

# The Cornerstone

WINTER 2000

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE RICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOL. 5, NO. 2

## AN AUSPICIOUS BEGINNING:

### THE SELECTION OF EDGAR ODELL LOVETT AS UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT

By JOHN B. BOIES

William Marsh Rice, a native of Springfield, Massachusetts, came to the year-old town of Houston in 1837 determined to prosper as a merchant. By dint of hard work and shrewd decisions, he had become by the eve of the Civil War one of the two richest men in Texas. During the war he moved his cotton marketing operations to Matamoros, Mexico, to escape the effect of the Union blockade of the Confederate States of America. By the end of the war Rice was the richest man in the state, and he was already making preparations to move back to the Northeast. His first wife having died in 1863, Rice remarried in 1867, this time to a young widow, Elizabeth Baldwin Brown, who he called Libbie. About 1870 he and Libbie began spending the summer months in New York City (except for five years in the mid-1870s when they experimented with living on a farm in nearby New Jersey) and wintering in Houston. But despite this change of residence to New York, Rice's business investments remained centered in Texas, and he continued to supervise his prop-



William Marsh Rice

erties with sharp attention.

Although Rice had not attended college, sometime during this period he became aware of two educational institutions that had been established by entrepreneurs, Girard College in Philadelphia (founded by Stephen Girard and free of charge to white orphan boys) and the Cooper Union in New York City (a coeducational collegiate institution founded by Peter Cooper). Drawing from these two examples, Rice

contemplated founding an orphans home in New Jersey and even wrote a will in 1882 leaving much of his estate to the proposed home. Shortly thereafter, on one of his inspection trips to Houston in 1886 or 1887, one of Rice's old friends, Cesar M. Lombardi, suggested that, because Rice had made his money in Houston and had no children as beneficiaries, he might leave a memorial to the city by endowing a public high school building. Rice, by nature cautious, began to consider this proposition, but what began to take shape in his mind was far more grand. Exactly how grand was revealed on May 13, 1891, when, again in Houston, he

called together six of his most trusted friends to reveal his project.

Mr. Rice announced that he was incorporating the William Marsh Rice Institute for the Advancement of Literature, Science and Art, backed by an indenture of \$200,000, with the clear indication that more would be forthcoming. These six friends – Frederick A. Rice, James A. Baker, Jr., Emanuel Raphael, Cesar Lombardi, John E. McAshan, and A. S. Richardson – were named as trustees, and Rice made clear that he wanted nothing done toward actually establishing the institute until after his death. What did Rice expect of the new institute? The charter of incorporation called for the “establishment and maintenance, in the City of Houston, Texas, of a Public Library, and the maintenance of an Institution for the Advancement of Literature, Science, Art, Philosophy and Letters; the establishment and maintenance of a Polytechnic school; for procuring and maintaining scientific collections; collections of chemical and philosophical apparatus, mechanical and artistic models, drawings, pictures and statues; and for cultivating other means of instruction for the white inhabitants of the City of Houston, and the State of Texas. The polytechnic was to be coeducational, “free and open to all,” and “non-sectarian and non-partisan.” What were the trustees to make of this hodgepodge of purposes that never actually used the words college or university? And what

*continued on page 3*

# The Rice Historical Society

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NEWSLETTER DESIGN  
BY TOMORROW'S KEY

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*First Board of Trustees and Faculty of the Rice Institute  
(Left to Right)*

*W. F. Edwards, F. E. Johnson, T. L. Blayney, P.H. Arbuckle, E.O. Lovett, B.B. Rice, W.W.  
Watkin, E. Raphael, G.C. Evans, J.E. McAshan, J.T. McCants, J.A. Baker, H.A. Wilson*

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did they know of such matters anyway? They no doubt were somewhat relieved that nothing was to be done in the immediate future.

Mr. Rice had been a hale seventy-five years old when he chartered his institute and intended to keep making money for it as long as he could. There is no way of knowing how long he might have lived had nature taken its own course. But human greed interfered in the form of a conniving lawyer named Albert T. Patrick and a manipulative valet named Charles Jones. This story has been told so often that it can here be briefly summarized. Patrick, learning the size of Rice's fortune and – to him – the almost whimsical nature of the so-called institute, drafted a fraudulent will giving most of Mr. Rice's moneys to himself. Then, when Mr. Rice proved more hardy than they expected and, in the aftermath of the destruction of the great Galveston hurricane of September 8, 1900, began using his most fluid

assets to rebuild damaged properties, Patrick and Jones decided to take matter into their own hands. They apparently chloroformed Rice to death on Sunday, September 23, 1900. Patrick took a hastily drafted check to the bank the next day, where an alert clerk noticed a discrepancy: Patrick's first name had been inadvertently misspelled on the face of the check. A quick telephone call to Mr. Rice's apartment for verification revealed that Mr. Rice had died the previous day. The bank president wired James

A. Baker, Jr., back in Houston that this train of events looked suspicious, whereupon Baker came to New York City and prompted an investigation and then a spectacular trial that resulted in the

lawyer's conviction and imprisonment. The valet who confessed and provided state's evidence was pardoned. Then Baker proceeded to settle the issue of the

*Patrick and Jones decided to take matter into their own hands. They apparently chloroformed Rice to death on Sunday, September 23, 1900.*

late Mrs. Rice's will, pay the legal fees, and honor various other bequests. In 1904 the Institute received a founding endowment of slightly more than \$4.6 million, a stupendous sum for the time.

