



REMEMBERING RICE:

HOW SHOULD THE UNIVERSITY ACKNOWLEDGE
AND REPRESENT ITS FOUNDER'S PAST?

William Marsh Rice, who chartered the Rice Institute, is popularly remembered for his philanthropy and for his dramatic murder. Often left out of the common narrative is his involvement in slavery, and the Texas cotton trade. This paper explores the current remembrance of Rice, details his connections to slavery, and provides a recommendation to Rice University on how to address the history of its founder. This recommendation is contextualized with how other universities have begun to address their ties to slavery.

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Despite the abolition of slavery by the Thirteenth Amendment over a century and a half ago, America still wrestles with how to remember and address slavery's painful legacy. One of American slavery's most common associations is with the growing of cash crops, but it also built and funded many of the early institutions in the American colonies and later states. During the past decade and a half, institutions of higher education, starting with Brown University in its ground-breaking study, have begun to take a closer look at how they were founded and what role the slave trade had in their early history.¹ Over thirty American universities, in both the North and South, have even joined an international group of universities whose goal is to research the lasting effects of slavery in their institutions.² These studies, as well as work by independent historians, show that many early American universities had a connection to slavery. For some it was through direct financing from slave traders. Others utilized slave labor to build and maintain university grounds, or they advanced the pseudo-science of white racial superiority that helped to moralize the ownership of other human beings.³ These universities, in addition to their connections to slavery, were all founded before 1865, the year that marks the end of legal slavery in the United States. But could there be universities founded after the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment that still benefited from slavery, albeit indirectly?

Rice University, which opened its doors in 1912, is a prime example of a university founded after abolition that owes its existence to the legacy of slavery. While the Rice Institute, later changed to Rice University, was not active during the time of slavery, its founder and namesake, William Marsh Rice, benefitted from the slavery driven economy of antebellum Texas.

William Marsh Rice was a New England businessman who moved to Texas after the panic of 1837.⁴ He spent nearly three decades in Houston as a merchant before splitting time between Texas, New York, and New Jersey for the rest of his life.⁵ Perhaps Rice's greatest accomplishment, which will place him in the footnotes of Texas history forever, was the donation of his fortune upon his death to endow the Rice Institute in Houston.

Outside of this action, Rice is not a heavily studied figure. He has one widely published full-length biography, published in 1972 and based on the research notes of Rice University professor and Rice graduate, Andrew Forest Muir.⁶ This book, and Muir's notes, lay the groundwork for most of our current understanding of William Marsh Rice. Muir's biography paints a picture of an astute businessman, who helped to found and develop the city of Houston.⁷ As Rice's fortune grew, so did his idea to use his wealth to advance education. William Marsh Rice's story has a tragic ending, however. On the night of September 23rd, 1900, Rice was murdered by his butler in a conspiracy to defraud him of his fortune. Muir sets this drama at the center stage of

Rice's biography, and it continues to dominate the modern remembrances of Rice. A statue of Rice occupies the center of the main academic quad at Rice University, and when tour groups pass by, the one story they tell of his life is the tale of his dramatic death. Rice University's website has a small history section under the "about" tab, however, it only starts in 1891, with the signing of the Institute Charter.⁸ Included are two paragraphs of biographical information for William Marsh Rice that state he was a businessman, chartered the university, and explain the circumstances of his murder.⁹ Rice University's Fondren Library constantly curates rotating exhibitions across campus, including a current installation in the student center titled "The Butler Really Did Do It: The Murder of William Marsh Rice."¹⁰ William Marsh Rice's story is at risk of becoming a lie by omission, by which his death has become so sensationalized that his actions have been forgotten. A philanthropist and the victim of a gruesome murder, William Marsh Rice was also a slaveholder and profited from the Texas cotton trade before and during the Civil War.

While Muir's work acknowledges that Rice did own slaves, Muir downplays this portion of his life. In the 180-page biography, Muir sets aside only 12 pages to cover Rice's involvement with cotton, slavery, and the Civil War.¹¹ This period represents a third of Rice's life. Muir's biography very carefully cultivates a complimentary view of Rice. Without passing judgement on Rice based on modern sensibilities, it is important to clearly and fully detail the business activities in which he was involved.

