

***FROM THE FRONT LINES: LT. COL. WILLIAM G. BELKNAP'S FIRST
HAND ACCOUNT OF THE BATTLE OF MONTERREY DURING THE
MEXICAN-AMERICAN WAR IN 1846.***

By Charles J. DiComo, PhD

This article shall paint a picture of the last days of the battle for the city of Monterrey during the Mexican-American War drawn from a first hand account written at the front lines by Lt. Colonel William Goldsmith Belknap (**Figure 1**) while he was serving as Inspector General at Camp Monterrey under the command of General Zachary Taylor in September of 1846.

The Mexican-American War (1846-1848) marked the first U.S. armed conflict chiefly fought on foreign soil. It pitted a politically divided and militarily unprepared Mexico against the expansionist-minded administration of U.S. President James K. Polk, who believed the United States had a “manifest destiny” to spread across the continent to the Pacific Ocean. A border skirmish along the Rio Grande started off the fighting on 25 April 1846 and on 13 May 1846 Congress declared war, despite opposition from some northern lawmakers. No official declaration of war ever came from Mexico and at that time only ~75,000 Mexican citizens lived north of the Rio Grande. U.S. forces were able to conquer these lands with minimal resistance, and advanced across Mexico and the disputed territories over the next two years. On 2 February 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed and when the dust cleared Mexico had lost about one-third of its territory, including nearly all of present-day California, Utah, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico.



Figure 1. William G. Belknap (1794 - 1851), U.S. Army Brigadier General.¹

William Goldsmith Belknap (7 Sept. 1794 – 10 Nov. 1851) was a career soldier in the United States Army, was brevetted three times for service in three wars, served as Brigadier General, and served as commandant at Fort Gibson, Fort Washita, and Fort Smith.² Belknap was born in Newburgh, New York to Samuel Belknap, Jr. and Mary Goldsmith. In 1821, he married Ann Clark (1801-1858) in Keokuk, Iowa and they had four children: Anna Mary

(1821-1893); Clara Belknap Wolcott (1824-1906); William Worth Belknap (1829-1890) and Frederick Augustus (1832-1832), who died in infancy.

Belknap was a lieutenant in the War of 1812 where he served with great distinction; became captain on 1 Feb. 1822; brevet major on 1 Feb. 1832; major on 31 Jan. 1842; and was brevetted lieutenant colonel on 15 Mar. 1842 for his services in the Second Seminole War in Florida. In 1828, Captain Belknap assisted in establishing Fort Leavenworth in Kansas. Belknap acted as inspector general at the Battle of Monterrey, became lieutenant colonel 26 Sep. 1847, and was brevetted brigadier general on 23 Feb. 1847 for services at the Battle of Buena Vista.

Belknap was involved in several battles during the Mexican-American War. One occurred during the Rio Grande campaign in May 1846. The Mexicans had just beaten back an American cavalry charge against their emplaced artillery at Resaca de la Palma, Texas on the eastern banks of the Rio Grande. General Taylor ordered Belknap, who was then commanding the 1st Brigade, to advance one regiment from the guard of the train and lead his 8th Infantry into action. Belknap sprang forward, seized a standard from a Mexican ensign, rallied his troops and engaged in hand-to-hand combat. His men then “split” the enemy lines and drove them from the field.



Figure 2. Gold-mounted cane, “split Mexican stick”, engraved **Resaca de la Palma 9th MAY 1846.**

The battle proved an overwhelming victory for the American forces and for this Belknap received the brevet of colonel for gallantry. **Figure 2** is a cane, referred to as the “split Mexican stick”, from the staff of the Mexican standard captured by Belknap on 9 May 1846 at Resaca de la Palma. William had this sent to his family friend and prominent Newburgh resident, Samuel Watkins Eager in New York to have it gold-mounted.³

So grateful were the citizens of Newburgh for his military service, that on 27 June 1846 a meeting was held at the Orange Hotel by a select committee of townspeople, including his

friend Samuel W. Eagers, to determine how they would honor him.⁴ After much discussion and a unanimous vote, it was resolved that the Trustees of the Village of Newburgh would procure a Sword with a value of \$350 be made for presentation of, on which were the following inscriptions below.

On the blade:

“Fort Eric, August 15, 1814; Palo Alto, May 8, 1846; Resaca de la Palma, May 9, 1846”

On the scabbard:

“Presented by citizens of Newburgh, his native place, to Col. Wm. G. Belknap, U.S.A.”

