

Palo Alto Battlefield

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



National Historic Site
Texas



Battle of Palo Alto, May 8, 1846. Lithograph by Adolphe Jean-Baptiste Bayot after Carl Nebel, 1851. AMON CARTER MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS

Nations in Conflict: A Fight Over Texas

"The jurisdiction of the United States...has passed the capes of Florida and been peacefully extended to the Del Norte." That's how U.S. President James K. Polk, in his December 1845 message to Congress, characterized the recent annexation of Texas by the United States, with a boundary along the Rio Grande (or Rio Bravo del Norte). He had campaigned for the Presidency with a pledge to extend the United States to the Pacific Ocean, and the addition of the Republic of Texas as the 28th state represented a major step toward that goal.

Mexico, however, challenged annexation. Although Texas had severed ties with Mexico in 1836, many Mexican leaders refused to recognize its independence, and they denounced the U.S. move as an attack on Mexico. Even those Mexicans who had accepted the loss of Texas bristled at the claim that the Rio Grande formed the boundary of the new state. Mexico had always mapped Texas as a much smaller region—bounded in part by the Nueces River. Polk's call for a Rio Grande border placed a huge expanse of territory in dispute (*see map*).

Polk attempted to force a settlement of the boundary issues. In the summer of 1845, he sent an envoy to Mexico City to negotiate an agreement. He also ordered Gen. Zachary Taylor to lead a 4,000-man army to Corpus Christi, on the Nueces River. Officially, Taylor's army had moved to defend Texas against threatened Mexican attacks. But the show of force also was designed to convince Mexican leaders to accept the loss of Texas, agree to the Rio Grande boundary, and, perhaps, even sell the New Mexico and California territories.

The tactic failed. In Mexico, hard-line Gen. Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga marched to the capital, seized control of the government, and announced that he would discuss nothing but the return of Texas. Clear battle lines had been drawn.

Polk continued to exert pressure by ordering General Taylor onward to claim the Rio

Grande. In March 1846 Taylor led his troops south, occupied the bank of the river across from the Mexican city of Matamoros and began construction of Fort Texas, an earthen fieldwork that would serve as his base of operations. General Paredes showed equal resolve. He expelled the U.S. envoy from Mexico, sent thousands of troops to Matamoros, and appointed General Mariano Arista to command this Army of the North.

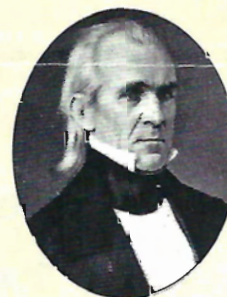
It was Polk who finally hesitated. Many political foes at home challenged his claims to the Rio Grande boundary, and Polk realized that by moving troops to the other side of the Rio Grande or initiating conflict, he risked turning the American public against him. Instead, he ordered Taylor to wait for Mexican forces to cross the Rio Grande, which Polk could portray as an attack on American territory.

He didn't have long to wait. Arista believed that Taylor's army had marched hundreds of miles into Mexican territory and, in late April, ordered troops across the Rio Grande to confront the Americans. Taylor heard rumors of this Mexican movement and sent a 63-man scout party, headed by Capt. Seth Thornton, to investigate. Some 28 miles west of Fort Texas, at a tiny settlement called Rancho de Carricitos, Thornton's party suddenly found itself surrounded by 1,600 Mexican soldiers under the command of Gen. Anastasio Torrejón. In a brief skirmish, 11 U.S. soldiers were killed and most of the rest taken captive.

When President Polk learned of the "Thornton skirmish," on May 10, 1846, he announced that Mexico had "shed American blood upon...American soil" and demanded action. Although some legislators referred to the coming conflict as "the murder of Mexicans upon their own soil," on May 13, 1846, Congress responded with a vote to declare war. Less than half a year after Polk had declared the peaceful acquisition of the Rio Grande, the United States and Mexico entered a two-year conflict to decide the matter.



The annexation of Texas by the United States in 1845 was a major cause of the U.S.-Mexican War.