Muir describes Rice as a general store owner, who acted as an importer and distributor and provided the people of the newly founded city of Houston with their assorted sundries.¹² Muir describes his customers as "settlers and plantation owners" and the "ladies of the gulf coast."¹³ At the time, Texas had a primarily agrarian economy, as the discovery of oil and the rise of the energy industry did not take place until after the turn of the century, a year after William Marsh Rice's death.¹⁴ Less than five percent of Texas families made their living off of commerce professions, but the major merchants and traders in the state were primarily located in Houston and Galveston.¹⁵ Within the agricultural community, the most important cash crop was cotton, which was planted, cultivated, harvested, and processed using slave labor.¹⁶ In 1860, slaveholding farmers harvested 27,758 bales of cotton worth \$999,288.¹⁷ Though Houston had some of the largest amount of commercial activity in the state, the surrounding counties had some of the largest concentrations of slave labor. In 1850, the counties of Brazoria, Fort Bend, Matagorda, and Wharton, all located immediately southwest of Houston, were four of six counties in the state with majority slave populations.¹⁸ By 1860, thirteen counties in Texas had majority slave populations, with nine adjacent to Houston to the north and southwest.¹⁹ The existence of a majority slave population likely indicates that plantation slavery was practiced by at least some of the residents of these counties. William Marsh Rice's

own brother, Frederick Allyn Rice, had a plantation in Fort Bend County that, in 1863, consisted of over 1600 acres of land and 43 slaves.²⁰ These wealthy planters who surrounded Houston would have looked to merchants like Rice to buy goods imported from the North and Europe and paid for these goods with money earned from slave labor.

In addition to their roles as store owners, Rice and his business partners served as sources of capital and loans. When Texas politicians were writing the Republic of Texas constitution, they drew influence from Jacksonian economic principles, and chose to ban the existence of banks.²¹ This meant that local merchants and planters, who had excess wealth, were the only people in their communities who could provide loans to drive economic growth. Rice's firm, and other merchant firms like his, "extended credit as part of their business transactions, thereby playing the part of private banks."²² While some of these loans were intended to sustain farmers before they were paid for their crops, others went towards building new business ventures. In 1849, one such loan of up to \$4,000 was granted to James Love of Brazoria County to purchase the materials necessary to begin processing sugar at his plantation.²³ While cotton was the main cash crop in Texas, slaves were also involved in sugar production in South Texas. Rice was not only involved in the slave economy through his acceptance of money from plantation owners, but he also gave plantation owners money to expand their businesses. The terms of these loans were also noteworthy; under collateral, Rice and his firm were entitled to recoup slaves as payment for defaulted loans. This was a common practice in antebellum Texas, where slaves were treated as capital assets.²⁴ This was the manner by which Rice received some of the fifteen plus slaves he owned in his lifetime.²⁵ While Rice's position as a merchant allowed him to interact passively with the slave economy by merely accepting the money of plantation owners, his actions as a lender rendered him an active participant who helped to grow the plantation businesses around Houston and acquire slaves through debt repayment.

As an importer and exporter of goods, Rice was directly involved with the largest export of Texas, cotton. Muir's original biography does not discuss the scale of Rice's cotton exportation; it merely notes that he was involved with the business. The updated centennial edition of *William Marsh Rice and His Institute* features some new documents, including a letter from 1852 in which R. G. Dunn & Company, a credit score assessor, notes that Rice "had made considerable money on cotton recently."²⁶ Rice's ledger books from 1857 to 1862 reveal that he had a separate account from that of his imported goods which strictly tracked his buying and selling of cotton bales. The ledgers reveal that Rice bought from farm owners, then sold in bulk to other exporters who handled transport out of Texas. His purchase of cotton was settled both in cash payments to these producers, as well as settlements for their debts in purchasing his goods. In March through mid-October of 1858, Rice's ledgers

show credits of over \$50,000 from his cotton accounts, meaning he resold \$50,000 worth of cotton in eight months.²⁷ This would be valued at approximately \$1.5 million dollars in 2018 when adjusted using consumer price index ratios.²⁸ While this number accounts for revenue and not profit, it does show that a large volume of cotton moved through Rice's business. To put this in perspective, Rice's total worth in 1858 was thought to be \$400,000, and he was likely the richest man in Houston.²⁹ Without making a moral judgment of Rice, he was involved through the cotton trade in profiting from slavery, and it should be clearly stated and understood that he had a role in perpetuating its existence in Texas.

