



Governor James Ferguson and the University of Texas

James E. “Pa” Ferguson came to office after the 1914 election as a champion of the small farmer. Sometimes called “Farmer Jim” (although he had been practicing law since 1897 and added insurance, real estate, and banking to his interests), he had never held office before he won the support of farmers by promising laws that limited the rent they could be charged. He also managed to win the support of anti-prohibition forces.

Ferguson’s battle with the University of Texas (UT) began in 1915 when he confronted the university’s president, William Battle, because Ferguson saw no reason that the university’s hiring of faculty needed to be any different than his patronage hires for other state positions. Battle refused to fire six faculty members who had angered the governor. Ferguson demanded that Battle be replaced, and, when asked his reason for wanting Battle’s removal, Ferguson proclaimed, “I don’t have to give any reason. I am Governor of the State of Texas.”ⁱⁱ To make matters worse, the next year the UT Board of Regents failed to consult Ferguson before picking Robert Vinson as the university’s new president, and Vinson, like Battle, then also refused to fire faculty members who irritated the governor. Ferguson warned Vinson that unless the faculty members were fired he would face “the biggest bear

fight that has ever taken place in the history of the State of Texas.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Ferguson warned the legislature when it opened the 1917 session that he opposed higher education when it “bec[a]me either autocratic or aristocratic in its ways or customs.” That year Ferguson vetoed virtually the entire appropriations for the University of Texas and warned the regents, “If the University cannot be maintained as a democratic university then we ought to have no University.”ⁱⁱⁱⁱ

Ferguson’s battle with the University of Texas cemented a coalition of UT alumni, prohibitionists, and supporters of women’s suffrage. Ferguson had treated others the way he treated UT, once explaining his stand on women’s suffrage by saying, “If those women want to suffer, I say let ‘em suffer.”^{iv}

The Texas Senate eventually convicted Ferguson of ten charges/articles; five were related to misapplication of public funds, three dealt with his quarrel with the university, one dealt with enforcement of the state’s banking laws, and one found that he had received \$156,500 in currency from a source that he refused to reveal.

Ferguson resigned from office a day before his removal by the Senate and contended that, because he had resigned, his impeachment and the ban from office

that accompanied it were not valid. Impeachment would have ended the careers of most politicians, but not Ferguson, who claimed that his family motto was “Never say ‘die,’ say ‘damn!’”^v Despite the ban from elective office that came with impeachment, Ferguson ran and lost in the 1918 Democratic primary for governor, and in 1920 he ran for U.S. president on the ticket of the “American Party” that he created. In 1924, “Pa” Ferguson ran his wife, Miriam A. Ferguson, for governor, and she won a term but failed to win reelection after questions about an exceptionally large number of pardons she issued undermined her campaign. The Fergusons, however, were not done, and Miriam was elected again in 1932. When Ferguson ran Miriam again for office in 1940, however, the Ferguson magic was long gone and the voters turned her away.

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- i. Randolph B. Campbell, *Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 350–351.
 - ii. *Ibid.*, 351.
 - iii. *Ibid.*, 351.
 - iv. James L. Haley, *Passionate Nation: The Epic History of Texas* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 468.
 - v. Norman D. Brown, *Hood, Bonnet, and Little Brown Jug: Texas Politics, 1921–1928* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1984), 97.