

## The Philanthropist and the Normal

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This is Paul Culp, Special Collections Librarian at Sam Houston State University. Our talk today is entitled "The Philanthropist and the Normal."

Perched on the side of the hill which is topped by SHSU's Quadrangle, center of the original campus, is a curious-looking structure shaped like a Greek cross. That building, the Peabody Memorial Library, is the result of the generosity of a man who never saw Huntsville—indeed, never came within hundreds of miles of the area—and was dead ten years before the creation of Sam Houston Normal Institute in 1879. Yet without the impetus provided by the Peabody Education Fund, decades might have elapsed before Texas decided to create a state-funded teacher-training institution, and by then it would quite probably have been located in some other city.

George [Peabody] "PEE-bu-dee"—as his name is called in his native Massachusetts—was born in the year 1795, in South Danvers, Massachusetts (renamed Peabody in his honor in 1868) to a family of modest means, only distantly related to the aristocrats of that name who formed the pinnacle of Boston society. Digressing from our philanthropist for a moment, it was one of THOSE Peabodies who was responsible for one of the most unfortunate feminine names since Governor Hogg of Texas named his daughter Ima: Phoebe B. (the initial is for Baxter, her mother's maiden name). Peabody was later married to a man named Beebe, thus becoming Phoebe B. Peabody Beebe.

Back to George [Peabody] "PEE-body"—I'll revert to Texanese for the remainder of this talk. He was apprenticed to a grocer at age 11, thus ending his formal education—certainly an irony for one who would become one of the greatest champions of the value of education. Perhaps his best-known quotation is in regard to education: *"I am well qualified to estimate its value by the disadvantages I labour under in the society in which my business and situation in life frequently throws me."* He worked in the then-new capitol city of Washington, D.C., before establishing himself in nearby Baltimore, where he proceeded to become very rich. This financial success was often owing to his assumption of what seemed dubious—but worthwhile—obligations and then surprising the investing world by making a profit. The best example of this success occurred after he established a banking and mercantile business in London, where he would live the rest of his life, in 1837. He negotiated the sale of bonds—buying many with his own funds—for the state of Maryland; so many states, including Maryland, had defaulted on their bonds that British investors looked askance at them, but Peabody campaigned around the US for states to honor their obligations, and when they did so, he made huge profits. Another risk-taking that paid off handsomely was his funding of the installation of American exhibits at the great London Exposition of 1851 in the famed "Crystal Palace." Congress, still suspicious of British motives, would give no funding for the display of such American technology as the Cyrus McCormick reaping machine and the Colt revolver. Peabody made possible one of the triumphs of that first and most memorable of great world exhibitions. His investment here in Huntsville paid off handsomely as well, educationally rather than financially.

Let me just briefly summarize some of his gifts, before I bring us back to this place and time. Peabody is regarded as the founder of modern philanthropy. He gave away between 8 and 9 million dollars; if that does not seem an enormous sum to you, keep in mind that the building here at SHSU which is named for him only cost a bit more than \$9,000, furnished, when it opened in 1902. The largest endowments of that total were the Peabody Donation Fund—which is still furnishing housing for the poor in London—and the Peabody Education Fund, founded in 1867 to "encourage the intellectual, moral, and industrial education of the destitute children of the Southern States." It is characteristic that at a time when lesser men were motivated by revenge or toward enriching themselves, Peabody (as you remember, a native of Massachusetts) thought only of providing a path toward a better life for the people of the war-devastated South. His best-known memorial is probably the George Peabody College of Education in Nashville (originally Peabody Normal, and

now a component of Vanderbilt University), but there were other normals besides Sam Houston, endowments for universities, libraries, and especially museums, such as those at Harvard and Yale. You may have wondered why the original name of this institution was Sam Houston “Normal” Institute. Long used to describe institutions of higher education for teachers, the term is still used in many countries outside the English-speaking orbit (examples are the Universidad Normal in Mexico City and Ecole Normale of the Sorbonne in Paris). Peabody is one of only two Americans who have been granted “Freedom of the City of London” (Dwight D. Eisenhower is the other) and the only American ever given a funeral in Westminster Abbey, though his body was then shipped off to his Massachusetts birthplace via the *Monarch*, largest warship in the Royal Navy.

There is nothing on this campus named for Dr. Barnas Sears, a president of Brown University and one of the most eminent scholars and educators of his day, but it should be appropriate if there were. As the first General Agent of the Peabody Fund—and he remained in that key role until his death in 1880—it was he who cajoled, prodded, and enticed the governor and legislature of Texas with the promise of 50% funding to establish Sam Houston. Dr. Rufus Burleson, President of Baylor University and also the state agent for the Peabody Fund, indicated in his memoirs that his own friendship with Governor Roberts played a role; upon observing how depressed Dr. Sears was during his third trip to Texas without success on the matter of the normal school, Burleson promised to do what he could. In any case, the concrete offer of matching funds, large enough at that time to pay the salaries of all faculty for an indeterminate period until Texas was ready to take over the obligation, finally prompted Governor Oran Roberts to push the legislation through.

