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Brazito Battlefield: Once Lost, Now Found

CHARLES M. HAECKER

When they wrote of their exploits after the 25 December 1846 battle, Veterans of Brazito only vaguely described the battle site itself. Apparently, little about its appearance demanded comment. Camino Real traveler Susan Shelby Magoffin noted in her diary (12 February 1847) that the battlefield was on “a perfect plain.” A few years later (19 April 1851) John R. Bartlett stopped at the battlefield and noted that it was “on the open plain.”¹ Early twentieth-century inhabitants of Mesilla Valley placed the battlefield somewhere in the vicinity of Brazito Schoolhouse, some two and one-half miles north of the village of Mesquite on New Mexico Highway 478. Later historians interested in locating the actual battle site had little else to use since only two battlefield maps are known to exist: the map produced by battle participant Frank S. Edwards, and published in John Hughes’ account of Colonel Doniphan’s campaign (figure 1); and a map included in the journal kept by battle participant Marcellus B. Edwards.² Both maps lack a scale, which limits their usefulness in locating the battlefield. George Ruhlen and Andrew Armstrong tried to determine its location by comparing the daily mileages noted in the diaries of several of the Missourians. Both historians resorted to this method because the landscape of the Mesilla Valley has changed considerably since 1846. They concluded that the battlefield was probably located farther to the south, as much as ten miles away from the schoolhouse.³

The most important battlefield landmark, the *brazito*, ceased to exist

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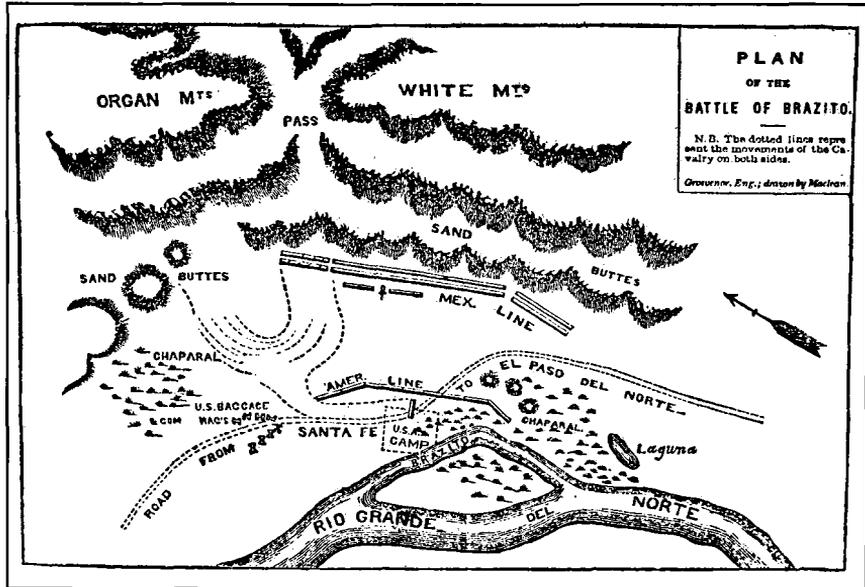


Figure 1. Plan of the Battle of Brazito. From John T. Hughes, *Doniphan's Expedition, The Conquest of Mexico*, p. 263.

some time during the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, we believe the valley still holds topographic clues that point toward the location of Brazito battlefield. Toward this goal we have attempted to identify the following: The Brazito, or little arm of the Rio Grande; Los Temascalitos, a grouping of round-topped hills; and a segment of the Camino Real that bisected the battlefield.

“La Battalla de los Temascalitos” is the name the Mexicans gave the battle, after the most prominent topographic feature located in the general vicinity of the battle site. The name supposedly derives from an Indian word *temascales*, the beehive-shaped ovens used as sweatlodges by the native inhabitants of the region.⁴ Apparently the shape of this landform was reminiscent of a group of domed ovens. In his report following the battle, Colonel Antonio Ponce de León wrote that Los Temascalitos was located north of El Paso del Norte, but he does not give any specific locational information about this feature.⁵ Roscoe and Margaret Conkling, in their research regarding the Butterfield Overland Trail, believe Los Temascalitos is “an isolated group of round topped hills” located two miles northeast of the present village of Vado. This formation is a 250-foot-high granitic outcropping named Vado Hill on present-day maps. To support their belief, the Conklings noted that “numerous relics [of the battle] have been collected over an extensive area about a half mile northwest of [Vado Hill].” The Conklings’ list of artifacts found on this site includes rimfire cartridge shells.⁶ Since metal

cartridges did not come into use until around the time of the Civil War, their theory is cast into doubt. Furthermore, the presence of Vado Hill near the battle site would certainly have exacted comment by Susan Magoffin and John Bartlett. Andrew Armstrong identifies eleven possible locations of the battlefield: two are northwest of Vado Hill, nine are south of it. Armstrong concluded that

