
Fort Brown, Texas: A New Frontier

By Sharyn Kane & Richard Keeton

Although small and relatively unknown, Fort Brown in Brownsville, Texas was nonetheless important in the changing tides of history of two neighboring nations, the United States and Mexico.

The original Fort Brown, shaped from dirt on the banks of the Rio Grande River, was hotly contested in the earliest battles of the Mexican-American War, which began



Juan Nepomuceno Cortina, photographed while governor of Tamaulipas, Mexico, led a bandit gang that sacked and burned United States border towns. Photo courtesy of the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma Libraries.

in 1846. Later rebuilt nearby, Fort Brown was the base for soldiers hunting an outlaw many Mexicans considered a folk hero.

When the Civil War erupted in the United States in 1861, Fort Brown again became a flash point of contention. Confederates seized control, then were ousted by the Union, only to have the Confederates recapture ownership. In fact, Confederates based at Fort Brown galloped into one of the very last, if not the final, land battles of the Civil War.

In following years, Fort Brown, rebuilt a third time in 1867, was the scene of deadly racial turmoil and medical experimentation leading to a cure for dreaded yellow fever.

Some of North America's most renowned military leaders participated in Fort Brown's history, including two future United States presidents and two men destined to be president of Mexico. The famous African-American troops, the Buffalo Soldiers, were stationed at Fort Brown and the first military airplane ever fired on in battle took off from the post.

Historians and archeologists continue to learn about Fort Brown. Much of the newest knowledge stems from research ordered by the U.S. General Services Administration before recent construction on the spot where the fort once stood. Expanded facilities were needed for U.S. Customs operations at the International Bridge connecting Brownsville with the city of Matamoros, Mexico.

The National Park Service conducted archeological excavations and historical research at the site to ensure information about Fort Brown would not be lost. Highlights of what was learned are included here.

Border Disputes Begin

In 1836 residents of the Mexican province of Texas revolted, declaring independence, only to be quickly overwhelmed in early fighting against Mexican soldiers.

Fortunes changed, however, when a ragtag army commanded by General Sam Houston surprised and routed Mexican forces camped near the San Jacinto River on the outskirts of the present-day city of Houston, subsequently named for the general. The

Texans captured Mexican leader, Antonio López de Santa Anna, who had little choice but to sign a treaty granting Texas independence.

The treaty designated the meandering Rio Grande River as the border between the new Republic of Texas and Mexico. Mexican authorities, however, vehemently disputed the treaty's validity, arguing that their congress never ratified the document that Santa Anna signed under duress. Furthermore, they insisted that the traditional Texas boundary was much further north and should remain there, paralleling the Nueces River. The Nueces flows into the Gulf of Mexico near the Texas coastal city, Corpus Christi.



Brownsville, Texas, beside the Rio Grande River, is a short walk over the water from Matamoros, Mexico.

Between the Nueces and the Rio Grande, stretched dry, dusty earth, mostly sparsely settled. Called a “no-man’s land,” much of the disputed territory was controlled by outlaws who swore allegiance to no government, only to themselves.

For nine years, Texas existed as an independent nation, recognized by many countries, but not Mexico. Finally, Mexico acknowledged Texas’s independence, with the condition that Texas would not join Mexico’s aggressive northern neighbor, the United States.

Tensions mounted as Texas and the United States flirted with union. The question of Texas’s southern border remained unresolved, with the border dispute festering, then erupting in 1845 when the United States annexed Texas. United States President James K. Polk, who envisioned a

nation stretching to the Pacific Ocean, had been elected the year before. Much of the territory he sought belonged to Mexico, which then encompassed New Mexico, Arizona, and California. Polk hinted that if Mexico wouldn’t sell these territories, the United States would seize them. He also championed Texas’s claim to a southern border along the Rio Grande. Issues of western expansion and the disputed Texas border became intertwined.

“Manifest Destiny” was a popular slogan of the day, reflecting a view that the United States was destined to control vast territories. Bolstered by such sentiments, Polk sent an emissary to Mexico to buy western lands. When Mexican officials rejected the offer, Polk ordered U.S. troops, led by General Zachary Taylor, to invade the disputed region between Texas and Mexico. The president was knowingly courting war. If bloodshed erupted, however, he wanted Mexico to be perceived as the aggressor. Having United States forces in the disputed region increased the likelihood that Mexican troops would cross the Rio Grande and strike the first blows. Powerful voices in the United States spoke against Polk’s provocations, including John Quincy Adams, a former president; John C. Calhoun, a former vice president; and philosopher Henry David Thoreau.

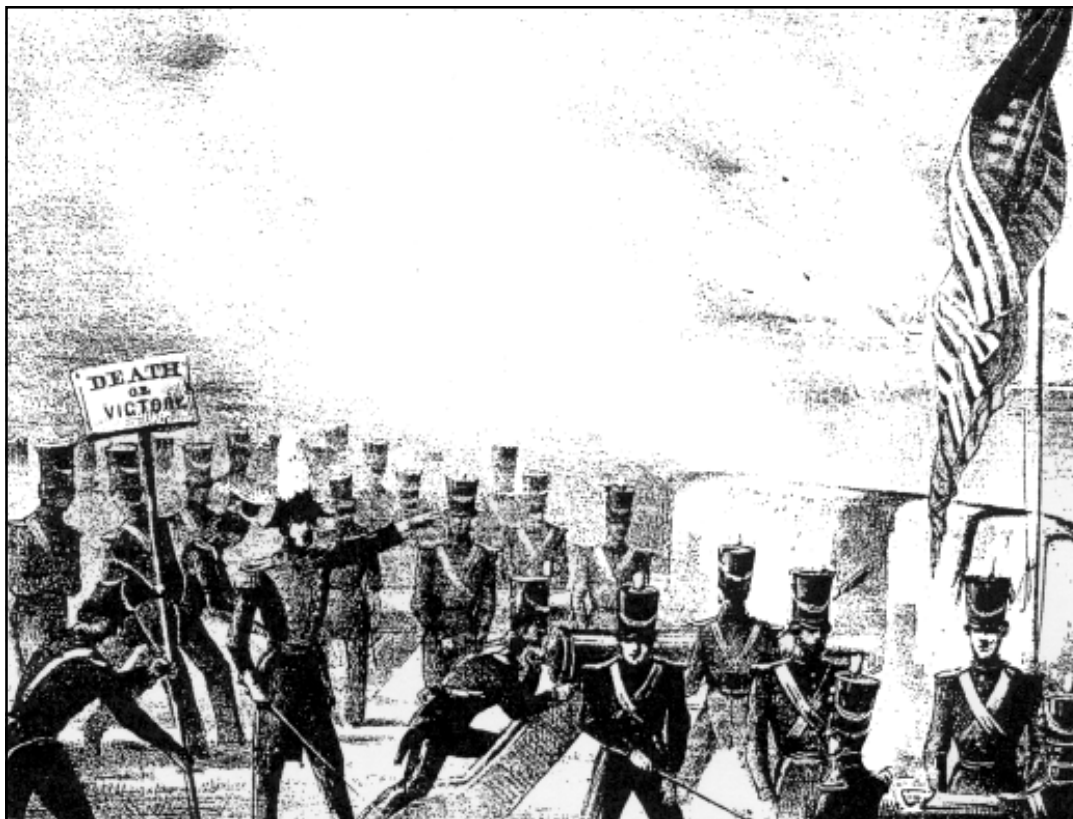
In March 1836, Taylor’s army of 3,000 crossed the Nueces River and marched south, passing through today’s sprawling King Ranch. At the Rio Grande, the general ordered a halt on a peninsular bluff beside a bend in the river, directly across from Matamoros. Seeing the U.S. soldiers, many of the 20,000 residents fled south, leaving behind a population of about 4,000 and the Mexican army.

