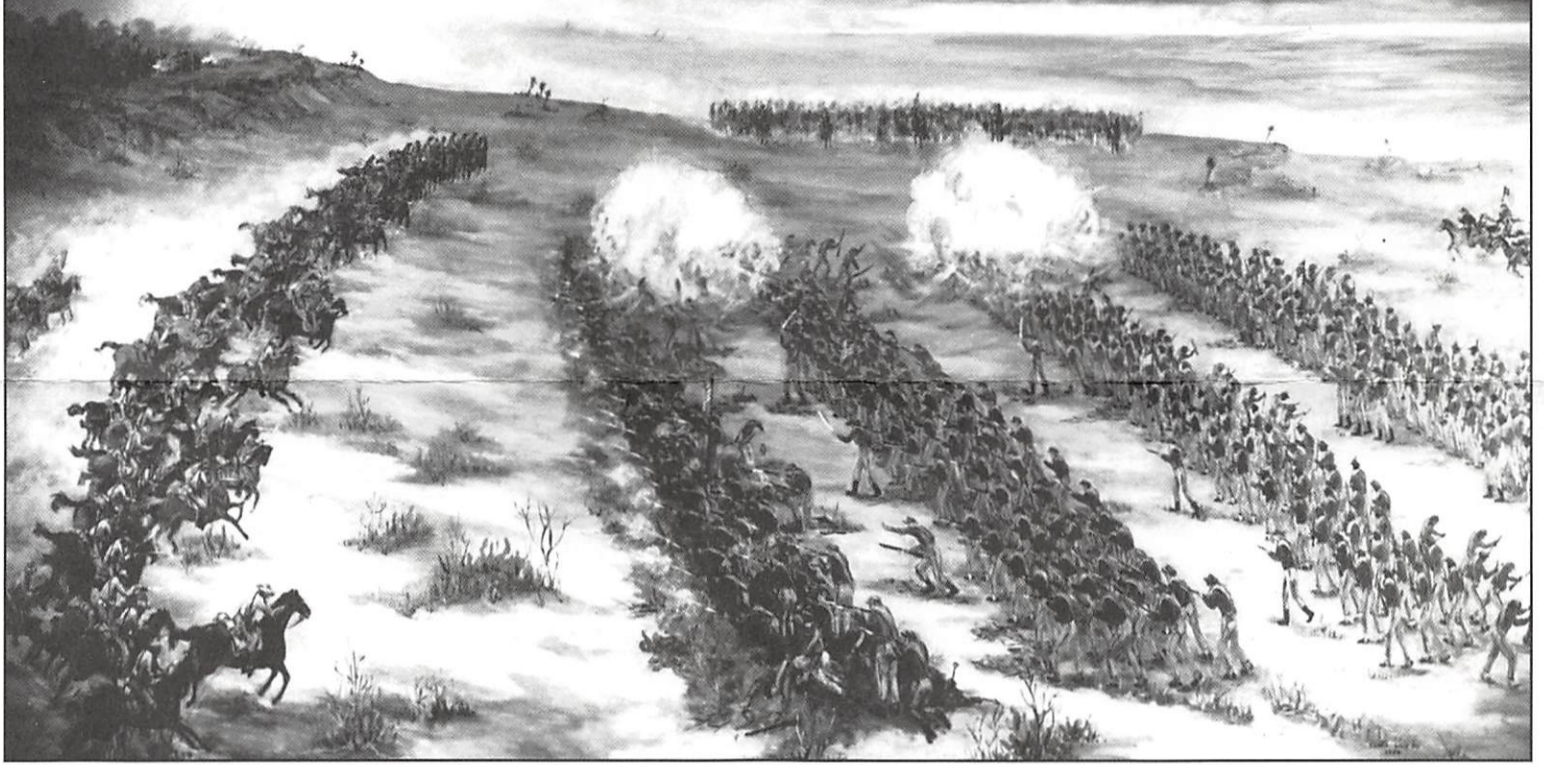




# The Battle of Palmito Ranch



The Battle of Palmito Ranch

Courtesy of the University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures

## The Last Battle

On May 12, 1865, weeks after other major Confederate armies surrendered at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia and Bennett Place, North Carolina, forces of the United States of America and the Confederate States of America clashed on the coastal plains east of Brownsville, Texas.

