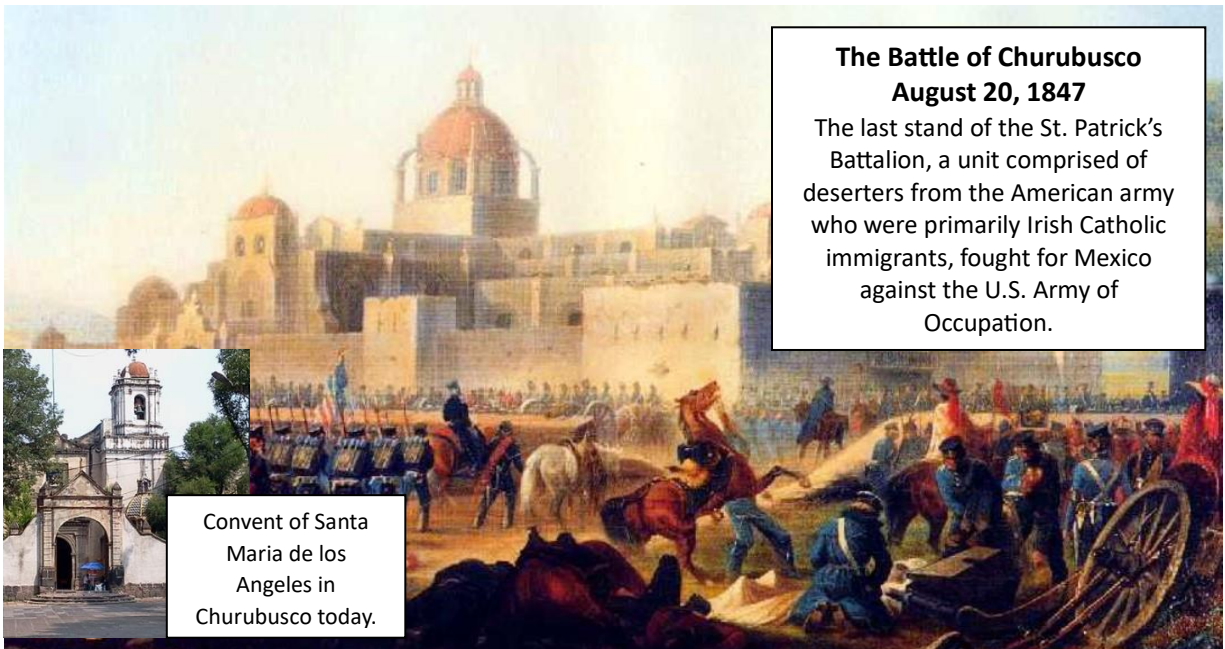


The St. Patrick's Battalion The Mexican – American War 1846 -1848

*“From Dublin City to San Diego
We witnessed freedom denied
So, we formed the St. Patrick's Battalion
And we fought on the Mexican side.”*
Ballad of the San Patricios by [David Rovics](#)



The Battle of Churubusco August 20, 1847

The last stand of the St. Patrick's Battalion, a unit comprised of deserters from the American army who were primarily Irish Catholic immigrants, fought for Mexico against the U.S. Army of Occupation.

Convent of Santa
Maria de los
Angeles in
Churubusco today.

Saint Patrick's Battalion. (2024, February 28). In *Wikipedia*.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Patrick%27s_Battalion

To celebrate St. Patrick's Day this year, I read several books about a group of deserters from the U.S. Army of Occupation during the Mexican-American War. These turncoats were immigrants, primarily Catholic and largely from Ireland who established the St. Patrick's Battalion¹ and fought valiantly against the Americans in five major battles. They are honored to this day as heroes in Mexico and St. Patrick's Day is a time when their deaths in battle and by mass execution after capture by the U.S. are memorialized. The leader of the battalion was John Riley. He joined the U.S. Army in 1845 in Michigan and drilled at West Point using artillery skills he had learned in his prior service in the British Army. John Riley was an Irish Catholic immigrant who soon found himself taken up in the United States' war against Mexico.

¹ Note: The St. Patrick's Battalion (the San Patricios) made up primarily of Catholic immigrants, a plurality of whom were Irish (39 percent), fought in five major battles. George Ballentine, an English soldier in the U.S. army wrote of the St. Patrick's Battalion that they "fought like devils" and at the Battle of Churubusco just outside Mexico City they inflicted heavy casualties on several American units and "settled old scores by seeking and killing dozens of West Point officers with the malignity of private revenge."

