ROBERT MORRIS:
LAWYER & ACTIVIST

Boston College Law Library
Daniel R. Coquillette Rare Book Room
Featuring the Morris collections from the John J. Burns Library & the Boston Athenaeum
Spring 2017
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Curated by:
Mary Sarah Bilder, Founders Professor of Law
Laurel Davis, Curator of Rare Books
We would like to offer a special thanks to everyone at Boston College’s John J. Burns Library for their support of this exhibit and for the loan of almost three dozen titles. In particular, a huge thank you goes to Christian Dupont, Katherine Fox, Shelley Barber, and, last but certainly not least, Barbara Adams Hebard, for her conservation work, advice, and generous help in mounting some of the more fragile items. Also, about two years ago, Barbara encouraged her lab assistant at the time, James Heffernan (BC, Class of 2015), to explore and write about the Morris collection at the Burns Library. It was through James’s wonderful blog post that we discovered the collection.

We also are deeply thankful for the Boston Athenaeum’s willingness to loan us items from the Robert Morris papers. Curator Stanley Cushing was an encouraging shepherd for that loan, and the exhibit is richer for it.

As always, many thanks to all of our colleagues and supporters in the BC Law Library. Much gratitude in particular to Lily Olson, Access Services Librarian, for her extraordinary work on the catalog cover, as well as the exhibit bookmark and webpage. We would also like to thank Ritika Bhakhri (BC Law, Class of 2018) and Lauren Koster (BC Law, Class of 2019) for their research assistance.

Additionally, we are very grateful to our friends at the Social Law Library for sharing the image of Morris used in the exhibit and catalog.

For a look at our prior exhibits, please visit our Rare Book Room exhibits webpage at http://www.bc.edu/bc-web/schools/law/sites/current-students/library/special-collections/rare-book-room/exhibits.html.
Robert Morris (1823-1882) has long been known as the second African-American lawyer in the United States. His deep involvement and leadership in African-American civil rights in the 1840s and 1850s, however, has been underestimated. This exhibit reveals Morris’s essential role in the Massachusetts antislavery and civil rights efforts.

Morris was born in Salem, Massachusetts, reportedly on June 8, 1823. Relatively little is known about his family. His grandfather, Cumono, was enslaved in Massachusetts and freed after the Quock Walker decision in 1783. Robert’s father, York Morris, was born after the decision in 1786 and became a well-regarded waiter in the homes of Salem’s elite. Little is known about the early life of his mother, Mercy. Both parents were active members in Boston and Salem’s early black organizations and societies. As a young boy, Morris worked at the home of John G. King, a Salem lawyer. At King’s home, Morris met Ellis Gray Loring, a Boston attorney and abolitionist. Morris became a copyist for Loring and then studied law. He became a member of the Massachusetts bar with his admission to the Court of Common Pleas in 1847.

Morris had a long and important legal career. His two most famous cases presumably are his representation of the young Sarah Roberts in *Roberts v. the City of Boston* and of alleged fugitive slave Shadrach Minkins. Morris even faced criminal
charges for allegedly aiding in Minkins’s escape from the courthouse during the course of litigation. Among his many other clients were Boston’s poor and working class Irish immigrants. Generally speaking, members of the Boston Irish community were not supporters of abolitionism nor African-American civil rights before the Civil War. Nonetheless, they repeatedly hired Morris as a lawyer. Morris also was connected with Boston’s Irish politicians. Morris hired Patrick Collins, a future mayor of Boston, as an office boy in the 1850s. Collins even attended Morris’s funeral three decades later.

A particularly fascinating aspect of Morris’s life is his conversion to Catholicism. His wife, Catharine, had converted in 1856. Morris, after a long spiritual struggle, officially converted in 1870 and joined the Jesuit Church of the Immaculate Conception in the South End. At the time, this church and Boston College were inextricably linked. Morris corresponded with Rev. Robert Fulton, S.J., first dean and early president of Boston College. When Morris died, the current president of Boston College, Rev. Jeremiah O’Connor, S.J., attended his memorial service.

