Guide to the Morse Family Papers

MS 358

compiled by Staff of Manuscripts and Archives

July 1980
Revised: July 1998

New Haven, Connecticut
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Paging Instructions

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Overview

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CALL NUMBER: MS 358

CREATOR: Morse Family

TITLE: Morse Family Papers

DATES: 1779-1868

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 8 linear feet (21 boxes, 1 folio)

LANGUAGE(S): The materials are in English.

SUMMARY: The principal figures in this collection are Jedidiah Morse (1761-1826) and his sons Samuel Finley Breese Morse (1791-1872) and Richard Cary Morse (1795-1868). More than half of the collection is made up of correspondence (1779-1868) among members of the family. Also included are legal and financial papers, sermons by Jedidiah and Richard Cary Morse, travel journals, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, printed matter, and photographs.

FINDING AID LINK: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, use the following address:
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Administrative Information

Provenance

Gift of the Morse family, 1943-1950. The papers of Richard Cary Morse were given by Mrs. Lawrence C. Wilkinson in 1976.
Jedidiah Morse, 1761-1826

Jedidiah Morse was born on August 23, 1761 in Woodstock, Connecticut. He graduated from Yale in 1783, and remained in New Haven studying theology until 1785, when he was licensed to preach. After a year of preaching and teaching school in Norwich, Connecticut, he returned to Yale as a tutor in 1786. He was ordained on November 9, 1786, and proceeded to Midway, Georgia, where he preached for five months. On April 30, 1789, Morse became the minister of the First Congregational Church of Charlestown, Massachusetts, where he remained for the next thirty years. On May 14, 1789, he married Elizabeth Ann Breese.

Throughout his career as a minister, Morse defended Orthodoxy against the intrusions of Arminianism and Unitarianism. As a member of the board of overseers of Harvard College, he opposed the election there in 1805 of Henry Ware as Hollis Professor of Divinity, because Ware, he felt, was not sufficiently orthodox. From 1805 to 1810, he edited the orthodox periodical Panoplist. In 1808 he helped to found Andover Theological Seminary, and in 1809, Boston's Park Street Church. But despite his efforts, Unitarian defection occurred in his own church, and after a few years of friction, he submitted his request for dismissal in 1819.

Morse was very active in evangelism and missionary work. He helped to found the New England Tract Society in 1814, and the American Bible Society in 1816. From 1811 to 1819, he served on the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. He was most interested in the conditions of the American Indians and of the poor whites living on the Isle of Shoals. The Federal government in the summer of 1820 commissioned him to study the Indians, and in 1822 he published a report of his findings.

He was a staunch Federalist, opposing republicanism and the prevalent "French influence." In 1801, he helped to found the Federalist periodical The Mercury and New England Palladium.

Morse is best known as the "Father of American Geography." He wrote the first geography to come from the United States: published in 1784, it was entitled Geography Made Easy and it ran to 25 editions in his lifetime alone. He later expanded this work; both it and his other geographies became immensely popular here and abroad, securing a virtual monopoly in America during his lifetime. In 1794 the University of Edinburgh presented him with its honorary S.T.D. degree.

Among his other publications were the article on America for the Encyclopedia Britannica's American edition (1790); a History of New England, (1804) with Elijah Parish, which led to a great literary controversy with Hannah Adams; and Annals of the American Revolution (1824), almost his last work. Morse returned to New Haven in 1819, to devote the remainder of his life to Indian affairs, writing and preaching. There he died on June 9, 1826.

Of the eleven children born to Jedidiah Morse and his wife, only three survived infancy. Certainly the accomplishments of these three might have alleviated the grief at the loss of the others;

Sidney Edwards Morse, 1794-1871

Richard Cary Morse, 1795-1868

Samuel Finley Breese Morse, 1791-1872
The eldest son of Jedidiah and Elizabeth Ann Morse, Samuel F. B. Morse was born on April 27, 1791 in Charlestown, Massachusetts. He graduated from Yale in 1810, acquiring while there a reputation for painting small but satisfactory portraits on ivory.