The major weight of evidence favors locating the battle of Brazito to the *southeast* of Vado Hill, rather than to the northwest, as has been popularly supposed. Moreover, the terrain appears to fortify this view. . . . [T]he configuration of bottom land and mesa strongly support the possibility of a bend in the old river at that point. Even Frank Edwards' crude map makes sense here, while it cannot easily relate to the area northwest of the hill.⁷

Armstrong's cogent arguments notwithstanding, he did not address one aspect of the battlefield: that the Camino Real closely juxtaposed with both the brazito and a promontory of some kind. Marcellus Edwards' map indicates the brazito anchored the Missourians' right flank, with the Camino Real bordered by a promontory to the east and the brazito to the west. In contrast, Frank Edwards' map shows a group of three sand dunes—presumably the same promontory noted on Marcellus Edwards' map—on the south end of the battlefield, with the Camino Real curving around the eastern side of the sand dunes. Regardless of which map was correct on this particular detail, the close juxtapositions of road, brazito, and sand dunes—promontory could not have existed in the vicinity of Vado Hill, which rises on a rough upland terrace a half mile east of the floodplain. Wherever practical, the Camino Real closely followed the margins of the Rio Grande. One must, therefore, look within the floodplain, specifically where the Camino Real once passed between some type of promontory and a former river meander.

The brazito is key to identifying the battlefield. During the first half of the nineteenth century and possibly earlier, the brazito, in association with the wooded island it formed, was a riparian habitat favored by those who traveled and camped along the Camino Real. At some time during the latter half of the nineteenth century, the brazito became a landlocked river meander, probably the result of the river bed shifting toward the west during the floods of 1862 and 1865.⁸ Once landlocked, the meander soon formed a marsh. During the early twentieth century the Bureau of Reclamation, as part of its flood control and land reclamation program in the valley, drained several meanders—turned—marshes located south of Las Cruces. Valley farmers also removed native riverine vegetation, leveled the low terrace dunes, and developed a network of irrigation canals. An inspection of 1940s aerial photographs of the Rio

Grande valley between Mesilla and Vado indicates several meander scars of unknown antiquity. Four of them have a looping configuration suggestive of a *brazito*, and any one of these is a candidate for the battle site. Fortunately, during the early twentieth century, the Bureau of Reclamation prepared detailed maps showing the location of riverine marshes scheduled for drainage.⁹ One of these maps indicates there once existed a two-mile-long meander-turned-marsh between the village of Mesquite and the site of Fort Fillmore. To drain this marsh the Bureau excavated a secondary canal, the "Brazito Lateral," carrying water from the marsh into the Rio Grande. We believe this marsh was the historic *brazito*, as the name of the lateral that drained it suggests.

If the present-day Brazito Lateral effectively obliterated the historic *brazito*, then the promontory that anchored the Mexican left flank should be located about one-half mile—the recorded maximum distance between the two armies—east of the Brazito Lateral. The United States Geological Survey San Miguel, New Mexico Quadrangle (1955) presents a likely promontory. As late as the mid-twentieth century there existed a multiple-peaked dune approximately thirty feet high and six hundred feet long, and located about one-third mile east of the Brazito Drain (See Dunal Formation, figure 2, opposite). Local resident Joe Allen related that during the 1940s the top several feet of the dune were removed during construction work in the valley. This removal exposed several human skeletons jumbled together and intermixed with musket parts, swords, "old" saddles, and a variety of other objects. Reportedly, someone collected these objects at the time of their discovery, but what eventually happened to them is unknown. Now about ten feet high and topped by a house, the dune is largely destroyed. Although apocryphal, this story receives some corroboration from research conducted in 1946 by Las Cruces historian Katherine D. Stoes.