This exhibit aims to reveal the many dimensions of the remarkable Robert Morris through his books and papers. The books featured in the exhibit have been chosen from the extant portion of Morris’s library. Since he was such a successful lawyer, the lack of law books is curious. However, Morris certainly had them, as his will bequeathed his law books to his son; unfortunately, those volumes have disappeared. After the death of Morris’s widow, the remainder of the library went to the Church of the Immaculate Conception, pursuant to her will. The books ultimately found a home at Boston College’s John J. Burns Library. All of the Morris books featured in the exhibit are here because of a generous loan from the Burns.

This exhibition simply would not have been possible without the help and support of the Burns staff. The exhibit also is immeasurably richer due to the eight items of ephemera that were loaned to us by the Boston Athenaeum. We cannot sufficiently express our gratitude to both institutions for entrusting us with their materials.
**Calling card and business card.**
The Athenaeum’s collection includes several of Morris’s cards. One is a simple calling card with Morris’s signature; another is from Morris’s law practice with his son, Robert Jr. The card indicates “French Spoken.” Robert Jr. graduated from the Imperial College of France in 1868; the Athenaeum collection includes two letters to Morris Sr. in French as well. The father and son practiced together until the elder Morris’s death in 1882. Sadly, Robert Jr. died two weeks later.

At a memorial held by colleagues after Morris’s death, Edwin G. Walker recounted a story about Morris’s first case. Morris was representing a client who alleged nonpayment for services rendered. The day before the trial, he met with opposing counsel who berated Morris for bringing the case to trial. Upset and shocked by this treatment from a brother at the bar, Morris returned to his office and cried. He then vowed to prove himself as a lawyer. The next day, in a courtroom filled with members of Boston’s black community, Morris won the case for his client and became the first African-American lawyer in the country to win a jury trial. He became an incredibly successful practitioner in Boston and undoubtedly distributed many of these cards over the course of his career.

*On generous loan from the Boston Athenaeum*


Although the Burns collection does not include law books, we know Morris had them. His will left his law books to his son, Robert Jr. Perhaps some of Morris’s law books will one day be found. Even without them, Morris’s interest in the U.S. Constitution and American politics is evident in these two classic texts. In *The Federalist*, Hamilton and Madison collaborated in defending the new federal Constitution. By 1793, they had become opponents with Hamilton (Pacificus) defending George Washington’s stance of American neutrality and Madison (Helvidius) criticizing the president’s executive power. Many readers wanted both texts, so, in 1847, the publisher reissued them in one volume.


This work about Bowditch, a Salem native and one of the earliest and most well-known American mathematicians, is inscribed to Morris “from his friend J.G.K.” Presumably, this is John G. King, the Salem lawyer who employed young Morris as a waiter and introduced him to the Boston lawyer and abolitionist Ellis Gray Loring. Loring, in turn, hired Morris and encouraged him to read the law.
SCHOOL DESEGREGATION: ROBERTS VS. THE CITY OF BOSTON

Morris was an important member of Boston’s African-American community. The community was relatively small, about 2000 people or 2% of the city’s population. In the early 1840s, African-American community leaders began an effort to permit their children to attend any public school. Morris represented Sarah Roberts and her father, printer Benjamin Roberts, in Roberts v. the City of Boston. In 1847, four-year-old Sarah was denied admission to one Boston public school near her house and forcibly removed from another by a Boston police officer.

Morris had been an attorney only one year when Roberts hired him, but he had recently won a case for an African-American client. Although the Supreme Judicial Court, led by Lemuel Shaw, decided against Sarah and upheld the Boston School Committee’s ability to segregate schools, Morris would join with others to bring political pressure that resulted in an 1855 state law requiring integrated schools. In the meantime, Morris moved his family to Chelsea so that his young children could attend integrated schools. Forty-six years after the decision in Roberts v. the City of Boston, the
Supreme Court cited to Roberts in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and ignored the Massachusetts legislature’s effective overruling of the case.