Taylor Ignores Demands

United States troops paraded into their new camp with much pomp and ceremony. Drums beat, colorful flags and banners waved, and a band played martial music while Mexicans on the other side of the river quietly watched. The spectators must have been uneasy, wondering what would happen with so many foreign troops stationed a stone’s throw away. Also watching were members of the Mexican army, about 5,000 strong, commanded by General Francisco Mejía.

Mejía quickly sent a message to Taylor, protesting the presence of U.S. troops on Mexican soil. Taylor responded that his army had every right to be there because they were on United States property. In the ensuing weeks, other increasingly insistent notes were sent demanding that Taylor and his men leave. All met the same response.

Taylor’s soldiers spent this time building Fort Texas. (Only later, after blood spilled, was the post renamed Fort Brown.) Guided by chief engineer Captain Joseph K.F. Mansfield, they followed a plan calling for an earthen



Major Jacob Brown, in a plumed hat and carrying a sword, leads defenders of the earthen fort on the banks of the Rio Grande River in a bombardment of Matamoros, Mexico. Brown was mortally wounded in the battle.

structure with walls 15 feet wide shaped into a six-sided star. Laboriously, the men molded and stamped the dirt. The finished walls would stand nine to 10 feet tall. They dug from ground surrounding the emerging fort walls, purposely hollowing out a ditch about eight feet deep and 15 to 22 feet wide, creating another defense around the fort perimeter. A draw bridge would span the ditch, and a gate would be placed at the only entrance.

When completed, the fort would project out to form palisades at each of the star's six points where soldiers placed cannons with barrels facing every possible approach, including Mexican gun emplacements on the opposite side of the Rio Grande. Sandbags stacked around the weapons gave added protection against incoming shells.

From atop the fort walls, soldiers could see across the river into Matamoros. The tall spires of the stately Catholic cathedral, still in existence today facing the Plaza Hidalgo, were clearly visible. At least some of the city's inhabitants were undeterred from daily routines by the troops' close presence. Women continued to bring laundry to wash in the river on the Matamoros side, almost within the shadows of Fort Brown's menacing guns.

Nor were the Mexican forces idle while Fort Texas took shape. They strengthened Matamoros's defenses, its forts and gun emplacements. One of the forts of the era, the Casamata, still stands and is maintained as a museum

of Mexican history.

War fever filled the air. Everyone expected shots to be fired, but nobody knew when or where.

Victory Belongs to Mexico

Rumors swirled that the Mexican army was crossing the Rio Grande, justified rumors because the new Mexican commander, General Mariano Arista, was considering just that. He feared that Matamoros could not withstand a siege if, as he expected, U.S. troops attacked. Arista decided to take the initiative.

Meanwhile, Zachary Taylor dispatched a patrol of 63 mounted troops, called dragoons, to survey up river to learn whether the Mexican army was indeed crossing to threaten Fort Texas. On April 25, 1846, the dragoons, led by Captain Seth Thornton, rode through an opening into a field surrounded by thick brush at Ranchos Carricitos. The soldiers were headed toward buildings in the field when some 2,000 Mexican cavalymen commanded by General Anastasio Torrejon appeared and sealed off the only exit. Shots were fired as the U.S. soldiers mounted a disjointed and futile charge, then galloped frantically in all directions, seeking escape.

The fight ended quickly. Eleven U.S. soldiers died, and most of the remaining force was captured, including Joseph

Hardee who later became a Confederate general. But at least one dragoon escaped and slipped back to Fort Texas with word of the military disaster. Now the president had provocation to seek a declaration of war, which the United States Congress soon supplied. The push to complete Fort Texas intensified.

A General's Dilemma

In early May, Texas Ranger Captain Sam Walker, scouting for General Taylor, brought him disturbing intelligence. Thousands of Mexican troops led by General Mariano Arista were crossing the Rio Grande and would soon be in position to block supplies from reaching Fort Texas from the U.S. base, Point Isabel, on the Gulf of Mexico coast. Unless Taylor acted swiftly, his force would be cut off from support by a Mexican army twice the size of his own. There was also another danger: The supply depot at Point Isabel, about 25 miles away, was inadequately protected. In all probability, Arista's men could overrun the guards and capture the army's crucial store of supplies.

Faced with this dilemma, Taylor divided his forces. He marched most of his army out of Fort Texas toward the coast, leaving behind some 500 men with artillery, in hopes they could hold off the expected attack. At first, this high-stakes strategy worked. The Mexican army's crossing of the river was delayed, allowing Taylor's force to skirt them and avoid a confrontation. Moving at night, Taylor safely reached Point Isabel where the soldiers began strengthening fortifications and filling supply wagons for a return to Fort Texas.

The next move was Arista's. The general decided to lay siege to Fort Texas, no doubt thinking that the 500 defenders, along with 100 women, children, injured soldiers, and Mexican captives, could not hold out long. The U.S. troops at Point Isabel would have to attempt a rescue, and when they did, Arista would catch them out in the open and vulnerable.

On May 3, Mexican soldiers began bombarding Fort Texas. United States forces answered with their own cannons, blowing up two artillery pieces on the other side of the Rio Grande and forcing the Mexican army to relocate several batteries. Fort Texas also rained cannon fire directly into downtown Matamoros. The Mexicans retaliated with more artillery shots. Battle sounds grew so loud that the rumbling was heard miles away at Zachary Taylor's coastal position, unnerving an inexperienced Ulysses S. Grant, who later wrote, "...for myself, a young second lieutenant who had never heard a hostile gun before, I felt very sorry that I had enlisted."

Taylor was torn. He worried whether Fort Texas could withstand the assault and also whether he could take time

to bolster Point Isabel fortifications before traveling to the fort's defense. He dispatched several scouts back to Fort Texas to learn how long the troops could hold out. Only one reached the fort, the Texas Ranger, Captain Sam Walker, who learned that Fort Texas's stout dirt walls were standing up well to the early bombardment. Cannon balls that hit the slanted walls tended to bounce harmlessly away, rather than explode. The defenders, led by Major Jacob Brown, were optimistic that they could survive until Taylor's return.

Soldiers continued building the fort during the artillery barrage. They still had the sixth wall to finish, as well as the draw bridge and gated entrance. Sergeant Horace B. Weigert was an early casualty, hit working on the final wall.

The next day, May 4, at four in the morning, the scout, Walker, attempted to return to Point Isabel to report to Taylor, but he was unable to get past Mexican troops and turned back. The Mexican army bombed the fort until late in the night. Fort Texas responded with some artillery fire, taking care to save ammunition. At nightfall, Walker once again rode out. Soldiers inside heard gunfire then quiet.

The Siege Continues

The Mexican bombardment resumed before sunrise on May 5. The noise must have been deafening and unnerving inside the fort. Most of the shells, however, caused little damage, although some landed directly inside the fortifications.

Along with the walls, soldiers erected several traverses. These long tunnels were two to three feet wide and provided covered passage from one part of the fort to another. Built with pickle barrels as side frames and wood planks for tops, the traverses were also covered with a foot or so of dirt, creating cave-like interiors.

Soldiers who were not keeping watch on the walls or firing the cannons sought shelter in the traverses and in smaller, similarly constructed bombproofs, according to National Park Service historian Aaron Mahr.

