

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD

Page 1

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD

Other Name/Site Number: PALMITO (OR PALMETTO) HILL BATTLEFIELD

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: South of Texas State Highway 4 (Boca Chica Highway) Not for publication: ___

City/Town: Brownsville Vicinity: X

State: TX County: Cameron Code: 061 Zip Code: 78520

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: ___

Public-State: ___

Public-Federal: X

Category of Property

Building(s): ___

District: ___

Site: X

Structure: ___

Object: ___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

1

1

Noncontributing

___ buildings

___ sites

___ structures

___ objects

___ Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 1

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ____ nomination ____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official

Date

State or Federal Agency and Bureau

5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ____ Entered in the National Register
- ____ Determined eligible for the National Register
- ____ Determined not eligible for the National Register
- ____ Removed from the National Register
- ____ Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

6. FUNCTION OR USE

| | | | |
|-----------|--------------------------|------|---------------------------------------|
| Historic: | DEFENSE | Sub: | Battle Site |
| Current: | AGRICULTURE LANDSCAPE | Sub: | Agricultural Field Unoccupied Land |

7. DESCRIPTION

ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: N/A

MATERIALS: N/A

Foundation:

Walls:

Roof:

Other:

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 4

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

Palmito Ranch Battlefield retains exceptional integrity of setting, feeling, association and location, nearly 130 years after the battle which occurred on May 12 and 13, 1865. Occupying the southernmost tip of Texas, midway between tiny offshore Brazos Santiago (Brazos Island) and the city of Brownsville, the battlefield appears very much as it did when Federal and Confederate troops fought the last land engagement of the Civil War on its windswept and marshy plain.

Of the major geographic locations associated with the Battle of Palmito Ranch—including Fort Brown, Brownsville, Brazos Santiago, the Mexican cities of Matamoros and Bagdad, and the American village of Clarksville—only the battlefield itself remains in a relatively unaltered state since 1865. Neither Bagdad, Clarksville, nor the military depot at Brazos Santiago survive, while the town of Brownsville, itself much changed since the Civil War, has grown to engulf the remnants of Fort Brown. Matamoros is a bustling border city, now as then, but it bears little physical resemblance to the town it was in 1865. The land comprising Palmito Ranch Battlefield, on the other hand, remains virtually unchanged since the mid-19th century due to inhospitable topographic and climatic conditions and lack of development. Thus the landscape contributes to the battlefield's high level of historic integrity by conveying a strong visual sense of the area as it must have appeared during the Civil War.

The following description of the area, written by William Emory in his 1857 *Report on the United States and Mexican Boundary Survey*, is essentially as accurate today as when Emory first ascended the Rio Grande in 1853:

The entrance to the mouth of the Rio Bravo [Rio Grande or Rio Bravo del Norte] is over a bar of soft mud, varying from four to six feet deep, and the river within a few hundred yards of its mouth is not more than one thousand feet wide. The shore-line of the coast, scarcely broken by the action of the river, is formed of a series of low shifting sand-hills, with a scanty herbage. Inside these hills are numerous salt marshes and lagoons, separated by low belts of calcareous clay but a few feet above the level of the sea, and subject to overflow. The first high ground is Burrita, ten miles from the mouth, where there is a small settlement of Mexicans engaged in agriculture upon a very limited scale...

Beyond Burrita, the river still pursues its serpentine course through alluvial soil, with an occasional patch of arable ground occupied by Mexican rancheros engaged in the cultivation of maize and the rearing of goats and chickens.

At the Rancheria de San Martin, a mouth of the Rio Bravo, forty feet wide, opens on the American side into the Laguna Madre, allowing some of the water of the river to escape to the sea by the Boca Chica and the Brazos St. Iago [Brazos Santiago]. On the American side the road leading from the mouth of the river to Brownsville crosses this outlet at San Martin, over a substantial wooden bridge erected by the army.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 5**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

From this point upward to Brownsville the river makes a great bend to the South, and is so winding in its course that frequently the curves almost touch. The land on each side is level, and covered with a dense growth of heavy mezquite [sic], (Algaroba.) It is generally too high for irrigation, and the climate is too arid to depend with certainty upon rain for the purposes of agriculture. The vegetation is of a semi-tropical character, and the margin of the river, which is exposed to overflow, abounds in reed, canebrake, palmetto, willow, and water-plants, and would no doubt produce the sugar-cane in great luxuriance.¹

With little exception, Emory's depiction of the area from Brazos Santiago, the base of Union operations, along the military road that parallels the Rio Grande to Brownsville and Fort Brown, held by the Confederates, was similar to that which the two forces encountered in 1864 and 1865.

The battlefield lies within a barren stretch of coastal plain, where the major vegetation consists of marsh plants and chaparral. A nearly flat expanse of salt marsh and sand dunes is alleviated slightly by a few scattered hillocks and spiked Palmetto trees that dot the landscape wherever the terrain rises a few feet above sea level (See Photos 1-5). A few miles inland from the coast, small thickets of trees and underbrush hug the Rio Grande as it bends back and forth toward the Gulf of Mexico. As the river approaches the Gulf, however, its banks become barren and flat until it empties into the sea. The climate is harsh and unpredictable, with extremely wet, stormy winters and hot, humid summers. These characteristics make the land unsuitable for extensive farming, grazing, or building development, and as a result, the battlefield remains remarkably similar in character to the way it appeared at the time of the battle.

This coastal point is also the target of frequent hurricanes and squalls. Numerous attempts at development—notably the Civil War boomtowns of Clarksville and Bagdad and a 1920s resort planned for Brazos Island—have ended in failure. The remains of early ranches and railroad camps, evidenced by small mounds of mid-19th century artifacts throughout the battlefield, attest to habitation further inland that also failed to thrive. Today, only a few permanent buildings stand at the periphery of the battlefield, primarily in the vicinity of Palmito Hill. Members of the Orive and Champion families retain ownership of much of Palmito Ranch as did their ancestors since before the Civil War.

The battlefield lies approximately midway between Brazos Island, a Union Army base of operations during the Civil War, and Fort Brown at Brownsville, the Confederate headquarters in South Texas (See Figure 1). As the Union troops marched towards Brownsville, they encountered Confederate outposts in the areas of White's Ranch and Palmito Ranch, and this initial resistance determined the placement of the battle. Later in the fighting, the Confederates launched their counterattack in the same vicinity, before driving the Union troops back towards Brazos Island. The most concentrated fighting took place in the area nominated as the Palmito Ranch Battlefield. Small hillocks, or lomas,

¹Emory in Santos, Richard G. (compiler). *Early Visions of the Lower Rio Grande*. Munguia Printers, San Antonio: 1983, pp. 58-59.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 6**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

currently dot the battlefield area, and were present at the time of the conflict. These small increases in elevation, none of which rise more than thirty feet above sea level, were important to both armies for gathering intelligence. Likewise, the dense thickets that grew on the hillsides provided both surveillance and cover.

According to eyewitness accounts of the battle, a few buildings were scattered throughout the plain when the fighting took place—principally ranch houses and auxiliary buildings. Praxedis Orive, an ancestor of the family that still owns part of the battlefield land, was a little boy when the battle occurred. Years later, he recounted to his grandchildren that he first heard the sounds of the battle from his family's ranch house and barnyard at Palmito Ranch. Later that afternoon, according to Orive, Union troops burned the ranch house as they passed through the area. The exact location of the house is unknown. The only surviving remnants of historic properties in the principal battlefield area are ruins, including the concrete steps, brick piers, and concrete foundation of a circa 1920 dwelling, and the adjoining ruins of a small concrete outbuilding. Both are atop Palmito Hill on property owned by the Orive family.

Of the key places and geographic locations germane to the battle, only the battlefield itself remains relatively unchanged today. The marshy soil and unpredictable weather conditions, subject to hurricanes and frequent storms, combine to create an unstable environment not well suited to extensive development. Other sites in the area associated with events leading to and including the battle have been significantly altered or are no longer standing. Soldiers vacated Fort Brown (National Historic Landmark 1960), the Confederate headquarters in Texas at the time of the battle, for the last time in 1944; today, Texas Southmost College owns and occupies the few remaining fort buildings. The city of Brownsville and the college itself have grown to surround the fort, which no longer retains its parade grounds. No buildings or structures survive at Brazos Santiago (National Register 1971), the Union post during the conflict and a recorded archeological site, although artifacts are occasionally uncovered after heavy storms. A hurricane shortly after the war permanently destroyed the once-bustling city of Bagdad, which saw its heyday during the Civil War years as a shipping point for Confederate cotton. However, some of the footings of the quickly erected frame buildings of Bagdad can be seen today.

Only five Civil War battlefields are documented in Texas; two of them are fragmented and designated "lost as complete battlefields" by the Civil War Sites Advisory Commission in its Civil War battlefield report. Of the five, the commission determined that only Palmito Ranch Battlefield exhibits a "good" level of integrity. Further, the commission listed Palmito Ranch Battlefield as the major site associated with the International Interpretive Theme of the Civil War.²

The battlefield has been used primarily for ranching since 1865, as it was in the years prior to the battle. Like nearby Palo Alto Battlefield, a National Historic Landmark (1960) of the

²Civil War Site Advisory Commission. *Report on the Nation's Civil War Battlefields*. Prepared for the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, United States Senate, the Committee on Natural Resources, United States House of Representatives and the Secretary of the Interior. Washington D.C.; National Park Service, 1993, pp. 23, 32.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 7**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Mexican War era, Palmito Ranch Battlefield's major geographical and topographical features remain intact. Little development, either urban or agricultural, has occurred within the battlefield itself or along the old Brownsville Road (Highway 4) to Boca Chica, which provides the only access to the battlefield. In addition, there is little peripheral development. As a result, Palmito Ranch Battlefield retains its integrity of location, setting, feeling and association to an outstanding degree.