**Writ from Roberts v. City of Boston. Boston, 1848.**
Morris filed a writ of trespass on the case for Sarah Roberts against the City of Boston in early 1848, alleging that she had been unlawfully excluded from the public school closest to her home. The writ gave Morris’s name and business address and was endorsed by Sarah’s father, Benjamin.

*Image courtesy of the Supreme Judicial Court Archives*

Many scholars have emphasized Charles Sumner’s role in the Roberts case, as Sumner argued the case before the Supreme Judicial Court. However, the writ reproduced in this case establishes Morris’s critical early involvement and leadership. The two men remained in contact, corresponding long after their collaboration on the case. Morris’s volume of Sumner’s speeches and addresses includes many that the great abolitionist senator made on the floor of the Senate.

Benjamin F. Roberts, father of young plaintiff Sarah, was a Boston activist and printer. His business focused on works commissioned by African-American institutions and works by and about members of the African-American community, such as this one. Roberts also printed broadsides for the Vigilance Committee and other anti-slavery and civil rights groups.
Equal School Rights Meeting, Among the Colored Citizens. Boston, August 12, 1850.

This report from a meeting at the Belknap Street Church shows Morris’s continuing role in pursuit of school integration, even after the loss in the Roberts case earlier that year.

On generous loan from the Boston Athenaeum

MORRIS & THE ANTISLAVERY MOVEMENT

Morris’s fierce commitment to abolitionism appears in his choice of books. Approximately one-third of Morris’s books held by the Burns Library relate to antislavery and abolitionism. Morris was an activist in the abolitionist community in Boston. In 1846, he became a member of Boston’s Vigilance Committee to assist fugitive enslaved people, along with Charles Sumner, future governor John Andrew, and William Nell.

In September 1850, the passage of the pro-slavery Fugitive Slave Act created defiant resistance in Boston. Morris joined the newly reformed Committee of Vigilance and Safety. In 1851, alleged fugitive slave Shadrach Minkins was freed by a group of unidentified African-American men who carried him out of the courtroom. Despite an absence of evidence that Morris was in the courtroom, he was indicted and tried.

Source: Boston Public Library
Lawyer and historian John Gordan has recently shown that the trial judge, Supreme Court Justice Benjamin Curtis, attempted to obtain Morris’s conviction by disregarding precedent. The jury, however, refused to convict Morris.


Goodell was an American abolitionist who helped found the American Anti-Slavery Society and was involved with the Liberty Party. As was his custom with his personal library, Morris signed this book; he also dated it Feb. 26, 1853 and noted his address on Williams Street in Chelsea.


Griffiths, a founding member of the Rochester Ladies’ Anti-Slavery Society and an associate of Frederick Douglass, edited this compilation of essays by abolitionists such as William Wells Brown, Horace Greeley, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Morris would have chosen to pay extra for this special binding. Barbara Adams Hebard, Burns Library Conservator, explains: “The Abolitionists produced a number of titles which have come to be called “political” gift books. This copy of *Autographs for Freedom* is one such exam-
ple. Gift books were produced on an annual basis, often to mark specific occasions, such as holidays, and had eye-catching covers designed to appeal to the feminine reader. Books with a political message were not as lavishly decorated as the holiday gift books and the Abolitionists used fewer illustrations, often choosing images of the authors for the illustrations rather than delicate pictures of flowers commonly seen in other gift books. However, like the more lavish gift books, *Autographs for Freedom* was meant to be displayed, not kept on a bookshelf. The bright red colored book with the charming gilt-stamped image of an autographed manuscript and plumed pen in inkwell gracing the cover would have looked elegant lying on a parlor table.”


