

The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo Forgotten or Remembered?

In December 1997, the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in Washington, DC, informed Chamizal National Memorial in El Paso, Texas, of its selection to exhibit portions of the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Park staff received the news with understandable ambivalence. On the one hand, they were honored to host an exhibit commemorating the sesquicentennial of the document terminating the war between Mexico and the United States. On the other hand, some were justifiably wary that the presence of this document—representing a tragic moment in the history of two bordering nations—so near to Mexico might prove offensive.

Indeed, officials on both sides of the border voiced concern about the purpose of hosting the exhibit. *Cual es el punto?* some Mexican skeptics asked. Why would the National Park Service wish to commemorate the defeat of Mexico and the disenfranchisement of thousands of former Mexican citizens who remained in this country? Why, El Paso critics queried, out of the 385 units in the National Park System, was Chamizal National

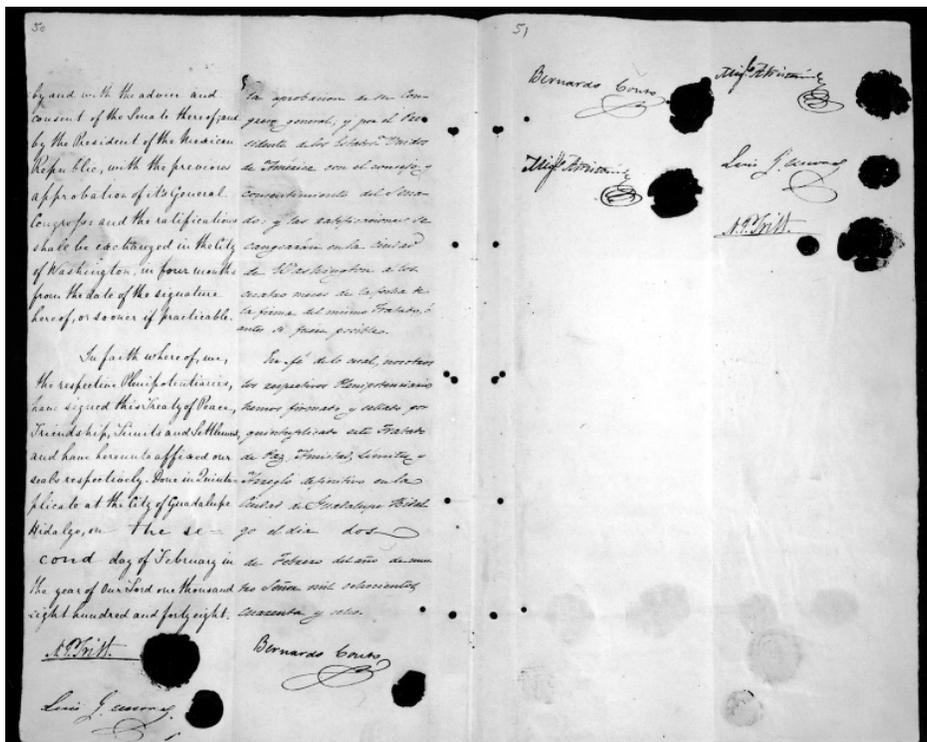
Memorial in the El Paso/Juárez metro area selected as the site to host this controversial document? Why, some emphatically challenged, should the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo be commemorated at all? This essay attempts to address these very poignant questions.

As steward of numerous national treasures, the National Park Service has a responsibility to educate the general public through the interpretation of its protected resources from various points of view. A recent example of this was the redesignation of Custer Battlefield in Montana to Little Big Horn Battlefield National Monument. In redesignating the park, the National Park Service recognized its responsibility to honor all combatants—American Indian as well as non-Indian—who participated in this momentous engagement on the American western frontier.

