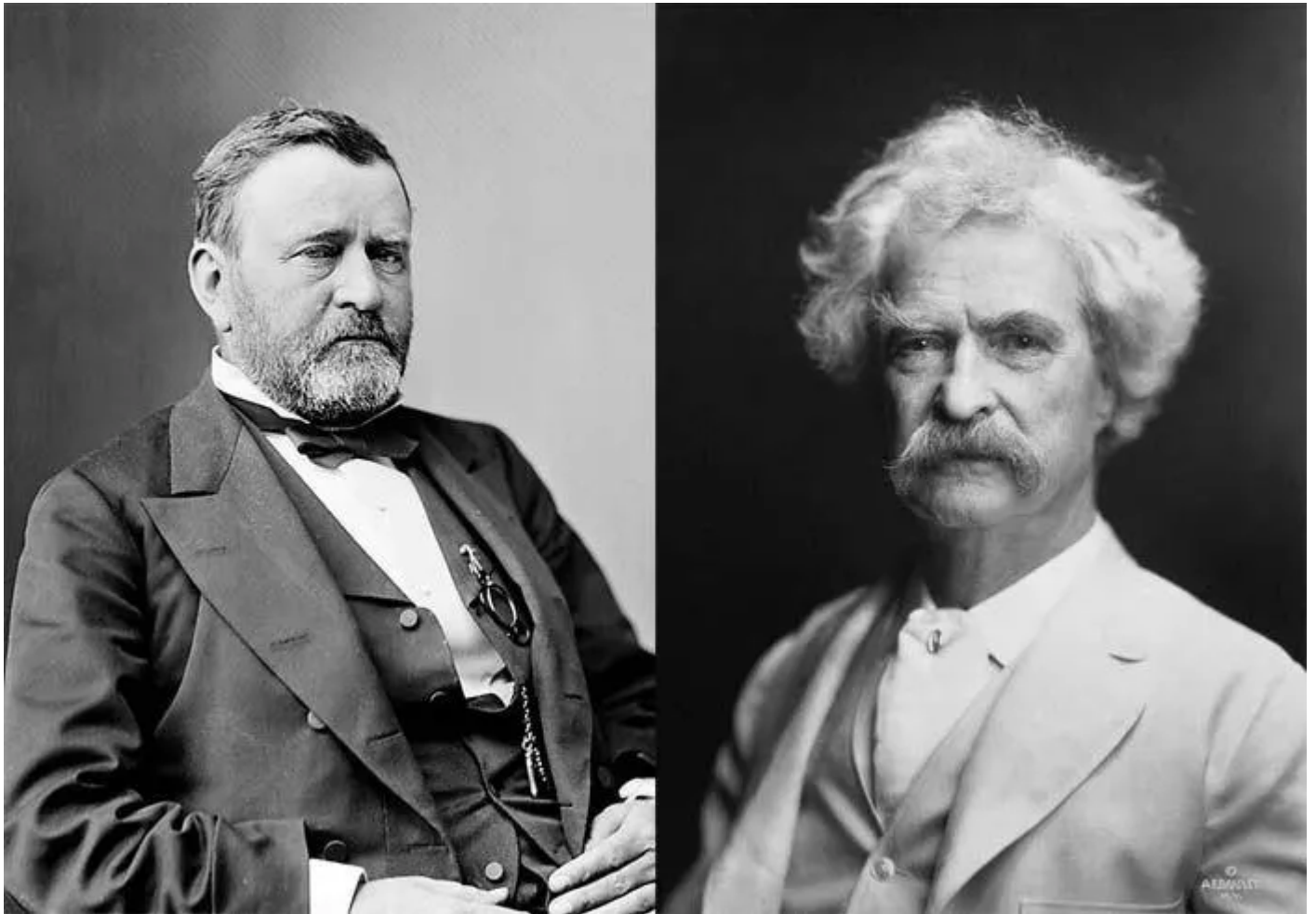


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# How Mark Twain Helped Ulysses S. Grant Write His Personal Memoirs

[Ulysses S Grant National Historic Site \(https://www.nps.gov/ulsg/\)](https://www.nps.gov/ulsg/)



Ulysses S. Grant and Mark Twain  
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Rumors have persisted for many years that Ulysses S. Grant did not entirely write his own memoirs. In a February 2012 article for *The Atlantic* writer Ta-Nehisi Coates explained the myth by stating that, “a lot of really intelligent people are under the impression that Grant’s lucid prose are really the result of Mark Twain’s editing hand . . . My sense is that people read Grant’s writing, hear about the association with Twain and assume that explains it.” However, the claim is untrue. The original hand-written manuscript still survives and is entirely penned with Grant’s own handwriting. Twain was not even involved with the project when he began writing. Grant had previously agreed to allow a publishing company to print the book but had not yet signed a final contract. Grant was writing articles about the many battles he had fought during the Civil War and hoped to expand on these articles and form a memoir of his military career. Under this original plan, *The Century Company* was willing to give Grant ten percent of all sales after the book was finished. When Twain heard about the offer, he was appalled by how little money Grant would get from the sales of the book. He believed he

could offer Grant a better deal.