Before the siege, soldiers used tents on the fort grounds because there was no formal housing. Now forced to seek shelter in the cramped earth traverses and bombproofs, they must have felt like moles. Still, they were relatively safe from Mexican cannons. But they had a new worry. About one thousand Mexican troops began crossing the Rio Grande, taking position near the rear of Fort Texas. Commanded by General Pedro Ampudia, the soldiers extended in a line behind a long lagoon, formed by a former channel of the Rio Grande. (The lagoon is now called the Fort Brown Resaca.)

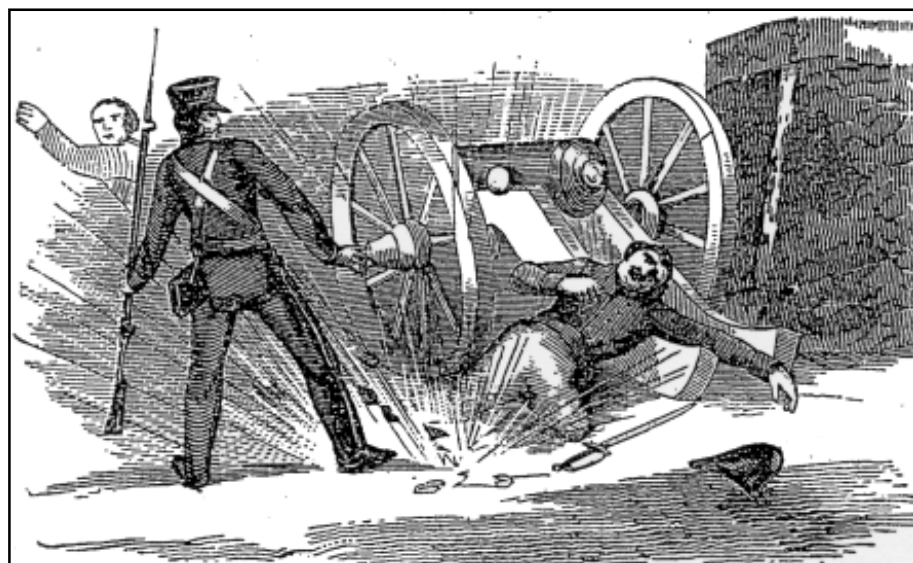
Several soldiers slipped out of Fort Texas to spy on these Mexican positions, inching close enough to determine that a significant force of cavalry and infantry was

perilously close. Clearly, the Mexican army was poised to charge. Efforts to finish the fort's final wall took on even more urgency.

The reconnaissance also established that the Mexican army had stationed artillery near the lagoon. With these weapons fired in concert with their big guns on the other side of the river, they would have Fort Texas caught in a crossfire.

That evening Mexican troops began firing rifles at the fort. They were too far away to hit their targets, but the fusillade must have been an added reminder of just how perilous life inside Fort Texas had become.

The next day, May 6, the onslaught intensified. The fort was now being pounded by artillery from three sides. Fort commander Major Jacob Brown, in charge of the defense, was overseeing the firing of a cannon when an



Major Jacob Brown, leader of the defense of Fort Texas, is felled by a fatal cannon shot.

incoming shell crashed a few feet away and exploded, shattering his leg. Bleeding profusely, he was carried to safety, with concerned officers huddled nearby. Reportedly Brown told them, "Go to your duties. Stand by your posts. I am but one among you." Surgeons decided the only chance to save Brown's life was to amputate his leg.

Ampudia Decides Not To Charge

Meanwhile, General Ampudia tried his own daring tactic. He ordered a group of men, including sharpshooters, to edge closer to the fort. They cloaked their movements by hiding behind a ravine formed by the southern edge of the lagoon. As they crept closer to Fort Texas, they used the banks of the Rio Grande for cover, but fort lookouts spotted them and began firing cannons. They killed one

Mexican soldier, and the others quickly pulled back. Watching the precision of his foe's artillery, Ampudia concluded that charging the fort would be too costly. He would wait and continue the siege.

Lieutenant Braxton Bragg directed the U.S. artillery that fired on Ampudia's troops. Later, Bragg became a Confederate general, commander at such fierce Civil War battles as Chickamauga, Georgia. In fact, 15 soldiers in the Fort Texas siege were later Civil War officers, including George Thomas, whose stand at Chickamauga staved off destruction of Union forces. Other Fort Texas defenders included John Reynolds, a key figure in the Union defense of Gettysburg, a battle that cost him his life, and Lafayette McClaws, a Confederate commander at Gettysburg.

By the evening of May 7, Fort Texas had withstood five days of heavy bombardment. Neither side showed any intention of abandoning the fight, and there was still no sign of help for the U.S. soldiers. Finally, they finished the fort's last wall, as the Mexicans continued to blast away with artillery, with sporadic return fire from within the fort.

U.S. officers decided to take the offensive. Chief engineer Mansfield stealthily led a group out of the fort, managing to approach some Mexican fortifications and explode an embankment. Another group left the protection of fort walls to torch houses occupied by Mexican troops.

These forays no doubt bolstered morale, but did nothing to alter the strategic balance. The U.S. Army, with dwindling supplies and ammunition, remained trapped inside the fort.

Walker, the Texas Ranger, had somehow threaded his way around thousands of Mexican soldiers to reach Point Isabel where he reported to General Taylor that fort defenders were holding up well, giving Taylor time to bolster the supply depot's defenses and to organize a rescue.

By May 8, Taylor was moving toward Fort Texas with an army of 2,300 men and 250 supply wagons. Blocking his path, about eight miles north of the fort, was a Mexican army of about 4,000, commanded by General Mariano Arista.

Armies Clash At Palo Alto

The Mexicans waited at a place called Palo Alto. Their lookouts could see the approaching U.S. troops from some distance crossing the flat salt prairie. Men from the two sides had skirmished the night before, and there was little

doubt that a major clash was imminent.

Arista ordered his men into a wide line, about one mile long, across the road leading to Fort Texas. As the U.S. troops moved closer, they halted, filled their canteens, and took up battle formations. Then they advanced to within about 800 yards of the Mexican positions and stopped.

For about two hours the armies eyed each other warily across an open field of tall grasses. The ground was muddy, with small water pools. Commanders on both sides shouted orders. There were few other loud noises as horses and men shifted uneasily under a blistering sun.

Then, about two in the afternoon, loud explosions shattered the quiet as the Mexican cannons spit out artillery shells. The U.S. force retaliated with their own cannons. Taylor prepared to order his troops to charge, but changed his mind as he saw the damage done by his artillery. The Mexican soldiers, hampered by outdated equipment, were at a distinct disadvantage despite their greater number. They fought with old, unreliable guns and gun powder and depended primarily on single-shot cannon balls. These often fell short, and even when they covered the desired distance flew so slowly that the targeted soldiers simply side-stepped them.

U.S. troops had newer weapons firing case projectiles that exploded on impact and canister shells stuffed with multiple shots. The combined effect was devastating. Cannon fire ripped huge gaps in the Mexican lines. Hot shards of flying metal maimed or killed many. Yet, the Mexican forces did not panic and stood their ground. Arista ordered a cavalry charge. Led by General Anastacio Tarrejon, the highly trained cavalry galloped at the U.S. force's right flank. The usual strategic advantages of cavalry, speed and momentum, however, were reduced by the muddy ground. The waiting U.S. infantry formed into a tight square, bristling with rifles and bayonets, further blunting the Mexican charge. The U.S. soldiers also deployed fast, horse-drawn cannons. Able to move these guns rapidly whenever conditions warranted, they could fire at close range into opposition forces. The Mexican cavalry retreated.