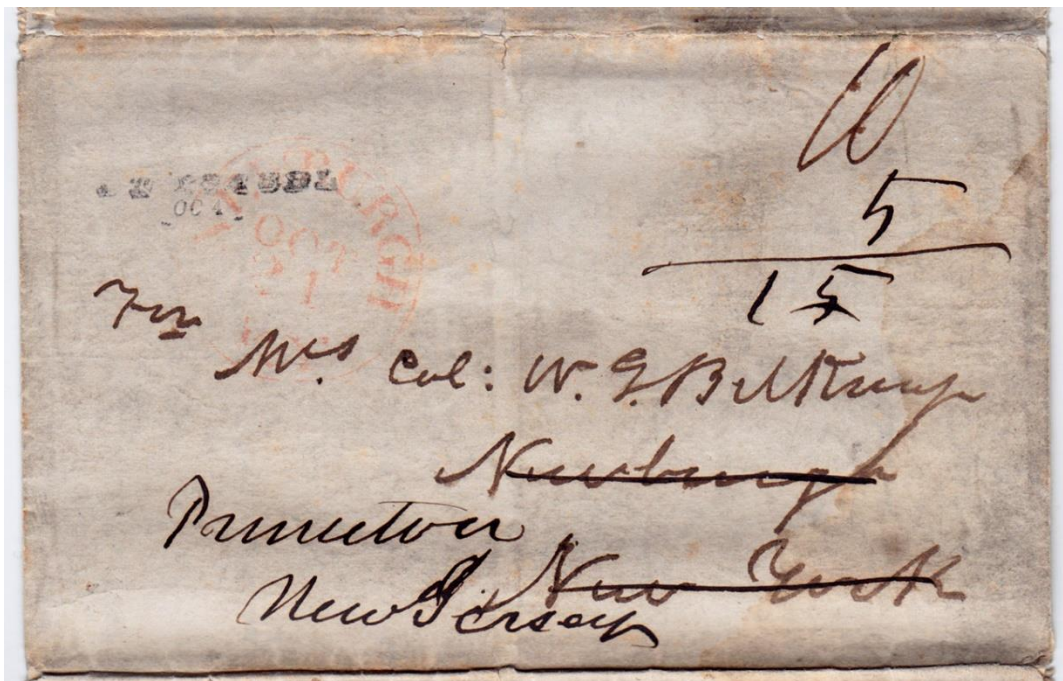


Figure 3. 1846 SFL from Camp Monterrey, Mexico to Newburgh, New York. Letter was carried by military transport overland to provisional P.O. at Point Isabel, Texas, where it entered the mails, traveled via military vessel to New Orleans, LA where it was distributed for delivery to Newburgh, NY.

And now on to the primary focus of this article, the stampless folded letter (SFL) illustrated in **Figure 3**. I was fortunate to acquire this in a random box of un-cataloged stampless postal history at the Reading Stamp Collectors Club Annual Stamp Show in Leesport, PA. Upon opening the folded letter, I was delighted to discover it contained contents, was datelined September 24, 1846, and had been written by Belknap while he was stationed at Camp Monterrey during the last days of the battle for the city.

On the obverse, the SFL is addressed to “Mrs. Col: W.G. Belknap, Newburgh, New York”, his wife Ann Clark Belknap. It also shows the “Newburgh New York” crossed out and

“Princeton New Jersey” added at lower left, as well as two handstamps and three manuscript rate markings. I shall describe these features in the subsequent sections.

Armed Forces mail being sent from the front lines in Mexico headed for the United States was carried by military transport to points in southwest Texas. By May of 1846 in response to the military build-up in this region, the New Orleans postmaster dispatched Henry Levy, one of his distribution clerks to Point Isabel, TX. His job was to set up a provisional Post Office and facilitate the transportation of the mails to the U.S. Troops on the Rio Grande (Figure 4). It was here that the SFL entered the mails, where Levy struck the letter with the faint black “PT. ISABEL OC 4” handstamp and wrote a manuscript “10”, as a rate stamp had not yet been introduced. The 10¢ denoted the U.S. inland rate from New Orleans, LA to Newburgh, NY, a distance of >300 miles.

