

TRIVUS

*Arkansas and the
U.S.-Mexican War*



“It is the right of our manifest destiny to over spread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty.” – John L. O’ Sullivan

In 1846 the United States declared war on Mexico. This two-year conflict found its roots in the pursuit of Manifest Destiny.

Arkansans were eager to fight when the war began. Volunteers quickly signed on, fueled by geographical proximity, patriotism and anger over the death of a fellow Arkansan in the conflict. The state’s involvement throughout the war was marked by highs and lows and ultimately resulted in lingering controversy.



*Map of Mexico, 1846
Courtesy of University of Texas at Arlington*

Beginning with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Americans spent the first half of the 19th century moving westward into new territories like Arkansas, Missouri and Louisiana that eventually became states. Settlers pushed further south and west, turning their eyes toward Spanish-governed Texas. After Mexico won its freedom from Spain in 1821, Texas became part of Mexico.

By the 1830s, Texas’ growing American population unnerved Mexican leaders. In March 1836, Texans declared their independence from Mexico, and Mexican General Antonio López de Santa Anna set out to put down the rebellion. After a short but bloody war, Texas’ independence was established. Santa Anna, captured at the end of this struggle, was forced to sign a treaty ending the war and recognizing the independent republic south to the Rio Grande, but the Mexican government never acknowledged that treaty.

Fighting continued between the two countries. Mexican officials knew that the U.S. was helping the new republic. When U.S. leaders suggested annexing Texas, relations grew worse. Mexicans viewed annexation as a challenge to their national honor and an act of war.

U.S. President James K. Polk, who campaigned on a platform of Manifest Destiny--specifically Texas annexation and further expansion westward — was determined to expand the U.S. to the Pacific Ocean. Efforts to purchase Alta California and Nuevo Mexico were ignored by the Mexican government.

► MEXICO AFTER INDEPENDENCE

Throughout Mexico’s early history the country was beset by political and economic instability. From 1821 to 1845, the country suffered many coups and civil wars, led by men who sought to create governments ranging from republics to monarchies. This continual confusion made governance nearly impossible for a large nation that stretched to Oregon on the north, Guatemala to the south, the Pacific Ocean to the west, and through Texas to the Louisiana and Arkansas border on the east. By 1840, Mexico had about 7 million inhabitants, and 71 percent of those lived in the valley around Mexico City. War and coups destroyed much of the country’s economic infrastructure, closing many of Mexico’s profitable silver mines, pulling farmers from fields to fight, and destroying trade.

► PRELUDE TO WAR

In early 1846, U.S. General Zachary Taylor led the “Army of Occupation” to the Rio Grande River, recognized as the Texas border by the Americans. On April 25, Mexican General Anastasio Torrejón’s troops exchanged fire with U.S. Dragoons (cavalry) north of the Rio Grande. Taylor took most of his troops and raced to the coast for provisions to fortify the remaining soldiers at the newly-built Fort Texas, commanded by Arkansas Major Jacob Brown.

While returning to the fort on May 8, Taylor met General Mariano Arista’s army blocking the road at Palo Alto; the indecisive battle resulted in a Mexican withdrawal. The next morning, the Americans met Arista’s forces in battle at Resaca de la Palma and won. During the siege of Fort Texas, Brown was wounded by a cannon ball and died.

Brevet 2nd Lieutenant Erastus B. Strong, from St. Francis County, was the first Arkansas to graduate from West Point. He was in Ft. Texas during the siege and was present at Brown’s death.

On May 11, President Polk carried battle news to the U.S. Congress, declaring that Mexico had “invaded our territory and shed American blood upon American soil.” Congress declared war on Mexico.



*Major Brown Mortally Wounded
From Frost’s Pictorial History of the Mexican War,
Courtesy of Bill Frazier*

In the mid-1830s, Captain Jacob Brown served as the disbursing officer for the Indian Office in the War Department, based in Little Rock. Without

surrendering his commission, he was named president of the Arkansas State Bank. A strong Jacksonian Democrat, Brown was politically and socially connected. By 1837, however, he grew tired of dealing with the state's financial problems and resigned his position as head of the State Bank. His death made a huge impact on Arkansans, particularly those in Little Rock, indignant over the loss of American life and that of a fellow "Arkansan."

