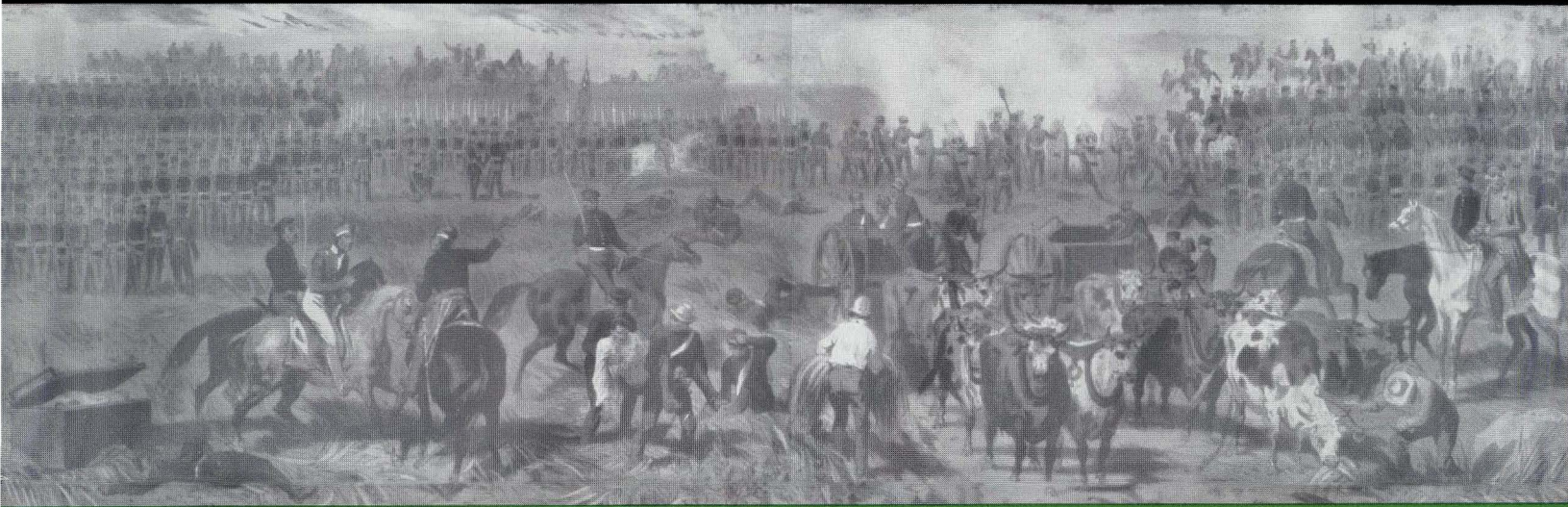


Palo Alto Battlefield

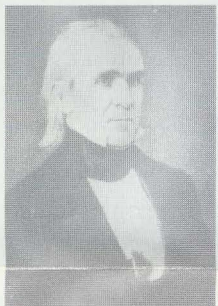
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Palo Alto Battlefield
National Historic Site
Brownsville, Texas

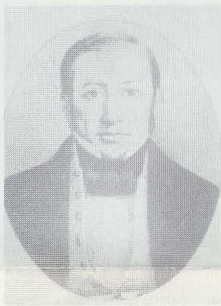


Territorial Disputes

When the United States annexed the Republic of Texas in 1845, President James K. Polk announced that the Rio Grande—following its winding course from the Rocky Mountains to the Gulf of Mexico—was the boundary of the twenty-eighth state. This border provided the United States with a vast expanse of territory and represented a giant step toward Polk's goal of stretching the nation to the Pacific coast.



James K. Polk



Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga

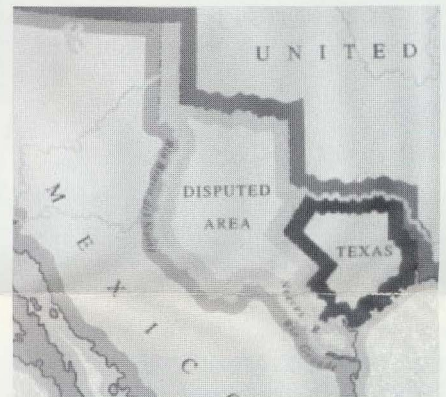
Mexico was not eager to recognize this river as its territorial limit. The Texas boundary had been disputed since 1836, when the province gained its independence from Mexico. Mexican officials continued to assert that Texas was a much smaller territory, with its border defined, in part, by the Nueces River—more than 200 miles north of the Rio Grande.

