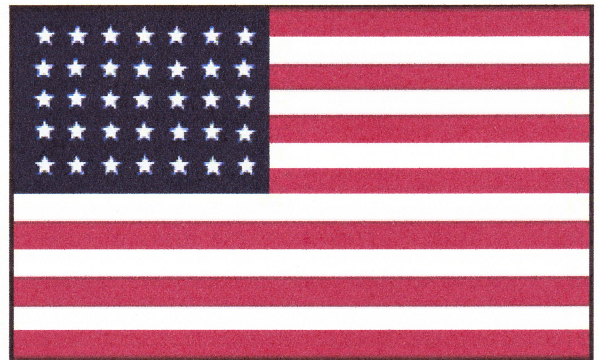
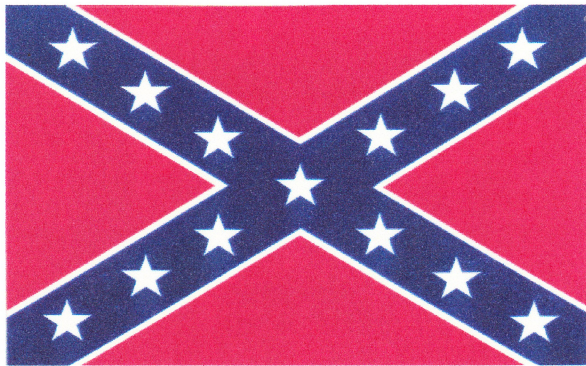


The Final Military Battle of the Civil War (or "Don't Mess With Texas")

**A Paper for the Hopkinsville, Kentucky Athenaeum Society
September 3, 2009**

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I do not claim to be a qualified Civil War historian, but I do have a number of connections and an interest. While there are many major and significant battles in Civil War history, I will mention just a few to show my point. There was the first one at Fort Sumpter in Charleston, South Carolina. I have been there several times. Gettysburg is certainly well known and I have been there. Shiloh is very famous and a relative of mine was wounded there. It just so happens that to my knowledge he was my only relative who was on the Union side. Then there was Vicksburg. I was born there. Also, the relative that was wounded at Shiloh found himself in the hospital at Vicksburg after the battle. He met a nurse there, a Southerner, and married her after which he lived the rest of his life in the Mississippi Delta near my home town. The battle of Corinth, Mississippi, is not as well known but was critical because two major railroads, one East-West and one North-South crossed in the middle of town (and still do today). It was a spot greatly desired by both Union and Confederate forces. Thousands of Confederates marched from further south in Mississippi to Corinth, and in doing so went right across part of the land now owned by my wife and me. We have several artifacts from there. Perhaps I should clarify my position a little here by stating that, yes, I was born and raised in the South and am proud to be a Southerner. However, I have never and do not now in any way approve of human slavery in any form, at any time, in any place in this world. I am also deeply proud to have been born and raised in the United States. Come to my home and you will see a U.S. flag proudly

displayed at the entrance to my driveway.

I am confident that you are familiar with many famous and critical battles of the Civil War, but there is one that is not as famous or critical to the outcome of the war, but which claims a unique place in Civil War history. It was the last land battle of the war. This paper is about that battle. Yes, I have been there also. Perhaps it would be helpful to at this point have a brief geography review of the area where the focus of this paper takes place. I am confident that you are already quite familiar with the shape and location of the state of Texas. The Texas city of Brownsville is located on that southernmost tip that borders on Mexico and the Gulf of Mexico. About 15 miles east of Brownsville is the Gulf of Mexico and the border of Mexico where the Rio Grande river flows into the Gulf. As you probably are aware, today the Rio Grande is quite small (even small enough to at places wade and swim across!) Just a few miles north of the mouth of the Rio Grande is the barrier island named Brazos Island, the northern tip of which is about 4 miles from the southern tip of the now famous South Padre Island. On the north end of Brazos Island is the town of Brazos Santiago. About 6 miles or so southwest of Brazos Santiago near the Rio Grande is the site of the old White's Ranch and a little further southwest Palmito Ranch. The site of Palmito Ranch is about 10 miles from Brownsville. The whole area is rather flat coastal land with any hills mentioned being relatively low. There are numerous small bodies of water and much brushy vegetation. Sand dunes appear as you get closer to the Gulf. It generally is a windswept, marshy prairie on the north banks of the Rio Grande and appears today much as it did during the 1860's. The area's high salinity and its tendency to hold water have protected the landscape from intensive farming and development. The sights and sounds today are much the same as those encountered by soldiers during the Civil War. The primary area is

