

A TALE OF TWO STORMS:  
PROGRESSIVE ERA DISASTER RELIEF IN PUERTO RICO AND TEXAS, 1899-1900

A Thesis

by

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## ABSTRACT

On August 8, 1899, hurricane San Ciriaco ravaged Puerto Rico, killing nearly 3,000 people in the floodwaters. The U.S. military's occupational government reacted quickly in the aftermath and petitioned the federal government for relief supplies. Only a few months had passed since the island's sovereignty had transferred from Spanish to American rule in 1898. The military governor Brigadier General George Davis saw this as the perfect opportunity to demonstrate American benevolence to people of the newly acquired territory. On September 8, 1900, exactly one year and a month after hurricane San Ciriaco struck Puerto Rico, a great storm lambasted Galveston, Texas claiming the lives of over 6,000 people. The American Red Cross (ARC), led by Clara Barton, swiftly answered Galveston's plea for relief and partnered with the elite of Galveston to administer aid.

I argue that both storms should be examined together because the relief efforts were informed by Progressive Era ideas about race, class, and poverty. In both cases elites determined who received aid, imposed conditions that were attached to the aid, and created distinctions between worthy and unworthy poor. These common trends employed by elites deliberately excluded people of color and furthered disenfranchisement. Thus, these two storms also highlight what scholar Thomas Leonard calls the "Progressive Paradox" which was the inconsistency between elite reformers promoting progress while preserving social control over domestic and foreign affairs. The Progressive Paradox was symptomatic of the Federal government's increased presence in domestic and foreign concerns. The two relief efforts showcase the escalated Federal role because they were the first instances of Federally organized disaster relief. Therefore, these two disasters foreground how prominently environmental factors impacted the history of the Progressive Era and American imperialism.

## **CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES**

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## INTRODUCTION

On August 8, 1899, hurricane *San Ciriaco* ravaged Puerto Rico, killing nearly 3,000 people in the floodwaters.<sup>1</sup> The U.S. military's occupational government reacted quickly in the aftermath and petitioned the federal government for relief supplies. Only a few months had passed since the island's sovereignty had transferred from Spanish to American rule in 1898. The military governor Brigadier General George Davis saw this as the perfect opportunity to demonstrate American benevolence to people of the newly acquired territory. When American ships arrived with aid (food, medical supplies, and clothing), Davis and Chief Surgeon John Van Hoff determined that only those willing to help clean up debris and bury the dead would receive aid. In addition to limiting the amount of people who could obtain aid, Davis and Van Hoff put elite Puerto Rican plantation owners in charge of distributing food to the poor. Thus, plantation owners only distributed food to those that helped with clearing property and recovering crops. Davis then appeared before the Senate Committee on the Pacific Islands and Puerto Rico in 1900, because of his insights as military governor and argued that the U.S. needed to control the governance of Puerto Rico.<sup>2</sup> Davis' testimony proved indispensable in the passing of the Foraker Act in 1900, which established a civil government in Puerto Rico under American rule.

On September 8, 1900, exactly one year and a month after hurricane *San Ciriaco* struck Puerto Rico, a great storm lambasted Galveston, Texas claiming the lives of over 6,000 people. The American Red Cross (ARC), led by Clara Barton, swiftly answered Galveston's plea for relief and partnered with the elite of Galveston to administer aid. However, outside of the ARC,

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<sup>1</sup> Puerto Ricans named storms for Catholic saints on whose day the storm first visited the island. This storm was named for *San Ciriaco*.

<sup>2</sup> *Hearings Before the Committee on Pacific Islands and Puerto Rico of the United States Senate on Senate Bill 2264, To Provide A Government For the Island of Puerto Rico and For Other Purposes*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), 57.

which just became a government sanctioned organization in June 1900, the federal government did not play as active a role in Galveston as in Puerto Rico.<sup>3</sup> The Central Relief Committee (CRC), comprised of elite white Galvestonians, took charge and issued multiple statements proclaiming that any able-bodied men who did not volunteer to clean debris and bury dead bodies would not be fed.<sup>4</sup> These proclamations were aimed towards poor African Americans and treated aid similarly to Puerto Rico, as a reward for performing one's civic duty not as accessible necessities to alleviate suffering. The top down approach to disseminating aid transitioned to the rebuilding process when elite businessmen that oversaw relief efforts formed a commission-style city government to rebuild Galveston and exclude African Americans from political participation. This form of government originated in the U.S. during the Progressive Era (1880s-1920s) and ruled Galveston from 1901 until 1960.<sup>5</sup> By not including African-Americans, the commission government reinforced Jim Crow's presence and highlighted the Progressive's pursuit of reform, progress, and control at the expense of African Americans.

In the cases of Puerto Rico and Galveston and I argue that the storms need to be examined together because disaster relief at this time became a Progressive Era Federal government enterprise. A comparative approach works in these cases because the two storms

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<sup>3</sup> Congress granted the ARC a charter and was going to be funded by the federal government. For more information on the formation of the ARC, its role in Progressive Era reform, and U.S. foreign relations see Julia Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and A Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* (2013) and Marian Moser Jones, *The American Red Cross: From Clara Barton to the New Deal* (2013).

<sup>4</sup> W. A McVitie, "Instructions to Chairman of the Various Ward Relief Committee, September 10, 1900, John Focke Papers, MSS #04-0028, Rosenberg Library, Galveston Texas History Center (hereafter GTHC), Galveston Texas, [www.gthcenter.org/exhibits/storms/1900/Manuscripts/Focke/04-0028\\_6.html](http://www.gthcenter.org/exhibits/storms/1900/Manuscripts/Focke/04-0028_6.html).

<sup>5</sup> This style of government became extremely popular in Progressive Era America. By 1917 nearly 500 cities had adopted this system. For more information about the inception of commission governments during this era see Charles Beard, *American City Government: A Survey of Newer Tendencies* (1912), Clinton Rodgers Woodruff, *City Government By Commission* (1914), Henry Bruere, *The New City Government: A Discussion of Municipal Administration Based on a Survey of Ten Commission Governed Cities* (1916), Bradley Rice, "The Galveston Plan of City Government by Commission: The Birth of a Progressive Idea," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 78 (April 1975), 365-408, and he expands his research in *Progressive Cities: The Commission Government Movement in America 1901-1920* (1977).

occurred only a year apart and Puerto Rico and Galveston are in temporally close proximity. In addition, the American south and Puerto Rico, as a newly acquired territory after the Spanish-Cuban-American War, were two of the most undemocratic spaces in the greater U.S. Therefore, these factors examined in tandem showcase how similarly the Federal government responded in the wake of these storms.

Prior disaster relief was handled on a case by case basis primarily by private charities and local governments that petitioned for Federal government involvement.<sup>6</sup> These early efforts were largely piecemeal and disorganized. However, beginning in the 1880s through the 1920s, Progressive thinkers from the U.S. and Europe such as Lester F. Ward and Richard T. Ely wrote about social welfare, the eradication of poverty, and increase access to education.<sup>7</sup> These concepts sparked a humanitarian awakening among U.S. middle-and upper-class whites during the Progressive Era while also piquing their interest in achieving greater social control of the lesser classes by increasing the federal government's power.<sup>8</sup> Some middle-and upper-class whites did not identify as Progressive but they nonetheless were influenced by the aforementioned ideas when it came to social control.

