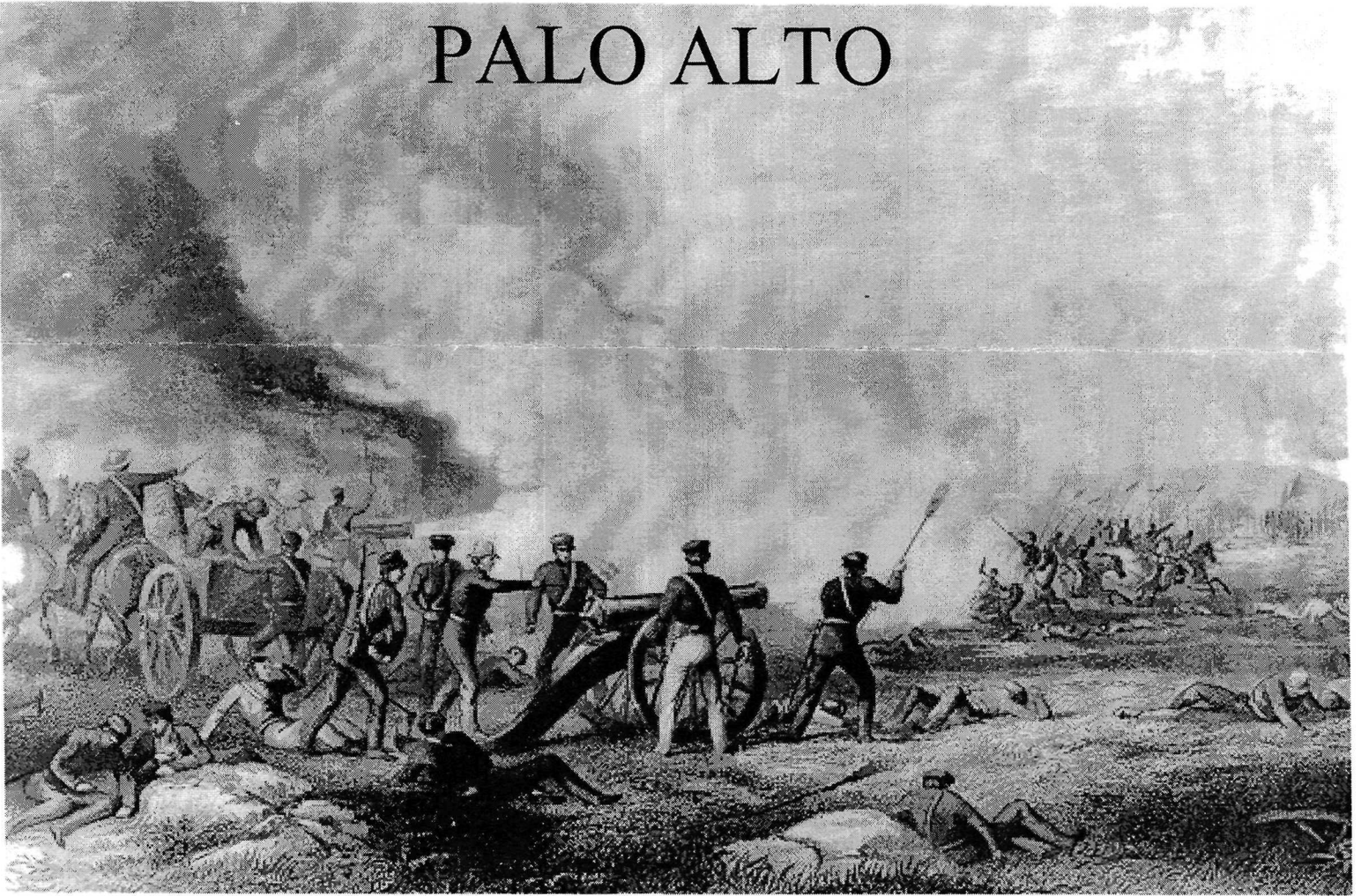


Palo Alto Battlefield

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

PALO ALTO



The Battle of Palo Alto

Courtesy, Special Collections Libraries, University of Texas at Arlington

Palo Alto

On May 8, 1846, General Zachary Taylor's 2,300-man army marched out of the cover of trees onto the broad prairie field known as Palo Alto. At the far side of the plain, Mexican General Mariano Arista had lined his 3,200 troops in a mile-long line, blocking the road toward the city of Matamoros.

As Mexican forces looked on, the US soldiers filled canteens, entrenched their supply wagons, then assumed a battle formation and began a slow advance. The two armies were less than 800 yards apart when Mexican cannons fired, signaling the start of the first major battle of a war between the two countries.

War On the Rio Grande



General Zachary Taylor

The battle of Palo Alto was closely tied to events at Fort Texas, a US outpost on the Rio Grande. Operating deep into territory claimed by Mexico, General Taylor had erected this fort as part of his orders to strengthen US claims to territory north of the river.

