



Gen. Belknap's “Old Split Mexican Stick”

by John Peter Beckendorf

Top, Gen. William Belknap, taken from a painting in the Washington Headquarters State Historic Site, Newburgh, New York, donated to the museum by Thomas Bangs Thorpe and most likely painted by him as well. Photo is reproduced as it appeared in a 1950 article in the Wichita Daily Times, Wichita Falls, Texas.

Right, closeup of the engraving on the cane. Photo by author.





So often there's an inclination to think of the Civil War in a vacuum, as though the only truly momentous events occurred in isolation from 1861 to 1865. This does a grave injustice to the actualities. History does not occur in a vacuum, and no single conflict or event is the result of sudden, unexpected cataclysm. History is, rather, a flowing tide.

Witness that the often criminally overlooked Mexican War of 1846-'48 was a staging ground for many of the military leaders North and South who would come to the forefront in the dramatic years of the Civil War. Others were the sons of the veterans of the Mexican War, the military life bred into their very bones.

The Mexican War first entered the pages of history with Gen. Zachary Taylor's campaign in Texas and northern Mexico. The opening salvos took place on May 8, 1846, at Palo Alto, where the opposing forces fought to a draw, and on May 9th at Resaca de la Palma.

The American army, approximately 2,000 strong, found itself vastly outnumbered as it faced more than twice as many Mexican soldiers across a resaca, or dry stream bed. There remained pools of water on the rugged terrain through which the Rio Grande once coursed. Dense, almost impenetrable chaparral surrounded the roadway through the resaca.

The Mexicans had just beaten back an American cavalry charge against their emplaced artillery when Gen. Taylor ordered Lt. Col. William Goldsmith Belknap, commanding the 1st Brigade, to advance one regiment from the guard of the train. Col. Belknap led his 8th Infantry into action.

Journalist, author, and painter Thomas Bangs Thorpe was an eyewitness. In *Our Army on the Rio Grande*, published in 1846, he wrote:

Captain May had dashed up to the Eighth, with the information that he had carried the main battery of the enemy, but, being unsupported, was unable to maintain it; Col. Belknap immediately ordered the regiment to form in the road, when he led it on in person. While advancing, he was joined by a part of

the Fifth Infantry under Capt. M. Scott. For an instant, the fire of the Mexicans checked the advance, when Col. Belknap sprang forward, and seizing one of their standards, waved on his troops, who were now with the entire Fifth regiment, engaged in a hand-to-hand conflict with the celebrated Tampico veterans.

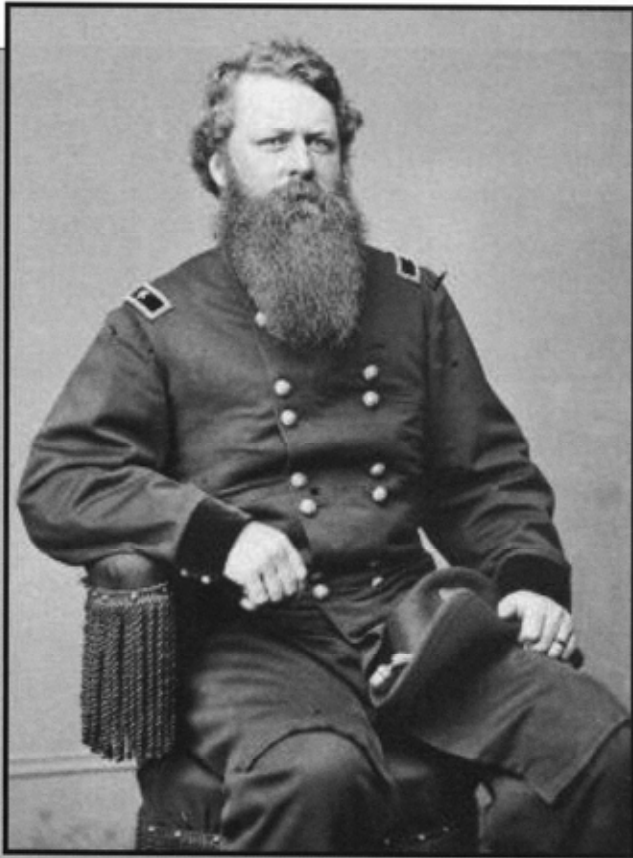
In *A Complete History of the Mexican War*, N.C. Brooks concurred with this retelling, stating that "the gallant Belknap sprang forward, and smiting down a Mexican ensign, seized his standard..."

