

Grant's Visit To Groton Was Stop-Over From Grand Celebration Of Civil War's End In Boston

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Interior view of the 2 Football Fields Long, 86 feet high, Coliseum built expressly for the celebration of the ending of the Civil War near the location of the Prudential Center and Trinity Church in Boston where Ulysses Grant was the most honored and celebrated dignitary. After the celebration, he traveled to Groton.

3,000 Well-Wishers Shook Grant's Hand At Boutwell House Reception

by Jeffrey H. Boutwell, Ph.D.

In June 1869, Boston threw a party the likes of which the city had never seen, at least not since 1773. The National Peace Jubilee, organized by one of the first great impresarios, Patrick S. Gilmore, took place from June 15-19 in a specially built coliseum that was almost two football fields long and 86 feet high. Located near Trinity Church where the Prudential Building now stands, it played host to 1,000 musicians, 10,000 choral singers, and a daily audience of 50,000 people in a celebration of the Union victory in the Civil War. [See photo]

Among the Jubilee's many guests of honor, none were as prominent as President and Civil War hero, Ulysses S Grant, and his Secretary of the Treasury and the former Governor of Massachusetts, George S. Boutwell, who in the early days of the conflict coordinated the Massachusetts military contribution to the Union and then helped with raising needed funds as Abraham Lincoln's Commissioner of Internal Revenue.

Grant Was Accompanied By Ralph Waldo Emerson On His Trip to Groton

Grant and Boutwell were in New York together prior to sailing to Fall River, Massachusetts on the steamship SS Providence and then continuing by rail to Boston. They arrived in Boston early on June 16, spent the morning reviewing Massachusetts troops on Boston Common, attended the Jubilee in the afternoon, then departed that evening by train to Groton, accompanied by Ralph Waldo Emerson and other notables.

The President Was Met On Station Ave. By The Groton Cornet Band

The Grant-Boutwell entourage was met at the rail depot on Station Avenue by the Groton Cornet Band, which provided musical accompaniment as the President walked the few hundred yards to the Boutwell home on Main Street. One of the young cornet players, J.B. Raddin, recalled more than 60 years later that, on arriving at the Boutwell house, he and his fellow band members were "dismissed very suddenly" by Boutwell "to get them out of the way." Given that President Grant had earlier said he "was all fagged out" by the whirlwind visit to Boston and was looking forward to a restful sleep in the country, George Boutwell might be forgiven if he was a bit abrupt with the members of the band.

Sleeping in the front bedroom on the second floor on that Wednesday, June 16, 1869, Ulysses Grant became the first and only President to spend the night in Groton while in office. [In 1934, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a 1900 graduate of Groton School, came for his son John's graduation and the school's 50th anniversary celebration, but spent the night in a special Presidential train in Worcester. In May 1904, Theodore Roosevelt spoke at Groton School's Prize Day, but he returned to Washington by train that evening.] The bed where Ulysses Grant slept can still be seen in what is today referred to as the Grant Bedroom in the Boutwell House.

3,000 Well-Wishers Passed Through Boutwell House To Shake Grant's Hand

The next morning, after showing the President his cattle and fruit trees in the surrounding fields that extended to Martin's Pond and Gibbet Hill, George Boutwell hosted a reception where perhaps three thousand well-wishers came through the house to shake

the President's hand. That afternoon, George Boutwell stayed behind as President Grant and his son Ulysses Jr. traveled on to Worcester and then back to New York.

Percolating beneath what had been a joyous and successful Presidential trip to Boston and Groton, however, was a devious financial plot of mammoth proportions that few people knew about at the time, and which came close to crippling the Grant administration, and George Boutwell's role in it.

The story of Wall Street manipulators Big Jim Fisk and Jay Gould seeking to drive up the price of gold and sparking a crash of the financial markets on Black Friday, Sept. 24, is well known. The two sharp-elbowed capitalist predators had already snookered Cornelius Vanderbilt out of the Erie Railway Company. They owned the steamboat and rail lines that ferried Ulysses Grant and George Boutwell to Boston for the National Peace Jubilee and had brought Grant's brother-in-law, Abel Rathbone Corbin, into their conspiracy.

In repeated visits with both Grant and Boutwell that summer and early fall, often at Corbin's townhouse in New York, Gould and Fisk argued that rising gold prices would benefit American farmers and bring in needed foreign exchange. For that to happen, there would need to be a suspension of the regular Treasury Department gold sales that Boutwell oversaw each month. If Gould and Fisk could arrange that, they could quickly drive up the price of gold and make a killing.

The 1860s were a period of little governmental oversight of financial markets, so George Boutwell and Ulysses Grant had few measures at hand to thwart the conspiracy. In the end, however, they did just that. In an emergency meeting at the White House on Friday morning, Sept. 24, Boutwell and Grant agreed to announce the release of 4 million dollars in gold into the markets. The gold fever broke immediately, with prices falling from \$160 to \$130 within the hour.

Big Jim Fisk and Jay Gould would escape largely unscathed from the affair, having New York's judges and politicians in their pocket. But Treasury Secretary George Boutwell and Ulysses Grant, despite the President's often misplaced trust in family and friends, came through in a pinch to block the gold manipulation.

Ulysses Grant & George Boutwell Were Trusted Friends

Ulysses Grant and George Boutwell would become trusted friends over the course of their careers to the point where George served as pallbearer at the President's massive funeral in New York City in August 1885.

When the President spent the night at the Boutwell House in June 1869, there were many years yet to come of the two working closely together as America moved into the tumultuous financial years of the Gilded Age.

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Promise: George S. Boutwell and the Politics of Race, Money and Power, 1818-1905." He'd like to thank Don Black for sharing information about Don's family member, J.B. Raddin, and Josh Vollmar and Earl Carter for providing local Groton historical expertise.

*For a lively account of Black Friday, see Kenneth D. Ackerman's *The Gold Ring* (1988).*

Read Jeffrey's commentary in the April 18 issue of the Baltimore Sun on George Boutwell, the KKK Act of 1871 and the 2021 riot on Capitol Hill at

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