

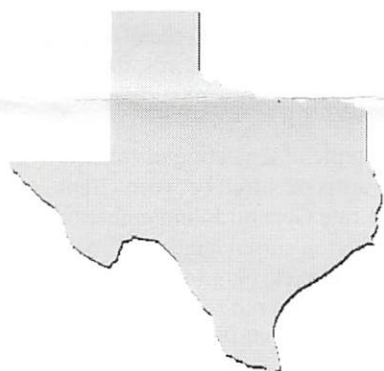
A Site of Mythical Importance

Columbus thought the world was flat. The Pilgrims first set foot in America on Plymouth Rock. George Washington never told a lie. Abraham Lincoln hastily wrote the Gettysburg Address on the back of an envelope.

Many of the people, places, and events of U.S. history have become the subject of popular and familiar legends. Some of these tales hold a grain of truth and some none at all.

Like any historic site, Palo Alto Battlefield has great significance and generates many interesting stories. Most of the tales linked to the battle site are true. Some are partly true. Others are myths and unfounded rumors. Have you been misinformed?

Texas: A Whole Other Country?



The Claim:

The Republic of Texas joined the United States through a treaty between two equal Republics. This means Texas can leave the Union whenever it wishes.

The Story:

Diplomats from the United States and Texas did sign an annexation treaty in 1844. The U.S. Congress rejected the document, leaving annexation in question.

When James K. Polk won the presidency later that year, Texas reemerged as an issue. Polk had run for office with a promise to annex Texas and as soon as he was elected, out-going President John Tyler introduced legislation to bring Texas into the Union. That resolution passed both houses of Congress and, on March 1, 1846, Texas was offered a place as a U.S. state.

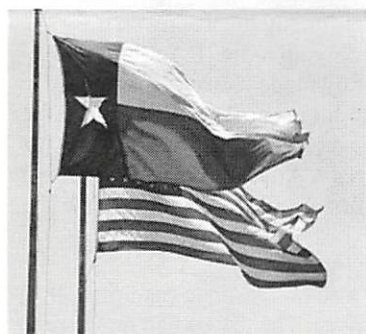
This invitation was sent to the Republic of Texas, which accepted the offer on July 4,

1845. Texas officials then began the well-established procedure for bringing new territories into the Union: they developed a state Constitution and submitted it to the U.S. Congress for approval.

The process was completed on December 29, 1845. On that date, the government of the Republic of Texas was formally dissolved and the State of Texas emerged. Texas did not enter the United States as one of two equal republics but as one of 28 equal states.

The Civil War reinforced this bond. Texas did leave the Union in 1861 and was one of the last Confederate states to rejoin the fold. By retaking its place in the United States, Texas once again accepted the supremacy of the federal Constitution. A Presidential proclamation of August 20, 1866 welcomed Texas' return, but firmly stated that, "...no state, of its own will, has a right or power to go out of or separate itself from, or be separated from the American Union..."

A Flag Like No Other?



The Claim:

The Texas flag is the only state flag permitted to fly side-by-side with the U.S. flag. All other state flags must fly below the Stars and Stripes.

The Story:

The belief that the Texas flag has some unique status is often linked to the idea that Texas joined the United States in a special way. Others claim that Texas is different simply because it is the only state that was once an independent nation. Neither is true.

Texas surrendered special rights when it joined the Union. Texas is also not so unique for operating as a separate nation. Vermont (independent from 1777-1791), California (home of the short-lived "Bear Flag Republic"), portions of Florida (included in the 1810 Republic of West Florida), and Hawaii, (which was once an independent kingdom), all claim periods of independence. Like Texas, none have special flag rights.

It is true, however, that the Texas flag may be flown on an equal level with the United States flag.

The U.S. flag code requires that the U.S. flag should always be higher if flown on the same pole with a state flag. If a state flag and the national flag are flown on separate poles, the code merely states that no other flag be flown higher than the U.S. flag. This means that the Texas flag may be flown at the exact same height as the U.S. flag. The same rule applies to all other state flags.

This does not imply that the state and national flags are considered to be completely equal. When displayed alongside a state flag, the Stars and Stripes is always given a place of honor on the right. Likewise, the code specifies that the U.S. flag is always raised first and lowered last. These rules apply to displays of any state flag, including the banner of the Lone Star State.

Samuel Ringgold: The First Fallen?



The Claim:

Major Samuel Ringgold was the first U.S. officer to die in the war with Mexico.