Stoes' informants report that relatives of Mexicans killed at Brazito regularly decorated their graves (some two miles north of the village of Mesquite, "through the swamps and over an *acequia*," about where the dune stands) on the Day of the Dead.¹⁰ We believe this dune is a remnant of the same one noted on Frank Edwards' map, and the unnamed promontory noted on Marcellus Edwards' map. It is also possible that this dune was Los Temascalitos, not Vado Hill, as suggested by the Conklings. Before its virtual destruction in recent years this unusually high and areally extensive dune would have been a notable local landmark within the Mesilla Valley floodplain. Furthermore, the rounded profiles of its multiple peaks would have been more reminiscent of domed ovens than the sharply peaked, granitic Vado Hill. Of course, the comments of Susan Magoffin and John Bartlett—that the battlefield was on a featureless plain—would seem to discredit this possibility. Both battle maps, however, do indicate a promontory on the south end of the battlefield.

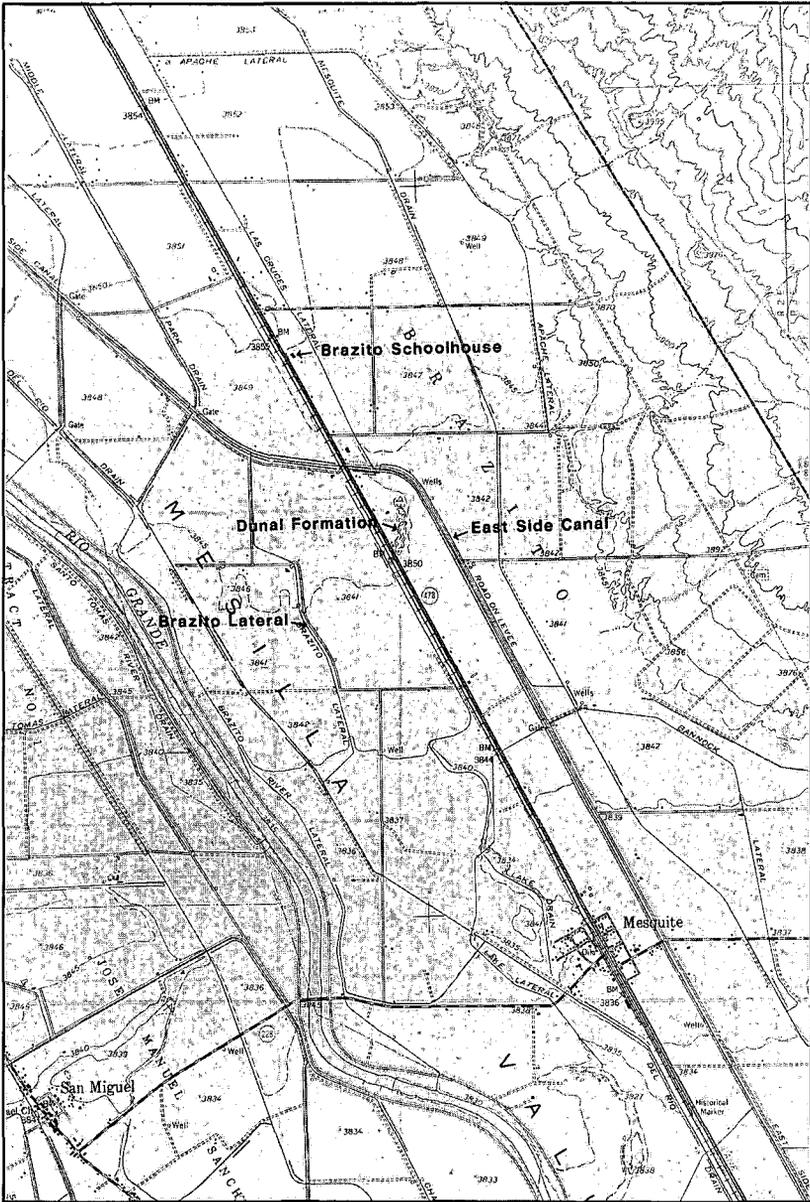


Figure 2. Detail from U.S.G.S. 7.5' San Miguel, New Mexico Quadrangle Map (1955 ed.), showing the locations of the dunal formation, the Brazito Drain, the East Side Canal, and the Brazito schoolhouse.

In order to occupy the higher ground east of the American encampment, the Mexican army turned off the Camino Real just before the road bended around the promontory. The east side canal bends around the eastern face of the dune, in a fashion similar to how Frank Edwards' map shows the Camino Real bending around what he labeled "sand buttes." We believe the Bureau of Reclamation, when constructing the east side canal, simply utilized the swale of the Camino Real where the road extended around the dune.

