

James K. Polk and the Mexican War: In Honor of Charles Sellers

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Get up and just start reading the last pages of James K. Polk *Continentalist*.

I'm here to remind you that before the Market Revolution there was Polk. And to discuss the contribution of Charles Grier Sellers to our historical understanding of America's 11th president and the war with Mexico that he provoked in May of 1846, the war that brought California into the United States, and thus, in some sense made this symposium possible. So thank you to James K. Polk, but more specifically thank you to Charlie for writing two volumes on Polk that brought Young Hickory, one of America's most effective, but also most secretive of Presidents, to life.

I first encountered *James K. Polk, Jacksonian* and *James K. Polk, Continentalist* in the Harvard Library. I was searching for something entirely different. What it was I'm not sure, but it was something far less interesting on my comprehensive exam lists. I pulled the first of the volumes down and started reading, and found myself transported to the year 1821, when Colonel Ezekiel Polk, "with several stalwart sons and a band of slaves at his back" marched through Chickasaw territory in West Tennessee, intent on recreating the "half

remembered, half imagined Arcadia” of Mecklenburg, North Carolina. I was hooked. Here was history that read like fiction, languid and elegant, and in no particular hurry to make an argument. You can imagine what succor this was for a fiction loving PhD student studying for exams. I read both volumes, cover to cover, with the care they deserved, not because they would appear on my comprehensive exam, but because the author put so much care into writing them. I read them like a novel. And then I searched in vain for the third volume, the one that would take me through the War with Mexico and to the end of Polk’s short life. Yet it was nowhere to be found. I went to my dissertation advisor, Bill Gienapp, and asked him if he knew the volumes, (he did), and did he find them as remarkable as I did (he did), and where was volume three?

Probably the best thing I could do with my time today would be to pick a page at random and just keep reading. But instead I want to talk a little bit about the reception and influence of this unfinished Polk trilogy, and then share with you some thoughts about the missing volume three.

James K. Polk: Jacksonian, 1795-1843, described by the author in the preface as a “‘life and times’ type of historical biography”, appeared in print in 1957. This was the first significant work on Polk to appear since Eugene McCormac’s 1922 biography, the first to make a strong argument in Polk’s favor, and to elevate his reputation, if not to the first rank of presidents, than certainly out

of the basement where he had previously dwelt. McCormac's biography, considered at the time definitive, was suffused with the nationalism of the period, and explicitly focused on Washington and Polk's accomplishments as president. Sellers' volume was something very different--500 pages exploring the evolution of Polk's political beliefs and the practice of politics in early Republican Tennessee, from Polk's sickly childhood, difficult relationship with his father, and college career, through his advantageous marriage, law practice, and political success as the leading Jacksonian Democrat of Tennessee, all of which culminated in four years as the seventeenth Speaker of the House of Representatives, and then a single term as governor of Tennessee from 1839-1841. Through impeccable research, Sellers made a clear but never explicit argument about the significance of the local in the politics of the era. But he also told the story of an individual's triumph over adversity, and success through hard work, and he did so with a clear eye, and marked sympathy.

Sellers was open about his relationship to his subject. Few reviewers failed to mention that Sellers was, himself, a native of Mecklenburg, County, N. C. Some saw an autobiographical strain in his insistence on the influence of "old Mecklenburg" on Polk and his politics. Norman Graebner, writing in the *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* attributed the author's "devotion" to his

historical subject (a devotion not misplaced, according to Graebner) to Sellers' own boyhood in Mecklenburg.¹

Not everyone got it. Asking why “a person would write 509 fat pages on the life of a man who is almost unknown apart from the fact that he was president of the United States for one term . . . and that the author would not in all those pages get down even to the presidency of the man,” the *Georgia Historical Quarterly* concluded “here is Hamlet, with the Hamlet left out.”² But the reviews, for the most part, were quite positive. Richard Hofstadter, reviewing the volume for *Political Science Quarterly* in 1958, declared that by providing an institutional understanding of Tennessee state politics before the emergence of a firm party system -- by revealing how important local considerations were, and revealing the vicissitudes of political faction, that Sellers “helped subvert some of the clichés [about the Jacksonian period] that need subverting.”³ Almost everyone praised Sellers for his “careful detail and measured judgment”⁴

Nine years later, Volume 2: *James K. Polk, Continentalist, 1843-1846*, appeared in print. Volume 1 covered 48 years; Volume 2 only 3. Suddenly it was clear that this would be a trilogy. Beginning with Polk's defeat in the 1843 Tennessee gubernatorial election, volume 2 followed the remarkable ascension of a 49 year old Polk to the presidency, (making him the youngest man to occupy the office up to that date), and ends with the commencement of war against Mexico,

the ominous first debate over the Wilmot Proviso, and the conclusion of the first session of the Twenty-Ninth Congress.

