

Houston Philosophical Society Dinner and Lecture

Cohen House, Rice University

October 3, 2019

After cocktails and dinner, President Browning announced that this is the 701st meeting of the Society in this its centennial year, "Leading Houston: Past, Present and Future." Later this month, at the regular October meeting on the 17th, Anthony Brandt and Evans Hankey will present a program on creativity.

He reminded members to turn in their nominations for new members. He announced that former Houston mayor Bill White will speak at the November 19 meeting.

He then announced the evening's program, "Town, Gown and the Roots of the Houston Philosophical Society."

The first speaker was **Randall Hall**, a past president of the Society and the editor of the Journal of Southern History, who spoke on "William Marsh Rice and his Institute." Rice was born in 1816 in Springfield, Massachusetts. He dropped out of school at 15 and worked for a time in his father's store before starting a store of his own. During the Panic of 1837, he moved to Texas. He managed the bar at the Milam House Hotel, then opened a store and invested in realty and moneylending. By 1840, his store operated as a cotton factor and supplier to cotton farmers. Houston was booming, and so was Rice. He invested in land and the railroad, and by 1860 was very wealthy. Throughout the Civil War, he prospered by shipping cotton through Mexico while the Texas coast was under Union blockade. In 1867 he moved to New York, where he was inspired by the Cooper Union and began studying education. He often returned to Houston to visit, and in 1891 he chartered the Rice Institute.

Rice's second wife Libbie came from a philanthropic family and was interested in various charities. A lawyer named Orren Holt persuaded her to make a will, leaving her "community property share" of Rice's estate to her family and various charitable beneficiaries. However, New York (where the couple resided) was not a community property state; this led to years of litigation.

The second speaker, **Kate Kirkland**, took up the story. On September 24, 1901, Rice's valet telegraphed Captain James Baker that Rice was dead. Baker was a lawyer and the son of a lawyer (the founder of Baker & Botts). He had worked for Rice for years, and when he received the telegram he boarded a train to New York City. The ensuing investigation showed that the valet had conspired with one Albert Patrick to forge a will and poison Rice. The valet cooperated with the investigation, and only Albert Patrick was tried for the murder. The forged will was set aside, the bequests made by Libbie Rice were settled by James Baker, and in 1896 the bulk of the Rice estate was used to create Rice Institute.

Baker had studied colleges, and had bigger plans for the new institute than Rice had had. He decided to make the school a research center and a civic partner with the city of Houston. He found an excellent president, with whom he worked closely for the rest of his life. He managed the Rice endowment and supplemented it through canny investment. He lived until 1941, his "head, heart and brain" at the service of the new school.

The third speaker, **John Boles**, spoke of Edgar Odell Lovett, the first president of Rice and its intellectual architect. Lovett was recruited from Princeton, where he had become a full professor after only three years. He had doctorates in math and astronomy, and had a bright future at Princeton. He was

persuaded to take on the new institute and began with a nine-month trip to see the world's great universities. He formed an ambitious plan for Rice, insisting on excellent professors from all over the world, focusing first on science but intending to broaden as time and money allowed. He emphasized five things: reason, beauty, fellow men, teaching and learning. In October 1912, Rice opened with a symposium, a "galaxy of savants," elaborately advertised and produced, announcing that Rice would become an academic giant, a "university for the world."

Lovett instituted Rice's college system and honor system. He intended the school to be an integral part of the city, and provided community outreach programs—free lectures, lectures in downtown Houston. He was Rice's president from 1912 to 1947, and provided the ethos it retains today.

The Houston Philosophical Society was founded in 1919, and in 1927 it moved its headquarters to Rice.