This desire for social control amidst reforms accurately describes the “Progressive Paradox” in the U.S. when these storms occurred.<sup>9</sup> I define the “Progressive Paradox” as the

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<sup>6</sup> For information about disaster relief throughout the 19th century see David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood: The Incredible Story Behind One of the Most Devastating “Natural” Disasters America Has Ever Known* (1968), Ross Miller, *American Apocalypse: The Great Fire and the Myth of Chicago* (1990), Steven Biel, ed., *American Disasters* (2001), and Michelle Landis Dauber. *The Sympathetic State: Disaster Relief and the origins of the American Welfare State* (2013).

<sup>7</sup> For contemporary works addressing social welfare and poverty see Lester F. Ward, *Dynamic Sociology Or Applied Social Science As Based Upon Statical Sociology and the Less Complex Sciences* (1883), Herbert Spencer, *Principles of Sociology Volume 1 Part III: Domestic Institutions* (1885), and Richard T. Ely *Socialism: An Examination of Its Nature, Its, Strength and Its Weakness, With Suggestions for Social Reform* (1895) .

<sup>8</sup> Julia Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and A Nation's Humanitarian Awakening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>9</sup> The term “Progressive Paradox” is borrowed from William Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), xi and Thomas Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), xi.

cognitive dissonance between elite reformers promoting uplift while preserving social control over domestic and foreign affairs. William Link and Thomas Leonard describe the “Progressive Paradox” in their works *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism* and *Illiberal Reformers*. Link views it as “a clash between the radically divergent views of traditionalists and reformers about the social contract.”<sup>10</sup> Leonard sees it as, “the campaign of reformers to exclude the disabled, immigrants, African Americans, and women from the American workforce, all in the name of progress.”<sup>11</sup> I assert that this term also applies to the concept of Federal disaster relief both domestic and foreign. It is necessary to include it in the broader Progressive Era conversation and in U.S. foreign relations. The military and local elites demonstrated facets of the “Progressive Paradox” when they chose who received aid and created certain conditions to obtain aid after these two disasters to maintain the social hierarchy. However, Progressivism itself was not monolithic, it took different shapes in the North, South, and in foreign affairs but the parallels present in these two relief efforts beckon a comparative interpretation.

Scholars have discussed these two storms at length but failed to put them in conversation with each other as part of a broader Progressive Era discourse even though they were only a year apart.<sup>12</sup> The only comparative study of Progressive Era disasters is *Disaster Citizenship* by Jacob

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<sup>10</sup> Link, xi-xii.

<sup>11</sup> Leonard, xi.

<sup>12</sup> For works on *San Ciriaco* see Stuart Schwartz, “The Hurricane of San Ciriaco: Disaster, Politics and Society in Puerto Rico, 1899-1901,” *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 72 No. 3 (August, 1992) pp. 303-334. He also includes a chapter in his larger work *Sea of Storms: A History of Hurricanes in the Greater Caribbean from Columbus to Katrina* (2015), for agricultural and economic perspectives of *San Ciriaco* see Laird Bergad, *Coffee and the Growth of Agrarian Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Puerto Rico* (1983) and Cesar Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898* (2007). For the Galveston storm of 1900 see early accounts by Paul Lester *The Great Galveston Disaster* (1900), John Edward Weems, *A Weekend in September* (1959), and Herbert Mason, *Death From the Sea: Our Greatest Natural Disaster, The Galveston Hurricane of 1900* (1972), for more recent studies see Erik Larson *Isaac's Storm: A Man, a Time and the Deadliest Hurricane in History* (1999), Patricia Bixel and Elizabeth Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm: Catastrophe and Catalyst* (2000), Casey Edward Green and Shelly Henley Kelly, ed., *Through a Night of Horrors: Voices from the 1900 Galveston Storm* (2002) and Andy Horowitz, “The Complete Story of the Galveston Horror: Trauma, History, and the Great Storm of 1900,” in *Environmental Disaster in the Gulf South: Two Centuries of Catastrophe, Risk, and Resilience* ed. Cindy Ermus, (2018), for a study that examines the meteorological history of the West Indies during



Remes which examines a fire in Salem, Massachusetts in 1915 and an explosion in Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1917. Remes provides a framework that compares two disasters in relatively close proximity and evaluates them in the context of Progressive Era ideas about race, class, and labor.<sup>13</sup> However, he mainly focuses on those affected by the disasters and less about the ideas behind the responses and relief. This essay uses Remes' framework but centers more on the Progressive ideas that informed relief efforts and the distribution of aid rather than the lived experiences of the people on the ground.

Three common trends appear when investigating the American response to these hurricanes: the distribution of aid was not equal, conditions were attached to obtain the aid in order to create distinctions between the worthy and unworthy poor, which led to the exclusion of people of color from the rebuilding processes except for menial labor. These trends exist because of the military presence in Puerto Rico that contributed to a top down approach of disseminating aid. This method became prevalent not just in American colonies but domestically and throughout the world. The American Red Cross assisted in military conflicts and disaster relief beginning in the 1880s. The incorporation of the ARC into the U.S. Federal government structure in 1900 highlights the exchange of European ideas and programs to America during the Progressive Era because the Red Cross initially began in Switzerland.<sup>14</sup> This exchange prompted a move toward professionalization of Federal government institutions including disaster relief. The deployment of Federal aid in Puerto Rico and the Red Cross in Galveston were similar in implementation but differed in practice. Private and local aid outweighed Federal aid in

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these two storms see Jamie L. Pietruska, "Hurricanes, Crops and Capital: The Meteorological Infrastructure of American Empire in the West Indies," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 15 (2016), pp. 418-445.

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Remes, *Disaster Citizenship: Survivors, Solidarity, and Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> For more information about these social, intellectual, and economic exchanges see Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (1998).

Galveston but the inverse took place in Puerto Rico. Thus, Puerto Rico serves as the first case study for examining how these Progressive Era ideas influenced disaster relief efforts.

## THE CHANGE IN SOVEREIGNTY

Puerto Rico lost any semblance of autonomy under U.S. rule but a brief examination of the change in sovereignty highlights the differences between Spanish and U.S. regimes. Puerto Rico endured Spanish colonial rule from 1493 until 1898, but the discussion of autonomy did not manifest until the 1880s and persisted into the 1890s. Luis Muñoz Rivera, a well educated lawyer, led the push for autonomy and allied with the Spanish Liberal party recently taken over by Praxedes Mateo Sagasta at the apex of the Cuban War for Independence in 1897.<sup>15</sup> Muñoz Rivera often compared Puerto Rico to Cuba because they were two of Spain's last colonial holdings and he opportunistically used the events in Cuba to lobby for concessions in Puerto Rico. He argued for an anti-revolutionary but oppositional line that allowed him to chastise the Cuban revolutionaries and implicate Spanish misrule for the support they garnered.<sup>16</sup> This political cunning by Muñoz Rivera led to Sagasta signing an autonomous charter for Puerto Rico on November 25, 1897.<sup>17</sup> This charter gave Puerto Rico quasi-dominion status and representation in the Spanish *Cortes* (parliament).<sup>18</sup> The Insular Cabinet, comprised of democratically elected Puerto Ricans, governed the island during the autonomous period. Elections of the Insular Cabinet took place March 27, 1898, and in its short tenure, Muñoz Rivera served as the secretary. These elections proved futile because four months later U.S. forces landed at Guanica on the southern part of the island, July 25, 1898.

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<sup>15</sup> Manuel Maldonado-Denis, *Puerto Rico: A Socio-Historic Interpretation*, trans. by Elena Vialo (New York: Random House, 1972), 48.

<sup>16</sup> Cesar J. Ayala and Rafael Bernabe, *Puerto Rico in the American Century: A History Since 1898*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 23.