While volume one was as much a portrait of the west in the early American Republic as it was of Polk, the second volume was very clearly a political biography, devoted almost exclusively to the federal politics and diplomacy of the first two years of Polk's single presidential term. Rather than mark a shift in Sellers' interests, volume two reflected the fact that Polk's adult life was almost exclusively devoted to politics, and those politics were now national. Polk and his wife Sarah now had to work just as hard as he to advance their political agenda. The 500 pages of volume two allowed Sellers to go into great detail about bills, legislation, and Polk's relationship with dozens of individual politicians.

Sellers' research was staggering, digesting the personal and public papers of scores of politicians. His characterizations were deft, confident, and to the point, and it was easy to imagine, while reading, that one was there in the White House when Polk promised newly seated senator John Dix, of New York, that, of course he would send negotiators to appeal Texas's boundary claims just as soon as that republic was annexed. Dix bought the line, and gave his vote in favor of Texas annexation, because he believed Polk's "honor" was a "sufficient security" to keep him from lying. Sellers didn't need to spell out that Dix was a fool.

This “splendid volume”⁵ as the *New England Quarterly* called it, was lauded as a “model study” with “unimpeachable scholarship”⁶ and a narrative of unequaled “sweep and clarity.” Sellers was clearly “master of his material” wrote Holman Hamilton. “If the third volume proves to be of the same quality as the two published to date, Sellers’ total Polk contribution will undoubtedly be regarded as one of the finest biographies ever composed by an American scholar.”⁷

Not all the reviews were favorable. Some thought Sellers was too hard on Polk, that it was unseemly of him to “repeatedly” note Polk’s “smallness of stature and physical infirmities.”⁸ Others expressed the opinion that Sellers too willing to blame John C. Calhoun and James Buchanan, for failures of diplomacy that rightly belonged to Polk, and equally willing to give Polk credit for successes that belonged to others.⁹ But most reviewers found Sellers’ approach about right. “Objective, unbiased history may be impossible to write,” commented Brainard Dyer in 1967, “but this volume certainly approaches objectivity.”¹⁰

What I found interesting, and I will admit heartening, while I reviewed the literature, was the extent to which the initial reservations of some reviewers disappeared as time went on, and these two volumes took on the weight of classics. By 1980, it had become a commonplace that, as *Reviews in American History* put it, Sellers’ biography of Polk was “uncompleted, but otherwise definitive.”¹¹ As the Vanderbilt University Press turned out volume after volume of Polk

correspondence in the 1970s and 1980s, each reviewer duly noted the extent to which Sellers' evaluations of the man were born out by new evidence. Robert Remini was just one reviewer of Lillian Handlin's 1984 biography of George Bancroft to note how much of her analysis was taken from Sellers' Polk volumes.¹² And Joel Silby concluded his review in the AHR of the next major biography of Polk to appear in print, by Paul Bergeron in 1987: "Scholars will still turn to Charles G. Sellers, Jr. for the full story, (at least through 1846)".¹³

The reasons why these volumes have lasted are fairly clear. No one had before, or will again, do the kind of archival research that Sellers did. The 1000 plus pages are almost entirely error free, and free as well of the kind of bias that has too often consigned volumes written by previous generations to the dustbin of historiographical essays. And I need not tell you, because you heard a bit of it yourself, his writing style is enviable.

But I think there's more to it than that. One of the most striking aspects of these volumes is their balance, and Sellers' determination to reserve judgment, and allow his narrative to make his arguments for him. Sellers' restraint, and lack of editorializing, has allowed readers, I think, to see who they wanted to see in this Polk. Indeed Sellers' Polk volumes have been lauded by historians from both sides of the political spectrum. Scholars looking for evidence that Polk manufactured the war need look no further than Sellers' own descriptions of Polk's pre-war

diplomatic shenanigans. Yet William Hanchett's 1986 overview of Mexican War scholarship, a diatribe against works (including "peoples histories") that "continue to denounce the war in the partisan terms of the 1840s," when Justin Smith's 1919 2-volume *War with Mexico* "put to rest the simplistic view" that the US was responsible for the war, (he claimed), praised Sellers for "appreciatively reassess[ing] Polk's leadership as a geopolitican." (Smith's incredibly racist account, in case you are unfamiliar with it, argued that the war was justified because of Mexican anti-Americanism.)¹⁴ And when the *Wall Street Journal* wanted to slam my book *A Wicked War* as "far from neutral," where did the author turn? Charles Sellers, of course. Which was amusing because my book is little more than an homage to Charles Sellers, and I am not embarrassed to admit it.

