

BAYTOWN'S MADISON AVENUE MURDER

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At approximately nine o'clock on the evening of Tuesday, November 16, 1954, local police found Charles Freeman Jones shot to death in his Travis Street home in Baytown, Texas (Death Certificate). Confessed murderer in the September 23, 1900, poisoning death of his employer, William Marsh Rice, founder of Houston's Rice University, Jones was discovered by police lying in bed in a pool of blood with a .38 caliber bullet wound to the left temple, the victim of an apparent suicide (Slagle). After Baytown police officers identified the 79 year old man, the notorious past which he had endeavored to conceal for more than half a century, once again became headline news. Although Jones' role in one of the most celebrated murder trials in New York's history had been publicized in newspapers all over the world, at the time of his death, his identity as Rice's murderer was virtually unknown (Rice Papers). Newspaper accounts after the suicide linking Jones to the murder of William Rice shocked most of the area residents who had little knowledge that an infamous murderer had been living quietly in their small community just thirty miles east of the city of Houston (Orton 8). Jones had appeared to his neighbors as nothing more than a kind, elderly gentleman who lived alone and cultivated few close relationships (Chandler). Yet Charles Freeman Jones was an enigmatic individual, an unsolved puzzle, a killer whose silence leaves only conflicting accounts from which to recreate his motives in the murder of one of America's wealthiest men.

Although labelled the "criminal of the century," Jones had not acted alone in the crime; he had entered into a conspiracy to defraud the millionaire Rice of his fortune with an attorney named Albert T. Patrick who, like Jones, was a native Texan living and working in New York City. Ironically, for several weeks following their arrest, reporters identified Patrick as Rice's attorney when, in fact, the attorney had never met the late William Marsh Rice (Muir "Murder" 1). Even though court testimony revealed that Charles Jones had actually committed the murder, he became the state's key witness and aided the prosecution in convicting Patrick for his role as the mastermind of the scheme to kill the elderly millionaire (Rice Papers).

Jones became acquainted with the man he would later murder while working in the Capitol Hotel in Houston in April, 1897, when the hotel's owner, William Rice, offered Jones a position as valet and personal secretary. Rice had been entangled in lengthy will litigation involving the relatives of his late wife, Elizabeth, since her death in August, 1896, and consequently had decided to return to the home he kept in New York City. Therefore, on May 7, 1897, Jones accompanied his new employer to the fifth floor suite of the Berkshire Apartments on Madison Avenue where they spent the last three years of Rice's life (Muir 77). As an aging man of 78, Rice was often difficult to care for, but the evidence suggests that Jones executed his duties to the millionaire's satisfaction. In a letter to a friend, Mary C. Brewster, dated January 8, 1899, Rice wrote, "I lead a very quiet life - go out when I wish - taking my man with me. I do not worry - attend to my business and read when not otherwise engaged - and am contented here probably more than I would be anywhere else" (Muir 82).

As a native of Massachusetts, Rice felt accustomed to the East, but Madison

Avenue society differed greatly from Charles Jones' early life along the Texas Gulf Coast. Called Charlie by family and friends, Jones was born on February 3, 1875 (Death Certificate), just across the bay from Houston in Cedar Bayou, the tiny community which would later become part of Baytown. Former Mississippi tenant farmers, his parents, L. W. and Onelia Jones, were among the early settlers to the area (Ashworth). According to records at the Baytown Historical Museum, L. W. Jones voted along with just 92 residents in the February 15, 1876, election held at Ilfrey's Store in Cedar Bayou (Henson 60). Just south of Ilfrey's stood the Cedar Bayou Masonic Lodge which housed the one room school where area children like Charlie attended a few months out of the year (Henson 70). As a teenager, Jones went to work for his brother on a schooner which ran from the local port at Lynchburg to the major port city of nearby Galveston. Charles later found employment in Galveston's Star Flour Mill where he met a young man named Joseph Stanberry who, in 1896, offered Charlie a bellman's job at the Capitol Hotel in Houston (Muir 77). From these modest beginnings, Charlie found himself at age 22 living among wealth and privilege in one of the most prestigious neighborhoods in America's largest city where gentlemen escorted ladies to elegant restaurants, the theater, and to concerts in Central Park (Metropolis 37). Charles Jones quickly became a part of New York society. His "rugged good looks won his success with the ladies" (Muir 86), and sometime during his three years on Madison Avenue, Jones became involved with Miss Mabel Whitney, an attractive young woman from New York's fashionable Astoria (Jones to Wed).

