The Grants are Comfortably Situated

1879 Ulysses S. Grant and his wife Julia returned to the United States from their trip around the world on September 20, 1879 and disembarked at San Francisco. After touring a bit in the West they returned to Galena, Illinois where they had a home that was given to them by the citizens of their proud community. In November Grant attended a reunion of the Army of the Tennessee in Chicago at which Mark Twain gave a rousing and humorous speech about him to a crowd of Grant's former soldiers. (Toast: the Babies) The irony of this is that Twain was a Confederate veteran, a deserter no less, who spent his weeks early in the War avoiding being captured by Grant's men who were on patrol in Missouri. He memorialized this experience in his The Private History of a Campaign that Failed.

1880. Ulysses and Julia continued traveling, visiting Mexico, Florida, and Cuba. He allowed his name to be placed in nomination for a third presidential term at the Republican National Convention held in Chicago, June 7-8. He lost on the 36th ballot to Ohio congressman James A. Garfield.

1881. Grant became president of the Mexican Southern Railroad in March. Around this time William H. Vanderbilt, Jay Gould and John Mackay raised funds for the Grants through public subscription. George W. Jones, the owner of The New York Times initiated and oversaw this effort (Green, p. 269). The interest from the fund gave the Grants an income of $15,000 annually. It was invested in railroad bonds which evaporated when the railroads defaulted (Pitkin, p. 10).
In the fall of 1881 Ulysses and Julia moved into a New York City home on East 66th Street (now demolished). This home was purchased with funds raised by George W. Childs and Anthony J. Drexel and presented to Julia by them (Julia Grant’s *Personal Memoirs*, p. 323).

Meanwhile, Ulysses S. Grant, Jr. (Buck) married (Nov. 1880) into an affluent family and obtained from his father-in-law $100,000 to enter into a partnership with Ferdinand Ward in a new Wall Street private banking (called the Marine National Bank) and brokerage firm. Ward was a rising star in the world of Wall Street and he and Buck were doing quite well. Ulysses and Julia were offered the chance to invest in the firm of Grant and Ward; they did so to the tune of $100,000. Other members of the Grant family also invested in the firm. For three years everything appeared to be going splendidly and all investors were earning healthy dividends (Pitkin, p. 1-2).

The Grants are Defrauded of their Investments

1883, December 24. Grant slipped on the sidewalk in New York, injuring his left leg and hip, the same part of his body that he had injured badly in his 1863 riding accident in New Orleans. He would walk with a cane or crutches for the rest of his life.

1884, Sunday May 4. Ferdinand Ward came by Grant’s New York home and told him that the Marine National Bank was having temporary difficulties because of a large unexpected withdrawal by one of its clients. He asked Grant if he could come up with $150,000 for only 24 hours and by Monday or Tuesday the situation would be all cleared up.

Grant, that same day, limped from his home and went to see his friend William Henry Vanderbilt. He asked Vanderbilt to lend him $150,000, telling him the same story Ward had fabricated. Vanderbilt told Grant he did not care one bit about the Marine National Bank, but that he would be pleased to make a personal loan to Grant for the amount requested.

1884, Tuesday May 6. The whole thing was an instance of “creative bookkeeping” and Ward had absconded with the money. Buck told his father the sad news when the General arrived at the Grant and Ward office late Tuesday morning. The Grants were wiped out, as were other trusting investors, including friends and family of the Grants. They were not the only ones. "Some of the richest financiers ... became victims .. because Ward was a highly persuasive individual who could convince people of high interest rates and large profits..." (Pitkin, p.9)

The Grants Divest Themselves of all their Worldly Goods

Grant was devastated. That evening he and Julia checked around their New York home for cash. They found they had about $210.00 between them. The first thing they thought of was repaying Vanderbilt. A few days later Vanderbilt left for
Europe but not before sending a lawyer to tell the Grants as diplomatically as possible that the loan was forgiven, at least for the present. The Grants would not hear of it.