After graduation, he returned to Charlestown, where he met the painters Gilbert Stuart and Washington Alston. They approved of his work, and on July 13, 1811, Morse left for England with Allston, who was his mentor there for the following four years. While there, some of his paintings earned him some recognition by the members of the Royal Academy. In 1815, he returned to Boston and opened a studio, anxious to resuscitate the glories of the fifteenth century. But Boston was disappointing. Only portraits were in demand, and Morse had to travel widely in order to secure enough commissions to enable him to earn a living. He went to Concord, New Hampshire; New Haven; Charleston, South Carolina; and New York, where he remained for several years. His portraits were becoming popular, and he began to have some success. In 1826, he helped to found the National Academy of Design and became its first president, holding classes of instruction for aspiring painters and waging a pamphlet war against the rival American Academy of Fine Arts. He served as president until 1842.

In 1829, probably partially to escape the unpleasant memory of the deaths of his wife, father, and mother during the previous four years, Morse went to Europe to study, paint, and travel. He confined most of his travelling to Italy and Paris. While abroad, he cultivated friendships with James Fenimore Cooper and Horatio Greenough. After three years, he returned to New York, where he was appointed professor of painting and sculpture (later, also professor of the literature of the arts of design) in what is now New York University. It proved to be a much more prestigious than lucrative position. Between 1832 and 1836, Morse was engaged in much anti-catholic and Native-American activity; he wrote several tracts and ran unsuccessfully for mayor of New York City in 1836 on the Native-American ticket. About 1837, disappointed in his hopes of creating an American Rennaissance, he retired from painting.

While returning from Europe in October of 1832, a fellow traveller named Charles Thomas Jackson had shown Morse certain electrical apparatus he had acquired in Europe. Morse's interest in electricity, fostered earlier by the lectures and demonstrations of Benjamin Silliman and Jeremiah Day at Yale and James Freeman Dana before the New York Athenaeum, was renewed; the following twelve years were spent in perfecting a crude but efficient model of the telegraphic apparatus for which Morse is best known. With the aid of Leonard Dunnell Gale (1800-1883), Joseph Henry, and Alfred Vail, the invention was ready by 1837; but seven years of disappointment and often hunger followed before the funds necessary to construct a working model were supplied. The English and the French were uninterested, and it was not until 1843 that the United States Congress voted the funds ($30,000) for an experimental line, to be built from Washington to Baltimore. On May 24, 1844, Morse sent the famous message "What hath God wrought!" over this line, and Vail in Baltimore returned it correctly. The telegraph was born.

Sidney Edwards Morse, 1794-1871

The son of Jedidiah and Elizabeth Ann Morse, Sidney Edwards Morse was born on February 7, 1794 in Charlestown, Massachusetts. He received an A.B. degree from Yale in 1811, and from there went on to study law at Tapping Reeve's law school in Litchfield, Connecticut.

In 1813, he wrote a series of articles on the new southern states, to show "the injustice of erecting new states at the south", and in 1814, he published an explanation of the literary controversy between Hannah Adams and his father, Jedidiah Morse, (1761-1826)

At his father's suggestion, Morse helped to establish the Boston religious paper, the Recorder; the first issue appeared on January 3, 1816. In 1817, he left the paper to study at Andover Theological Seminary, where he remained until 1820. He then moved to New York, where, with his brother Richard Cary Morse (1795-1868) he established another religious paper, the New York Observer; the first issue appeared on May 17, 1823. Morse was senior editor and proprietor of this paper until 1858.

He was helpful to his father in revising the famous Geography of the elder Morse, and in 1822 the two edited a New System of Modern Geography. He made further advances in the field of geography when, in the 1830's, he and Henry A. Munson began working on a new method of printing maps: an engraving was made on wax, and from the engraving was made a plate to be inserted with the type. Morse had written atlases previously, the first being An Atlas of the United States in 1823, and the new method proved very valuable in enabling him to print several more. The first production using the new method was his Geographic Atlas of the United States, published in 1842.
He is credited with two other inventions. On October 3, 1817, he and his brother Samuel F. B. Morse (1791-1872) were granted a patent for a "flexible piston pump", and on July 17, 1866, he and his son were granted one for a "bathometer", to be used in deep-sea exploration.

Morse on April 1, 1841 married Catherine Livingston, who bore him one son and one daughter. He died on December 23, 1871.

Richard Cary Morse, 1795-1868

Richard Cary Morse, while on a tour of foreign travel, died at Kissingen, Bavaria, Sept. 22, 1868.

He was the fourth son of Jedidiah (Y. C. 1783) and Elizabeth Ann Breeze Morse, and was born in Charlestown, Mass., June 18, 1795.