Nor am I alone. The mark of Sellers' scholarship is evident in virtually every scholarly and serious popular work on Polk and the U.S.-Mexican War published since. Sellers' assessments about Polk's diplomacy with Mexico are repeated nearly verbatim in a host of works, as are his analyses of Polk's rise to power and relationships with other politicians. One of the most obvious signs of our reliance on these two Polk volumes (and when I say "we" I'm speaking generally here of political historians interested in the 1840s, as well as scholars of the politics of territorial expansion) is the interesting shift you can find in many studies of Polk-

wherein political maneuvering is related with far more detail before August of 1846, when vol. 2 leaves off, than after.

When I asked Charlie why he never wrote volume three, he told me that the opportunity to write *Market Revolution* came along, and he thought that was more interesting. This explanation of course makes sense. Who wouldn't rather write for the *Oxford History of the United States* than turn out the third volume of a study that won the Bancroft Award? But I can't help wondering whether Sellers wasn't a bit tired of Polk the man, and unwilling to dive back into his life. I detect an increasing impatience and distaste for Polk through the two volumes. In volume I, Polk is portrayed as self-disciplined, astute, and honorable- upholding the simple, forthright, and honest Republican creed of his forefathers, and overcoming obstacles of personality and situation in order to combat Whig aristocrats in the name of the people. But in volume two, as Polk dissimiliates his way into the annexation of Texas and then the U.S-Mexican War, his Democratic colleagues, and I think, his biographer, turn against him. Yes, Polk is still the consummate politician and statesman, overseeing what Sellers calls the "most remarkable congressional session of the nineteenth century." Yes, his continental vision transcended that of Andrew Jackson, setting him apart from all his political mentors, in fact. But he is also a liar, with a shocking moral blindness to problems of territorial expansion, and slavery, issues his own policies did so much to

exacerbate. In Sellers' so much more eloquent language, Polk "had so little feeling for the moral dimension of questions like slavery and expansionist aggression that he could not understand how other men were affected by them."

So what would volume three look like, had it been written? Many have asked this question, but few, besides Sellers himself have been in a position to answer. All that has changed. I have had the singular good fortune of being gifted Charlie's notes for volume three, and having read through them, I am able to offer a few suggestions about where the missing volume might have taken us. Please note that these suppositions are incredibly tentative: and based entirely on Sellers' notes-- several hundred pages of them, organized chronologically, in three large card storage boxes designed to hold 5 x 8 inch pieces of paper. Since I, myself, have yet to write a book that aligns neatly with the notes I took during the research stage, I can't say I have a lot of confidence in what I am about to tell you, and you shouldn't either, beyond the fact that the following seems to be what Sellers imagined the book looking like when he took these notes.

1. Volume three would have focused largely on the war. This shouldn't be a surprise. By August of 1846, where Vol. 2 leaves off, Polk has already settled the Oregon dispute, reinstated the independent treasury system,

revised the tariff, and incited war with Mexico. All that's left, to make his legacy complete, is to bring that war to a close. That doesn't really happen until July of 1848. The overwhelming majority of Charlie's notes relate to the war. And the focus of the war here, is, to a large degree a focus on Polk's role in the war, evaluation of the war, and impact of the war on Polk's reputation. Polk, the man, is very much at the center of the notes Sellers took on the war. In other words, were Charlie to delve deeply into the military situation in Mexico, or events on the ground there, he would have had to do more research.