▶ ARKANSANS PREPARE FOR ACTION

Arkansas was asked to provide one regiment, or 10 companies, of "mounted gunmen" for the war. Crawford, Franklin, Independence, Johnson, Phillips, Pope, and Sevier counties each raised one company. Saline and Hot Spring counties combined to create one company, while Pulaski County supplied two companies. Five additional infantry companies were sent to the Indian Territory (Oklahoma) to relieve the regular army there.

Many flag presentations took place around the state as companies departed. Soldiers were honored with picnics, speeches, and presentations of company flags made by local ladies.



Try Us Battle Flag, 1846
Old State House
Museum Collection

After making final preparations and electing officers, 870 Arkansas volunteers began the 500-mile journey to San Antonio, Texas, where they would receive orders for their mission in Mexico.

A typical Arkansas company included 78 men: one captain, one first lieutenant, one second lieutenant, four sergeants, four corporals, two buglers, one farrier (blacksmith), and 64 privates. Mounted gunmen provided their own horses and wore civilian clothes at the beginning of the war; they did not receive official uniforms until much later.

▶ ARKANSAS'S REGIMENTAL OFFICERS

The selection of officers for Arkansas's volunteer companies quickly became a matter of politics: Democrat versus Whig. The Whigs were the minority party in Arkansas. Men like Albert Pike, a prominent Whig and captain of the Little Rock Guards, found themselves shut out of the regimental officer elections.



Albert Pike at age 34, from an oil portrait by Charles Elliott Loring
Courtesy of Supreme Council Library



Archibald Yell Portrait
Courtesy of Arkansas Office
of Secretary of State

Before the Arkansas Regiment left Little Rock, Congressman Archibald Yell, a close friend of President James K. Polk, joined the ranks as a private. Yell received much criticism for fighting instead of serving out his term in Congress. At the July 4, 1846, election of officers at Washington, Arkansas, Yell was elected colonel, but suffered criticism for his lack of military bearing. John Selden Roane, who served as speaker of the state house of representatives, was elected lieutenant colonel (second in command). Third in command was Major Solon Borland, a doctor and former Little Rock newspaper publisher. At the beginning of the war, Borland was Adjutant General for the state of Arkansas.

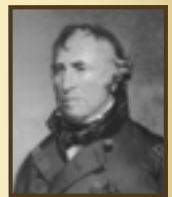
▶ THE AMERICAN GENERALS

When the U.S. declared war on Mexico in 1846, the U.S. Army had just more than 8,000 men serving. Severely under-funded and low on both troops and supplies, the Army faced a huge task. They recruited "regulars" to serve as career soldiers, while each state recruited "volunteers" to serve limited tours during the war.

While Polk made leadership appointments, the main generals, like Zachary Taylor, Winfield Scott and John Wool were in command despite his efforts. The American military leaders were nearly all career soldiers. Many fought in the War of 1812 or the Seminole War. Despite their military prowess, they quarreled with each other and even President Polk throughout the war due to their political differences.

Brigadier General John E. Wool: The Arkansas Regiment served under Brigadier General John E. Wool. A hero of the War of 1812, the New Yorker was nicknamed "Old Granny Wool" by the volunteers who did not care for his strict discipline, but he eventually earned their esteem at the Battle of Buena Vista.

Major General Zachary Taylor, known throughout the army as "Old Rough and Ready," was in command at Buena Vista. A career soldier, Taylor rose through the ranks while serving in the War of 1812, the Black Hawk War, and the Seminole War. Many Arkansans knew Taylor from his days commanding Fort Smith and overseeing outposts in the Indian Territory.



Major General Zachary Taylor, original print published by the Gravure Co.
On loan from University of Texas at Arlington

Major General Winfield Scott, another War of 1812 hero, was known as "Old Fuss and Feathers." Scott commanded operations from Veracruz to Mexico City.