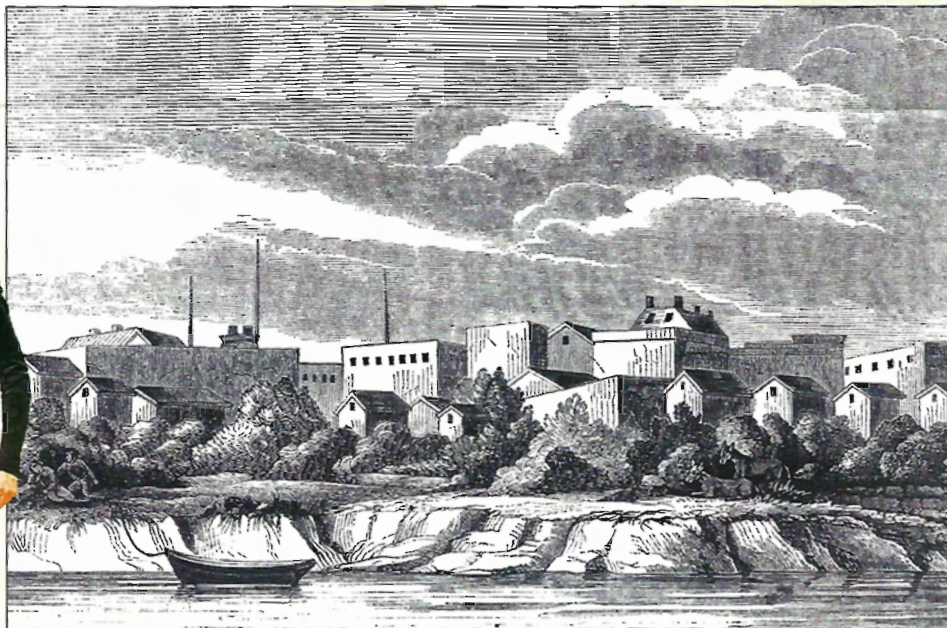
U.S. President James K. Polk relied on a war with Mexico to settle territorial differences and add a vast area to the United States. His tactics, however, raised questions about national honor, the extension of slavery into newly acquired lands, and the role of the military in the United States.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



Mexican President Gen. Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga seized control of the Mexican government to take a strong stand against U.S. territorial claims. By marching his troops to the Mexican capital, however, he ultimately weakened Mexican defenses along the Rio Grande.

BENSON LATIN AMERICAN LIBRARY,
UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN



SPECIAL COLLECTIONS DIVISION, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES

The Mexican city of Matamoros (above) found itself at the center of conflict along the Rio Grande. Positioned on the Rio Grande near the Gulf of Mexico, it became a target for a U.S. army that wanted to "show the flag" along the river while remaining close to naval supply lines. The city also became a

staging area for Mexican troops marching to the Rio Grande. Following the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, Mexican troops abandoned Matamoros. U.S. troops occupied the city on May 18, 1846. For the next two years Matamoros would serve as a base for U.S. operations in Mexico.

The Opposing Forces

Above: These soldiers, a dragoon and an infantry officer in campaign dress, are typical of those who fought under Taylor in northern Mexico in 1846.

FROM A PAINTING BY H. CHARLES McBARRON. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE U.S. ARMY

Left: A captain of the 1st Line Regiment of Mexico, which formed part of Arista's Army of the North.

FROM A PAINTING BY G. A. EMBLETON. ©GOSPREY PUBLISHING LTD.

Some 4,000 U.S. troops occupied Corpus Christi, just within territory under dispute with Mexico. When Mexico refused to bow to this display of power, the army marched toward a confrontation on the Rio Grande. Lithograph by Charles R. Parsons, 1847.