2. A figure of important secondary interest in Sellers' account of the war was Nicholas Trist. (Trist was the diplomat who disobeyed his president and negotiated a treaty with Mexico after being recalled by Polk). Sellers uncovered a great deal of evidence that Trist was carrying on a love affair in Mexico City, and appears to have been poised to argue that Trist was unwilling to come home in part because of that relationship.
3. Sellers would have discussed antiwar activism in some detail. His close notes on the administration newspaper, the *Washington Union*, demonstrate the efforts to which the Polk administration went, to tar opponents of the war as anti-American. One of my favorite quotes, from the *Washington Union*:
“Acquiescence in the war becomes a part of good citizenship . . . when non-

acquiescence follows its principles . . . it becomes like parricide, the highest and most infamous of crimes.”¹⁵ (Have I mentioned how much I wished I had these notes before I wrote my last book?)

4. Sellers would also have focused on the role of nativist agitation during the war- the manner in which nativism increased during the war, and the war empowered nativism. And most of all he would have focused on the impact of the war on domestic politics. As John C. Calhoun wrote in November of 1846, “We all begin to feel the effects of the Mexican War, both on our finances, & the slave question, the Tariff, and almost any other touching our interior relations. Already it has done much to widen the breach between North & South”.¹⁶
5. As I said, the war would have occupied the bulk of this volume, but not all of it. Elections were the biggest non-war issues covered in Sellers’ notes for the second half of Polk’s presidency. Charlie also took a lot of notes on the impact of the Walker Tariff of 1846 on Pennsylvania, including Secretary of State James Buchanan’s thinly veiled opposition to it. The good people of my commonwealth were, I would argue, (Sellers does not) hoodwinked into voting for Polk because his vice presidential candidate, Pennsylvanian George Mifflin Dallas, promised Pennsylvanians that if elected, Polk would protect Pennsylvania’s iron industry. The Walker Tariff did not go over well

in Pennsylvania and the missing volume three would, I believe, have offered a great portrait of the Polk administration attempting damage control as Buchanan attempts to uphold his reputation in the state.

6. Which brings us to the 1846 elections. Whigs picked up 37 seats as Democrats lost control of the House of Representatives. The Polk administration seems to have been blindsided by this and struggled to find any explanation besides public weariness with the U.S.-Mexican War.
7. The election of 1848 appears to have consumed Washington's attention after the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, brought the Mexican War to a close, and the bulk of Charlie's notes for that period as well. The formation of the Free Soil party received a great deal of attention, not surprisingly. Sellers has about as many notes from key Free Soil politicians as from opponents of the Free Soil movement, so I suspect it would have been a sympathetic portrait that emphasized the role of Democrats in the movement, somewhat like the work of Jonathan Earle.
8. One surprise of these notes: Polk pledged himself in 1844 to only serving one term, and historians have generally accepted that he never had any intention of serving a second, in large part, I think, because he was so ill by the end of his presidency that it would have been physically impossible for him to serve a second term. Sellers, however, has amassed a great deal of

evidence that almost everyone in Polk's inner circle assumed he would run again- that he was waiting for the 1848 convention to deadlock (as the 1844 election had), and then he would present himself as the compromise candidate who would save the Democracy. This didn't happen. Was Polk really intending such a thing? It's impossible to say.

9. Polk died only three months after leaving office. Was there a great outpouring of grief for this 52-year-old ex-President, who accomplished so much in such a short time? Not according to the notes taken by Charles Sellers. I can't help but think that volume three would have ended with the decidedly ambivalent reaction of some of Polk's closest colleagues to news of his death. Cave Johnson didn't even bother to mention Polk's death in his letter to James Buchanan until the third paragraph, and then devoted only a few lines to Johnson's belief that the change of "habits, climate, and water" after he left the White House was the cause. Elizabeth Blair Lee, daughter of Francis P. Blair, wrote to her husband when news of Polk's death arrived in the Blair circle, "They are not very tender of Mr. Polk, for whom I expect few will mourn deeply." Only William Marcy seems to have been genuinely upset.¹⁷

I will close with a quote from Marcy's diary the day he learned of Polk's death. "I may deceive my-self in thinking as I do that I had a very accurate

knowledge of his character, not only in regards to his talents, his general information and what is less obvious but also to his motives of action. With such abundant means for information & observation I could draw an accurate character of Mr. Polk, perhaps as much so as any man. Why then it may be asked do you not set yourself about it? Perhaps I will some day set myself to the task. He is one who will find a place, not inconspicuous in the history of this country, his impress is stamped upon his times and cannot & should not be defaced or obliterated.”¹⁸ Marcy never wrote that biography. It was left to Charles Sellers to insure that James K. Polk’s impress on his times, or good and evil, was neither defaced nor obliterated.