The scale of the opportunity before them now became evident to the trustees. Here was the seventh largest endowment of any educational institution in the nation, freedom from either state or church control, and a charter so broad and vague as to allow almost anything. They could do practically anything they had the wisdom and boldness to envision, and the thought almost staggered them. Already in 1901 they had commissioned a New York law firm to poll a number of universities about their acts of incorporation, and in 1905 and 1906 they consulted with educators in Texas and elsewhere about the size of campus needed and the kind of leader they should choose to plan the

*At the next meeting of the trustees, on January 16, 1907, Raphael and J. E. McAshan reported that, acting as a committee to choose "an educational head for the Institute," they had sent the following letter to a number of the leading university presidents of the nation (and such political leaders as Theodore Roosevelt, William Jennings Bryan, and Grover Cleveland) asking for advice and nominations.*

new institute. They knew enough to understand that they should call upon an experienced educator to transform the paper charter into a living institution. In December 1906 Emanuel Raphael reported to his fellow trustees upon a trip to the East Coast to visit a number of universities, art galleries, and schools of applied science and technology to get ideas that might "be applied to the workings of the William M. Rice Institute,"

and he urged other trustees to follow his example. At the next meeting of the trustees, on January 16, 1907, Raphael and J. E. McAshan reported that, acting as a committee to choose "an educa-

tional head for the Institute," they had sent the following letter to a number of the leading university presidents of the nation (and such political leaders as Theodore Roosevelt, William Jennings Bryan, and Grover Cleveland) asking for advice and nominations.

Names and suggestions flowed in, and the trustees subsequently interviewed

The Wm. R. Rice Institute for the Advancement of Literature, Science and Art is now being organized. It has an endowment of Five Million Dollars, or more. It will be non-sectarian and non-political, free tuition to whites. It will be located here.

It is our desire to do the greatest good with the money at our command, and to cover the whole field as indicated in our title, as rapidly as we can. We think it was the intention of the founder to give manual training, applied science, and liberal arts preference in the organization...In order to hasten our work, we need for the head of the institution the very best man that can be had. We need a young man, a broad man, and we need him at once; and we are able to pay him such a salary as such distinguished services should command, and will gladly do so if we can get the right man.

Our object in writing to you is to ascertain if you know of such a man, and if so advise us and place us in correspondence with him – such a man as you yourself would select.

several of the persons suggested. William M. Rice, Jr., the founder's nephew and currently a member of the trustees, had been educated at Princeton; at his request Raphael and McAshan sent a letter to President Woodrow Wilson of Princeton on January 10 soliciting a nomination. Wilson of course was from the South and understood how desperately his region needed academic leadership: the South was totally destitute of any university on the par with the

best northern universities, and most of them had small faculties, few students, sponsored no research, and could not compete with the national universities for distinguished scholars. Wilson saw instantly the promise represented by the letter from the Rice Institute committee, and he had a nominee in mind, though he may have hesitated to pass it on because he so valued this colleague at Princeton. But on March 11, 1907, Wilson wrote the following note to the potential candidate enclosing the letter from the Rice Institute:

Who was this treasured colleague?  
Edgar Odell Lovett, a native of Ohio

My dear Professor Lovett:

Here is a letter which I wish you would read. I need not tell you that there is no man in the Princeton faculty I have more counted on to remain part of us, both in action and inspiration, than yourself; but I feel bound, when a thing like this turns up, to present it to the man who seems to me best fitted, and let him say whether he wants to be considered or not. Apparently, it might be made an opportunity to do a very great service to the South.

and graduate of Bethany College (where he also tutored in Greek), had earned a doctorate in astronomy at the University of Virginia in 1895 and a second doctorate in mathematics from the University of Leipzig in 1896. He had taught briefly at Western Kentucky University in 1890-1892, where he met Mary Ellen Hale, a student there, whom he later married in 1897. After returning from Leipzig he lectured in mathematics at the Johns Hopkins University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Chicago before joining the Princeton faculty in 1897. A member of the mathematical societies of America, France, London, Edinburgh, and Palermo and a fellow of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science, he had published a number of scholarly articles

in mathematics and astronomy and had risen to the rank of professor of mathematics at Princeton and presently served as chairman of the astronomy department. He was six feet tall, slim, with blue eyes, brown-gray hair, and a dignified countenance. He had already been offered the presidency of Drake University and was recognized in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, and university administration as a person of rare talent and was, as one letter of recommendation put it, of "spotless character."

Wilson's letter deeply moved Lovett, who at the moment was heavily involved in a fundraising effort to establish an astronomical observatory in South Africa which, by allowing the study of relatively unknown southern skies would propel the Princeton department to world prominence in the field. His undated reply to Wilson indicates Lovett's affection for Wilson and Princeton, his devotion to this current project, and simultaneously his openness to new opportunity.