Winfield Scott
Courtesy of Library of Congress

► THE MEXICAN GENERALS

The Mexican Army was composed of *permanentes*, or full-time soldiers, and *activos*, or militia. They suffered from low morale, desertion, and irregular pay. Men were often conscripted using the unpopular *leva* system, instead of being recruited. A huge gulf in class and economic differences separated the officers and the enlisted men.

The Mexican Army had little experience with large-scale invading forces prior to the U.S.-Mexican War and spent most of its time dealing with domestic issues. Lack of cohesiveness was a serious problem for the army; officers and soldiers often formed alliances with different political groups to further their own plans and those of a particular political constituency.

The Mexican Army had a standing pool of generals to command, but many achieved their rank through political favors, not military victories. Many of these men were of Spanish descent, although a few were *mestizos* who rose through the ranks. The Mexican commanders were often in conflict with Santa Anna and with each other due to differing interests.



Antonio López de Santa Anna, circa 1835, Black and white engraving Courtesy of University of Texas at Arlington

General Antonio López de Santa Anna: Born February 21, 1794, to Spanish parents, Santa Anna originally joined the Spanish Colonial Army before joining the revolutionaries in 1821 to help fight for Mexico's independence. Over the course of his career, Santa Anna was involved in numerous internal and external conflicts and was a towering figure of politics and military matters in the Mexico's early history.

General Pedro de Ampudia: He became one of Santa Anna's generals in 1840 and commanded troops throughout the war, including forces at the battles of Monterrey and Buena Vista (or La Angostura).



General Ampudia treating for the capitulation of Monterrey with General Taylor, September 24, 1846. Lithograph published by Savony and Major, N.Y. Courtesy of Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division

General Gabriel Valencia: Valencia was very active politically and often made or broke alliances to advance his own interests and career. Valencia and his forces were located in Northeast Mexico early in the war; they were routed at the Battle of Contreras in August 1847, by troops that included Arkansans serving in the 12th Infantry.

► U.S. PLAN OF ATTACK

In 1846, the U.S. planned to launch a three-pronged attack on Mexico and force negotiations. Stephen Kearny's army marched first for New Mexico and then for California, while Taylor's army pushed south of the Rio Grande. The U.S. Navy,

under Commodore John D. Sloat, would attack California by sea. Wool's Army of the Central was to attack Chihuahua.

Outside San Antonio, Wool assembled his forces, mostly volunteers from Arkansas, Indiana, and Illinois. His army marched 500 brutal miles through Mexico to Monclova and Parras. By the time they reached Parras, their mission to Chihuahua was unnecessary. In December 1846, Wool's army was summoned to join Taylor's forces south of Saltillo.



Plaza, Saltillo, Mexico to N.E. Courtesy of Yale Collection of Western Americana, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library

Jonathan W. Buhoup was a sergeant in Captain C.C. Danley's Pulaski County Company. His rank gave him access to both officers and privates, allowing him to observe all aspects of life in the Arkansas regiment. Buhoup wrote an extensive narrative of what the Arkansas volunteers experienced during the war, providing everything from descriptions of day-to-day life to critical observations of how the officers conducted themselves.

► BATTLE OF MONTERREY

After securing the Rio Grande, General Taylor decided to move his army further into Mexican territory to Monterrey, the capitol of the Mexican state of Nuevo León. General Ampudia moved the remains of his army there after the battle at Resaca de la Palma (or Resaca de Guerrero) and bolstered the city's defenses. At the center of these defenses was the "Black Fort," an abandoned cathedral with 30 foot high solid stone walls and ample positions for cannon.

Taylor underestimated the Mexican resolve, and although outnumbered, he assaulted the city in September 1846. His losses were heavy and after three days, the fighting moved from house to house. Taylor agreed to let Ampudia withdraw from the city to prevent further bloodshed. They also negotiated an eight-week truce to regroup their battered armies.

This unauthorized truce did not sit well with President Polk, and Taylor was ordered to cancel it. Taylor's increasing popularity was becoming a threat, and Polk decided to try to direct the war away from Taylor and his army. Santa Anna had other plans, though.