Many Mexican leaders—including General Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga, who seized the Mexican Presidency in January 1846—also refused to concede the independence of Texas and still claimed the region as their own. When the United States added additional demands that Mexico sell its vast New Mexico and California territories, Paredes responded that he would discuss nothing but the return of Texas.

In July 1845, Polk sent Brevet Brigadier General Zachary Taylor and a 4,000 man army to the Nueces River, to defend against a threatened Mexican attack on Texas and as a show of force to influence negotiations. When this move failed to produce Mexican concessions, Polk ordered the army onward to the Rio Grande. In March 1846, Taylor led his troops south, to a bluff overlooking the Mexican city of Matamoros, and began construction of a fort, known as Fort Texas.

General Paredes was not swayed by this display of power. He dispatched Mexican troops northward to fortify the south bank of the river and appointed Mariano Arista as the General in Chief of this army.

With troops positioned on opposite banks of the Rio Grande, fighting became inevitable. On April 25, 1846, a large force of Mexican troops overwhelmed a U.S. scout party in a brief skirmish on the north bank of the river at a site called Rancho de Carricitos. Mexican leaders proclaimed the battle to be a brave act of national defense against an invading army deep in Mexican territory.



U.S. President Polk made a similar statement. When word of this clash reached Washington D.C. on May 10, he announced that Mexico had "spilled American blood upon the American territory" and demanded a response. On May 13, 1846, Congress complied with a declaration of war against Mexico.

War on the Rio Grande

Following the first skirmish of the war, military action proceeded quickly.

Aware that his outpost on the Rio Grande was vulnerable to siege, on March 1, 1846 General Taylor marched the majority of his troops to the Gulf coast to gather supplies and await reinforcements. Two days later, Mexican troops surrounded the riverside fort and began to bombard the post and the 500 troops that remained within.

On May 7, Taylor marched to relieve his embattled outpost. On May 8, about eight miles from the Rio Grande, his 2,300-man force

was intercepted by Mariano Arista's 3,400-man army on the prairie of Palo Alto. There, the two forces faced off in an artillery exchange that lasted from mid-day until nightfall.

With this stand at Palo Alto, Mexican forces maintained their siege of the U.S. fort, but suffered severe casualties.

In the early hours of May 9, Arista's troops withdrew to Resaca de la Palma, a brush-covered ravine three miles north of the river, and prepared for another fight. U.S. troops pursued and, that afternoon, engaged the

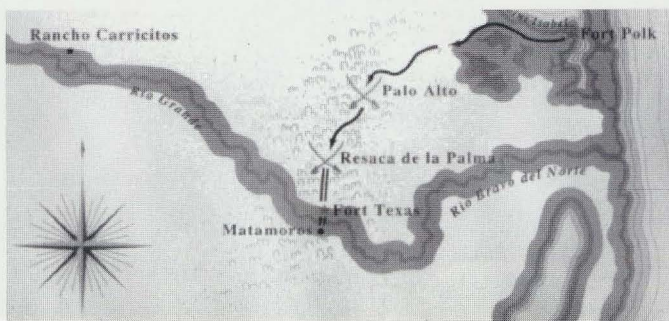
Mexican soldiers in a second battle.

In the short but fierce clash, the American army overwhelmed the Mexicans and sent them rushing for the safety of the river. Taylor's forces also ended the siege of Fort Texas.

His forces decimated by the two battles, General Arista determined that he could not defend Matamoros and withdrew westward toward the city of Monterrey. On May 18, 1846, U.S. troops crossed the Rio Grande, occupied Matamoros without a fight, and brought the first campaign of the war to a close.