Lovett was correct that a recommendation from the illustrious and innovative Princeton president would bring

My dear President Wilson:

I cannot tell you how hard it is for me to say to you that I shall be compelled to consider the matter of which you wrote if the opportunity presents itself. Your recommendation will mean a call, but I am not going to face the situation until it is upon me. In the meantime you must not question my loyalty—you will not—for you know what faith I have had in your plans for Princeton, you know with what loyal pride I have done my modest part in your administration, you know, too, how boisterously I have rejoiced over the things you are bringing to pass in this place. I am deeply touched by your letter. For reasons that are sacred I broke into tears over it. I thank you for the expression of confidence and goodwill which it contains...

an invitation for an interview from the Houston committee, and at its board meeting on March 20, 1907, the Rice trustees – who had already interviewed one candidate from the University of Missouri – decided to bring in two more candidates, including Lovett, "the expense of such visits," the board recorded, "to be borne by the Institute." An exchange of correspondence resulted in Lovett's arrival on April 10 for an interview with the trustees the next day. The very day Lovett arrived, James A. Baker had written a letter to an educator in Huntsville, Texas, that indicated how remarkably ambitious and prescient the trustees were in their search. Baker wrote that "the trustees of the William M. Rice Institute are trying to select a man for the executive and administrative head of the Institute. A man who will be to it what Prof. Harper was to Chicago University, and Mr. Elliot to Harvard, etc." William R. Harper and Charles W. Eliot were perhaps the most distinguished university



Woodrow Wilson

leaders in the nation at that time, and they were the models Baker and the Rice trustees were bold enough to hold up before them as they searched for a president for the new Rice Institute.

A number of advisors from throughout the nation had recommended to the trustees that they choose "southern men" for the leadership and faculty of the Institute, but Baker and the trustees proved surprisingly cosmopolitan. The Rice trustees had an international membership with one member from Switzerland (Cesar Lombardi) and another from England

(Emanuel Raphael), and Raphael was a very prominent Houston Jew at a time when the Ivy League universities were often shockingly discriminatory toward Jews. Raphael had earlier been on the committee that chose a new rabbi for his synagogue, Temple Beth Israel, and perhaps that experience was one reason Raphael played such a leadership role in the Rice search for a president.

Lovett greatly impressed the Rice trustees, and seven months later, after careful consideration, the trustees resolved to send William M. Rice, Jr., (known as Will Rice) to Princeton to talk with Lovett and call upon him to “take charge as educational head of the Institute, and to make such terms for compensation and time contract as would be to the best interest of the Institute with a salary limit of \$7,500 per annum and a time contract for five years.” Two weeks later, on December 3, 1907, Will Rice wrote to Lovett that he expected to be in New York City on the fourteenth of the month and would like to see him before returning home. Lovett accepted this invitation which, despite its wording was far from incidental, and on December 18, at the regularly scheduled meeting of the trustees in Houston, Will Rice reported on the visit. He had spent an evening with Mr. Lovett and tendered him the offer. But Lovett told him that he “had entered upon some new work [fundraising for the proposed observatory] which he would like to carry on, and could not say at the time whether he would accept or not. Furthermore, that the remuneration of \$6,000 did not appear to be sufficient,” so Will Rice raised the offer to \$7,000—he was still under the authorized limit—with provision of a home. Will Rice reported that Lovett “was not particular about a contract”; at the conclusion of the evening meeting Will Rice suggested to Lovett that he take thirty days to consider the offer and then notify the Rice trustees.

No one was more hopeful that Lovett would accept the offer than James A. Baker, the chairman of the trustees, because he simply wanted to get the institution under way (the Houston public and the newspapers were pressuring the trustees for action), and he

wanted someone with genuine academic experience to develop the plans. After all, the charter of incorporation was so vague and general that it offered little guidance, and the freedom the trustees possessed meant that the possibilities were great if the proper wisdom and boldness could be discovered.

Baker apparently saw in Lovett the talent, the drive and the charisma to create from this raw potential something truly distinguished. Baker was not about to wait passively for Lovett to make a decision; Baker wrote Lovett on December 19 – the day after Will Rice’s report to the trustees – and in effect told Lovett that he had been made an offer that he shouldn’t, couldn’t, reject.

Baker’s letter must have had its intended effect, for at a specially called meeting of the Rice Board of Trustees on December 28, 1907, Will Rice



*Edgar Odell Lovett*

My Dear Mr. Lovett:

Mr. William M. Rice returned home yesterday and reported to the Trustees the substance of his recent interview with you in reference to becoming the educational head of the William M. Rice Institute, and I write now to express my disappointment in learning that you had not been able so far to give the Trustees a definite answer one way or another, and to urge you to cast your lot with us. The Trustees have proceeded quite deliberately in making a selection of an educational head, and purposely so, because they realized that there was no more important step for them to take in the inception of the enterprise than to get a proper man to take the lead and blaze the way. They have talked to a great many persons in and out of Texas, all of whom were recommended by some one or more persons for the head of the Institute, but I want you to know, that the position has been offered to no one except you...Your presence in Houston made a fine impression upon the Trustees; they like your manner, your frankness and candor and they believe your qualifications, to say nothing of your youth, eminently fits you for the place. We all realize that it is no small sacrifice to give up a position such as you have in Princeton; while this is true, yet I can assure you that in coming to Houston you and your family will find a warm welcome among generous and hospitable people, who will strive in every way to make you feel at home among them.

Our institution is well endowed – more so than any institution I know of in the South; the Trustees are practically without any experience in educational matters and they will be disposed to give you a very free hand. As a rule they are broad minded and liberal, and desire in establishing the new institution to lay its foundations broad and deep, and to employ at all times the best talent that can be had anywhere. The opportunity offered you is an unusual one, and however promising may be your prospects at Princeton, you ought to be slow in declining. Such an opportunity rarely comes to one so young in life.