<sup>17</sup> Christina Duffy Ponsa, "When Statehood Was Autonomy," in *Reconsidering the Insular Cases: The Past and Future of the American Empire*, ed. Gerald L. Neuman and Tomiko Brown-Nagin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 23.

<sup>18</sup> Edward J. Berbusse, *The United States in Puerto Rico 1898-1900*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1966), 56.

General Nelson Miles, Commander of the American forces, occupied the major ports and population centers on the island within three weeks. Many of the Spanish forces became ill from disease and offered little resistance.<sup>19</sup> Miles acted as the Military Governor of Puerto Rico until hostilities ended on August 12, 1898. The last Spanish forces withdrew from the island on October 18, 1898, and the Treaty of Paris was signed on December 10th. Article II of the Treaty stated that, “Spain cedes to the United States the Island of Porto Rico [sic] and other islands now under Spanish sovereignty in the West Indies.”<sup>20</sup> Article IX determined the outcome of the people articulating that, “The civil rights and political status of the native inhabitants of the territories hereby ceded to the United States shall be determined by the Congress.”<sup>21</sup> The Treaty also classified Puerto Rico as a protectorate not a colony because as historian Daniel Immerwahr argues U.S. policymakers were reluctant to use the taboo “c”-word.<sup>22</sup> This reluctance to classify Puerto Rico as a formal colony played an important role in constructing American policymaker’s attitudes toward Puerto Ricans and the question of Puerto Rican autonomy. The next Military Governor, Brigadier General George Davis, felt strongly about the prospect of autonomy before assuming the position.

Davis, born in Connecticut in 1839, worked as a private tutor for a white family in Savannah, Georgia before the Civil War broke out. After the attack on Fort Sumter, he trekked back to Connecticut to enlist in the Union Army and participated in the South Mountain, and Antietam campaigns. After the war, as a captain Davis served the U.S. army in the Dakotas,

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<sup>19</sup> Brigadier General George W. Davis, *Military Government of Porto Rico: From October 18, 1898, To April 30, 1900* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1902), 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Treaty of Peace Between the United States and Spain; December 10, 1898*, Article II, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/sp1898.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/sp1898.asp).

<sup>21</sup> *Treaty of Peace*, Article IX, [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th\\_century/sp1898.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/sp1898.asp).

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019), 7.

Nebraska, Utah, and Texas fighting in the Indian Wars. In 1890 he was granted a leave of absence to pursue a business venture with the Nicaraguan Canal Company that sought to build a canal. Financial difficulties ensued and forced the company to cease operations in 1893. The Army called him back to serve in Washington at the War Department and worked there until the outbreak of the Spanish-Cuban-American War in 1898.<sup>23</sup>

Now at the rank of Brigadier General, Davis commanded a volunteer division. In November of 1898, he was sent to Cuba to serve as military governor of the province Piner del Rio. In May 1899, President William McKinley appointed him military governor of Puerto Rico for his administrative abilities. His time working as a tutor in Georgia before the Civil War, fighting Native Americans, and canal building in Nicaragua shaped his ideas of race and class. Davis left his reports as the military governor of Cuba, Puerto Rico, and later Manila in the Philippines. From his writings he cannot be labeled a Progressive. However, he did align with the Progressive ideas of social control and uplift through education.

In his reports as military governor, he critically evaluated the race and class of the people he governed. The idea of the disenfranchisement of African Americans in the South after the Compromise of 1877, appealed to Davis and he thought it could be implemented in Puerto Rico as he stated:

These citizens of the Union who are being disenfranchised are largely descendants of former slaves who were liberated ten years before the Porto Ricans [sic] were [Spain abolished slavery in Puerto Rico in 1873]. If the disenfranchisement of the negro illiterates of the Union can be justified, the same in Puerto Rico can be defended on equally good grounds, for the educational, social, and industrial status of a large part of the native inhabitants of Porto Rico is no higher than that of the colored people.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Merrill E. Gates, *Men of Mark in America: Ideals of American Life told in Biographies of Eminent Living Americans*, (Washington: Men of Mark Publishing Company, 1905), 277-279.

<sup>24</sup> Davis, *Military Government of Porto Rico*, 115. The formal U.S. spelling of the island at this time was 'Porto Rico' and in all quotes it will be spelled this way. Outside of quotes in my analysis it will be spelled 'Puerto Rico' which became the formal spelling in 1931.

Davis knew that whites in the American South actively disenfranchised blacks and saw this as a justification for enacting the same policy in Puerto Rico. This attitude was not limited to Puerto Ricans of color but toward the entire population. He wrote, “if universal manhood suffrage be given to the Porto Ricans bad results are almost certain to follow. The vast majority of the people are no more fit to take part in self-government than our reservation Indians.”<sup>25</sup> Davis also viewed suffrage as a part of “true manhood” and he believed that Puerto Rican men were not “true” men therefore they did not deserve the suffrage.<sup>26</sup> If he deemed Puerto Rican men not worthy of suffrage than autonomy for the island was certainly out of the question.

This view of Puerto Rico and its people prevailed within the U.S. government. President McKinley was not a Progressive but he remained uncertain about the Puerto Ricans’ capability of self-government until he read a report from Henry Carroll an advisor on the island in 1899, that informed his decision to withhold autonomy from Puerto Rico.<sup>27</sup> The tone of Carroll’s report was paternalistic and he recommended that Puerto Rico not have autonomy but establish an insular government to teach the islanders how to properly govern.<sup>28</sup> Secretary of War Elihu Root also advocated for the U.S. to take a paternalistic role towards Puerto Rico. Carroll’s idea of paternalism, combined with Roots’s rhetoric that implied Puerto Ricans freely submitted themselves to America, helped this idea grow.<sup>29</sup> These paternalistic sentiments echoed Progressive Era ideals to help educate and reform those less fortunate while still maintaining a

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<sup>25</sup> Davis, *Military Government of Porto Rico*, 116.

<sup>26</sup> Davis, *Military Government of Porto Rico*, 116.

<sup>27</sup> The report mentioned was Henry K. Carroll, *Report on the Island of Porto Rico; Its Population, Civil Government, Commerce, Industries, Productions, Roads, Tariff, and Currency*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1899).

<sup>28</sup> Carroll, 58.

<sup>29</sup> “Relief Measures Adopted,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1899, accessed April 5, 2019, 2.

strict social hierarchy. These outlooks also manifested in the relief efforts after hurricane *San Ciriaco* hit the island on August 8, 1899.

## SAN CIRIACO AND THE RELIEF EFFORTS

“I remember *San Ciriaco*, I was living in a house similar to a ranch house. Behind the house there was a hill with a lot of trees. When the hurricane passed, I was amazed to see that the trees had been stripped by the hurricane. It had no leaves or flowers it was completely bare!”<sup>30</sup> Luis Medina was only three years old when *San Ciriaco* hit southern Puerto Rico. Fortunately, Medina and his family did not experience the most devastating effects of this storm because they lived in Cubuy a small town in the El Yunque forest on the northeast part of the island. The city of Ponce, a major population center in the south, endured the worst of *San Ciriaco* and at least 300 people were swept away by the flood waters.<sup>31</sup> Altogether the storm claimed over 3,000 lives throughout the island, devastated the lucrative coffee crop, and caused over \$20 million worth of property damage.

