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WILLIAM MARSH RICE, HOUSTONIAN*

ANDREW FOREST MUIR

William Marsh Rice the man has been overshadowed in the twentieth century by William Marsh Rice the victim of an intricate murder plot\(^1\) and by William Marsh Rice the founder and endower of Rice University.\(^2\) This paper proposes to examine Rice in a domestic light, as a resident of the city of Houston between February, 1839, when he arrived as a poor young man of twenty-two,\(^3\) and December, 1863, when he left Houston as a middle-aged widower worth almost a million dollars.

Rice was of the small group of men who discerned, during the late 1830's and the early 1840's, Houston's critical geographic location. The city was then, as it is now, the most interior point of dependable navigation in all of Texas. Not only that, it was also a funnel of the mesopotamian region between the Trinity and Brazos rivers that had already begun to be a great cotton-raising area. Bringing with him from his native Massachusetts no more than youth, sturdy health, Yankee caniness, a brief apprenticeship as both clerk in and proprietor of a general store,\(^4\) and a determination to get ahead in a new and burgeoning community, Rice started a general store on the east side of Main Street between Congress and Franklin avenues. Though his firm name changed from time to time—at first Rice & Haskill, later Rice & Nichols, and finally Wm. M. Rice & Co.—and though his partners changed also—Barnabas Haskill, Ebenezer B. Nichols, Abraham Groesbeeck, and his youngest brother, Frederick Allyn Rice—the location of his store remained the same as long as he operated in Houston.\(^5\) Over a period of years Rice became the most important commission merchant and cotton factor in all of Texas. Plodding oxen brought cotton to his warehouse from as far away as Dallas and returned home with manufactured goods that Rice stocked on his shelves or supplied on individual order. In addition, as banks were illegal and nonexistent in Texas, he, like other merchants, provided all manner of banking services except the issuance of currency.

Concerned as he was with transporting a bulky commodity, Rice early became a champion of improvement in both overland transportation and river navigation. As liquid wealth existed in Texas in no more than dribbles and also as railroad construction was expensive, the first realistic attempt to improve overland transportation was directed to plank roads that had had some initial success in and around Syracuse, New York. In 1850 Rice was associated with the Houston Plank Road Co., which received a charter to build a plank road from Houston northwestward to the Brazos bottoms.\(^6\) Soon afterwards, though, the state of Texas agreed to reward railroad construction with land grants and to lend the Permanent School Fund in sufficient sums to cover the cost of railroad iron.\(^7\) There was, then, an immediate railroad boom. Rice showed his interest in railroads by serv-

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*Read at the dedication of the Nichols-Rice-Cherry house in Sam Houston Historical Park, Houston, October 9, 1962.
ing as an incorporator of both the Buffalo Bayou, Brazos and Colorado Railway Company, built during the 1850's from Harrisburg to Alleyton, and the Houston Tap and Brazoria Railway Company, built at the same time from Houston to Columbia; but the railroad attracting his determined support was the Houston and Texas Central Railway, designed to run to Red River through the area his firm was already serving. No sooner had the track of the H. & T. C. pushed out of the Buffalo Bayou timber on to the gumbo prairie through which runs the present highway to Hempstead than freight began rolling into Houston on iron tracks. When the iron finally reached Hempstead and turned northward to Millican, at which the railhead remained for the duration of the Civil War, the road had tapped the rich cotton lands of the Brazos bottoms, and the flood of staple into Houston rose sharply year by year until the disruption of the Union and the blockade of Southern ports put an end to the normal flow of cotton. In the H. & T. C. Company, Rice became stockholder, director, bondholder, trustee, and, for a short time during a critical period in the company's operations, general manager. Rice was also a director of the Washington County Railroad that connected with the H. & T. C. at Hempstead.

At the same time he was lending his capital and executive talents to the development of overland transportation, Rice was also active in projects directed to the improvement of Buffalo Bayou and Galveston Bay and the establishment of an efficient and frequent packet service between Houston and Galveston. In 1851 Rice joined a number of his fellow Houston commission merchants and three steamboat captains in organizing the Houston and Galveston Navigation Company. This firm, continuing as a limited partnership under the name of Houston Navigation Company, owned seven steamboats in 1858 that alternated in making daily runs between the two cities. The craft were kept busy carrying cotton down the bayou and bringing manufactured goods up. With the increase of the cotton traffic, Wm. M. Rice & Co. and four other firms organized the Houston Cotton Press, and, in addition, Rice was an incorporator of the Houston Insurance Company, organized to write insurance on carriers and their freights.