When war commenced, with a skirmish between US and Mexican forces on April 25, 1846, Taylor became increasingly concerned about his post. Close to Mexican forces in the city of Matamoros but isolated from reinforcements, Fort Texas made an easy target for attack. For this reason, on May 1, Taylor marched most of his troops to a coastal base at Point Isabel, to gather materials need to withstand a siege.

Mexican General Arista had planned a blockade of Fort Texas and was moving troops across the Rio Grande as Taylor set out. The Mexican troops, however, had difficulties crossing the raging river and could not prevent the US force from reaching the coast. Unable to surround the entire US army, on May 3, Arista settled for a siege of the 600 defenders remaining in Fort Texas.

Receiving word that the fort defenders could endure for several days, Taylor secured his coastal base and gathered supplies, before marching to the rescue of Fort Texas on May 7. The following day, halfway to his destination, Taylor encountered Arista's troops, positioned at Palo Alto to halt the US advance.

The Battle



General Mariano Arista

The battle at Palo Alto was primarily an artillery duel. Taylor opened with a cannon barrage that created huge gaps in the Mexican lines. Noting these results, he used his large guns to pound the opposing lines throughout the day. The exploding- and multiple shot shells took a heavy toll. Mexican troops, equipped with older cannon, poor powder, and single-shot ammunition, were less successful. Their shots regularly fell short or wide of the mark, causing little damage.

Mexican cavalry troops attempted to change these fortunes. Lancers led by General Anastasio Torrejón swept along the the western edge of the field toward the US right flank.

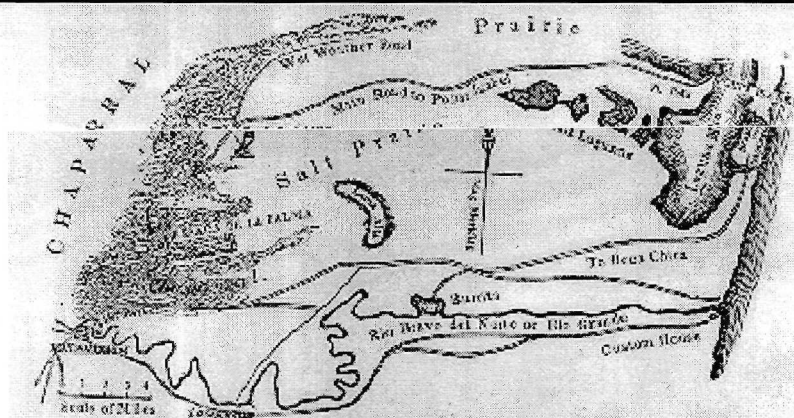
A second, directed against the US supply train, was met by Major Samuel Ringgold's "flying artillery"—light, highly-mobile, field guns that were quickly repositioned and fired. These guns decimated the oncoming horsemen and forced their withdrawal. A final Mexican charge against the US left flank met with a similar reception and also was turned back.

The US soldiers could not build upon their success. Unwilling leave his supplies unprotected, Taylor avoided a charge. Over the course of fighting, US troops pushed slightly further along the road, but when nightfall brought a halt to the fire each army camped on the ground it had occupied prior to the battle.

Aftermath

Fighting at Palo Alto had mixed results. US troops counted only 9 dead and 43 wounded, but had not rescued their fort. Mexican troops stood their ground under heavy fire, but suffered more than 125 killed and 200 wounded. This toll convinced Arista that he could not risk another stand against the US cannon at

Palo Alto. Early on May 9, the Mexican general withdrew to Resaca de la Palma, where heavy brush would limit the use of the US artillery. It was there that American troops overwhelmed the Mexican forces in hand-to-hand combat, forced Arista to retreat, and liberated Fort Texas (renamed Fort Brown).



Legacies

The brief battle at Palo Alto had a lasting impact on military methods.

"Flying artillery," —used for the first time outside of Europe— proved its value and became a standard feature of future battles of the United States and the Americas.

The battle also was an arena for notable people. Generals Arista and Taylor both moved on to become

president of their respective countries. Young Mexican officers would move on to command frontier posts in the years following the war. Similarly, a great number, including James Longstreet, George Meade, John Pemberton, and Ulysses S. Grant, would later earn recognition as generals in the American Civil War. Grant also became the 18th U.S. president.

Today, Palo Alto Battlefield is a U.S. National Historic Site. The park strives to preserve the site of the Palo Alto battle and to interpret the events that occurred there. As the only NPS site to focus on the U.S.-Mexican War, Palo Alto also pursues a larger mission to present information about the entire conflict and its broad range of causes and consequences.

Palo Alto Battlefield NHS may be found five miles north of downtown Brownsville Texas on FM 1847 just north of the intersection with FM 511.

The park's visitor contact area is located at 1623 Central Boulevard, Room 213, Brownsville, TX 78520. Or call (956) 541-2785