

G.T. Ruby: Galveston's Black Carpetbagger in Reconstruction Texas

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In recent years revisionist historians have corrected many of the fallacies which previously surrounded southern politics during Reconstruction. No longer tenable is the view that "scalawags" and "carpetbaggers," supported by newly enfranchised freedmen, inflicted corrupt, arbitrary rule on the South. That northerners, both black and white, came into the South and rose to positions of political leadership and influence is, however, an established fact. Often, too little is known about the background, character, and careers of many of these men. Correct historical assessments of them are thus difficult. Such is the case with George T. Ruby, a premier politician during the postwar era and the most important of the few "carpetbaggers" who played significant roles in the Reconstruction of Texas.

Born in New York City in 1841, G.T. Ruby was the mulatto son of a well-to-do white father who raised him. After spending ten years in New York, Ruby's father moved the family to Portland, Maine, where George received his elementary and secondary education. In 1861 the twenty-year-old Ruby left Portland and began a career as a newspaperman, his first job taking him to Haiti, where he served as a correspondent for the Boston press, *The Pine and Palm*. Later he also worked for Horace Greeley's *New York Tribune* and for William Lloyd Garrison's *Anti-Slavery Standard*. In addition, he served as an occasional correspondent for the *New York Times* and the *Toledo Blade*.¹ Maintaining his ties with the above newspapers, in 1864 Ruby moved from Haiti to New Orleans, where he began a night school for adult freedmen. With

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¹U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report on Emigration to Kansas*, 46th Cong., 2d sess., 1880, Rept. 693, pt. 2, pp. 37, 55, 59; Walter Prescott Webb, ed., *The Handbook of Texas*, 2 vols. (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1952), II, p. 513.

limited funds, he held classes in a local black church. Later he established a school for blacks in Saint Bernard Parish before moving back to New Orleans to serve as teacher and principal of the Fort Douglas grade school. For a monthly stipend of \$125, Ruby joined the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands in 1866 and took as his primary responsibility the task of organizing schools in East Feliciana Parish. He found that the almost daily displays of hostility from the white communities in his parish limited his effectiveness. In March 1866, for example, he tried to recruit teachers and start schools in Clinton and Jackson. He succeeded in establishing classes in Clinton but could find no instructors nor building facilities for a Jackson school because of extreme white opposition to education of freedmen.² After he established a school in a private residence and began teaching classes himself, Ruby lamented that "a party of armed men came to my home, seized me, carried me out, and threw me in Thompson's Creek after they had belabored me with the muzzles of their revolvers. . . . They did not want to have any damned nigger school in that town, and they were not going to have it."³

Ruby began his Texas career in September 1866, when he took over a Galveston school from the bureau. He also served as a correspondent for the *New Orleans Tribune* and later began publication of the short-lived *Galveston Standard*, which he used as a forum to lobby for suffrage and full civil rights for Afro-Americans. In addition, he joined and actively participated in Galveston's Loyal Union Association, which Unionists had established in mid-1865 and which was one of several associations that became precursors of the state Loyal League. In August 1867, Ruby gained distinction by becoming the only black appointed to office by Governor Elisha Pease who named him as notary public for Galveston. Ruby exhibited such leadership and organizational ability that the bureau called upon him in 1867 to serve as a traveling subagent and to assume the duty of founding new bureau schools. His travels took him through most of the counties of the Gulf Coast region, where he learned much about the economic plight of Texas freedmen and where he gained a large following as area blacks looked to the educated mulatto for help.⁴

²U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report on Emigration to Kansas*, 46th Cong., 2d sess., 1880, Rept. 693, pt. 2, pp. 53, 55.