The success of Rice's activities can be measured by the figures he gave in census years to the assistant United States marshals engaged in enumerating the population of Houston. In 1850 he estimated his wealth at $25,000. Ten years later he estimated it at $750,000. Unlike other wealthy Texans, Rice had an estate consisting largely of personalty and not of the deceptive assets so dear to the hearts of most Southerners—land and slaves. At the outbreak of the Civil War Rice closed his firm. A unionist, who did not, however, make a nuisance of himself during the secession crisis and the unhappy days of the Confederate States of America, Rice had no incentive to deplete his exchequer by purchasing Confederate paper. Throughout the war he had a substantial hand in moving Texas cotton out of Mexico, especially Bagdad, the seaport of Matamoros, Tamaulipas. Shortly after the death of his first wife in 1863, he went to Matamoros and later to Havana, Cuba. So extensive were his wartime cotton activities that a former employee of his, Archibald St. Clair Ruthven, returned to his native Scotland to handle the European end of the business. Immediately after Appomattox, Rice told a nephew of his that he was a millionaire. His fortune had come unscathed through the collapse of the Confederacy and indeed had been augmented by profits from the
services he had rendered the Confederacy in selling the great money crop of the South for gold during a critical period.

But not all of Rice's talents, during the course of his residence in Houston, were devoted to business. He was in every respect a responsible citizen and an ornament to the limited social life that commercial Houston offered. In 1842, during the season of two Mexican invasions of San Antonio, Rice did his stint as a private in a militia company commanded by Captain Sidney Sherman. As the invasions quickly proved to be mere incursions rather than sustained occupations and, also, as President Sam Houston was, at the time, more perturbed by a crowd of Texan expansionist militiamen than he was by the hasty sorties of a handful of Mexican soldiers, the troops from the Houston area got no farther west than Columbus, at which point the President disbanded them and ordered them to return home. Rice laid down his arms and never again took them up. On occasions during the quarter century of his residence in Houston, he did his duty as a citizen in sitting upon both petit juries and the Harris County grand jury and in serving in the slave patrol, and he was also a member of a volunteer fire company, Liberty Fire Company No. 2. In addition, during the three years 1855-1857 he represented his vicinage, Ward 2 of the city of Houston, as alderman in the city council.

Although his parents had been among the founders and pillars of the Methodist Episcopal Church in western Massachusetts and he himself had been christened a Methodist at the age of four, Rice was during his Houston residence and afterwards a member, and presumably a communicant, of the Episcopal Church. Perhaps Rice's early partner, Ebenezer B. Nichols, a staunch churchman, with the aid of the Rev. Charles Gillett, who became rector of Christ Church, Houston, in 1843, induced Rice to switch ecclesiastical allegiances. From time to time he stood as godfather for the children of his close friends, and in 1845-1849 and again in 1852-1857 he was a vestryman of the parish. He also was generous in contributing to the rectors' salaries, the building and maintenance of the church, the support of music for divine services, and the decoration of the chancel for the great double first-class festivals of the church's calendar.

Rice exchanged vows with his two successive wives in Christ Church. On June 30, 1850, the Rev. Benjamin Eaton solemnized his marriage to Margaret C., daughter of Paul Bremond, who was then only beginning to promote the Houston and Texas Central Railway that was to make both his own and his son-in-law's fortunes. The first Mrs. Rice bore no children. A year after the marriage, Rice purchased a tract of land on Congress Avenue, between Fannin and San Jacinto streets, across from the courthouse, and to this plot from another lot in the same block he moved a sturdily built and tastefully decorated two-story dwelling—this house—that his partner, Ebenezer B. Nichols, had begun building shortly before he changed his residence to Galveston. Rice and his wife occupied this house for twelve years, during which from time to time they dispensed hospitality to Sam Houston. In the two connecting parlors on the ground floor, Mrs. Rice spread her festive Christmas board the entire length of the house, and from its front porch, in 1860, she presented an ornate banner to the Houston Hook and Ladder Company No. 1. In the house, also, Mrs. Rice, aged thirty, died on August 15, 1863, and from its parlors on the
following day her remains were taken for burial in the Episcopal Cemetery. Although often in Houston between 1865 and 1867, Rice never again lived in the house. Certainly his second wife, Julia Elizabeth, daughter of sometime Mayor Horace Baldwin and widow of John H. Brown, never resided in it. On the morning of June 26, 1867, Rice and she exchanged their vows in Christ Church before the Rev. Joseph Cross, and during the course of the same day they left for New York, where they were to remain as residents until Mrs. Rice’s death in 1896 and Rice's death in 1900.