Despite General Davis’ racial predilection towards Puerto Ricans, he knew that action needed to be taken to show the new colony, the world, and most importantly the American public how the government dealt with disaster relief in its’ sphere of influence. The social hierarchy amongst elites and poor farmers blurred due to the destruction of plantations and material wealth.<sup>32</sup> The existing social hierarchy began with elite white *peninsulares* and *criollos* at the top who usually owned land then trickled down to white or mixed race poor farmers who were called *jibaros* and then newly freed slaves.<sup>33</sup> All social classes now needed relief and elites could no longer patronize the poor because they had nothing to give. Davis was cognizant of the existing

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<sup>30</sup> Barbara Tasch Ezratty, *Puerto Rico Changing Flags: An Oral History 1898-1950* (Stevensville: Omni Arts Incorporated 1986), 5.

<sup>31</sup> “Ponce Wrecked by Hurricane,” *New York Times*, August 12, 1899, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Julian Go, *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning: Elite Political Cultures in the Philippines and Puerto Rico During U.S. Colonialism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 145.

<sup>33</sup> *Peninsulares* were white, born in Spain and moved to the New World, *criollos* were white but born in the New World, and *jibaros* were poor peasant farmers who were either white or mixed race. Slavery was abolished in Puerto Rico in 1873 so these new freedmen began to work as sharecroppers, similar to freedmen in the U.S. South.



patron-client relationship and thus petitioned Root to create a relief committee for the island. On August 19, Root created the Central Porto Rican Relief Committee that consisted of New York businessmen and situated its headquarters in New York City. This committee cooperated with banks and merchant associations to obtain capital and supplies to send to Davis. In his 1902 report, Davis stated that, “the immensity of the work of relief made it impractical to rely on private contributions for the food needed and other supplies.”<sup>34</sup> Therefore the federal government appropriated most of the aid. This insistence on federal aid assured Davis that ships reached Puerto Rico swiftly. In total the Central Porto Rican Relief Committee raised just shy of \$1 million to aid the island.

When the first ship arrived in Puerto Rico with supplies on August 19, 1899, Davis appointed Chief Surgeon Colonel John Van Hoff President of the charities board. Van Hoff received the incoming aid and distributed it to military commanders stationed throughout Puerto Rico. The commanders at first freely gave away the supplies to those that came to the aid depots. Davis and Van Hoff then received reports that many people were not clearing debris or helping recover dead bodies. This prompted Davis and Van Hoff to issue conditions in order to get food, clothing, and medical supplies. Van Hoff stated that, “Food is issued to prevent starvation. It is intended for the worthy poor, and no able-bodied man shall receive any unless he gives a full day’s work in return.”<sup>35</sup> These strict conditions created a distinction between the worthy and unworthy poor. This process of delineation happened frequently in private relief work during the Progressive Era but this time the Federal government made the calculation.<sup>36</sup> Davis and Van

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<sup>34</sup> Davis, *Military Government of Porto Rico*, 217.

<sup>35</sup> Davis, *Military Government of Porto Rico*, 703.

<sup>36</sup> This process of determining worthy and unworthy poor is discussed at length in David Huyssen, *Progressive Inequality: Rich and Poor in New York, 1890-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 96.

Hoff originally instituted the conditions to not run out of supplies, but Davis also had plans to maintain the social hierarchy when he created the program of planter relief.

In mid-September, Davis and Van Hoff frustrated with the unorganized distribution of aid at the depots, decided to foist part of the problem onto the elite Puerto Rican sugar and coffee planters. The planters, whose crops destroyed and social standing in question, obtained supplies from the military government and hired poor workers to help clean up their land.<sup>37</sup> In exchange for their labor, workers were supposed to receive a usufruct plot of land to till and daily food rations. Van Hoff took pride in this “partnership” of planters and peons and saw this as an opportunity to educate Puerto Ricans of the value of honest labor. This sentiment by Van Hoff echoed Progressive Era attitudes towards poor people and their education.

Prominent Progressive thinker Lester F. Ward stated, “Everything that distinguishes a savage from a civilized man can be directly or indirectly traced to the differences of education.”<sup>38</sup> Ward also called for the “artificial civilization” of the lesser classes by the government since the lesser classes were not capable of civilizing themselves. This artificial civilization consists of the education of the lesser classes in order to propel them into a more learned position therefore making them civilized and eliminating lesser classes altogether.<sup>39</sup> Ward also advocated for state regulated economic reform and the distribution of aid to the poor by the government. Van Hoff nor Davis specifically cited Ward in their writings, but their rhetoric was eerily similar to his ideas on social welfare and education

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<sup>37</sup> Chief Surgeon Colonel John Van Hoff, “Open Letter to the Planters of Porto Rico,” in Davis, *Military Government of Porto Rico*, 718, Go, *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning*, 145.

<sup>38</sup> Lester F. Ward, *Dynamic Sociology Or Applied Social Science As Based Upon Statical Sociology and the Less Complex Sciences* Vol. 2, (New York: D Appleton and Company, 1883), 593.

<sup>39</sup> Ward, 596.

Davis and Van Hoff not only viewed the planter relief program as a means to reestablish the social hierarchy and instill moral guidance but also as economic recovery. The planters and peons working together to restore the land and crops became the goal. The planter relief program boosted the economic recovery on the island. However, the coffee planters lost their position on top of the social hierarchy because 90% of their crop was decimated. The coffee planters struggled the most in this period of blurred class distinction because they were not able to give patronage and the worker knew that coffee crops took a long time to regenerate.<sup>40</sup> Thus, the coffee planters either waited for the crop to mature, switched to another crop, or worked for another planter. Ultimately the planter relief program achieved its goals in helping the Puerto Rican economy recover, but maintenance of the social hierarchy and instilling an artificially civilized work ethic fell short. As a result, coffee no longer prevailed as the bulwark of the island's economy, sugar became king.

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<sup>40</sup> Go, 146.

## TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUERTO RICAN ECONOMY

Before the U.S. invasion and the *San Ciriaco* hurricane, coffee cultivation dominated the agricultural sector and was the island's chief export.<sup>41</sup> The main markets for Puerto Rican coffee were Cuba and Europe, but as Davis noted in an earlier report, those markets were practically lost because of the American occupation.<sup>42</sup> The coffee industry never effectively penetrated the U.S. market because Brazil monopolized U.S. coffee imports.<sup>43</sup> Brazil produced coffee much faster and cheaper due to slave labor until 1888 when the government abolished slavery. This caused a boom in the Puerto Rican coffee industry during the 1880s until 1899 when coffee accounted for 54% of all exports. During the boom, 41% of Puerto Rico's land was dedicated to cultivating coffee.<sup>44</sup> The destruction *San Ciriaco* caused to the coffee industry in 1899 made it easier for U.S. policymakers to facilitate a dramatic switch from an emphasis on coffee production to sugar production.

In an 1899 report following the hurricane, General Davis assessed that the U.S. government should allow Puerto Rico to export sugar freely to the U.S. in order to stimulate the island's economy because of the coffee crop's decimation. He also estimated that because of *San Ciriaco* the coffee crop would take five years to regenerate and it should be disregarded as an export of value.<sup>45</sup> The American Sugar Refining Company, owned by Henry Havermeyer, influenced Congress to switch the island's economy. The "Sugar Trust" as it was known, monopolized the sugar industry in the U.S. and had immense power over foreign policy in the

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<sup>41</sup> Lieutenant Colonel J.P. Sanger, *Report on the Census of Puerto, 1899*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), 52.

<sup>42</sup> Davis, *Report on the Civil Affairs of Puerto Rico 1899*, 40.

<sup>43</sup> Laird W. Bergad, "Agrarian History of Puerto Rico: 1870-1930," *Latin American Research Review* 13, no. 3 (1978), 68.

<sup>44</sup> Sanger, *Report on the Census of Puerto, 1899*, 152.