The series of violent skirmishes endured for two days, over twelve miles of prairie. When the engagement ended on the afternoon of May 13, with a decisive rout of Federal troops, the Confederacy had prevailed in the last battle of the American Civil War.

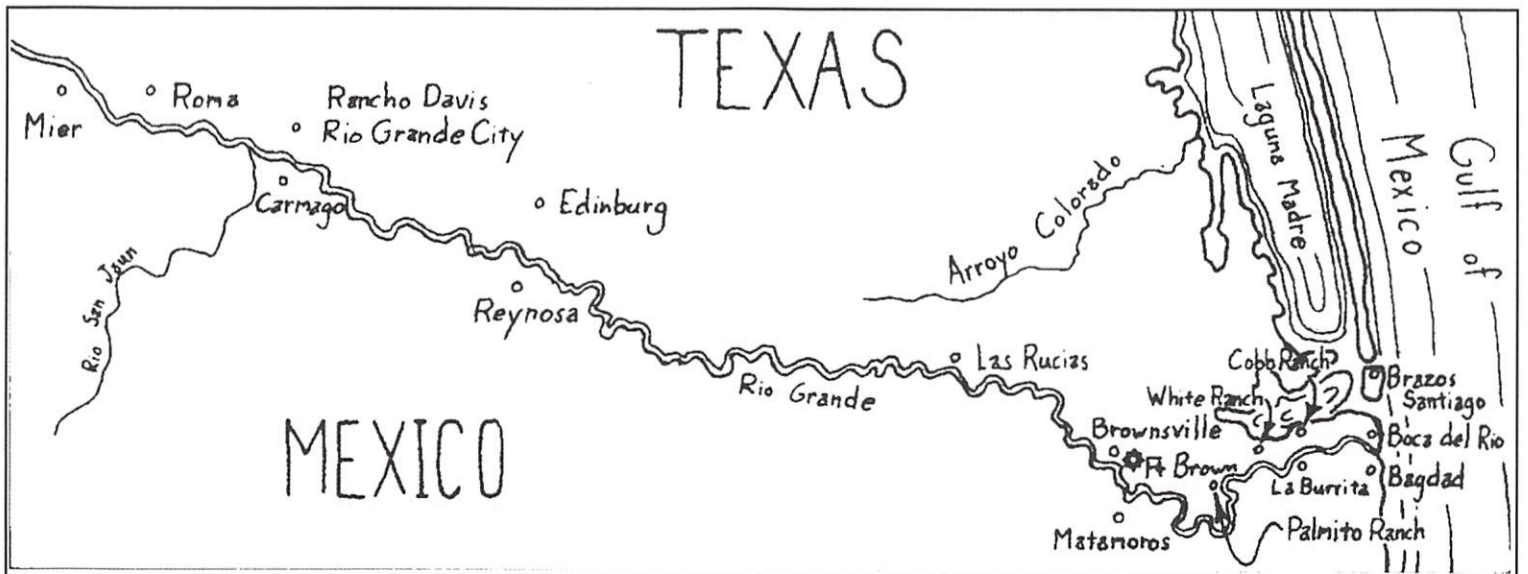
## The Civil War in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas

The southern tip of Texas played a vital economic role in the conflict in the War Between the States. Shortly after fighting erupted, Union naval forces established an effective naval blockade of Southern ports, severing trade links with European markets and crippling the Confederacy's ability to fund its war effort.

The importance of this area also made it a center of conflict. In 1863, Union troops captured the military installation of Fort Brown, occupied Brownsville, and briefly plugged the leak in their blockade. But the Confederates, determined to keep the cotton trade flowing, soon retook the fort and pushed the Federal troops to Brazos Island. There, the Union forces maintained a presence at the Brazos Santiago depot and continued to control the coast for the duration of the war.