Thorpe's account continued:

In the charge, Col. Belknap had the staff of his standard shot away [Brooks stated, "... but with the staff he continued to cheer on his men ..."], and on the same instant his horse, coming among a pile of dead and wounded artillerists made a sudden movement aside, and threw his rider. The Eighth took up the cry that their commander was killed, and dealt their blows the heavier, when he appeared at the head of his column; the battery having been carried. The Eighth, then under the immediate command of Capt. W.R. Montgomery, and the Fifth under Lieut. Col. McIntosh, charged up the ravine amidst a sheet of fire from the enemy's right and front. They drove their supporting columns before them, repulsing charges of cavalry and infantry of immense superiority of force, and although killing vast numbers, with difficulty driving the enemy from the field.

Thus the battle proved an overwhelming victory for the American forces, whose losses were only 33 killed in action. The official records report the losses of the fleeing Mexicans as 154 dead, but Taylor claimed to have buried 200.

Belknap, who was already a veteran of the War of 1812 and the Seminole Wars and had established Fort Leavenworth in 1828, was brevetted colonel for his services in the Rio Grande Campaign and then brevetted brigadier general for his actions at Buena Vista in 1847. He died in 1851 at Fort Belknap, named in his honor, and was buried



William Goldsmith Belknap's son, William Worth Belknap, born in Newburgh, New York, studied at what is now known as Princeton and practiced law for a time in the District of Columbia. He then moved west and was elected to the Iowa legislature as a Democrat in 1857. However, he came to agree with Lincoln's position on the war and was commissioned a major of the 15th Iowa Volunteers in 1861. He was wounded at Shiloh, fought at Corinth, and was promoted to colonel in June of 1863.

After leading the Iowa regiment through the Vicksburg Campaign, Belknap was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers. He later took part in the March to the Sea and the Carolinas Campaign, and by war's end was brevetted a major general.

After the war he joined the Republican Party and was appointed secretary of war under President Grant in 1869. Misfortune followed in March 1876 when he was accused of accepting over \$24,000 in bribes and was impeached by a unanimous vote of the House of Representatives. To this day it is uncertain whether Belknap knew of the bribes or if his wife had engineered them. Later acquitted of the crime, he resigned amid scandal nonetheless.

at Fort Washita, south of the Red River. His son, William Worth Belknap, had his remains reburied in Oakland Cemetery in Keokuk, Iowa, in 1872.

Numerous future Civil War generals were engaged at Resaca de la Palma with Belknap. These include (West Point graduating class in parentheses) Benjamin Alvord (1833, Union); Samuel Gibbs French (1843, Confederate); James Longstreet (1842, Confederate); John Sedgwick (1837, Union); George Gordon Meade (1835, Union); Isaac Ingalls Stevens (1839, Union); Ulysses Simpson Grant (1843, Union); Rosell Sabine Ripley (1843, Confederate); George Henry Thomas (1840, Union); Lloyd Tilghman (1836, Confederate); David Emanuel Twiggs (N/A, both Union and Confederate); Cadmus Marcellus Wilcox (1846, Confederate); and John Cleveland Robinson (dismissed 1835, Union). After the Northern Campaign, many of these men went on to serve with great distinction under Gen. Winfield Scott in the taking of Mexico City.