Today the desolate, windswept landscape conveys a vivid historic sense of the battlefield as it was seen by the Union and Confederate soldiers in May 1865, when they finalized the long struggle to control this strategic region that was the life line of the Confederacy in its last days.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: ___ Locally: ___

Applicable National Register Criteria:

A X B_ C_ D_

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions):

A___ B___ C___ D___ E___ F___ G___

NHL Criteria:

1

NHL Theme(s):

- VI. The Civil War
 - C. War in the West
 - E. Political and Diplomatic Scene

Areas of Significance:

- Military
- Commerce
- Diplomacy

Period(s) of Significance:

May 11-13, 1865

Significant Dates:

May 12 and 13, 1865

Significant Person(s):

Cultural Affiliation:

N/A

Architect/Builder:

N/A

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 9

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.**Summary**

Palmito Ranch Battlefield (May 12-13, 1865) uniquely represents the crucial role of the Lower Rio Grande Valley to the Confederacy's pursuit of international recognition and economic viability during the American Civil War. The *Civil War Advisory Commission Report on the Nation's Civil War Battlefields* (1993) identified Palmito Ranch Battlefield as the major site associated with the International Interpretive Theme.¹

Although Palmito Ranch Battlefield is renowned as the site of the last land engagement of the Civil War, its greater significance derives from its strategic position at the mouth of the Rio Grande which defined the Confederacy's only international border. The economic and diplomatic machinations devised by Confederate and Mexican accomplices on both sides of the river allowed cotton and other Southern goods unchallenged, if suspect, access to the Gulf of Mexico and the foreign ships anchored offshore throughout the course of the war. The army that possessed the Rio Grande Valley controlled a key link in the Confederacy's economic lifeline, particularly in the waning years of the war when the Union naval blockades effectively closed other Southern ports. Further, command of the Lower Rio Grande Valley was vital to gathering intelligence regarding the French "interference" in Mexico, then evident and threatening at the border. As the war lingered on, Union strategists aspired to regain control of the Lower Rio Grande Valley, both to check French ambitions and to halt the Confederate trade that enabled its armies to continue the struggle. It was equally clear to the Texans who guarded the mouth of the Rio Grande that this strategic economic and diplomatic position should be held as long as possible, even though Confederate defeat appeared inevitable. Finally, when victorious Federal troops marched on Brownsville, issues of personal honor, self-promotion and fortune aggravated the war-long objective to control this point of land—regardless of Lee's surrender at Appomattox Court House.

The role played by the Lower Rio Grande Valley throughout the course of the Civil War was that of a vital economic outlet for Confederate cotton, a source of guns and ammunition from European dealers, and a vantage point from which to observe the movements of the French interventionists clustered at Matamoros, just across the river. Ultimately, the Battle of Palmito Ranch symbolized the Union's failure—despite its superior numbers and strength—either to stop the contraband trade or to quell the Confederate resolve to fight to the very end. It was the collapse of the Confederacy elsewhere that led finally to the surrender of this area—not the Union's military prowess.

Introduction

¹Civil War Site Advisory Commission. *Report on the Nation's Civil War Battlefields*. Prepared for the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, United States Senate, the Committee on Natural Resources, United States House of Representatives and the Secretary of the Interior. Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1993, p. 32.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 10**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Synopsis of the Battle

The two-day battle, fought May 12-13, 1865, took place on a broad expanse of land halfway between Brownsville and Brazos Island. This approximately five-mile stretch of land is known as Palmito Ranch Battlefield. Union Colonel Theodore H. Barrett, commander of the U.S. forces stationed at Brazos Santiago (Brazos Island), instigated the battle on May 11, 1865, when he ordered an expedition of Union troops to cross onto the mainland and march in the direction of Fort Brown. These troops skirmished with increasing numbers of Confederates during the next two days, although the total number of Confederates was always well below the number of Union troops. Finally, on the afternoon of May 13, 1865, the Confederate Army, under the command of Colonel John S. (Rip) Ford, launched a spirited, two-pronged counterattack that eventually drove the Union troops back to Brazos Island.

Interpretation

Throughout the Civil War, but particularly in the last years of the conflagration, Southern and Mexican mercantile operations along the Rio Grande formed an alliance utilizing the river as a conduit for Confederate cotton and foreign supplies that were effectively halted elsewhere by Union blockade. The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican War and determined the border between the two countries, established the river's neutral status. Provisions of the treaty declared the river an international stream, "... free and common to the vessels and citizens of both countries."² As such, Mexican vessels enjoyed safe passage both on the river and in the Gulf of Mexico, free from search or seizure by the United States Navy during a time when the Union blockade effectively stifled commerce along the entire Confederate coastline. With other ports cut off, Southern cotton dealers and merchants turned to Mexico and the Rio Grande to carry their products to market under a neutral flag. Cotton trains from Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana made their way across rugged terrain to the border towns of Brownsville, Roma and Rio Grande City, on the American side of the Rio Grande, where their goods were loaded onto steamboats and ferried downriver under Mexican flag. French and British ships also unloaded much needed Enfield rifles, ammunition and medical supplies onto lighters and steamboats flying Mexican flags but destined for Confederate troops. Thus, Southern control of the region surrounding the border, including the town of Brownsville near the mouth of the Rio Grande, as well as the upriver towns, became crucial not only to the regional economy but to an increasingly isolated Confederacy as well. As a result, the region became the focus of concerted Union and Confederate military efforts to control strategic positions at the mouth of the river to either promote or discourage the cotton/arms commerce.

In addition, both Confederate and Union strategists needed to keep abreast of French activities in Mexico and particularly along the border. Early in the Civil War, the South initiated discussion of a "treaty of amity, commerce, and navigation" with Mexico.³ This was the beginning of Confederate attempts to use Mexico as a port of entry for European

²Irby, James A. *Backdoor at Bagdad: The Civil War on the Rio Grande*. Southwestern Studies Monograph No. 53. Texas Western Press: The University of Texas at El Paso: 1977, p. 5.

³Fielder, Bruce Martin. *The Mexican Connection: Confederate and Union Diplomacy on the Rio Grande, 1861-1865*. Masters thesis, North Texas State University, Denton: 1978, p. 2.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 11**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

goods as well as a means of obtaining European recognition.⁴ The Confederate government succeeded brilliantly in obtaining trade concessions and cooperation from Mexico, its only international neighbor. Part of the Confederacy's success in attaining cooperation and assistance, if not official recognition, in Mexico can be attributed to its appointment of Jose Augustin Quintero as its emissary to the northern states of Mexico. During his diplomatic tenure in northern Mexico, the Cuban-born Quintero managed to "secure the Confederate-Mexico border trade, obtain favorable responses from various ruling parties in northern Mexico, and hamper the union agents' attempts to quell the border trade."⁵ These were extraordinary achievements in the realm of foreign diplomacy for the fledgling Confederate States of America.

By that time, Mexico was embroiled in its own civil war as a result of British, French and Spanish bullying that eventually led to the French establishing a puppet government under Austrian Archduke Maximilian to rule the country at the head of the Imperialist party. With the Republican government of Benito Juarez occupied by the French in the interior, Confederate diplomacy wisely concentrated on the northern Mexican states of Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon and Coahuila. These states had strong economic reasons to support the Southern cause; the town of Matamoros, on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande which marked the international border, was the natural shipping and receiving point for any European-Confederate trade. As the war progressed and the Union blockade of other Confederate ports proved increasingly effective, European vessels frequented the Gulf waters at the mouth of the Rio Grande more and more often. By the end of the war and the Battle of Palmito Ranch, between 200 and 300 foreign ships—most of them flying French or English flags—could be counted within sight of the Rio Grande at any given time. Thus, while the Confederacy never received official foreign sanction, through its canny diplomacy and careful manipulation of the border trade, it garnered international attention, commerce and potential military assistance at the mouth of the Rio Grande. Control of the region, represented by the Battle of Palmito Ranch, was a major component of the Confederacy's international diplomatic and economic policy. The battlefield, therefore, represents a highly significant element in the interpretation of international themes during the Civil War.

Background**The Civil War in Texas**

Texas seceded from the United States on February 1, 1861, under the authority of an ordinance passed by the newly-created Secession Convention, later confirmed by a popular vote on February 23. In that vote, the majority of the state's citizens expressed support for secession. Texas was among the first six states—all major cotton producers—to leave the Union and officially join the Confederate States of America in early March 1861. Soon after the formal transition, Major General D.E. Twiggs, commander of the Union military forces in Texas, surrendered all federal military supplies and posts to Texas Ranger and state agent, Ben

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, p. ii.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 12**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

McCullough. After that point, United States troops not already evacuated were then held as prisoners of war and Confederate troops commandeered Union forts.⁶

At the start of the Civil War, the Texas forces initiated several offensive maneuvers, principally in New Mexico Territory just west of Texas. Early in 1862, for example, Confederate Brig. Gen. H.H. Sibley led a force of Texas troops in the successful capture of Santa Fe and Albuquerque. Sibley was forced to retreat through the mountains following a defeat at Glorieta, New Mexico, on March 28, 1862. Most of these offensive engagements, however, were relatively minor events in the overall military campaigns of the Civil War.

A much more important aspect of the South's military strategy in Texas was the defense of its borders and ports from Federal attack. From the outset of the war, Federal forces struggled to gain control of Gulf Coast ports and thereby sever the state's flow of communication, funding and matériel. In October 1862, Federal troops seized the port of Galveston, a major population and trade center, but on January 1, 1863, General John B. Magruder launched a successful amphibious campaign to retake the strategic city. In September 1863, Maj. Gen. William B. Franklin commanded a Federal expedition to invade Texas from a strategic Gulf Coast pass at the mouth of the Sabine River. Union troops stormed into Sabine Pass with a massive array of force including more than 5,000 men and four gunboats, but Confederate soldiers, under the command of Lieutenant Richard "Dick" Dowling, repelled the invasion.⁷

Despite their inability to permanently occupy Texas port cities, Federal troops largely succeeded in their coastal blockade of Texas with the important exception of its southernmost tip where the Rio Grande formed the international boundary with Mexico. The unhampered flow of goods across the border and down the river under the guise of Mexican ownership presented a major breach in the otherwise effective blockade of the Texas coast. The only way the Union could hope to stifle the contraband border traffic and avoid a direct challenge to Mexican authority was to occupy the territory at the mouth of the river including Fort Brown. In November of 1863, an invasion force of more than 6,000 federal troops, the largest yet to invade the state, descended on South Texas. They were so successful in securing Brownsville and other points in the Rio Grande Valley that by January 1, 1864, the Union effectively controlled the entire Texas coast from the mouth of the Rio Grande, at Fort Brown, to the Matagorda Peninsula.