Of course the question for you and your family is a serious one, but while you are considering it, I want you to know that you are the first choice of the Board of Trustees; that the offer has gone to you practically unsolicited, and we are all anxious that you should accept it and cast your lot with us.

announced that he had received a letter from Lovett stating that he “would accept our call, provided that the salary was made \$8,000 and a house; and further, that if he were elected he could be released from Princeton University before his academic year would expire next June, and would be able to come to Houston about March 1st, 1908.” The board accepted this offer, and Raphael as board secretary was instructed so to inform Lovett. Raphael quickly sent Lovett a telegram, then wrote him a more generous letter the next day laying out the terms and concluding: “I now want to say to you frankly and personally that myself, as well as every other member of the Board of Trustees, feel that we are, mutually, to be congratulated upon the action we have taken,” Lovett replied to Raphael on January 2, 1908, and said that his formal acceptance would be sent within a fortnight, the delay occasioned by his need “to meet certain formalities connected with the resignation of my position here.” He then explained why he was taking such care to smooth the transition:

The following page of Lovett’s letter was in fragments, but among the visible sentences were these pregnant phrases: “honor and glory to the City of

I have told you how long and deep my roots are here, and I need not tell you how hard I am finding the breaking of them. I am trying to move in such a way as to retain the interest and influence of Princeton in our undertaking at Houston; the importance of this you of course recognize.

On the other hand I want to assure you that I look forward to the work ahead with great joy, and I am almost arrogant in my hopefulness. I believe we are going to have the patience and the power to do the thing right, and by all the demons dancing in the Dog-star we will make the thing go.

Houston, a tower of strength to Texas, and a permanent source of inspiration to the whole South.”

This was an age when honorable men like Lovett took commitments and contracts seriously, and so it was with special care that he undertook to inform President Wilson of the new developments in his life. On January 3, the day after the above letter to Raphael, Lovett wrote Wilson:

Wilson replied in kind, informing Lovett on January 14 that...

With these formalities all in order, Edgar Odell Lovett was now ready

My dear President Wilson:

It was with very great regret that I am writing to ask you to receive and present to the Trustees of the University my resignation of the professorship which I have had the honor to hold at Princeton, the resignation to take effect at the close of the current academic year. I am making this request in order that I may be free to accept an administrative appointment which seems to offer unusual opportunity to translate into action the inspiration received here under your leadership and the tutelage of those who have been associated with you in shaping the policy and directing the destiny of this institution.

I grew into Princeton from the Faculty side, but the best of the formative years of my life have been lived here, and I am leaving Princeton a Princeton man firmly believing that whatever training I may have achieved here can be devoted to the interests of the University in no better way than in an effort to bring to realization in another environment those spiritual and intellectual ideals and traditions which have made Princeton conspicuous in the Nation’s service, and which, in terms of your far-reaching plans for the development of the University, are now making Princeton the most interesting educational center on the continent.

I have been trying to make this letter a formal one, and to keep my feelings out of it, but I am unwilling to bring it to a close without saying to you again that my roots here are long and deep; I cannot tell you how hard it is for me to break them.

to write his official acceptance of the offer to be president of the Rice

I read your letter of resignation to the Board at its meeting last week and it was voted to accept the resignation with the greatest regret.

I was instructed to express to you the Board’s deep sense of the distinguished service you have rendered in the faculty and its very cordial hope that you would have the most abundant success in the new work which you are undertaking...these assurances which I now convey were in no sense perfunctory, but sprung from the warmest feeling and from a real knowledge of your work and worth.



*The University of Liverpool*



*Heidelberg University  
Front & Back of Post Card  
sent to E. Raphael from Lovett*

Institute, so on January 18, 1908, he sent a letter filled with stirring rhetoric to Emanuel Raphael, secretary of the Rice Board of Trustees:

The Rice trustees formally received Lovett's acceptance letter on January 22 and entered it into their minutes. The Rice Institute at last had a president,

his word, Lovett arrived in Houston on February 29, appeared before the Board of Trustees for the first time at its regular meeting on March 11, and "outlined a rough sketch of the work of organizing the Institute as it appeared to him, at the present time." The board then suggested, recalling Raphael's com-

I am writing this letter to convey through you my acceptance of the responsible position to which the Trustees of the William M. Rice Institute of Houston have done me the honor to elect me.

Will you not say to your colleagues of the Board that with a deep sense of the obligation to service imposed on me by the donor's philanthropy and a firm faith in the determination of his Trustees to build for Houston, for Texas, the South, and the Nation, I pledge whatever strength or training I may have to the great task in which we hereby join hands and hearts, believing that in common counsel we are going to find the wisdom which shall issue in constructive ability to plan and executive courage to achieve the manifold possibilities of the splendid foundation on which we have the good fortune to build.

Tell them also that in an abiding confidence in those conspicuous characteristics which mark Texans among men—I mean their breadth, their independence, their courage, their loyalty—and relying upon the cooperation of all friends in education in the City and Commonwealth of which I am soon to become a citizen, I accept the privilege of leadership which they have accorded me and I promise to serve The Rice Institute of Houston in patiently seeing with them the lines of development, in persistently pressing with them the plans for its usefulness, in striving with their help to combine in its personality those elements—the largeness of mind, strength of character, determined purpose, fire of genius, devoted loyalty—which make for leadership in institutions as in men, and finally by the brands and torches they shall hand me in blazing a trail down which we may hope to find a time when from its walls shall go forth a continuous column of men trained in the highest degree, equipped in the largest way for positions of trust in the public service, for commanding careers in the world's affairs.

