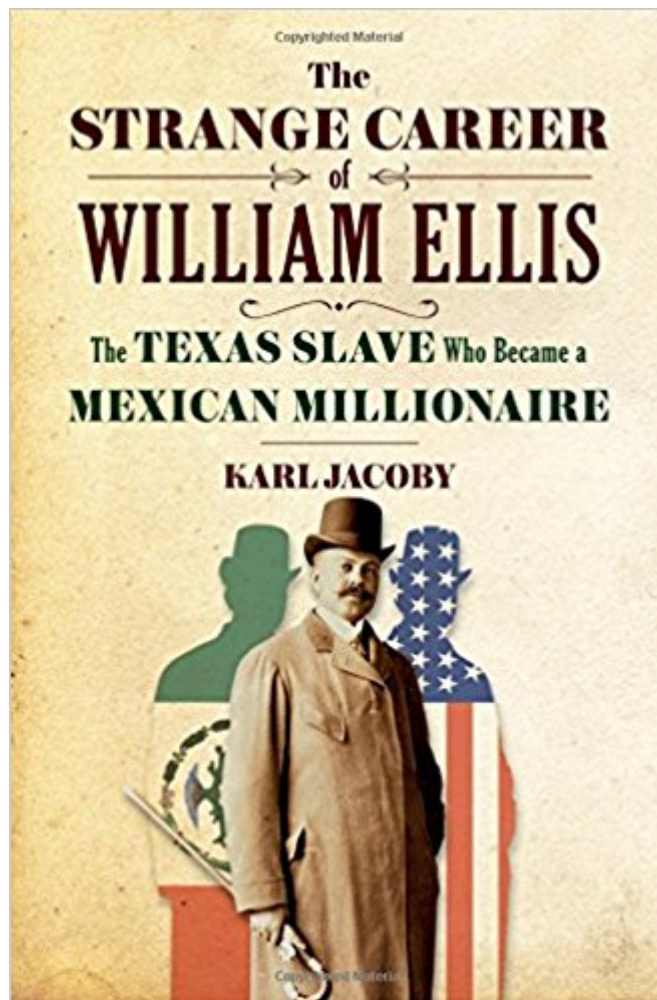




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# The Strange Career Of William Ellis: The Texas Slave Who Became A Mexican Millionaire



## Synopsis

A prize-winning historian tells a new story of the black experience in America through the life of a mysterious entrepreneur. To his contemporaries in Gilded Age Manhattan, Guillermo Eliseo was a fantastically wealthy Mexican, the proud owner of a luxury apartment overlooking Central Park, a busy Wall Street office, and scores of mines and haciendas in Mexico. But for all his obvious riches and his elegant appearance, Eliseo was also the possessor of a devastating secret: he was not, in fact, from Mexico at all. Rather, he had begun life as a slave named William Ellis, born on a cotton plantation in southern Texas during the waning years of King Cotton. After emancipation, Ellis, capitalizing on the Spanish he learned during his childhood along the Mexican border and his ambivalent appearance, engaged in a virtuoso act of reinvention. He crafted an alter ego, the Mexican Guillermo Eliseo, who was able to access many of the privileges denied to African Americans at the time: traveling in first-class train berths, staying in upscale hotels, and eating in the finest restaurants. Eliseo's success in crossing the color line, however, brought heightened scrutiny in its wake as he became the intimate of political and business leaders on both sides of the US-Mexico border. Ellis, unlike many passers, maintained a connection to his family and to black politics that also raised awkward questions about his racial status. Yet such was Ellis's skill in manipulating his era's racial codes, most of the whites he encountered continued to insist that he must be Hispanic even as Ellis became embroiled in scandals that hinted the man known as Guillermo Eliseo was not quite who he claimed to be. *The Strange Career of William Ellis* reads like a novel but offers fresh insights on the history of the Reconstruction era, the US-Mexico border, and the abiding riddle of race. At a moment when the United States is deepening its connections with Latin America and recognizing that race is more than simply black or white, Ellis's story could not be more timely or important.   
Winner of the 2017 Phillis Wheatley Award for nonfiction from the Harlem Book Fair   
1 map; 8 pages of illustrations

## Book Information

Hardcover: 336 pages

Publisher: W. W. Norton & Company; 1 edition (June 14, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 039323925X

ISBN-13: 978-0393239256

Product Dimensions: 6.5 x 1.2 x 9.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 31 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #417,662 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #207 in Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Historical > Latin America #430 in Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Latin America #434 in Books > History > Americas > United States > African Americans