The Mexican army tried two more cavalry charges, with similar results. The "flying artillery" of the U.S. troops, commanded by Samuel Ringgold and James Duncan, proved brutally effective, although Ringgold, who had pioneered light artillery for the army, was fatally wounded.

Cannon sparks ignited grass fires, creating smoke that enveloped the battlefield. When the smoke cleared and the fighting finally ceased, the two armies were in similar positions to those before the battle. The Mexicans still outnumbered U.S. troops and still blocked the way to Fort Texas. The fight, however, had bolstered U.S. spirits and

perhaps undercut Mexican confidence.

Forty-three U.S. soldiers were injured and nine died. Mexican casualties were more severe. Some 100 to 400 Mexican fighters suffered wounds, and at least 125 were killed. Official estimates are unreliable, however, and some historians think that perhaps as many as 200 to 300 Mexican soldiers died.

The armies spent an uneasy night camped on the battlefield. The next day Arista calculated he could reduce his enemy's artillery impact by pulling back to a place with natural defenses. He stationed men on both sides of a lagoon, the Resaca de la Palma, where the tall banks formed shields. The chaparral of bushes and small trees was dense, providing additional protection, near this former channel of the Rio Grande.

Soldiers Fight In The Chaparral

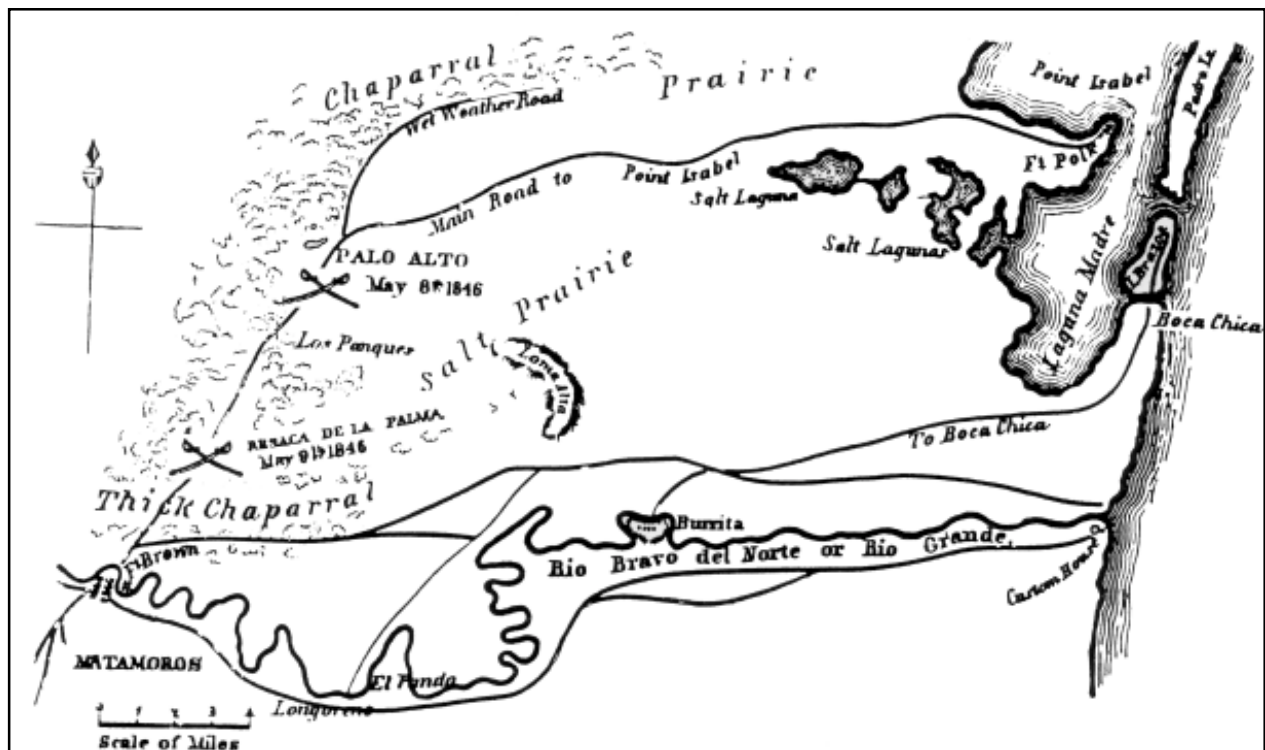
Arista placed his heavy artillery on the main road leading over the resaca. As U.S. troops approached, Taylor divided his infantry into small units and sent them into the chaparral. Skilled in frontier fighting, these soldiers soon engaged Mexican fighters in fierce hand-to-hand combat. Some of the U.S. troops were able to fight their way across the resaca, then turned and began advancing from the side toward the Mexican center.

At the same time, Taylor ordered a direct assault by mounted troops at the Mexican center. While the two armies' artillery engaged in another duel, horsemen led by General Charles May rode hard down the main road. The cavalry, in the open, was extremely vulnerable and needed to get out of range quickly of the Mexican cannons.

With his long, black hair whipping in the breeze, May rode straight into intense rifle fire. The air filled with bullets, but the U.S. cavalry managed to push forward and capture the Mexican artillery. Now a flood of troops hammered the Mexican army from two directions. The Mexicans began retreating. Seeking to stem the tide, Arista displayed his own valor, riding at the head of a cavalry charge into the teeth of the oncoming soldiers. Despite his fearlessness, defeat was at hand. The Mexicans began streaming toward the Rio Grande, only to become targets for Fort Texas cannons.

Fort troops soon ceased fire, however, fearing they would hit their comrades pursuing Arista's men. Mexican forces, now in chaos, tried to swim the Rio Grande to safety. The river, wider and more powerful than today, was swollen by spring rains and swept many soldiers under. The Mexican army reported that 159 troops were missing after the battle. Many likely drowned. The Mexican army also listed an additional 160 soldiers killed and 228 wounded in the battle at the Resaca de la Palma. Forty-five U.S. soldiers died and 97 were wounded.

Major Jacob Brown, who led the fort's defense, died



Crossed sabers toward the center left of this map show where General Zachary Taylor fought the Mexican army, led by General Mariano Arista. They met on a muddy battlefield at a place called Palo Alto, as Taylor tried to advance toward Fort Texas.

as a result of his battle wound a few hours before Taylor's victory and return.

When Taylor arrived, he somberly renamed the bastion to honor the fallen commander. Fort Texas became Fort Brown.

There was no further combat at the fort in the following two years of the Mexican-American War. Fort Brown, however, was an important post on Taylor's supply route as his army trekked deep into Mexico, fighting at Monterey, La Angostura, and Buena Vista against elements of the same army they had battled along the Rio Grande. Other U.S. forces invaded Mexico, including what is now New Mexico, Arizona, and California. At war's end, Mexico was forced to sell half its territory to the United States.

Lingering bitterness remained between the two nations for years. Those north of the new border recounted wartime excesses and atrocities committed by Santa Anna's armies during the fight over Texas independence. For their part, residents south of the border fumed about stolen lands and atrocities they had suffered, especially at the hands of the Texas Rangers.

Search Leads to the Past

After the Mexican-American War, U.S. troops built a new Fort Brown about a half mile north of the original bastion, again beside the Rio Grande. U.S. Customs facilities were recently enlarged on the site where this

second Fort Brown once stood. Archeologists explored some of this area before construction began.