Although childless, Rice had an abiding interest in education. He may have come by this interest naturally, as his father had been, during the son's childhood, a trustee of a common school district, a high school district, and a Methodist academy. Rice may also have been influenced by a close friend, the Rev. Charles Gillett, who was active during the 1840's and 1850's in furthering the cause of education by establishing and operating schools, by galvanizing opinion in support of a public school system, and by urging the establishment of the University of Texas. Certainly, during the course of his last decade in Houston, Rice served as a trustee of the Houston Educational Society and of three schools: the Houston Academy, the Texas Medical College, and the Second Ward Free School.

Although there is no evidence that Rice was gregarious, as a young man he joined a number of fraternal organizations. Early in his Houston career he was a member of Lone Star Lodge No. 1 and, somewhat later, a charter member of Ridgely Lodge No. 4, I. O. O. F. Still later, possibly under the influence of his partner, Ebenezer B. Nichols, a staunch Freemason, he became a member of Holland Lodge No. 1, A. F. & A. M., of Washington Chapter No. 2, R. A. M., and of Ruthven Commandery No. 2, K. T. Of these Masonic bodies he was still a member at the time of his death.

These, then, are the simple annals of a poor man grown rich in early Houston.

FOOTNOTES


3Rice arrived in Texas and in Houston during the first twelve days of February, 1839. See Harrisburg County Third Class Certificate No. 1294, February 12, 1839, in Fannin 3d Class (General Land Office of Texas, Austin), file 182.

4Rice's testimony, August 2-15, 1898, pp. 2-3, in William M. Rice vs. Oran T. Holt, executor of the last will of Elizabeth B. Rice, deceased, Circuit Court of the United States for the Eastern District of Texas, Equity, file 339, certified copy, Rice Litigation Papers accumulated by the law firm of Baker, Botts, Baker and Lovett of Houston (Fondren Library, Rice University). The original papers of the case were destroyed by fire when the United States courthouse in Houston burned in 1910.

5Deed Records of Harris County, Texas (County Clerk's office, Houston), F, 398-99; K, 81-82; S, 204-205; Deed Records of Austin County, Texas (County Clerk's office, Bellville), II, 503-505; Houston Morning Star, November 18, 1841; December 24, 1844; Houston Weekly Telegraph, August 12, 1853; April 7, 1858.


7Ibid., 1455-59; IV, 449-55, 897-901, 929-30.

8Ibid., III, 632-36.

9Ibid., IV, 808-16.

10Deed Records of Grimes County, Texas (County Clerk's office, Anderson), B-2, 761; Deed Records of Harris County, S, 252-53, 262-65; V, 207-11; W, 105-10; Houston Democratic Telegraph and Texas Register, October 15, 1852; Houston Weekly Telegraph, May 12, 1857; Galveston Weekly News, May 12, 1857; Houston Republic, July 4, 1857; Wm. M. Rice to J. W. Latimer, Houston, March 26, 1859, in Dallas Herald, April 6, 1859. The H. & T. C. had a locomotive named Wm. M. Rice. G. M. Best, Locomotives of the Southern Pacific Company (Boston: Railway and Locomotive Historical Society, 1941), 45-56.

11Houston Weekly Telegraph, October 29, 1856; Gammel (comp.), Laws of Texas, IV, 347-51.

12Deed Records of Harris County, O, 518-20.

13Ibid., X, 78-81.

14Gammel (comp.), Laws of Texas, IV, 1259-62; V, 1649-52; Houston Daily Telegraph, June 8, 1867.

151850 Census, Texas, Schedule 1 (National Archives, Washington, D. C.), Harris County, p. 8.
16 1860 Census, Texas, Schedule 1 (National Archives), Harris County, p. 105.

17 The last instrument relating to Rice's firm the writer has found is dated December 3, 1861. Deed Records of Harris County, Y, 594-95.

18 Rice did, however, use Confederate money to pay his debts whenever possible. Rice's testimony, August 2-15, 1898, p. 108.

19 W. M. Rice to James A. Baker, Jr., New York, September 26, 1896, in New York Supreme Court, Appellate Division—First Department in the Matter of Proving the Last Will and Testament of William M. Rice, Deceased . . ., Brief for Respondent . . . (New York: C. G. Burgoyne, 1903), 65. See also answers of Charlotte S. McKee (Rice's sister), March 31, April 6, 1904, to cross-interrogatories, Adele Baldwin and another, as administratrix, etc., of Elizabeth B. Rice, deceased, v. William M. Rice and others, executors, etc., of William M. Rice, deceased, in Rice Litigation Papers accumulated by the law firm of Hornblower, Byrne, Miller and Potter, of New York (Fondren Library, Rice University); Houston Tri-Weekly Telegraph, November 18, 1864; New York Herald, September 31, 1900. The Deed Records of Harris County contain no instruments to or by Rice between December 24, 1862, and September 14, 1865.