He was fitted for College at Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass., and after graduating, the youngest member of his class, and spending a year with President Dwight as his amanuensis, returned to Andover, completed the three years' course at the Theological Seminary there and was licensed to preach by the Union Congregational Association of Massachusetts, in October, 1817. During the winter of 1817 and '18 he supplied the pulpit of the Presbyterian Church on John's Island, S. C. Returning North, he was for some time associated with his father in geographical labor, and in editing a Universal Gazetteer. In 1823 he removed to the city of New York and engaged with his elder brother, Sidney E. Morse (Y. C. 1811), in founding the New York Observer, the oldest religious newspaper in that state. He remained associate proprietor and editor till 1858, and then retiring from active life, continued to reside in New York till 1863, when he removed to New Haven. He left that place for a tour of foreign travel in May, 1868.

Mr. Morse was married Sept. 30, 1828, to Miss Sarah Louisa Davis of Claverack, N. Y., who died in Paris, France, Oct. 17, 1851. They had ten children, nine of whom, 4 sons and 5 daughters, survive them. The sons are graduates of this College in the classes of 1856, 1862, 1867, and 1868. Mr. Morse married again, Aug. 12, 1856, Miss Harriot Hinckley Messinger of Boston, who survives him.

Yale College Obituary Record, 1859-1870, pp. 302-303.

Description of the Collection

The principal figures in this collection are Jedidiah Morse (1761-1826) and his sons Samuel Finley Breese Morse (1791-1872) and Richard Cary Morse (1795-1868). More than half of the collection is made up of correspondence (1779-1868) among members of the family. Also included are legal and financial papers, sermons by Jedidiah and Richard Cary Morse, travel journals, newspaper clippings, scrapbooks, printed matter, and photographs.
Collection Contents

Inventory

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<tr>
<th>Box</th>
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8 linear feet (21 boxes, 1 folio)

DESCRIPTION OF THE PAPERS

Notes Regarding Box 20

The addition to the Morse Family Papers in Box 20 is the gift of Mrs. Lawrence C. Wilkinson, made in 1976. They comprise three journals, two in the form of letters, by Richard Cary Morse, correspondence with his wife and with other members of his family. Included also is a pamphlet written by his brother, Sidney Edwards Morse: *Memorabilia in the life of Jedidiah Morse, D.D.*, Boston, 1867. 24 p.

The Journal of 1838, from which the first four leaves are missing, records a tour of Europe made by Richard Morse to improve his health. He complains of a stomach ailment, but principally of depression. In his travels through England, France and Switzerland, he visits several doctors and describes their diagnoses and prescriptions. Indeed, the notes and recommendations of one Dr. Charles Petit at Vichy are included with the journal. He is also a close recorder of scenery, manners and the minutiae of life. His interest in practical affairs leads him to inquire about and set down the exact cost involved in building a hotel in Vichy, including figures for the various classes of laborers and the materials. He seeks out churches, clergymen and delights in religious conversation. In Vichy, he happens on a religious procession which he describes. He also compares political, social and cultural differences between Europe and America, not always to America's advantage.

The letters to his wife in 1838 include an account of the coronation of Queen Victoria, which he witnessed from stands in the street. They are particularly interesting for the strong expression of republican sentiment which the occasion elicited. The remaining letters, which range over a decade, are full of family news and cares, with constant references to the health and spiritual education of the children and, after 1848, for the health of his wife.

In 1855 he toured Europe again, and his letters to his family, in effect, make a journal. In them he describes his sea voyage, and his progress from Bremen to Vienna, Venice, Zurich, Antwerp, Leyden, Amsterdam and Norway.

The letters of his wife, Sarah Louisa Morse, written between 1838 and 1850, are the records of a woman in the midst of her most active time of childbearing and caring for a large household. They are full of domestic details and vividly convey a picture of family life as well as the manner in which children were raised and cared for in sickness and health.

Correspondence

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Access Terms

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Adams, John Quincy, 1767-1848.
Baldwin, Rebecca Sherman, 1764-1795.
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Wood, George, 1799-1870.
Yale University. Students.
Art.
Artists.
Children--Care and hygiene.
Clergy.
Depression, Mental.
Diaries.
Educators.
Europe--Description and travel.
Family.
Geography.
Indians of North America.
Inventors.
Journalism.
Missionaries.
Painters.
Psychology.
Science.
Sermons.
Telegraph--History.