In 1990, researchers guided by archeologist Randall Moir delved into the ground about 250 feet from the present inspection booths near the International Bridge. They uncovered a tiny flake of chert, a type of rock, apparently left from the making of a stone tool by early Native Americans. One of the roving bands of Indians, whose ancestors lived in the area for thousands of years, apparently left the flake during a visit to the river.

Archeologists also discovered a very old gun flint fragment from a rifle that was perhaps carried by Indians soon after the first Spanish explorers appeared and introduced the weapons. Artifacts, objects shaped or used by people, also surfaced that seemed to have been made by Mexicans in the area before Taylor's army arrived. Until recently, historians tended to overlook the possibility that there were settlements north of the river before U.S. forces came. But animal bones and pottery fragments, likely discarded in the 1830s, perhaps earlier, were found by archeologists. Some of the pottery pieces are thought to be English, while other ceramics were locally made. Some fragments were tempered with quartz and left unglazed; others were glazed with lead.

Researchers also uncovered pieces from white clay smoking pipes. These "kaolin" pipes were made between 1790 and 1830. Buttons, various types of bottle glass, and

very thin window glass, all apparently predating Taylor's army, also surfaced.

Farmers Left Traces

Archeologists speculate that the objects were left by tenants or farm laborers working municipal land owned by the city of Matamoros. Hand-made, soft clay bricks or adobe and clay daub, along with small nails, suggest the inhabitants lived in a house with clay walls and a wooden frame, perhaps a small hut with a thatched roof, known as a *jacal*. The dwelling probably stood within 100 feet of the archeological excavation.

In 1991, other researchers working nearby discovered additional evidence of an early settlement. Led by Douglas Potter, archeologists found pieces from ceramic pots made between 1820 and the 1850s. Further evidence of early settlement comes from National Park Service historian Aaron Mahr. He found maps and other historical documents showing substantial farming and several standing structures, presumably houses, near the Rio Grande that existed about the time U.S. forces reached the area.

Archeologists also found buried artifacts from the bombardment and siege of the original Fort Brown in 1846. Gun flints, percussion caps, cannon pieces, and other military pieces were uncovered, prompting speculation that a ridge near the International Bridge was the scene of an intense fire fight. United States and Mexican armies battled over some fortification on the ridge, according to this theory, although more research is needed to confirm this thinking.

Unsanitary Conditions Take a Toll

After the Mexican-American War, life at the new Fort Brown was less eventful, but at times still perilous. Soldiers in the late 1840s and the 1850s occasionally rode out on patrols to hunt cattle thieves and bandits, but for the most part their existence was taken up with drudgery.

The frontier post, built primarily from wood scavenged from the Point Isabel supply depot, was decidedly rustic. There were some softening touches, however. Vines wrapped around posts on the porches of officer quarters, providing shade and some relief from the scorching sun, and nearby picket fences were brightened by flowers planted nearby.

The wood buildings met strong disapproval from the Army inspector general who complained in 1854 that wood was inferior to brick. He further pointed out that cheap brick was available (\$2 per thousand) in the new town of Brownsville. Brownsville, named for Major Jacob Brown, began taking shape in 1848 as soon as the Mexican-American War ended. Charles Stillman, a successful

American merchant who had prospered in Matamoros, bought land across the Rio Grande after the war and formed a company to develop the town. His home, built in 1850, is maintained today as the Stillman House Museum.

Deadly diseases were a constant threat at Fort Brown in the 1850s. In fact, almost every officer died from illness in 1853. Foul drinking water from the Rio Grande was a leading cause of sickness because the river was the polluted repository of human and animal wastes upstream. Food was also often unhealthy. Bruce Aiken, executive director of the Historic Brownsville Museum, points out that soldiers sometimes ate spoiled bacon and "vermin-infested" flour.

Idle time led many soldiers to drink, spawning alcoholism and its attendant ills. Drunkenness was not confined to the enlisted men, either. The fort commander, Giles Porter, was court-martialed in 1857 because of alcohol abuse and relieved of his post by a panel of military judges. Two Virginia friends, Robert E. Lee and George Thomas, were among the judges, both of whom later fought on opposing sides during the Civil War.

Archeologists recently learned more about life at Fort Brown during the late 1840s and the 1850s. The National Park Service's William Hunt and his team located various artifacts that apparently date to this period.

Digging on the former site of the Brownsville Civic Center, they uncovered many tobacco pipe fragments. Called ball clay pipes, these light colored smoking pipes were popular in the 1850s, then gradually lost favor. By the end of the Civil War, smokers preferred terra cotta pipes, mass produced by machine.

Hunt's team also uncovered many ceramic shards that apparently date to the 1850s. Several pieces came from the same light blue plate with a design of flowers and ferns in front of a braided stick fence, along with a human figure. Apparently, the plate was a copy of a design created by a company called Enoch Wood and Sons, which closed in 1846.

Two percussion caps used to shoot military pistols, remnants of the kinds of weapons stockpiled at Fort Brown in the 1850s, also surfaced. There was also evidence that soldiers made bullets and sometimes used their own firearms. The scientists discovered lead spatter, the apparent byproduct of bullet making, and also found a gun decoration, a "cupric star," that didn't come from a regulation Army weapon, suggesting that soldiers kept personal guns, perhaps using them on patrol.

A large spike, probably from a steamboat hull, reflects the importance of river transportation in the early days of the fort before railroads reached Brownsville. Steamboats traveling up river from the coast delivered much of Fort Brown's supplies.

Scientists also exposed pieces of glass probably used



Successful businessman Charles Stillman, Brownsville's founder, built this residence in 1850. Stillman first prospered as a merchant in Matamoros, Mexico, before establishing the Texas town across the Rio Grande River. His historic home is now the Stillman House Museum at 1305 East Washington Street.

in constructing fort buildings in the late 1840s and 1850s.

The Fort Brown of the 1850s was built around a small parade ground with a flag pole at the center. Nearby were graves of several U.S. soldiers killed in the Mexican-American War, including Major Jacob Brown. To the east of the parade grounds were officers quarters; barracks stretched to the south. Behind the barracks were the kitchens, laundries, and stables, according to an 1854 fort map.

Archeologist Douglas Potter discovered in the early 1990s a fragment of a carved bone knife, numerous pieces of various kinds of pottery, and animal bones, including cattle bones that appeared cut with a knife. This refuse probably came from an 1850s kitchen and seemed to confirm the 1854 map's accuracy.

Bandit or Hero

The U.S. Army abandoned Fort Brown in the late 1850s, and without military protection, Brownsville soon fell prey to a fierce fighter, Juan Nepomuceno Cortina. Born into a family with large land holdings near Brownsville, Cortina was in the Mexican cavalry and fought at Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma for control of Fort Brown.

After the Mexican-American War, he settled on a ranch near Brownsville and smoldered over the vast territory the United States had taken from Mexico. Cortina was also incensed by Brownsville-based attorneys and judges whom he thought were stealing land from Spanish-speaking people unfamiliar with U.S. law.

Cortina's own brushes with the law steadily escalated. Grand juries twice indicted him on charges of cattle thievery, but he was not arrested, perhaps because he was already so popular among people of Mexican descent. Then in July 1859 he shot a Brownsville marshal who was arresting and beating one of Cortina's former employees. Cortina and the worker escaped.

That September, Cortina rode back into Brownsville, leading 40 to 80 armed men. They terrorized the townspeople, firing weapons and shouting, "Viva Mexico!" and "Death to the Americans!" They killed five men, including a guard at the city jail, where they freed prisoners. They then took control of the town. Some residents, whom Cortina had apparently targeted to kill, escaped.