Perhaps the most direct way in which Rice participated in the peculiar institution was through slave ownership. The 1860 census lists Rice as owning fifteen slaves, ranging in age from three to forty-five years old.³⁰ In addition to the slaves Rice received from defaulted loans, he also purchased slaves. One example is Amanda, a seventeen-year-old he bought in 1861 for \$1050.³¹ Though cotton exportation was one of Rice's businesses, he never participated in plantation slavery. Muir writes, "Cannily, he was too shrewd to get into cotton raising himself, subject as it was to the endless uncertainties of labor."³² This is a euphemistic manner of saying that Rice, with great foresight, avoided growing cotton himself, partly because it would have been difficult to control and manage so many slaves. Instead, his slaves would have worked in his home, as well as potentially around his business.³³ In 1856, one of Rice's slaves, thirty-year-old Merinda, ran away. Rice believed that she was probably "lurking around town" and placed a wanted-ad in the *Houston Telegraph*, offering a "liberal reward for her apprehension."³⁴ In addition to his efforts to track down his own runaway slaves, Rice served for a year on the local slave patrol in Houston.³⁵ Rice, therefore, actively worked to prevent the loss of property both of his own slaves and in the larger Houston community. If Rice had only received slaves through defaulted loans, one could theorize that his slave ownership was a purely passive consequence of his business, but these actions reveal that he deliberately engaged in slave ownership.

A claim in Muir's biography that Rice was a Unionist risks misrepresenting Rice's feelings about the Civil War and secession.³⁶ The term "Unionist" is commonly perceived as someone who supported the federal government and its policies during the Civil War. These policies include efforts taken by the Lincoln administration to begin limiting slavery, such as the Emancipation Proclamation issued in 1863. However, this is not a complete description of Unionism, which in the antebellum period was simply the belief that the United States should remain a single united country. By this broader definition, the term Unionist carries no judgments on slavery or preference for government policy addressing it. A popular form of Unionism in the antebellum South, especially among merchants and businessmen, was a movement called Constitutional Unionism.³⁷ Members of this movement were

in favor of keeping the Union together, “but were by no means opposed to slavery.”³⁸ In 1860, the Constitutional Union ticket provided a “conservative alternative [to Southern Democrats] for Southern voters who wished to preserve slavery within the Union.”³⁹ Merchants during this time-period, including Rice, were caught between two regional economies, and many viewed secession as a “dire threat to their economic well-being.”⁴⁰ They relied on the industrial goods produced in the North to sell in their stores, but they also needed the Southern slave economy to succeed in order to have customers.⁴¹ Both political extremes, secession and abolition, would spell disaster for Southern merchants. As a result, they clung to a middle option, which was to maintain the status quo.

Governor Sam Houston provides an excellent example of a Texas politician who supported the ideals of Unionism. A slave owner, Houston believed that despite the rise of the Republican Party and Lincoln, the United States and its Constitution still provided the best defense of property rights, and by extension slavery.⁴² Houston viewed the Republican party as a Northern sectional party, and instead of advocating for Southern secession, he “ask[ed] not for the defeat of sectionalism by sectionalism, but by nationality.”⁴³ He saw uniting with Northerners who opposed abolition as the only way forward for the South. Houston most closely aligned with the Constitutional Union party; he finished second for their presidential nomination in the 1860 national convention, and eventually endorsed the party’s candidate after a failed independent presidential run.⁴⁴ Sam Houston is significant to understanding Rice’s beliefs, as Rice was considered by Muir to be a “lifelong admirer of Sam Houston.”⁴⁵ An interaction between Houston and Rice is recorded in an 1897 letter, in which Rice reminisces about the last time he had seen “Old Sam,” who had come into Rice’s store shortly before his death in 1863.⁴⁶ Muir notes that Rice twice wrote to Sam Houston asking him to give public addresses.⁴⁷ Rice also publicly urged Sam Houston to convene the Texas legislature six days after Lincoln’s election, ostensibly to address calls for Texas’s secession.⁴⁸