These present-day features, then, are our indicants of the historic brazito, battlefield promontory, and Camino Real. If correct, the battlefield should be north of the dune and east of the brazito drain. We tested this theory by applying archaeological methods. Finding battle-related artifacts within this location would provide independent verification to data derived from historical documents. Coincident to our research, a farmer recently discovered a roughly spherical iron object while digging a tree hole located approximately one-half mile north of the above-described sand dune. The farmer showed his find to historical archaeologist Ken Faunce who later informed the author about this discovery. The object, which measures 2.2 by 1.9 inches, might be an out-of-round, castiron cannon ball. The only cannon present at the battle was a fieldpiece one Missourian scorned "as near of no account at anything could be."¹¹ This comment suggests that the Mexican cannon was significantly smaller than a six-pounder, the smallest caliber artillery fieldpiece used during this period by United States land forces. It is almost certain that the Mexican cannon at Brazito was no larger than a three-pounder. Such a diminutive ordnance caliber had been obsolete since before the Napoleonic Wars, but militarily ill equipped Mexico utilized antiquated ordnance during the Mexican-American War.¹² A three-pounder cannon ball has a diameter of 2.77 inches, but then any scrap metal or even rocks could be fired as long as the ammunition was smaller in diameter than the bore of the cannon tube.¹³ At the Battle of Brazito the Mexicans reportedly fired their cannon only twice, thus the chances of finding a projectile fired by this cannon would be quite slim. It is possible, however, that the Mexican gunners at Brazito made a pile of round shot and scrap metal on the ground which, like the cannon that was to fire it, were abandoned in the hasty Mexican retreat. This iron object, when conjoined with our topographic interpretations and the story of human burials on the nearby dune, suggests that local tradition was correct when it placed the Brazito battlefield in the vicinity of Brazito schoolhouse.

If our theory regarding battlefield location is correct, then the Mexican battle line extended along the edge of the northwest to southeast-running terrace, with its left flank anchored on the northern flank of the dune. Mexican tactics of the period required two paces, about five feet, per infantryman when in linear formation.¹⁴ A linear formation of Mexi-

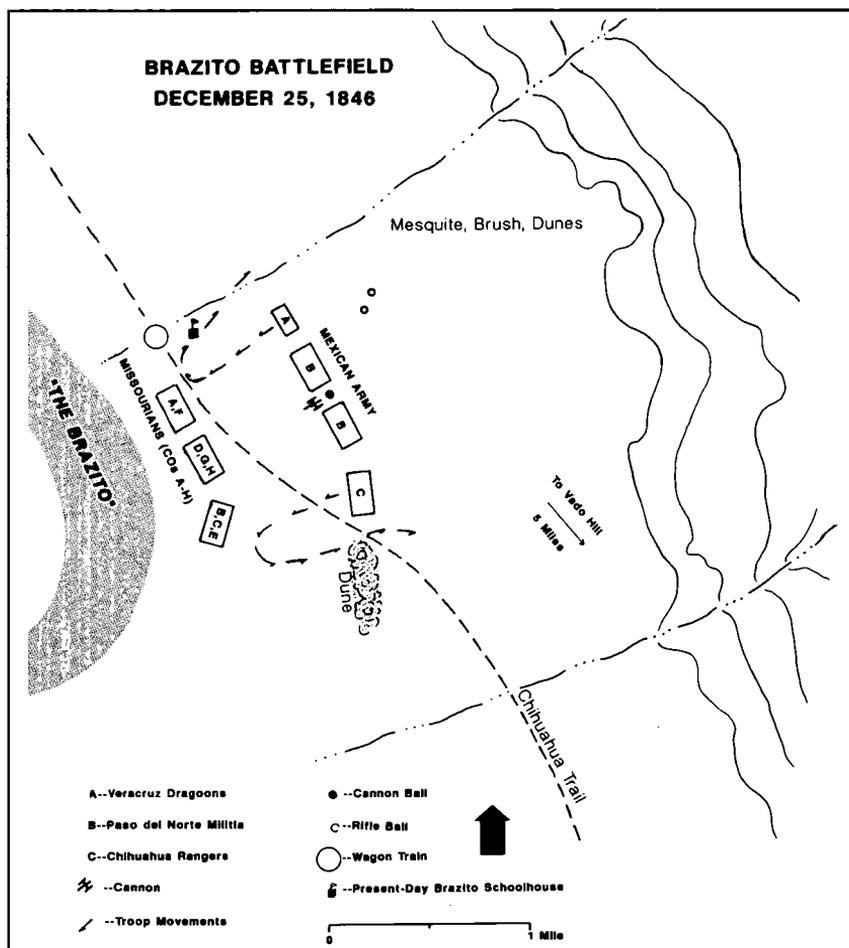


Figure 3. Reconstruction of Brazito Battlefield by the Author.