Twain wasted little time making his way to New York City to convince Grant that he could give him a better deal. When Twain arrived at his home on 66<sup>th</sup> Street, Grant and his eldest son, Frederick T. Grant, were reading over *The Century Company's* contract that needed to be signed before publication. Grant was ready to pick up his pen and sign the contract when Twain asked if he could read it before any signature was made. Twain reviewed the contract and believed that the ten percent royalty being offered was too low and even exploitative. Twain tried to convince Grant that he could give him a better deal, which would provide Grant with more money. Grant was reluctant to back out of the contract that he and the publishers had negotiated. He believed it would be dishonorable to back out after giving his word. Twain tried to convince Grant that he should investigate a different publisher. For example, the *American Publishing Company* had published many of Twain's books, and the company would be able to bring in more profit than *The Century Company*. Grant was still resistant to the advice when Fred suggested that the contract be set aside while they investigated the facts behind Twain's advice. Grant felt loyalty towards the *Century Company* because of the work he had done with the company while writing his articles on the Civil War battles. Grant did agree, however, to listen to Fred, and the contract was set aside for twenty-four hours.

Twain was not sure that setting the contract aside for a day would work. He thought Grant would not change his mind and remain with the *Century Company*. Twain told Grant that by selling the book through a subscription system, the book would produce thousands of dollars in sales. Door-to-door salesman (oftentimes Civil War veterans) would promote the book and get potential readers to place an order prior to publication. Twain himself was getting ready to sell *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* through subscription sales. The thought of making thousands appealed to Grant. He knew that he would not benefit from the sales of the book because of his terminal throat cancer, but his family would need the money since Grant had lost nearly everything when he was recently swindled by a business partner.

Grant decided to follow Twain's advice. He offered Grant 70% of the profits made by the sales of the book. The book would be published through Charles Webster Publishing, a new publishing company managed by a nephew of Twain's wife. Grant chose this option because he did not want to take money from Twain if the book flopped. If the book sold well, the sales would lift the Grant family out of debt. The sales would also help Twain, who was having financial issues of his own. Grant did not like turning down the offer from *The Century Company*, but reality told him that the money was needed for his family when he inevitably met his end. Twain worked by Grant's side over the next several months as Grant wrote his now famous memoirs, providing literary advice as Grant wrote out each page. Twain also proof-read the pages as Grant worked tirelessly to finish the book before he passed away. The entire writing was nevertheless Grant's words and thoughts. There is no way Twain could have known so many facts about the Mexican War and the Civil War, both of which heavily detailed in the memoirs.

Rumors about the authorship of Grant's memoirs began in 1885 before the book was even finished. They were started by Adam Badeau, one Grant's former staff officers in the U.S. Army who assisted Grant during the early stages of writing the memoirs. Most notably, Badeau helped Grant with some of the details concerning the battles they had served in during the Civil War. Badeau had already written his own trilogy on Grant's career, *Military History of US Grant*. Badeau, however, became disgruntled and felt like he was not getting the credit he deserved for the creation of the memoir. Badeau began spreading rumors that he was responsible for much of the writing of the memoirs and that he was hired as a ghost writer to help Grant. He also asked Grant for a pay increase. These rumors would eventually make their way into the newspapers. Colonel George P. Ihrie, who had served with Grant during the Mexican War, told reporters from *The World* that Grant was only providing the information for the memoirs, but that Adam Badeau was doing the writing. Grant woke up on the morning of April 29, 1885 to read that he was not the author of his own memoirs. Grant felt that a response was needed. He emphatically replied in a widely printed letter that the work on the memoirs was "entirely my own." Grant relieved Badeau from his duties after the request for more money and the spreading of rumors. Badeau's accusations opened the door for others to question the authorship of the memoirs. Many people had difficulty accepting the fact that Grant was an

excellent writer. Since Twain assisted Grant with the memoirs, some believed Twain was the author.

Grant passed away on the morning of July 23, 1885 just days after finishing his memoir. The book was sold in two volumes at that time through the subscription system proposed by Twain. Despite the rumors created by Adam Badeau, the book became an instant bestseller. Twain said that the book was one of the best written he had ever seen. Charles Webster Publishing wrote a check for \$200,000 to give to Julia Dent Grant in early 1886. It was the biggest royalty check written up to that time. Grant's *Personal Memoirs* are still in print today and are often considered one of the best written ever produced by a former president.

## Further Reading



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