By mid-1864, however, the Confederates had begun rebuilding their strength in the South Texas area. Colonel John S. (Rip) Ford (1815-1897), who later played a decisive role in the defeat of Union troops at the battle at Palmito Ranch, recaptured Brownsville on July 30, 1864. By the middle of August 1864, Union soldiers had abandoned almost all posts in the Rio Grande area and along the Gulf Coast, presumably to concentrate their military strength in states to the east. In Texas, they remained only at Matagorda Peninsula, an island separating Matagorda Bay from the Gulf of Mexico, and at Brazos Santiago Depot, on the northern tip of Brazos Island (See Figure 1). Following the Union withdrawals, the

⁶Webb, Walter Prescott, editor-in-chief. *The Handbook of Texas. Volumes I-III*. Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1952, pg. 351.

⁷*Ibid.*

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 13**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Confederacy controlled all of South Texas except for these two off-shore bases. By that time, however, the two armies had essentially ceased fighting in Texas with the exception of a few scattered skirmishes, as it had become increasingly apparent to both parties that further conflict in the state would do little to change the ultimate outcome of the Civil War. In the waning months of the Civil War, Union troops bided their time on Brazos Island, while Confederate troops held Fort Brown at Brownsville, about 22 miles up the Rio Grande from the Gulf coast. Both sides watched and waited as the war drew to a close. Confederate troops were not idle, however. They patrolled the vast ranchland along the South Texas coastal plain to protect the steady stream of cotton-bearing wagons on their way to Brownsville where their burden was ferried across the river to buyers in Mexico.

Cotton Smuggling on the Rio Grande

Of all the Texas coastal regions threatened during the war, the Lower Rio Grande Valley was the most significant area of military conflict, due to the strategic location of the Rio Grande as both the international border shared with Mexico as well as an entrance to the Gulf of Mexico. Access to ports was vitally important to the Confederacy during the Civil War, since the transatlantic shipment of cotton provided essential financing for their government and war effort. As one chronicler of the war notes:

To an economist the history of the Confederate States centers about the government's attempts to secure the material means with which to carry on the war. The wealth of the South consisted chiefly of land and slaves, and its industries were almost exclusively agricultural.⁸

The South's "material means" to finance a war effort was cotton which had formed the basis of its plantation economy in the antebellum era.

At the start of the war, the Confederate strategists intended to withhold cotton from European textile mills—the main importers of Southern cotton—in hopes that they might drive the European governments to pressure the Union into allowing the Confederacy its independence. As the war dragged on, however, Confederate leaders realized that withholding cotton deprived their fledgling government of vital currency.⁹ Union strategists recognized the importance of Texas ports to both the export of Confederate cotton and the import of medical and military supplies, and they set up a blockade around most southern ports, effectively sealing off Texas "from the balance of the world."¹⁰ The Confederacy desperately needed to circumvent this barrier if it wished to export its cotton.

Confederate cotton farmers used different methods to slip through the blockade, depending on their location. Farmers east of the Mississippi River relied on their government for

⁸Schwab, John Christopher, A.M., Ph.D. *The Confederate States of America: A Financial and Industrial History of the South During the Civil War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1901, p. 2.

⁹Schuler, Louis J. *The Last Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Brownsville: Springman-King Company, 1960, p. 11.

¹⁰Ford, Horn Salmon. *Rip Ford's Texas*. Stephen B. Oates, editor. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1963, p. 328.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 14

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

smuggling attempts. One South Texas historian notes:

Planters in deep southeastern states were cut away from markets by the blockade. These planters sold their cotton, for there was no other outlet, to Confederate government cotton agents, and were paid, because there was no other money, in a Confederate currency which constantly depreciated. To dispose of the cotton thus acquired, the Confederate government fitfully depended upon the limited and uncertain operations of maritime blockade runners.¹¹

On the other hand, cotton farmers in Confederate states west of the Mississippi (the Trans-Mississippi Department) were not obligated to sell their cotton to their government, and could instead attempt to smuggle the crops themselves. Western planters quickly learned the strategic importance of the twin cities of Brownsville and Matamoros to the trading and shipment of Confederate cotton. In fact, towns along the border historically engaged in smuggling as routine business. According to William Emory, whose 1853 boundary survey of the Rio Grande helped establish the international border, the upriver settlement of Roma (a National Historic Landmark) was a town made prosperous and beautiful by its residents' regular smuggling activities. He commented:

As might reasonably be expected in any country where the duties on foreign goods amount almost to prohibition, smuggling ceases to be a crime, but is identified with the best part of the population, and connects itself with the romance and legends of the frontier.¹²

(Indeed, during the Civil War, activities of businessmen like Mifflin Kennedy, Richard King and Charles Stillman, whose combination steamboat and shipping operations in the Lower Rio Grande Valley transported cotton to foreign markets under Mexican flag, were considered patriotic to the Confederacy. This, despite the fact that Kennedy, King and Stillman and other smuggler/merchants in the border region grew rich from the lucrative cotton and contraband trade occasionally at the expense of the Confederacy.)

Premiere among the smuggler/merchants were Richard King, founder of the great King Ranch (a National Historic Landmark), and his partners Mifflin Kennedy and Charles Stillman. King was a steamboat captain who joined Mifflin Kennedy at the Rio Grande during the Mexican War, where the pair helped transport troops and supplies for Zachary Taylor's army. In 1850, following the war, Kennedy and King formed a steamboating partnership on the river. (King's success enabled him to purchase the 75,000 acre Santa Gertrudis Ranch, a former Spanish land grant.) Kennedy and King's partnership, which later expanded to include New Yorker Charles Stillman, flourished and in 1861 they contracted with the Confederate government to supply European buyers with cotton. Theirs was the principal smuggling operation on the Rio Grande during the war and they used their considerable profits made from their wartime venture to enhance their land holdings.

¹¹Lea, Tom. *The King Ranch*. Volume One. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957, p. 190.

¹²Santos, Richard G. (compiler). *Early Visions of the Lower Rio Grande*. Munguia Printers, San Antonio: 1983, p. 64.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 15**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

(Eventually the Santa Gertrudis Ranch, later named the King Ranch, became one of the largest ranches in the world).¹³

Under the watchful eye of Fort Brown and Brazos Santiago, the steamships of R. Kennedy and Co. plied the Rio Grande under Mexican flag. Brownville's proximity to the border and the Gulf Coast was crucial to merchants' schemes to evade the Union's naval barriers. The city lay across the Rio Grande from Matamoros, and traders in the Mexican city were sympathetic to the Confederate cause, as well as to their own economic gain. A complex, clandestine trade agreement was thus informally established between the Mexicans and the Confederates, whereby cotton from Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Missouri was transported across the Rio Grande to Matamoros, then shipped by wagon to Bagdad, Mexico, at the mouth of the Rio Grande. At that point, steamboats flying the Mexican flag carried the cotton to European ships moored beyond the reef in the Gulf. Prior to the war, the privately owned steamboats, nearly all of which belonged to the Kennedy-King-Stillman partnership, were registered in Brownsville. For the Confederate ruse to work, merchants changed the registry of their vessels, placing them under the neutral Mexican flag and under the command of Mexican friends. Federal forces knew they were being tricked, yet a challenge to the authority of one of the "Mexican" steamboats would risk a confrontation with Mexico and possibly another war on another front.¹⁴

In addition to facilitating the export of cotton, the Confederate-Mexican trade agreement enabled the importation of arms and other supplies necessary for the South to maintain an adequate defense and withstand the naval blockade. Ultimately, and ironically, these alliances extended across ideological boundaries to the financial houses and speculators of the Northeastern United States. Although the North and South were engaged in bitter war, merchants and financiers on both sides of the conflict, who learned to circumvent legalities and naval blockades, profited enormously from doing business with their enemies.¹⁵ According to a contemporary article in the *Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph*:

Some merchants largely engaged in the trade found it more satisfactory to have a relatively permanent arrangement of "straw-men" to conceal the actual parties in the trade. Such an arrangement called for a "loyal" citizen to buy and sell in

New York, a "neutral" to carry on the operations in Matamoros, and "an avowed rebel" to purchase and export cotton from Texas.¹⁶

¹³Webb, Walter Prescott, editor-in-chief. *The Handbook of Texas. Volumes I-III*. Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1952, p. 959.

¹⁴Schuler, Louis J. *The Last Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Brownsville: Springman-King Company, 1960, p. 12.

¹⁵Graf, LeRoy P. *The Economic History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley: 1820-1875, Volume II*. Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University, 1942. On file at the Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin, p. 556.

¹⁶*Ibid.* Quotes from the New Orleans *Independent*.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 16**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Confederate Colonel John S. (Rip) Ford, who would later lead the Confederate counter-attack at the Battle of Palmito Ranch, was instrumental in negotiating with the Mexican traders. According to Ford's memoirs, at the start of the war,

[I] visited the merchants of Matamoros, particularly those of foreign countries, and insisted upon steps being taken at once to open trade with Europe and the Confederate States through Matamoros ... The consuls of Great Britain and Germany promised to aid in the matter, and they did. Cotton was hauled across Texas to Matamoros where it was traded for foodstuffs and war matériel. An immense trade opened up in a short while. Matamoros was soon crammed with strangers and filled with goods of every class.¹⁷

The Confederate government both suffered and benefitted by the Matamoros trade. Toward the end of the conflict, one observer summarized the role the Mexican town played in the war:

Matamoros is to the rebellion west of the Mississippi what New York is to the United States—its great commercial and financial center, feeding and clothing the rebellion, arming and equipping, furnishing it materials of war and a specie basis of circulation in Texas that has almost entirely displaced Confederate paper. But it is not alone the Trans-Mississippi: The entire Confederate Government is greatly sustained by resources from this point.¹⁸

Colonel Rip Ford played an integral role, not only in establishing the clandestine South Texas trade route, but also in cloaking it from the Union and protecting those who used it. He regarded his role as a military commander in the Rio Grande Valley as twofold: first, his troops were to defend the area against Union military attacks, and second, they were to oversee the delicate trade relationship he helped establish between Mexico and the Confederacy. As one of his biographers noted, Ford saw his purpose "to be the nourishment and protection of the Rio Grande trade and the cultivation of friendly relations with Mexican authority in preparation for unhindered pursuance of that trade during the war emergency."¹⁹ Thus, the presence and mission of the Confederate troops in South Texas was as much for economic reasons as it was for military security.