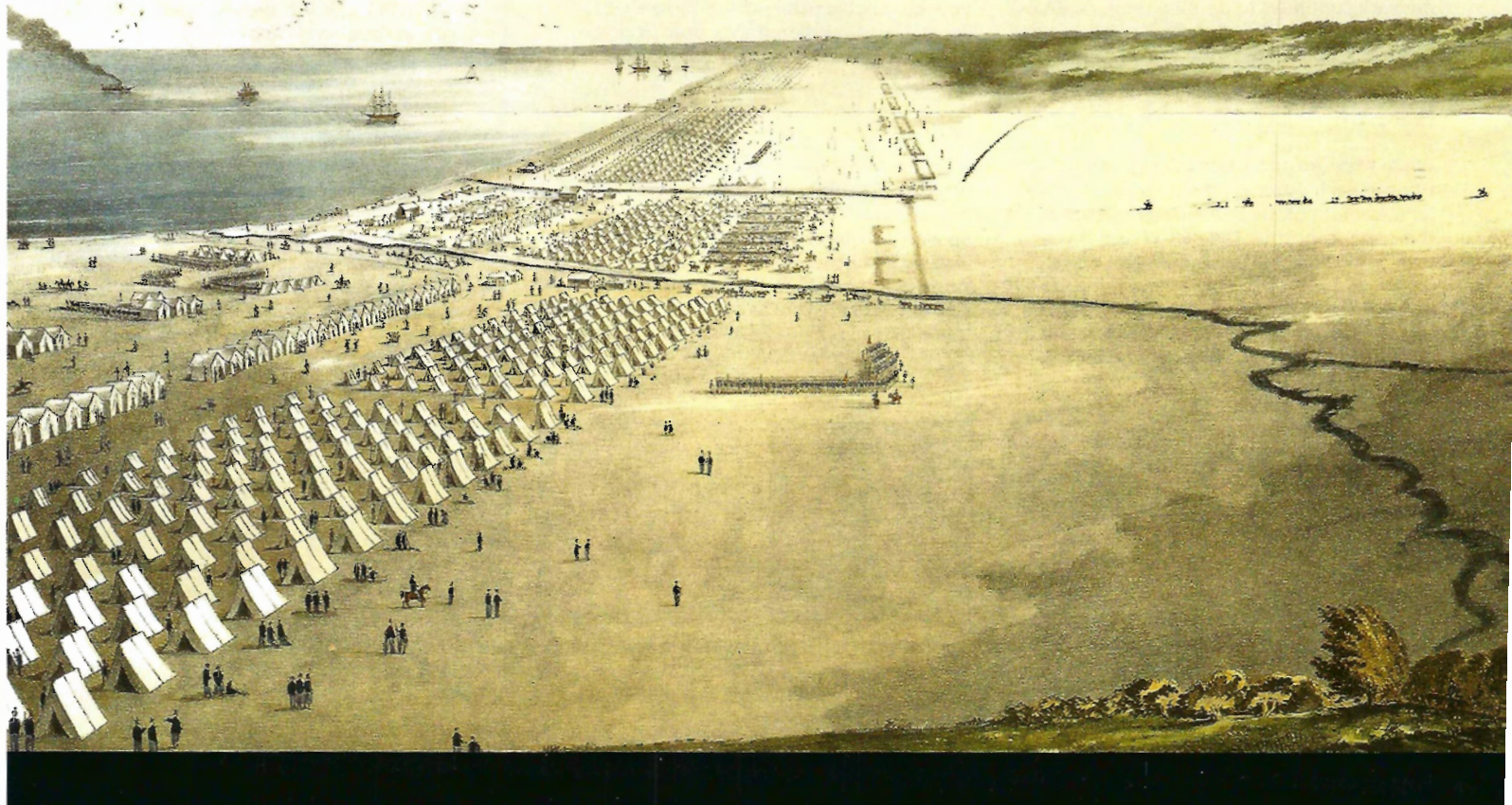
AMON CARTER MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS

The two armies that faced each other on the Rio Grande were as different as the nations they represented. Mexico's army was larger than the U.S. army of 1846, and more Mexican troops marched to the Rio Grande. Mexican officers also had seen battle on numerous occasions, including clashes of the Texas Revolution of 1835-36. Many of the young U.S. officers had never faced the heat of battle but, as graduates of the military academy at West Point, had received training that would allow them to distinguish themselves in combat.

Gen. Mariano Arista's army relied heavily on cavalry—especially the fast-moving lancers who could charge across a field to engulf an enemy. Taylor's army had only a small force of dragoons, or mounted infantrymen, and relied more on infantry, or foot soldiers. Arista's troops carried a larger number of cannons in-

to the field, but Taylor's guns were newer, had greater range, and fired a variety of multiple-shot projectiles. The U.S. forces also included well-trained regiments of "Flying Artillery"—lightweight guns that could be rapidly repositioned and fired. These units provided a defense against the Mexican cavalry.

Each army relied on smoothbore muskets, but the U.S. forces had recently forged guns, while Mexican troops received older, often-faulty weapons. The men carrying these guns in the American ranks were often European immigrants—primarily of Irish and German origin—who had volunteered in the hopes of earning a place in U.S. society. Indians formed part of the Mexican army, including many who had been drafted into service. Despite these differences, troops of both countries received broad praise for their loyalty and bravery in battle.