now a National Historic Landmark, with a boundary encompassing roughly 6,000 acres. At present the only indication that a major event took place in this area is a small historic marker the state of Texas has placed on the highway near the site of the old Palmito Ranch. Efforts are underway to recognize the importance of this site. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, present owners, the National Park Service, the Texas Historic Commission, and the Civil War Preservation Trust are currently working together to preserve this battlefield and to increase public awareness and understanding of the site.

The southern tip of Texas played a vital economic role in the terrible and deadly conflict between Union and Confederate forces throughout the war. Shortly after fighting began, Union naval forces established an effective blockade of Southern ports, cutting off many normal trade links with European markets and having an effect on the Confederacy's ability to fund its war effort. They were, however, unable to blockade the Mexican port of Bagdad just south of the Rio Grande river. Mexicans tended to side with the Confederates partly because of a lucrative smuggling trade. Thus the Confederates were able to land supplies at Bagdad and then transport them twenty-five miles inland to Matamoros, to then be shipped across the Rio Grande into Brownsville, Texas. Similarly, the Confederates found that if southern planters could get their cotton to Brownsville and across to the Mexican city of Matamoros, the precious cargo could be loaded onto Mexican merchant ships and sail, untouched, past the prowling Union fleet. In time, wagon trains loaded with the "white gold" flowed into the Lower Rio Grande Valley, making the area an economic lifeline for the Confederacy.

In 1863, Union troops captured the military installation of Fort Brown, occupied Brownsville, and briefly plugged the leak in their blockade. But the Confederates, determined to

keep the cotton trade flowing, soon retook the fort and pushed the Federal troops to Brazos Santiago on Brazos Island just a few miles north of where the Rio Grande flows into the Gulf of Mexico. There the Union forces maintained a presence at the Brazos Santiago depot, blockading the Rio Grande and Brownsville from the Gulf, and continuing to control the coast for the duration of the war. Then in the summer of 1864, many Union troops were withdrawn from the Texas coast and were sent to focus more on campaigns in the East. Federal forces maintained their coastal defenses only in the area of Brazos Santiago Depot. Some small skirmishes happened at times but the Confederates were able to continue their international trade.

In February, 1865 the Union commander at Brazos Island, Col. Theodore H. Barrett, reported to his superiors that his area was secure from attack and that with permission he could take Brownsville, but he was refused permission for such an attack. Also at that time, Maj. Gen. Lewis Wallace asked for and received General Grant's permission to meet with the Confederate commanders of the Brownsville area at Port Isabel on March 11, 1865, in hopes of arranging a separate peace. In Port Isabel there is one of many lighthouses that were built on the Texas coast. This one was constructed in 1852 and was used at various times by both Confederate and Federal forces for an observation post. It still stands today and , yes, I have climbed to the top of it. The Confederate commanders were Brig. Gen. James E. Slaughter, of the Western Sub-District of Texas, and Col. John Salmon (Rip) Ford of the southern division of Slaughter's command. These two commanders were willing to meet with General Wallace because evidence was mounting that the war was approaching its end. Wallace promised no retaliation against former Confederates so long as they took an oath of allegiance to the United States. Anyone who preferred to leave the country would be given time to gather up property and family before doing