While we may not have any direct writings from Rice detailing his political beliefs, we can deduce an educated guess based on the beliefs of those with similar occupations and the types of politicians that he supported. Rice most likely would have opposed secession. However, it is unrealistic to believe that Rice supported any type of abolition movement, since his economic prosperity was tied to a slave-driven economy. Instead, he might have believed that there would be more stability in the Union than in a secessionist Confederacy that might be on a path towards armed conflict. This set of beliefs would have allied him with the conservative sectional parties that supported slavery but opposed secession, such as the Constitutional Union movement. He most likely did not support liberal Northern sectional parties, such as the fledgling Republican Party. To describe Rice simply as a Unionist is to ignore a complex spectrum of his possible beliefs about the Union and slavery.

Rice's actions following secession provide further evidence that he did not have an ideological allegiance to the North. During the beginning of the Civil War, Rice remained in Houston, where he continued to operate his business.⁴⁹ Two of his customers during this time were the state of Texas and the Confederate States of America. Ledgers show that in 1861, the CSA used Rice's service as a financier to pay nearly \$17,000 in salaries to Confederate military officers.⁵⁰ There are also records that indicate Rice's first wife, Margaret Bremond Rice, provided material support to the Confederacy through uniform donations to troops and monetary donations to troops' families.⁵¹ While Rice may have preferred for Texas to stay in the Union, he nonetheless supported and advanced the interests of the Confederacy following secession.

This leads to an important question: how much of William Marsh Rice's fortune, and the university's original endowment, can be traced back to profits made from slave labor?

William Marsh Rice's true allegiance was likely to profits and his business interests. As the war dragged on, Federal blockades of Southern ports made it difficult to import Northern and European goods and to export Southern cotton.⁵² These products were the basis of Rice's business. Like many Texans, he was forced to consider smuggling through Mexico in order to continue exporting cotton and importing European goods.⁵³ Rice's wife died unexpectedly in 1863, and shortly afterwards Rice decided to leave the city. He travelled to Mexico, to the town of Matamoros.⁵⁴ Matamoros was a hub for smuggling activity, which took Texas cotton out of the Confederacy and around Union blockades.⁵⁵ Most shipping records from Matamoros have been destroyed, but historians estimate that over 320,000 bales of cotton were smuggled out of the port, which would comprise more than twenty percent of the Confederacy's total cotton exports.⁵⁶ It is not immediately clear whether Rice cooperated with the Confederacy or worked outside of its smuggling system. The Confederacy attempted to control and benefit from the exportation of cotton, but "private profiteers, having arrived first with the most, dominated the trade throughout the war, making enormous profits from it."⁵⁷ The smuggling of cotton afforded the opportunity for the most enterprising of businessmen to make millions.⁵⁸ After Rice's cotton left Matamoros, it travelled to Cuba, and then onto the United Kingdom, where Archibald St. Clair Ruthven, Rice's former employee, received it.⁵⁹

Despite the absence of records detailing whether Rice worked with or around the Confederacy, there is significant documentation showing that his former

business partner and close friend, E. B. Nichols, was involved in cotton speculation and evaded paying money to the Confederacy by working with the state of Texas towards the end of the war.⁶⁰ During the middle of the war, Rice and Nichols appear to have worked together to sell cotton. In a series of letters between Rice and E. B. Nichols in September of 1863, Nichols complains that months after sending cotton to Mexico “nothing has been done with our cotton,” but two days later he had “arranged with the forwarding agents to send our cotton . . . at once.”⁶¹ These letters carry significance, as Nichols uses the term “our cotton.” Later in the letter Nichols references other shipments using the phrase “my cotton,” meaning the cotton shipment that had been stalled was shared by Rice and Nichols. In the letter from September 12, 1863, Nichols also complains about the difficulties of doing business from across the border, stating that “we have slept on our rights . . . if one of us had come here a month ago we could have gotten all our cotton off.”⁶² This provides a potential motive for Rice’s decision to move to Mexico after the death of his first wife. Whether Rice cooperated with the Confederacy or acted as a private profiteer, his wartime cotton smuggling, by which he benefited from inflated prices of the scarce resource, made him rich.