All this, with great joy and in bold hope, I shall seek to do. By God's help and His fear, I will.

and the entire Board of Trustees in effect heaved a sigh of relief. Raphael wrote Lovett the next day how pleased the board was to have him. "We feel now," he confided, "that a great burden of responsibility has been lifted from our shoulders, and the Board join me in saying that they await your early coming with pleasurable anticipation, and look for you, as you state, about March or a little earlier." The responsibility, of course, had shifted from the board to Lovett, and the board was quick to urge the new president to inform himself even further about the academic possibilities that lay before them. True to

mentation back in December 1906 of the value of traveling to inspect other educational institutions, that Lovett "make a tour of observation and investigation of the best work done in the Universities and Technical Colleges, both in the United States and in Europe." The board asked him to provide them in writing at their next meeting a detailed plan for such a tour, along with a proposed budget for his own expenses including a private secretary to accompany him.

Lovett was sufficiently familiar with the best institutions in the Northeast that his plan laid out an ambitious itin-



*St. Deniol's Library, Hawarden*

erary that would take him to Europe, to Russia, from there via the Trans-Siberian Express to Vladivostok, thence to Japan, and finally to California, returning to Houston by the Sunset Express. The board accepted the itinerary, Lovett hired a young, Princeton-trained Houstonian, F. Carrington Weems, to be his private secretary, and the two of them along with Mrs. Lovett set forth from Quebec on July 24, 1908, on an amazing journey around the world seeking ideas and inspiration for the new institute in Houston. A simple chronological list of their destinations indicates the expansive nature of their ambition for the university-to-be: they departed Quebec for Liverpool, then on to Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Liverpool again, Dublin, London, Hamburg, Göteborg, Christiania [Oslo], Stockholm, Lund, Berlin, Gottingen, Leipzig, Munich, Zurich, Milan, Padua, Bologna, Pisa, Paris, Brussels, The Hague, Leiden, London again, Paris again, Madrid, Lisbon,



*University & West End Park, Glasgow*

Seville, Cordoba, Granada, Gibraltar, Genoa, Rome, Naples, Athens, Corfu, Constantinople, then via the Orient Express to Vienna and Budapest, Warsaw, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Vladivostok, Tokyo, Kyoto, Yokohama, Honolulu, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and arrived back in Houston on May 7, 1909.

Lovett kept an account book of his

travels, wrote occasional letters back to the board, interviewed university officials, and inspected buildings of all sorts, absorbing everything he could and doubtless piquing the curiosity of those he met about the new institution being planned for faraway Texas. Experts advised Lovett to emphasize research as well as teaching in the new university, to remember that “those teach best who are continually learning, and those learn best who are continually investigating,” to “consider men [faculty] and equipment rather than expensive buildings” but to have “substantial buildings,” likewise to “consider men before mortar and brains before bricks,” and “women should be admitted to the institution.” Of course, the charter already provided for the admission of women. Not all the advice Lovett heard did he consider sound; in London, Professor Simon Newcomb of Johns Hopkins University thought “America has enough universities now, but perhaps needs more in the South.” He emphasized to Lovett that “instructors should be Americans, preferably of southern birth.” Lovett of course would hire a beginning faculty that would be noted for its cosmopolitan background and training precisely because he did not intend for the Rice Institute to be merely a university for the South.

Lovett had to think of the kinds of faculty to choose, devise a proper curriculum, and make plans for a campus while traveling. On January 31, 1909, he wrote board secretary Raphael from Gibraltar:

Lovett was unusually interested in architecture, and a major task before him after his return to Houston was

the choice of an architect to design the new campus. A number of firms were considered, with Lovett initially not disposed to choose the celebrated firm of Cram, Goodhue, and Ferguson of Boston because they had done much work at Princeton and he did not want to seem to be lazily imitative. Lovett assembled a committee of distinguished scientists and engineers from the nation’s best laboratories to advise him on laboratory design. After considering many architects, Lovett finally recommended to the board that they commission Ralph Adams Cram of Cram, Goodhue, and Ferguson to design the buildings and develop a master plan for the university. Cram was unimpressed with the newly purchased campus of almost 300 acres just outside the southwestern boundary of Houston, actually beyond the paved roads. The site was level and almost treeless, and with no adjoining buildings or even tradition of building, of what design should the new campus be: Spanish, adobe, Georgian, baroque?

Cram visited Houston on a glorious January day, with warm temperatures and deep blue sky, and the climate reminded him of the Mediterranean, from which he had just come. He imagined buildings of an eclectic Mediterranean style, borrowing ideas from Florence, Venice, the Dalmatian coast. Had Lovett suggested his own interests in a combination of Mediterranean styles? Lovett oversaw the work of the architects so carefully and made so many suggestions that the firm on March 17, 1910, in effect asked Lovett to back off: “Now can you not place some reliance in us as your chosen

architects when it comes to a matter that, like this one, is one almost wholly of design?” Certainly the Moorish touch Lovett had seen in southern Spain was present in the indigenous architecture of Dalmatia and in Venice and its environs. Any visitor today to Venice will



*Fondaco dei Turchi  
Venice*

note buildings that could have served as inspirations for the Cram-designed buildings at Rice, and Lovett himself in a letter to President Eliot of Harvard on September 27, 1910, referring to the progress of the architects at Rice, spoke of “the Venetian effect, for which they strive.” Construction began on the Rice campus in the summer of 1910, with the official laying of the cornerstone on Texas Independence Day, March 2, 1911.