can infantry at Brazito, therefore, would have extended between one-half and one mile long, depending on whether there were one or two files of infantry in a one-thousand-man army. It is conceivable that the farm of the present-day landowner had been bisected either by the Mexican army's center—and where their one cannon had been placed—or by its northern flank. The American army's initial position would have been between one-quarter and one-half mile away, northwest of the dune, and likewise extending along a northwest to southeast axis.

The farmer granted us permission to conduct an archaeological survey of his property. He also informed us that prior to land leveling during the 1930s, his property was once part of a broad terrace of mesquite-stabilized dunes that were two to five feet high. Perhaps these

are the "sand and thorns" noted on Marcellus Edwards' battle map. The leveling of the dunes indicates that battle-related artifacts could be found exposed and down to five feet below the present-day surface. Large artifacts—for example, lance heads that were within the plow zone—would probably have been destroyed by plowing or collecting. Plowing also would rearrange any artifact patterning that existed prior to land leveling. For the purpose of this survey, however, the discovery of any battle-related artifact, regardless of condition, would provide the archaeological corroboration of our theory of battlefield location.

The most ubiquitous artifact type would be the lead balls fired by both armies' shoulder arms. The Missourians (most, if not all, armed with rifles rather than muskets) reportedly loosed at least two volleys before advancing toward the retreating Mexicans. With approximately five hundred Missourians along the battle line, that would mean at least one thousand fired rifle balls scattered over the battlefield. Most of the fired balls missed their intended targets, becoming buried within the low dunes. Additionally, some rifle balls were probably dropped and lost along the Missourians' battle line. Marcellus Edwards was armed with a muzzle-loading flintlock rifle, probably a Model 1817. Other Missourians used the Model 1841 "Mississippi" rifle.¹⁵ Both .54 caliber rifle models fired a .525 caliber ball.

During this period, Mexican infantry regulars were usually armed with British India Pattern muskets, which fired a .70 caliber ball.¹⁶ There probably also would have been personal firearms of varying calibers. Although muskets have an effective range of approximately one hundred yards, a fired musket ball could travel several hundred yards more before falling to the ground. Discovery of .70 caliber musket balls might indicate the following: the location of the Mexican battle line, since its troops would have dropped musket balls just as the Missourians had; the area between battle lines; Mexican musket balls that reached the Missourians' battle line; and those that overshot and fell harmlessly behind the Missourians. Analysis of the lead balls would indicate caliber (thus origin) and whether or not they had been fired. If found in significant numbers, a linear patterning of the lead balls might also indicate the location of a battle line(s).

The archaeological survey used metal detectors and executed a concurrent inspection of the surface. The survey crew, consisting of the author and amateur volunteers, was aligned at six-foot intervals and then proceeded in line. Ground markers were placed at each point where metal was detected and a follow-up crew excavated the target area for artifact recovery. A hand-held Global Positioning System unit was used to plot artifact locations to within five-foot accuracy.

The location where the landowner found the possible cannon ball was particularly suited for such a search. Unfortunately, our survey indicated that nothing else of historic interest was within this vicinity of his property, at least not in the top foot of soil, the effective range of the metal detectors. To the northeast of this locale, however, we recovered two lead balls. One of the lead projectiles had been fired, as its flattening from impact indicated. Because it was out-of-round, the caliber of the ball was determined by its weight. The ball weighed 13.5 grams, the weight of a .525 caliber lead ball. The other lead ball, located approximately seven hundred feet away, was perfectly round, therefore unfired. Its caliber, determined by using calipers, was also .525. We believe both artifacts are rifle balls typical of those fired by the Missourians at the battle of Brazito. There is the remote possibility that both rifle balls are, in fact, **not** related to the battle. Fort Fillmore (1852–1863) is located two miles north of where the rifle balls had been found. Infantrymen stationed at this fort were initially armed with .69 caliber muskets, requiring a .65 caliber ball. Their muskets were later replaced just prior to the Civil War by the .58 caliber rifle–musket that fired the distinctive, conoidal minié ball. Still, it is possible that a pre–Civil War dragoon, armed with the regulation carbine that required .525 caliber balls, could have fired the one rifle ball and dropped the other ball in its paper cartridge. In response to that scenario, we apply the logic of “Occam’s Razor”—that is, the simplest of all possible explanations is usually the most likely. Given that at least one thousand .525 caliber rifle balls were fired during the battle of Brazito, the simplest explanation is that the two rifle balls are relics of this battle. Granted, one cannot create a meaningful distribution pattern from two rifle balls, but their discovery provides strong physical support to our theory that the battle of Brazito was fought north of the dune and east of present–day Brazito Drain. This is where local tradition places the battle, near the Brazito Schoolhouse.