³*Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 39-50; *Flake's Daily Bulletin* (Galveston, Texas), July 21, August 26, September 12, 1865; Elisha Pease to George T. Ruby, August 22, 1867, Elisha Pease Papers, Archives, Texas State Library, Austin, Texas; Ruby to Texas Assistant Commissioner, April 10, July 26, 1867, Bureau of Refugees, Freedman, and Abandoned Lands, Record Group 105, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as BRFAL, NA); roster of officers and civilians, August 10, 1867, American Missionary Association, Amistad Research Center, Dillard University, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Ruby arrived in Texas at a time when racial violence was at its height. Various sources, including newspapermen and Freedmen's Bureau agents, reported almost daily beatings and killings of freedmen by whites who rebelled against black emancipation. And Ruby abhorred what he saw. "Positively, Unionism, black or white, is not safe anywhere here [Texas] beyond the military limit," he told one of his editors.⁵ He held that order could not be restored in the state until "those rebels" who ruled "with the venom of slavery" were ousted from the state government.⁶

His interest in politics and in advancing Afro-American rights led Ruby to an association with Edmund J. Davis, and the two men became close personal friends. A prewar Texas Unionist and a federal officer during the Civil War, Davis had as early as the 1866 state constitutional convention voiced support for unconditional suffrage and extension of full civil rights to freedmen. Later he became a leading figure in the Texas Republican Party after its formation in July 1867.⁷ Together, Ruby and Davis played important political roles in Texas in the years to follow.

With the national Reconstruction Acts of 1867 and the subsequent founding of the Texas Republican Party, politics in the state entered a new phase. The Reconstruction Acts made it necessary for Texas to hold a new constitutional convention and give both races the right to vote for delegates. A constitution then must be framed that would be consistent with the United States Constitution and would grant black suffrage, thereby adhering to the provisions of the newly ratified Fourteenth Amendment.⁸ For the first time in the state, the "door" to political power opened for black people, and they responded by becoming as active as the white power structure would allow. They began holding political rallies and joining the expanding Loyal League. And Ruby contributed his skills to the black effort. Focusing on the Gulf Coast where he had much political support, he spoke at barbecues and other rallies, and he stood for and ultimately won a seat in the constitutional convention from a district that included Galveston, Brazoria, and Matagorda counties, all areas of large black population. Ruby also was a delegate to the 1868 National Republican Convention in Chicago, where he cast his vote for U.S. Grant.⁹

⁵*New Orleans Tribune*, December 20, 1866.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷*San Antonio Daily Herald*, January 3, February 20, 1866; Edmund J. Davis to Ruby, April 16, 1872, Edmund J. Davis Papers, Archives, Texas State Library.

⁸U.S., *Statutes at Large*, vol 15, p. 14; Walter L. Fleming, ed., *Documentary History of Reconstruction*, 2 vols., paperback ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), I, pp. 401-418.

⁹*Texas Republican* (Marshall, Texas), June 3, 1868; Ruby to James P. Newcomb, March 17, 1869, James P. Newcomb Papers, Archives, University of Texas Library, Austin, Texas.

Ruby was one of ninety delegates elected to the Texas constitutional convention of 1868-1869. Conservatives won only twelve seats, but "carpet-baggers" and blacks did not dominate the convention. Only ten freedmen secured election as delegates. Only three delegates were native Texans, but forty-six came from other southern states. Most representatives who had been born in northern states had lived in Texas before the Civil War. Only five entered the state after 1865. Of the seventy-eight Republican-Unionist members, probably forty, Ruby included, considered themselves "radicals," while the remainder considered themselves moderates. Nevertheless, Davis, the radical candidate for president, defeated the moderates' choice by a forty-three to thirty-three vote.¹⁰

Immediately the convention split into two factions. Conservatives and moderate Republicans and a handful of Democrats led by A.J. "Jack" Hamilton, who had earlier served as provisional governor of the state, generally favored President Andrew Johnson's plan of Reconstruction and intended to make as few concessions as possible to radicals in Congress. Texas radicals led by Davis and Ruby showed greater concern for black rights and wanted to take immediate steps to end the racial violence then sweeping the state. The Davis-Ruby faction also favored, while "Hamiltonians" opposed, *ab initio* — a resolution which would have invalidated the Texas Secession Ordinance and all subsequent laws passed by the Confederate States government — and a proposal to divide Texas into two or three smaller states because its immense size hampered attempts to re-establish law and order. Ruby, like many other radicals, also objected to allowing ex-rebels the franchise, arguing that they might become strong enough to regain political control of the state, violate the will of Congress, and suppress black rights. Ruby, who became the leading black spokesman at the convention because of his education and his strong ties with Davis, remained firm in his demands for black rights but showed moderation in trying to hold the Republican Party together by not pushing *ab initio*. He also introduced resolutions, which were ultimately tabled, that would have made voter intimidation and bribery misdemeanors. In addition, he served on the committee on education, which strongly recommended that the convention include constitutional provisions for a free public school system, one that would be open to children of all races.¹¹