Citizens Plea For Help

Leading Brownsville citizens, without U.S. troops nearby, appealed to officials across the border for help. Jose Maria Carbajal, an influential Matamoros resident, agreed to negotiate with Cortina who grudgingly left Brownsville for his ranch about six miles up river. Still, his fame among poorer Mexicans grew, as did his army. His notoriety spread throughout the Rio Grande Valley to the point that any banditry that occurred was blamed on him whether he was involved or not, a situation he seemed to relish, according to historian Bruce Aiken.

The fight between Cortina and those who wanted to stop him escalated. A Brownsville posse joined militia from Matamoros to attack Cortina's forces at his ranch, but they

were beaten back and lost two cannons in a hasty retreat. Soon after, one of Cortina's men, Tomas Cabrera, was taken captive in Brownsville. Cortina threatened to attack the town again and burn it to the ground unless the man was released. But before he could fulfill his threat, Texas Rangers, commanded by Captain William Tobin, arrived and hung Cabrera. Next, they went after Cortina, but his forces repelled them.

During these struggles, Cortina issued two proclamations asserting the rights of Mexicans in Texas. He also appealed directly to Texas Governor Sam Houston to defend those rights, but his string of successes was about to end.

Because of appeals from Brownsville citizens, the U.S. Army again sent troops to Fort Brown. The fort's new commander, Major Samuel P. Heintzelman, led a force against Cortina, dealing him a stinging defeat. Cortina's army, now grown to about 400 men, suffered 60 casualties and was forced to flee into Mexico.

Cortina's attack on a Rio Grande steamboat also failed when Texas Rangers commanded by John ("RIP") Ford crossed the border to block his maneuvers. Again, the Mexican had to retreat.

Colonel Robert E. Lee next assumed command of Fort Brown and the surrounding military district. He threatened to invade Mexico unless Cortina's hostilities ceased. At the same time, Lee began quiet negotiations with Mexican authorities, gaining cooperation and respect. One Mexican official said of him, "There is a man of honor."

Cortina and his battered force vanished into the Burgos Mountains. There they remained, causing no trouble along the border, for about a year. He returned to the valley during the Civil War to battle Confederate forces then controlling Texas, but suffered another major defeat and again retreated. In subsequent years, he actively participated in Mexican political squabbles and twice named himself governor of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. Eventually, because of United States diplomatic pressures, Mexican officials arrested Cortina in 1875 and transported him to a jail in Mexico City.

Civil War Reaches Texas

Soon after Texas seceded from the Union in 1861 to join the new Confederate States of America, state officials demanded that federal troops abandon Fort Brown and leave all supplies for the Confederacy. U.S. Army Captain B.B. Hill complied with the request to leave, but not before destroying many supplies.

The Confederates took control of the fort and remained there for a time. Military clashes scarring the southeastern landscape of the United States and killing thousands seemed far away from south Texas. Gradually, however, the U.S.

Navy strengthened its blockade of Southern ports, making it increasingly difficult for the Confederacy to export its primary crop, cotton, to Europe and to receive valuable imports to sustain its armies and civilians.

Confederates, as a countermeasure, used blockade runners who camouflaged fast-moving ships along river banks or rarely-used shores before setting sail and trying to slip through the thick net of ships flying the U.S. flag. Brownsville became another increasingly important avenue for trade as the blockade tightened.

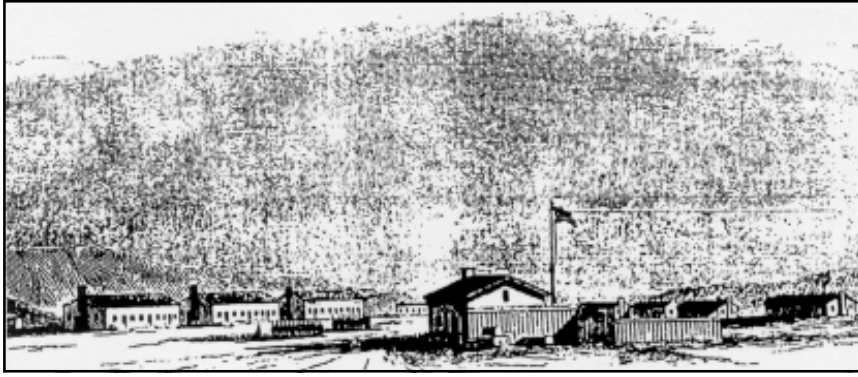
From all over Texas and nearby Southern states, farmers too old, young, or infirm to fight, along with slaves still in bondage, rode wagons loaded with cotton to the banks of the Rio Grande. Taken across the river into Mexico, the cotton was then driven by oxcart toward the coast and the mouth of the Rio Grande. There, at the once sleepy town of Bagdad, ocean-going ships anchored by the dozens waiting to load and unload precious cargoes. Bagdad mushroomed from a small fishing village into a bustling city of 15,000 people, becoming a polyglot of diverse nationalities lured by the possibilities of earning gold from the trade.

A Helpless Giant Can Only Watch

Bagdad and Brownsville boomed because the Union navy had become a helpless giant, watching the blossoming trade, but hampered from interfering by an earlier diplomatic agreement. Cotton from Southern states, once transported across the border, became Mexican goods, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, ending the Mexican-American War, stipulated that the United States would respect Mexico's right to international commerce along the Rio Grande.

Frustrated Union strategists decided to act, but in a manner that didn't violate the agreement. In November 1863, General Nathaniel P. Banks launched an invasion toward Brownsville from Brazos Santiago Island on the Gulf of Mexico coast. Hearing of the Union approach, Confederate General H.P. Bee ordered Fort Brown's evacuation. Confederate soldiers set fire to the fort and dozens of bales of cotton as they left and dumped other cotton, waiting for transport across the Rio Grande, into the river. Fort Brown's fire spread to downtown Brownsville, leaping from one building to the next as smoke and panic engulfed the town. Law and order departed with the army and looting began.

Fearing approaching Union troops, many Brownsville citizens fled across the river, seeking sanctuary in Mexico. Adding to the panic was a tremendous blast as flames engulfed Fort Brown arms depot. Some 8,000 pounds of explosives erupted, creating a blast so massive that it sent a heavy wood beam sailing through the air across the Rio



A government draughtsman made this sketch of Fort Brown in 1860. The drawing appeared in *Harper's Weekly* magazine. While mountains appear in the background, there are actually none near the site.

Grande. The beam crashed into a customs house in Matamoros.

Union troops soon occupied what was left of Fort Brown. They slept in tents and began rebuilding, using bricks stockpiled during the construction of the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, the picturesque cathedral still in existence in Brownsville.

Fort Brown became the Union staging ground for raids against wagon trains carrying cotton toward Mexico. As Union patrols became more vigilant, the wagon drivers changed routes to avoid them, crossing the border more to the north and west, upstream on the Rio Grande and farther from Fort Brown. Once the cotton crossed the border, Mexican soldiers, commanded by General Santo Benevides, provided safe escort to Bagdad, protecting the cotton from thieves.

Union troops, forced to travel farther and farther from Fort Brown to block cotton from reaching the border, were vulnerable to hit-and-run raids by Confederate soldiers led by John "RIP" Ford. Ford, a doctor, acquired the nickname "RIP" during the Mexican-American War when he took time to write "Rest in peace" on soldiers' death certificates. Pressed for time as casualties escalated, he shortened the benediction to "RIP."

Confederates Retake Fort Brown

During the Civil War, Ford and his troops were increasingly emboldened by their successes against Union troops. Union officers, fearing an overwhelming attack, decided to abandon Fort Brown and retreat to the coast. Before leaving, they apparently returned several thousand bricks to the Immaculate Conception Church, according to a soldier's diary entry.

