

**Finding Aid to the Martha's Vineyard Museum  
Record Unit 396**

**The Phidelah Rice Playhouse Papers**

By

Tom Dresser, Linda Wilson, Barbara Murphy

**Descriptive Summary**

**Repository:** Martha's Vineyard Museum

**Call No.**

**Title: Creator:** Tom Dresser, Linda Wilson, Barbara Murphy

**Quantity:** .5 cubic feet

**Abstract:** The Phidelah Rice Playhouse papers are a mix of playbills, pamphlets, correspondence, newspaper articles and a scrapbook pertaining to the Rice Playhouse based on East Chop in Oak Bluffs and the murder that was committed there.

Researchers should refer to Mr. Dresser's book published in 2008 for further information and to the typewritten transcript of the trial in the Huntington Library.

**Acquisition Information:** The Phidelah Rice Papers were acquired by the Martha's Vineyard Museum from undocumented sources.

**Processing Information:**

**Access Restrictions:** none

**Use Restrictions:** none

**Preferred citation for publication:** Martha's Vineyard Museum, Record Unit 396, The Phidelah Rice Playhouse

**Index Terms**

Rice, Phidelah

Rice, Elizabeth

Rice Playhouse

Smith, Clara

Rice, R. Huntingdon

Tracy, Harold

**Series and Subseries Arrangement**

Series I: Correspondence

Series II: Rice Playhouse Programs

Series III: Phidelah Rice School

Series IV: Rice Playhouse Murder

Series V: Rice Related Material

**Biography/Historical Note:**

Phidelah Rice summered on Martha's Vineyard from 1911 until 1940. In 1912 he and his wife Elizabeth founded the Rice School of the Spoken Word aimed at instructing students who wanted to improve public speaking and reading techniques.

As a monactor, a term he invented meaning a professional actor who played several roles in succession, Phidelah Rice was committed to promoting community theatre. In 1924 he founded the Rice Playhouse in Oak Bluffs. It was the second summer theatre organized in the United States. Over a fifteen year run he attracted Broadway stars and playwrights to work with him. Ultimately the Playhouse evolved into a cultural enclave on the Vineyard complete with a Children's Theatre and a refreshment stand.

In 1940 a trio of events led to the demise of the theatre. Phidelah Rice became ill and had to surrender management of his operation. As the summer season started, a student of the School was murdered in her dormitory. Phidelah's brother was charged but found innocent, and the case was never solved. On the international scene, World War II had started in Europe and there were fears that the United States would be drawn into war. These three pressures brought about the closure of the Rice Playhouse. An attempt to revive the Playhouse occurred in 1941 and again in 1945 when the theatre was leased by another producer. The Playhouse limped along until 1953 when its lights went out forever.

**Scope and Content Note:**

The files on the Phidelah Rice Playhouse span the years from 1927 to 1952, with some correspondence dating up to 2001. Included are letters, programs arranged, Phidelah Rice School pamphlets and material on related Rice productions in Dedham and Wellesley Hills MA. Also included are an original scrapbook of the Rice Playhouse murder and related newspaper clippings, originals and copies.

**Series Descriptions:**

**Series I: Correspondence**

**Series II: Rice Playhouse Programs**

**Series III: Phidelah Rice School**

**Series IV: Rice Playhouse Murder**  
**Series V: Rice Related Material**

**Series I: Correspondence**

Box 1 of 1

Folder 1: Correspondence 1936, 1941, 1942, 1982, 2001

**Series II: Rice Playhouse Programs**

Box 1 of 1

Folder 2: 1927-1934

Folder 3: 1935-1940

Folder 4: 1941-1952

**Series III: Phidelah Rice School**

Box 1 of 1

Folder 5: School pamphlets 1932, 1939, 1940

Folder 6: Phidelah Rice School programs 1932-1938

**Series IV: Rice Playhouse Murder**

Box 1 of 1

Folder 7: MVM acquisition note re materials pertaining to murder, 1 photo, Tom Dresser article 2001

Folder 8: Rice Murder scrapbook

Folder 9: Clippings related to murder and playhouse history

**Series V: Rice Related Material**

Box 1 of 1

Folder 10: Programs from Phidelah Rice's Dedham players 1927-28, and the community playhouse in Wellesley Hills

Note:

See *Record Unit 397: Martha's Vineyard and the Performing Arts* for other programs and playbills