Unfortunately, the struggle between the two factions sometimes degenerated into attacks on personalities, and Ruby did not escape criticism. As a leader of

¹⁰*Daily Austin Republican*, June 24, 1868.

¹¹*Journal of the Reconstruction Convention, 1868-1869*, 2 vols. (Austin: Tracy, Siemering and Company, 1870), II, pp. 510-511, 523-524, 610; *Daily Austin Republican*, June 15, 1868; *Flake's Daily Bulletin*, January 14, 1869.

the black delegation and of freedmen throughout the state, Ruby drew much of the conservatives' ire, and two fights which he engaged in drew wide news coverage. "The Ruby," as some editors called him, first engaged in fisticuffs with fellow Republican R.K. "Revenue" Smith because he had made insulting remarks about Ruby's ancestry. More disastrously, Ruby tried to remove Scipio McKee as convention doorkeeper because Ruby believed McKee had slandered another black delegate. McKee, a freedman who would later campaign for Jack Hamilton in the upcoming governor's race, assaulted Ruby outside the convention hall and left him unconscious in the gutter.¹²

While in Austin the dapper Ruby, who had a flair for dress with his plug hats, claw-hammered coats, and lavender shoes and who liked to socialize, had several firsthand encounters with social discrimination. Once he tried to secure tickets for a theatrical performance in Buaas' Hall but was turned down. A white friend, Julius Schutze, intervened, but he too was turned away. Only on going to a second ticket window did Schutze secure Ruby a ticket whereupon the mulatto immediately entered the hall and broke the color line by sitting in the white circle.¹³

Unhappy over what he regarded as petty personal squabbles involving printing contracts as well as the lenient suffrage restrictions that the convention placed on ex-Confederates, Ruby resigned as a delegate before the constitution was completed. Later, in 1869, he joined a commission headed by Davis that went to Washington to lobby against acceptance of the document. The commission stressed the racial violence still occurring in Texas, the continuing "rebel" control of the state, and the lack of safeguards to protect the voting rights and physical security of black and white Unionists. Conservative Republicans sent a group to lobby for the constitution, however, and its members managed to bury the radicals' resolutions in congressional committees. Although the radical commission failed to secure its objectives, Ruby did not leave Washington empty-handed. He met and married a "blonde haired white woman" who was probably a mulatto and thus gave Texas conservatives another reason to dislike him.¹⁴

After failing to influence Congress, Ruby and other radicals accepted the constitution and met in conventions at Galveston and Houston in May and June 1869, to write a platform and select candidates for the upcoming elections who would challenge a "regular" Republican slate headed by Jack Hamilton. Ruby assumed important roles in both meetings when he won

¹²*Daily Austin Republican*, August 29, 1868, February 16, 1869.

¹³*Ibid.*, July 21, 1868, April 3, 1869.

¹⁴*Journal of the Reconstruction Convention, 1868-1869*, II, pp. 527-528; *Flake's Daily Bulletin*, March 27, May 11, 1869; *Daily Austin Republican*, April 3, 6, 9, 1869.

election as permanent president of the conventions, served on the platform committee, and also was named to the radicals' state executive committee. Adopting a platform which approved the constitution but called for the protection of voters by federal troops, radicals chose a ticket headed by Davis for governor. Ruby, the choice of many for lieutenant governor, proved to be too young at twenty-eight years of age to accept the nomination. He did, however, stand for a state senate seat.¹⁵