Yet Jones' involvement with the attorney Albert Patrick altered the course of the valet's life more than any other event. Patrick also aspired to the prestige of Madison Avenue's elite, but in his climb to success, the attorney was perhaps more influenced by the tactics of men like New York's Tammany Hall city bosses who, in their passion for wealth and power, ran the city through graft and corruption (Metropolis 37). Patrick epitomized this desire for success, and set about to present himself as a gentleman of means. He dressed with impeccable taste and attended the Fifth Avenue Baptist Church, or as he called it, "John D. Rockefeller's church" (Muir 85). Patrick's ambitions to achieve the pre-eminence of men like Rockefeller no doubt motivated him in his design of the conspiracy to defraud Rice of his fortune.

Hired by Orren Holt, the attorney representing the heirs of the late Mrs. Rice in the will litigation, Patrick's job involved gathering evidence in New York which would establish the legal residency of the wealthy couple. During his investigation, Patrick became aware of Rice's fortune, and in an effort to gain access to the millionaire's affairs, the ambitious attorney went to great lengths during November, 1899, to acquaint himself with valet Charles Jones. During their first meeting, Patrick offered half of his \$500 fee to Jones for information concerning Rice's business affairs which would assist the attorney in securing financial justice for Elizabeth Rice's relatives (Killgore 33). From this meeting, a conspiracy grew, and in the spring of 1900, Patrick began handling much of Rice's business correspondence on stationery which Jones had provided. Ultimately, on June 30, 1900, Jones slipped a fraudulent document among a stack of legitimate contracts which Rice unknowingly signed before witnesses. Drawn up by Albert Patrick, this document would later become known as the "Patrick Will," and its contents named the attorney executor and heir to the estate of a man whom he had never actually met (Rice Papers).

With a vast estate to inherit, Patrick quickly tired of waiting for the elderly mil-

lionaire to die a natural death, and during the first week of August, 1900, the unethical attorney asked his accomplice the inevitable question: "Don't you think Rice is living too long for our purposes?" (Muir 93). Acting on Patrick's instructions, Jones began to slowly poison his employer by orally administering mercury pills which had been prescribed for dilution into an antiseptic wash for Rice's face where tumors had recently been removed ("Jones Confesses"). Patrick hastened his plans after the September 3, 1900 Great Galveston Hurricane which destroyed many of Rice's Texas holdings, including his Merchants and Planters Oil Company which had burned in Houston's fires following the storm. When Rice received news of the damages, he wrote out a bank draft in the amount of \$2500 to begin reconstruction of the Houston oil company (Muir "Murder" 1). But Patrick worried that in rebuilding the property, Rice would deplete the \$25,000 New York bank account which represented his most liquid asset, the funds which Patrick would most easily acquire after the millionaire's death (Killgore 58). Determined to see that the draft never reached Houston, Patrick convinced Jones to murder William Rice. Despite some misgivings on the part of the young valet, on the evening of September 23, 1900, Charles Jones placed a chloroform soaked towel over the face of the 81 year old gentleman, who quickly and quietly died in his sleep (Rice Papers).

The plot aroused suspicion on the following Monday morning when Patrick attempted to cash the draft at Rice's bank, and the teller noted that, in signing the draft over to Patrick, Albert had been incorrectly spelled "Abert." It appears that Jones, in his anxiety after the murder, had misspelled the name, leaving out the letter "l." When the teller called the Berkshire Apartments demanding to speak to Mr. Rice before cashing the check, Jones lost his composure and revealed that the millionaire William Marsh Rice was, in fact, dead. Their plot had failed because of Jones' apparent lack of criminal prowess, and on October 4, 1900, New York police arrested the pair on forgery charges and took them into custody in Manhattan's dismal Tombs Jail (Texas file).