Activist David Walker’s famous appeal for the abolition of slavery is bound here with 16 other documents dealing with the anti-slavery and early civil rights movements. This volume features a handwritten table of contents apparently in Morris’s hand. Perhaps Morris had this collection bound together. From what we can tell, no other library holds this particular compilation. Morris was a mentor to David Walker’s son, Edwin (also known as Edward), who became a lawyer and gave a powerful speech at Morris’s memorial service. He also was one of the first African-American legislators in Massachusetts.


Morris’s name appears frequently in Garrison’s *Liberator*, the famous anti-slavery newspaper, based in Boston. The rear flyleaf of this Garrison compilation contains
a note in Morris’s hand that reads: “and, if Slavery continues, the sooner that day comes the better.” It is keyed to a statement in the text by a pro-slavery advocate in which he claims that the union will break if Northern abolitionists get their way.

These observational letters were written by Gurney to Kentucky senator Henry Clay about his journey from New York to the West Indies. In the letters, he urged Clay to support the abolition of slavery.

Copley was an English writer known for her instructive books for children, including this indictment of slavery. Morris signed the book and noted the year 1853. At the time, he had two young children, Robert Jr. and Catharine (one son, Mason, had died as a baby; Catharine would die in 1856 at age 10). One wonders if the book was used to teach and guide conversation with his young son and daughter.

Gasparin was a French statesman and abolitionist who wrote about the state of American politics in 1861, just after Lincoln’s election. Noting the difficult road ahead, Gasparin advocates for hope, noting that “[j]ustice cannot do wrong.” This passage was underlined in the Burns Library’s copy by a reader, likely Morris.
Henry Wilson, *History of the Antislavery Measures of the Thirty-seventh and Thirty-eighth United-States Congresses, 1861-64.* Boston: Walker, Wise, 1864. Though focused on antislavery measures, this book also takes a broader view of civil rights legislation, including chapters on legislative efforts to prevent racial discrimination in the mail service or railroad cars. This mirrors the breadth of Morris’s own activism: beyond abolitionism, he also rallied for integrated schools and militias and supported equal political rights for women.

**THE MILITIA AND MORE**

Morris continuously fought to ensure that African Americans were permitted full participation as citizens in Massachusetts. This activism was clear in the school integration battle; it also was apparent in his advocacy for alleged fugitive slaves and in his fight for an integrated militia.

In 1851, William Nell petitioned the Massachusetts legislature to appropriate funds for a statute of Crispus Attucks, “a colored man, who was killed in the Boston Massacre, on the 5th of March, 1770.” When the legislature refused, Nell focused on completing a book about “Colored Patriots” to help those lobbying for change.

In the 1850s, Morris began to challenge the Massachusetts statute that only allowed whites to serve in the militia. The Massachusetts act paralleled a federal act that described state militias as white only. Although the state militias were no longer critical for national defense, their segregated status remained a symbol that African Americans in the North were still not treated as equal citizens. In 1860, the Massachusetts legislature took up Morris’s petition and agreed to amend the statute, but the Governor vetoed the bill. Even after this defeat, Morris remained committed to full and equal participation by African Americans in military service.

Morris himself was indicted and tried under the Fugitive Slave Act for allegedly helping Shadrach Minkins escape and avoid rendition to Virginia. Gordan explores the evidence, the involvement of the great Boston lawyer Richard Henry Dana, Jr. in Morris’s defense, and the machinations of the presiding judge, Justice Benjamin Robbins Curtis of the U.S. Supreme Court, who was working to please his political patron, Daniel Webster.

“To the friends of liberty”. Boston, 1848.

Morris was deeply involved in the ongoing effort to aid those who had escaped bondage, both before and after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. He was an active member of the Boston Vigilance Committee, which raised money to help fugitives and provided representation to individuals facing rendition to Southern slave owners. With this notice, the undersigned (including Morris) sought financial support to employ legal counsel for three men who had been charged with assisting in the escape of fugitive slaves, as well as to fight for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia.