► NEW PLAN AND NEW ARMY

In the fall of 1846, President Polk was frustrated with developments south of the Rio Grande. Following the battle of Monterrey, General Taylor was being mentioned as the 1848 Whig candidate for president. Polk believed that the war needed to

be prosecuted vigorously and agreed to a plan by General Scott to invade Mexico at Veracruz and then march on Mexico City, using Taylor's army regulars from northern Mexico. Congress also agreed to add regulars, not volunteers, to Scott's army. Polk chose the officers for the new regiments—mostly Democrats like himself.

Life in the Arkansas Regiment: The U.S. Government provided supplies for the Arkansas mounted horsemen or "Rackensackers." Daily rations were supposed to include ¾ pounds of bacon or beef per day, hard bread (in the Civil War called hardtack), and occasionally coffee, salt, and soap. As Sgt. Buhoup recalled "The beef we here received was very bad—so poor, as the soldiers say, that to throw it against a smooth plank it would stick." After traveling 15-30 miles a day in the saddle, the Arkansans set up camp, cared for their horses, cooked meals, and were assigned to guard or "picket" duty.

Death & Disease: Disease was a common problem for soldiers in the U.S.-Mexican War. Typhus, measles combined with the common cold, yellow fever, malaria, dysentery and smallpox were some of the most common illnesses during this conflict. The Arkansas regiment left in July 1846 with 870 men. Disease, death and desertion reduced those ranks to 479 men fit for duty by February 1847.

► ATROCITIES

Atrocities against soldiers and civilians were committed by both sides during the U.S.-Mexican War. Much of the hatred by Americans for Mexicans dated back to hard feelings over the massacres at the Alamo and Goliad during the war for Texas' independence. During the war, Mexican soldiers were known to lasso American soldiers who lagged behind, drag them through the thorny and cactus-filled vegetation and leave them to die. Several large-scale atrocities took place as well during the war.

After six weeks of back and forth attacks between the Arkansas volunteers and Mexican guerillas, activities came to a head. In February 1847, a group of Arkansas volunteers killed the Mexicans they believed responsible for the murder of a fellow soldier, Samuel H. Colquitt, near Agua Nueva. Later that month, Mexican guerillas attacked a U.S. quartermaster train between Camargo and Marín and killed 40-50 teamsters, many tied to the wheels of their wagons and burned alive. A group of Texas volunteers attacked a rancho near San Felipe de Jesús de China, killing nearly 30 civilians in retaliation for that quartermaster train attack. In October that same year, U.S. volunteers "sacked the town of Huamantla in retaliation for the death of Captain Samuel H. Walker."

Encarnación: With the news that Mexican cavalry was near Saltillo, Major Solon Borland was ordered to take 44 men from various counties (Crawford, Franklin, Independence, Sevier, Saline, and Hot Spring) to Encarnación to join with Kentucky cavalry. Failing to post pickets during the night, the 72 Americans awoke January 23 to find they were

surrounded by General José Vicente Miñón's cavalry. The Americans surrendered and began the march to Mexico City.



Solon Borland, circa 1850
Courtesy of Library of
Congress, Prints and
Photographs Division

Massacre near Agua Nueva: Solon Borland's capture increased tensions among the Arkansans. Then Private Samuel H. Colquitt of Pulaski County was found killed on February 9. A small group of men from both Colquitt's company and the Sevier County company searched for his attackers and found a carbine sling with Colquitt's name, as well as a uniform from a missing Illinois volunteer. The volunteers rounded up a group of Mexicans outside Agua Nueva (without the knowledge of U.S. Army officers) for interrogation and started shooting when they did not receive any answers. Accounts vary, but 18 to 30 Mexicans were killed, some shot while trying to run, before Illinois troops arrived and stopped the massacre. Furious, General Taylor tried to force the companies involved to turn in the killers, but no one confessed. He threatened to send both companies to the Rio Grande to face hard labor. Before he had a chance, Santa Anna's army reached the area, and the Arkansans were needed for battle.

► BATTLE OF BUENA VISTA



Battle of Buena Vista, from Carl Nebel's The War Between the United States and Mexico, Illustrated.
Courtesy of University of Texas at Arlington

In late January 1847, Santa Anna led an army of about 20,000 men toward Saltillo to meet Taylor's mostly volunteer army of 4,700. As the first shots were exchanged late February 21, the Arkansans burned supplies at camp before joining Taylor's army. It was midday February 22 when Santa Anna's 15,000 remaining men took position, attempting to outflank the smaller American army.

