

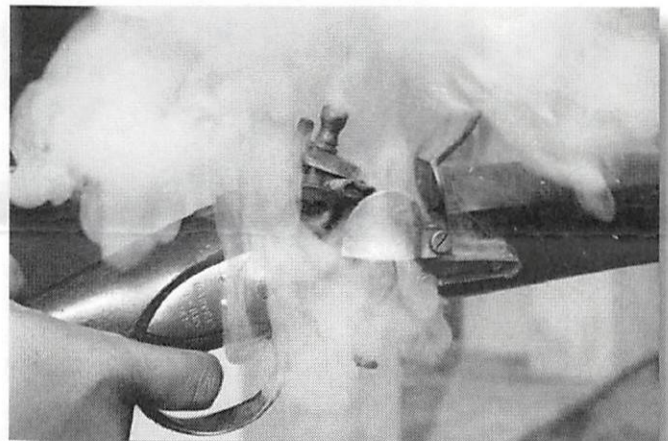
Lock, Stock, & Barrel



Living historians portraying Mexican War era U.S. infantrymen.

Considered a simple weapon by today's standards, the flintlock musket was the primary weapon of infantrymen during the U.S.-Mexican War. It was here at Palo Alto Battlefield the first angry shots of the war sounded on May 8, 1846. Though muskets saw limited use during the battle, they saw much action in later engagements. Eventually, some of the muskets present at Palo Alto would make their way to Mexico City when the U.S. Army captured the Mexican capital in September of 1847. The peace treaty that ended the war not only changed the boundary between the two countries but also greatly influenced their socioeconomic and political development. The United States went on to become a superpower while many argue Mexico continues to struggle.

In the hands of U.S. and Mexican soldiers alike, the flintlock musket was both a giver and taker of life. An instrument of war made of wood and steel, it was often the only thing standing between an early grave or living another day. The musket was a constant companion of the infantryman, at times even sharing a bedroll with the soldier. The weapon employed a simple firing mechanism that relied on a piece of flint crashing down on a steel plate. The resulting shower of red-hot sparks ignited gunpowder held in a shallow pan on the side of the lock, setting off the main charge inside.



Black powder igniting in a puff of smoke.

Why were man and musket here at Palo Alto in the first place? Some attribute that to the desire of President James K. Polk to free the U.S. from its continental confinement. In the United States presidential election of 1844, Polk had run on a platform favoring annexation of Texas and territorial expansion. Before President Polk left office, he would realize his vision, though not before the U.S. and Mexico waged war on each other.

Peace comes with a price. With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, the war ended. The treaty finalized the boundary issue between Texas and Mexico and the U.S. acquired nearly one million square miles of territory from Mexico—nearly half of its national territory. Polk had succeeded in stretching the boundaries of the U.S. from sea to shining sea.

Just 25 years young, Mexico was ill prepared to fight a large-scale conflict with the U.S. Her government seemed to be in constant turmoil, the treasury did not have the funds to supply the army, and her arsenals could not produce weapons in any great quantity. This forced Mexico to purchase much of its weaponry from Europe. This is evident by the use of surplus British Brown Bess muskets by Mexican infantrymen. However, these were generally not quality weapons.

There were many instances of Mexican infantrymen, wary of their muskets, firing from the hip to avoid a possible backfire occurring so close to their face. The very thing a soldado had to defend himself with was capable of rewarding him with a fate similar to one given a foe's musket.

U.S. infantrymen fared better than their Mexican counterparts did. To feed the U.S. war effort, the armories at Harpers Ferry and Springfield churned out thousands of Model 1816 muskets. The model number dated back decades before the war but most of the muskets used during the war were only a couple years old. Armed with newer, more reliable weapons, U.S. infantrymen did not worry about firing from the hip. They could properly aim and fire their muskets straight and true—as much as you can with a musket.



Top: M1816 Harpers Ferry flintlock musket
Bottom: "Brown Bess" musket

While the musket itself is a simple weapon, its operation is not. The loading and firing drill for U.S. troops called for twelve motions and the Mexican drill called for eleven. To stand completely exposed and under a withering fire requires a certain amount of composure as was shown by the Mexican Army's Tampico Battalion at the Battle of Resaca de la Palma, whose "brave spirits fought on until all were cut down."¹ Many times throughout the war, the courage and determination of soldiers on the field of battle drew praise from friend and foe alike.



Live fire musket demonstration during a Living History program at the park.

Many of the muskets present at the Battle of Palo Alto had made long journeys. Many travelled by ship from the east coast of the United States, landing at Corpus Christi before making the march down to the Rio Grande. Others had come from the interior of Mexico on long marches from as far away as San Luis Potosi—400 miles away. Some would find new owners as their former masters succumbed to the perils of war. Others shared their master's fate, mouths silenced forever, never again sending forth their destructive retort. Only a few Mexican War era muskets survive today and the soldiers who wielded them are long departed. Yet the profound impact both had on the development United States and Mexico continues to reverberate through both nations.

1. Grigg, Elliot. *The Mexican War and Its Heroes*. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1860), 33.