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978-1-108-07438-4 - Samuel F.B. Morse: His Letters and Journals: Volume 1

Samuel Finley Breese Morse Edited by Edward Lind Morse

Excerpt

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SAMUEL F. B. MORSE

HIS LETTERS AND JOURNALS

CHAPTER I

APRIL 27, 1791 — SEPTEMBER 8, 1810

Birth of S. F. B. Morse. — His parents. — Letters of Dr. Belknap and Rev. Mr. Wells. — Phillips, Andover. — First letter. — Letter from his father. — Religious letter from Morse to his brothers. — Letters from the mother to her sons. — Morse enters Yale. — His journey there. — Difficulty in keeping up with his class. — Letter of warning from his mother. — Letters of Jedediah Morse to Bishop of London and Lindley Murray. — Morse becomes more studious. — Bill of expenses. — Longing to travel and interest in electricity. — Philadelphia and New York. — Graduates from college. — Wishes to accompany Allston to England, but submits to parents' desires.

SAMUEL FINLEY BREESE MORSE was born in Charlestown, Massachusetts, on the 27th day of April, A.D. 1791. He came of good Puritan stock, his father, Jedediah Morse, being a militant clergyman of the Congregational Church, a fighter for orthodoxy at a time when Unitarianism was beginning to undermine the foundations of the old, austere, childlike faith.

These battles of the churches seem far away to us of the twentieth century, but they were very real to the warriors of those days, and, while many of the tenets of their faith may seem narrow to us, they were gospel to the godly of that time, and reverence, obedience, filial piety, and courtesy were the rule and not the exception that they are to-day.

Jedediah Morse was a man of note in his day, known and respected at home and abroad; the friend of General Washington and other founders of the Republic; the

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author of the first American Geography and Gazetteer. His wife, Elizabeth Ann Breese, granddaughter of Samuel Finley, president of Princeton College, was a woman of great strength and yet sweetness of character; adored by her family and friends, a veritable mother in Israel.

Into this serene home atmosphere came young Finley Morse, the eldest of eleven children, only three of whom survived their infancy. The other two were Sidney Edwards and Richard Carey, both eminent men in their day.

Dr. Belknap, of Boston, in a letter to a friend in New York says:—

“Congratulate the Monmouth Judge [Mr. Breese] on the birth of a grandson. . . . As to the child, I saw him asleep, so can say nothing of his eye or his genius peeping through it. He may have the sagacity of a Jewish rabbi, or the profundity of a Calvin, or the sublimity of a Homer for aught I know. But time will show forth all things.”

This sounds almost prophetic in the light of future days.

The following letter from the Reverend Mr. Wells is quaint and characteristic of the times:—

MY DEAR LITTLE BOY, — As a small testimony of my respect and obligation to your excellent Parents and of my love to you, I send you with this six (6) English Guineas. They are pretty playthings enough, and in the Country I came from many people are fond of them. Your Papa will let you look at them and shew them to Edward, and then he will take care of them,

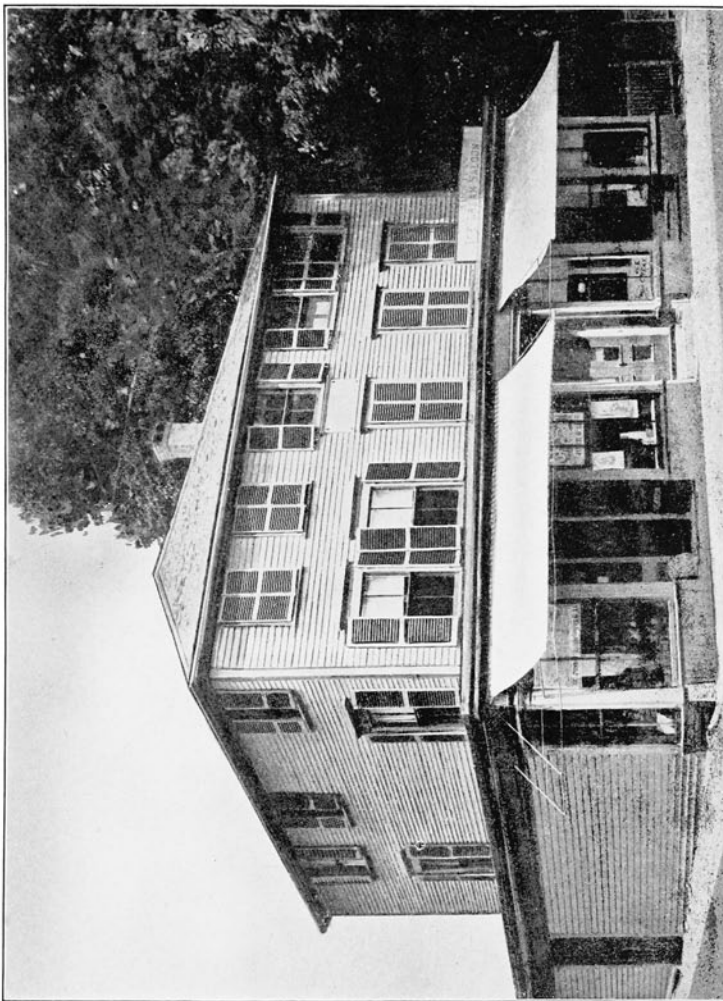
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HOUSE IN WHICH MORSE WAS BORN. IN CHARLESTOWN, MASS.