<sup>45</sup> Brigadier General George Davis, *Report of Brigadier General George W. Davis U.S.V. on the Civil Affairs of Puerto Rico 1899*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), 40.

Caribbean and wanted Puerto Rico to expand the American sugar kingdom.<sup>46</sup> These pressures from the Sugar Trust echoed Davis' sentiments and made it difficult for Congress grant Puerto Rico any autonomy.

The Senate Committee on the Pacific Islands and Puerto Rico on began hearings on February 5, 1900. General Davis testified at the hearings and plainly asserted that Puerto Rico was not fit for self-governance. He further advocated that the U.S. should transition the Puerto Rican economy from coffee production to sugar production. In a lengthy monologue he stated:

The new government will probably be obliged to borrow in order to maintain itself, and this will demand immediate action; but no matter how soon that action be taken, it will not be in time to save the coffee culture. Free trade with the United States will give stimulus to agriculture, and especially sugar and tobacco; but this will not affect coffee. The general stimulus to other cultivation will perhaps have a detrimental effect upon coffee.<sup>47</sup>

Davis' testimony to the Senate Committee proved to be the death knell for Puerto Rican autonomy and the coffee industry. His testimony amplified the remarks he made in his report on the civil affairs of Puerto Rico in which he wrote, "Puerto Rico, never was, is not, and probably never will be, independent. It is now a possession of the United States and must so continue until Congress decides otherwise."<sup>48</sup> These circumstances moved Puerto Rico away from autonomy and toward a monocrop economy focused on sugar production. This sequence of events led President McKinley to sign the Foraker Act (also known as the Organic Act of 1900) on April 12, 1900, establishing a civil government in Puerto Rico controlled by the United States. It did however establish a lower house of elected Puerto Ricans but this body had limited power and little voice. Ultimately, the Foraker Act provided no guarantee of citizenship, statehood, nor

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<sup>46</sup> Cesar Ayala, *American Sugar Kingdom: The Plantation Economy of the Spanish Caribbean, 1898-1934*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 34.

<sup>47</sup> *Hearings Before the Committee on Pacific Islands and Puerto Rico*, 40.

<sup>48</sup> Davis, *Civil Affairs of Puerto Rico 1899*, 74.

extension of constitutional protections.<sup>49</sup>

An additional provision in the Foraker Act stated that U.S. interests could only occupy up to 500 acres of land per enterprise, and that Puerto Rico could not trade with any other country except the U.S.<sup>50</sup> Subsequently with a new focus on sugar, the Sugar Trust and other U.S. absentee corporations began invading and did not adhere to the Foraker Act's land ownership provision. The Aguirre Sugar Company in 1899, the South Porto Rico Sugar Company in 1901, and the Fajardo Sugar Company in 1905, dominated the export of Puerto Rican sugar to the U.S. well into the 1930s.<sup>51</sup> However, Puerto Rican elites owned most plantations and refineries but the U.S. sugar companies monopolized who the Puerto Rican planters could sell to. This system of sugar production stimulated the Puerto Rican economy but also furthered U.S. sugar interests.

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<sup>49</sup> Sam Erman, *Almost Citizens: Puerto Rico, the U.S. Constitution, and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 53-55.

<sup>50</sup> *An Act Temporarily to Provide Revenues and a Civil Government for Porto Rico, and for Other Purposes* (Foraker Act), (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900), 77.

<sup>51</sup> Cesar Ayala, 106-107.

## PROGRESSIVE IMPERIALISM

The U.S. adopted imperialist characteristics from Europe but chose to operate differently and viewed itself as more of a paternal mentor than regional hegemon. American policymakers hesitated to use the word colony to refer to Puerto Rico and instead dubbed it a protectorate. This and many other Atlantic crossings during the Progressive Era informed how elite intellectuals thought about race, poverty, and education. As demonstrated in the case of Puerto Rico, Progressive Era views on race, poverty, and class informed the dissemination of aid after *San Ciriaco*. In the eyes of Davis, Van Hoff, and those in Congress that signed the Foraker Act, Puerto Ricans needed to work in order to receive aid. This lesson in work ethic meant to educate Puerto Ricans so that someday they could be capable of self-government. At the same time, protecting the social hierarchy was of utmost importance so that chaos did not ensue and the Sugar Trust benefitted. This paradox of fostering uplift whilst maintaining social control defined Progressive Era reform domestically and in the case of Puerto Rico colonially. An examination of Galveston, Texas before and after the great storm of 1900, also underlines this “Progressive Paradox”.

## **GALVESTON PRIOR TO THE GREAT STORM OF 1900**

The Great Storm of 1900 prompted the white elites of Galveston to reconfigure the local government to exclude African Americans in the name of progress. However, an analysis of Galveston prior to the storm reveals that, like Puerto Rico, politics were more inclusive. The Texas Congress incorporated Galveston into the state legislature and granted it a charter to elect city officials in 1839. The port and its commerce sustained the island city's economy. Cotton, the main export, shipped throughout the United States and Europe which made Galveston relevant to the Texas economy as a whole. Much like other southern cities in the mid to late 1800s, Galveston did not industrialize but continued to focus on port commerce. Galveston businessmen who operated out of the port argued against industrialization because the lack of fresh water supply made it difficult and the island did not have structural sustainability due to the frequency of hurricanes.<sup>52</sup>

Immediately after the Civil War, Federal troops seized the port crippling Galveston's economy because the port was the bedrock. However, when Federal soldiers left in the 1870s the economy returned to pre-war production, but the focus continued to be on the port and not industrialization. In the mid-1870s, the Chamber of Commerce promoted grain trade through Galveston to Denver. The Galveston Wharf Company built grain elevators to house the grain before it left for Denver which stimulated the economy by adding an additional crop to export.<sup>53</sup> The end of reconstruction in Galveston may have helped the economy but race relations became a contentious issue because thousands of freedmen inhabited the city after emancipation and needed employment and housing.

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<sup>52</sup> David G. McComb, *Galveston: A History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 47-48.

<sup>53</sup> "Charter and By-Laws of the Galveston Wharf Company 1898," Port of Galveston Papers, MS #79-0012, Box 1, File Folder (FF) 18, Rosenberg Library, GTHC, Galveston, Texas.



Public education, instituted by the Freedmen's Bureau immediately after the war, helped African Americans in Galveston improve their financial and social situations. However, after Federal troops vacated the city in 1870, public schooling for African Americans suffered and attempts at integration were ignored. This phenomenon dominated the Southern experience post-occupation and succeeded in disenfranchising African Americans. An 1871 article in the *Galveston Daily News* stated that, "Colored children are not sufficiently advanced in civilization to be the fit companions of white children. They are not as cleanly; they are not as well developed morally and intellectually."<sup>54</sup> This view of African Americans persisted in white thought throughout the south but that did not stop Norris Wright Cuney from being elected an alderman of the city council from 1883-1887.

Cuney, the illegitimate child of a white Brazos Valley planter and a black mistress, went to school in Pittsburgh but moved back to Galveston in 1865 at the end of the war.<sup>55</sup> He then became involved in politics and ran for mayor in 1875 where he spoke against injustice towards freedmen. Ultimately, he lost that mayoral election, but later in 1883 he won his bid for alderman and became a prominent figure in the Republican Party. Cuney lobbied for a new integrated high school but his efforts were unsuccessful. After his term as an alderman, he became the chief collector of customs at the port of Galveston and helped many African Americans get hired as dock workers. Cuney died in 1898 from Tuberculosis but his accomplishments and ideas proved that an African American could hold office in Galveston and improve race relations.<sup>56</sup> Unfortunately after Cuney died race relations took a turn for the worst as did the economy.