Early in the war, Union leaders recognized that the Rio Grande had become the "back door" of the Confederacy, and they moved to end the cotton smuggling as it was feasible. The Rio Grande region military initiatives, including the taking of Brownsville in late 1863, were all part of Union attempts to wrest control of the Rio Grande and its potential for cotton shipping from the Confederacy. The continued presence of Union troops at Brazos Santiago

¹⁷Ford, John Salmon. *Rip Ford's Texas*. Stephen B. Oates, editor. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1963 p. 329.

¹⁸S.S. Brown to L. Wallage, January 13, 1865, *War of the Rebellion: a Compilation of the official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies Series I, vol. 48, pt. I*: 512-513. cited hereafter as *O.R.*

¹⁹Lea, Tom. *The King Ranch*. Volume One. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957, p. 176.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 17

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

and at other points along the South Texas coast was a direct result of the economic importance of the area to the Confederacy. Palmito Ranch's strategic South Texas location—midway between Fort Brown and Brazos Santiago—is centered in this important trade zone, which explains why the area had already seen military combat in 1863 and 1864, and why in May 1865 it again became the scene of intense fighting between the North and the South.

As the war drew to an end, cotton speculators, dealers and smugglers all knew their days were numbered. While most combatants, both Union and Confederate, likely looked forward to the end of hostilities, those who had the most to lose financially lamented the end of the "cotton times."

As Confederate defeat appeared imminent, Mifflin Kennedy wrote frantic letters from Matamoros urging his partner, Richard King, in the Texas interior to hasten delivery of a shipment of cotton to the border. He advised King to get the cotton downriver and out to sea before the War's end when Federal troops would doubtless seize the goods. King was not fast enough, and as Union troops prepared to commandeer Fort Brown from their base on Brazos Santiago, the partnership had a huge shipload of cotton upriver in Camargo, Mexico, waiting to steam out to sea.²⁰ They stood to lose a small fortune if the cotton were confiscated by Union troops as contraband. Their best hope of protection lay in the cavalry of John "Rip" Ford, second in command at Fort Brown, who had guarded Kennedy and King interests on the Rio Grande throughout the war.

The Trans-Mississippi Department After Appomattox

Although South Texas had seen little action outside of brief skirmishes during the spring of 1865, as news of the Confederacy's impending collapse came to the border, both Federal and Confederate troops remained vigilant. While General Robert E. Lee officially surrendered his troops to Union General Ulysses S. Grant on April 9, 1865, in Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, his announcement did not signal the absolute conclusion of the war, since each Confederate military department had to achieve its own separate peace. General Taylor, for example, in charge of Confederate forces in Mississippi and Alabama, did not surrender his troops to Union General Canby until May 4, 1865.²¹ Texas was part of the Trans-Mississippi Department of the Confederate Army (Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and the Indian Territory), which had not yet surrendered as of May 12, 1865, the date of the Battle of Palmito Ranch. Several prominent Texans, including General Magruder and Governor Pendleton Murrah,

"vainly exhorted Texas soldiers to continue the struggle," despite Lee's surrender and the virtual dissolution of the Confederacy.²²

²⁰Cheesman personal communication, 1994.

²¹Schuler, Louis J. *The Last Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Brownsville: Springman-King Company, 1960, p. 18.

²²Webb, Walter Prescott, editor-in-chief. *The Handbook of Texas. Volumes I-III*. Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1952, p. 351.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 18**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Thus, by the middle of May 1865, despite the fact that most of the Confederate Army had surrendered, both armies still had troops on alert at their respective Texas posts. In the Rio Grande Valley, Union troops held only tiny Brazos Santiago (Island), off the Gulf Coast and within sight of Clarksville and Bagdad. Meanwhile, the Confederates retained control over the remainder of the Rio Grande Valley including Brownsville directly across the river from Matamoros and about 22 miles upriver (by road) from the coastal ports. Based at Fort Brown, established in 1846 by Brigadier General Zachary Taylor during the Mexican War, the Confederates determined to persevere until further notice. During the war, under the control of the Confederacy, the fort served as an essential link in the cotton smuggling operations.

Although both the Federals and Confederates maintained armed forces in the area, by May 1865 leaders in both camps realized that the Civil War was essentially over, and that continued fighting in Texas would do little to change the final outcome of the War. In fact, until Colonel Theodore Barrett ordered 300 men to march on the town of Brownsville on May 11, both armies honored an informal truce agreement negotiated about two months earlier between Union General Lew Wallace and Confederate commanders General John E. Slaughter and Colonel Rip Ford.

Wallace, acting on orders from General Grant, had come to Brazos Island in February 1865, to negotiate a peace agreement with the Trans-Mississippi Department of the Confederate Army. In addition, Grant hoped that Wallace might curtail "the international intrigue and trade at the Rio Grande."²³ Indeed, with the Civil War struggling to a close, Grant's suspicion of "international intrigue" in the form of French Imperial troops poised at the border in Matamoros, posed an entirely new dimension of concern for the Federal government.

French Interference

Throughout the war, but particularly at the outset and toward its conclusion, Union and Confederate leadership lobbied the nations of Europe for support and/or recognition. The foreign countries with the most direct bearing on the United States and the fledgling Confederacy involved the two dominant governments of Europe, England and France. Essentially an aristocracy, the South appealed to both England and France for support against the invading Yankees. Although the two monarchies were sympathetic to the Confederate cause, the institution of slavery, upon which the Southern cause was based, was anathema to both nations. Until 1862, though, the morality of slavery was not at issue and European countries threatened to enter the fray on one side or the other. Neither the Union nor the Confederacy could afford an extra enemy.²⁴ After Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, however, no European country dared rouse its own populace against a cause to end slavery and the threat of Confederate recognition lessened. England continued to build ships for the Confederate navy, however, and Napoleon III, Emperor of France,

²³Schuler, Louis J. *The Last Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Brownsville: Springman-King Company, 1960, p. 17.

²⁴Catton, Bruce. *The American Heritage Picture History of the Civil War*. American Heritage Publishing Company: New York, 1982, pp. 250-51.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 19**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

fomented his own intrigues on the Mexican border.²⁵

Napoleon III encouraged the Confederacy and laid some ambiguous plans to assist it, but he would not act without the support of England. His real interest was in Mexico, where he set up a French puppet state headed by the Hapsburg Maximilian as Emperor of Mexico with the support of French troops. This step was taken in defiance of the Monroe Doctrine and at a time when the United States and Confederate States were distracted by the war. In fact, Maximilian's presence in Mexico shored sagging Confederate morale. Had Maximilian's hold on the throne been stronger, Napoleon would probably have aided the Confederacy from his base in Mexico. Meanwhile, the United States was aware of the French threat at the Texas border but could not spare the troops required to retake the region and hold it from the Confederates while continuing to prosecute the war in the East.

As the war came to an end, however, General Grant began to take preventive measures to prevent further trouble on the Rio Grande. Wallace made a special trip to effect peace at the border, partly because of the inevitability of the war's outcome, but primarily to focus undivided attention on the French machinations on the border.²⁶ With the war quickly drawing to a close, Federal strategists wished to maintain a strong and highly visible military presence at the border to discourage any ambitions that Maximilian or, more accurately, Napoleon III, might entertain either in assisting the Confederates or planning an invasion of South Texas in the confusion following surrender. Meeting in conference with Ford and Slaughter at Point Isabel on March 11, Wallace proposed a settlement of peace between the two sides. According to Ford's memoirs, Wallace "suggested that it was useless to fight on the Rio Grande, [and] that if the contending parties met and slaughtered each other it would have no effect on the final result of the contest."²⁷ Ford and Slaughter, while in concert with Wallace, could not formally sign any truce since they lacked the authority to do so from the Confederate government. They did, however, leave the meeting with the intention of honoring the terms of the truce, and fully expected the Federals to do the same.

The next day—March 12, 1865—General Wallace sent a letter to Slaughter and Ford specifically outlining the truce they had discussed earlier. The document, while acknowledging that neither party had the explicit authority of their respective governments to negotiate a settlement, nevertheless outlined specific propositions intended "to secure a speedy peace" between the Union and the Confederate's Trans-Mississippi Department.²⁸ In return for the Confederates' ceasing all military opposition to the Union, Wallace promised immunity. The agreement read, in part,

The officers and soldiers at present actually composing the Confederate Army

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 252.

²⁶Irby, James A. *Backdoor at Bagdad: The Civil War on the Rio Grande*. Southwestern Studies Monograph No. 53. Texas Western Press: The University of Texas at El Paso: 1977, p. 46.

²⁷Ford, John Salmon. *Rip Ford's Texas*. Stephen B. Oates, editor. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1963, p. 388.

²⁸*O.R.*, p. 1281.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 20**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

proper ... shall have ... a full release from and against actions, prosecutions, liabilities, and legal proceedings of every kind, so far as the Government of the United States is concerned: Provided ... they shall first take an oath of allegiance to same.²⁹

Further, the agreement guaranteed safe passage to any Southerners who wished to leave the country rather than take such an oath.³⁰

During the two months following the agreement, the Union and Confederate forces in South Texas honored the truce, actually a gentleman's agreement. By May 11, 1865, however, Wallace had returned to his post in the East, secure that he had established peace at the border.³¹ Colonel Theodore H. Barrett, commander of the Union forces stationed at Brazos Santiago, disregarded Wallace's truce and ordered his troops to advance towards the Confederate stronghold at Fort Brown in Brownsville. The Federals soon encountered a Confederate outpost, and fighting erupted. Outraged at the Union transgression, Colonel Ford ordered retaliation, and the Battle of Palmito Ranch began.

The Battle of Palmito Ranch**Prelude to the Battle**

Although the Union evacuated most of its troops from South Texas by 1864, they maintained bases on Brazos Island and Matagorda Peninsula for the duration of the war to support blockade ships along the Texas coast. Colonel Theodore H. Barrett of the 62nd U.S. Colored Infantry (U.S.C.I.), who himself had no combat experience prior to the engagement at Palmito Ranch, was one of the commanding officers stationed on the island, along with Brigadier-General E.B. Brown.³² Lieutenant Colonel David Branson, also of the 62nd, assisted the commanders. The battle accounts of Barrett and Branson possibly provide some of the best

descriptions of the early stages of the battle, since they were recorded almost immediately after the conflict—earlier than other accounts which survive today.³³

The Union force on Brazos Santiago consisted of both black and white soldiers, men from the 62nd U.S.C.I. and the Second Texas Cavalry (unmounted). The latter were pro-Union Texas residents who joined the northern army at the start of the Civil War. Soon after the

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰*Ibid.*

³¹Irby, James A. *Backdoor at Bagdad: The Civil War on the Rio Grande*. Southwestern Studies Monograph No. 53. Texas Western Press: The University of Texas at El Paso: 1977, p. 47.