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PHILLIPS, ANDOVER

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and, by the time you grow up to be a Man, they will under Papa's wise management increase to double their present number. With wishing you may never be in want of such playthings and yet never too fond of them, I remain your affectionate friend,

WM. WELLS.

MEDFORD, July 2, 1793.

Young Morse was sent away early to boarding-school, as was the custom at that time. He was taken by his father to Phillips Academy at Andover, and I believe he ran away once, being overcome by homesickness before he made up his mind to remain and study hard.

The following letter is the first one written by him of which I have any knowledge: —

ANDOVER, 2d August, 1799.

DEAR PAPA, — I hope you are well I will thank you if you will Send me up Some quilts Give my love to mama and NANCY and my little brothers pleas to kis them for me and send me up Some very good paper to write to you

I have as many blackberries as I want I go and pick them myself.

SAMUEL FINLEY BREESE MORSE

YOUR SON

1799.

This from his father is characteristic of many written to him and to his brothers while they were at school and college: —

CHARLESTOWN, February 21, 1801.

MY DEAR SON, — You do not write me as often as you ought. In your next you must assign some reason

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for this neglect. Possibly I have not received all your letters. Nothing will improve you so much in epistolary writing as practice. Take great pains with your letters. Avoid vulgar phrases. Study to have your ideas pertinent and correct and clothe them in an easy and grammatical dress. Pay attention to your spelling, pointing, the use of capitals, and to your handwriting. After a little practice these things will become natural and you will thus acquire a habit of writing correctly and well.

General Washington was a remarkable instance of what I have now recommended to you. His letters are a perfect model for epistolary writers. They are written with great uniformity in respect to the handwriting and disposition of the several parts of the letter. I will show you some of his letters when I have the pleasure of seeing you next vacation, and when I shall expect to find you much improved.

Your natural disposition, my dear son, renders it proper for me earnestly to recommend to you to *attend to one thing at a time*. It is impossible that you can do two things well at the same time, and I would, therefore, never have you attempt it. Never undertake to do what ought not to be done, and then, whatever you undertake, endeavor to do it in the best manner.

It is said of De Witt, a celebrated statesman in Holland, who was torn to pieces in the year 1672, that he did the whole business of the republic and yet had time left to go to assemblies in the evening and sup in company. Being asked how he could possibly find time to go through so much business and yet amuse himself in the evenings as he did, he answered there was nothing so easy, for that it was only doing one thing at a time,

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LETTER FROM HIS FATHER 5

and never putting off anything till to-morrow that could be done to-day. This steady and undissipated attention to one object is a sure mark of a superior genius, as hurry, bustle, and agitation are the never-failing symptoms of a weak and frivolous mind.

I expect you will read this letter over several times that you may retain its contents in your memory, and give me your own opinion on the advice I have given you. If you improve this well, I shall be encouraged to give you more as you may need it.

Your affectionate parent,

J. MORSE.

This was written to a boy ten years old. I wonder if he was really able to assimilate it.

I shall pass rapidly over the next few years, for, while there are many letters which make interesting reading, there are so many more of the later years of greater historical value that I must not yield to the temptation to linger.