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<sup>54</sup> *Galveston Daily News*, February 11, 1871, pp. 1.

<sup>55</sup> Virginia Neal Hinze, "Norris Wright Cuney," (Master's Thesis, Rice University, Houston, Texas, 1965), 2.

<sup>56</sup> McComb, 92.

Galveston's economy in the 1890s looked unstable because of the hyper focus on the port coupled with the fragility of the industry due to frequent inclement weather. Race relations ephemerally improved with Norris Wright Cuney's presence but largely remained under Jim Crow's firm grasp. Prior to the great storm of 1900, Galveston experienced harsh environmental conditions other than hurricanes, most notably repeated yellow fever outbreaks every decade starting in the 1830s. The 1890s were no different with a massive outbreak in 1897 that affected the entire Gulf Coast Region.<sup>57</sup> New Orleans and Havana suffered the brunt of the outbreak and ships headed for those ports were rerouted to Galveston which initially boosted the economy.<sup>58</sup> However, "yellow jack" struck Galveston later in 1897 which led to a massive quarantine of the port and in turn the economy suffered a blow. The quarantine directly affected revenues of the Galveston Wharf Company and other Galvestonians whose businesses operated out of the port. The Wharf Company began improvements to its landside space in 1893 by extending the port 30 miles. By 1897 when the outbreak occurred, the improvements were mostly complete but the company owed \$2 million to northern investors.<sup>59</sup> Unable to pay the loans and now in serious debt, elites called for a change in city government because they had lost faith in the existing one.

Galveston employed a typical mayor-council style with 12 aldermen elected by wards prior to the great storm. This system fostered corruption and allowed political machines to wield power. One journalist stated that, "The city was bankrupt by a board of ward-alderman who had out-Tweeded Tweed."<sup>60</sup> Prominent historian Charles Beard also criticized Galveston's

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<sup>57</sup> "A Death in Beaumont," *Galveston Daily News*, September 23, 1897, pp. 1.

<sup>58</sup> Mariola Espinosa, "The Threat from Havana: Southern Public Health, Yellow Fever, and the U.S. Intervention in the Cuban Struggle for Independence, 1878-1898," *The Journal of Southern History* Vol. 72, No. 3 (August 2006), 545.

<sup>59</sup> Harold M. Hyman, *Oleander Odyssey: The Kempners of Galveston, Texas, 1854-1980*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1990), 130.

<sup>60</sup> H.S. Cooper, "Something New in Government," *Success Magazine* 11 (February 1908): 83. The reference is to Boss Tweed and the political machine he ran in New York City during this time.

governmental system commenting, “the local government was paralyzed, because the problems connected with the reparation of the ruin were too much for the old political machine which had control.”<sup>61</sup>

Some businessmen created the Deep Water Committee in 1882 which initially promoted harbor improvements. Throughout the 1890s the committee lobbied to increase local government oversight that in turn would lead to economic and social progress. Only 15 anonymous men were involved with the committee but they exercised significant influence because those men owned more than half of Galveston’s property.<sup>62</sup> Isaac Kempner, a young cotton merchant and John Sealy, a director of the Galveston Wharf Company, involved themselves with the Deep Water Committee in the mid-1890s. These young men had immense power in city affairs because of their wealth and connections. Kempner became city treasurer in 1899, and while cleaning up the books he noticed the city’s massive debt.<sup>63</sup> He secured loans from companies in Cincinnati and New York to keep the city afloat. However, financial matters became more complex a year later, as the city and its economy were swallowed by the sea.

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<sup>61</sup> Charles Beard, *American City Government: A Survey of Newer Tendencies*, (New York: The Century Company, 1912), 93.

<sup>62</sup> George Kibbe Turner, “Galveston: A Business Corporation,” *McClure’s Magazine* 27 (October 1906): 611.

<sup>63</sup> Hyman, 128.

## THE GREAT STORM OF 1900 AND THE RELIEF EFFORTS

After the storm hit, *Collier's Weekly* interviewed an unnamed survivor and they stated, "it was at six o'clock that the storm broke on the city. The wind suddenly became cyclonic in its velocity. The rain fell in great spouts, and the roar of the wind and water was deafening. The fearful rush and onslaught of the storm, even after the prelude of gale and rain was stupefying in its terrible force."<sup>64</sup> Big city dailies and small-town weeklies all over the United States covered the storm and most were sensationalist in their language evidenced by the earlier quote from *Collier's Weekly*. This sensationalism directly connected to the rise of yellow journalism which appealed to the public's sensibilities and tried to stir people to action.<sup>65</sup> This type of news coverage contributes to the mythology behind disasters. Ultimately, relief work or the lack thereof categorizes the event as a disaster.<sup>66</sup>

Clara Barton and a team of Red Cross workers headed for Galveston on September 13, just five days after the storm to ameliorate suffering. In its day, this response time was considered speedy and they gathered ample medical supplies and food to distribute before embarkation. Barton stated in her official report that a group of businessmen in the city created a committee that the Red Cross partnered with to organize relief efforts.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> "The Destruction of Galveston," *Collier's Weekly*, September 29, 1900, (New York: P.F. Collier and Son Publishers.)

<sup>65</sup> Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxiv-xxv.

<sup>66</sup> For more information on this theory see John C. Burnham, "A Neglected Field: The History of Natural Disasters," *Perspectives* (The American Historical Association newsletter) 26:4 (April 1988), 22-24, Steinberg, *Acts of God*: (2000), Chester Hartman and Gregory D. Squires ed., *There Is No Such Thing As A Natural Disaster: Race, Class, and Hurricane Katrina*, (2006), and Kevin Rozario, *The Culture of Calamity: Disaster and the Making of Modern America*, (2007).

<sup>67</sup> Clara Barton, *Report of Miss Clara Barton, President of the American National Red Cross, To the People of the United States*, 1901, pp. 6, Red Cross Records, MSS #05-0007, Rosenberg Library, GTHC, Galveston, Texas, [www.gthcenter.org/exhibits/storms/1900/Manuscripts/RedCross\\_7/RC05\\_2.html](http://www.gthcenter.org/exhibits/storms/1900/Manuscripts/RedCross_7/RC05_2.html).

Elites and members of the Deep Water Committee formed the Central Relief Committee (CRC) to help ease the suffering immediately and clean up the debris. W.A. McVitie chaired the CRC and set up relief stations in each ward of the city.<sup>68</sup> This ad hoc group of elites determined which residents received aid and what conditions they wanted in exchange for the aid. McVitie sent out a notice that established requirements to obtain food, clothing, and medical supplies which stated that, “any able bodied man who will not volunteer to clear debris and dead must not be fed.”<sup>69</sup> This statement, aimed towards the poor, insisted that aid not be looked upon as a free handout but as compensation for services rendered. The apprehension to make Galveston into a welfare state represented a larger debate amongst Progressives at this time.

Progressive sociologist Lester Ward advocated for a welfare state where the government functioned as a business to provide food and medical services in addition to governing. Many disagreed with him like economist Richard T. Ely who stated, “under socialism, be only one considerable sphere of employment, and there is reason to fear that the inability to escape from the public sphere would compel the submission to onerous and tyrannical conditions, imposed by the administrative heads of the business in which one might be engaged.”<sup>70</sup> His argument gained momentum by those who invoked the longstanding American ideal to not have the government interfere with the economy. Ely and other Progressive economists were against a full-fledged welfare state however, they did want to increase reliance on the federal government but not too much so that idleness and inactivity would hamper social progress.<sup>71</sup> Much like the military

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<sup>68</sup> W.A. McVitie, “Notice to All Persons Requiring Food,” Galveston Central Relief Committee Records, MSS #24-0149+, Rosenberg Library, GTHC, Galveston, Texas, [www.gthcenter.org/exhibits/storms/1900/Manuscripts/Galveston\\_relief/index.html](http://www.gthcenter.org/exhibits/storms/1900/Manuscripts/Galveston_relief/index.html).

