

Ulysses S. Grant National Historic Park

The Texas Eagle route is often called the Presidential Corridor because it touches the hometowns of so many United States presidents. You may recall that Ulysses S. Grant was born in Ohio. However, the National Historical Park which bears his name is located on the west side of St. Louis, where this controversial president spent some of his quieter years.

Do you know someone who seems to be bright and capable, yet can't quite find their path and keep a job? Historians describe Grant as such a person for much of his life, even though he is famous as a military leader and a U.S. president. He was bright enough to be accepted to West Point and complete a degree, but he did not stand out among his classmates. It was as a junior officer in the Mexican war that he first distinguished himself and learned valuable lessons about sound military logistics and adequate supply of troops. Ulysses was given several mundane assignments after the Mexican war ended, but became so homesick for his wife, Julia Dent, that he resigned his commission and moved to St. Louis. Here he lived with his wife's family for six years. He tried farming on land given him by his father-in-law, then a real estate partnership, but both ventures failed. He had moved his wife and four children back to Galena, Illinois to work in a leather business owned by his father when the Civil War broke out.

In April of 1861, Ulysses Grant helped recruit, equip and train troops in Galena, and accompanied them to the state capitol. He advanced rapidly as an officer, won many battles for the Union Army, and in 1864 was named commander of the entire army by President Lincoln. His success in forcing the surrender of General Robert E. Lee's army at Appomattox Courthouse, Virginia, in 1865 propelled him into a successful presidential campaign, and he served as president for two terms.

Grant was widely honored for his honesty throughout his presidency. However, he was known to be completely trusting of corrupt officials who ultimately betrayed him and damaged his reputation. Many historians consider him a failure as a president due to government inefficiency and fraud. At the end of his second term, Grant assured Congress, "Failures have been errors of judgment, not of intent."

Ulysses was still immensely popular with the public, and after his presidency he chose to open a brokerage firm on Wall Street. This business failed so miserably that Grant had to sell his war trophies and his home. In 1885, he was diagnosed with throat cancer and was desperate that his family be provided for after his death. With the encouragement of his close friend, Mark Twain, Grant began to write his Memoirs, working through pain and weakness from the cancer. Just five days after completing the two-volume set, Ulysses Grant died quietly in a rented home in the Adirondack Mountains of New York, surrounded by his wife and children. Grant's Memoirs, considered to be one of the finest writings in the English language, sold over 300,000 copies and earned Julia a staggering \$450,000. This is equivalent to over 10 million dollars today.

It seems fitting that the National Park Service set aside his in-laws' residence in East Saint Louis as an Historic Site in honor of Grant, for devotion to his family was a powerful influence on his life. If you have an opportunity to visit St. Louis, make the short trip to the restored home and farm buildings for a scenic and educational experience.

Source(s):

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