³²Widener, Dr. Ralph W. *The Last Land Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Unpublished manuscript on file at Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas, p. 4.

³³Branson's account, in the form of a report to the headquarters of the 62nd, is dated May 18, 1865, just a few days after the battle, while Barrett's report to the headquarters of the Third Brigade dates to August 10 of that year.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 21**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

battle began, men from the 34th Indiana Volunteer Infantry (also known as the Morton Rifles), under the command of Lieutenant-Colonel Morrison, joined these troops. Altogether, the Union Army had more than 1,500 men in place at Brazos Santiago, although a somewhat smaller number actually participated in the Battle of Palmito Ranch.³⁴

Confederate forces at Fort Brown were under the command of Colonel John Salmon (Rip) Ford and General James E. Slaughter. Ford was a South Carolina native who came to Texas in 1836. He served in the Texas Army for two years, and later, in 1847-48, was a member of the Texas Rangers during the Mexican War.³⁵ In 1849, Ford was made a captain in the Texas Rangers and patrolled the territory between the Nueces River and Rio Grande. He gained political as well as military experience as a Texas Ranger, serving as a delegate to the state's Secession Convention in 1861. That same year, he initiated the trade agreements between Mexico and the Confederacy that eventually led to the transport of Confederate cotton to European ships via Mexican-owned wagons and steamboats.³⁶

Ford and his superior officer, General Slaughter, had an unusual working relationship according to several sources, including Ford's own memoirs. Although Slaughter was technically in charge of the soldiers, Ford actually commanded the troops, and it was Ford to whom the troops were loyal. They obeyed and respected him.³⁷ Slaughter seemed comfortable with Ford in command. Indeed, it would be Ford who soon led the Confederate troops' effective counterattack in the Battle of Palmito Ranch.

Significantly, the number of Confederate troops based at Fort Brown had shrunk dramatically in the weeks immediately preceding the encounter at Palmito Ranch. On May 1, 1865, the Confederates counted approximately 500 troops in the Rio Grande area, but two weeks later, by the time fighting began, they had only about 300 men. Reasons for the sharp decline in Confederate strength are unclear, although Captain W.H.D. Carrington of Austin, a participant in the battle who detailed the conflict in his memoirs, suggested that a large number of Confederates deserted after hearing news of Lee's surrender one month earlier. His account, written in 1883, almost 20 years after the conflict, offered this explanation:

Other historians agree with Carrington's figure of 300, but suggest that the decrease in soldiers was due not only to deserters, but also to a large number of troops on furlough (due to the presumed truce and imminent end to the hostilities). Also, some soldiers fled across the Rio Grande to Mexico to escape capture by a victorious Union Army. Regardless of the

³⁴Schuler, Louis J. *The Last Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Brownsville: Springman-King Company, 1960, p. 1.

³⁵It was during this tour of duty that Ford earned the name "Rip." Responsible for the writing of condolence letters to the families of soldiers killed in action, Ford would end all of his messages with the words, "May he rest in peace." After writing hundreds of such letters, Ford began to abbreviate this message "R.I.P." and soon afterwards acquired the nickname.

³⁶Webb, Water Prescott, editor-in-chief. *The Handbook of Texas. Volumes I-III*. Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1952, p. 617.

³⁷Schuler, Louis J. *The Last Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Brownsville: Springman-King Company, 1960, p. 8.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 22**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

reasons, most sources agree that the Confederates had only about 300 men at Fort Brown on May 12, 1865, far fewer than the 1,500 Union troops stationed at Brazos Santiago. The Southern forces appeared ill-prepared for the coming battle in South Texas.

Carrington's report is also important in that it defies the popular notion that the last battle occurred because Confederate troops, isolated in their remote South Texas outpost, had not yet learned of Lee's surrender. In fact, the many merchants, soldiers, speculators and opportunists on both sides of the border were well informed of the war's progress. Throughout the conflict, and particularly at its end, this vital strategic and economic locale had constant contact with foreign ships bearing the news of war.

The Last Battle: May 12-13, 1865

The following account of the battle is based principally upon the written accounts of four key participants. Colonel Barrett's and Lieutenant Colonel Branson's reports, mentioned above, provide the most detailed descriptions of the Union's initial advance towards Palmito Ranch. The memoirs of Colonel Ford and Captain Carrington of the Confederate Army cover the southern army's counterattack and the last stages of the battle.

On the evening of May 11, 1865, Union Colonel Barrett ordered an expedition of 250 men of the 62nd U.S.C.I., along with fifty men of the Second Texas Cavalry, all under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Branson, from Brazos Santiago [A figure 2] onto the mainland. Originally ordered to land at Point Isabel, just northwest of Brazos Santiago across the Laguna Madre, an intense storm thwarted the expedition and forced the troops to return to camp. At approximately 9:30 p.m., they made the crossing at Boca Chica—a narrow inlet at the southern tip of Brazos Island (See Figure 1). Upon reaching the mainland, the force marched all night, in the direction of Fort Brown.

At approximately 2:00 a.m., Branson's troops surrounded White's Ranch [B], a small settlement east of Palmito Ranch, in hopes of capturing a Confederate outpost. They discovered, instead, that the outpost had been deserted one or two days prior to their arrival. Hiding themselves in a thicket of tall weeds, the troops camped out for the rest of the night on the banks of the river, approximately 1.5 miles above White's Ranch.³⁸

About 8:30 a.m., collaborators on the Mexican side of the Rio Grande spotted the Union camp and promptly brought the concealed soldiers to the attention of the Confederates. According to Branson, "At the same time soldiers of the Imperial Mexican Army were marching up that bank [on the Mexican side] of the river." The Imperial Mexican Army was sympathetic to the Confederate cause, and its presence no doubt caused concern amongst the Union soldiers. Branson continues, "I immediately started for Palmetto Ranch [C], skirmishing most of the way with the [Confederate's] cavalry, and drove them, at noon, from their camp, which had been occupied by about 190 men and horses, capturing 3 prisoners, 2

³⁸Branson, Lt. Col. David. "Report to Headquarters, Sixty-second Regiment U.S. Colored Infantry: May 18, 1865." In *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series I, Volume 48, Part I*. Published under the direction of Daniel S. Lamont, Secretary of War. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896, p. 268.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 23**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

horses, and 4 beef cattle, and their ten days' rations, just issued."³⁹ Union soldiers confiscated the supplies and materials they could carry. They burned the rest.

The Confederate forces with whom Branson's troops had skirmished were members of Gidding's Regiment under the command of Captain Robinson, a Confederate cavalry officer. Colonel Ford notes in his memoirs that, on the afternoon of May 12, he received a message from Robinson that "the Yankees had advanced, and he was engaged with them just below San Martin Ranch." Ford sent a message back to Robinson urging the captain to hold his ground, and that Ford would bring reinforcements as soon as possible.⁴⁰ After the brief skirmishing at Palmito Ranch, Branson and his Union troops retreated to the hill nearby to rest and feed their animals. At approximately 3 p.m., however, the Confederates appeared again with reinforcements. Branson considered the Federal's position on Palmito Hill to be "undefensible," so he led his troops back to White's Ranch for the night, "skirmishing some on the way."⁴¹ At White's Ranch, Branson sent a message to Barrett requesting additional support.

At daybreak the next morning (May 13, 1865), Branson and his men were joined at White's Ranch [D] by 200 men of the 34th Indiana Volunteer Infantry under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Robert G. Morrison. Colonel Barrett also joined the troops and assumed command of the enlarged Federal force.

Barrett, in his report to Union headquarters, recalled his activities that morning:

I at once ordered an advance to be again made in the direction of Palmetto Ranch [E], which, upon the retirement of Lieutenant-Colonel Branson, had been reoccupied by the rebels. The enemy's cavalry were soon encountered. Driving them before us, we reached the ranch by 7 or 8 a.m., and again compelled the rebels to abandon it. Such stores as had escaped destruction the day previous were now destroyed, and the buildings which the enemy had turned into barracks were burned, in order that they might no longer furnish him convenient shelter. A detachment was here sent back to Brazos Santiago with our wounded and the prisoners and captures of the day previous. The remainder of the force was ordered to advance. Nearly the entire forenoon was spent in skirmishing. The enemy, though taking advantage of every favorable position, was everywhere easily driven back.⁴²

Meanwhile, Ford had difficulty organizing the main body of the Confederate troops for battle. Much of the disarray can be attributed to the reduced force and ambivalence in the face of imminent defeat (or of Lee's surrender). Regardless of the cause, Ford's troops were

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰Ford, John Salmon. *Rip Ford's Texas*. Stephen B. Oates, editor. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1963, p. 389.

⁴¹*O.R.*, p. 288.

⁴²*O.R.*, p. 266.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 24**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

ill-prepared for battle, and after receiving Robinson's request for assistance on the afternoon of the 12th, Ford had to act quickly to assemble a defensive force. The majority of Ford's troops would not be ready and in place for battle until late the following afternoon. Ford arrived on the parade grounds of Fort Brown on the morning of May 13, 1865, and waited for General Slaughter to lead the Confederates to battle. Slaughter did not appear, however, and around 10:00 a.m. Ford "placed himself at the head of the troops present and marched to a short distance below San Martin Ranch."⁴³

Some Southern troops had already assembled near Palmito Ranch, however, and it was these Confederate outposts with whom Barrett's force skirmished in the early afternoon on May 13. One particularly "sharp" engagement pushed these Confederates west of Tulosa Ranch [F], back towards Fort Brown. Barrett described the incident:

In this engagement our forces charged the enemy, compelled him to abandon his cover, and, pursuing him, drove him across an open prairie beyond the rising ground completely out of sight. The enemy having been driven several miles since daylight, and our men needing rest, it was not deemed prudent to advance farther. Therefore, relinquishing the pursuit, we returned to a hill [at Tulosa Ranch] about a mile from Palmetto Ranch, where the Thirty-fourth Indiana had already taken its position.⁴⁴

Tulosa Ranch is southwest of Palmito Ranch and approximately twelve miles from Boca Chica. Once at Tulosa, Barrett and his men rejoined the 34th Indiana Volunteer Infantry, who, as Barrett mentioned in the passage above, anticipated fighting and had already established a skirmish line. The Union soldiers made preparations for renewed fighting atop the hill.