The war was the culmination of twenty years of tension between Mexico and the United States centered on their dispute over Texas and the U.S. view that Manifest Destiny ordained a national goal of creating a country stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. The American government offered to buy California and other western territories from Mexico to achieve the latter, but was rebuffed. The election of James K. Polk as president of the United States in 1844 strengthened the political faction that wanted to go to war with Mexico to annex her territory in the West. Many Americans cited the unjust nature of the war at the time and gave rise to the first anti-war movement in our country's history. "Civil Disobedience" was written by Henry David Thoreau as a protest to the war with Mexico causing Thoreau to refuse to pay a poll tax. Another critical issue was slavery and there was heightened Northern concern over the westward spread of slavery. Others were concerned with American soldiers fighting in a foreign land. For these reasons, Texas remained an independent republic for eight years (from April 21, 1836, when General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna was defeated at the Battle of San Jacinto until the admission of Texas into the Union in 1845).

With the annexation of Texas by the United States, President Polk sent General Zachary Taylor to lead the Army of Observation comprised of 3,900 men which were half the total U.S. enlisted forces. John Riley was part of Company K, 5th U.S. Infantry. At this point, the U.S. had 734 officers and 6,563 enlisted men. Fifty percent of these troops were made up of immigrants: 24% - Irish; 10% - German; 6% - English and 4% West Europe-Canada. The U.S. Congress voted to fund eight additional regiments of infantry, two mounted cavalry units (dragoons), four artillery units, and administrative staff. Congress also authorized a call for 50,000 volunteers. As war approached, the U.S. Army began increasing the number of enlisted men and volunteers by 42,587 and 73,532, respectively. The Marine Corps strength rose sharply as new units were created for the war with Mexico going from 42 officers and 986 men before the war to 75 officers and 1,757 men in 1847. Mexican forces, the Army of the North, numbering approximately 3,700 men under General Pedro de Ampudia moved to the Rio Grande near Matamoros on April 12, 1846. Ampudia was soon replaced by General Mariano Arista.²

Both Ampudia and Arista had been ordered by the Mexican government to attack the American force under General Zachary Taylor who established an initial base of operations at Point Isabella in mid-1845 near Corpus Christi before moving to the Rio Grande opposite Matamoros in February 1846 where he established Fort Texas. Negotiations continued with the Mexican government but were not productive.³ In the meanwhile, desertions from the U.S. Army began in earnest. Taylor ordered sentries to shoot to kill any soldiers attempting to swim across the Rio Grande to Matamoros. This problem plagued the army throughout the war: "Out of 40,000 regulars who saw duty during the conflict, a stunning 5,331 -- nearly thirteen percent of the ranks

² "The Mexican War 1846 - 1848, K. Jack Bauer, MacMillan Publishing Company, New York, N.Y. 1974.

³ In the "Shamrock and Sword," Robert Ryal Miller cited the failed negotiations of John Slidell with the Mexican government. His objective was to offer payment of Mexico's debt to the U.S. in exchange their recognition of the Rio Grande as their border with Texas and the United States. He also was authorized to offer \$25 million for the purchase of California. The Mexican government refused to accept Slidell citing the encampment of a U.S. army on Mexican soil (Texas). While Slidell was waiting to present his credentials, a coup removed the Mexican president with the new leader, Major General Mariano Paredes y Arrillaga, refusing to see Slidell and vowing to maintain Mexico's border to the Sabine River, the Texas - Louisiana border.

– deserted.”⁴ Of the 5,000 Irishmen who enlisted in the regular army, one in five deserted, and many of them fought in what became the St. Patrick’s Battalion.

Hostilities began on April 25, 1846, when Mexican forces attacked a U.S. cavalry unit, killing eleven, wounding six, and capturing 47. This bloodshed prompted President Polk to push Congress for a declaration of war, which Congress enacted on May 13th. Mexico reciprocated with a declaration of war with the United States on July 2, 1846. The U.S. Army of Observation became the Army of Occupation, and the issue of desertion became increasingly crucial for the Polk administration.

Propaganda leaflets from the Mexican government were distributed, highlighting the war as a campaign against Roman Catholicism by the predominantly Protestant United States. The plea was for Irish and other immigrant Catholics to protect the faith against a Protestant onslaught. President Polk asked Georgetown College to provide two priests as Catholic chaplains to the Army of Occupation. There was also an effort to curb the harsh discipline applied to immigrant soldiers. A significant number of officers also supported Nativism, which called for discrimination against Catholic immigrants.⁵ As the U.S. began to recruit heavily for an expanded army, one-third of the recruits were immigrants from Ireland, Great Britain, and other countries. The U.S. Army’s treatment of these immigrants is thought to have contributed to the high desertion levels. In this setting, John Riley deserted on April 12, 1846, and accepted a commission in the Mexican Army of the North and a monthly pay of \$57, eight times greater than his pay in the U.S. Army.