<sup>69</sup> McVitie, “Instructions to Chairmen of the Various Ward Relief Committees.”

<sup>70</sup> Richard T. Ely, *Socialism: An Examination of Its Nature, Its Strength and Its Weakness, With Suggestions for Social Reform*, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1895), 206.

<sup>71</sup> Leonard, 27.

government in Puerto Rico the elites of Galveston thought that distributing free handouts to the needy would create a dependence on welfare. This aversion to the welfare state informed relief efforts and sought to show the poor that just because a hurricane destroyed the economy and much of their property that people had to work in order to receive aid.

It is important to note that Progressives are most often associated with the northern part of the country in densely populated areas. An omission of the rural South from the annals of the Progressive movement, outside of a few select works, overlooks how African Americans were directly affected by these lines of thinking.<sup>72</sup> The commitment to upholding Jim Crow laws was an essential part of the Progressive movement in the South.

For the elite whites of Galveston, a clear distinction of who consisted of worthy and unworthy poor was firmly established by race. The CRC sought to keep African Americans in place on the social hierarchy by preferring some city wards over others when it came to distributing aid. The *City Times*, Galveston's only African American newspaper, candidly spoke out against this injustice stating, "The colored man is good enough to save the lives of the little white babes, white women, and every man. He has lost everything he had and in all of that he has not been good enough to even be represented as a committeeman."<sup>73</sup> This statement appeared in a September 29th issue weeks after the storm passed. An October 27th issue echoed the remarks from the earlier issue when addressing the CRC, "... for heaven's sake how long are you going to wait before you set aside some of that financial aid for these poor people who have lost every piece of their household goods. I hope that you all will not overlook the fact so long that there

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<sup>72</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955), 74, and William Link, *The Paradox of Southern Progressivism, 1880-1930* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), xii.

<sup>73</sup> "Suggestions and Advice About Conditions of the Poor and Suffering People," *The City Times*, Galveston, Texas, September 29, 1900, pp. 1

were thousands of people who were losers and did not own a home.”<sup>74</sup> More than a month after the storm African Americans still received no relief.

A contributing factor to this injustice stemmed directly from sensationalist reporting that claimed African Americans looted dead bodies. One gruesome report said that an African American man was caught with cut off human fingers in his pocket that still had rings on them.<sup>75</sup> Another account from James Brown, an English immigrant, who arrived shortly before the storm wrote his family and stated, “About 20 men was shot dead for robbing dead of rings and jewelry.”<sup>76</sup> Stories like these represented African-Americans negatively and contributed to the lack of relief sent to them.

In total, the great storm of 1900 claimed the lives of over 6,000 people and still ranks as the deadliest hurricane in American history. For the people of Galveston their identity now linked to the storm and served as a defining moment for the city.<sup>77</sup> The heightened focus on the structural sustainability of the city in the post-storm years represented how aware Galvestonians now were of the environment they inhabited. Living in Galveston always meant the possibility of a storm threat, but the refusal to industrialize throughout the 1800s proved catastrophic for the city. Citizens shared this defining moment and referred to events prior, as before the storm and to events post, as after the storm. However, the cloud of debt and governmental disarray provided an opportunity for the elites of the Deep Water Committee and CRC to enact a different form of government. They chose a commission style of government that elected a chairman and appointed three at large members. This governing body presided over Galveston until 1960.

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<sup>74</sup> “Central Relief Committee,” *The City Times*, Galveston, Texas, October 29, 1900, pp. 1.

<sup>75</sup> Paul Lester, *The Great Galveston Disaster*, (Chicago: Providence Publishing Company, 1900), 61.

<sup>76</sup> James Brown to his sisters and cousins, October 7, 1900, pp. 6, James Brown-Winnifred B. Clamp Letters, MSS #85-0013 (GTHC), [www.gthcenter.org/exhibits/storms/1900/Manuscripts/Brown\\_Clamp/6.html](http://www.gthcenter.org/exhibits/storms/1900/Manuscripts/Brown_Clamp/6.html).

<sup>77</sup> For more information about how societies who experience hurricanes frequently incorporate that into a shared identity see Louis Perez *Winds of Change: Hurricanes and the Transformation of 19th Century Cuba*, (2001).

During the reign of the commission, African Americans were continually disenfranchised and excluded in the planning of structural improvements. The Progressive Era ideal of social control manifested in the commission government.



## THE COMMISSION RULES

On September 12, 1901, real estate broker Valery Austin became the last member of the four-man commission government appointed by Texas Governor Joseph Sayers.<sup>78</sup> The other members of the commission were Judge William T. Austin, financier Isaac H. Kempner, and wholesale grocer Herman Lange. Governor Sayers appointed these first commissioners because Galveston needed a governing body quickly to restore order, but subsequent commissioners would be elected. These elite men assumed social and political control of the city while facing little opposition. This Progressive municipal innovation did however incur backlash from those that saw this plan as un-American and un-democratic. The most substantial contemporary critics of the commission plan attacked its oligarchical structure and anti-democratic focus on business progress.<sup>79</sup>

Progressives throughout the U.S. chose to ignore these side effects of the commission because by 1917, over 500 cities adopted this style of government.<sup>80</sup> Although another faction railed against the insistence that commissioners be experts on financial, civil, and educational matters which at the time were hard to come by. This last view highlights a theme throughout Progressive Era reform where “experts” became a sought-after commodity in order to achieve progress.<sup>81</sup> These experts, often recently trained in European or American universities, desired to put their training into practice. They applied economic, sociological, and educational theory to municipal governments in order to move toward social progress which often alienated the

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<sup>78</sup> Kempner Family Scrapbook 1885-1927, pp. 3, Kempner Family Papers MSS # 93-0008, Oversize Box, Rosenberg Library, GTHC, Galveston, Texas.

<sup>79</sup> William Bennett Munro, “The Galveston Plan of City Government,” in Clinton Rodgers Woodruff ed., *City Government by Commission* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1907), 55, and F. I. Herriott, “Defects of Commission Plan,” in E. Clyde Robbins ed., *Selected Articles on the Commission Plan of Municipal Government* (Minneapolis: The H. W. Wilson Company 1909), 108-111.

<sup>80</sup> Bradley Rice, *Progressive Cities: The Commission Government Movement in America, 1901-1920* (Austin: University of Austin Press, 1977), 110.

<sup>81</sup> Leonard, 27.

working class and minorities.<sup>82</sup> These first Galveston commissioners initially wanted to make the city safe from future disasters but in doing so they failed to include African-Americans in the planning process.

Commissioner William Austin said in an interview with the *Galveston Daily News* in 1901 that, “The most important subject, in my opinion, with which the Commission will have to deal is the matter of protection of Galveston from the sea. I think all of the members of the Commission will be of the same opinion upon this point.”<sup>83</sup> The commissioners viewed structural sustainability above all, and they sought to tackle this challenge immediately. These much-needed improvements were a long time coming as the city government repeatedly put off industrialization throughout the 1800s. On November 20, 1901, the commission appointed a board of engineers to plan renovations. Absent from any of these committees were African Americans, whose land needed to be protected the most because of its low-lying nature. However, protecting the city from the sea meant acquiring money to make the improvements, which Galveston did not have.

