

Colonel Doniphan and Volunteers Won Battle of Brazito

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Anyone who has lived in El Paso for a while is likely to be familiar with Doniphan Drive in the Upper Valley. However, not everyone is as familiar with [Colonel Alexander William Doniphan](#) for whom the street is named. Doniphan Drive is not only an alternate route from the Upper Valley to I-10 but a road marking the route of a conquering army.

After the U.S. formally annexed Texas in December 1845, the Americans inherited the boundary conflict between Texas and Mexico. Texas, and thus the U.S., recognized the Rio Grande as their southern border while the Mexicans insisted on the Nueces River, north and parallel to the Rio Grande. President Polk had also attempted to negotiate with Mexico the purchase of California and New Mexico.

Image caption: Alexander Doniphan from "Twelve Travelers Through the Pass of the North" Courtesy of Tom Lea.

When Mexico refused to discuss the purchase, President Polk sent the United States Army to the Rio Grande. With this perceived intrusion into Mexican territory, the Mexicans began attacks against the Army. On May 13, 1846, the president proclaimed that an official [state of war](#) existed between Mexico and the United States.

On this same day the U.S. War Department, planning on the conquest of New Mexico, began to organize the "Army of the West" at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Comprised primarily of Missouri Volunteers, this army of about 1,700 men was under the command of General Stephen Watts Kearny.

The men were organized into thirteen companies, eight of them placed under Colonel Alexander William Doniphan. These men, known as the "First Regiment of Missouri Mounted Volunteers" were to make history in El Paso.

The men were accepted as volunteers if they "looked" to be between the ages of eighteen and forty-five and were in good physical shape. These men furnished their own equipment and supplies except for their weapon. A uniform was not mandatory but desired. The men used Spanish saddles, saddle frames covered above and below by a blanket also used for sleeping. The soldiers carried one-half gallon canteens covered with a wet blanket to keep water cool. Each man wore a strong leather belt from which hung a butcher knife and revolver.

All of the companies left Fort Leavenworth by July 6, 1846. The volunteers headed for Santa Fe, hoping to make it by the beginning of August. The men were put short rations of food as they began crossing the desert. Coffee, rice, salt and sugar were withheld from the men, but each was allowed a half-pound of flour and three-eighths of a pound of pork per day. Writer Frank Edwards says the men faced the short rations bravely, thinly mixing the flour with water and frying it into "slapjacks."

General Kearny, along with men like James Magoffin, managed to convince territorial Governor Manuel Armijo to surrender New Mexico, and the [Army of the West](#) peacefully occupied Santa Fe on August 18, 1846. Kearny sent mounted troops to Apache, Navajo and Ute tribes to talk peace in an attempt to protect settlers in New Mexico from the Indians. Then Kearny's men started west to occupy California, and Doniphan's men rode south.

On December 23, 1846, Colonel Doniphan and his troops started south from Doña Ana. Upon reaching Brazito, present day Vado, the Colonel and his men came face to face with a large Mexican army of about 1,000 men. The Americans were surprised and outnumbered, but they formed a line of battle. The men were on foot, armed only with rifles, while the Mexican forces were a mixture of infantry, cavalry and artillery.

The Americans refused Mexico's demand to surrender, and the Mexicans charged. Doniphan gave the command to open fire. The Americans obeyed, fighting strongly and decimating the Mexican ranks with accurate rifle fire. Casualties included 63 Mexicans killed, 150 wounded and a few taken as prisoners. The Americans suffered only seven wounded.

Leon Metz writes that two days later, "Colonel Alexander Doniphan and 800 Missouri Farm Boys walk [ed] through the mountain canyon past modern-day [ASARCO](#), cross [ed] the Rio Grande at Hart's Mill, and bloodlessly capture [d] El Paso, Chihuahua."

In March 1847, Colonel Doniphan and his army of volunteers marched further south seized Chihuahua City, securing northern Mexico for the United States. Many more battles would be fought in the Mexican-American War, with the United States gaining almost half of Mexico's territory.

The [Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo](#) was signed on February 2, 1848, making the Rio Grande the boundary between Texas and Mexico. Mexico also gave up the New Mexico and California territories.

Not only did Texas break away from Mexico in 1836, it began a war that was to change the shape and future of both the United States and Mexico. Today, thousands of El Pasoans drive up and down Doniphan Drive without realizing they are tracing the route of the Army of the West.