In 1992, the National Park Service actively endorsed the 500-year observance of Columbus' voyage to America. Again, this event was greeted with disdain and, in some cases, hostility demonstrated by indigenous people in the United States as well as in Latin America. Clearly,

it was never the intent of the National Park Service to appear insensitive to the American Indian point of view by participating in the Columbus quincentenary. Rather it was the agency's responsibility to recognize the significance of this landmark historical episode, while cognizant of the many negative aspects associated with early European contact on native dwellers. Thus, in its desire to promote a more balanced understanding of European arrival to the New World, the National Park Service hosted numerous symposia within as well as outside the boundaries of the United States, encouraging the participation of indigenous peoples to present their point of view. For all of its negative connotations, the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo rep-

These signature pages represent a portion of the actual Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, which was on exhibit at Chamizal National Memorial from January to May 1998. Photo courtesy Chamizal National Memorial.



resents a similarly pivotal historical moment deserving of commemoration.

The conflict of 1846-48, which culminated with the signing of the treaty, is in fact a definitive point of departure in the history of United States-Mexico relations. From that point forward, both nations pledged a commitment to the resolution of their differences by diplomatic rather than military means. During the tempestuous years of the Mexican Revolution, both nations violated the territorial sovereignty of the other. Diplomacy rather than armed conflict, however, prevailed in the effort to ensure quiescence along the international border. In August 1963, Mexico and the United States resolved a 100-year-old conflict over Mexican loss of territory to the United States as the result of the unpredictable meandering of the Río Grande. The Chamizal Treaty resolved the long-standing controversy to the satisfaction of both governments.

When asked what he considered the most significant accomplishment of his six-year term as president of Mexico, Adolfo López-Mateos responded, "My greatest satisfaction was in having solved the centenary problem of the re-incorporation of el Chamizal into national territory." Indeed, by anyone's measure the United States' return of the Chamizal, land located in downtown El Paso, was a prestigious diplomatic moment for Mexico. At the astounding cost of \$48 million, the U.S. government, in cooperation with the State of Texas, removed railroads, public utilities, industrial sites, and relocated nearly 5,000 residents to other quadrants of the city in order to transfer the lands to rightful ownership. In the spirit of international cooperation, Mexico and the United States combined finances and technical expertise to construct four new bridges across the newly-channelized river marking the international boundary, which facilitated customs and immigration inspections on both sides of the border. Finally, the signatory nations mutually agreed to establish national memorials on both sides of the Río Grande to commemorate the success of the peaceful resolution. In Ciudad Juárez, where the official transfer of lands took place on October 28, 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson summarized the significance of the moment saying: "Too many times has the world seen attempts to change boundaries through force. Let us be thankful that today we celebrate an example of how such matters should be settled."

For this reason, it is appropriate that the NARA selected Chamizal National Memorial—out of all other units in the National Park System—to

host the first public exhibit of this historic document. What more fitting location than a national park dedicated to the harmonious coexistence of bordering nations and the mutual understanding of their diverse cultures to promote greater understanding of the treaty and its historical complexities? This is not to suggest, however, that relations along the 2,500-mile international border are without disharmony. All the more reason in 1998 to restate the ideals of peaceful resolution and harmonious coexistence espoused in 1848, and again in 1963 when Congress enacted the enabling legislation to create Chamizal National Memorial.

Thus, the question: Should the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo be remembered or forgotten? The American and Mexican combatants in the War of 1846—whether history ultimately determines their cause to be just or unjust—should nevertheless be remembered. The sesquicentennial commemoration of the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, in my judgment, presented a timely opportunity to gain new perspective on past and more recent international border history.

Upon reconsideration, the question should more appropriately be stated: How will the Treaty of Guadalupe be remembered? The 150th anniversary of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo offered the opportunity to evaluate how far relations have progressed since 1848. The objective of the exhibit at Chamizal National Memorial, therefore, was not to dwell on the past; rather, it was to focus upon the bi-national achievements of present and future years.

The National Park Service, Mexican Affairs Office, and the Center for Spanish Colonial Research, for example, have cooperated with Mexico on numerous meaningful projects. Both nations have sponsored symposia, intercultural exchange programs, and public celebrations in conjunction with the Camino Real de Tierra Adentro and the Quartocentenary of the Colonization of New Mexico. Big Bend National Park has taken the lead role among our border parks in promoting the establishment of a bi-national park along the U.S.-Mexico Border. Chamizal National Memorial also serves as a venue for international friendship. It is in this spirit of mutual cooperation and bicultural understanding, that the park proudly hosted the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo.

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