Mariano Arista



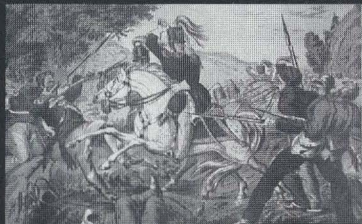
Zachary Taylor

Palo Alto Battlefield

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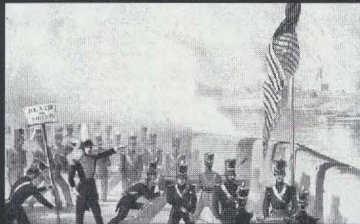


Rancho de Carricitos

The first encounter of U.S. and Mexican troops was a clear military victory for Mexico. Captain Seth Thornton's 63-man scout party was patrolling the north bank of the Rio Grande, investigating reports that Mexican forces crossed the river, when they were overwhelmed by General Anastasio Torrejón's 1600 man force. In a matter of minutes, eleven U.S. soldiers were killed and 46 taken prisoner.

U.S. President Polk, however, earned a political victory with the clash. Faced with an American public that was reluctant to fight Mexico, he used the skirmish as a tool to rally support for a declaration of war.

Today, the exact spot of the skirmish is unknown, but the site is remembered with a historical marker on Highway 281, approximately 25 miles west of Brownsville, Texas.

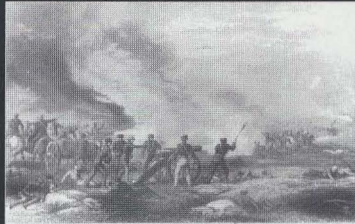


Fort Texas/Fort Brown

The hastily constructed Fort Texas served as the U.S. base on the Rio Grande during the spring of 1846. The star-shaped structure, formed from packed earth, also became the target of the siege that provoked the first major battles of the war.

The siege was characterized by periods of heavy cannon fire and longer periods of inactivity. After six days, each army counted only two casualties in the fight. But one of the U.S. dead was Major Jacob Brown, the fort commander. The Major was wounded by cannon fire and died in the final hours of the siege and the post was later named Fort Brown in his honor.

Only a portion of this original post has survived to the present. These eroded remains and some historical markers may be found near the Fort Brown Golf Course in Brownsville.



Palo Alto

The May 8, 1846 clash at Palo Alto was an open-field combat typical of the 19th century. The two armies formed long battle lines and faced each other on the broad prairie.

Mexican troops had the advantage of numbers but it was firepower that would decide the battle. U.S. heavy cannons pounded the Mexican lines while light artillery turned back charges and left Mexican troops defenseless on the field.

At day's end, Mexican forces suffered more than 100 dead and 125 wounded. By comparison, U.S. troops listed 5 killed and 17 wounded.

The Palo Alto site has survived the years relatively undamaged by development. There, visitors may still see the broad prairie and surrounding tall trees that inspired the name "Palo Alto."



Resaca de la Palma

Following the devastating clash at Palo Alto, General Mariano Arista withdrew to Resaca de la Palma, hoping to use the dense brush of the area as a shelter from cannon fire.

On the afternoon of May 9, 1846, U.S. troops engaged the Mexican force in these dense thickets in a furious hand-to-hand struggle.

Skilled at fighting in the brush, the American army quickly advanced and drove the Mexicans from their positions. The bloody clash left 160 Mexicans dead, 228 wounded, and 159 missing. U.S. troops counted 45 dead, 97 wounded.

In modern times, much of the Resaca de la Palma site has been overtaken by development. Portions of the site, a historical monument, and the resaca bed itself may be seen from Paredes Line Road in Brownsville, Texas.

Palo Alto 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.

Presently, the park is acquiring property and moving forward with efforts to fully restore the battlefield to its

appearance at the time of the 1846 battle. The park is also developing trails, facilities, and visitor services at the site.

Plans are also underway to preserve and interpret the Resaca de la Palma and Fort Brown sites. The National Park Service is working closely with the City of Brownsville, Texas, the International Boundary and Water Commission, and other private and public entities to preserve these internationally important sites.

Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site currently operates an interim visitor facility from its offices at 1623 Central Boulevard in Brownsville, Texas—on the second floor of the International Bank of Commerce Building.

The center offers exhibits, an orientation video, information, and special programs on an occasional basis.

The park also offers interim access to the battlefield—which lies at the intersection of FM 511 and FM 1847 in Brownsville. On-site offerings will increase as the park moves forward with development plans.

For additional information,
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E-mail: paal_interpretation@nps.gov
Internet: www.nps.gov/paal