They proceeded to strip themselves of all their possessions, including White Haven, and other properties (Goldhurst, p. 23). The proceeds did not add up to $150,000, so they transferred to Vanderbilt various household and personal items, among them all the memorabilia and awards Grant received for his Civil War accomplishments. Also they turned over gifts they received on their trip around the world.

When Vanderbilt came home from Europe he found all of these items in his foyer and the deeds to the properties on his desk (Goldhurst, p. 23). He tried to return them to the Grants who adamantly refused. He then told them he would give the historical items to the government and, after selling the properties, he would use the monies to set up a trust fund for Julia. Julia, in a gracefully worded letter, turned down this offer.

William H. Vanderbilt

Grant Becomes an Author

1884. The twenty year anniversary of the end of the Civil War was approaching in 1885 and the editors at the Century Magazine had big plans to increase readership and profits by running a series of articles on the great battles written by the generals who directed them. Eventually this publishing project earned $1,000,000 for the Century Company and was developed into the 3,000 page Battles and Leaders of the Civil War (Goldhurst, p. 111-112). Robert Underwood Johnson, one of the editors at Century, approached Grant in January of 1884 with the request that he write something for the series. Grant declined.

Mid-May 1884. Right after losing his investments, Grant told Johnson he would reconsider writing the articles. Johnson visited Grant at Long Branch, New Jersey, the summer-by-the-sea resort city where the Grants had a cottage, several times in the early summer. He told Grant the Century Company would pay him $500 for each article he would write for them. Needing the money, Grant began to write. On July 1st Grant completed an article on Shiloh and sent it to the Century. The staff there, while thrilled to receive it, found it dry and colorless and essentially the same as an official report. Johnson went back to Grant with suggestions on
how to make it more personal and lively with more of Grant himself coming through to the reader.

Grant took the advice to heart and re-wrote the Shiloh article. It was exactly what the editors at the *Century Magazine* wanted and so Grant continued writing, starting next on the Vicksburg article. A new light began to dawn in Grant's mind. He began to think that perhaps he could write an entire book and on July 22, 1884 he told Johnson this. Johnson told the other editors at the *Century* about this new idea of Grant's and they all began dreaming about the rare opportunity of being the publisher of this book. Grant let it slip to the press that he was thinking about such a venture and other publishers eventually approached him as well.

**Who Will Win the Gran(t)d Prize?**
The executives at the Century Company were not particularly knowledgeable about the book publishing industry and would have sold the book in bookstores (of which there were very few in those days) for a 10% royalty on an expected sale of 25,000 copies. Roswell Smith, president of the Century Company had an extremely conservative idea of how many copies would sell, as did Grant, himself. Many other publishers sold books on a subscription basis, with canvassers going door to door peddling the books. Grant found this sales method distasteful and told the men from The Century Company that. Consequently, the bookstore idea remained at the center of the sales plan.

**1884 October 22.** Grant walked into the Century Company and asked the company if it wanted to publish his memoirs. Richard Watson Gilder, chief at the Century Company, apparently did not realize the import of this offer, and took it quite calmly. Leisurely, he began writing up a contract.

