

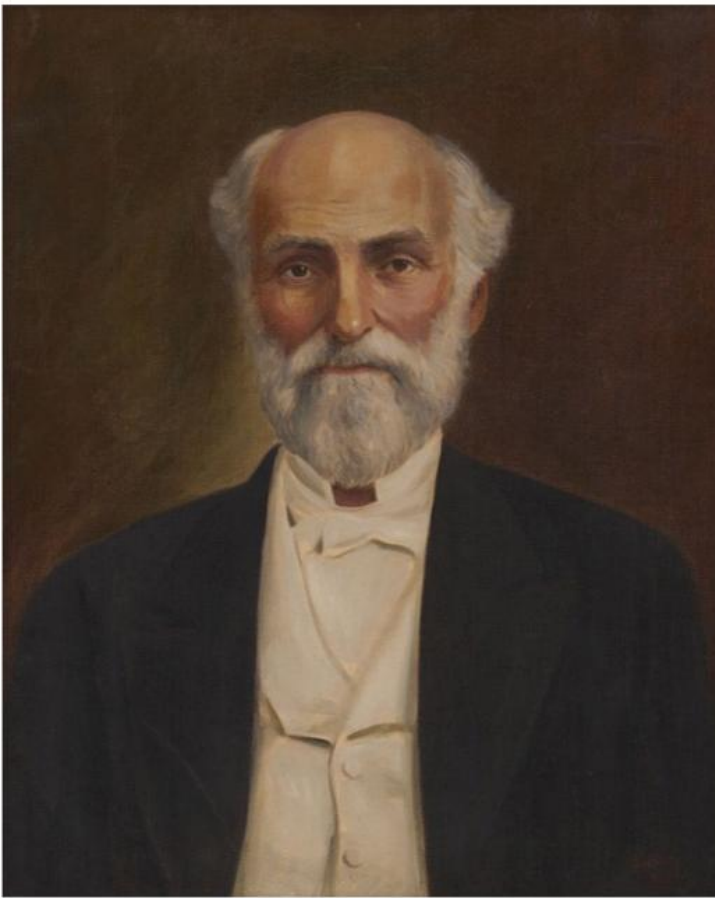
Rufus Columbus Burleson

by: Jim Burleson

Few Burlesons spark controversy to levels seen by Dr. Rufus Columbus Burleson. Minister, educator, guardian, missionary and family man were but a sample group of his roles... not all handled well. We'll attempt to present you a balanced view of the man, highlighting genuine praise for pioneering activity and honestly criticizing his flaws that led to his being eased out of his most prominent role.

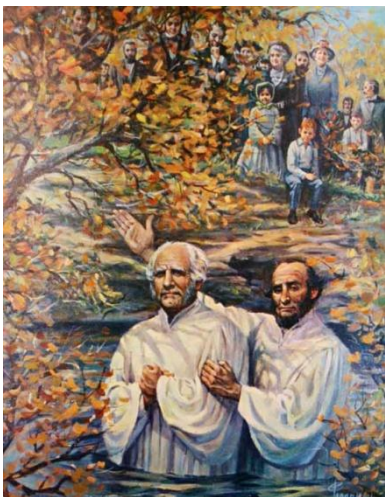
Burleson was born 7 August 1823 in the northern Alabama town Decatur. At age seventeen Rufus moved to Nashville, Tennessee to study law at the University of Nashville but soon dropped out to begin a preaching career. This restart took place at Nashville's First Baptist Church. Illness cut short his preaching, stalling out in 1841. To make a living Rufus moved on to teaching in Mississippi through 1845. During 1846 to 1847 Burleson attended the Western Baptist Literary and Theological Institute in Covington, Kentucky. He returned to preaching at the First Baptist Church of Houston. A highlight in this role had to be his baptizing of Sam Houston on 19 November 1854.

Seen as a rising star in Baptist theology, Burleson was urged to organize and promote that religion through education with a pointed slant to displace the papist dominance in Texas. He served as second president of Baylor University from 1851-1861. He moved to Waco University, later merged with Baylor, because of friction (some said his bullying) with Horace Clark, and he became its president. Loyal Waco U. alumni would say

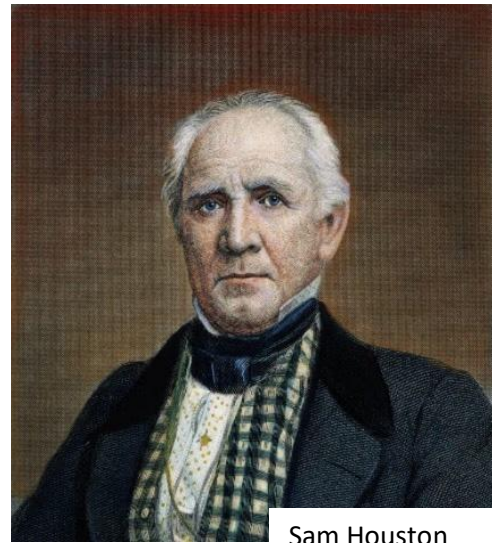


Painting, Portrait of Rufus Columbus Burleson, located at Baylor University. Courtesy of [Baylor University Libraries](#). Image available on the Internet and included in accordance with [Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107](#).