During the six-day siege, American defenders of Fort Texas withstood a heavy Mexican bombardment with limited casualties. One of those killed was Maj. Jacob Brown, for whom the post was renamed. The city of Brownsville, Texas, grew up around it.

NATIONAL ARCHIVES



Gen. Mariano Arista expected the open prairie of Palo Alto to favor his larger army and his cavalry. Instead, the power and mobility of U.S. artillery placed him at a disadvantage.

SPECIAL COLLECTIONS DIVISION, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT ARLINGTON LIBRARIES



The battle of Resaca de la Palma was primarily an infantry clash in dense thickets. A cavalry charge by Capt. Charles May's dragoons, however, captured both Mexican Gen. Rómulo Díaz de la Vega and the American imagination.

AMON CARTER MUSEUM, FORT WORTH, TEXAS

War Begins on the Rio Grande

The outbreak of hostilities at Rancho de Carricitos led to more military activity along the Rio Grande, centered around the U.S. outpost of Fort Texas. General Arista immediately began moving additional troops across the river in an effort to surround the isolated earthwork. In response, General Taylor marched most of his army to a coastal supply base at Point Isabel on the Gulf of Mexico, where he waited for ships carrying supplies needed to withstand a prolonged siege. He left behind some 550 men under the command of Maj. Jacob Brown to defend the post until his return. Unable to prevent Taylor's departure, Arista arrayed his soldiers around the fort on both sides of the Rio Grande and on May 3 ordered his artillery to open fire.

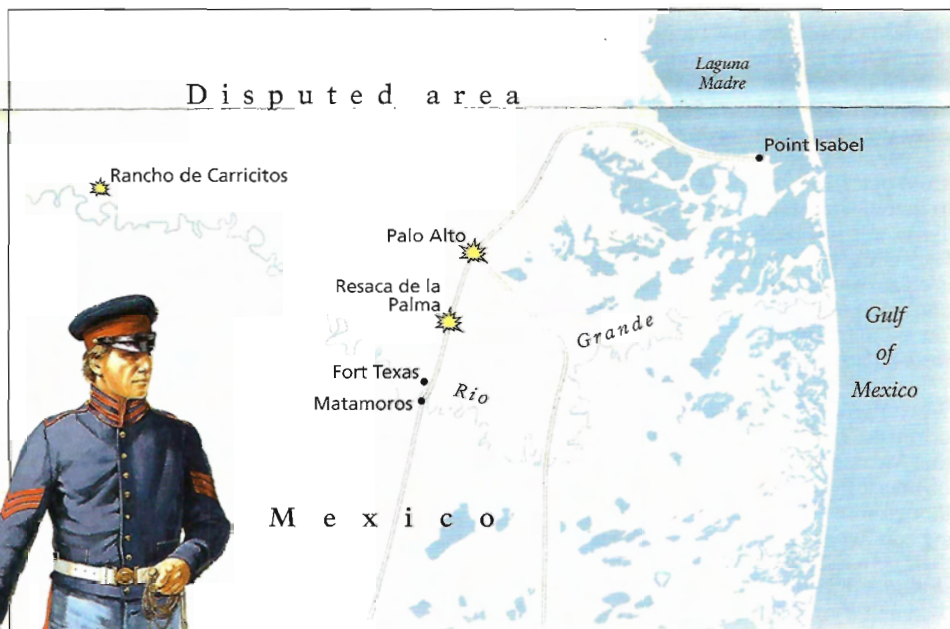
Aware that their compatriots were under attack, Taylor's troops improved their defenses at Point Isabel, gathered supplies and ammunition, then set out on May 7 with 2,300 troops and 200 supply wagons on the 25-mile march to break the siege. General Arista watched this advance closely and on the morning of May 8, 1846, in an effort to maintain his blockade of Fort Texas, positioned 3,200 troops on

the halfway point of the Matamoros-Point Isabel Road, where it crossed the broad plain of Palo Alto. That afternoon the two forces engaged in a fierce four-hour artillery duel on the prairie. Although Arista held an advantage in troop numbers, Taylor's 18-pounder siege cannon dominated the battle, pounding Arista's lines with exploding shot and decimating the Mexican ranks. Mexican efforts to mount cavalry charges were turned back by the maneuverable and quick-firing "Flying Artillery" of Maj. Samuel Ringgold and Capt. James Duncan. Mexican soldiers held their ground, but with a toll of 100 dead and 125 wounded. Taylor's force counted only 9 killed and 17 wounded by comparison.