The Confederates, however, soon found a way to avoid these restrictions. If southern planters could get their cotton to the Mexican city of Matamoros, across the Rio Grande from Brownsville, Texas, the precious cargo could be loaded onto Mexican merchant ships and sail, untouched, past the prowling Union fleet. In time, wagon trains loaded with the "white gold" flowed into the Lower Rio Grande Valley, making the area an economic lifeline for the Confederacy.

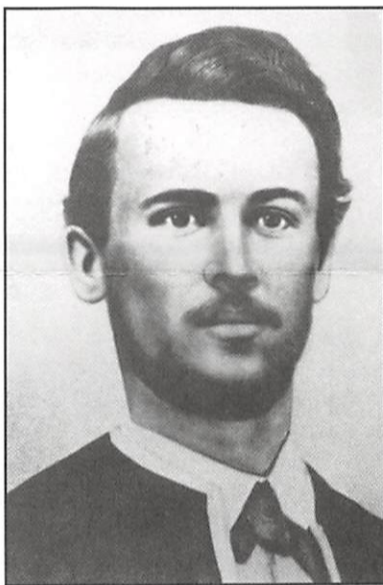
In March of 1865, as evidence mounted that the war approached its end, local Confederate commanders, Brigadier General James E. Slaughter and Colonel John S. Ford, accepted the Union's Major General Lewis Wallace's invitation to meet at Port Isabel to discuss terms of peace. An informal truce was established and a formal peace seemed near at hand.



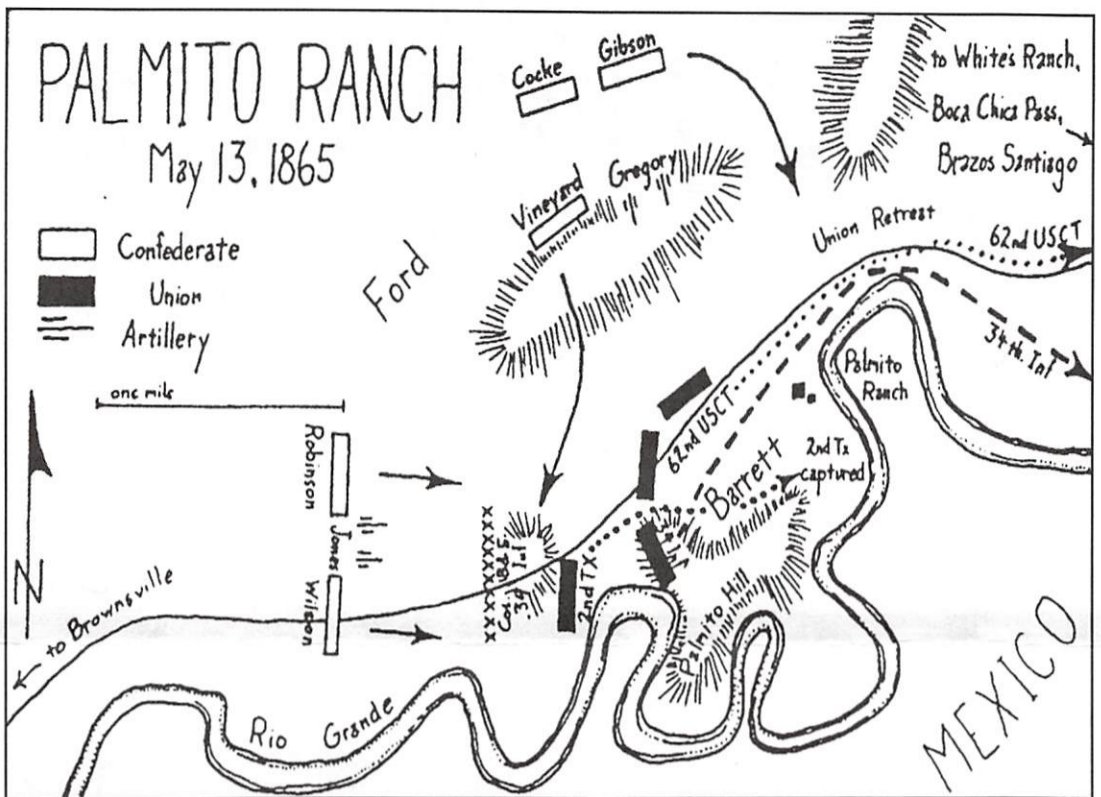
## The Battle of Palmito Ranch



Colonel John Salmon "RIP" Ford, commander of the 2nd Texas Cavalry, led the Confederacy to victory at Palmito Ranch. His losses in the battle are unknown.