Thank you.

¹ *James K. Polk, Jacksonian, 1795-1843* by Charles Grier Sellers,
 Review by: Norman A. Graebner
The Mississippi Valley Historical Review, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Sep., 1957), pp. 357-359
 Published by: [Organization of American Historians](#)
 Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1887209>, see also Culver Smith in the *Journal of Southern History*.

² *James K. Polk, Jacksonian, 1795-1843* by Charles Greer Sellers,
The Georgia Historical Quarterly, Vol. 42, No. 2 (June, 1958), p. 229
 Published by: [Georgia Historical Society](#)
 Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40577870>

³ *James K. Polk, Jacksonian, 1795-1843.* by Charles Grier Sellers,
 Review by: Richard Hofstadter
Political Science Quarterly, Vol. 73, No. 2 (Jun., 1958), pp. 276-278, quote 278.
 Published by: [The Academy of Political Science](#)
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- ⁴ *James K. Polk, Jacksonian, 1795-1843* by Charles Grier Sellers,
Review by: Norman A. Graebner
The Mississippi Valley Historical Review , Vol. 44, No. 2 (Sep., 1957), pp. 357-359
Published by: [Organization of American Historians](#)
Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1887209>, see also Culver Smith in the Journal of Southern History.
- ⁵ *James K. Polk, Continentalist: 1843-1846* by Charles Sellers
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Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/363175>
- ⁶ *James K. Polk, Continentalist, 1843-1846* by Charles Sellers
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The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography , Vol. 75, No. 4 (Oct., 1967), pp. 500-501 , quote 500.
Published by: [Virginia Historical Society](#)
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- ⁷ *James K. Polk, Continentalist, 1843-1846* by Charles Sellers
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Published by: [Texas State Historical Association](#)
Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30237950>
- ⁸ *James K. Polk: Continentalist, 1843-1846* by Charles Sellers
Review by: Harry L. Coles
Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science , Vol. 373, Social Goals and Indicators for American Society, Volume 2 (Sep., 1967), p. 248
Published by: [Sage Publications, Inc.](#) in association with the [American Academy of Political and Social Science](#)
Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1037383>
- ⁹ *James K. Polk, Continentalist, 1843-1846* by Charles Sellers
Review by: Philip S. Klien
The Journal of Southern History , Vol. 33, No. 2 (May, 1967), pp. 256-257
Published by: [Southern Historical Association](#)
Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2204983>
- ¹⁰ *James K. Polk: Continentalist, 1843-1846* by Charles Sellers
Review by: Brainerd Dyer
The Pacific Northwest Quarterly , Vol. 58, No. 4 (Oct., 1967), pp. 209-210
Published by: [University of Washington](#)
Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40488435>.
- ¹¹ The Slave Power and its Enemies
The Presidency of James K. Polk by Paul H. Bergeron; *Salmon P. Chase: A Life in Politics* by Frederick J. Blue
Review by: Louis S. Gerteis
Reviews in American History , Vol. 16, No. 3 (Sep., 1988), pp. 390-395, quote page 392.
Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)
Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2702271>
- ¹² *George Bancroft: The Intellectual as Democrat* by Lilian Handlin

Review by: Robert V. Remini

The New England Quarterly , Vol. 58, No. 1 (Mar., 1985), pp. 120-122

Published by: [The New England Quarterly, Inc.](#)

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¹³ *The Presidency of James K. Polk* by Paul H. Bergeron

Review by: Joel H. Silbey

The American Historical Review , Vol. 93, No. 5 (Dec., 1988), p. 1402

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#) on behalf of the [American Historical Association](#)

Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1873700>

¹⁴ Americans and their First Foreign War

To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination by Robert W. Johannsen

Review by: William Hanchett

Reviews in American History , Vol. 14, No. 1 (Mar., 1986), pp. 76-82, quotes pg. 77.

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](#)

Article Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2702119>

¹⁵ *Washington Union*, 5 Nov. 1846.

¹⁶ Calhoun Papers, JCC, Fort Hill, to TG Clemson, Brussels, 6 Nov. 1846.

¹⁷ Buchanan Papers. C. Johnson to JB, 17 June 1849; Blair-Lee Papers, SP Lee, 9. EBL, to EPJ, 20 June 1849; Marcy papers Diaries, June 19-20, 1849.

¹⁸ Marcy papers Diaries, June 19-20, 1849.