**Mark Twain to the Rescue, or, "Century, Your Offer is a Monumental Injustice."**

**November 1884.** Mark Twain, by now world famous for his writing and speaking, and a friend of Grant, became aware of the publishing deal that Grant had negotiated with the Century Company. In mid-November he went to visit Grant and found him going over the details of the publishing contract with his oldest son Fred. [The details of how Twain found out about Grant's decision to publish his memoirs are suspect and therefore are not related here. Twain liked to embellish any story for its potential entertainment value and his telling of this incident is no exception. One part of that tale is that after he accidentally heard about the possibility of Grant publishing his memoirs, the next day he went to Grant's home on East 66th St. and was invited in just in time to find Fred Grant going over the details of the contract with his father. This is almost too much of a coincidence to believe and one bit of evidence suggests that Twain actually had an appointment to see Grant about the book. Pitkin, p. 19].
Fred and Ulysses allowed Twain to read the contract. Knowing the book publishing industry far better than either the Grants or the Century Company, Twain was stunned at what the Century had offered him. Ten percent royalty was what they proposed to pay the savior of the Union for his memoirs, with no advance, and an anticipated sale total of 25,000 copies. Twain told the Grants that 10% of the net return is what was customarily offered to the lowest of the low authors whose sales could be predicted at maybe 3,000 copies. Fifteen percent was the more usual offering for authors whose sale was certain to rise to 35,000 copies. Knowing the public was still fascinated with Grant and his accomplishments, Twain flatly told him and his son to strike out the 10% and replace it with 75%. (Here he probably meant 75% of the gross profits, not the net, which is what the book would bring in before expenses were deducted. The 10 or 15 percent would have been of the net.) The modest Grant vetoed that idea and said he felt he had an obligation to go with the Century Company because they had helped him by paying him for the articles which appeared in their magazine at a time when he desperately needed the money.

Later Twain had this to say about the payment for these articles: "The thing which astounded me was that, admirable man as Gilder certainly is, and with a heart which is in the right place, it had never seemed to occur to him that to offer General Grant five hundred dollars for a magazine article was not only the monumental injustice of the nineteenth century, but of all centuries. He ought to have known that if he had given General Grant a check for ten thousand dollars, the sum would still have been trivial; that if he had paid him twenty thousand dollars for a single article, the sum would still have been inadequate; that if he had paid him thirty thousand dollars for a single magazine war article, it still could not be called paid for; that if he had given him forty thousand dollars for a single magazine article, he would still be in General Grant's debt." (Green, p. 290-291)

Keep in mind, Twain did like to emote. Nevertheless, there is probably a grain of truth to these statements. Twain knew that Gilder had experienced a huge increase in sales of *Century Magazine* because of these articles; his new rates for advertising, which Twain himself had to pay in order to promote his own books, had increased dramatically, no doubt because of this increased readership.
Twain argued with Grant, saying that any reputable publisher in the country would offer Grant 75% of the profits on the book. Grant was still reluctant and said he felt he owed the Century Company something because they had asked him first. "If that is the case," said Twain, then, you owe the book to me, because several years ago I told you that you should publish your memoirs." At this point it dawned on Twain that he himself owned a publishing company with his niece's husband Charles L. Webster. He asked Grant to award the book to him for either a 20% royalty or 75% of the profits. The Grants said they would think about it and Twain went off on a lecturing tour, leaving the negotiating to Charles Webster.

After thinking it over and seeking advice from outside the family, the Grants accepted the offer from Charles Webster and Company and a contract was signed at the end of February, 1885. As Twain had predicted, other publishers made similar offers, which helped convince Grant that Twain's offer was not a "gift," but a real business deal (Goldhurst, p. 130). The Century Company wrote a very gracious letter to Grant wishing him well.

**What Did Grant Earn on the Book?** When faced with deciding whether to accept a 20% royalty or 75% of the profits, he asked Twain what he would suggest. Twain told him the 20% royalty was the better choice. That way Grant stood to gain something no matter how the sales went. Grant immediately chose 75% of the profits, feeling that if there was no profit, it was only right that he receive nothing. Furthermore, Twain set aside a $10,000 advance for Grant if he felt he needed it before publication. Grant never took a dime of it (Goldhurst, p. 131).

The book would be sold by subscription, a method that Grant must have become reconciled to. Webster and Company used 16 general agents and 10,000 door to door sales people who prevailed upon the American public's sentiment for the great general. It was a huge publishing undertaking, both in terms of physical production of the volumes and in the method of salesmanship. There were various qualities of bindings available:

- Fine cloth binding, plain edges.................................................................$7.00 a set
- Full sheep binding, library style, marbled edges.............................................$9.00 a set
- Fine half morocco binding, marbled edges....................................................$11.00 a set
- Full Turkey morocco, beveled board, antique back and gilt edges.............$18.00 a set
- Tree calf, full gift edges, hand tooled.......................................................$25.00 a set