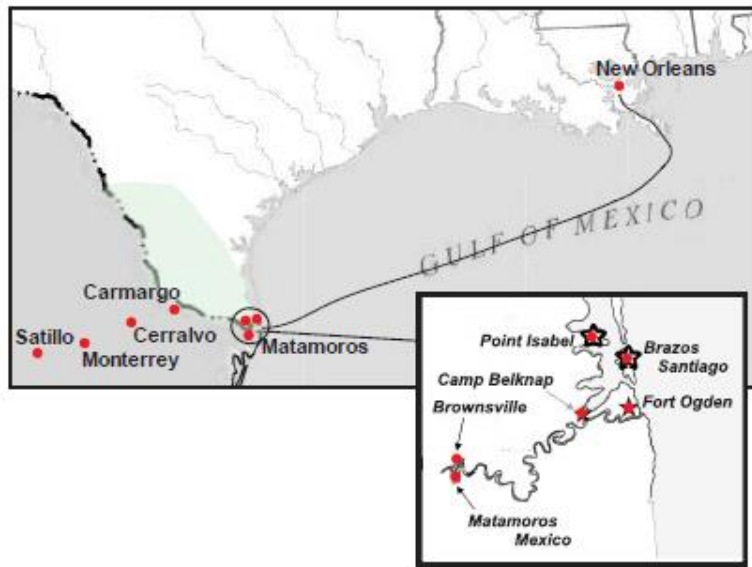


Figure 4. Map of the Gulf of Mexico, SW Texas and NE Mexico. Point Isabel (now called Port Isabel) is located just north of Camp Belknap and Fort Ogden, which sits on the mouth of the Rio Grande.⁵

Figure 5 is an enlargement of the 2-line Type I Point Isabel, TX handstamp. This device was in use for only ~3 weeks (16 Sept. – 22 Oct. 1846) and was removed from service due to rapid degradation. Most examples are very indistinct with illegible dates. This example clearly shows the month/day “OC 4” for October 4. I am pleased to announce that after corresponding with noted Texas postal historians Mark Bankchik and Vince King, this is a new find that can be added to the census, of which there are fewer than 10 examples known.

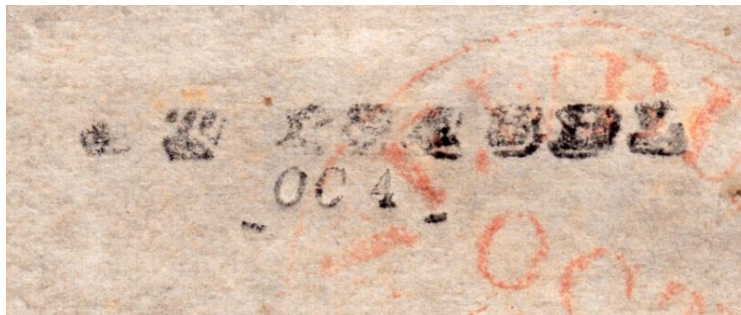


Figure 5. Enlargement of the 2-line Type I Point Isabel, TX handstamp “PT. ISABEL OC 4”.

From Point Isabel the letter traveled via military transport vessel to New Orleans, LA where it was distributed for delivery to New York. After a 17 day overseas journey, the letter arrived in Newburgh, NY. While the letter has no indication it was advertised, the clerk must have been aware that Mrs. Belknap was not in the city to pick up her mail at the P.O. and knew where she was residing. He proceeded to cancel the letter with a red “NEWBURGH OCT 21 NY” circular date stamp, crossed out “Newburgh, New York” with a single black line and re-addressed the letter at lower left to “Princeton, New Jersey”. He then added a manuscript “5” (the forwarding fee), along with an underline and total of “15” cents due upon arrival. It is most likely that Mrs. Belknap was visiting her son William Worth Belknap who was attending Princeton University (graduate of 1848). He would go on to be a lawyer, soldier in the Union Army (achieving rank of Major General), government administrator in Iowa, and the 30th United States Secretary of War under President Ulysses S. Grant.⁶

Mrs. Belknap no doubt was relieved to receive any letter from her husband, a lifelong military man who served in numerous conflicts, and was now very much involved in the Mexican-American War. **Figure 6** illustrates the two-page letter datelined “Camp Monterey [sic] Mexico Sept. 24, 46”. While William’s letter is brief, its contents are detailed and compelling, which the translation shall reveal.

