



William Marsh Rice

March 14, 1816 - September 23, 1900

New York, New York

William Marsh Rice - Massachusetts-born merchant who built a fortune in Texas cotton, real estate, and railroads and left the endowment that became Rice University - was murdered in his New York City apartment on September 23, 1900. He was eighty-four. Born March 14, 1816, in Springfield, Massachusetts, he arrived in Houston when it was still a raw port town, prospered through commerce and land, and eventually drafted a will meant to found a tuition-free institute for the advancement of literature, science, and art in Texas.

The death itself became a Gilded Age scandal: his valet and a crooked lawyer conspired to forge a new will and hasten the inheritance with chloroform. Detectives, trials, and newspaper coverage followed; the forged scheme collapsed, and the original educational bequest survived to open what is now Rice University in Houston. Historians of Texas philanthropy still treat that courtroom fight as the violent birth story of a research university.

New York was his late-life address more than his identity; Houston remained the city his fortune was meant to reshape. He died far from the campus that would carry his name, yet the papers that survived him did what the conspirators could not undo.

He died in New York on September 23, 1900. Students still cross a Houston quad paid for by a merchant who never saw the classrooms.

Rice's gift was long-horizon philanthropy - turning frontier commerce into a permanent school. Notice Nearby keeps the death date so September 23 remembers the Massachusetts trader whose murder nearly stole a university and instead sealed its founding.

Services

Murdered in New York City, September 23, 1900. Texas merchant and philanthropist; endowment founded Rice University in Houston.

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