

Rancho Carricitos Battlefield on the Rio Grande

The National Register sites thematically related to the War between Mexico and the U.S. in and around Brownsville, Texas, attest to the area's pivotal importance in the evolution of relations between the two countries. Remarkably free of development or improvements and significant as the site of the first major battle in the war, Palo Alto became a National Historic Site in 1992. It is the only battlefield from the war between Mexico and the U.S. in the national park system. The nearby National Historic Landmark boundary of Resaca de la Palma pro-

TECTS about one third of that battlefield's core area. Urban development has carved away the rest of the site. Taylor's river fort, which sustained a Mexican bombardment for seven days, was named Fort Brown for its fallen commander. This NHL property encompasses about one third of the fort grounds and includes visible traces of the fort's curtains and bastions. At Port Isabel and Brazos Santiago were important depots for Taylor's army during the war. Both are on the National Register.

Noteworthy for its absence among the collection of war-related protected sites is Rancho Carricitos. Despite its significance as the catalyst for war and for galvanizing international attention on the Rio Grande in the Spring of 1846, Carricitos remains an unprotected and uninterpreted site. Indeed, with the exception of a road marker placed on Highway 281 in 1936, the site remains unidentified a century and a half after the skirmish.

This situation is attributed to several causes. In addition to the small size of the conflict, there

Mid-morning on April 25, 1846, militia lieutenant Roman Falcón led his four mounted scouts along the narrow, crooked trail that cut through the flood forest of the Rio Grande delta country. Waiting about a mile behind the scouts was a 1,600-man brigade led by General Anastasio Torrejón. The Mexican force had just crossed the Rio Grande to the left, or north, bank, for the first time since the U.S. Army under General Zachary Taylor had arrived to claim that side of the river for the U.S. a month before.

Falcón's men were not alone on the road. About to come in sight was a party of 63 mounted U.S. soldiers, dragoons Taylor had sent up the river from his fort opposite Matamoros. The dragoons under Captain Seth Thornton were themselves reconnoitering, searching for signs of Mexican soldiers in the area. Earlier that morning, Thornton had decided to ignore his guide, Chipito Sandoval, who refused to go any further because he was certain Mexican troops had crossed the river and were nearby.

When Thornton's party appeared, Falcón immediately reported to Torrejón, who hurried his men forward. They came upon the Americans at a large plantation-like field known as Rancho Carricitos that sat on the riverbank. Surrounded by a dense, impenetrable chaparral fence with one small entrance on the western side, the field was a natural trap. Inside, the U.S. detail had gathered near a small cluster of huts, or jacales. While Thornton and his officers questioned a man they found in one jacal, the troops relaxed on the riverbank without posting a guard. Torrejón had the field quickly surrounded and then ordered his infantry through the gate and onto the field.

The Americans were caught by surprise. In the melee that followed, nine dragoons were killed and the rest wounded or taken prisoner. Torrejón reported no casualties among his ranks. Later that afternoon, when Taylor was apprised of the fate of Thornton's party, he notified President James Polk in Washington by steamer that hostilities had commenced.

The news of the attack on Thornton's small force reached Washington on May 9. By provoking the Mexicans to cross the river and attack U.S. forces on the left bank, an anxious President Polk could make the dubious claim that "American blood has been shed on American soil." On May 13, he pushed a controversial declaration of war through the reluctant Senate. In Mexico, news of Torrejón's victory at Carricitos sparked hopes that the Mexican division gathering at Matamoros under General Mariano Arista would quickly expel Taylor's army from the area south of the Nueces River, and perhaps force the Americans to rethink their bold annexation of Texas.

Events accelerated on the Rio Grande after the skirmish at Carricitos. Determined to follow up on the easy win, Arista ordered a siege of Taylor's fort on May 3, which continued until May 9. This attack provoked battles between Arista's forces and Taylor's north of the Rio Grande at Palo Alto on May 8 and Resaca de la Palma on May 9. These clashes dashed all hopes for a quick Mexican victory as the American army pushed Arista's forces back across the Rio Grande. On May 18, the U.S. Army occupied Matamoros. Thus began a war that ended nearly two years later with U.S. forces occupying Mexico City, after already capturing the critical route between the capital and the port of Veracruz, and most of northern Mexico.



Highway marker in general vicinity of Carricitos skirmish site.

NPS Americorps archeologist Rolando Garza (right) poses with Alfredo Cantu (left), a third-generation Carricitos farmer. Like many old-timers in the delta, Mr. Cantu had no lore or recollections of the 1846 skirmish, but he told of a rich farming history along the river bank.



was no U.S. victory at Carricitos. The diminutive site didn't elicit the reverence that was shown Palo Alto or Resaca de la Palma. Travelers frequently took note as they passed those battlefields along the Brownsville-Point Isabel Road, which carried traffic until 1853. Carricitos, upriver and off the main thoroughfare, was ignored. Neither Taylor's nor Arista's engineers mapped the skirmish site, and both U.S. and Mexican sources are ambiguous in describing the location. Further difficulties are encountered in the field. Over 150 years of intensive agriculture, combined with the roving nature of the Rio Grande over the flat prairie, have obliterated any obvious features of the skirmish site.

In Autumn 1994, a National Park Service and Texas Historical Commission survey team, with support from the NPS American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP), began to identify, document, assess the condition, and map battlefields from the War between Mexico and the U.S. in southern Texas. Carricitos quickly became a high priority during the surveys because of the site's elusive nature. Extensive investigations in U.S. and Mexican archives combined with archeological surveys yielded no conclusive evidence, but focused attention on Galveston Ranch, an early-20th-century farmstead since razed by levee construction that is popularly believed to be the skirmish site. It lies in the middle of

large plowed fields between Highway 281 and the Rio Grande, about 25 miles west of Brownsville, and within a mile of the highway commemorative marker.

Further surface pedestrian archeological surveys sponsored by the ABPP in 1996-1997 at Galveston Ranch failed to uncover munitions, armaments, or accoutrements to distinguish the skirmish site. However, during the course of the survey work, attention shifted to the cultural features of the battlefield—the jacales described in battle accounts. Eight discreet artifact clusters in a square-mile area among the plowed fields along the river were recorded on State of Texas site forms. Artifacts typical of historic farmsteads of the 1840-1860 era were identified. These included a dark green wine glass, decorated whitewares, yellowware, salt-glazed stonewares, lead-glazed earthenwares, coarse hand-made earthenwares, 19th-century Mexican majolica, and blade gunflints for muskets.

Identifying these settlement clusters raised important topical concerns within the broader thematic context of the war between the U.S. and Mexico. To identify the Carricitos skirmish site, the challenge is to determine how common ranches and farmsteads were along the Rio Grande on this far southern extension of the Tejano ranching frontier in the mid-19th century. If they were uncommon, this site could have been the isolated cluster of jacales in the Carricitos plantation.

In 1846, both the U.S. and Mexico claimed the land between the Nueces River and Rio Grande, yet neither claim was strongly based on occupation by their respective citizens. In fact, since the Texas rebellion in 1836, the land between the two rivers was generally considered unsettled, with the noteworthy urban exceptions of Laredo and Point Isabel. The results of the Carricitos survey and other survey work conducted in the surrounding area, suggest that Mexican families lived and worked on the left bank of the river. Although their numbers were never great, they were probably more numerous than previously thought. In any case, agricultural exploitation of the rich delta soils on the left bank preceded the arrival of Anglo-American culture after the war. Further investigations could yield rich information on the ranching and farming lifestyles of the sparse population on this river frontier.

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Photos courtesy National Park Service.