Following the war, Rice briefly returned to Houston before heading north to New Jersey, where greater financial opportunities existed. The import business would have been difficult in Reconstruction Houston, where federal troops governed and controlled property.⁶³ The finances of the city were also in turmoil, as those who held Confederate currency and bonds were left with useless paper. Rice had escaped financial ruin by avoiding the use of Confederate bonds in favor of gold and silver coins, selling his merchant business, and investing heavily in real estate.⁶⁴ When he believed that the South was no longer the best seat of his business, he moved, seeking better financial stability.

An examination of Rice’s actions before, during, and after the Civil War reveals that his true ideological loyalty was to economic prosperity, whatever would make him the most money. He was a slave owner who directly participated in the cotton trade and profited from the institution of slavery. He may have been anti-secession, but he likely would not have supported any government action that limited his ability to profit from slave labor. When cooperation was advantageous for his business, he worked directly with the Confederacy. During the war he smuggled cotton, potentially for his own gain as a privateer. When Rice left Texas in 1867, he was a rich man.

This leads to an important question: how much of William Marsh Rice’s fortune, and the university’s original endowment, can be traced back to profits made from slave labor? Towards the end and directly after the Civil War, Rice began to buy land and increase his wealth through real estate. Real estate made up a large portion

of the endowment that Rice pledged to the Institute.⁶⁵ Some of this land, therefore, could have been purchased directly with proceeds from the cotton trade. At the very least, Rice's fortune was based on his early success in Houston. If he had not been a successful merchant who participated in the slave economy, Rice University might not exist.

What responsibility does the University have to acknowledge its founder's actions, especially since its first students did not arrive until over a decade after his death? Though William Marsh Rice was never involved in the daily operations of the Rice Institute, he wrote the founding charter and set the initial vision for the school. This included a provision that instruction at the Institute was to be for "white inhabitants of the City of Houston, and State of Texas," which became an issue when the University began the process of integration.⁶⁶ Several alumni filed a lawsuit that attempted to block integration on the basis that the founding charter, and William Marsh Rice's intentions, only provided for the education of white students. In hopes of providing evidence during the trial, Rice historian Andrew Forest Muir searched for any statement from William Marsh Rice outside of the charter detailing his intentions about who could receive an education at Rice. However, he found nothing. Rice University eventually won the court case, successfully integrating, but it was "the last university of its type to complete this action."⁶⁷ As the University's founder, William Marsh Rice and his beliefs had an outsized effect on campus policy long past his death, even when similar organizations no longer accepted these ideas. The University also stands as the most visible piece of Rice's legacy and will be associated with him as long as it bears his name.

Rice University now has a unique opportunity to be proactive in understanding and acknowledging its connection to slavery and to be a leader among its peer institutions. While we cannot change our past, it is time for us to better understand our history, and rise to address it. In early 2019, political scandals surrounding blackface incidents inspired a Rice student to examine and begin sharing examples of racist pictures published in past issues of Rice's *Campanile* yearbook.⁶⁸ This story was picked up by the media, and prompted Rice University President David Leebron to send a campus wide email addressing the fact that Rice has a "clear and painful," history of racial intolerance.⁶⁹ One of his calls to action was for "members of the Rice community . . . to learn about our own history and acknowledge aspects of that history that are distasteful and painful."⁷⁰ This email is encouraging because it shows an awareness and willingness from the University's administration to address past actions. The administration could go further, however, as the earliest event President Leebron mentioned in his email was the creation of the Institute charter in 1891.⁷¹ To support President Leebron's call to learn about and acknowledge Rice's history, the University should charter a working group to further research William Marsh Rice's connections to slavery and provide a formal



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recommendation to the university on how to recognize this chapter in its founder's past.