Private John Jefferson Williams of the 34th Indiana Volunteer Infantry, one of 118 U.S. soldiers killed, wounded, or missing at Palmito Ranch, is recognized as the last soldier killed in a Civil War battle.



In May 1865, despite the informal truce and the surrender of Confederate armies elsewhere, Colonel Theodore H. Barrett, the commander of Union forces on Brazos Island, ordered an advance on the Texas mainland. Barrett claimed that he acted to secure much-needed supplies for his troops. Others have suggested that he sought personal glory before war came to a close.

Regardless of the reason, on the morning of May 11, Lieutenant Colonel David Branson led 250 men of the 62nd U.S. Colored Infantry and 50 men of the 2nd Texas U.S. Cavalry (dismounted) toward a party of Confederates reported to be based at nearby White's Ranch. Confronted with numerous difficulties, this force did not reach the ranch until 2 a.m. and found no Confederates in sight.

At 6 a.m. on the 12th, Branson resumed his advance, and soon encountered a small number of rebel horsemen. Skirmishing with these troops, he drove on toward Palmito Ranch. There, the Confederates withdrew and, at midday, Branson tried to give his troops some rest.

Around 3 p.m., the Confederates returned in force. Captain W. N. Robinson, at the head of some 190 men of Giddings' Texas Cavalry Battalion, advanced on the weary Federal troops

and, with scattered fighting, pursued them all the way back to White's Ranch.

On the morning of May 13th, 200 troops from the 34th Indiana Infantry and Colonel Barrett himself, arrived to reinforce the Union forces, and the detachment resumed its march inland. After facing some light skirmishing along the way, the Federals once again engaged the main body of Robinson's company at Palmito Ranch and slowly began to drive them toward Brownsville. Around 3 p.m., however, Confederate reinforcements arrived. Colonel John S. "Rip" Ford, with some 300 cavalry troops and six pieces of field artillery, met the Union force on the western limits of Palmito Ranch. In the sharp engagement that followed, the Confederates routed Barrett's force and chased the fleeing Federals all the way to the coast.

By dusk, the Federal troops had returned to Brazos Island, covered by fire from a Union Sloop of War. As the sun sank below the horizon, a Federal shell exploded over the head of a teen-aged Confederate soldier. Rattled, the young Rebel shouted obscenities at the Blue Coats, turned, and fired the last shot of the Civil War into the shadowy sand dunes in the distance.

## Aftermath

Palmito Ranch provided the Rebels with little more than a moral victory. Taking note of the Union victories East of the Mississippi River, Confederates in Texas soon accepted the inevitable. On May 30, 1865, they surrendered Brownsville to Union forces, without a fight.

Three days later, General Edmund Kirby Smith, commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department of the Confederacy, which included the Rio Grande Valley of Texas, surrendered the last major Confederate army to the United States and brought the Civil War to a close.

## Today



The windswept, marshy prairies on the north banks of the Rio Grande appear today much as they did during the 1860's. The area's high salinity and its tendency to hold water have protected this landscape from intensive farming and development. The sights and sounds that you experience today are much the same as those encountered by soldiers during the Civil War.

The site has been designated as a National Historic Landmark, with a boundary that encompasses roughly 6,000 acres. Much of this property is now owned by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as part of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Wildlife Refuge.

At present, the only indication that a major event took place on this landscape is a small historic marker that the State of Texas has placed on the Boca Chica Highway (HWY 4) near the site of the old Palmito Ranch.

Efforts are underway to recognize the importance of this site. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, the Texas Historic Commission, and the Civil War Preservation Trust are currently working together to preserve this battlefield and to increase public awareness and understanding of the site.

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