On generous loan from the Boston Athenaeum
**Petition to strike the word “white” from the militia law of Massachusetts. Boston, c. 1853-1856.**

Morris was the leader of the effort in Massachusetts to integrate the militia. This petition, written by Morris, is one of several similar ones in the Robert Morris papers at the Boston Athenaeum. It is signed by two of his brothers and several other leaders in Boston’s African-American community, including George Ruffin, the first African-American graduate of Harvard Law School.

On generous loan from the Boston Athenaeum

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**Petition to form a military company under the name of the “Massasoit Guards”. Boston, c. 1853-1856.**

In tandem with his efforts to remove the word “white” from the state’s militia laws, Morris also sought a charter for a company of black soldiers called the “Massasoit Guards”. Despite his efforts, the charter was never granted and the Guards disbanded. When the Emancipation Proclamation eventually led to the formation of the 54th Regiment, Morris continued his activism in this realm, refusing to serve unless black officers were commissioned.

On generous loan from the Boston Athenaeum
African-American Culture & History

Morris’s library demonstrates his strong interest in Africa, African-American writers, and the history of African Americans in the United States. He owned copies of the two most famous works by African-American writers, Phillis Wheatley and Frederick Douglass. His copy of William Nell’s *Colored Patriots* emphasizes Morris’s economic support of his friends and collaborators. Purchasing Nell’s book was itself a statement of African-American patriotism. Morris’s interest in Africa suggests his self-identity as part of a larger African community, foreshadowing the pan-African movement of later writers such as W.E.B. DuBois.

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave.*
*Boston: Pub. at the Anti-slavery Office, 1845.*

After escaping from slavery in Maryland, the young Douglass settled for some time in New Bedford, Massachusetts. This book, the first of three autobiographies, made Douglass a national figure in the abolitionist movement. He and Morris undoubtedly crossed paths many times; Stephen Kantrowitz notes that Morris sided with Douglass in an argument about racial tokenism at the *Liberator.*

*Memoir and Poems of Phillis Wheatley, a Native African and a Slave...*
*Boston: I. Knapp, 1838.*

Wheatley (c. 1753-1784) was kidnapped from her West African home as a child and sold into slavery in Boston. Emancipated by her master’s will in 1778, Wheatley
died free just a few years after the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts and well before Robert Morris was born.

Wheatley represents one of many poets in Morris’s library; she is also one of over a half-dozen women writers in his collection, with Harriet Beecher Stowe and Harriet Martineau among them.

William Cooper Nell, *The Colored Patriots of the American Revolution: With Sketches of Several Distinguished Colored Persons*. Boston: R.F. Wallcut, 1855. Nell began working in the early 1840s on this history of African-American soldiers. Nell’s documentation of the service of these soldiers provided powerful ammunition to African-American activists who were fighting exclusion from the militia and many other public spheres. Morris contributed to the research and obtained this copy in 1855, the year that the book was released.

J. A. Carnes, *Journal of a Voyage from Boston to the West Coast of Africa: With a Full Description of the Manner of Trading with the Natives on the Coast*. Boston: J. P. Jewett, 1852. Carnes’s journal of his explorations on the African continent applauds the abolition of slavery in Great Britain. A section on the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans includes some pencil markings, possibly from Morris but also potentially from a later owner.
In March 1846, Robert Morris married Catharine H. Mason, the daughter of a Boston businessman. They were married at the home of Morris’s mentor, Ellis Gray Loring. Boston mayor Josiah Quincy, Jr. was present for the occasion. One of our favorite discoveries from perusing Morris’s library involves Robert and Catharine’s custom of exchanging books on special occasions.

It was Catharine’s will (she died in 1895, thirteen years after Robert) that ultimately would send Morris’s books to Burns Library, by way of the Church of the Immaculate Conception and B.C. High.