Patrick had no doubt offered Jones wealth beyond his dreams, but whether Jones had any actual proof that he would receive a part of Rice's estate is unclear. After their arrest, Jones learned that he had not been mentioned in either William Rice's legitimate will or in the infamous Patrick Will (Rice Papers). The evidence indicates that while Rice paid Jones a handsome salary of \$100 a month, later court testimony revealed that Jones felt concern over the longevity of his boss. Realizing that Mr. Rice was getting on in years, Jones had set about to establish another career for himself and in 1899, had entered night school in the pursuit of a career as a New York City Police Officer. His teacher, Mr. Gould, later testified that he had suggested that Jones look to his wealthy employer for security, adding that, "I don't think Jones had ever thought of inheriting any of his (Rice's) money until I suggested it to him" (Muir 86).

A month after their arrest, Jones apparently realized that he would become Patrick's scapegoat for the crime, and consequently made a full 550 page confession to New York District Attorney Osborne on November 2, 1900 (Thompson). Following Jones' confession, the guard returned the highly distressed valet to Cell 87 where he attempted to commit suicide by slashing his throat with a penknife provided him by the inmate in the next cell – none other than Albert T. Patrick. Sensational newspaper coverage detailed the confessed murderer's suicide attempt using front page illustrations of Jones on his jail cell cot in the throes of despair (Jones Confesses) and headlines which read, "I Was Haunted, I Had To Confess" (*Journal*). But in a later statement to the press, the New York District Attorney's Office

explained that, rather than overwhelming guilt, Jones' motive for the attempt upon his own life had actually been Patrick's alleged threats to kill the valet if he did not take his own life first (Rice Papers). It would appear that Patrick's ability to manipulate Jones had gone beyond simple persuasion.

During his stay in New York City's Bellevue Hospital, Jones' presence drew crowds of spectators hoping to get a glimpse of the infamous "Valet Jones" and created such a nuisance that officials partitioned his bed from view. This quiet young man from rural Texas had been thrown into New York City notoriety, his every move recounted on the front pages of every paper in the city for weeks following his arrest (Rice Papers), yet amid the sensationalism, none of these reports offered logical explanations for his actions.

In spite of his quick recovery in the hospital following the suicide attempt, Jones' irrational behavior continued ("Jones Confesses"). He did not return to the Tombs, in part because of Patrick's alleged threats upon Jones' life and because officials felt that the unstable prisoner would no doubt try to kill himself again. Reportedly, while in the House of Detention, Jones did make another attempt and therefore, spent the next two years before the end of the trial in a private boarding house under the guard of police detectives. In keeping Jones alive to testify against Patrick, the city of New York spent over \$7000 for his upkeep, and newspapers wrote with disdain of the grand treatment that this notorious murderer received ("Jones Released").

Even though both Jones and Patrick had been indicted for forgery and murder, in turning state's evidence, Jones secured his freedom while Patrick was sentenced to death by hanging on April 7, 1902 (Texas File). Little corroborating evidence existed as Jones had been the only material witness to the plan to murder William Rice, and while the coroner's report did show that a murder had been committed, the state needed Jones' testimony to convict Patrick for his role in masterminding the conspiracy and murder. New York State Court of Appeal records explained that while greed and a desire for social prominence had clearly motivated Patrick, Jones "seemed to have had little initiative of his own, being susceptible instead to whatever stronger personality went to work on him" (Muir 103). In the ten years following the trial, Patrick avoided execution through motions for appeals which, though never granted, gave him time to compile new evidence. Through the help of the newly formed Medico-Legal Foundation, Patrick proved that Rice's death had resulted from the mercury administered by Jones, not the chloroform which Patrick had persuaded Jones to administer (Muir "Murder" 1). No doubt Jones' release at the end of the trial ten years earlier helped to sway public opinion in Patrick's favor, and on November 27, 1912, he received a full pardon from New York Governor John A. Dix. Patrick's release from Sing Sing Prison came just two months after the long awaited opening of Rice University on the twelfth anniversary of the founder's death, its construction forestalled by the forged will and subsequent trial (Muir 106).