Lovett was not only supervising every detail of the design and construction of the campus; he was also engaged in hiring the initial faculty. This involved substantial correspondence with scholars from the Northeast, England, and Europe and another trip to England and the Continent in early 1912. Lovett and the board were determined to hire the best faculty they could, and the positions filled the first few years set the standard for decades to come: Griffith C. Evans, math, from Harvard; Harold C. Wilson, physics, from McGill University after training at Cambridge; Thomas Lindsey Blayney, German and European literature, with his doctorate from Heidelberg; William Ward Watkin, architecture, with his degree from Pennsylvania but supervisor for Cram, Goodhue, and Ferguson of the construction of the Rice campus; William F. Edwards, chemistry,

The journey through Spain to Gibraltar yielded most in the way of architectural suggestion. The winter climate strongly resembles that of Texas: bright sunshine and a clear sky and not too cold. We also found in the flora of the country a striking similarity to the Gulf Coast...The widely prevalent live oak and magnolia trees met with in the better watered areas were reminders of the more splendid specimens of the Magnolia City [Houston]. The peninsula is rich in architectural remains. Spanish, Gothic, or Renaissance, and Moorish—the acme of this latter at the Alhambra—are all represented with innumerable variations and combinations, and in Portugal the so-called ‘Emmanuel’ style is to be found as nowhere else.

formerly president of the University of Washington; Julian Huxley, biology, from Oxford; Albert L. Guérard, French, from Stanford; Stockton Axson, English, from Princeton, Radislov A. Tsanoff, philosophy, trained at Cornell; and Claude W. Heaps, physics, from Princeton. They would be joined by



*Rice Administration Building*

others from the finest graduate programs in the world.

Lovett by 1911 was expecting to welcome the initial students in September 1912, but he wanted formally to open the university with a spectacular academic ceremony that would in effect announce to the world that this infant institute would ultimately aspire to membership among the world's great academic centers. The board of trustees on May 2, 1912, accepted Lovett's proposal for such ceremonies, including handsome honorariums for the visiting speakers and preparations for publishing their remarks in a commemorative volume. (That same board meeting authorized the first of many contacts with Teas Nursery Co. for the planting of trees and "other horticultural work" that would eventually transform the prairie campus into a forest of live oaks.) Lovett proceeded to invite a series of world-renowned scholars to present lectures "in the fundamental sciences of mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology and in the humanities of philosophy, history, letters and art." Stunningly impressive invitations to attend the opening ceremonies were sent to universities, learned societies, and scientific and research institutes literally around the world. Some of the ancient centers of learning were astonished by the plans emanating from

remote Texas. The Polish university in Lwow (Lemberg) sent a congratulatory scroll, saying of the new university, "It will become a fruitful fount of educational work through which you fill old Europe with amazement." Similar messages came from around the world. By early September scholars in Rome, London, Paris, and elsewhere began making final preparations for their journey to Houston.

As they were setting out, the first students assembled on campus for the actual opening of classes on September 23, 1912 – twelve years to the day since the murder of William Marsh Rice. Four days later the fifty-nine students who had arrived (more were yet to come) assembled with the faculty, trustees, and city dignitaries in the Faculty Chamber of the administration building (now called the Founder's Room of Lovett Hall), for the matriculation address by President Lovett. The reporter from the *Houston Post* captured the occasion:

President Lovett first spoke to the faculty, welcoming them to Houston.

*The trustees seated themselves and Dr. Lovett raised his hand and a stillness fell over the assemblage. That the head of the institution felt the solemnity of the occasion was plainly depicted in his countenance. It was evident, too, that those in the chapel [faculty chamber], students and visitors, caught the spirit from him, for the hush amounted to a silent prayer.*

*Dr. Lovett opened his address with a few preliminary remarks and then requested that all bow their heads in prayer. He then invoked a blessing upon the institution and its work...*

*Dr. Lovett then began his brief address. He was slow and deliberate, at times dropping his voice to a conversational tone. Especially was this true when he addressed his remarks to the members of this class.*

*"You will find yourselves in a cosmopolitan place," he said, "where the old South grows into the new West. You will learn to talk about lumber and cotton and railroads and oil, but*

*you will also find every ear ready to listen if you really have anything to say about letters or science or art." He then forewarned them that in the immediate future there would be construction and confusion and inconvenience on the campus, "wherein the sound of the hammer may often clash with the voice of the scholar," but he quickly spoke of "glorious problems bristling with difficulties and joyous days in creative effort." He asked the faculty to join with him as they commenced an academic adventure together. Then turning to the students and calling them all by name (they were all Texans except for one male student from Louisiana),*

Lovett became even more serious:

*"I trust that we begin here today cooperation in high and noble tasks with the common sympathy, affection, and energy which would characterize the members of a growing and immense family. I require that those who listen to my words should hold one faith with me. They must believe in the value of human reason; they must love beautiful things and consider them important; they must be enthusiastic for their fellow-men. They must believe that it is possible to learn and that it is also possible to teach. Otherwise my words here this morning will be vain and convey neither meaning nor persuasion."*