so. Although it was in fact to be a temporary one, an informal truce was arranged after which Ford and Slaughter sent Wallace's proposals up the chain of command and Wallace reported to Grant that the rebels in Texas would soon surrender. However, Slaughter's superior in Houston, Maj. Gen. John G. Walker, denounced Wallace's terms and wrote a stinging letter to Slaughter for having even listened to Wallace. Lt. Gen. Edmund Kirby Smith, commander of the Confederate Trans Mississippi Department, which included Texas, Arkansas and the Indian Territory that is now Oklahoma, was not ready to abandon the cause either. Shortly after the Confederate Trans Mississippi Department refused to accept General Wallace's terms, General Robert E. Lee on April 9, 1865, surrendered his Army of Northern Virginia at Appomattox Court House, Virginia. Although many Confederate troops in the East surrendered their arms within the month, the Trans- Mississippi Department refused to do so. Even though CNN was not on the air that week, the Confederates in Texas became aware of the fate of the Confederacy's eastern armies when on May 1, 1865, a passenger on a steamer, heading up the Rio Grande towards Brownsville, tossed a copy of the New Orleans *Times* to some Confederates at Palmito Ranch. It contained news of Lee's surrender, Lincoln's death, and surrender negotiations between General Joseph E. Johnston and General William Tecumseh Sherman in North Carolina. Johnston then did surrender to Sherman on April 26 in Bennett Place, North Carolina. Within ten days of getting this news, several hundred rebels left the army and went home, but those who remained were as determined as their commanders to continue the fight in Texas.

Further information about Major General Lewis (Lew) Wallace is worthy of comment here. General Wallace had a reputation of being a master politician and negotiator. He was a veteran of the Mexican War, after which he practiced law and entered politics. Of local interest

is that he fought under General Grant at Fort Donelson, Tennessee, in February, 1862. In 1864, he temporarily stopped a Confederate offensive at the Battle of the Monocacy, an action that may have saved Washington, D.C., from capture. It is suggested that a primary reason for wanting to go to south Texas to spearhead a truce with the Confederates there was to improve his reputation that had been blemished during the Battle of Shiloh, Tennessee, in April 1862.

General Wallace's division had been late arriving on the battlefield when General Grant's army was in difficulty after the Confederate surprise attack. He hoped that a successful mission to Texas would improve his postwar political ambitions. To avoid arousing suspicion, the mission was disguised as an inspection tour of Union troops at the garrison of Brazos Santiago. General Wallace was a man with numerous talents and interests. He is likely best known today for his writing in 1880 of the Biblical classic, "Ben Hur: A Tale of the Christ". Probably many of you have seen the movie starring Charlton Heston. If you have not, I highly recommend that you consider doing so.

You are all familiar with media releases in recent years that told of major intelligence reports that later turned out to be false or inaccurate reports. Well, the occurrence of such incidents did not start in our generation. In May, 1865, Union forces in south Texas received an erroneous report that the southerners were preparing to evacuate Brownsville and move to a place east of Corpus Christi about 150 miles north of Brownsville. Partly because of this report and likely in part because of his political ambitions and a desire to gain personal glory before the war ended, Colonel Theodore Barrett, commander of the Union forces on Brazos Island, ordered an advance on the Texas mainland toward Brownsville. You recall that Colonel Barrett had earlier been given direct orders to not try to take Brownsville. For William Turner, this is one more bit

of evidence to back up his often used name for the Civil War: "The War of Northern Aggression". Colonel Barrett ordered 250 men of the Sixty-second United States Cavalry (dismounted) to cross to the mainland from Brazos Island at Boca Chica Pass and then advance to and eventually occupy Brownsville. They carried five days' rations and 100 rounds of ammunition per man. They were under the command of Lt. Col. David Branson and were first to encounter a party of Confederates reported to be based at nearby White's Ranch. Because of bad weather and other difficulties they did not reach the ranch until 2:00 a.m. and found no Confederates in sight. They halted there and tried to conceal themselves in a thicket along the Rio Grande, but were spotted by "civilians" (probably Confederate soldiers) on the Mexican side of the river. Realizing that hope of surprising the Confederates was lost, at 6:00 a.m. on the 12th Branson resumed his advance and soon encountered a small number of Confederate horsemen. After a small skirmish with these troops he moved on toward Palmito Ranch. There, the Confederates withdrew and, at mid-day Branson tried to give his troops some rest. Around 3:00 p.m., the Confederates returned in force. At that time the Federals encountered Captain George Roberson's 190-man company of Lt. Col. George H. Giddins's Texas Cavalry Battalion. After a brief skirmish the Confederates retired for a time. The Federals also fell back to a hill overlooking the ranch to rest and camp for the night. They were undisturbed until 3:00 a.m. when Roberson's Company reappeared. Colonel Ford, at Fort Brown, had ordered Roberson to maintain contact with Branson's troops and promised to reinforce him as soon as possible. Under pressure from Roberson, the Federals fell back to White's Ranch, from where Branson sent a courier to Brazos Santiago asking Colonel Barrett for reinforcements. Barrett himself arrived at 5:00 a.m. on May 13, 1865, with 200 men of the thirty-fourth Indiana Infantry,

bringing the Union strength up to 500 officers and men.