## Customer Reviews

How is it that a black man named William Ellis, living in Reconstruction-era Texas, could transform himself into a Mexican magnate and conquer Wall Street, then disappear into history without a trace? Fortunately, Karl Jacoby has done the detective work to bring this intriguing larger-than-life figure back to life, challenging America's fixed concepts of race, ethnicity and national identity. This fascinating history book reads like a novel. • - Margot Lee Shetterly, author of *Hidden Figures* A masterpiece of border history. Jacoby has a biographer's eye for detail and a detective's talent for discovery, which he deftly uses to construct both the inner emotional life and larger social world of his subject. At once a history of the United States and of Mexico, *Strange Career* offers a truly transnational history of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century North America. Today, as borders are simultaneously being dissolved and hardened, Jacoby's study of Ellis's exceptional career is as timely as it is compelling. • - Greg Grandin, author of *Empire of Necessity* and *Fordlandia* William Ellis was a chameleon, a trickster, and a man determined to shape his own identity. With enormous skill, Karl Jacoby uncovers this tremendous subject, revealing Ellis's lies, and crafting a powerful new narrative about the porous borders of class, race, and national identity in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American life. Deftly moving between the improbable details of Ellis's biography and the larger political and cultural stories of the day, Jacoby demonstrates how one man's life can help us understand the past in an entirely new way. • - Martha A. Sandweiss, professor of history, Princeton University, and author of *Passing Strange: A Gilded Age Tale of Love and Deception Across the Color Line* Like all of his remarkable scholarship, Karl Jacoby's *The Strange Career of William Ellis* takes an unexpected or little-known subject and, with great insight and imagination, uses it to shed new light on our larger past. He has excavated a life that began in obscurity and was ever being reinvented, and, in so doing, offers a deep understanding of the shifting boundaries of place, race, and social standing. An extraordinary story told with extraordinary skill. • - Steven Hahn, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *A Nation under Our Feet* Elegantly written. • - Vladimir Alexandrov, *San Francisco Chronicle* [A] welcome and nuanced perspective to the racial history of the U.S. as well as a textured examination of the legacy of distrust between the United States and Mexico.

â Ellisâ™ life is also a cracking good story, illustrated with intriguing photos and helpful maps topped off by an emotionally satisfying epilogue.â • - Sara Martinez, Booklistâ œFascinatingâ | [an] important slice of American history.â • - Karen M. Thomas, Dallas News

Karl Jacoby is a professor of history at Columbia University. The author of two previous books, he has won the Albert J. Beveridge Award and a Guggenheim Fellowship, among many other honors. He lives in New York.

Interesting look at a man, William Ellis, who transcended his birth and childhood as a plantation slave in south Texas to take on a persona of an elegant, successful Mexican entrepreneur. Mr. Jacoby provides a great deal of historical background into that time period and uses it to craft an amazing story. However, at times it felt a little overwhelming in scope. Well written and well edited (thank goodness!) this is a story that would be unbelievable if not backed up with so much historical proof.

Reads like a novel but it actually falls under the category of historical non-fiction. The author did extensive research. It took him decades, he said, to investigate the life and times of William Ellis, a master "trickster". The reader will readily acknowledge the commendable biographical piece of historical non-fiction this book is. Get your copy today and read on for more insights.

This is a great read! It's a fun way to learn history and has relevant lessons for today. I'm from Texas and I learned a lot about the history of Texas and Mexico during the period right before and after the end of the Civil War. By painting a picture of those times through the life of William Ellis, the saga is personal and memorable. Issues like fluid racial lines during the era and movable cultural barriers come alive in the pages of this book. I did not understand that the Mexican constitution was written as a strong response against slavery. Ellis, born a slave, was a master at languages and cultures. His success Ã¢Â“against all odds Ã¢Â“was inspiring. Author Jacoby has woven the story together seamlessly and gave us a book that is a pleasure to read.

This is an excellent book that highlights the many struggles African Americans faced during the 19th and 20th centuries in Texas and Mexico. Mr. Jacoby wrote the autobiography of William Ellis with candor and truth. This book should be read by all who share an interest in the African American journey in the United States during the 1800's and 1900's. In fact I venture to say that it is required

reading for the African American History Buff.

This is a documentary. While it uses the story of William Ellis as its backbone, there is a lot more history surrounding the emancipation of the slaves and the issues that people of color experienced both before and after. I found the stories both interesting and enlightening.

Interesting text book style read

A biography of an unbelievable man with a great drive to succeed. Some of the history about Texas after the abolition of slavery is shocking. Who ever knew that colonization of Mexico by freed slaves was seriously contemplated?

Interesting tale about a fascinating character. Karl Jacoby weaves a surprising narrative with history about William Ellis. A true American story.

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