

Lay Final Research Report
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Research in the U.S. National Archives to locate maps of historic roads
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From July 7-13, 2001, I conducted research in the cartographic sections of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and in the map room of the U.S. National Archives in College Park, Maryland. The object of this search was to locate maps and charts denoting information about the course of the Point Isabel-Matamoros road, which bisected the Palo Alto Battlefield in 1846 and the old road that delineated the boundary of the 1865 battle of Palmito Ranch in 1865.

Since previous park efforts have already uncovered maps from the period of the U.S.-Mexican War, I chose to concentrate on later maps, particularly those from the Civil War era and the late-nineteenth century. The document collections studied came ranged from military maps and fortification plans, to postal route charts, to civil surveys and aerial photographs. This broad search produced a wealth of documents and a limited amount of practical information.

Although many maps showed the course of both roadways from their origins to the site of the modern-day city of Brownsville, a large number of these were on a scale that prevented any accurate determination of the exact paths followed. Likewise, aerial photographs from the 1930s and 1940s proved to be inconclusive as to the definitive locations of the road across the Palmito Ranch Battlefield. Adding to the challenge, a large number of the more accurate regional maps focused on the endpoints of the two roadways, but did not include the midpoints of the trails. These charts provided a great deal of information that is valuable to the park, but they leave the routes of the two roads across the prairie and over the two battlefields shrouded in mystery. Nevertheless, the research yielded about a dozen maps that provide some important new information about the roads.

For the Brazos Santiago/ Boca Chica to Brownsville Road, the most helpful maps are an 1854 U.S. Army Engineer Department Map of Fort Brown and vicinity and an 1866 plot of the

military railroad from the fort to Boca Chica. Both maps provide a good view of the roadway, the course of the Rio Grande, and identifying landmarks. Neither map offers an exact placement of some of the most notable milestones of the Palmito Ranch battle, but they present a number of additional landmarks that will assist in efforts to locate this road on the open prairie. Also valuable is a circa-1920 map of Laguna Vista, Texas--northeast of the City of Brownsville. This map presents a full view of the road along the river and, though it does not identify the Palmito Ranch Battlefield, clearly shows the path the road follows across that site. The chart also shows the tract numbers and property owners for the land that comprise the battlefield, which will benefit efforts to obtain additional maps from the County Appraisal District.

The map is also valuable for understanding the route of the old Matamoros to Point Isabel road. The document does not show this route, since it had been officially eliminated long before the 1920s, but it provides a listing of previously unknown landowners and tracts along the route, including those who owned property on the battlefields of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma. Several of the property lines seem to fall along what may well have been a division created by the old route between these two battlefields. Further research into the history of these landholdings may verify this supposition.

Other maps also provide some interesting details. An 1864 Map of Brownsville and Vicinity, commissioned by Maj. Gen. F. J. Herron does not show the course of the road across the Mexican War battlefields, but it does show the route of the road across the newly established town plat for the City of Brownsville. This path cuts across much of what is now the City of Brownsville's "Cultural District," and may be easily determined by using modern landmarks. The map also clearly differentiates between the road and the "Old Port Isabel Road," which replaced the Point Isabel/Matamoros route in the early 1850's

An additional discovery, an 1867 coastal survey of the U.S. Army's Brazos Santiago Depot, also affords some interesting details. Although this is primarily a nautical chart, the document does offer a view of part of the road in question and associates it with several surviving

landmarks. The chart also has an additional benefit in that it provides an exact location of the site of the 1846 Fort Polk at Point Isabel. This is the first map that the park has located that clearly shows the placement of this defunct fieldwork.

Neither of the latter two maps shows the course of the road as it crossed the fields of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, but they allow for some extrapolation using other sources. Knowing the two termini of this roadway, I was able to locate what appear to be the traces of this roadway along a series of aerial photographs from a 1939 over flight of Cameron County, Texas. Although it is difficult to follow this course across a series of more than ten overlaying images, it seems reasonable to assume that this is the footprint of the 1846 road. The park has ordered some photographic reproductions of the original microfilm, and it is hoped that the images will provide a clear enough trace to enable an educated guess as to the entire course of the road.

While this week of research did not produce definitive answers on the paths of the two roadways in question, the study did unearth a number of charts and maps that will be of value in other areas. In addition to the survey that provided information on Fort Polk, a number of the military maps provided new information on Fort Brown. A series of documents from the late nineteenth century offers a chronology of the military reservation and of the gradual deterioration of the original earthworks. These will be put to use in the development of a Cultural Landscape Inventory for the site planned for the coming year.

Likewise, even though many of the maps did not show the sought-for roads, they do show other historical features and activities that hitherto fore had been unknown. Many of the maps show the development of canal networks, railroad spurs, property subdivisions, and other activities on or near the Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma Battlefields. This information will be extremely important background material for cultural research surveys and archeological projects that have been scheduled for both sites.

Copies were obtained of 12 of the most useful maps and these were placed in the Palo Alto map collection.