By about 4:00 p.m., Colonel Ford and his troops had reached a point just below San Martin Ranch [G]. The Union Army at Tulosa Ranch was in sight, although not yet aware of the Confederates' presence. Ford issued directions for a two-pronged attack:

... Having made reconnaissance and determined to attack, [Ford] directed Captain Jones to place one section of his battery in the road under Lieutenant Smith, another under Lieutenant [William] Gregory on the left, supported by Lieutenant [Jesse] Vineyard's detachment. The other section was held in reserve. The guns were directed to move in advance of the line. Captain Robinson was placed in command of the main body of cavalry -- Anderson's battalion under Captain D.W. Wilson on the right by consent, and Giddings' battalion on the left. Lieutenant Gregory had orders to move under cover of the hills and chaparral, to flank the enemy's right, and if possible to get an enfilading fire. Captain Gibson's and Cocke's companies were sent to the extreme left with orders to turn the enemy's right flank. Skirmishers were

⁴³Ford, John Salmon. *Rip Ford's Texas*. Stephen B. Oates, editor. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1963, p. 390.

⁴⁴*O.R.*, p. 266.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 25**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

advanced.⁴⁵

According to Barrett's account, the Confederates opened fire on the Federals simultaneously from the front and the side:

... The rebels, now largely re-enforced, again reappeared in our front, opening fire upon us with both artillery and small-arms. At the same time a heavy body of cavalry and a section of a battery, under cover of the thick chaparral on our right, had already succeeded in flanking us with the evident intention of gaining our rear. With the Rio Grande on our left, a superior force of the enemy in front, and his flanking force on our right, our situation was at this time extremely critical. Having no artillery to oppose the enemy's six 12-pounder field pieces, our position became untenable. We therefore fell back, fighting [I]. This movement, always difficult, was doubly so at this time, having to be performed under a heavy fire from both front and flank.⁴⁶

While the main body of the Union troops fell back, 110 men were deployed as skirmishers under the command of Captains Miller and Coffin and Lieutenants Foster and Mead. The effectiveness of this skirmishing force is uncertain. Branson recalls that, "They kept the enemy at a respectful distance at all times and did their duty in the best possible manner."⁴⁷ Ford, however, writes that he "saw the enemy's skirmishers, which were well-handled, left without support by the retreating main body, and ... [Ford] ordered an advance. Very soon Captain Robinson charged with impetuosity. The Confederates captured the Yankee

skirmishers while the enemy troops retreated at a run."⁴⁸ Barrett confirmed the capture of some 48 Federal skirmishers.⁴⁹

In addition to the difficulties the skirmishers faced, the main body of Union troops rapidly broke into disarray, forced to retreat from an "untenable" defensive position at Tulosa. The 62nd U.S.C.I. had been ordered to cover the Union forces as they fell back [J], but, according to Captain Carrington, "Branson's negro regiment was quickly demoralized and fled in dismay."⁵⁰ Carrington described the Federals' frantic retreat and frustrated attempts

⁴⁵Ford, John Salmon. *Rip Ford's Texas*. Stephen B. Oates, editor. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1963, p. 390.

⁴⁶*O.R.*, p. 266.

⁴⁷*O.R.*, p. 266.

⁴⁸Ford, John Salmon. *Rip Ford's Texas*. Stephen B. Oates, editor. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1963, p. 391.

⁴⁹*O.R.*, p. 266.

⁵⁰Schuler, Louis J. *The Last Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Brownsville: Springman-King Company, 1960, p. 21.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 26**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

to escape the superior Confederate forces:

The Indiana troops [34th Volunteer Infantry] threw down their arms and surrendered; most of Hancock's company escaped; retreating through the dense chaparral. The entire force of the Federals commenced to retreat; Ford's fierce cavalry charges harassed them exceedingly. The artillery moved at a gallop. Three times, lines of skirmishers were thrown out to check the pursuit; these lines were roughly handled and many prisoners captured.⁵¹

Colonel Barrett, understandably, described the Federals' hasty retreat as occurring in a more orderly fashion: "... The entire regiment fell back with precision and in perfect order, under circumstances that would have tested the discipline of the best troops. Seizing upon every advantageous position, the enemy's fire was returned deliberately and with effect. The fighting continued three hours."⁵² As the Union soldiers quickly retreated towards the east, one group of troops was cut off from any escape route by a bend in the Rio Grande. The Confederates captured or shot many of those who ran, yet most escaped. Carrington noted the unfortunate fate of some who braved the river crossing: "It is greatly to be regretted that several who attempted to swim the river to escape capture were drowned. Several swam across and were immediately slain and stripped by Mexican bandits, and thrown into the river."⁵³ This was not confirmed by any official record, however.

The Confederates pursued the Union troops in a northeasterly direction for approximately seven or eight miles. Ford described their efforts:

Our guns pursued at the gallop; the shouting men pressed to the front. Occupying the hills adjacent to the road, Confederates fired in security from behind the crests. The enemy endeavored to hold various points, but were driven from them. The pursuit lasted for seven miles, the artillery horses were greatly fatigued (some of them had given out), the cavalry horses were jaded. Ford was convinced the enemy would be reinforced at or near the White House [at White's Ranch]. For these reasons he ordered the officers to withdraw the men.⁵⁴

The Union troops were driven back to Cobb's Ranch [K], approximately two miles from Boca Chica, where they could cross over to their base on Brazos Island. Ford then ordered his troops to halt. Carrington speculated as to why Ford discontinued the pursuit at this critical point, when the Confederates were so successfully driving the Federals back towards the Gulf Coast:

⁵¹*Ibid.*

⁵²*O.R.*, p. 266.

⁵³Carrington, Capt. W.H.D. "The Last Battle—The Last Charge, and the Last Gun Fired in the War." Chapter XLI in *History of Texas, Volume II: From 1685 to 1892*, by John Henry Brown. Austin: Jenkins Publishing Company, 1970, p. 434.

⁵⁴Ford, John Salmon. *Rip Ford's Texas*. Stephen B. Oates, editor. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1963, p. 391.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 27**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

If Ford had more troops he would doubtless have placed himself between the enemy and Brazos Island, but with his small force of less than three hundred men, he said "the undertaking would be too hazardous." He thought the Federals would be reinforced from Brazos Island, as they knew from the sound of approaching artillery, and from couriers that Barret [sic] was defeated, and Ford's force would have been between two bodies of enemies, each numbering as many as five to one.⁵⁵

After withdrawing from the pursuit, the Confederates retreated a short distance. At this time, General Slaughter arrived. According to Ford, Slaughter assumed command and sent a messenger to Ford directing the colonel to "resume the pursuit." The Federals, at this point,

had commenced to double quick by the left flank across a slough through which a levee had been thrown up about three hundred yards long [L]. The slough was an impassable quagmire for any character of troops except upon the narrow levee. General Slaughter saw the movement and scarcely pausing for a moment, ordered the pursuit to be resumed; ordering Carrington to press the rear guard of the enemy. His idea was to strike the rear guard so as to cut it off before reaching the levee; but the rear guard was in a hurry. Although Carrington's troopers were comparatively fresh and spurred their horses up nearly to their best running capacity, the enemy gained the levee when they were about two hundred yards from the main body of the enemy who had formed a line of battle at the farther end of the levee among the sand hills. Carrington immediately formed the Confederate troopers into line on the edge of the slough then covered with tide water. While doing this he saw General Slaughter dash forward into the water in front, and emptied his six-shooter at the retreating foe. The Federal line formed on the other side of the slough was three hundred yards off from the Confederate troopers. A heavy skirmish fire was kept up for nearly an hour across the slough. The enemy though in full view shot too high. They were, as we thought, five or six times as numerous as the Confederates.⁵⁶

Ford himself refused to join in the resumed pursuit of the Federals, protesting that the horses were too tired and that the Union would be reinforced as soon as they were within range of Brazos Island. In his memoirs, he described the above action as a minor coda to the overall Battle of Palmito Ranch. According to Ford, Slaughter merely sent skirmishers in the Union Army's direction, and the Federals responded by sending out skirmishers of their own. Both sides then engaged in firing—for "perhaps ten minutes," according to Ford, rather than Carrington's "nearly an hour"—and then Slaughter withdrew his skirmishers.

Regardless of how long this fighting took place, it undoubtedly occurred at or immediately following sunset. Most members of the Union Army forged their way back to Boca Chica and then to Brazos Island. The Confederates also withdrew a short way, with Slaughter

⁵⁵Schuler, Louis j. *The Last Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Brownsville: Springman-King Company, 1960, p. 21.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 22.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 28**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

announcing his intention to camp nearby at Palmito for the night. Ford, however, insisting that the Union Army still might receive reinforcements and return during the night, moved his troops to a point about "eight miles higher up," and encamped there.⁵⁷

That evening, as both armies retreated from the site of the final skirmishing, a shell from a ship stationed nearby, possibly *SS Isabella*, exploded between the two armies. Although details of this story vary, most accounts contend that this was the last shot of the Battle of Palmito Ranch, the last land battle of the Civil War.

Aftermath of the Battle

Historians still debate the number of casualties for each side. First hand reports report light casualties for both armies. Barrett reports 111 Federal casualties total, a number that includes both killed and wounded men, as well as those the Confederates captured. Rip Ford, in his handwritten memoirs, recalled that the Confederates only sustained seven casualties during the conflict; all seven men were wounded, he reported, and not killed. However, Stephen B. Oates, the editor of *Rip Ford's Texas*—the edited, organized version of Ford's manuscripts compiled in 1963—believes that about thirty Federal troops were killed and 113 more were taken prisoner, out of a total fighting force of 800. Oates theorized that the Confederates lost about the same number, although their total fighting force was much smaller, about 300.⁵⁸ According to numerous accounts, many Union troops died when they tried to swim across the Rio Grande in their panic to flee the conflict.