Isaac Kempner used this change in government structure to his advantage when lobbying to Northern creditors about Galveston’s plight. He appealed to their humanitarian sensibilities and secured new bonds that allowed him to pay off portions of the city’s debt. He also influenced the Texas legislature to remit all property taxes collected by Galveston to enable debt payment.<sup>84</sup> This sudden influx of money also permitted Kempner to begin paying for the improvements. This financial cunning by Kempner led to the discussion of erecting a seawall to withstand the storm surge of future hurricanes. Only important financial matters such as this needed taxpayer

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<sup>82</sup> Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 112-113.

<sup>83</sup> “Commission Is Now Complete,” *Galveston Daily News*, September 12, 1901, pp. 1.

<sup>84</sup> Hyman, 159.

approval in order to begin quickly. Of those eligible, 98 percent turned out to approve the building of a seawall.<sup>85</sup> The engineering committee confirmed this idea and construction began in June of 1902. While middle- and upper-class white Galvestonians looked to improve the city's structure and economy, the Texas legislature passed a Poll Tax in 1902 that further disenfranchised African Americans.

An editorial in the *City Times* condemned the poll tax stating, "The colored voter cannot afford to lose any strength; the *Times* has at all times been opposed to restrictions on manhood suffrage but while the law is in force go and pay your poll tax and arm yourself with a weapon."<sup>86</sup> African Americans made up 22 percent of Galveston's population and of that percentage only 4,000 were eligible to vote. Of those eligible to vote 675 paid the tax, so in a city of 36,000 only two percent of African Americans voted.<sup>87</sup> This made it nearly impossible for a man like Norris Cuney, who paved the way for African American involvement in city politics, to get elected to the commission. African American men also jockeyed against middle- and upper-class white women in the early commission era. White women began organizing for the right to vote and formed a group called the Women's Health Protective Association to lobby for concessions. African Americans had no such organization to lobby outside of the *City Times*. The poll tax enabled a rise in female power at the expense of African American men which also manifested in other locations throughout the South during the Progressive Era. With the implementation of the poll tax the elite white businessmen in Galveston now how unbridled control of the city's political landscape.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Patricia Bixel and Elizabeth Turner, *Galveston and the 1900 Storm: Catastrophe and Catalyst* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 96.

<sup>86</sup> "Poll Tax Outrage," *City Times*, Galveston Texas, November 5, 1902.

<sup>87</sup> Bixel and Turner, 149-450.

<sup>88</sup> Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 91.

The commission implemented streetcar segregation in 1905, which humiliated the African American community. The commission, now at five members, voted 3-2 in favor of segregation in this public space. The *City Times* editor William Noble appeared before the commission to argue his case and stated, “I do not think it is right to discriminate against a people when they have not shown cause, it is only a matter of plain prejudice against the colored people.”<sup>89</sup> African American lawyer Joseph Cuney (Norris Cuney’s brother) also responded by publishing a vehement protest in both the *City Times* and the *Galveston Daily News*. Outside of these two men, most of Galveston’s African American community were silenced and experienced extreme hardships because of the poll tax and streetcar segregation.

The commission government stepped in and improved Galveston economically and structurally after the hurricane. However, this progress only applied to certain factions of the population. The African American community certainly did not progress when the commission came to power. Race relations experienced an uptick when Norris Cuney became the first African American alderman elected to the city council but he after he died in 1898, they regressed significantly. The storm gave Galveston a chance to start over economically and politically but that meant excluding African Americans from the rebuilding and planning processes. The commission government hurt Galveston more than it helped because it allowed business elites to consolidate power and keep that power in perpetuity. Nevertheless, the “Galveston Plan” as it came to be known, spread like wildfire amongst Progressives throughout America who sought to enact political reform. The way the commission operated in Galveston defines the “Progressive Paradox” where the language of reform and progress whitewash the underbelly of suffering and disenfranchisement.

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<sup>89</sup> William Noble addressing the Commission regarding streetcar segregation in 1905, in Bixel and Turner pp. 150.

## CONCLUSION

This comparative study of Puerto Rico and Galveston underlines the “Progressive Paradox” that manifested in both relief efforts. In both cases elites and government personnel used the storms to shift the economic and political structures of the communities at the expense of minorities and the poor. Progressive ideas about social welfare, poverty, and race guided these shifts. Economically, in Puerto Rico that meant switching the economy to focus on sugar rather than waiting for the destroyed coffee crop to regenerate. This pushed many coffee planters into poverty or forced them to the sugar industry that aligned with U.S. interests. In Galveston, the commissioners appealed to the humanitarian sensibilities of state officials and Northern creditors to secure capital for structural reform. African Americans were excluded from planning how the capital needed to be spent and thus were only used as laborers in the erection of the seawall.

The political shifts in these communities ultimately disenfranchised Puerto Ricans and the African American population in Galveston. In Puerto Rico, the racial views of General Davis coupled with Progressive theories about poverty, class, and education informed his testimony to the Senate committee to not grant Puerto Rico autonomy. The Senate then passed the Foraker Act in 1900, that established a civil government on the island run by Americans that excluded many Puerto Ricans. In Galveston, Progressive Era ideas about reforming local government and controlling social progress helped elite businessmen establish the commission style of government. The commissioners sought to reshape Galveston to protect itself from the threat of future hurricanes. In doing so, they excluded African Americans and further reinforced Jim Crow by enforcing the Poll Tax passed in 1902 and voting to segregate streetcars in 1905. The commission government hurt Galveston more than it helped. However, these issues did not

matter enough to persuade Progressive reformers against this type of government because by 1917 over 500 cities adopted Galveston's plan.

The relief efforts following both storms enabled these economic and political shifts. The common trends of unequal distribution of aid and conditions attached to the aid led to the delineation of worthy and unworthy poor. This establishment of worthy and unworthy poor helped exclude Puerto Ricans and black Galvestonians from political participation and reconstruction of their communities except for manual labor. The Planter Relief Program in Puerto Rico and the Central Relief Committee in Galveston acted similarly in their relief efforts. Both disseminated aid unequally, in Puerto Rico the military government gave food, clothing, and medical supplies to the planters who were then supposed to pay the poor to clean their land. Some African American wards in Galveston received no aid for months and when they plead their case they were painted as looters who defiled the dead that perished in the storm.

Both aftermaths showcase how disaster relief became professionalized at the Federal level and thus distinctly Progressive. As previously mentioned, earlier disaster relief efforts undertaken by the Federal government were piecemeal and these two cases set the precedent for future Federal disaster relief. Both relief efforts occurred in two of the most undemocratic spaces in the greater U.S. and enabled further disenfranchisement. The Federal government quickly responded to both situations by creating an agency and sending a newly incorporated one that implemented relief from the top down. The Central Porto Rican Relief Committee (CPRRC) obtained capital and supplies that were sent to the island post haste. The American Red Cross, headed by Clara Barton, brought ample supplies to Galveston and worked with the Central Relief Committee to distribute it.

The ARC and the ideas behind the CPRRC originated in Europe and were part of a transatlantic exchange of ideas and programs that took place in the Progressive Era. The ever-growing ideas of an administrative state and increased Federal government oversight were also manifested in these relief efforts. The implementation of these ideas in the wake of the hurricanes in Puerto Rico and Galveston guided the way those societies developed for better and for worse. These storms, examined together, foreground how predominantly the “Progressive Paradox” informed American domestic and foreign relations in response to natural disasters.

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