The Arkansas volunteers were split into three groups under Yell, Roane and Pike. Limited fighting took place before dark when Santa Anna reinforced the area. The next day, the ranks, which included dismounted Arkansas riflemen under Roane, held until an Indiana colonel called retreat, causing volunteers to make a wild dash toward Saltillo. When 2,000 Mexican cavalry threatened wagons near Buena Vista, at the rear of the American lines, Yell and his Kentucky counterpart took their cavalry, about 400 strong, and charged. The charge split the Mexican forces and ended that attack. During the charge, Yell was killed by Mexican lancers. Pike's squadron, the best of the Arkansas cavalry, was used in support of U.S. dragoons throughout the battle. Cold, tired, and hungry, Santa Anna's army marched south the next morning.

► BATTLES OF VERACRUZ AND CERRO GORDO

General Scott's route to Mexico City passed through the coastal city of Veracruz. Using nesting surf boats, 15,000 troops landed out of artillery reach south of the city's walls on March 9, 1847. U.S. engineers, including Captain Robert E. Lee, ringed the city with earth works and began a siege using heavy artillery. General Juan Landero surrendered on March 25.

Santa Anna rushed from Mexico City to meet Scott's army, taking up a defensive position around the mountain at Cerro Gordo. Using artillery on a neighboring hill, the Americans struck on April 17, and then flanked Santa Anna's troops. Santa Anna escaped, leaving supplies and personal belongings behind, as he prepared to save the capitol.

► BATTLES OF CONTRERAS AND CHURUBUSCO



Battle of Churubusco, from Carl Nebel's The War Between the United States and Mexico, Illustrated.
Courtesy of University of Texas at Arlington

Santa Anna had about 20,000 men waiting for Scott when he neared Mexico City in August 1847, so Scott turned south. Santa Anna redeployed with General Valencia near Contreras.

The Americans faced a massive lava field near Contreras, but Captain Robert E. Lee built a road through it. Early August 20, General Gideon Pillow's army attacked from the north, while another army launched a sneak attack from behind. Among them was Captain Allen Wood's Company C (12th Infantry), who wrote of his Arkansans, "We all

hastened as rapidly as the ground would permit, forded the stream, and poured into their dismayed ranks a most destructive fire." Valencia's troops fled.

Wood's men continued the fight at the convent of Churubusco. After the Mexican defenses fell, Scott called a truce. The peace did not last, but provided relief for both sides

Captain Allen Wood of Carroll County relied on Arkansas men to fill out the ranks of a company for the 12th Infantry. Lieutenants Alden M. Woodruff and Lloyd Magruder were among those recruiting Arkansans in spring 1847. By early June, Captain Wood took his first 82 recruits to New Orleans to drill them before joining Scott's army. Captain J. Banks Anthony tried to recruit a company at Batesville for the 12th Infantry, but had little success, and moved on to Tennessee and Kentucky to fill out his ranks.

Borland & Danley: After their capture at Encarnación, Arkansans Major Solon Borland and Captain C.C. Danley were taken with the rest of their men to San Luis Potosí and then on to Mexico City. They were sometimes forced to travel over 40 miles a day on the journey, suffering the "third plague of the Egyptians" (lice), and were provided poor rations including "stewed cur." Both Borland and Danley eventually managed to escape from captivity, but were forced to go into hiding outside of Mexico City when Danley became deathly ill. Shortly after the Battle of Contreras, American troops passed by where the two were hiding and Borland found a musket, "fell into ranks and did some little duty that day."

► "HALLS OF THE MONTEZUMAS"

In September 1847, the Americans received incorrect information that a foundry was casting cannons for the Mexican Army at Molino del Rey, a complex of stone buildings used by Santa Anna to defend Mexico City. General Scott ordered an assault on September 8. The Mexican Army repulsed repeated assaults before finally falling to U.S. forces. Lt. Strong, who served with Scott's army since the landing at Veracruz, was killed during an American assault.