The Story:

Following the battle of Palo Alto, Ringgold became a national hero. His countrymen celebrated his efforts to develop the “flying artillery” that performed so well in combat. They also mourned his death from wounds received in that fight. Numerous prints and paintings showed him receiving his fatal wound. Poems and songs praised his bravery. Citizens even named towns, streets, and parks for the first officer to die on the battlefield. But he wasn’t the first and he didn’t die on the field.

Ringgold was struck by Mexican cannon fire during the battle of Palo Alto on May 8, 1846, but did not die on that day. He had both legs amputated and was sent to a hospital at Point Isabel. There, he succumbed to his wounds on May 11.

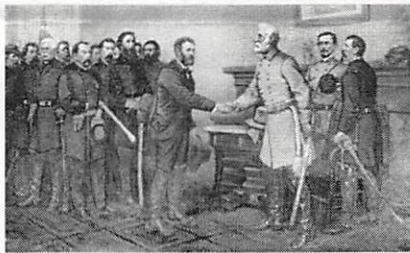
Several other officers died before this date.

Some fell before a formal war declaration. Colonel Truman Cross and Lieutenant Theodore Porter were killed in April 1846, in separate attacks by bands of Mexican guerrillas. Lieutenant George T. Mason fell in combat with Mexican troops on April 25 at Rancho de Carricitos. That skirmish prompted a formal war declaration but again occurred before a formal conflict.

Lieutenant Jacob Blake died on the field at Palo Alto on May 9, but not from battle wounds. He shot himself with his own gun in a freak accident the morning after battle.

That leaves Major Jacob Brown as the first officer to die in combat wounds after war was declared. The commander of the U.S. fort on the Rio Grande was struck by Mexican cannon fire on May 6 and died on May 9—two days before Ringgold. Brown received recognition for his sacrifice, most notably as the namesake of Fort Brown and the city of Brownsville, Texas. Ringgold, however, remains widely known as the “first killed.” in the war.

Appomattox: A Reunion of Friends?



The Claim:

Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee fought side by side in battles of the war with Mexico before leading opposing armies in the U.S. Civil War. The two old friends discussed their shared experiences in the first war just before signing their famous peace treaty at Appomattox Courthouse in 1865.

The Story:

Numerous veterans of the war with Mexico fought in the Civil War, some for the Union and some for the Confederacy. Often men who had been friends in the first war were forced to directly confront each other in the later conflict.

Lee and Grant both fought in the war with Mexico, but they were not close friends. Grant, a Lieutenant in the infantry, and Lee, a Captain in Corps of Engineers, apparently only crossed paths once during that war.

The two men did speak briefly about the war with Mexico before settling down to business at Appomattox. In an attempt to lighten the mood, Grant mentioned their one time acquaintance. General Lee reportedly replied, “Yes, I know I met you on that occasion, and I have often thought of it and tried to recollect how you looked, but I have never been able to recall a single feature.” After a few more words, the two moved on to discuss terms of surrender.

A better example of a meeting of former brothers-in-arms occurred between Grant and Confederate General John Pemberton. Before Pemberton surrendered the besieged city of Vicksburg to Grant on July 4, 1863, the two old friends and veterans of the battle of Palo Alto first sat down together under a tree and recalled the years when they had been fighting in the same army for the same cause.

A Golden Piece of Ground?



The Claim:

General Mariano Arista buried a payroll box full with gold somewhere near Palo Alto on May 8, 1846. He was preparing to pay his troops when the U.S. Army arrived at the scene. As he rushed to confront the enemy, Arista ordered paymasters to bury the box of pesos for recovery after the battle. The clash went poorly for Arista and he withdrew before he disinterred the gold. Following the disastrous loss at Resaca de la Palma, the Mexican army retreated and was unable to retrieve the money. A small fortune may still be hidden in the brush.

The Story:

Supporters of this myth offer a variety of endings to the tale. Some report that those who buried the gold returned years later to claim it. Others insist that it remains in the ground. Treasure hunters have searched for the gold in the 150 years since the battle. Stories abound of ghostly fires that flare up

in near where the pay box lies. There have even been suggestions that a modern treasure hunter found the box and disappeared with its riches.

Did the box exist? Almost certainly not.

Arista had very little money to buy food and even less to pay the troops. In the months leading up to the 1846 fight, the Mexican army made its payments in the form of worthless paper or IOUs. Since the Mexican government was bankrupt and its treasury empty, Arista never received a large quantity of gold to disburse to the troops.

There was also no reason to haul payroll across the river. The troops had nowhere to spend the money and, as they prepared for battle, they would have been far happier with a small increase in their rations than a whole chest of gold.