After joining the Mexican Army, John Riley asked General Arista to serve in an artillery company, and with 48 other deserters, primarily Irish, he formed an artillery battery that saw its initial action in the bombardment of Fort Texas. Zachary Taylor left a small force at Fort Texas (later Fort Brown and Brownsville) and took the main body down the Rio Grande to the coast and onto Point Isabell to protect his supply lines. After he accomplished that, he marched his forces back toward Matamoros to relieve the siege of the fort.

General Arista sent his main force against the American force. He encountered Taylor and the main body of his army at Palo Alto on May 8th along the coastal road from Point Isabell to Ft. Texas. The battle started at 2 pm and lasted until dusk. The Mexican forces were forced to retreat and assume a defensive position at Resaca de la Palma where a second battle took place on May 9, 1846. The Mexican forces were routed and they retreated to Matamoros. After the battles, General Taylor noted the bravery of Irish soldiers but also highlighted the support provided to the Mexicans by Irish deserters. John Riley later wrote that he had participated in the shelling of Ft. Texas where the commanding officer, Major Brown was wounded and died three days later. The loss of Major Brown and other American officers and enlisted men at the hands of the Irish and immigrant manned artillery caused deep hatred for these deserters.

⁴ “The Rogue’s March” Peter F. Stevens, p. 2.

⁵ Note: It is thought that this type of prejudice could have reminded the Irish of the economic, social, religious, and military repression of the Irish by the British. The subsequent famine and poverty caused massive outmigration with many of the immigrants coming to the United States (175,000 Irish immigrants entered the United States from 1840 to 1844).

After the retreat of the Mexican army, Ampudia was put back in charge and he marched a strengthened Army of the North of 7,300 men to Monterrey. The American forces, 6,200 men, moved up the Rio Grande and then turned south toward Monterrey. Taylor attacked the city on September 21, 1846, in a battle that lasted three days with heavy losses on both sides. During the first day, the Army of Occupation lost ten percent of its total force with 400 casualties as the Mexicans fought bravely from strong defensive ramparts. At the end of the third day, General Ampudia asked for a parley with General Taylor. To prevent more civilian deaths, Ampudia agreed to leave the city if he and his men could take their small arms and two batteries of cannon. Taylor agreed and the Mexican army marched out of the city on September 24, 1846. John Riley and around 100 other deserters were part of the Mexican army that left Monterrey marching out between the ranks of the U.S. Army. The San Patricios went unmolested although the U.S. troops made their anger at the turncoats known through oaths and shouts at them.⁶

Retreating to Saltillo, and then on to San Luis Potosi, the Mexican army came under the command of General Santa Anna in October 1846. Realizing the potential value of U.S. deserters, he began making a plan to entice 2,000 soldiers to come over from the American side. "Santa Anna believed that a unit in which the deserters would serve as a body rather than scattered through the Mexican units would prove a powerful attraction for immigrants."⁷

Based on the heroism shown at the Battle of Monterrey by John Riley and the deserters serving with him as part of the artillery company, Santa Anna approved the formation of the St. Patrick's Battalion. During the six weeks after the Battle of Monterrey, the Army of Occupation suffered through another round of desertions. A major in the First Regiment of Ohio Volunteers noted that more than fifty regulars crossed over to the Mexican side: "These the enemy joyfully received and speedily enrolled in their ranks, where they served with courage and fidelity, they never had exhibited in ours. Doubtless, the humblest soldier of the battalion of St. Patrick was honored with much consideration by the Mexicans."

Many desertions were recorded in the muster rolls of the U.S. army at Monterrey.⁸ Official Mexican government documents indicated that an army payroll was registered in November 1846 for the "Voluntarios Irlandeses." Captain Francisco Rosendo Moreno was named the unit's commander and John Riley was made responsible for training in artillery tactics and battle command. He also designed the unit battle banner.⁹

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⁷ "The Rogue's March," p. 166.

⁸ "Shamrock and Sword" P. 47.

⁹ John Riley created the banner of St. Patrick's Battalion, which was to become the most famous or infamous of the war. On September 9, 1847, the New Orleans Daily Picayune provided this description: "The banner is of green silk, and on one is a harp, surmounted by the Mexican coat of arms, with a scroll on which painted, 'Libertad Por la República Mexicana' – underneath the harp is the motto 'Erin go Bragh' (Ireland Forever), on the other side is a painting of St. Patrick and underneath is written 'San Patricios.'"