Rufus had long plotted to join the colleges. Having seen the merger through, Burleson again took the helm as Baylor's president from 1896 to 1897.



Between these college shifts, the Baptists had other plans for Rufus. They named him their president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas from 1892 to 1893. Back in 1869, Burleson was asked by Barnabas Sears, former president of Brown University to establish the Peabody Education Fund. He also helped establish Bishop College, a historically black institution originally in Marshall, Texas, but later moved to Dallas. Rufus, under unanimous opinions, influence of his wife, Georgia took great pride in promoting education of women. More on that later.



Sam Houston

Burleson died in Waco 1901. He is buried in Oakwood Cemetery, Waco, Texas. The suburban city of Burleson, Johnson County south of Fort Worth is named in his honor. So was Burleson College in Greenville, Texas.

Continuing with the theme of monuments, "June of 1905, four years after Burleson's death, a statue in his image was unveiled. Standing about seven feet tall, the statue created by Signor Pompeo Coppini, can still be found in Burleson Quadrangle, which is also named after the past president of Baylor University. "Additionally, Burleson Hall, an important student center bore his name. * Most of you know now Rufus' statue was removed just a few years ago over revelations that he had ownership or at least, sympathetic attitudes toward slavery. Regents stated the statue would be moved; it has not resurfaced. Burleson Quadrangle is now simply called "The Quadrangle "and Burleson has been removed from any student buildings. His wife, Georgia is still held in high regard for her efforts furthering women's learning.



Let's retreat in time to explore how Rufus' life formed. He was the son of Jonathan and Elizabeth (Byrd) Burleson. His mother descended from the Byrd family of Virginia. He

entered Summerville Academy in 1837, remaining two years, then spent time at schools in Danville and Decatur. His desire was to be a lawyer. After a religious conversion in April 1839, however, he felt a call to preach. Dropping out of the University of Nashville, as noted previously, he fell ill then took to self-school a bit. He studied Greek, Hebrew and Bible history while recuperating. Returned to health Rufus taught in Mississippi where he was ordained and served briefly as pastor of three churches near Starkville. After seminary in Kentucky, 1846, he was appointed for mission work in Texas by the Southern Baptist Domestic Mission Board to become pastor at First Baptist Church in Houston. After a short successful pastorate, he was appointed second president of Baylor, succeeding Henry Lee Graves, born Yanceyville, North Carolina 22 Feb 1813, died 1881. Henry was son to Thomas Graves ** This was noted to excite Burleson history buffs anxious to solidify genealogy connections of these two families AND to emphasize Baylor University was alive and well long before Rufus came on scene... he was the SECOND president. Rufus did exhibit remarkable talent as he constantly advertised, traveled, speaking over the state. Burleson brought relative strength and stability to Baylor. The friction mentioned earlier between Rufus and Horace Clark was over the move of their school to merge with Baylor and to make the resultant institution...coeducational.

That stability and Rufus 'standing became vulnerable when he and Georgia brought into their home a Brazilian orphan girl. A Baptist missionary, Zachariah Taylor brought an eleven-year-old girl named Antonia Teixeira to Waco from her native Brazil. The plan was to foster Teixeira in the Baptist faith then return her at sixteen years old to her homeland, where she could share her faith with the Papists. Antonia was given room and board at the home of Baylor president Dr. Rufus Burleson and his wife, Georgia, in return for domestic service.

In the next two years Antonia was taught proper English and etiquette. Religious training took precedence. Her relationship with the Burlesons was much closer than domestic/employer. It was common for the young Teixeira to refer to Rufus as "Grandpa", an affection he never corrected. This welcoming home also saw Rufus' son in law visit daily to take his meals. This in law often brought along his brother, H. Steen Morris.

When Antonia was just shy of fourteen, it became apparent she was pregnant. The Burlesons kept the young teen indoors for months, refusing to reveal the circumstances to the outside world. The Waco Morning News broke the story on June 16, 1895. Antonia claimed she had been drugged and raped on multiple occasions by H. Steen Morris. The girl said she told Georgia Burleson about the attacks, but that “nothing was done about it.” And so, they continued. At some point the Burlesons handed over the pregnant (showing) Antonia to a Catholic woman (interesting choice given their anti-papists sentiment). The Burleson-Morris clan had hoped that the girl would deliver the baby under the Catholic’s roof and return with it to Brazil and the whole thing would blow over.



Meanwhile, Morris and friends floated the story she had taken a black lover, but that story came to naught when Teixeira gave birth to a white baby, prematurely, two days after the ‘Morning News’ story broke. In newsman Brann’s words, the sickly child lived ‘just long enough to develop a striking resemblance to H. Steen Morris. ‘Brann was William Cowper Brann- publisher of the “Iconoclast.”