Just two weeks later, October 10, 1912, the formal opening ceremonies were held. Last minute details were completed, and the building site was rushed to sufficient completion to allow the guests to walk across campus and assemble outside the west facade of the administration building. The elaborate ceremonies proceeded smoothly with dinners, teas, addresses by eminent scholars, concerts, a special train to Galveston for a shore supper at the new Galvez Hotel, an ecumenical worship service back in Houston on Sunday. The highlight of the event was a long, moving talk by Lovett himself entitled "The Meaning of the New Institution," in which he sketched the history of the

Rice Institute and laid out an ambitious vision of its future. The grandeur of the entire occasion, from the initial invitations (“I do not know that I have ever seen so elaborate an invitation,” wrote Chancellor J. H. Kirkland of Vanderbilt University) to the embossed leather programs, from the international assemblage of guests to the remarkable academic plans set forth by Lovett, absolutely astounded those in attendance, especially the European dignitaries. Sir William Ramsay, according to Lady Ramsay, “had been present at several of the gatherings in [England] to commemorate centuries of university history, but none were more impressive than this, looking forward to a great future.” Describing the event, she wrote, “As there was no large hall, so the ceremony took place in the open air, in the shadow of the finest part of the buildings. The wide extent of the Campus, typical of the spacious years to come, the beauty of the buildings against the background of tropical vegetation and the cloudless southern sky, the simplicity of the proceedings and the earnestness of all who took part in them, made it different from anything ever experienced before.” Even more fulsome was another featured speaker, Dutch botanist Hugo de Vreiss. He wrote Lovett from aboard ship back to Holland,

Certainly the success of the opening

I admired the brilliant exercises of the opening of the Rice Institute... I have admired your buildings and your masterly address on the last day, but I have especially admired the complete and careful preparation, the work of so many years, which has brought this great success.

You have succeeded not only in founding a great university on a large campus, but in founding it in the heart of the citizens of Houston, and in giving it a wide reputation all over the world of learning.

ceremonies and all they foreshadowed moved Lovett almost to tears, and at times it was only with difficulty that he maintained his composure.

R. W. D. Bryant, the president of the University of New Mexico and one of the invited participants, was sensitive enough to observe the effect of the festivities on Lovett and wrote a kind letter to Mrs. Lovett upon returning to Albuquerque.

President Bryant was correct that the

My dear Madam,

I intended at once on my return to acknowledge the many courtesies which you and your husband showed me while I was in Houston... As I saw on several occasions during those wonderfully interesting inaugural exercises, the emotions of your husband and how hard at times it was for him to control himself, I realized how much the consummation of long years of thought and endeavor meant to him, especially when he felt that the thing he has dreamed of and planned for was even greater than his anticipations.

I am sure that you have reason to be very proud of your husband and I trust that you will long be spared to be an incentive and a help to him during the coming years when there will be painstaking drudgery to build up and perfect the institution.

future would bring to President Lovett hard labor in the form of concern over finances, controversies over curriculum and student discipline, recruitment and retention of faculty and providing them the resources to do their work, the pressure for more books and additional buildings and new programs. Perhaps it could have been predicted that future greatness would not come easily to any new institution. Yet despite the



*Mrs. Edgar Lovett*

disappointments came great achievements, and Lovett inspired most of the faculty and students with the ideal that together they were building a great university. As one of the first faculty members, Radoslav Tsanoff, wrote to his mentor back at Cornell in 1914, “Rice is a fine place to work in. The Institute is strangely like Dr. Lovett – enthusiastic but steady, solid and ambitious for genuineness and ‘nothing but the best.’ One feels here an honest endeavor is being made to build up, not the gaudy shell of a university, but a real seat of scientific learning and culture.” Lovett, soon predictably mired in administrative details, no doubt particularly appreciated the warm letter of support written to him by faculty member Stockton Axson on May 14, 1914. Axson, like Lovett, had been a much-beloved professor at Princeton, a confidant of Woodrow Wilson (in fact, Axson was Wilson’s brother-in-law), and now recognized Lovett’s need for empathetic understanding.

By the time President Lovett gave his



*Post Card from Lovett*

My dear Lovett:

...I think the position of a college president is a rather lonely one; his membership in the board of trustees [Lovett had been added to the Rice trustees] to some extent isolates him from his colleagues of the faculty, and his membership in the faculty must, I suppose to some extent, isolate him from his comrades on the board. He must be the advocate for each body with the other, must be always explaining to men who necessarily think in terms of money the apparent extravagances of men who necessarily think in terms of ideas, and he must as far as possible justify to ardent theorists the apparent niggardliness of cautious financiers.

Then, his subordinates in the faculty, honestly desiring to 'make good,' look to him for encouraging approval many times when he himself needs encouragement. Because you are very modest you probably do not realize how great is the esteem and respect in which you are held, not only in Houston but in Texas at large. This has been, and is, a terrific undertaking, to build up out of nothing a great college, and the task is probably made heavier rather than lighter by reason of the fact that people suppose that the Rice funds are 'unlimited' whereas you, with all the practical and pressing problems before you, feel daily how sharply and sternly they are limited. But you are doing a great work, and I am thankful to say that people all over the state realize and appreciate what you are doing, and are grateful to you for what you are doing for Texas. I hear it on all sides as I travel about the state. Though you never thought of it in that way, you are building a great monument to yourself as well as to Mr. Rice. And every earnest educator in the country who knows what you are doing to establish a high standard of education in the South, and who knows how firmly you stand by your principles, must be gratified as is the President of the United States [now Woodrow Wilson] himself when he gets confirmatory evidence that you are doing exactly what he thought you would do.