The three brothers were all sent to Phillips Academy to prepare for Yale, from which college their father was also graduated.

The following letter from Finley to his brothers was written while he was temporarily at home, and shows the deep religious bent of his mind which he kept through life: —

CHARLESTOWN, March 15, 1805.

MY DEAR BROTHERS, — I now write you again to inform you that mama had a baby, but it was born dead and has just been buried. Now you have three brothers and three sisters in heaven and I hope you and I will

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meet them there at our death. It is uncertain when we shall die, but we ought to be prepared for it, and I hope you and I shall.

I read a question in Davie's "Sermons" the last Sunday which was this: — Suppose a bird should take one dust of this earth and carry it away once in a thousand years, and you was to take your choice either to be miserable in that time and happy hereafter, or happy in that time and miserable hereafter, which would you choose? Write me an answer to this in your next letter. . . .

I enclose you a little book called the "Christian Pilgrim." It is for both of you.

We are all tolerable well except mama, though she is more comfortable now than she was. We all send a great deal of love to you. I must now bid you adieu.

I remain your affectionate brother,

S. F. B. MORSE.

I am tempted to include the following extracts from letters of the good mother of the three boys as characteristic of the times and people: —

CHARLESTOWN, June 23, 1805.

MY DEAR SON, — We have the pleasure of a letter from you which has gratified us very much. It is the only intelligence we have had from you since Mr. Brown left you. I began to think that something was the matter with respect to your health that occasioned your long silence. . . . We are very desirous, my son, that you should excel in everything that will make you truly happy and useful to your fellow men. In particular by no means neglect your duty to your Heavenly Father.

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LETTERS FROM HIS MOTHER 7

Remember, what has been said with great truth, that he can never be faithful to others who is not so to his God and his conscience. I wish you constantly to keep in mind the first question and answer in that excellent form of sound words, the Assembly Catechism, viz: — “What is the chief end of Man?” The answer you will readily recollect is “To Glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”

Let it be evident, my dear son, that this be your chief aim in all that you do, and may you be so happy as to enjoy Him forever is the sincere prayer of your affectionate parent. . . .

The Fourth of July is to be celebrated here with a good deal of parade both by Federalists and Jacobins. The former are to meet in our meeting-house, there to hear an oration which is to be delivered by Mr. Aaron Putnam, a prayer by your papa also. And on the hill close by the monument [Bunker Hill] a standard is to be presented to a new company called the Warren Phalanx, all Federalists, by Dr. Putnam who is the president of the day, and all the gentlemen are to dine at Seton’s Hall, otherwise called Massachusetts Hall, and the ladies are to take tea at the same place. The Jacobins are to have an oration at the Baptist meeting-house from Mr. Gleson. I know nothing more about them. The boys are forming themselves into companies also; they have two or three companies and drums which at some times are enough to craze one. I can’t help thinking when I see them how glad I am that my sons are better employed at Andover than beating the streets or drums; that they are laying in a good store of useful knowledge against the time to come, while these poor

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boys, many of them, at least, are learning what they will be glad by and by to unlearn.

July 30, 1805.

MY DEAR SONS, — Have you heard of the death of young Willard at Cambridge, the late President Willard's son? He died of a violent fever occasioned by going into water when he was very hot in the middle of the day. He also pumped a great deal of cold water on his head. Let this be a warning to you all not to be guilty of the like indiscretion which may cost you your life. Dreadful, indeed, would this be to all of us. I wish you would not go into water oftener than once a week, and then either early in the morning or late in the afternoon, and not go in when hot nor stay long in the water. Remember these cautions of your mama and obey them strictly.

A young lady twenty years old died in Boston yesterday very suddenly. She eat her dinner perfectly well and was dead in five minutes after. Her name was Ann Hinkley. You see, my dear boys, the great uncertainty of life and, of course, the importance of being always prepared for *death*, even a *sudden death*, as we know not what an hour may bring forth. This we are sensible of, we cannot be *too soon* or *too well* prepared for that all-important moment, as this is what we are sent into this world for. The main business of life is to prepare for death. Let us not, then, put off these most important concerns to an uncertain tomorrow, but let us in earnest attend to the concerns of our precious, never-dying souls while we feel ourselves alive.