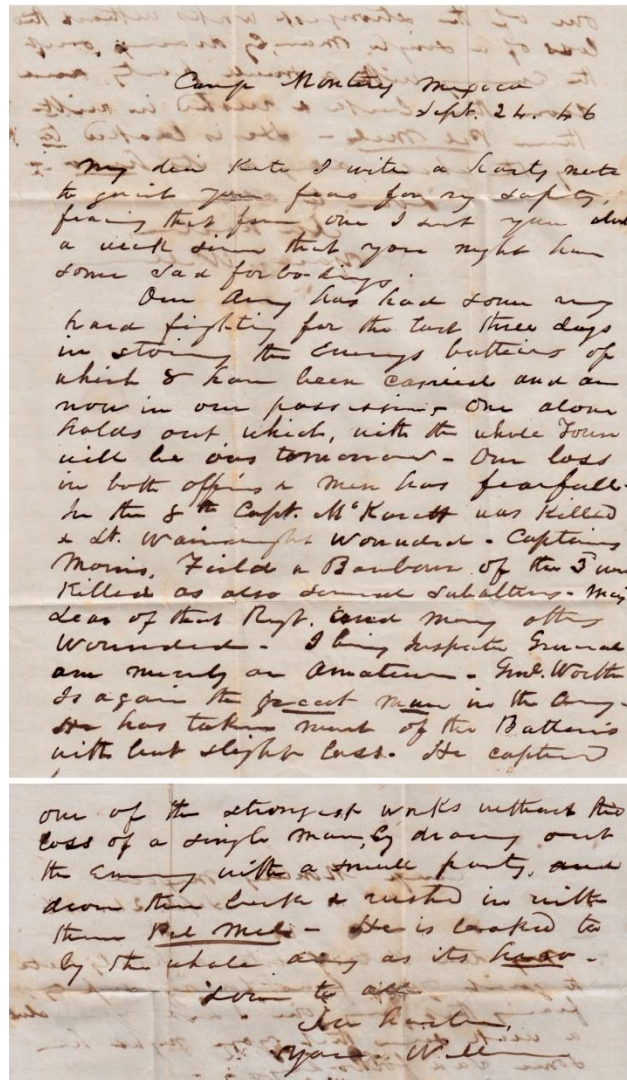


Figure 6. The 2-page letter William wrote to his wife Ann from Camp Monterrey on 24 September 1846 during the last days of the battle while serving as Inspector General under the command of Gen. Zachary Taylor.

Belknap was an educated, career soldier who exhibited the typical penmanship and writing style for the period. Decoding his letter was not as difficult as one might consider. What follows is the literal translation.

Camp Monterey [sic] Mexico

Sept. 24. 46

My dear [Kate] I write a hasty note to you with your fear for my safety. Fearing this for one I write you about a week since that you might have some sad forebodings.

Our Army has had some very hard fighting for the last three days in storming the Enemys [sic] batteries of which 8 have been ca[rried] and are now in our possessions – one alone holds out, which, with the whole Town will be ours tomorrow – Our loss in both officers and men was fearfull [sic]. In the 8th Capt. McKavitt was killed & Lt. Wainwright wounded. Captains Morris, Field, & Barbour of the 3 were killed as also several subalterns – [illegible words] of that Regmt. And many others wounded. I being Inspector General am merely an Amateur.

Genl. Worth is again the front man in the Army. He has taken much of the Batteries with but slight loss. He captured one of the strongest works without the loss of a single man, by drawing out the enemy with a small party and drew them back & rushed in with them Pel Mel [sic] – He is looked to by the whole Army as its Hero.

*Love to all
In Haste,
Your William*

This “hasty note” and stark details from the front lines while the battle for Monterey was still raging reminds us of the harsh reality of war. William opens by endeavoring to dispel his wife’s concern for his safety, having only written her a week earlier, presumably telling her of the impending march on Monterey (**Figure 7**).



Figure 7. General Worth’s Division Marches on Monterey from the West.⁷

The Battle for Monterrey commenced on 21 September pitting ~6200 U.S. Troops against ~7300 Mexican Troops. Under the command of General Zachary Taylor, Generals William J. Worth, William O. Butler, and John A. Quitman led divisions that marched on Monterrey city that was being fortified by General Pedro de Ampudia and the Mexican Army of the North (**Figure 8**). After 4 days of intense fighting the U.S. Troops were victorious. On 24 September General Ampudia decided to negotiate with General Taylor. This led to a two-month armistice in return for the surrender of the city. The Mexican Army was then allowed to march from the city from 26 to 28 September with their personal arms. In the end, this hard fought battle led to numerous casualties and losses on both sides; 488 on the American and 367 on the Mexican.