**February 27, 1886.** Charles Webster presented Julia Dent Grant with a check for
$200,000 on the one year anniversary of Grant and Webster entering into a contractual agreement for the Memoirs (Pitkin, p. 115). All totaled, Julia eventually received between $420,000 and $450,000. (Goldhurst, p. 257)

**General Grant Did Not Sign Your Copy of His Memoirs**

Sadly, Grant died before the Memoirs were off the press. All the copies of the book display a facsimile of Grant’s signature. He signed the manuscript, not the actual hard copies of the book.

**In the early summer of 1884**, following the debacle of Ferdinand and Ward and the divestiture of all their worldly possession, Ulysses and Julia were at Long Branch, New Jersey, living frugally. On June 2 Grant bit into a peach and leaped up from the table in acute pain from something that felt sharp in his throat. He found as time passed that citrus fruits caused the pain to return, although it subsided quickly. A friend of Grant's at Long Branch arranged for Jacob Mendez Da Costa, a Philadelphia surgeon, to visit and have a casual look at Grant's throat. He was alarmed when he saw something other than an ordinary inflammation and advised Grant to see his regular physician as soon as possible. That physician was Dr. Fordyce Barker who happened to be on a European trip at that time.

Early in October he saw Dr. Barker in New York when the pain had become more persistent and discomforting. He was even more alarmed than Da Costa had been and sent him to Dr. John Hancock Douglas, a renowned throat specialist. Grant saw Dr. Douglas on **October 22, 1884**, the same day he stopped by the Century Company's offices to offer them his memoirs.

Dr. Douglas saw the beginning of an epithelial carcinoma at the base of the tongue. The gland on the right side of Grant's tongue was enlarged and was the chief source of his pain. There was a slight ulceration in the right tonsil and also an irritated area on the roof of the mouth. Here, like stalactites, were three cancerous warts each less than one eighth of an inch in length. His condition was past that which could be controlled by surgery. (Goldhurst, p. 143)

Dr. George R. Elliott of New York performed a microscopic examination of cells from Grant's throat and then asked Dr. George Frederick Shady to confirm his findings. Dr. Shady pronounced the dreaded diagnosis: lingual epithelioma, or, cancer of the tongue. (Goldhurst, p. 145)
**The Decline of General Grant**

**Early 1885.** Grant worked on his memoirs in his New York home, with assistance from his oldest son Frederick Dent Grant and biographer Adam Badeau. Physically he would decline and then rally. The doctors hovered nearby at all times. His family was extremely attentive to his every need. His daughter Nellie came from England to spend his last months with him. Still, no matter what was going on around him or was happening to him physically, he persistently pressed on with his two volume set of memoirs.

**Grant Seeks Twain's Comments** The galley proofs for volume one were delivered to Twain and he read them, something he had never done for any other author. He made a few emendations for grammar and punctuation and made no editorial comments. This disappointed Grant, who would have welcomed comments from the reigning master of literature of the day. Fred hinted to Twain that such comments would be much appreciated. Twain was taken aback by this news. "I was much surprised as Columbus's cook would have been to learn that Columbus wanted his opinion as to how Columbus was doing the navigating." Twain told Grant that his writing was direct and un martial and of the highest literary quality.

**Grant and His Family Move to Mount McGregor**

**1885 June 16.** The heat in New York City was, by early summer, becoming oppressive and a hindrance to Grant's health and comfort. The doctors recommended that he be taken out of the city to a more comfortable location. When Mr. Joseph W. Drexel, financier and philanthropist, offered his summer cottage on Mount McGregor, just a few miles north of Saratoga Springs, New York, the Grant family, upon the approval of Dr. Douglas, accepted his offer. On June 16th Grant and most of his family arrived on the mountain after a rather arduous trip by railroad.
Dates of Delivery of the Manuscripts
Grant and his son continued to edit the first volume, finishing and sending it to the printer on July 11, 1885. The manuscript for the second volume was delivered to the printer on July 18th. (Chronology of Grant's life in the Library of America edition of the Memoirs, p. 1160).