In July 1864 Confederates once again took possession of Fort Brown and remained until the war ended. In fact, Fort Brown troops fought in one of the last land battles of the Civil War at Palmito Hill about 15 miles away, a battle

fought after the conflict was officially over. Confederate General Robert E. Lee had surrendered at Appomattox, Virginia five weeks earlier. But how much troops in south Texas from either side knew about the Confederacy's collapse is a matter of historical conjecture. Some Confederate troops had already headed home, at the very least sensing that the end was near.

Certainly, the ambitious commander of Union troops, Colonel Theodore Barrett, yearned for combat, perhaps to boost his career. He probably knew more fighting was unnecessary. Nonetheless, he launched threatening moves toward Brownsville and Fort Brown, and Confederate forces responded.

On May 13, 1865, Confederate troops commanded by John "RIP" Ford attacked Union soldiers and sent them fleeing toward their base on Brazos de Santiago Island. A running battle continued over about five miles before shooting finally stopped. John Williams was killed, one of the last casualties of the Civil War, which all told took some 670,000 lives from injury and disease.

The French Pose A Threat

U.S. troops retook what little remained of Fort Brown. Confederate soldiers, in the closing years of the conflict, had neither the will nor the resources to make many repairs, and the fort was in poor condition. Consequently, many of the U.S. soldiers lived in Brownsville, occupying homes abandoned by residents who had fled to Mexico in fear of United States reprisals because of their support for the Confederates. The troops at Fort Brown became part of a large Army buildup along the border, prompted by concerns over events in Mexico during the Civil War.

The central government in Mexico City was under the thumb of the Austrian, Ferdinand Maximilian Joseph, known as Maximilian, who was named Mexican emperor by the French who had invaded the country. The U.S. government threatened to invoke the Monroe Doctrine and invade Mexico unless Maximilian stepped down.

Mexican revolutionaries also agitated for Maximilian's removal. The dispute spread to Matamoros, where fighting broke out between two factions. The United States ordered troops, led by General Thomas L. Sedgwick, into Matamoros, ostensibly to protect the U.S. Consulate and other foreigners living there, but also to show willingness to fight to oust the French.

Sedgwick withdrew within about a week when the rival factions in Matamoros ceased fighting and united behind Benito Juarez, who executed Maximilian and became

Mexican president.

For a while, the commander of Fort Brown troops and those stationed nearby at Brazos de Santiago Island was General Phillip Sheridan, whose place in history was already assured because he led the cavalry that rode behind the beleaguered Confederate Army and forced Robert E. Lee to surrender, ending the Civil War.

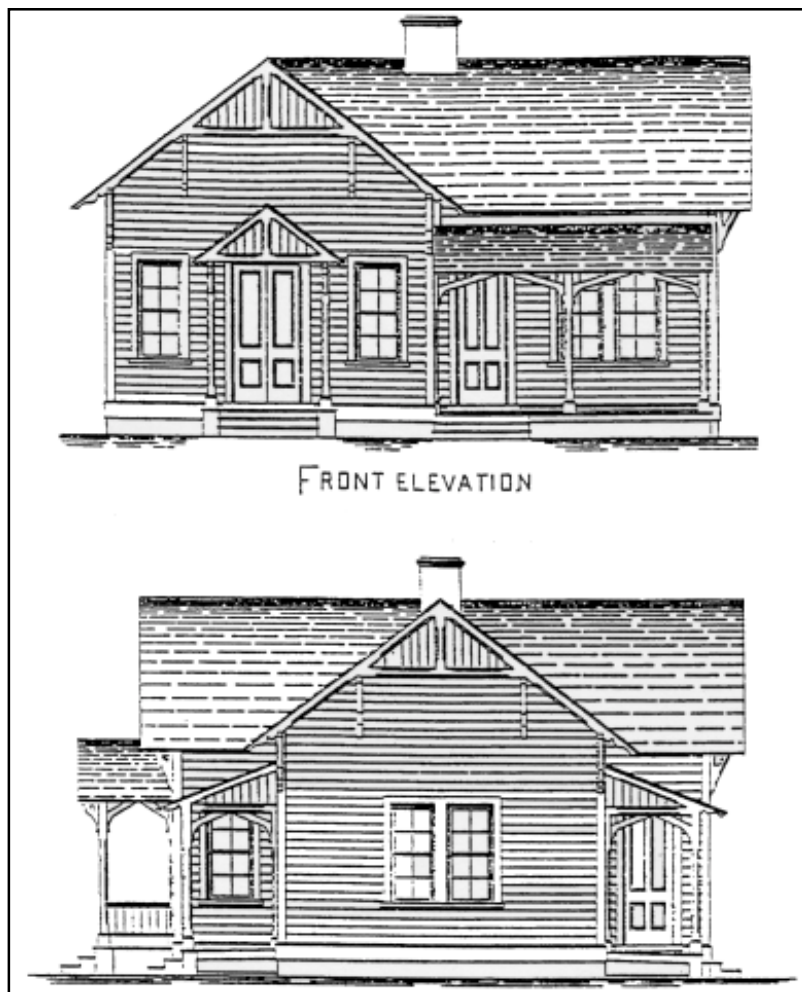
Gradually, Brownsville's citizens returned, many of them pardoned for their support of the Confederacy. Fort Brown soldiers continued to live in Brownsville, but now they stayed in temporary huts instead of private homes. By 1867, fort rebuilding began in earnest, but the project had barely started when a powerful hurricane, one of the worst on record, struck the coast in October, leaving horrible devastation. The coastal city of Bagdad, Mexico, so important during the Civil War, was virtually destroyed. The storm also blew apart many buildings in Brownsville and Matamoros, tearing off roofs and flattening walls. Fort Brown was once again in shambles. Most of the new buildings only recently completed were leveled by the powerful winds.

A National Cemetery Is Declared

Rebuilding began yet again. Administered by Captain Alonzo Wainwright of the Quartermasters Corps, construction over the next 12 years led to between 40 and 70 new buildings, including seven officers quarters, a headquarters building, and a hospital, said to have been the most beautiful hospital on any U.S. Army post. It was during this era that the U.S. government designated the small island surrounded by the Fort Brown Resaca as a National Cemetery. Here victims of the Mexican-American War (including Major Jacob Brown), the Civil War, and the many epidemics that had plagued Fort Brown were buried.

In the 1990s, archeologists located several layers of soil containing pieces of brick buried beneath the Brownsville Civic Center. Researcher William Hunt thinks one of these layers possibly represents rubble left from the 1867 hurricane destruction and the building demolitions that followed. If he is correct, the findings may help future researchers pinpoint other remnants from the storm and the new buildings constructed soon after.

Archeologist Douglas Potter, also working in the 1990s nearby, discovered pieces of pottery, bits of glass, brick fragments, and pieces of metal that perhaps came from workshops in the Fort Brown complex. In 1869, carpenter, blacksmith, and paint shops were apparently clustered together at the fort.



These sketches of building plans drawn in 1879 show a structure from Fort Brown that was studied, then dismantled to make way for new U.S. Customs facilities. The building, once a school and library, eventually will be reassembled for tours.

Doctor's Risky Efforts Succeed

Randall MacKenzie, who served at Fort Brown during the 1800s, became famous for his role in the 4th Cavalry's battles in the West against Native Americans who resisted settlers moving into their lands.