Not only do some of the names resonate in both the Mexican War and the Civil War, but some of the actions are reminiscent of both as well. In his memoirs, onetime general and president Ulysses S. Grant described the hand-to-hand fighting through the dense chaparral that so limited the visibility at Resaca de la Palma. His description eerily brings to mind the experience so many soldiers would have

years later at the Battle of the Wilderness, almost as though the past was prelude.

As December drew to an end in 2002, I acquired on eBay a cane reputed to have belonged to Lt. Col. William Goldsmith Belknap. On the gold mount of the 35 1/4" cane is inscribed "Resaca de la Palma" and "9th May 1846," and the point of sale was Keokuk, Iowa, the subsequent home of Belknap's son, William Worth Belknap. William Worth—no stranger to a legacy of military service—was a major general during the War Between the States.

The seller, John Werwick, had acquired the cane at a Carthage, Illinois, auction six or seven years prior along with a tag stating that the cane had been in the collection of Charles O. Frazier. I subsequently contacted Mr. Frazier, who informed me that he had acquired the cane at a sale in the late 1960s or early 1970s from the estate of John Irwin, who had passed away in 1966. Irwin was from an old and politically-involved Keokuk family that would likely have been intimate with William Worth Belknap.

The wood is Douglas fir, which is common to flag poles and flag staffs. Although it remains conjecture, it is my belief that the cane may have been made from the flagstaff that Lt. Col. Belknap seized on the battlefield of Resaca de la Palma. If so, it was his personal battle trophy, a memento of his heroism that day.

My search for a “smoking gun” to verify my theory took me to the archives of the Princeton University Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. In their library reside the William W. Belknap Papers, which include much correspondence of his father, William Goldsmith Belknap. I focused on Col. Belknap’s Mexican War correspondence, which contained personal letters to his wife, Anne Clark Belknap. Therein I found not one but two smoking guns.

In a June 22, 1846, letter Anne Belknap wrote to her husband, beginning the letter from Tampa Bay, Florida, and ending it at Princeton, New Jersey, she acknowledged his letter of May 23rd in which he recounted the battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma. It would appear that the May 23rd letter did not survive, but Anne’s acknowledgement helps suggest its contents.

... that you were still safe although so prominent an actor in times of such dreadful carnage and deat — and it made my blood chill to think of the heart thrilling sufferings you must have witnessed and of the perils encountered by your gallant little band, which in the opinion of all has won for itself more than golden honors, and by its members wounded, has truly, told its own story.

In the margin of this letter, Anne added: “Mr. Eager¹ says he will take the old split Mexican stick, instead of the cane I promised him.”

In a letter dated October 21, 1846, from Matamoros, Mexico, Col. Belknap replied: “I sent the ‘Mexican stick’ as Mr. Eager called it to New York by Mr. Burbank² to have it mounted with gold. Did Mr. B. say anything of it when you saw him.”

I believe the “Mexican stick” is the gold-mounted cane featured here.

Much as history flows through time, the cane apparently flowed through the hands of the family and then into those of family friends and ultimately into the hands of collectors, mine merely the most recent of them.

The Mexican War cane’s connection to a battle that was a proving ground for so many Civil War heroes and its direct familial relationship to a soldier who would play a pivotal role in the Civil War serves as a reminder: History never occurs in a vacuum. NSTCW

Notes

¹ The Mr. Eager to whom they referred was Samuel Watkins Eager, a family friend, onetime congressman, and prominent resident of Newburgh, New York, where the Belknap and Clark families were from. So entrenched in Newburg was Eager that he wrote the first history of the town.

² John G. Burbank was graduated from West Point in 1841 and was commissioned in the 8th Infantry. He served with Col. Belknap in Florida, was promoted to first lieutenant in 1845, was wounded at Resaca de la Palma, and was sent back to the United States on recruiting service. He subsequently returned to Mexico and was mortally wounded at the Battle of Molino del Rey, dying at the age of 28 on September 10, 1847.

Sources

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The author bails from California.