The following morning, Arista withdrew his battle-weary soldiers five miles to Resaca de la Palma (also known as Resaca de la Guerrero), a brush covered ravine astride the road to Matamoros, three miles north of the Rio Grande. He hoped to use the dense chaparral along the bank of this old river bed to shelter his troops from the potent U.S. cannon fire. Taylor's troops pursued the Mexicans and, on the afternoon of May 9, engaged Arista's sol-

diers in hand-to-hand combat in the thickets. Skilled at such fighting, the American army quickly overran the Mexican lines. A cavalry charge into the heart of the Mexican position then broke resistance and forced Arista's troops into a disorganized retreat across the Rio Grande that ended the siege of Fort Texas. Mexican losses in the battle were 160 killed, 228 wounded, and 159 missing, including many who drowned trying to cross the river.

U.S. losses at Resaca de la Palma were 45 killed and 97 wounded, but the American army now firmly held the land north of the Rio Grande and would never face another effective Mexican challenge in that sector. Still, it would be months—only after Mexican forces suffered more disastrous defeats and their capital city fell to the army of Gen. Winfield Scott—before the two nations signed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ending the war. Mexico's leaders then faced the painful task of renouncing claims to Texas, accepting the Rio Grande as the boundary, and selling vast stretches of other territory to the United States. The end of the battles on the Rio Grande was only the beginning of the bloodshed over land.



Light artilleryman, Ringgold's "Flying Artillery" battery.

ILLUSTRATION © BY RICHARD HOOK



Gen. Pedro de Ampudia, second in command on the Rio Grande, urged Arista's removal after his defeat. Ampudia himself suffered a similar fate, losing his command after Taylor defeated him at Monterey.

BENSON LATIN AMERICAN COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN



Maj. Samuel Ringgold devoted years to developing the "Flying Artillery" that served so well at Palo Alto. In his moment of triumph, however, he was fatally wounded by a Mexican cannon ball.

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, GIFT OF THE WILLIAM WOODVILLE ESTATE



Capt. James Duncan's daring use of light artillery turned back the final Mexican cavalry charge at Palo Alto, and allowed Capt. Charles May to make a dramatic charge at Resaca de la Palma.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



One of the most respected generals in the Mexican army prior to the war, Mariano Arista saw his reputation tarnished by the defeats on the Rio Grande. Removed from command following the battles, he eventually recovered to become Mexico's Secretary of War in 1848 and President of the Republic in 1851.

PUBLIC DOMAIN



The battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma thrust Zachary Taylor into a national spotlight. Additional victories at Monterey and Buena Vista solidified "Old Rough and Ready's" status as a hero. By war's end he was so popular that he was elected President despite his lack of political experience.

BENECKE RARE BOOK AND MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY, YALE UNIVERSITY



Gen. Rómulo Díaz de la Vega fought at Palo Alto and fell captive at Resaca de la Palma, where his determination to stand his ground earned him the admiration of soldiers in both armies.

BENSON LATIN AMERICAN COLLECTION, UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN



Lt. Ulysses S. Grant played a minor role in the battles on the Rio Grande. Like many young U.S. officers, he remained unknown in the war with Mexico but rose to prominence in the Civil War.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Palo Alto Battlefield 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. Efforts to restore the battlefield to its 1846 appearance are currently underway, and the park continues to develop trails, facilities, and visitor services at the site. The park is located at 7200 Paredes Line Road (FM 1847)

in Brownsville—just north of the intersection of FM 511. It is open daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Plans are also underway to preserve and interpret the Resaca de la Palma and Fort Brown sites, both listed as national historic landmarks. Today the Resaca de la Palma battlefield lies on Paredes Line Road in the heart of Brownsville, Texas. Although much of the original scene has been overtaken by the growing border city, a 38-acre portion of the site, the waterway, and traces of the chaparral have survived. The site is currently owned by a private foundation that is working with the National Park Service to protect it and open it to the public.

Fort Brown, the namesake of Brownsville, Texas, has also suffered over time from the effects of erosion and levee construction on

the Rio Grande. Earthen mounds marking the remains of the fort can be seen adjacent to the Fort Brown Golf Course. Palo Alto Battlefield is cooperating with a number of private and public partners to preserve this site and make it available for public enjoyment and education.