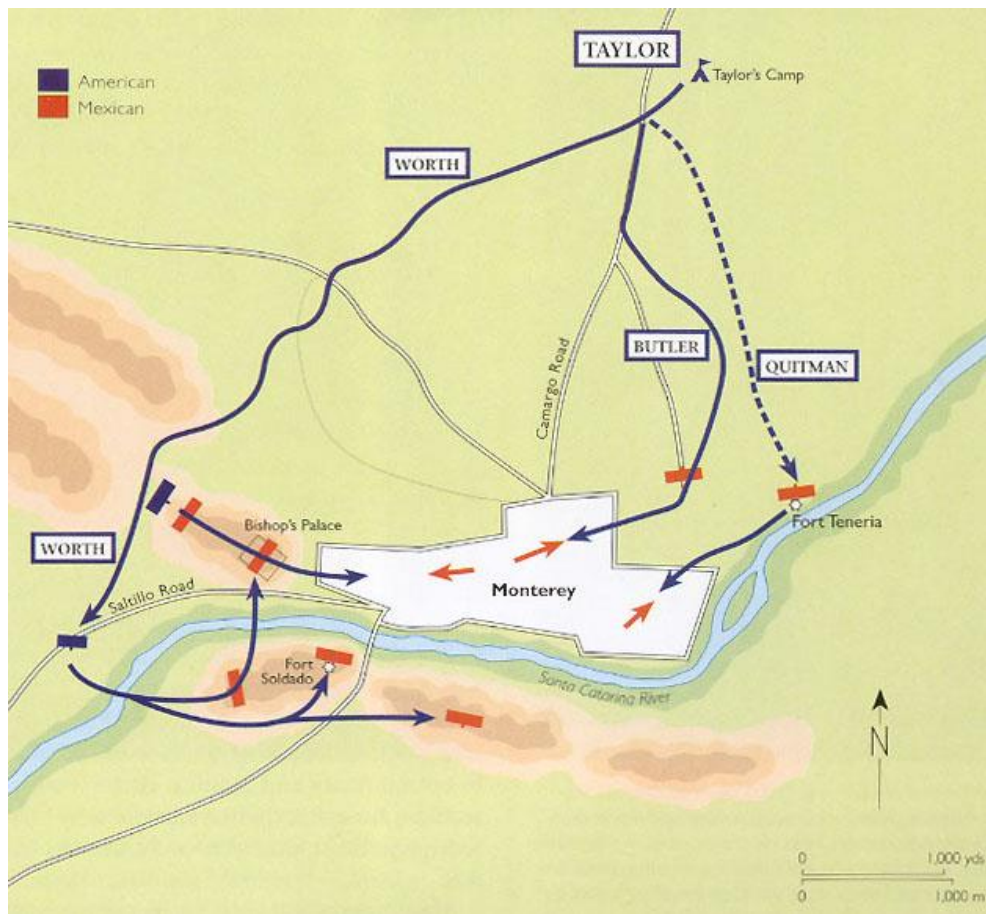


Figure 8. Map of the Battle of Monterrey showing American and Mexican Troop advances.⁸

William does not hold back in sharing his experiences with his wife. He details the fighting and taking of the enemies batteries; mentioning by name the dead (Captains McKavitt, Morris, Field and Barbour) and wounded (Lieutenant Wainwright), along with the “*many others wounded*” of the 8th Regiment. Even though a career Army soldier having fought in multiple wars, being wounded in a sortie in 1814, and engaging in hand-to-hand combat a few months earlier at Resaca de la Palma, he admittedly tells his wife after experiencing this clash “*I being Inspector General am merely an Amateur.*”

William ends his letter to Ann by giving deference to General Worth for his heroics in capturing numerous batteries and much of Monterrey city with “*slight loss,*” even leading a

small party headlong, or “*Pel Mel*,” to draw out the enemy. I think it is safe to say that the Belknap family would have been relieved to learn that he survived such an intense battle, during which well over 800 lives were lost.

Following the Mexican-American War, General Belknap commanded his regiment and the garrison of Fort Gibson, Oklahoma in the Cherokee Nation from 14 December 1848 to 7 May 1850. He devoted himself greatly to secure the welfare of the Cherokees. In May 1851, he was ordered into Upper Texas to keep the Indian tribes within their lines. He died near Preston, TX of typhoid dysentery on 10 November 1851 engaged in scouting a location for a military post to protect California-bound emigrants and settlers moving to Texas while *en route* from the Brazos River to Fort Washita, Indian Territory.⁹ He was buried temporarily at Fort Washita, south of the Red River according to the *Fort Belknap Post*.