There is no shadow of question that Rice Institute is going to be a huge success, and you, beyond all other men, are the agent of that success.

matriculation address to the fifth entering class of Rice freshmen in 1916, the initial class having graduated the year before, he felt secure that his ideals had successfully taken root in the soil of Houston.

More than anything else, then

*Thanks to the high aims and fidelity of the faculty, the standards of Rice are high standards – high for admission to its opportunities, high in scholarship and science and service and sport after admission: standards animated by the spirit of research and service of discovery; standards secured by freedom to seek the truth wherever the truth may be found, to follow truth whithersoever truth may lead; standards sustained by respect for the dignity and destiny of the human spirit, by faith in the capacity of that spirit for progress; standards supported by belief in the power of human reason and the power of human feeling to solve the universe of our experience.*

as now, Rice has stood for excellence, and that tradition is Lovett's legacy to the university he shaped and nurtured. Lovett continued as president of Rice until he tendered his resignation on May 18, 1941, but with the looming Second World War, he agreed to serve for the duration until another president could be chosen. Ultimately physicist William V. Houston was identified and assumed office on January 1, 1946, with the formal inaugural on March 1 of that year. Throughout his long tenure, Edgar Odell Lovett retained the respect and affection of his faculty, especially those who remembered the first days when the university was being founded and its character shaped. All the early faculty felt this pioneer spirit, all shared in the enthusiasm for the goals and principles Lovett laid out. Years later, mathematician Griffith C. Evans, who had moved

to Berkeley (where the math building is now named in his honor), gave the commencement address at Reed College in 1942, and recalling his early days at Rice, Evans told the students in Oregon that "There is no greater inspiration than to work under such circumstances, being one of a few in the group which determines the initial quality of an institution." Lovett, though he impressed most students as shy and aloof, kept his ideals before them in annual messages printed in the student newspaper, *The Thresher*, and in messages introducing each volume of the yearbook, *The Campanile*. And Lovett inscriptions adorned many of the buildings on campus.

The Rice Institute was, to an unusual degree, the lengthened shadow of Edgar Odell Lovett. On the day of his surprise resignation in 1941, two of the earliest and most respected faculty penned Lovett personal acknowledgement of what he had meant to them and the university. English professor Alan D. McKillop admitted that...

And William Ward Watkin, who had

Most of us are pretty inarticulate in real life; and though we are aware that our daily routine is based on personal relationships too valuable and too significant to be carelessly taken for granted, we seldom get back to fundamentals. But your resignation of which I read with the greatest regret this morning, has set me to thinking anew of the great premises on which our daily work at the Rice Institute is founded – your unflinching adherence through good days and bad, to the highest standards of academic life, and your generous confidence – generous, but never, I think, blindly or lightly given – in those years I have spent here have put me greatly in your debt professionally and personally. A man can but ask, like Archimedes, for a [fulcrum], and you have given me that and much more.

come to Rice in 1910 to supervise the construction of the first buildings and had stayed as professor of architecture, wrote on the same day, May 18, 1941:

Your decision announced today comes with intense regret to each of us, though with personal understanding that it is a privilege nobly earned.

Out of the marsh and swamps of this campus you have brought beauty and fineness at every step along the way. Into its building you have woven your life with all its clearness and kindliness. All that we see about us is yours in every sense, creative, nurturing, and fulfilling toward an enduring meaning. It will ever be yours in each step forward so long as you shall live.

In retrospect you have the right to view with warmth and joy a noble work faithfully done. I pray that for years and into generations to come it may carry us toward the soundness and beauty which your vision holds for it.

In August came a congratulatory note from F. Carrington Weems, who had been Mr. Lovett's young personal secretary on the round-the-world trip. Weems greeted Lovett with affection, hope he could now turn again to his love for the classics and for mathematics, alluded to their trip begun in 1908, and concluded:

*"In any event, you must view with deep gratification the complete vindication of the choice you made, for the Rice Institute as it stands today is your achievement and yours alone. Nobody has a better right to congratulate you and I do it with all my heart."*

The affection for Mr. Lovett continued as he grew older and the university continued to prosper. Still he wrote his elegantly worded thank you notes and condolences to friends of the university, still he stood for excellence in everything attempted. On June 16, 1954,

he returned to Princeton where, along with Adalai E. Stevenson and Nathan M. Pusey, president of Harvard, he was awarded an honorary doctorate. The commendation called him "A Princeton professor who took an open space of Texas and turned it into a campus." Three years later, on August 13, 1957, Mr. Lovett died at the age of 86 after a brief illness. Some years before, the Administration Building had been renamed Lovett Hall, and just outside the archway of the Sallyport was incised the following inscription: "In grateful homage to the clear vision unfaltering zeal and beneficent labors of Edgar Odell Lovett First President of the Rice Institute. Exegit Monumentum Aepe Perennius." As the plaque suggests, the university received its name from William Marsh Rice, but its sustaining ethos is from Edgar Odell Lovett. "He has built himself a monument more lasting than bronze."



Main Street Looking North, (Rice Campus on left) 1912 Houston, Texas