For More Information

Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site
1623 Central Blvd., Suite 213
Brownsville, TX 78520
(956) 541-2785
www.nps.gov/paal

Palo Alto Battlefield is one of more than 380 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about parks and National Park Service programs in America's communities, visit www.nps.gov.

It's Still A Battlefield

When Mexican and United States troops confronted each other on the Palo Alto battlefield, cannon blasts and musket fire were not their only concerns. They also faced hazards from poisonous snakes and insects, prickly plants, and the harsh environment of the field. Today the dangers of war are gone, but the natural hazards remain and make the site a potentially dangerous area. Please minimize

your risk by following these guidelines: Stay on marked paths and in designated areas; do not wander onto the prairie or into the brush. Be alert for snakes, thorny plants, stinging insects, and other plant and animal threats. Drink plenty of water and guard against heat and sun stroke. Report any perceived dangers to a park ranger.

Help us protect this special place. Please respect the battlefield and the memory of the men who fought and died here. Do not remove plants, animals, or artifacts. Avoid harm to any living or historical objects. Be aware that hunting is prohibited and carrying weapons on federal property is a crime. Metal detectors and digging are also prohibited on the battlefield. Please place any litter in trash cans.

Palo Alto Battlefield is home to a large variety of plants, animals, birds, and reptiles common to the Lower Rio Grande Valley. A few are pictured here; check at the visitor center for additional information.

©GPO:2005-310-394/00398 Reprint 2004
Printed on recycled paper.



Harris hawk

©KEITH CHANNING, HAWK CONSERVANCY, UK



Desert hackberry

©BENJY J. SIMPSON, TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY, DALLAS



Texas horned lizard

©MARILYN LAMANTIA



Western diamondback rattlesnake

©G. C. KELLEY



Javelina

©D. ROBERT FRANZ



Battlefield Trail Guide

In the early afternoon of May 8, 1846, 2,300 U.S. troops, escorting 300 wagons full of supplies, marched out of thickets of thorny brush and onto the broad prairie known as Palo Alto. Across the field, where the road toward Matamoros once again entered the chaparral, some 3,200 Mexican soldiers lined up to block the way.

Within minutes, the peaceful coastal prairie—named for the “tall trees” that ringed the field—erupted with the rumble of artillery fire. For five hours the two armies engaged in a fierce battle, the first of a 2-year-long war.

Much has been written about Palo Alto, the men who fought in the battle, and the strategies and tactics they employed. Nothing, however, can substitute for the experience of walking upon the ground where history took place and viewing the surroundings that soldiers encountered more than 160 years ago.

This guide is designed to assist you as you take that walk; to orient you to the site and facilities, explain the surroundings, and help keep you safe during your stay.

We hope that you enjoy your visit.

The Battle Setting

United States General Zachary Taylor led his troops onto the prairie from the north and immediately spotted the Mexican troops on the southern end of the field. The U.S. soldiers advanced until they reached a position about 600 yards from the Mexican forces and then deployed into their own battle lines.

Mexican General Mariano Arista had positioned his men in a long line of infantry and artillery with cavalry units on the extreme right and left. He hoped to lure the U.S. troops into an attack on his line and then engulf them with charges by the cavalry.

Taylor, however, opted to remain in a defensive formation to protect his wagon train. Instead of a charge, he relied on cannon to shower the Mexican line with a variety of artillery shot.

Arista attempted a flanking maneuver on the unmoving American line but failed. Cavalry charges on the U.S. right and left flanks were turned back by blistering fire of the U.S. light artillery.

During the five hour battle, the opposing lines shifted slightly, but neither army made a significant advance. United States troops suffered relatively few losses in the cannon exchange while Mexican casualties numbered in the hundreds. This set the stage for a Mexican withdrawal from the field and a U.S. victory the following day at Resaca de la Palma.



The Natural Setting

As you walk along the battlefield trail and view the field from the overlook, you will see a landscape similar to the scenery viewed by soldiers in 1846.

Much of the low-lying vegetation is typical of a traditional south Texas coastal prairie. Wildflowers that tolerate salt and heat thrive on the field, as do plants like Gulf Cordgrass, a thick grass with razor-sharp points that caught the attention of soldiers in 1846.