After General Belknap’s death, his wife Ann, accompanied by her daughters Anna and Clara, traveled to join her only son William W. Belknap, who was serving as a government administrator in Keokuk, Iowa, and make it her home. She passed on 7 December 1858 and her obituary extols her life as “*the wife of a gallant and distinguished soldier – the late Brig. Gen. William G. Belknap,*” who came with her husband “*to the then far west more than a third of a century ago to lead a frontier life,*”¹⁰ This is a reference to the period between 1827 and 1828 when then Capt. Belknap was ordered to establish a military post on the Missouri with the name of Fort Leavenworth.

Ann had been far removed from the comforts and refinements to which she had been accustomed in her early life in Newburgh. It was only in the last few years of her life spent in Keokuk with her children did she experience calm and enjoyment. It was fitting then when in 1872 their son William W. had his fathers remains brought back to Keokuk and reburied in the Oakland Cemetery nearby Ann. (**Figure 9**).



Figure 9. Headstone of Brigadier General William Goldsmith Belknap, Oakland Cemetery, Keokuk, IA.¹¹

In closing, Brigadier General William Goldsmith Belknap, a native of Newburgh, NY, was a highly decorated, career soldier in the United States Army, serving his country until his untimely death in 1851. This article portrays William's first hand account in his 1846-dated letter to his wife Ann of the last days of the battle for the city of Monterrey during the Mexican-American War. We are fortunate that this postal history artifact has survived and that I was able to recount this brief snapshot of his storied life with our readers.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Mark Bankchik and Vince King for sharing their knowledge and exhibits^{12, 13} of the postal history of Texas, Point Isabel and the provisional Post Offices during the Mexican-American War. I would also like to thank my daughter McKenna R. DiComo for assisting in the translation of the letter. Any error and/or omission is the author's responsibility. He can be reached at charlesdicomo@gmail.com.

References

1. Image [William Goldsworth Belknap (1794-1851) (US Army Brigadier General).jpg], 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. Available from U.S. Library of Congress's Prints & Photographs division, digital ID 2004666583.
2. Biography of William G. Belknap, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William G. Belknap](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_G._Belknap) (last viewed 27 July 2019).
3. "Gen. Belknap's 'Old Split Mexican Stick,'" by John Peter Beckendorf, NSTCW, Vol. 30, No. 5, 2004: 52-55.
4. "*An Outline History of Orange County, with an Enumeration of the Names of its Towns, Villages, Rivers, Creeks, Lakes, Ponds, Mountains, Hills and Other Known Localities, and their Etymologies or Historical Reasons Therefore; together with Local Traditions and short Biographical Sketches of Early Settlers, etc.,*" by Sam'l W. Eager, Esq., Newburgh: S.T. Callahan, 1846-7: 196-198.
5. Map of SW Texas and Expansion of Mail Routes to Serve U.S. Troop, from "Under Six Flags, Expanding the Mail Service in Texas 1801-1865," Postal History Exhibit of Vince King, 2013: 29.
6. Biography of William Worth Belknap, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William W. Belknap](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_W._Belknap) (last viewed 27 July 2019).
7. Image [mex-war13.gif] available from www.latinamericanstudies.org/mex-war/mex-war13.gif (last viewed 27 July 2019).
8. Image [map-monterey-1847.jpg] available from www.latinamericanstudies.org/mex-war/map-monterey-1847.jpg (last viewed 27 July 2019).
9. The American Almanac and Repository of Useful Knowledge, for the Year 1853 (Boston: Little, Brown and Co.), 1853: 332.
10. "*Annual Obituary Notices of Eminent Persons who have died in the United States for 1858*", by Hon. Nathan Crosby, Boston: John P Jewett and Company, 1859.
11. Image [129812572_1422504994] available from www.findagrave.com/memorial/129812572/william-goldsmith-belknap (last viewed 27 July 2019).
12. "*United States Intervention in Mexico: 1846-1848 (Mexican-American War)*," Mark Banchik, as received by The Exhibition Photocopy Committee, U.S. Philatelic Classics Society, Inc., June 2006: 129 pages.
13. "*Under Six Flags, Expanding the Mail Service in Texas 1801-1865*," Vince King, 2013: 80-page Exhibit.