General Grant Dies
July 23, 1885, at 8:08 a.m., with his family surrounding him, Ulysses S. Grant died. Frederick Dent Grant, his oldest son, stopped the clock on the fireplace mantel at that time. To this day, that very clock still stands there, a lasting testament to the extinguishing of America's greatest flame, the person of Ulysses S. Grant.

Why Did General Grant Contract Cancer in his Mouth?
Dr. Shrady wrote the following:
"The cause of the disease in this case is largely conjectural. Epithelioma, as a rule, starts from local irritation, and, unlike other forms of cancer, is not dependent upon hereditary predisposition to the disease. There must, however, aside from this, be a latent tendency toward cancerous troubles which is more pronounced in some individuals than in others, otherwise we should be unable to explain why simple and continued irritation would induce the disease in one case and not in another. It is however, quite probable that the irritation of smoking was the active cause of the cancer in General Grant's case, or, at least, it is fair to presume that he would not have had the disease if his habit had not been carried to excess. This assumption is made in the face of the fact that, of the thousands who smoke, but a very small proportion suffer from the disease." (The Surgical and Pathological Aspects of General Grant's Case, The Medical Record, August 1, 1885).

Other writers have often commented on the fact that Grant delayed in seeing a physician who could have started treatment perhaps early enough to save his life. The advice we hear so often today, that early detection is the key to curing cancer, applied in Grant's day as well.

Some doctors of his day also attributed his disease and swift decline to the stress caused by the failure of Grant and Ward.
There are many events and incidents tangential to the decline and death of Grant. Some of those are:

- the intense interest of the press who clustered around outside his New York apartment, awaiting any sight of him or word of his condition
- the attempts of Adam Badeau to convince the public that he, not Grant, wrote the *Memoirs.*
- the awarding of a pension to Grant by Congress
- the attempts of the Rev. Dr. Newman to baptize Grant
- Grant’s trip to the overlook at Mount McGregor
- the visits Grant received from former generals, both Union and Confederate
- the poignant note Grant left for Julia.
- the crass attempts by some individuals to capitalize on Grant’s presence on Mount McGregor
- the two funeral ceremonies, one at Mount McGregor and one in New York

All of these topics could not be covered in this document, but I suggest that you read more on your own. Consult the bibliography below.

**Read More About the Last Years of General Grant** The last years of the life of Ulysses S. Grant were complicated and it is difficult to relate with complete
certainty everything that happened to him and all the decisions he made. The situation was made murkier by Mark Twain who embellished the truth of some of his interactions with Grant. Every attempt has been made here to relate the events of those years as accurately as possible. The readers of this website are encouraged to investigate these years further on their own by consulting the following materials:


3. Clarke, Oliver P. *General Grant at Mount MacGregor*. Pamphlet by the first custodian of the Grant Cottage at Mount McGregor. Return to the LibGuide for a link to the text of this pamphlet.

4. Elliott, George R. The Microscopical Examination of Specimens Removed from General Grant's Throat. *The Medical Record*, Vol.27, March 14, 1885, p. 289-290. The slides of Grant's throat tissue were not destroyed and are presently housed at the National Museum of Health and Medicine, in the Anatomical Collections. Return to the LibGuide for a link to the text of the article by Dr. Elliott.


9. Green, Horace. *General Grant's Last Stand*. Scribner's, 1936. Based on the notes General Grant used to communicate with Dr. Douglas.


11. Miller, Craig E. Give the Book to Clemens. *American History*, vol.34, April 1999, p. 40 (7 pages total) Online [here](#).

13. Shrady, George F. *General Grant's Last Days*. Privately Printed, 1908. Only 50 copies were printed. Return to the LibGuide for a link to the text of this book.


**Other**

Grant's Sad Death as Reported in the [New York Times](#).


By Dr. Marie Kelsey

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