After the nominations of Hamilton and Davis, the differing Republican factions engaged in a flurry of campaign activity. Fortunately for the radical campaign, Ruby assumed the presidency of the state Loyal League, took over the chairmanship of the Republican executive committee for important Harris County, and gave his unconditional support to Davis. At one point in the campaign, "the Ruby" believed he could command 40,000 black votes. Although his figure proved to be inflated, he "got out" the Afro-American vote by touring the Gulf Coast and central Texas and by urging local leagues to work among freedmen, to explain issues to them, and to insure that local authorities granted them their right to vote. He spoke at assorted meetings including barbecues and church gatherings. In his speeches and circulars he denounced "defectionists" like Jack Hamilton and other moderate Republicans who, Ruby held, had become "pawns" of the Democracy and who intended to suppress the black population. Lack of funds, however, hampered Ruby's efforts. He constantly complained to Davis that he needed money to pay for printing costs and other expenses. At times he had to forward circulars to the national office of the league for printing.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the radical effort headed by Ruby proved successful. In the elections of November 1869 voters ratified the constitution by a 72,466 to 4,928 count and chose Davis over Hamilton by a 39,901 to 39,092 vote. The Democratic candidate, Hamilton Stuart, received only 380 votes because of the fusionist tactics of his party. Unhappy with the narrow margin of victory, Ruby held that the radicals could have won by 10,000 votes if black voters had been better protected by the

¹⁵John Carrier, "A Political History of Texas During the Reconstruction, 1865-1874" (Ph.D. dissertation, Vanderbilt University, 1971), p. 344; John Mason Brewer, *Negro Legislators of Texas and their Descendants* (1935, reprint ed., Austin: Pemberton Press, 1970), pp. 29-30; Paul Casdorff, *The Republican Party in Texas, 1865-1965* (Austin: Pemberton Press, 1965), pp. 12-13; E.W. Winkler, *Platforms of Political Parties in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1916), pp. 119-120.

¹⁶Marion Merseburger, "A Political History of Houston, Texas, During the Reconstruction Period" (M.A. thesis, Rice Institute, 1950), p. 61; *Daily Austin Republican*, May 7, 1869; *Weekly Austin Republican*, February 10, 1869; *Galveston Daily News*, July 8, August 27, 1869; *Freeman's Press* (Houston, Texas) August 15, 1868; Ruby to Newcomb, May 6, 27, July 1, August 11, 1869, Ruby to Subordinate Councils, August 9, 1869, Davis to Newcomb, July 4, 1869, Newcomb Papers.

military.¹⁷

While directing the Davis victory, Ruby became one of eleven blacks to win office, capturing a state senate seat and representing Galveston, Brazoria, and Matagorda counties. Of the black delegates to the Twelfth Legislature, Ruby held predominant power. Friendship with the governor and control of the league guaranteed him a place in the radical inner circle. Respected by freedmen, he built a reputation of being honest and conscientious in performing his duties. He always advised Davis on the distribution of patronage, especially in the Gulf Coast region. Sometimes criticized by constituents who wanted but could not secure positions, Ruby tried to see that qualified blacks and whites were chosen to serve the government. Although he remained mildly suspect in the eyes of other black leaders because of his ties with the white Republican power structure, seldom did Ruby's counsel go unheeded.¹⁸ In particular, Ruby facilitated the rise of the Afro-American Norris Wright Cuney, who took over as titular head of the Texas Republican Party after Davis' death in 1883. It was through Ruby that Cuney received introduction to Davis in 1869 and through Ruby that Cuney secured his first important political appointment, that of sergeant at arms for the Twelfth Legislature. Ruby continued to show interest in Cuney's career and repeatedly sought offices for him.¹⁹

In the senate Ruby served on committees on the judiciary, militia, public lands, contingent expenses, and engrossed bills. He also served as president *pro tempore* of the senate in the absence of Don Campbell, president of the senate. Ruby proved to be a foe of the railroad lobbies, voting against subsidies and relief bills. He generally supported the Davis reform program, however, casting votes for state militia and police bills which allowed the governor to declare and enforce martial law in troubled areas, which placed a new police force directly under his control, and which allowed him to remove any state officials who obstructed justice. Other reforms supported by Ruby included laws designed to end discrimination on public carriers, to protect voter privileges, and to establish a free public school system.²⁰

Ruby also remained loyal to Davis although some of the black political and

¹⁷Election Returns, 5th Military District, Record Group 393, National Archives; *Daily Austin Republican*, January 12, 1870; Ruby to Newcomb, December 21, 1869, Newcomb Papers.