NOTES

1. Susan S. Magoffin, 12 February 1847, *Down the Santa Fe Trail and Into Mexico, the Diary of Susan S. Magoffin, 1846–1847*, ed. Stella M. Drumm, (1926; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 202; John R. Bartlett, *Personal Narrative of Explorations and Incidents in Texas, New Mexico, California, Sonora, and Chihuahua*, 2 vols. (1854; Chicago, Illinois: Rio Grande Press Inc., 1965), 1:199.

2. Plan of the Battle of Brazito, p. 263, John T. Hughes, *Doniphan’s Expedition, The Conquest of Mexico* (Cincinnati, Ohio: J.A. and U.P. James, 1848); Brazito battle map, Marcellus B. Edwards’ journal, vol. 1, p. 134, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. See also Frank S. Edwards, *A Campaign in New Mexico with*

Colonel Doniphan (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Carey & Hart, 1847), 83–88, for his description of the battlefield and conduct of the battle. See also figure 1, Plan of the Battle Ground of Brazito, in Niel Mangum, "The Battle of Brazito," page 231.

3. George Ruhlen, "The Battle of Brazito—Where Was It Fought?" *Pass-Word*, 2 (May 1957), 53–60; Andrew Armstrong, "The Brazito Battlefield," *New Mexico Historical Review* 35 (January 1960), 63–74.

4. Roscoe P. Conkling and Margaret B. Conkling, *The Butterfield Overland Mail 1857–1869*, 3 vols. (Glendale, California: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1947), 2:94–95, as cited by Ruhlen, "Battle of Brazito," 57.

5. Ponce de León, "Parte Oficial de la Accion de Armas de Temascalitos," trans. F.M. Gallaher, *New Mexico Historical Review* 3 (October 1928), 381–89.

6. Conkling and Conkling, *Butterfield Overland Mail*, 2:95.

7. Armstrong, "The Brazito Battlefield," 74.

8. P.M. Baldwin, "A Short History of the Mesilla Valley," *New Mexico Historical Review* 13 (July 1938), 319–20.

9. Mesilla Valley aerial photos, 21–2, 22–4, on file at the Bureau of Land Management Field Office, Las Cruces, New Mexico; "Rio Grande Project, Project History 1919," Doc. 191, Bureau of Reclamation, El Paso, Texas Office.

10. Katherine D. Stoes, "Christmas Gift To Nation: New Mexico's Acquisition Insured By Doniphan's Victory At Brazito Dec. 25, 1846," *Las Cruces Citizen* (New Mexico), 24 December 1946, p. 5, special Christmas Eve edition, not included in the microfilmed collection distributed to research libraries. See also Katherine D. Stoes Historical Research Collection, New Mexico State Library Special Collections, box 4, "Miscellaneous Notes On Site of [Brazito] Battlefield," n.d.

11. Marcellus Ball Edwards, "Journal of Marcellus Ball Edwards," 106–280, 233. In Ralph P. Bieber, ed., *Marching With the Army of the West 1846–1848*, vol. 4 of *The Southwest Historical Series* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Co., 1936), 4:106–280, 233.

12. Justin H. Smith, *The War With Mexico*, 2 vols. (Gloucester, Massachusetts: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 1:301–2.

13. Harold L. Peterson, *Round Shot and Rammers* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1969), 41.

14. Josef de Orga, *Prontuario en que se non Reunido las Obligaciones del Soldado, Cabo y Sargento* (Valencia, 1808), 116.

15. Louis A. Garavaglia and Charles G. Worman, *Firearms of the American West 1803–1865* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 122; George W. Smith and Charles Judah, eds., *Chronicles of the Gringos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1968), 138.

16. Charles M. Haecker, *A Thunder of Cannon, Archeology of the Mexican–American War Battlefield of Palo Alto*, Professional Papers 52 (Santa Fe, New Mexico: National Park Service Southwest Regional Office, Divisions of Anthropology and History, 1994), 45.