Newspapers gave considerable attention to Jones' release in August of 1902, creating a stir both in New York and in the Houston area (Rice Papers). Followed constantly by reporters for months after he returned to his home in Cedar Bayou, Jones was reportedly "shadowed" by Houston detectives who claimed that they wanted to insure that Jones would be available to testify should a second trial occur ("Jones Denies"). In poor health after the long trial, Jones stated to reporters, "I have not known what refreshing sleep is for years, and the dreadful insomnia is constantly growing worse. What little repose I do get is caused by chloral and mor-

phine. The only thing that has saved my life is the change to this mild and balmy climate" ("Jones May Die"). Yet the local social climate created problems for Jones when he could not secure employment because everyone seemed to know his name and would have nothing to do with him. At last he went to work on the schooner, *Rapella*, owned by his brother-in-law, Captain Walter Tabbs, where reporters claimed that Tabbs guarded Charles "as if he were some rare treasure" ("Closely Guarded"). When Charles took a trip to New Orleans, Louisiana, in the summer of 1903, newspapers from Houston to New York reported Jones missing and feared dead. Within days, wire service reports from Galveston verified that Jones had been spotted in the city on July 21, 1903, and even though it had been over a year since the end of the trial, every major New York City newspaper carried the story of his reappearance (Rice Papers).

After he had allegedly vanished in 1903, Jones did in fact disappear without a trace for some thirty to thirty-five years before returning to the Cedar Bayou area (Meyer 1). No one has ever discovered the whereabouts of Charles Jones during those missing years because he remained so elusive about his past that those who knew him did not even know that he was a native of the area. He made his home in the small town of Pelly which consolidated into Baytown shortly before his death. Area residents saw little of Jones except when he walked the four blocks from his home at 206 Travis to downtown Pelly, where he frequently visited with the employees at City Hall and sometimes had coffee at a neighborhood drugstore with the city attorney, George Chandler. Even though Mr. Chandler knew Charlie better than most of the townspeople, Charlie never discussed his past with Chandler, who only learned about Jones' infamous background from the occasional whispering about the elderly man (Chandler). After becoming ill in late 1954, Jones refused to hire anyone to care for him, and in fulfilling his vow to remain totally independent, he shot himself to death on November 16, 1954 (Meyer 1). Buried in Houston's Lawndale - Forest Park Cemetery in an unmarked grave, Jones secured his anonymity at last (Lawndale).

Whether driven by his own greed or persuaded to commit murder by his accomplice, Jones' refusal to fully explain his role in the sensational case leaves only speculation on his reasons for killing William Marsh Rice. Although the courts credited Jones' lack of polish and intelligence as the flaws which made him the perfect dupe for Patrick's scheme, from a criminologist's point of view, Jones does not appear as unsophisticated as the court's decision suggests. As Rice's valet, Jones assimilated into Madison Avenue society and held a respectable position working for one of the country's wealthiest men, a man who apparently trusted Jones implicitly (Grimsley). A close inspection of the historical facts of this case leads to puzzling questions concerning the psychological motivations of this quiet, unassuming valet who quickly became known as one of the most notorious criminals of the nineteenth century. Jones himself said after the 1902 trial, "It has always been a mystery to me that he should have exerted such a malign influence over me. Many a time before killing Rice I tried to shake off Patrick's influence, but it was in vain. I am paying for my sins now" ("Jones May Die"). The isolation in which he spent the next fifty years of his life reveals that Valet Jones was never truly free of his crime. "...It is rash to say that he himself escapes punishment. On the rack of memory, who shall commute his sufferings?" (*New York World*).



(Taken from *New York World*, April 8, 1900. Rice Papers, Fondren Library)

NEW YORK, THURSDAY, APRIL 4, 1901.

THE EXAMINATION OF VALET JONES BEFORE JUSTICE JEROME.



(Taken from *New York World*, Rice Papers, Fondren Library)

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