The community pressure grew quickly. Rufus attempted to quell the swelling controversy by sending out a four page pamphlet entitled, “ Baylor and the Brazilian Girl.” Rufus claimed the girl had never said anything to Georgia about Morris, calling the accusations were “black and damnable lies” concocted by a troubled young girl. He went on to say, “ With exceeding great reluctance... the girl was utterly untrustworthy...and in addition to her other faults, crazy about the boys.” All this despite he’d treated her as his granddaughter. Then, Burleson went on to reveal the true intent of his pamphlet, he reassured readers that Baylor was a perfectly safe place for young women to receive their Christian education. He reminded Waco just how much Baylor had done for the city. Of the 300 female students attending, 35 withdrew immediately. This angered the Baylor Board of Trustees. Georgia Burleson quickly responded by agreeing to establish a new female college.

Rufus ‘pamphlet then turned focus on Brann, the reporter who brought attention to the case. Burleson said Brann and their lot,” needed to repent and confess openly their sins and receive forgiveness, before they are everlastingly lost.” This only further infuriated Brann.

He continued to report that “Baylor University brought all its power not to ferret out the criminal and bring him to the bar, but to forever blacken the character of the little orphan and to shield the author of her shame.” Brann continued that Teixeira’s case was not isolated, that other girls had complained only to be sent away in disgrace. Brann explained the Baylor reach was so expansive that Rev. Taylor, the missionary who originally brought Antonia to Burleson had recently changed story to state she was known all along to be a foul prostitute, daughter of a courtesan. Brann noted Taylor brought her to Texas claiming she had a certificate of good character. This orphan’s late father in his last years was a convert who assisted Taylor. Why was Taylor now calling her a child harlot?

H. Steen Morris was brought to trial for the time’s equivalent of statutory rape. During the trial, two attempts were made on the reporter, Brann’s life. Seven jurors voted to convict Morris- five to acquit. The hung jury case was rescheduled for a second trial. Morris’ attorney, fearing a second trial’s consequences, approached Antonia, now fifteen, to convince her to go home to Brazil quietly. He met her, boat ticket and affidavit in hand. That paper retracted Antonia’s statement Morris ever raped her. Rufus had long since refused her his home and further convinced townfolk

to do the same. Abandoned and hopeless, Antonia signed the document. Next boat out she was gone. She was never heard from again.

Contrary to many unsubstantiated stories, Rufus Columbus Burleson, was never actually accused of any sexual misconduct. His Board of Trustees were extremely displeased he had used University assets to defend his honor. They accused him of what we in the 21st century would call "victim shaming." In a meeting called to discuss Burleson's continued service, lawyers and Board of Trustees argued. Rufus would not go quietly. A compromise was crafted in which Rufus would not discuss the circumstances; he would be eased out carrying the title of President Emeritus with full salary for life.



For balance we should point out Brann had never liked Baptists; he made no secret of that. When confronted with his hatred of them, he often quipped, "They just weren't held under long enough. "Brann had reported Baylor was being discussed as moving to Dallas. He went on, "Dallas doesn't want Baylor even a little... there isn't a town in the world that wants it except Waco...as a small Waco property owner, I will give it \$1000 any time to move it to Dallas and double that amount if it will move to Honolulu or Hell." Brann's first article after moving to Waco highlighted the fact it was one of few cities in America actually licensed prostitutes under its legal prostitution policy. April Fool's Day 1898, Tom Davis, a political hopeful with daughters at Baylor approached Brann near the post office and shot him in the back, killing him.

With poor Antonia somewhere in Brazil alone and ruined, Brann shot in the back, dead and buried and Rufus retired at full pay, you think we'd be done. Unfortunately, we must address Rufus' Orleans speech before a large gathering of Burlesons. In that address he elaborated on Burleson origins in Wales, holding titles like Sir Edward Burleson, two brothers arriving to seek each other and so on. He made these assertions without a single source citation, a major no-no for a PhD. Wales was a departure site, no Burlesons have ever been verified as Welsh, Burlesons were Puritans escaping the constraints of the Church of England- unlikely to curry crown favor. Two attempts to seek out documents supporting Rufus' claims at, yes good old Baylor, were both met with the response, "sir, those documents do not exist."

Endnotes:

Dr. Rufus Columbus Burleson (1823-1901)-Find a Grave Memorial

The Baylor Lariat (Waco, Texas), Vol. 67, No. 124, Saturday, May 7, 1966

Burleson, Rufus Columbus (1823-1901) biography by J. A. Reynolds Texas State Historical Association 1952

Texas Archival Resources Online: Baylor University- Rufus Columbus Burleson papers, Inclusive 1836-1966 Accession Number 57

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Texas Monthly June 3, 2016 "The Apostle of the Devil " by John Nova Lomax

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Aggressive Historian "The OTHER Baylor University Scandal" February 2017 Dr. Brennan Gardner Rivas, PhD

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William Cowper Brann, "The Complete Works of Brann the Iconoclast, Vol X (New York: The Brann Publishers, 1919), 63-64.