Not all those who crossed the river in the aftermath of the battle were Union soldiers, however. Confederate General James Slaughter and several men in his command, reportedly upon hearing of Lee's surrender from some of the captured Union soldiers, crossed the river to Matamoros just prior to the Union occupation of Fort Brown on June 20, 1865. Once in Mexico, Slaughter conveyed the remaining Confederate military supplies and artillery under his command to the Imperial Mexican Army over Ford's objections.⁵⁹ Slaughter, who refused to surrender to the Federals, apparently planned to join with the Mexican Imperialists in the hope that the Confederates could reorganize and mount an offensive with French support. Neither Rip Ford nor the majority of his Cavalry of the West was interested in pursuing such a scheme. In fact, Ford refused an offer of civilian-disguised lancers from Imperialist General Mejia to hold Brownsville against the Federal troops.⁶⁰ It was clear to Ford and most of his men that the war was over for the South, despite their resounding victory at Palmito Ranch.

Victory notwithstanding, the Battle of Palmito Ranch did nothing to alter the ultimate course of the war. It did, however, herald an intriguing aftermath. Ford and Slaughter, always at

⁵⁷*Rip Ford's Texas*. Stephen B. Oates, editor. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1963, p. 392.

⁵⁸*Ibid.* p. 390.

⁵⁹Pipkin, Maurice. *An Early History of Cameron County*. MA, Texas College of Arts and Industries, Kingsville, Texas, 1940, p. 111; Fehrenbach, T.R. *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans*. New York: The MacMillian Company, 1968, p. 390.

⁶⁰Fehrenbach, T.R. *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans*. New York: The MacMillian Company, 1968, p. 391.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 29**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

odds over who held command on the Rio Grande, parted on less-than-friendly terms after the battle. When Ford discovered that Slaughter had sold Confederate artillery to Mejia and apparently planned to keep the 20,000 pesos he received in payment, he confronted the general at gun point and demanded that he return the money. Ford disbursed some of the money among troopers remaining in Brownsville, as back pay. He kept \$4,000—albeit less than he was owed—for himself. General E. Kirby Smith surrendered the Texas troops of the Trans-Mississippi Department of the Confederate Army in Galveston on May 26, 1865,⁶¹ the same day Slaughter turned over his command to Ford before fleeing into Mexico. Ford immediately dismissed his Calvary of the West and, as a precaution, took his own family across the border with Mejia's consent. When the Federal troops marched into Brownsville, they met no opposition.⁶²

On May 29, the Confederates evacuated Brownsville, but not before sending a large shipment of cotton across the river.⁶³ Probably belonging to the partnership of Kennedy and King, it was the last shipment of the war era. The next day, Federal troops led by Brig. Gen. E.B.

Brown occupied Fort Brown and Brownsville where they captured about five hundred bales of cotton, several hundred head of cattle, some horses and mules.⁶⁴

The entire Trans-Mississippi Department formally surrendered on June 2, 1865.⁶⁵ In the month that followed, a number of prominent Confederates crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico. Some feared reprisals; others hoped to join Slaughter's ill-conceived plan to launch a renewed offensive against the victorious Union.⁶⁶ As long as Maximilian retained his tenuous position in Mexico, Confederate officers flocked to his capital for refuge. They tried to establish a colony of Confederate soldiers and their families on the Mexican Gulf coast but their plans failed to fully materialize. Maximilian, struggling to keep his floundering government afloat, could offer no assistance, and the Confederates themselves felt uneasy and unwelcome in the foreign land. When the Union offered paroles and amnesty to the Confederate ex-patriots in July 1865, most returned north. Rip Ford and his family were among them. After Lee's surrender at Appomattox, the Federal government moved Phil Sheridan and 50,000 troops to occupy Brazos Santiago and the border forts and

⁶¹Schuler, Louis J. *The Last Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Brownsville: Springman-King Company, 1960, p. 18.

⁶²Fehrenbach, T.R. *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans*. New York: The MacMillian Company, 1968, p. 392.

⁶³Coalson, Polly Ann. *The Rio Grande Campaign: 1863-1965*. Masters thesis, Texas A&I University, 1991, p. 73.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*

⁶⁵Schuler, Louis J. *The Last Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Brownsville: Springman-King Company, 1960, p. 18.

⁶⁶Ferhenbach, T.R. *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans*. New York: The MacMillian Company, 1968, p. 392.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 30**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

discourage any French/Mexican Imperialist or Confederate aspirations along the border.⁶⁷ Sheridan courteously received Ford who then helped repatriate other former Confederates.⁶⁸ At the same time, Secretary of War Seward filed a formal protest against French troops in Mexico and Napoleon withdrew his soldiers—those at the border were evacuated through Brownsville—leaving Maximilian to his fate. The Mexican liberals, or Juaristas, ultimately gained control of the government over the Imperials.

The poor showing of the Union Army at Palmito Ranch was an embarrassment and commanding officers attempted to shift the blame for the loss on the shoulders of Lieutenant Colonel Robert G. Morrison. The Federals conducted a courtmartial of Morrison in July 1865, charging him with "disobedience of orders, neglect of duty, abandoning his colors," and displaying "conduct prejudicial to good order and military discipline." However, the prosecution lacked substantial evidence against Morrison and he was acquitted in September of that year.⁶⁹ Morrison's acquittal closed the official record on the Battle of Palmito Ranch. The event itself became regarded as a postscript in the history of America's bloodiest war.

The Battle in Retrospect

As stated above, General Lew Wallace, along with General Slaughter and Colonel Ford, arranged an unofficial truce between the Texas forces of the Union and Confederate armies during March 1865. Since both parties apparently negotiated the truce in good faith, it remains unclear as to what prompted the Union Army to advance on Fort Brown, instigating the Battle of Palmito Ranch and clearly violating the understanding.

Civil War Historians have advanced two theories to explain the Union's actions. The first of these theories involves Union Colonel Theodore Barrett and seeks to understand his motives for launching the attack. Barrett's motives remain undocumented. Presumably, Barrett instigated the attack while Brigadier General Brown was absent from Brazos Santiago on other business. However, unlike Ford, Carrington, Branson, and the other key figures of the battle, Barrett had no prior military experience. The first theory states that Barrett triggered the conflict out of a personal desire for combat experience. With the end of the Civil War rapidly approaching, Barrett perhaps felt that time was growing short for him to gain actual combat experience that might later prove invaluable if he hoped for advancement in the U.S. armed forces. Perhaps Barrett triggered the Battle of Palmito Ranch for personal reasons, hoping that a quick battle would enhance his fledgling reputation as a soldier.⁷⁰

Historian J. Schuler, in his booklet *The Last Battle*, presented a more plausible theory as to

⁶⁷Catton, Bruce. *The American Heritage Picture History of the Civil War*. American Heritage Publishing Company: New York, 1982, p. 253.

⁶⁸Ferhenbach, T.R. *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans*. New York: The MacMillian Company, 1968, p. 392.

⁶⁹Kent, Lt. Richard. "General Court Martial Orders, No. 1." September 5, 1865. In personal files of Charles Morris, Harlingen, Texas, p. 1.

⁷⁰Weidner, Dr. Ralph W. *The Last Land Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Unpublished manuscript on file at Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas, p. 4.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 31**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

why the Union descended upon the Confederacy in South Texas. Schuler contends that the decision to attack came not from Barrett, but from his commanding officer, Brigadier General E.B. Brown.

The bulging warehouses at Brownsville, with some two thousand bales of cotton earmarked for consignees in Matamoros, was the primary cause for the breaking of the truce on May 12, by the Federal troops at Brazos Island, then under the command of Brigadier General E.B. Brown ... Brown had been persuaded by the Yankee cotton speculators at Matamoros, anxious to unload their cotton before the Confederate collapse, that the cotton could be seized by the Federals and sold as contraband, and the rebels at Brownsville would offer no resistance to the capture of the city and the cotton stored there. The plan took no account of Rip Ford, the man of integrity; the man who believed in the pledged word of the Wallace truce.⁷¹

According to Schuler, the Union either overestimated the faith the Confederates placed in the truce agreement, and would therefore not fight even when directly challenged, or else they underestimated the fighting strength of the troops defending Fort Brown commanded by

Rip Ford. Regardless, the Union's inability to correctly predict the response of the Confederates to an attack ultimately led to the Union's defeat in the Battle of Palmito Ranch.

Cotton elicited previous conflict in the area. In November 1863, for example, immediately prior to the imminent Union occupation of Fort Brown, Confederate General Bee ordered more than 200 bales of unshipped cotton burned rather than let the precious commodity fall into Yankee hands. The resulting fire destroyed all of Fort Brown and much of the surrounding areas of Brownsville.⁷² The incident suggests the importance of cotton in the series of south Texas Civil War battles fought as much for economic as for military reasons. The Confederacy's shipments of cotton through south Texas certainly influenced the location of the Battle of Palmito Ranch, and the immediate presence of stockpiles of cotton in Brownsville in May 1865 perhaps provided the impetus for the Union to launch an attack on the south Texas city, although the Civil War was essentially finished.

Conclusion

Palmito Ranch Battlefield is certainly noteworthy as the final episode—the last land engagement—of the great American Civil War, arguably the most significant and defining event of the nation's history. It is listed in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A (NR 1993) for this historic association.

More important, however, is the battlefield's national significance, which is more complex than its role as a historic milestone. While the Battle of Palmito Ranch did nothing to affect

⁷¹Schuler, Louis J. *The Last Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Brownsville: Springman-King Company, 1960, p. 18.

⁷²Banks 1983:34, p. 34.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 32**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

the outcome of the war, it is representative of the war-long struggle between the North and South to control southern ports and manipulate foreign diplomacy for economic and military advantage. Moreover, the battle for the mouth of the Rio Grande symbolized the Union's failure to check the flow of contraband along the international border with Mexico. That vexation, coupled with the potential booty and recognition to be had in capturing the great stores of cotton reputed to be held in Brownsville, may have compelled young Colonel Barrett to march against the remaining Confederate forces in violation of the Wallace agreement.

Due to the Union's successful blockade of southern ports, the mouth of the Rio Grande had become the focal point of foreign trade—a lifeline to the Confederacy by the last years of the war—thus adding an international dimension to the military and economic objectives. Beyond the immediate concerns of the American Civil War, the border region also presented unique diplomatic and potentially volatile military challenges, as well. The presence of French, Belgian and Austrian troops in an alliance with the Mexican Imperialist Army at the border encouraged the Confederates and heightened Union anxiety over possible hostilities with Mexico at the conclusion of the war. Both the Union and Confederate leadership realized the strategic value of maintaining Mexican alliances on the border and occupation of the Lower Rio Grande Valley was paramount to that goal.