¹⁸*Daily State Journal* (Austin, Texas), August 17, October 13, 1870; Brewer, *Negro Legislators of Texas and their Descendants*, pp. 47-60, 125; Elius Blonover to Assistant Superintendent of Education, November 18, 1870, BRFAL, NA.

¹⁹Ruby to Newcomb, August 18, 1871, Newcomb Papers.

²⁰Texas Senate, *Senate Journal*, 12th Leg., reg. sess., pp. 36-39; Carrier, "A Political History of Texas During the Reconstruction, 1865-1874," p. 476.

educational elite wanted more than the radicals offered. As early as January 1870, when white Republicans failed to invite freedmen to the state ball for Davis, many Afro-Americans became highly critical of the governor. Black senator Matt Gaines, an ex-slave, was the most vocal. Beginning in 1870 he tried to block Texas' readmission to the Union because he believed black rights would not be protected by the state government. He constantly complained that Anglos monopolized political offices, and he accused Davis of creating an all white political party. At the 1871 Republican convention, where radicals chose nominees for the congressional races, Gaines tried to force the nomination of a freedman on his district's ticket. Afraid of losing white votes if a black were nominated, the Davis faction maneuvered to have Ruby's name placed before the convention. As was prearranged, he declined the nomination, thus showing support for the Davis strategy. After Gaines failed to secure the nomination of another freedman, he bolted the convention taking several supporters with him. But again, Ruby demonstrated solid support for the governor and held many blacks in the Davis camp. Later, in 1873, when freedmen held their first Colored Men's Convention in Brenham, Ruby's conspicuous absence again demonstrated support for the governor. He refused to participate in the convention because he knew that it would not explicitly endorse Davis for reelection.²¹

Ultimately, Ruby's political career in Texas suffered the same fate as the careers of other leading radicals in the state. Conservative Republicans and Democrats formed a political alliance designed to overthrow the Davis faction. Not above using oblique tactics, conservatives tried to wrest control of the state Loyal League from the radicals by establishing counterfeit organizations and recruiting black members. Ruby and James P. Newcomb, who replaced Ruby as state president of the league in 1870, continually struggled to maintain radical control, but increasingly the conservative press attacked radical leaders and tried to destroy their reputation. Moreover, conservatives continued to use violence and economic pressure to control the black vote.²²

Radical power began to decline in 1872. In the general elections conservative Republicans and Democrats fused to support Horace Greeley, who carried Texas by almost 20,000 votes. State Democrats captured all five of the congressional seats and both houses of the legislature. Ruby returned to the

²¹W.A. [?]worth to Newcomb, June 24, 1871, T.J. Powell to Newcomb, March 18, 1872, J.R. Burns to Newcomb, September 28, 1872, Newcomb Papers; *Flake's Daily Bulletin*, January 5, February 24, August 3, 1870, July 19, 1871; *Brenham Banner*, August 4, September 26, 1871; *Galveston Daily News*, January 24, April 18, 1873.

²²H.C. Hunt to Newcomb, June 17, 24, 1871, B.C. Thomas *et al* to Davis, June 24, 1871, Ruby to Newcomb, July 13, 1871, Newcomb to Subordinate Councils, July [?], 1871, Newcomb Papers; *Flake's Semi-Weekly Bulletin*, November 1, 1871.

senate to finish his four year term, but with Democrats in control, the legislature quickly annulled many radical reforms. It abolished the state police and stripped the governor of the power to declare martial law. New school laws also abolished the centralized system created by the radicals and returned administration of schools to local communities.²³ Along with most other radicals, Ruby lamented the Democratic "counterrevolution." He knew that in stripping the governor of police power the Democrats had opened the way for increased violence and that in changing the school laws they had ensured that freed people would not receive an equal education.²⁴

