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Peace Circle Memorial: Commemorating an Unkept Promise of Peace

The Peace Circle monument in Grapevine, Texas is a memorialization of a significant point in history when chiefs of many Indigenous tribes in Texas, including the Tahuacarro, Waco, Wichita, and Keechi tribes, came together for a council with Sam Houston and other Texan officials. The aim of this meeting was to move towards peace and to clear “the path between the White and the Red man [that] was full of brush” (Webb 160) as per Houston’s wishes to reverse Lamar’s aggressive policies towards Indigenous tribes in Texas. Since this is certainly a momentous point in Texas history in terms of the relationship between Anglo settlers and Indigenous tribes, one can understand the erection of a monument to commemorate the proceedings. However, this memorial, unveiled with celebration by the city of Grapevine and Indigenous tribe representatives, leaves more information to be desired. No memorial plaque could ever fully describe the events that it honors, however, these statues also fail to fully educate the public by leaving out much basic information.

The city of Grapevine’s published narrative is on public display and subsequently has a large influence on the accepted historical account of what happened before, during, and after the peace circle council. In line with how the Southwestern Historical Quarterly relays the facts, Grapevine’s narrative leads with Sam Houston’s heroic actions for initiating the conversation about peace between settlers and Indigenous populations; it hails him as a hero before anything else. While President Houston may be an important figure in Texas history, Caddo, Hainai, and

Anadarko chiefs do not receive credit where it is due for their role in bringing about peace talks. It was their desire for peace that brought General G.W. Terrell to their council on behalf of President Houston, beginning his speech with “The President of Texas has heard that our brothers, the red men, want to make peace with us” (Caddo Voices). Eager to reverse President Lamar’s policies, Sam Houston brought men to attend peace talks and to sign the Bird’s Fort treaty. Meanwhile, in more mainstream sources like the Southwestern Historical Quarterly and the public memorial in Grapevine, it is consistently told that Sam Houston, a very benevolent president, sought out the Indigenous tribe leaders one by one to initiate these talks. Webb also describes President Houston’s relationship with the Indigenous tribes in the Southwestern Historical Quarterly, stating that “he almost loved the Indians” but “[they] were suspicious and held back warily like guilty and stubborn children” (Webb 152). Webb assumes from one of Houston’s letters that “Houston’s plan was to begin with the near and more docile tribes, make peace with them, and then with their help reach out after the more distant and intractable Indians” (Webb 153) although the letter just suggested for the Indigenous tribes, Caddo specifically, to separate themselves from other tribes. This suspicious characterization of Indigenous people combined with the generous interpretation of Houston’s letter would have readers believe Indigenous tribes to be practically resisting peace; a harmful and defamatory depiction of the native people of what is now Texas.

Regardless of how the origin story is told, the peace circle did in fact convene, bringing together Sam Houston and his officials with Indigenous tribes except the Comanches and Wichitas. The Peace Circle Memorial specifically symbolizes this moment of collaboration. The treaty signed as a result of this meeting was one promising lasting peace, if not any rights for Indigenous people to own land in Texas, and this message is reflected in the public

commemoration piece. However, the memorial fails to explain how this treaty was signed “some forty days before Texas had completed annexation to the Union” or how after the annexation, Indigenous people were continuously forced out of their homes. The memorialized council was an effort by Indigenous tribes, particularly the Caddo, Hainai, and Anadarko to stop “the expulsion of the civilized Indians from Texas [which] began in 1839” (Porter 207). The fighting did end in 1843 with the treaty but “in 1859, except for a few strays, they were driven from Texas into the Indian Territory” (Porter 207) since the annexation mean the United States now “had political control of the Indians, but the state controlled the land they lived on” (Caddo Voices). With mass displacement following the commemorated moment, it is not hard to see why statues were built only for that moment of collaboration and good will. Anadarko chief José Maria was an example of a peacekeeping leader that put too much faith in the white settlers to choose peace over their greed for land. “In 1848, Texas Rangers killed a sixteen-year-old nephew of Caddo chief Ha-de-bah” (Caddo Voices), he was a familiar face who gave them no reason for violence. With this provocation, José Maria managed to calm his people and move twelve hundred of them yet again. Because of this, a period of homelessness set in for the Indigenous people who called these areas home for hundreds of years.

The Grapevine Peace Circle Memorial depicts a momentous event in Texas history; the treaty signed as a result of this meeting was one of few in the Republic. Those present are accurately portrayed physically, but the memorial contributes to a harmful and inaccurate narrative that demotes the role of Indigenous people while uplifting the actions of Sam Houston without including how the people he reportedly ‘loved’ ended up thrown out of their homes with nowhere safe to land.

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