The inscription on this local history (one of several in the Morris library) reads “Robert Morris Jr. from C.H.M. Jan. 1, 1845.” This gift was part of a New Year’s exchange a little over a year before they married.
The reciprocal gift from Robert is inscribed “Miss Catharine H. Mason with the love of Robert Morris, Jr. Jan 1, 1845.” The book features a beautiful, ornate binding of green cloth with gilt lettering and pictorial decorations (shown on opposite page, along with the inscription). Robert would have paid dearly for it.

Another of Catharine’s books, this one is inscribed to “Catharine Morris, with the love and New Year's wishes of Robert Morris. Jan. 1, 1860”.

Catharine gave this book to Robert on June 8, 1853, his 30th birthday. On the front flyleaf, he copied Wordsworth’s sonnet about the heroic Haitian revolutionary. He copied it again in Martineau’s The Hour and the Man, a historical novel that features Toussaint as the hero. This is the first edition, so it was newly published when Catharine purchased the gift. It was printed again in Boston ten years later during the Civil War. Beard, an English Unitarian minister, depicted Toussaint as an unparalleled general—more powerful than George Washington and a better man than Napoleon.
POETRY

In the course of some speeches made after his death, some colleagues mentioned that, while he was an effective lawyer, Morris was neither bookish nor learned. Morris’s library indicates that this characterization is inaccurate. In addition to literary works by Stowe and Emerson, his collection is heavily populated with books of poetry, including the Phillis Wheatley book previously mentioned and the works of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats.

This book has the earliest publication date in Morris’s library. Unfortunately, his signature and date notation are obscured by a later bookplate, so it is impossible to know if he bought it as a boy or if he came upon it later. From articles in the _Liberator_, we know he was involved in a local literary society by 1842. Pope’s Essay on Man, Epistle IV, included in this volume, contains a famous line: “An honest man’s the noblest work of God.” Morris quoted this language in an 1860 letter to Charles Sumner.

This collection of poetry from Scotland’s bard was signed and dated Oct. 1852 by Morris.

Whittier was a Massachusetts poet and one of the founders of the anti-slavery Liberty Party; he convinced Charles Sumner to run on Free Soil ticket for Senate in 1850. It seems likely that he and Morris knew each other, as they ran in the same circles. With four titles, he is also one of the most represented writers in Morris’s collection, alongside Stowe and Emerson.


Like Burns, Campbell was a Scottish poet. This collection includes pencil markings of “10” throughout, as though Morris (or perhaps a later reader) was analyzing the structure of the poems.

19TH-CENTURY LITERATURE

Morris’s library included many of the greatest nineteenth-century authors. Three of the authors most represented in his library were Harriet Beecher Stowe, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Greenleaf Whittier. Morris seemed particularly intrigued by their writings on antislavery and legal themes. In addition, he seemed drawn to works that described heroic efforts to seek to end oppression. In particular, Morris admired Haitian revolutionary Tous-saint L’Ouverture (at right, from Beard’s *The Life of Tous-saint L’Ouverture*). In these accounts, Morris may have found renewed conviction for his efforts to achieve equality in the face of constant opposition.

*Dred* was Stowe's second anti-slavery novel, appearing four years after *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. The fictional hero, Dred, is depicted as the son of Denmark Vesey, the freed slave who was hanged for planning a slave revolt in Charleston, South Carolina in the 1820s. Abolitionist William Wells Brown reported that Morris called Vesey and Nat Turner “intrepid heroes...whose very names were a terror to oppressors” during a speech at the Prince Hall Grand Lodge of Boston.


One of the few novels in Morris’s library, this book, from the author of *Last of the Mohicans*, is an early courtroom drama and mystery. In the Preface, Cooper writes that his object “is to draw the attention of the reader to some of the social evils that beset us; more particularly in connection with the administration of criminal justice.” Morris largely made his living as a criminal defense lawyer, so it makes sense that he was drawn to this work.