The 9th and 10th Cavalry, the Buffalo Soldiers, also spent time at Fort Brown. According to local historian Bruce Aiken, these African-American troops were some of the most professional to serve at the post in the closing decades of the 1800s. They patrolled more miles from Fort Brown than any other units during the era.

For the most part, life at Fort Brown in the later part of the 1800s was fairly routine. There were occasional patrols to root out cattle thieves but few other activities. For many soldiers in this outpost far from major cities, life was terribly tedious, and they entertained themselves by drinking. Alcoholism became a significant problem, even though soldiers were often able to buy only poor quality



The Historic Brownsville Museum is housed in the former Southern Pacific Railroad Lines depot downtown. The ornate facade shows the influence of Mexican architecture in the town.

whiskey in Brownsville.

Epidemics continued to bedevil the troops, especially lethal yellow fever. In 1882, a young Army surgeon, Lieutenant William Gorgas, arrived in the midst of a yellow fever outbreak. Because Gorgas had never had the disease and therefore was not immune, his superiors forbade him from entering hospital wards.

Gorgas, ignoring the orders, tended the sick and also conducted postmortem studies on diseased victims. When his experimentation was discovered, he was arrested, but talked his way out of trouble and was released a few hours later. Because of his work at Fort Brown and later in Cuba, Gorgas was able to determine ways to eliminate yellow fever.

About the same time that Gorgas arrived at Fort Brown, construction began on a small, two-room building designed to serve as a school and a library for soldiers and their families. Called Building Two, the structure was originally designed in 1879 to be made of wood. In 1880, however, another powerful hurricane crashed into south Texas, again causing major damage at Matamoros, Brownsville, and Fort Brown. After surveying how the storm pulverized wooden structures, officials at Fort Brown probably insisted that Building Two have brick walls.

Archeologist Randall Moir and his crew determined that Building Two was erected sometime between 1882 and 1884. From then until 1907, the building's main function was as a school. There are no records between 1907 and 1922 detailing how the structure was used. Documents from 1922 seem to indicate that the building served as a chapel. Beginning in 1922, the building became housing for soldiers or fort guests. At some point it may have also been used as a fort post office. Later it housed the Brownsville Historical Society museum.

Because of the General Services Administration and the City of Brownsville, the building was preserved, rather than demolished, when the expansion of U.S. Customs facilities required its removal. The structure was carefully studied, then dismantled, and is now stored, waiting reassembly in an as yet undetermined site where visitors can share in this part of the area's past.

Violence Erupts Again

In 1906 word spread in Brownsville that white troops stationed at Fort Brown were to be replaced by African-American soldiers of the 25th Infantry, tough men who had served in Nebraskan Indian country.

Rumors described the new group as near barbarians who would stage drunken orgies and rapes. By the time the soldiers arrived, mistrust and outright contempt for them was widespread. Some were cursed, pushed around, and knocked to the ground. Saloons formerly open to white soldiers were suddenly closed to the newcomers.

Bitterness grew among the black soldiers, until late one night a small group of them fired shots into Brownsville residences and pushed their way into a saloon, where they shot and killed the bartender. They also wounded a town constable, shooting him in the hand, and killed his horse. They fired more shots at the Miller Hotel, the best inn in town.

Fort Brown Becomes A Ghost Town

The rampage caused an uproar and brought on hearings by the U.S. Congress. Eventually all of the black soldiers at Fort Brown were drummed out of the service, and the post was closed. Graves from the military cemetery, including remains of Jacob Brown, were exhumed and moved to the National Cemetery at Pineville, Louisiana in



A postcard from the 1920s shows the Elizabeth Street entrance to Fort Brown. Two soldiers stand near the guard house on the left, ready to grant or deny admittance to visitors. Fort Brown housed soldiers during both World War I and II.

1909.

By 1910, the fort resembled a ghost town with empty buildings and livestock grazing on the grounds, but then events in Mexico led to its revival. When Porfirio Diaz resigned in 1911 as Mexican president after 31 years, fighting erupted between factions seeking to choose his successor. By 1913, the U.S. Consul in Matamoros reported pillaging in the streets, and troops were again dispatched to Fort Brown.

Pancho Villa Strikes

Longstanding resentments simmered between the United States and Mexico, boiling over in 1915, when two signal corps officers took off in a small airplane in April from the Fort Brown cavalry drill field. Their mission was to spy on the movements of Mexicans allied with the revolutionary Pancho Villa. The pilots claimed that they never crossed over into Mexican territory, but whether or not they did, Mexicans shot at them with a machine gun and other weapons. The pair managed to return to Fort Brown safely, earning the distinction of flying the first U.S. military plane ever to be targeted by gunfire.

In October the same year, bandits lassoed railroad tracks six miles north of Brownsville, splitting them apart, then waited until an approaching train derailed. The

engineer was killed in the crash, clearing the way for the bandits to climb quickly aboard the train, where they robbed the passengers and shot two dead.

Soon after, Pancho Villa, leading a band of about 400, invaded the United States and attacked Columbus, New Mexico, where they torched portions of the town and killed 19 people before fleeing back into Mexico. An outraged U.S. President Woodrow Wilson deployed troops all along the border, and Fort Brown was again a busy outpost.

Fort Brown was also important during both World Wars. During the activation of forces for World War II, the 12th U.S. Cavalry was transferred from Fort Brown and replaced by the 124th Cavalry of the Texas National Guard, which was the last cavalry unit in the nation to give up their horses and also the last regiment housed at Fort Brown. The 124th left to fight in Burma in the Far East, leaving behind only a few soldiers at Fort Brown, which was soon deactivated. By 1948, what was once Fort Brown belonged to either the City of Brownsville or Texas Southmost College.



The former hospital of historic Fort Brown is now part of Texas Southmost College.

Contributors

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Remnants of the earthen walls of the original Fort Brown are visible in this historic sketch. This first Fort Brown was abandoned at the close of the Mexican-American War and the dirt was later used to build levees along the banks of the Rio Grande River. Two more forts were later built nearby with the same name, and archeologists have learned considerable information about their pasts through excavation and other research.

Booming International Trade Leads To U.S. Customs Expansion And Fort Brown Studies

Thriving trade between the United States and Mexico prompted expansion recently of truck inspection and administration facilities near at the International Gateway Bridge, linking Brownsville, Texas and Matamoros, Mexico. Archeological and historical research preceded construction so that important knowledge about the site would not be lost. In the Brownsville area alone, an average of more than \$3 billion in trade goods enters each year into the United States over bridges spanning the Rio Grande River. About six million vehicles annually pass into the U.S. from Mexico over the same bridges. Trucks, comprising some 300,000 of the vehicles, carry everything from farm products to textiles to automotive parts.

The U.S. Customs Service of the Department of the Treasury monitors this traffic to prevent entry into the country of illegal drugs, tainted food, counterfeit products, illegal weapons, and other contraband. “We

are here to enforce some 500 laws and to protect U.S. residents from narcotics or terrorists or patent violations,” explains Jorge Flores, Port Director. Interdicting illegal narcotics is a top priority, with Customs agents at the international bridges near Brownsville frequently stopping would-be smugglers attempting to sneak drugs into the United States. Agents use specially trained dogs to help them find hidden narcotics.

Working with U.S. immigration officials and inspectors from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Customs officials also try to facilitate easy movement of legal goods across the border, a flow that has dramatically increased because of new trade agreements between the two nations. “We walk a tight wire. It’s a balancing act,” says Flores. “We try to address our responsibility to halt illegal items without sacrificing efficiency.” He added, “We’re here to protect the public’s interests.”