The Battle of Buena Vista took place on February 23, 1847. Santa Anna with 20,000 men against Zachary Taylor's 5,000 soldiers seemed to have broken through the left flank of the American army. Taylor ordered Jefferson Davis' Mississippi Rifles and the 3rd Indiana to hold the line which they did successfully. Riley and the artillery he commanded proved to be deadly to the U.S. forces: "What Riley did not know yet was that his performance and that of his men at Buena Vista had awed the Mexican generals and had even earned accolades of American officers."¹⁰ Zachary Taylor lost 14 percent of his army at Buena Vista. Nevertheless, the Americans held the field and inflicted heavy losses on the Mexican army. Santa Anna retreated on February 24, 1847.

President Polk, concerned that Zachary Taylor was becoming too famous from his victories in Mexico and could become a strong political rival, ordered that Taylor turn over command of the U.S. army to Winfield Scott who was heading to Veracruz with a naval assault force. The navy bombarded Veracruz and the Marines and the army took the city with little resistance. The Battle of Cerro Gordo followed with heavy losses by both armies. The Mexicans withdrew to the Mexico City valley. On August 20, 1847, the last major battle of the San Patricios was fought at Churubusco. Santa Anna lost half his army while 12 percent of the American forces were lost. The Americans prevailed and captured the surviving members of the St. Patrick's Battalion. John Riley and the other deserters were tried and 51 were sentenced to hanging. Riley and 15 others were whipped and branded with a "D" for deserter.

To me, the lessons from this history are: (1) political and cultural movements such as Nativism have repercussions in a multi-cultural society – we need to be conscious of secondary effects of nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric; (2) the First Amendment guaranteeing religious freedom was, and is, important – trying to force a religion on others can create significant backlash; and (3) as citizens we have a moral obligation to oppose unjust actions by our nation's leaders.

¹⁰ "The Rogue's March", p.197

NOTES

The eventual cost to Mexico under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was half a million square miles of territory, an area larger than France, Spain, and Italy combined. The Mexican humiliation from this episode impacts, according to historian Michael Scott van Wagenen, the relationship between Mexico and the United States to this day. The concept of collective memory helps explain why there are no memorials in the United States, not even a statue, to the Mexican-American War. It also bothered me to learn that 750 of our soldiers were buried in a mass grave in Mexico City and that a U.S. military cemetery near Monterrey was plowed and planted in corn. The Mexicans remember and part of that collective memory is the heroism of a group of Irish Catholics and other immigrants who deserted from the U.S. Army and fought for them as the St. Patrick's Battalion and later as the Legion of Foreigners.¹¹ Important lessons can be learned from the past and the war with Mexico can serve to understand the present and how to avoid mistakes that can harm our country.

Why we forget:

“Individual memory signifies the experiences and recollections of a single person. Inherently diverse and intricate in their formation, these memories become the building blocks of group memory, or memory rooted in group identity whether large or small, every group has a socially negotiated story that defines its past, gives meaning to its present, and shapes its future. Individual memories are contextualized and shaped by the needs of the group to which that person belongs. Individual memories that support the larger goals, values, and beliefs of the group are preserved and perpetuated while those that threaten these values are rejected, forgotten, and discarded.”

Michael Scott van Wagenen
“Remembering the Forgotten War”

Where to begin?