Dr. Jack Humphries, a former Academic Vice President of SHSU and later president of Sul Ross State University, wrote a booklet on the Austin College Building that outlines how Huntsville was able to secure the location of Sam Houston here in Huntsville:

*“In 1878, rumors were rife that the State would soon establish a normal school for the purpose of training teachers. The state teachers’ meeting that summer gave its endorsement to the idea and a committee including Dr. Rufus Burleson and O.H. Cooper was appointed to make recommendations to the legislature ... Dr. Barnas Sears, general agent of the Peabody Educational Fund which was active in the improvement of the quality of education in the post-Civil War South, spent much time in Texas during the winter of 1878-79 encouraging acceptance of the normal school proposal.*

*“The community of Huntsville sent a committee to Austin late in 1878 to offer to the State clear title to the Austin College property which community leaders proposed to obtain. They offered the site and the building for a normal school to be named in honor of General Sam Houston.”*

Huntsville’s offer might not seem so magnanimous to us today in view of what we know of “incentive packages,” but Austin Hall would have been seen as quite an enticement at a time there were few major structures devoted to education in this state. The reason it is such an architectural treasure is that it is the only state-owned building (other than the two governor’s mansions in Austin, both designed by Abner Cook) that predates the Civil War. Its elegant Greek-Revival style had been used only in residences, as Texas was still too much the rustic frontier for such niceties. Until the so-called Colonial Capitol (burned in 1882) was built in 1853, there was no public building to compare with it, and it was “the wonder of all around.”

Governor Roberts formally opened this institution on October 10, 1879. The establishment of Sam Houston Normal Institute was the last that Dr. Sears was able to achieve as head of the Fund, as he died in 1880; it was so successful, apart from some faculty problems in the first couple of years, that the original building had to be enlarged almost immediately, and shortly thereafter plans began for what would become the beloved Main Building that would be the focal point of the campus from 1890 until 1982. We know the sad conclusion of the “Old Main” saga, but many of you are probably not aware that the *first* Peabody Memorial Library was an impressive room with two-level stacks within the walls of the Main Building.

In any case, the success of this institution prompted Texas to loosen its purse-strings just after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and enlarge the teacher-training system—first by taking over a private “normal” in Denton that would become North Texas State Normal, and then by creating Southwest Texas State Normal in San Marcos. The Peabody Educational Fund began weaning Texas so that funding could go to less responsible states, but enough remained committed that

SHNI was able to lead forth with what was considered a revolutionary new idea in education: providing a separate building entirely for use of the library. Yes, SHNI was the first college in Texas to have a library building. Baylor's Carroll Library would open a bit more than a year later, in 1903, and the University of Texas would build a still-impressive building by 1909, but Texas A&M would not move its library into a dedicated building until the Cushing Memorial Library was built in 1930! In addition to the Peabody Memorial Library itself, the Texas State Library noted early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that Sam Houston Normal had the largest and best college collection—other than that of the University of Texas at Austin—in the entire state. You would be amazed at the number of books still in Gresham Library that have SHNI bookplates; they are mostly histories, but there are some scientific and medical treatises kept in Special Collections as curio items.

The contractor of the Peabody Memorial Library, J.R. McKnight, had a slight cost under-run when he turned the building over to the state less than a year after receiving the contract on June 20, 1901. The concept of an *under*-run, especially on a sum (his successful low bid was \$9,372) which seems to minuscule to us today, is staggering—surely never again repeated. The stained-glass windows were a gift of the Class of 1902. They are all original, except the framed window on the right as one enters the building; that was constructed of glass salvaged from the massive windows in Old Main Auditorium after the fire of 1982. The embossed metal ceilings contain both original material and new material faithfully copied. The fireplace was reconstructed according to a photograph circa 1910, and even the statuettes shown in photographs were replaced when possible. In short, the Peabody Memorial Library is a careful restoration that was completed in 1991 after the building had endured many years of ever more inappropriate uses and even the threat of demolition in 1981. The only positive outcome of the Old Main fire was to promote the historical value of the Peabody and of Austin Hall. Such a restoration had never been done here before, and is unlikely to recur in the future, since university buildings these days are primarily utilitarian, without the uniqueness (or eccentricities) which characterize the Peabody.

This uniqueness presented difficulties in finding appropriate uses after Estill Library replaced it in 1928. Until the first permanent building designed for music opened in 1952, it made a rather good band hall, but later uses just chopped up the large spaces, dropped the high ceilings, and blackened the windows that gave such superior natural lighting. One curious use I had not known until recently was as a fishing worm supply; President Harmon Lowman, memorialized by our Student Center, discovered that the earthen end of the basement built into the hill (once known as Capitol Hill when Huntsville still aspired to be the capitol of Texas) was moist and cool and thereby provided a perfect environment for worms. Contrasting with the inflexibility of the Peabody, one can consider that the present Newton Gresham Library, huge as it is (an acre on each of its four floors), has nothing structural—other than the walnut paneling enclosing the Thomason Room—that would be problematic in preserving or altering for other uses. The present library has many art treasures and memorabilia, but all are portable and could easily be moved to another building. The Estill Building and Bobby K. Marks Administration Building are excellent examples of distinctive exteriors being preserved while interiors have been modernized into structures that are thoroughly comfortable and attractive. Austin Hall, of course, is an architectural treasure that would merit any conceivable preservation or restoration procedure; its exterior *has* been faithfully preserved and restored, but since no interior photographs until the 20<sup>th</sup> century are known to be extant, there is no possibility of knowing exactly what it looked like when it opened in 1852. Therefore the Peabody Memorial, as long as SHSU preserves it in its present state, will be its authentic self—unlike any other building in the state, even among libraries of its approximate age—as a time capsule far into the future.