

Palo Alto Battlefield

National Historic Site
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

RESACA DE LA PALMA



Charge of Captain May/Capture of General La Vega.

Courtesy, United States National Archives

RESACA DE LA PALMA



On May 9, 1846, General Zachary Taylor led 2000 troops to the spot where the road to Matamoros crossed Resaca de la Palma. Here, Mexican General Mariano Arista had positioned his 3000 men in the dense chaparral that lined this former bed of the Rio Grande. In the road, cannon batteries guarded the path across the waterway.

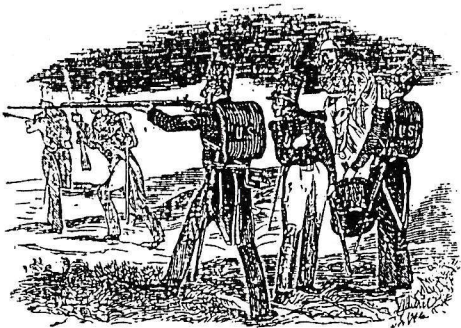
Taylor directed his troops forward into battle. US artillery rolled forward and blasted down the roadway. Under cover of this fire, infantrymen deployed in small squadrons and entered the thickets. Within minutes, US and Mexican soldiers had engaged in the fierce hand-to-hand combat that was to become the deciding battle of the war along the Rio Grande.

BACKGROUND

When territorial disputes erupted into war between the United States and Mexico, US General Zachary Taylor became concerned for the safety of his base on the Rio Grande. Fort Texas, across the river from Matamoros, was isolated from supply lines and within easy striking distance of the Mexican troops massed on the opposite shore. Believing that an attack was coming, on May 1, 1846, US General Zachary Taylor, marched his army to the coast to obtain provisions needed to withstand a Mexican siege. In his absence, Mexican troops surrounded Fort Texas and directed a cannon barrage against Jacob Brown and

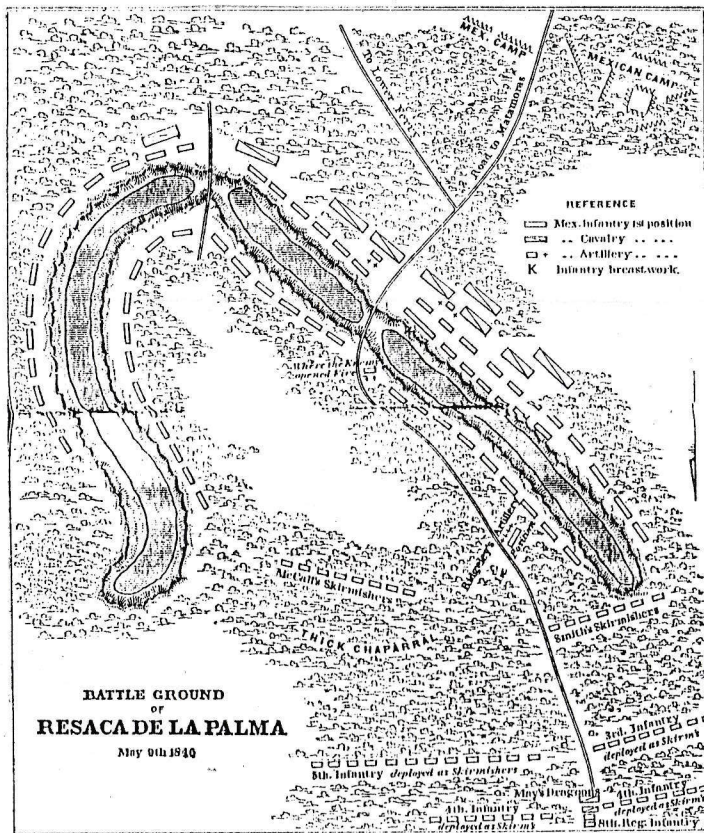
his 600 men, who had remained behind to defend the post.

This siege led the two armies into battle. Taylor's forces rushed to rescue the Fort; Mexican troops determined to hold the siege. In a May 8th clash at Palo Alto, Mexican forces prevented the US Army from reaching its fort, but suffered heavy casualties from US cannon fire. For this reason, Arista withdrew to Resaca de la Palma early the following morning. Here he expected heavy brush and the banked walls of the old river bed to nullify the US artillery and provide the Mexicans with a defensible position.



THE BATTLE

The US troops advanced on the resaca on both sides of the road, but concentrated to the west against the left side of the Mexican line. Using skills learned in frontier wars, the soldiers pushed forward through the dense undergrowth



against heavy fire. Reaching the edge of the resaca, the men found a

The maneuver surprised the Mexican soldiers. Already engaged with troops in front of them, the defenders suddenly found themselves under attack from the side as well. These men fought valiantly to prevent an advance, but were inexperienced with brush warfare and finally wavered before the onslaught.

As this action took place within the chaparral, General Taylor called up two dragoon platoons to charge the roadway and seize the cannons blocking the path. These horsemen, led by Captain Charles May, allowed the US artillery to draw fire then galloped in columns across the bridge. May's charge suffered intense fire and heavy casualties, but finally took the guns, along with General Rómulo Díaz de la Vega, who had refused to retreat.

With artillery silenced, US troops now attacked on the road and through the brush. Several units, most notably the Tampico Battalion, stood their ground, but the Mexicans were overwhelmed and began to retreat. General Arista tried to rally his forces by placing himself at the head of a cavalry

path across the water, pushed through the Mexican flank and fought back towards the road.

charge, but heavy fire forced him to join the rush back to the Rio Grande.

AFTERMATH

The combination of musket shot, bayonet attacks, cavalry charges, and cannon fire took its toll on both armies. The victorious US army counted 45 dead and 97 wounded on the field of Resaca de la Palma. Mexican forces listed their losses at 160 killed, 228 wounded, and 159 missing in action. Many of the missing were among the dozens of soldiers who lost their lives in the retreat as they tried to brave strong currents to reach the opposite bank of the Rio Grande.

The fight also had decisive results. The Mexican retreat ended the six day siege of Fort Texas (renamed Fort Brown to honor its fallen commander). Within weeks, Arista withdrew his weakened force from Matamoros, and allowed Taylor's army to occupy the city. With these moves, the Mexican army effectively gave the United States control of land north of the river, a condition that would become permanent with the peace treaty of 1848.

TODAY

Resaca de la Palma battlefield has faced its own attack in the years since the war. Brownsville, Texas, the town that developed around Fort Brown, has gradually surrounded the area. The position of the Mexican lines and the points of heaviest fighting have been the hardest hit by construction along the resaca.

Important portions of the battle site do survive. The field is currently split by Paredes Line Road, just

north of Price Road in Brownsville. The modern road probably bridges the resaca at the same point as the original crossing. Open areas to the east and west of the road preserve portions of the US positions during the fight. The resaca itself also remains and along its edge can be seen traces of the chaparral that so greatly influenced the battle. The site is privately owned, but the State of Texas has erected a marker to commemorate the battle.