Under Barrett's command Union forces moved on Palmito Ranch once more, and a "sharp engagement" took place between Barrett's 500 troops and Roberson's 190 Confederates in a thicket along the river bank. The outnumbered but persistent southerners were soon pushed back across an open prairie and beyond sight toward Brownsville, while the exhausted federals paused on a small hill about a mile west of Palmito Ranch. Then around 3:00 p.m. Confederate reinforcements arrived. Colonel John S. "Rip" Ford came with 300 men from his own Second Texas Calvary, Colonel Santos Benavides's Texas Calvary Regiment, and additional companies from Giddings's battalion, as well as a six-gun battery field artillery under the command of Captain O.G. Jones. With mounted cavalry and artillery, Ford had the perfect force to deal with Barrett's infantry on the flat, open land around Palmito Ranch. Hidden by a group of small trees, Ford's men formed their line of battle. At 4:00 p.m. Jones's guns began to fire. After a brief bombardment, Roberson's men attacked the Union left near the river, while two other companies of Giddings's battalion struck its right. At the same time, the rest of Ford's men charged the enemy center. The southern assault came as a great surprise, and the Union line rapidly fell apart. Barrett later reported that, "Having no artillery to oppose the enemy's six twelve-pounder field pieces our position became untenable. We therefore fell back fighting." Ford remembered it differently when he wrote in his memoirs that Barrett, "seemed to have lost his presence of mind" and to have led his troops off the field in a "rather confused manner." Forty-six men of the Thirty-fourth Indiana were put out as skirmishers and left to be captured as the federals fell back toward Brazos Island. Only by deploying 140 men of the Sixty-second Colored in a line running from the Rio Grande to three-quarters of a mile inland did the Union troops slow the

Confederate attack enough to allow the northerners to get away. Ford wrote that the battle from its beginning had been “a run,” and demonstrated “how fast demoralized men could get over ground.” The Confederates chased the Federals for seven miles back to Brazos Island. There the routed Union troops were met by reinforcements, and Ford ‘s men ceased their attack. “Boys, we have done finely,” said Ford. “We will let well enough alone, and retire.” The action lasted a total of four hours. As the sun sank below the horizon, a Federal shell exploded over the head of a teen-aged Confederate soldier. Rattled, the young Rebel shouted obscenities at the Blue Coats, turned, and fired the last shot of the Civil War into the shadowy sand dunes in the distance. With all due respect to any Yankees present here tonight and certainly due respect to the Yankees involved in this account, if this paper had sound effects and a musical background, the description of this last battle is one place “Dixie” would be playing loud and clear!

Reports from the Handbook of Texas and from information in a National Park Service publication indicate that about 115 U.S. soldiers were killed, wounded or missing in this last battle. Confederate casualties are indicated as a few dozen wounded. Some other reports gave different numbers. Private John Jefferson Williams, of the 34th Indiana Volunteer Infantry (U.S.) and from Jay County, Indiana, is recognized as the last soldier killed in a Civil War battle. It is reported that his comrades buried him in the outskirts of Brownsville.

A few days after the Battle of Palmito Ranch federal officers from Brazos Santiago visited Brownsville to arrange a truce with General Slaughter and Colonel Ford. Then on May 30, 1865, the Confederates in Texas accepted the inevitable and surrendered Brownsville to Union Forces without further fighting. Ironically, two years later the fort at Brazos Santiago was destroyed by a hurricane. Three days after the surrender of Brownsville, on June 2nd, General

Edmund Kirby Smith, commander of the Trans-Mississippi Department of the Confederacy, surrendered the last major Confederate army to the United States and brought the Civil War to a close.

In this report you have heard of the last land battle of the Civil War, the last shot fired in the Civil War, the last soldier killed in the Civil War and the last official surrender of the Civil War. Thus ends a horrendous chapter in our Nation's history.