20 Ruthven (ca. 1814-July 24, 1865) had worked for Rice & Nichols, and he was in Scotland during the Civil War on cotton business. J. C. Kidd (comp.), History of the Grand Commandery, Knights Templar, of Texas . . . (Houston: Dealy & Baker, 1899), pt. 4, p. 4; Register Book of Deaths for the District of Govan in the County of Lanark (General Registry Office, Edinburgh, Scotland), 1865, No. 303; Glasgow Herald, July 25, 1865.

21 Interview with William A. Rice (Rice's nephew), reported in Re Mr. Clark's Trip to Springfield, Mass., Feb. 19-20, 1904, in Rice Litigation Papers accumulated by Hornblower, Byrne, Miller and Potter.

22 Public Debt Papers (Archives Division, Texas State Library, Austin), file Wm. M. Rice.

23 Minutes of the 11th District Court (Harris County District Clerk's office, Houston), C, 1; D, 142, 479; Minutes of the Harris County Commissioners Court (County Clerk's office, Houston), A, pt. 2, 106, 220; Houston Weekly Telegraph, May 30, 1859.

24 Charles D. Green, Fire Fighters of Houston, 1838-1915 (Houston: no pub., 1915), 18-19, 41.


27 Rice was baptized on June 3, 1820. Register of the Methodist Society,
Springfield, from 1815-1838 (pastor's office, Asbury First Methodist Church), 83.

28Of Charles Gillette League, on November 10, 1846; William Rice Groesbeeck, on April 5, 1849; and Williametta Rice Stiles, on February 12, 1852. Register of Christ Church, Houston, 1843-1873 (Christ Church Cathedral office, Houston).

29Minutes of the Vestry of Christ Church, Houston, 1839-1875 (Christ Church Cathedral office, Houston), passim.

30Melodeon Subscription, undated; Subscription List to pay Debts to Apr. 1st 1848; List of names of persons who contributed to defray the expenses [sic] to decorate the Church for the Christmas holly days [sic] 1849; Subscription List for repairs of Christ Church Decr 1853; Rectory Subscription 1857; W. H. Eliot Treas a/c for 1862 (Christ Church Cathedral office, Houston).

31Houston Democratic Telegraph and Texas Register, July 4, 1850; Marriage Records of Harris County (County Clerk's office, Houston), B, 255.

32Deed Records of Harris County, P, 133. See also ibid., 378, 586; S, 310; vol. 2, pp. 490-91; vol. 6, p. 224; vol. 8, pp. 273-74; vol. 29, pp. 632-33.

33Writers' Program of the Works Projects Administration (comp.), Houston, a History and Guide (Houston: Anson Jones Press, 1942), 321.

34Bernhardt Wall and Amelia Williams, Following General Sam Houston from 1793 to 1863 (Austin: Steck Company, c1935), 233. For other materials on the relationship of Rice and Houston, see Houston Telegraph and Texas Register, November 12, 1845; Houston Weekly Telegraph, November 20, December 4, 1860; and B. H. Carroll, Jr., Standard History of Houston, Texas, from a Study of the Original Sources (Knoxville: Published by H. W. Crew & Co., 1912), 196-97.

35Sallyport (Houston), March, 1952, p. 5.

36Houston Weekly Telegraph, May 8, 1860.

37Register of Christ Church, Houston, 1843-1873. Later the remains were removed to lot 28, section F, Glenwood Cemetery, Houston, where there is a stone recording Mrs. Rice's terminal dates (September 28, 1832—August 15, 1863).

38Houston Daily Telegraph, June 27, 1867; Marriage Records of Harris County, E, 362; Register of Christ Church, Houston, 1843-1873.


40Deed Records of Harris County, S, 770-71.

41Gammel (comp.), Laws of Texas, IV, 783.

42Houston Weekly Telegraph, April 24, 1860.

43Ibid., May 22, 1860.
44W. H. Walker, *Odd Fellowship in America and Texas* (Dallas: no pub., 1912), 127, 145.


46For the subsequent history of Rice’s long life, see Muir, “Murder on Madison Avenue: The Rice Case Revisited,” *Southwest Review*, XLIV (Winter, 1959), 1-9.