Martineau was a British activist and writer; this historical novel features Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L’Ouverture as the hero. Just as he did with J. R. Beard’s work on Toussaint featured in Cabinet VII, Morris copied the William Wordsworth sonnet, “To Toussaint L’Ouverture”, this time in pencil on the front flyleaf of the second volume. Here is the text from the 1803 poem:
Toussaint, the most unhappy of men!
Whether the whistling Rustic tend his plough
Within thy hearing, or thy head be now
Pillowed in some deep dungeon’s earless den,
O miserable Chieftain! Where and when
Wilt thou find patience? Yet die not; do thou
Wear rather in thy bonds a cheerful brow:
Though fallen thyself, never to rise again,
Live, and take comfort. Thou has left behind
Powers that will work for thee; air, earth, and skies;
There’s not a breathing of the common wind
That will forget thee; thou hast great allies;
Thy friends are exultations, agonies,
And love, and man’s unconquerable mind.


Emerson’s seven lectures on representative men took up the topic of “great men.” Emerson wondered about the usefulness of the concept. He used six men (including Plato, Shakespeare, and Napoleon) to identify certain aspects of humanity. Ultimately, Emerson concluded that “we may say great men exist that there may be greater men.” Perhaps for Morris, Emerson’s lectures reaffirmed Morris’s own commitment to civil rights activism.

Emerson is one of several Unitarian writers in Morris’s library. These include Harriet Martineau, the poet Mary Hale, Toussaint L’Ouverture biographer J. R. Beard, and the Reverend William Ellery Channing (whose work was given to Morris by his friend James Freeman Clark, a Boston-based Unitarian minister and abolitionist).
MORRIS & THE IRISH COMMUNITY

As the authors of *Sarah’s Long Walk* note in their book on Morris and the fight for integrated schools in Massachusetts, Morris’s relationship with the Irish community “defied the conventional paradigm of Irish-black relations and serves consideration as an antidote to traditional historical accounts of ethnic relations in antebellum Boston.” Morris regularly represented Irish clients, mainly criminal defendants and women seeking child support; he hired a young Irish immigrant, Patrick Collins, as an office boy in the 1850s; and he ultimately, after a long spiritual and personal struggle, left his lifelong Methodism and converted to Catholicism. With the relocation of his spiritual home to the Jesuit Church of the Immaculate Conception, Morris also forged connections with a very young Boston College.


Balmes, a Spanish Catholic priest, wrote this defense of Catholicism in the 1840s. Several chapters focus on the Church’s opposition to slavery. One subtitle reads “The abolition of slavery exclusively due to Catholicity--Protestantism had no share therein.”

Morris was given this book by William T. Connolly, the clerk of the civil business session at the Boston Municipal Court, where they would have regularly crossed paths. Morris did not officially convert until 1870, but he was struggling with his faith well before that time. Perhaps Connolly gave Morris this work to help guide him through the spiritual struggle.

The Athenaeum’s collection includes two letters to Morris from Rev. Robert Fulton, S.J., first dean and early president of Boston College. Presumably the two men met when Morris began attending the Jesuit Church of the Immaculate Conception in the South End. This letter, which ends with a reference to Mrs. Morris’s health, mentions the Harbor Commissioners, the harbor committee, and potential legislative trouble with a senator from Fairhaven.

On generous loan from the Boston Athenaeum

Life membership to the Boston College YMCA

Robert Fulton, S.J., formed the Boston College Young Men’s Catholic Association in 1875 to provide educational and recreational opportunities for young Catholic men. Fulton granted Morris a life membership to the YMCA, which provided access to a gym and a library, among other amenities.

On generous loan from the Boston Athenaeum

In Memoriam, Robert Morris Sr: Born June 8, 1823, Died December 12, 1882. Boston, [1883].

A significant amount of the extant information about Morris comes from this In Memoriam. It includes remarks by colleagues and friends made at a special meeting of the Suffolk Bar convened after Morris’s death. One speaker was Patrick Collins, whom Morris hired as an office boy in the 1850s when Collins was a young Irish immigrant. He later would become mayor of the city of Boston.
THE ROBERT MORRIS COLLECTION AT THE JOHN J. BURNS LIBRARY


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