

Grant's Texas Tour: The Reconstruction President Reconciles with Redemption

Cotham, Edward T., Jr. *A Busy Week in Texas: Ulysses S. Grant's 1880 Visit to the Lone Star State*. Austin: Texas State Historical Association Press, 2021. viii + 127 pp. \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1625110640.

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Three years out of the White House but contemplating a run for a third term, Ulysses S. Grant toured Texas in March 1880. Over seven days, Grant visited Galveston, the state's link to the international cotton economy and site of emancipation; San Antonio, the gateway to Mexico and the spiritual home of the Texas Revolution; and Houston, a rising financial and transportation center. Grant delivered speeches and shook thousands of hands. Crowds rewarded him with enthusiastic receptions and notables feted him with banquets.

Edward T. Cotham Jr.'s *A Busy Week in Texas* dedicates a chapter to each day Grant spent in the Lone Star State. Cotham, who has authored several books and articles on Civil War battles and leads tours of Texas historic sites, recreates the sights, sounds, and even tastes of Grant's busy week. Cotham gives the reader the paths of welcoming parades and lists of the groups that marched in them. He recounts the shouts of well-wishers and the texts of lengthy toasts and speeches by Texas's business and political elite. He even reproduces the menus of lavish hotel banquets.

The sum of such historical detail is not only a definitive recounting of Grant's week-long Texas trip but also a worthwhile contribution to our understanding of his post-presidential ambitions. Although his post-White House career is notorious for its many business failures, the time he spent in Texas in 1880 was, Cotham argues, part of the former president's continued search for political and economic opportunities. After an around-the-world tour in 1877 and 1878 generated favorable press, Grant saw a Texas trip (and an earlier leg in Mexico) as a chance to court support for a run at the 1880 Republican Party nomination and connections with businessmen who might aid his scheme to build a railroad from Mexico City to a Gulf port along the Texas coast. These dual political and commercial aims, Cotham notes, were clear in Grant's few public statements on the trip, which "stressed the importance of putting sectional differences aside and uniting the country behind a mission of using its vast national resources and energy" for profitable expansion (viii).

If Grant's tour of Texas "can tell us much about Grant," it also can reveal "much about Texas" (vii). In particular, Cotham aims to explain why "Texans (including many former

Confederate soldiers) [were] so overwhelmingly enthusiastic about Grant's visit" (vii). Reporters on Grant's tour emphasized the "unbroken succession of ovations" and "admiration" of ex-Confederates for "the man who so very badly licked them" (70). Cotham gives a two-fold explanation for such a warm reception. First, Grant was "undoubtedly the biggest celebrity to come through Texas up to that date," with a "cult-of-popularity" generated by the many accounts and photographs of the man published in newspapers over the previous two decades (1). Second, Cotham notes that while Grant's "reputation had been forged in war," he "had come to stand as one of the leading advocates for peace" between the North and the South (99).

Cotham's explanations could benefit from additional consideration of political developments in Texas in the decade before Grant's visit. Texas had been "redeemed" from Reconstruction in January 1874 following the defeat of Republican Governor Edmund Davis by Democrat Richard Coke. Davis challenged the legitimacy of the election, but then-President Grant's refusal to support Davis's assertions paved for the way for Democrats to take political control and tear down Davis's Reconstruction policies. Democrats disbanded the state police force, which had protected Black rights and counted significant numbers of Black officers in its ranks, and turned over control of the state system of free public schools to local officials. But not all Reconstruction era policies were reversed: Democrats continued to support subsidies for railroads and industrial ventures.

Grant and Texas's business and political elite found common ground upon economic development. Economic boosters supported sectional reconciliation. Houstonians, for instance, constructed an arch topped by clasped hands and a banner declaring "The Broken Chain is Now United" (78). Their paeans to peace and unity were made alongside appeals for federal support for a ship channel between Houston and the coast and the dredging of a deep-water port in Galveston. Boosters had much to gain by forging a working relationship between Texas's growing cities and the man who might again be president. There was money to be made.

The legacy of Reconstruction in Texas had not been entirely erased by 1880, however. Large crowds of Black Texans cheered Grant on at his public appearances. The Lincoln Guards, Davis Rifles, and other Black militias marched with Black fire companies and benevolent societies in the parades welcoming Grant (they always marched behind their white counterparts). The reasons for Black support of Grant were obvious. Cotham points in particular to Grant's support of civil rights measures and his largely successful effort to crush the Klan (48). But the relationship between Grant and Black Texans could be probed further. Did Black Texans hope that the return of Grant to the White House might bring back Reconstruction policies? Was their public showing an opportunity to strengthen Black Republicanism in the state? The reader can likewise only guess at Grant's own feelings about the defeat of the Republican state government that had been supported by the very Black Texans who cheered him on. If Grant resented the Democrats who had undone much of Reconstruction in the state, he certainly didn't express it on his Texas tour.

For readers interested in these questions, *A Busy Week in Texas* will serve as an entry point into the larger issues of Texas political history. On its own, Cotham's account of Grant's tour offers neatly textured evidence of the extent to which Grant and other Republican Party leaders had, by 1880, accepted the collapse of Reconstruction and pivoted fully toward questions of economic development.