The final test of strength between Davis Republicans and the reviving Democratic Party came in the 1873 elections to fill state offices. The Davis ticket confronted a Democratic slate headed by conservative, ex-Confederate Richard Coke. Once again Ruby helped Davis by trying to "get out" the black vote. But problems beset the radicals. Intraparty conflicts continued as many Afro-American leaders remained "cool" to the governor because he had not given blacks more offices. Moreover, United States senator Charles Sumner's civil rights bill, then pending before Congress and supported by Texas radicals, proved intolerable to most whites and influenced many moderates to join an anti-Davis coalition. Ongoing Ku Klux Klan activity and economic pressure kept many freedmen away from the polls, while continuing white immigration to Texas from other southern states increased Democratic strength. The "counterrevolution" resulted in a landslide Democratic victory. Davis lost the governorship, and Ruby, believing that the campaign was hopeless, did not stand for reelection.²⁵

After the decline of the radicals in Texas, Ruby returned to Louisiana, where he again practiced his vocation as a journalist, at first working for the *New Orleans Tribune* and then in 1878 taking over the editorship of the *New Orleans Observer*. He also became a major political leader in Natchitoches County. Quickly he became involved in controversy, most noticeably in the Tilden-Hayes elections dispute. He castigated President Rutherford B. Hayes for ending military rule in Louisiana, holding that blacks had been denied the right to vote and that the Republican Party would have won victories in the

²³*Galveston Daily News*, January 24, April 18, 1873; Casdorph, *The Republican Party in Texas*, p. 27; Carrier, "A Political History of Texas During the Reconstruction, 1865-1874," pp. 505-506.

²⁴Ruby to Newcomb, January 15, 1873, Newcomb Papers.

²⁵*Galveston Daily News*, July 4, 5, 1873; *Brenham Banner*, August 9, 16, 1873; William P. Ballinger Diary, December 2, 1873, William P. Ballinger Papers, J. Rector to Dick Bozman, November 8, 1874, Mather Bozman to D. Bozman, November 22, 1874, Reuben G. White Papers, Archives, University of Texas Library; Texas Secretary of State, Election Returns, 1873, Archives, Texas State Library.

state elections if voter rights had been protected.²⁶

In the late 1870s Ruby became a major exponent of emigration schemes which would facilitate the removal of freedpeople from the racial turmoil still developing in the troubled South. He attended an emigration convention in Nashville, Tennessee, in 1877 and two years later spoke before the National Colored Colonization Society which met in New Orleans. Chief among the society's plans were schemes, supported by Ruby, to plant colonies of blacks in Kansas. Ruby chaired the committee on business which reported on the dire conditions of southern freedmen and recommended an exodus to the midwestern state. Ultimately, thousands of blacks left Texas, Louisiana, and other southern states and moved to the plains region.²⁷ After participating in the emigration conventions in 1877 and 1879 Ruby remained in semiretirement politically. He continued journalistic work, however, until his death in New Orleans in the mid-1890s.²⁸

By historical definition, G. T. Ruby may be classified as a carpetbagger. He entered Louisiana in the wake of Union victories and attached himself to the Freedmen's Bureau. After moving to Galveston, Texas, as a bureau agent, he rose to a position of political prominence. But when the fortunes of Texas radicals declined after 1873, he quickly left the state and returned to New Orleans, where he became involved in politics as an opinionated newspaperman. But Ruby was far from a "corrupt carpetbagger," as so many northerners who came into the South after the Civil War have been depicted. Rather, he remained scrupulously honest. He made a comfortable living but never acquired any property other than the short-lived *Galveston Standard*. Ruby was more than just a political opportunist. His occupation as a journalist and his natural interest in things political explained his deep involvement with the communities in which he lived. Moreover, throughout his career he remained consistent in his political views. Foremost among his goals always remained his desire to implement reforms to uplift and protect the black community.

²⁶U.S. Congress, Senate, *Report on Emigration to Kansas*, 46th Cong., 2d sess., 1880, Rept. 693, pt. 2, pp. 37, 47, 74.

²⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 30-40.

²⁸Webb, ed., *The Handbook of Texas*, II, p. 513.