Other institutions of higher education that explored their historical connections to slavery have commonly employed chartered working groups. These working groups are typically composed of history professors, current and former students, administrators, and other university stakeholders, and often spend months to years completing in-depth research. They then produce a report of their findings and often provide a recommendation to the administration on actions that can be taken on campus to incorporate this history into physical and published remembrance. Brown University completed the first of this type of study in 2006, after the university president commissioned the group to study Brown's historical connection to slavery and the general history of injustices and reparations.⁷² The study found a deep institutional connection to slavery and recommended that Brown report the full truth of these findings, memorialize the fact that the university had been involved with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, and create further initiatives and programs to study injustice.⁷³ The University of Virginia, who commissioned a study in 2013 to "report on UVA's historical relationship with slavery, highlighting opportunities for recognition and commemoration," provides another example of success by this type of working group.⁷⁴ The report, which was delivered in 2018, contains a recommendation to create sizable changes to the physical landscape of UVA by placing commemorative markers at historical locations around campus that were associated with slavery, as well as creating new monuments on campus dedicated to the memory of enslaved laborers.⁷⁵ Georgetown University commissioned the Working Group on Slavery, Memory, and Reconciliation in 2015 to engage with the university's history and propose a path forward for its community and those affected by Georgetown's historical actions.⁷⁶ The report was published in 2016 and contained recommendations for physical memorialization on campus, as well as steps towards reconciliation with those affected by Georgetown's involvement in slavery.⁷⁷ Georgetown has connected with descendants of slaves who were associated with the university, brought them into the conversation about how to move forward, and offered preferential status to these descendants for any program that factors legacy affiliation into the admission process.⁷⁸ This is a step towards not only acknowledging the past, but also working to overcome its effects. While these are only a few of the examples of working groups chartered to explore slavery at universities, these studies, and others like them, create a strong precedent for Rice to begin its own process of historical recognition.

Commissioning further study into William Marsh Rice will be integral to this effort, as the historical record is incomplete. There are still gaps in the story of William Marsh Rice's personal and professional life. There is a chance that there either was no original documentation or that it has not been preserved and is lost

to history. However, it has been over five decades since Andrew Forest Muir did his research, and new primary source documents, such as the Rice Papers collection at The Heritage Society, have been found. Neither the original publishing of Muir's biography nor the updated Centennial Edition incorporate these documents. By chartering a working group, the University would be able to give a team of professional historians the time and resources needed to continue to research this issue and hopefully close some of the knowledge gaps.

A working group would also give students a chance to gain valuable research experience in the humanities, as well as allow representation and input from a diverse selection of student groups. Rice University takes pride in its status as a world-class research university; giving students the chance to work with professional historians on in-depth archival research would further the University's educational mission. Rice also has a rather unique campus culture, in which its undergraduate students enjoy and expect a certain level of autonomy and responsiveness from the administration. If Rice chooses to address its history, students will need to be key stakeholders in the efforts of shaping the University's response.

Understanding our past, good and bad, is a vital part of understanding the present, as well as shaping the future. History is not just confined to textbooks, but also has a tangible effect in shaping the environment around us. Rice University still feels the effects of the racially intolerant views held by previous students and faculty. This history cannot be changed, but by understanding it, the Rice community can come together to understand where we stand today and where we want to stand in the future. The whole truth is necessary to combat biases that distort history to serve an agenda. Historians thus serve a vital purpose, to find the truth of our past, keep us informed of it, and accurately preserve the historical record. It is time that William Marsh Rice's truth comes to light. Rice was a philanthropist, and his generosity has, arguably, positively impacted the lives of the entire Rice community. This philanthropy, however, should not absolve or erase the actions he took in regards to slavery. His statue, and interred remains, take up a prominent position in the University's academic quad. He is placed on a pedestal, rising above the rest of us, both metaphorically and literally. Most students walk by this statue daily, and it is a near mandatory stop for all visitors to campus. However, few of the University's stakeholders know the full story of his history, instead fixating on the dramatic circumstances of his death. How can they know his full history when it previously has not been openly shared? Historical context should be added both to the larger than life physical space, as well as the written and oral histories the University shares about its founder. William Marsh Rice was a man of his time, but he chose to participate in slavery when other options existed. In his home state of Massachusetts, slavery had already been abolished by the time he was solidifying his fortune on the eve of the Civil War. Even though Rice University and its campus may not have been

directly touched by slavery like other American universities, it serves as the largest and most visible legacy of William Marsh Rice, and it therefore has a platform to recognize the role slavery played in its benefactor's life. It is time for Rice University to acknowledge the complicated history of the man who sits upon a pedestal at the center of its campus.

NOTES

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