Scott then focused on the fortified hilltop of Chapultepec, Mexico's military academy, at that time outside Mexico City. Artillery pummeled the fortress on September 12, before Scott sent his troops with ladders to scale its walls. After brutal fighting, the Americans rushed inside to meet Mexican defenders, including young cadets like *Los Niños Héroes*. Scott's forces regrouped and turned toward the city.

Wanting to avoid the house-to-house fighting that occurred in Monterrey, Mexico City officials met with Santa Anna, who agreed to withdraw. On September 14, Scott's army marched into the Central Plaza. Borland, a prisoner at the National Palace for months, said: "The whole of our little army ... took up quarters in the far-famed Halls of the Montezumas. You must imagine my feelings (a contrast to my first entree) when I rode through the streets that morning! I will attempt no description."

Arkansas soldiers: Among those working as aides to the generals were Arkansans Borland and Captain C.C. Danley, the latter wounded near Belén

Gate. After the fall of Chapultepec, C.C. Danley, now an aide to General Quitman, carried orders to Quitman's troops to push on to the Belén Gate, the entrance to Mexico City itself. After delivering the orders "through a galling fire," Danley was wounded in the knee.



Los Niños Héroes
Courtesy of University of Texas at Arlington

Chapultepec Castle was home to the Colegio Militar (Military College.) After brutal hand-to-hand combat with the American forces, Mexican General Nicolás Bravo surrendered the castle. According to legend, one cadet wrapped himself in the Mexican flag and jumped to his death from the high walls of Chapultepec Castle. Los Niños Héroes, or the heroic children, came to symbolize Mexican patriotism; poems and songs were written to commemorate the valiant actions of these young men in defending the castle and their country. Today, a monument honoring the fallen cadets is situated in Chapultepec.

► PEACE

Although most fighting ended in September 1847, no formal peace existed. Santa Anna resigned the presidency, but convening a government in exile took time. Negotiations began in January 1848 by American diplomat Nicholas P. Trist. Mexican negotiator Bernardo Cuoto said the treaty recovered "the better part of that which is already under control of the conquering army of the United States; it is more exactly an agreement of recovery than an agreement of cession."

On June 12, 1848, the last U.S. Division left Mexico City with Arkansas's U.S. Senator, Ambrose Sevier, who was appointed to carry the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo to Washington, D.C.



Additional and Secret Article, Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo
Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration

With a signed treaty and 15 million dollars, the U.S. finalized its claim to territories that would become part of the states. Article VIII of the treaty guaranteed protection for the property and civil rights of Mexican citizens who chose to stay in the now U.S.-governed land. Over time, Mexicans who remained discovered that the U.S. Government would not strictly enforce the protection of their individual or property rights.

► A LEGACY OF DISTRUST

After the war's end, a difficult relationship existed between the two countries. The U.S. gained a huge amount of territory, allowing the country to expand through population and economic growth. For Mexico, it was not so simple.

The U.S. never acknowledged how devastating the loss of half of Mexico's territory was to the development of the Mexican nation. To this day, Mexico has more than a little distrust of her neighbor to the north, citing America's three invasions; Americans' derogatory perceptions of Mexicans evident in American books, films and radio; and the unwillingness of Americans to recognize the Mexican cultural impact throughout the southwestern U.S.

► TODAY

In recent years, Mexico and the U.S. have tried to improve their relationship. The two countries are working to resolve immigration issues and provide the benefits of citizenship to Mexicans currently living in the U.S. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has expanded trade opportunities between Mexico and the U.S., providing economic benefits. Mexico also benefits greatly from U.S. tourists who visit its sunny locales and beaches.

Arkansas has one of the fastest-growing Hispanic populations in the nation, offering work opportunities for newly immigrated families as well as migrant workers. The state is benefiting from its new inhabitants as well and is working to recognize its Hispanic population. Arkansas hopes to become home to a Mexican consulate in the future.

Despite this progress, recent political debates throughout Arkansas and the rest of the U.S. reveal that the distrust and prejudices created by the U.S.-Mexican War have not been resolved. Much work remains to be done.



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