Finally, the war-long struggle for control of the border culminated in the last battle at Palmito Ranch. The battle was both a final, symbolic gesture of Southern defiance in the face of inevitable Northern domination, as well as one last ploy in the ongoing private (and not-so-private) economic ruse that played out along the international border—regardless of stated or intended military and political aspirations.

Ultimately, the legacy of Palmito Ranch lies less in its incidental distinction as the final battle of the Civil War, than as a part of the ongoing North-South struggle to secure a strategic economic and diplomatic position on the Lower Rio Grande—the gateway to Mexico. It also serves as a symbol of Confederate resolve; it was the Union's last, unsuccessful wartime attempt to seize control of the region and close the Confederacy's backdoor to Mexico. Even after the battle, the Lower Rio Grande served as a final avenue of retreat for recalcitrant Confederates hoping to reorganize in Mexico with Imperialist support—a possibility that prompted General Grant to fortify the border at the end of the war. The outcome of the battle simply confirmed that the diplomatic and economic alliances made at the border often operated independently of political or military objectives. It also highlighted the Confederacy's obdurate unwillingness to concede defeat—even though they were vastly outnumbered and almost certainly knew that the war was lost. In that respect, then, the battle presaged the difficulty with which the South would be repatriated into the Union.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 33

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Bailyn, Bernard, David Brion Davis, David Herbert Donald, John I. Thomas, Robert H. Wiebe and Gordon S. Wood. *The Great Republic: A History of the American People, Volume I*. D.C. Heath and Company: Lexington, Massachusetts, 1977.
- Barrett, Col. Theodore H. "Report to Headquarters, First Division, 25th Army Corps: August 10, 1865." In *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series I, Volume 48, Part I*. Published under the direction of Daniel S. Lamont, Secretary of War. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896.
- Branson, Lt. Col. David. "Report to Headquarters, Sixty-second Regiment U.S. Colored Infantry: May 18, 1865." In *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series I, Volume 48, Part I*. Published under the direction of Daniel S. Lamont, Secretary of War. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896.
- Carrington, Capt. W.H.D. "The Last Battle—The Last Charge, and the Last Gun Fired in the War." Chapter XLI in *History of Texas, Volume II: From 1685 to 1892*, by John Henry Brown. Austin: Jenkins Publishing Company, 1970.
- Catton, Bruce. *The American Heritage Picture History of the Civil War*. American Heritage Publishing Company: New York, 1982.
- Cheeseman, Bruce. Personal communication with Terri Myers, April 15, 1994.
- Civil War Site Advisory Commission. *Report on the Nation's Civil War Battlefields*. Prepared for the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, United States Senate, the Committee on Natural Resources, United States House of Representatives and the Secretary of the Interior. Washington, D.C.: National Park Service, 1993.
- Coalson, Polly Ann. *The Rio Grande Campaign: 1863-1965*. Masters thesis, Texas A&I University, 1991.
- Cohen, Barry M. "The Texas-Mexico Border, 1858-1867, along the Lower Rio Grande Valley during the Decade of the American Civil War and the French Intervention in Mexico" in *More Studies in Brownsville History*. Milo Kearney editor. Pan American University at Brownsville, 1989.
- Comtois, Pierre. "War's Last Battle" in *America's Civil War*. July 1992.
- Cowling, Annie. *The Civil War Trade of the Lower Rio Grande Valley*. MA thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 1926.
- Fehrenbach, T.R. *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans*. New York: The MacMillan Company, 1968.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 34**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

- Fielder, Bruce Martin. *The Mexican Connection: Confederate and Union Diplomacy on the Rio Grande, 1861-1865*. Masters thesis, North Texas State University, Denton: 1978.
- Ford, John Salmon. *Rip Ford's Texas*. Stephen B. Oates, editor. Austin: The University of Texas at Austin, 1963.
- Graf, LeRoy P. *The Economic History of the Lower Rio Grande Valley: 1820-1875, Volume II*. Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University, 1942. On file at the Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin.
- Hendry, A.B. "Last Battle of Civil War Is Recalled By Descendants of Man Who Watched It." Article in personal files of Charles Morris, Harlingen, Texas.
- Horgan, Paul. *Great River: The Rio Grande in North American History*. Volumes I and II. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1954.
- Irby, James A. *Backdoor at Bagdad: The Civil War on the Rio Grande*. Southwestern Studies Monograph No. 53. Texas Western Press: The University of Texas at El Paso: 1977.
- Kenedy, Mifflin letters to William G. Hale, 20 and 21 April 1865, Kenedy Papers, King Ranch Archives, Kingsville, Texas. Transcribed by Bruce Cheeseman.
- Kent, Lt. Richard. "General Court Martial Orders, No. 1." September 5, 1865. In personal files of Charles Morris, Harlingen, Texas.
- Lea, Tom. *The King Ranch*. Volume One. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957.
- Morris, Charles. Various files relating to Battle of Palmito Ranch. Harlingen, Texas.
- Parrish, Mike. *Richard Taylor: Soldier Prince of Dixie*. UNC Press: Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 1992.
- Pierce, Frank C. *A Brief History of the Lower Rio Grande*. Menasha, Wisconsin: The Collegiate Press, George Banta Publishing Company, 1917.
- Pipkin, Maurice. *An Early History of Cameron County*. MA, Texas College of Arts and Industries, Kingsville, Texas, 1940.
- Rankin, Melinda. *Twenty Years Among the Mexicans: A Narrative of Missionary Labor*. Chase and Hall Publishers: Cincinnati, 1875.
- Santos, Richard G. (compiler). *Early Visions of the Lower Rio Grande*. Munguia Printers, San Antonio: 1983.
- Schuler, Louis J. *The Last Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Brownsville: Springman-King Company, 1960.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 35**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Schwab, John Christopher, A.M., Ph.D. *The Confederate States of America: A Financial and Industrial History of the South During the Civil War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1901.

Trudeau, Noah Andre. *Out of the Storm: The End of the Civil War, April–June, 1865*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1994.

Wallace, Major-General Lew. "Letter to Brig. Gen. J.E. Slaughter and Col. J.S. Ford, C.S. Army: March 12, 1865." In *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies. Series I, Volume 48, Part I*. Published under the direction of Daniel S. Lamont, Secretary of War. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1896.

Webb, Walter Prescott, editor-in-chief. *The Handbook of Texas. Volumes I-III*. Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1952.

Widener, Dr. Ralph W. *The Last Land Battle in the War Between the States: May 13, 1865*. Unpublished manuscript on file at Texas State Archives, Austin, Texas.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- Previously Listed in the National Register.
- Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: # _____
- Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other (Specify Repository): _____

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 5,991 acres

| UTM References: | Zone | Easting | Northing | Zone | Easting | Northing |
|-----------------|------|---------------|----------------|------|---------------|----------------|
| | A 14 | <u>680344</u> | <u>2873953</u> | B 14 | <u>680350</u> | <u>2871740</u> |
| | C 14 | <u>666383</u> | <u>2866853</u> | D 14 | <u>666354</u> | <u>2871973</u> |

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD**Page 37**

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

Verbal Boundary Description:

Please refer to the accompanying map, which is based on official topographical maps of the United States Geological Survey, for a precise depiction of the boundaries of the Palmito Ranch Battlefield.

The southern boundary of the battlefield follows the current course of the Rio Grande which separates the state of Texas from Mexico to the south, while State Highway 4 (the Boca Chica Highway) marks the northern boundary. The western boundary roughly follows a line extending southward from Loma del Muerto to the Rio Grande, and the eastern boundary roughly follows a line extending southward from the westernmost tip of Verdolaga Lake to a point on the Rio Grande midway between Tarpon Bend and Stell-Lind Banco No. 128. (See the accompanying map in Appendix A for a thorough depiction of the battlefield area.)

Beginning at a point on the U.S. bank of the Rio Grande immediately south of Loma del Muerto, proceed due north approximately one mile to the intersection of the Boca Chica Highway and Loma del Muerto. Then proceed east along the south edge of the Boca Chica Highway, approximately 4.5 miles, to a point on the highway due south of the easternmost tip of Verdolaga Lake. Then proceed due south to the Rio Grande. Then proceed west along the U.S. bank of the Rio Grande approximately 4.5 miles to the point of origin.

Boundary Justification:

Boundaries for the Palmito Ranch Battlefield encompass the large expanse of land where the most intense fighting of the conflict took place. Since the battle consisted of a series of moving skirmishes, the battlefield itself covers a large area approximately five miles long.

The southern boundary of the Palmito Ranch Battlefield follows the current path of the Rio Grande, since the river formed one border for all fighting. Also, the river is the international boundary line between the United States and Mexico.

The western boundary of the battlefield roughly follows a line extending from the Loma del Muerto southward to the Rio Grande. This line approximates the point at which the Confederate reinforcements, led by Colonel John S. (Rip) Ford, arrived at the scene of the battle on the afternoon of May 13, 1865. This boundary also approximates the position of "San Martin Ranch," referred to by officers of both armies in written accounts of the battle. The Boca Chica Highway (State Highway 4) forms the northern boundary of the battlefield. Although some scattered fighting may have taken place north of this line, most of the conflict was concentrated much closer to the Rio Grande. The placement of the boundary at the highway allows for the inclusion of a broad expanse of land north of the river, providing a visitor to the site with a good sense of the large area in which the running battle occurred.

The battlefield's eastern boundary roughly extends from the westernmost tip of Verdolaga Lake southward to a point on the Rio Grande just east of Tarpon Bend and just west of Stell-Lind Banco No. 128, as shown on the accompanying map. This line marks the approximate location of a small levee referred to in written, first-hand accounts of the battle as the scene of the final skirmish, and the place where the Confederate Army ceased its pursuit of the Union troops on the evening of May 13, 1865.

PALMITO RANCH BATTLEFIELD

United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

Page 38

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Ms. Terri Myers, Historian
Hardy Heck Moore & Associates
2112 Rio Grande
Austin, Texas 78705

Telephone: 512/478-8014

Date: May 29, 1994

Edited by: Mr. Edwin C. Bearss
Special Assistant to the Director
for Military Sites & History
National Park Service, Washington Office
P.O. Box 37127, Suite 250
Washington, DC 20013-7127

Telephone: 202/343-1177; and

Edited by: Mr. James H. Charleton, Historian
National Park Service, Washington Office
International Affairs Division (023)
P.O. Box 37127, Suite 330
Washington, DC 20013-7127

Telephone: 202/343-7063

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS SURVEY
December 8, 1997