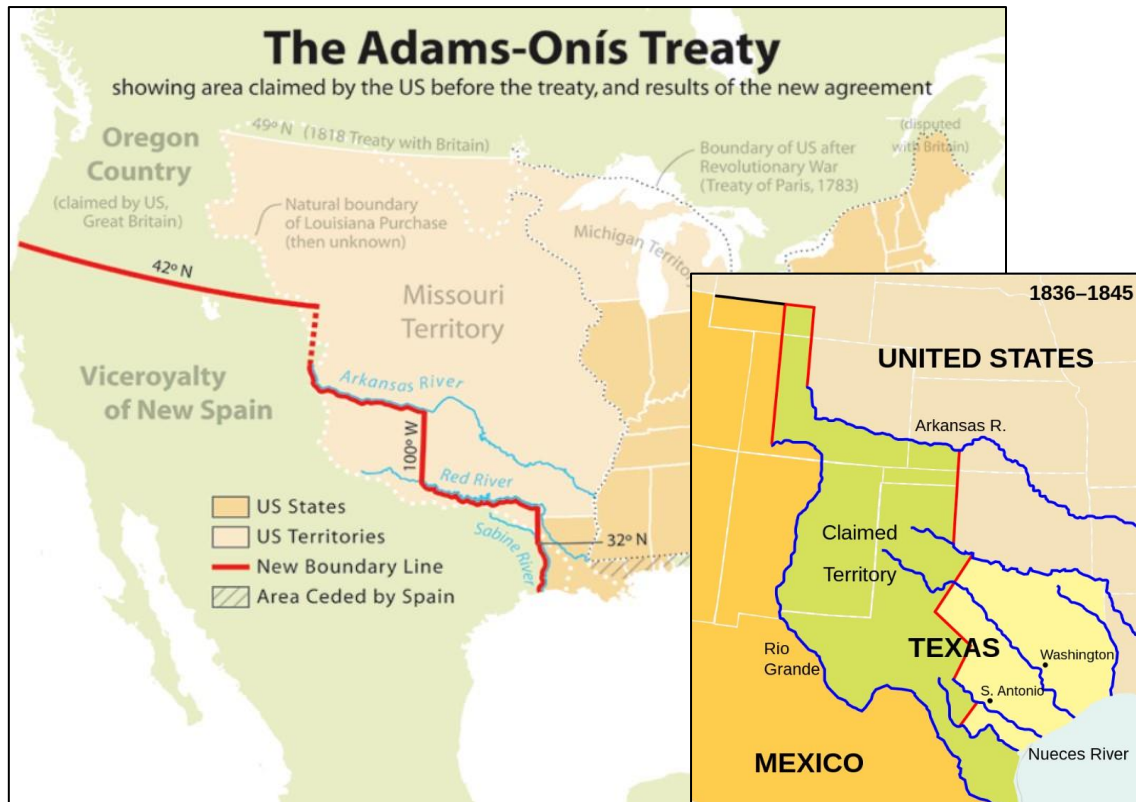
There were many actions leading to the war with Mexico, and according to historian Robert Ryal Miller, “The Mexican war was a culmination of competing forces that had been put in motion centuries earlier.” After Columbus discovered the West Indies there followed a great competition among Spain, France, England, and, after independence, the United States. The 1763 French and Indian War resulted in France's departure from the Ohio Valley and Canada. The Treaty of Paris ending that conflict gave Great Britain's ally, Spain, New Orleans, and the Louisiana Territory.

During the U.S. war for independence, Spain seized Natchez in 1779, and with American settlers already coming into the Mississippi Territory, Spain declared that Protestant groups were illegal – the only officially sanctioned religion was the Roman Catholic church. Until 1798, Spanish authorities persecuted Protestant preachers and banned the establishment of churches. After 1798, the U.S. was in control of the Mississippi territory again but the memory of the heavy hand of the Catholic church was remembered.¹² With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the U.S.

¹¹ “Remembering the Forgotten War” Michael Scott Van Wagenen, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Massachusetts, 2012. Note: A history, “Guerra de la Intervencion,” written by Mexican military officers is said to provide one of the most accurate histories of the time. Note: In 1875, A. G. Carothers tried to obtain U.S. funding to commemorate the U.S. dead at Monterrey. Note: The closest thing we have to a monument for the war is a statue of Winfield Scott located six blocks north of the White House at 16th St and N St NW inscribed with his name “Scott.”

¹² “A Christian Heritage” Jack Winton Gunn.

claimed a large part of Texas as part of the deal but this claim was settled along with the cession of Florida to the U.S. in 1819 with the Adams-Onís Treaty.



Adams-Onís Treaty. (2024, February 23). In *Wikipedia*.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adams%20On%20Treaty>

In 1821, Mexico won its independence from Spain. Tension existed between the U.S. and Mexico over issues with immigration, slavery, and border disputes. This is in contrast to Mexico's initial encouragement of immigration by Americans by offering tax exemption for ten years, cheap land that was good for cotton production, and, until 1829, laws permitting slavery. By 1834, English-speaking residents were 20,700 versus 4,000 Spanish-speaking citizens.

The abolition of slavery and the change in Mexico's constitution from a republic to a dictatorship in 1835 caused Texans to push back against federal authority. Mexico responded with a military campaign led by Santa Anna that included attacks on the Alamo and the cold-blooded massacre of 425 Texans at Goliad. With Santa Anna's defeat and capture at the Battle of San Jacinto on April 21, 1836, he agreed to sign two documents, one private and one public, known as the Velasco Treaties in which, without authority from the Mexican government, he agreed to recognize Texas independence and its southern border as the Rio Grande River. The Mexican government did not recognize the treaty. Texas was recognized as a sovereign nation by the United States, Great Britain, and France. In 1845, Texas accepted the American offer to become the 28th state and Mexico broke diplomatic relations with the United States.¹³

¹³ "Shamrock and the Sword: The St. Patrick's Battalion" Robert Ryal Miller, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Oklahoma, 1989.