Other vegetation has begun to encroach on the field. Development in the lower Río Grande Valley has drained much of the water from a once marshy prairie. On this dry soil, mesquite and cactus thrive,

in many cases waging their own territorial battle with the original prairie plants that occupied the site.



Hallowed Ground

In 1850, Melinda Rankin, a visitor to Palo Alto Battlefield, described the site as deserving of remembrance and respect. “The soil which has been wet with human blood,” she wrote, “has become too deeply hallowed to be soon regarded with careless indifference.”

Rankin’s words capture the feelings of many visitors to the site. While observing the historical markers and the natural environment of the modern field, it is important to remember that the ground also holds the memory of gallant deeds, loyal service, and spilled blood. Though the exact location of their graves is unknown, a number of Mexican and U.S. soldiers were buried on the field.

As you walk, we encourage you to remember the sacrifices made by U.S. and Mexican soldiers, to learn about their experiences, and to act in a way that shows respect for their service.





Visitor Opportunities

USE THE MAP ABOVE TO LOCATE VISITOR OPPORTUNITIES IN THE PARK.

- 1** THE PALO ALTO VISITOR CENTER serves as the primary orientation point for the park, offering exhibits and audiovisuals about the battle of Palo Alto and the U.S.–Mexican War. The visitor center also houses the only restrooms and water fountains in the park.
- 2** THE BATTLEFIELD TRAIL extends ½ mile from the visitor center to the battlefield overlook. A number of exhibits along the way provide battle details and soldiers’ perspectives of the events of May 8, 1846.
- 3** THE AUXILIARY PARKING AREA provides easier access to the battlefield overlook. From this point visitors can reach the overlook with a 350-yard walk. Visitors using this shorter path can view the same exhibits as on the longer battlefield trail.
- 4** THE PICNIC AREA has handicap accessible tables. Visitors are encouraged to use this area. Please dispose of any waste properly.
- 5** THE LIVING HISTORY AREA is used for demonstrations and special events. Please speak with park staff for information about upcoming programs.
- 6** THE BATTLEFIELD OVERLOOK is positioned at a point between the opposing battle lines at the western edge of the battlefield. In 1846, an observer from this point would have experienced cannonballs bouncing along the ground and whizzing over head. Today, interpretive panels at this point provide a general overview of the battle and its maneuvers.

Battlefield Orientation

THE PARK HAS INSTALLED VARIOUS MARKERS TO HELP VISITORS UNDERSTAND WHAT OCCURRED ON THE BATTLEFIELD IN 1846. USING THE NUMBERS ON THE ABOVE MAP, YOU CAN LEARN WHAT THESE MARKERS SIGNIFY.

- 7** THE MEXICAN LINE trail runs for several hundred yards along the southern portion of the battlefield. Flags along this route mark the position of the Mexican army at the start of the battle. That line extended for more than a mile on an east-west orientation. Interpretive exhibits along this trail present the battle of Palo Alto from the perspective of the Mexican troops who fought there.
- 8** THE CANNON on the Mexican line trail is a replica of an 8-pound artillery piece. The distinctive “Prussian Blue” color is an accurate color for Mexican artillery of this period. Mexican forces at Palo Alto had 12 cannon, compared to 10 on the U.S. line, but the Mexican guns were older and of smaller caliber than the American pieces.
- 9** THE U.S. LINE trail extends for 300 yards to the point where the initial U.S. battle line crossed the Matamoros to Point Isabel road. A row of flags at the end of this trail marks the battle line itself. Cannon—on the traditional U.S. Army olive green carriages—mark the position of U.S. light artillery at the start of the clash. U.S. heavy artillery used in the battle would have been located near the vantage point at the end of this trail. Interpretive panels present events of the battle as seen through the eyes of the American soldiers who were positioned there.
- 10** THE BOARDWALK OVERLOOK provides a view of the Palo Alto Resaca, which is believed to be the site of “Torrejon’s Charge,” one of the most notable maneuvers of the battle. United States light artillery repelled charging Mexican cavalrymen, demonstrating the versatility of U.S. cannons and rendering the strongest arm of the Mexican army ineffective.
- 11** THE MATAMOROS-POINT ISABEL ROAD was a primary feature of the 1846 battlefield. United States troops used it to enter the prairie from the north. Mexican troops blocked the road on the south end of the field. Palo Alto Battlefield National Historic Site is currently searching for traces of the route, now obscured by vegetation, and seeking ways to mark its course.