

Samuel George Morton papers

Morton

Finding aid prepared by Megan Atkinson and Christiana Dobrzynski Grippe.

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Library Company of Philadelphia

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Summary Information

Repository	Library Company of Philadelphia
Creator	Morton, Samuel George, 1799-1851
Title	Samuel George Morton papers
Call number	Morton
Date [inclusive]	1832-1862
Extent	3.2 linear feet (5 containers, 13 volumes)
Language	English
Abstract	<p>Samuel George Morton (1799-1851) of Philadelphia was a physician and natural scientist whose work focused on the craniometric studies of humans with conclusions regarding the relative intellectual capacities of the “five races.” His work had a profound influence on the development of physical anthropology in antebellum America. He also made contributions in the fields of geology, mineralogy, paleontology and natural history. Morton served as a professor of medicine at Pennsylvania College (now, the University of Pennsylvania). This collection contains mainly the papers of Samuel George Morton, which date from 1832 to 1851, when Morton devoted his research efforts almost exclusively to ethnology and to the collecting of human skulls for comparative studies. The bulk of the papers consist of incoming correspondence, from 1832 to 1851, relating to ethnology and other related interests such as anthropology, craniology, paleontology and Egyptology. The remainder of the collection contains the papers of Samuel George Morton’s son, James St. Clair Morton, who served as an engineer during the Civil War.</p>

Cite as:

[Description and date of item], [Box and folder number], Samuel George Morton papers, 1832-1862, Library Company of Philadelphia.

Biography/History

Samuel George Morton

Samuel George Morton (1799-1851) was a physician and natural scientist whose work focused on the craniometric studies of humans, from which he derived conclusions regarding the relative intellectual capacities of the “five races.” His work had a profound influence on the development of physical anthropology in antebellum America. He also made contributions in the fields of geology, mineralogy, paleontology, and natural history.

Samuel George Morton was born on January 26, 1799 in Philadelphia to George and Jane Cummings Morton. His father, George, was an Irish immigrant and a merchant in Philadelphia and died on July 27, 1799 when Morton was six months old. Following his father’s death, Morton’s mother moved the family to West Farms, New York in order to live closer to her sister. Morton was educated at the Schools of West Farms until his mother married Thomas Rogers and the family returned to Philadelphia. Morton then attended the Friends School at West Town in Chester County, Pennsylvania. In 1813, he transferred to a Friends School in Burlington, New Jersey where he studied the mathematical sciences under John Gummere. In 1814, he began working in a merchant’s counting house, but “his heart was not in his business; and though there is no reason to believe that he neglected the duties of his position, he devoted most of his leisure hours to reading, and have his thoughts rather to history, poetry, and other branches of polite literature than to mercantile accomplishment,” (Wood, page 6). His mother died in 1817 and he decided to become a physician. This decision is said to have been based upon “reading Dr. Rush’s sixteen Introductory Lectures,” (Meigs, page 12) and observing the “frequent attendance of physicians [during his mother’s illness, including] several of the most distinguished practitioners of Philadelphia,” (Wood, page 6). Morton began his education under the direction of Dr. Joseph Parrish and studied at the University of Pennsylvania, earning his degree of Doctor of Medicine in 1820. Following his graduation, Morton traveled to Ireland to meet his paternal relatives, attended classes at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, and traveled throughout Europe. He graduated from the University of Edinburgh, 1823.

In 1824, Morton returned to Philadelphia and began practicing medicine. In addition to his medical practice, Morton also renewed a lifelong interest in the natural sciences with his involvement with the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia. He began writing scholarly articles on the subjects of both natural sciences and medicine. His medical practice grew over time and he became a physician at the

Philadelphia Almshouse Hospital in 1829 and a medical teacher in 1830, eventually becoming a professor of anatomy at the Pennsylvania Medical College from 1839 to 1843. In 1840, he was elected one of the Vice Presidents of the Academy of Natural Sciences and in 1849, he was elected President, a position he held until his death. He was also elected to the College of Physicians of Philadelphia in 1845.

According to the American Philosophical Society, “beginning prior to 1834, Morton began to take a deep interest in the quintessentially American enterprise of racial science, and his groundbreaking work in craniology and craniometry proved to be the most enduring of his scientific contributions.” In the study of these fields, Morton collected human and animal skulls which fueled his “interests in the measurement of skulls as a means of identifying and comparing the intellectual capacities and ‘character’ of the races,” (American Philosophical Society). He published *Crania Americana* in 1839 and *An Inquiry into the Distinctive Characteristics of the Aboriginal Race of America and Crania Aegyptiaca* in 1844. In his writings, “for the subsequent history of racial science, Morton argued that he had demonstrated the presence of significant differences in cranial capacity—and therefore, intelligence—among the races, with ‘Mongolians’ and Caucasians heading the list, and ‘Americans’ and ‘Ethiopians’ bringing up the rear,” (American Philosophical Society). Largely, the population of the United States approved of Morton’s scientific studies, especially “pro-slavery advocates [and] Gliddon and the Alabama physician, Josiah Nott, who developed his own, highly elaborated polygenic theory as an apologetic for slavery,” (American Philosophical Society). Among those who did not support Morton’s views were those who felt that his assertions contradicted the Book of Genesis.

Morton married Rebecca Pearsall, daughter of Robert and Elizabeth Pearsall, on October 23, 1827. They had eight children. He died on May 15, 1851, following several illnesses including “severe pleurisy and pericarditis,” (Wood, p. 16). He was survived by his widow and seven children. Soon after his death, he was remembered as “modest in his demeanor, of no arrogant pretensions, and of a forgiving temper; charitable and respectful to others, yet never forgetful of self-respect,” (Meigs, page 48).

James St. Clair Morton

James St. Clair Morton, son of Samuel George Morton and Rebecca Pearsall, was a Union engineer during the Civil War. He engineered Fort Negley in Nashville, Tennessee and was killed just before the Battle of Petersburg on June 17, 1864.

Morton was born on September 24, 1828 in Philadelphia. He enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania at the age of 14 and then was accepted into the United States Military Academy at West Point where he graduated second in his class of forty-two in 1851. Prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, Morton worked on the construction of fortifications for the Corps of Engineers at Fort Sumter, Fort Jefferson and Fort Delaware. From 1855 to 1857, he taught mathematics and military engineering as an assistant professor at West Point. The Treasury Department then appointed him engineer and superintendent of the New York light-house district, at which point he wrote several “memoirs” regarding the defense of New York City. He served as chief engineer for the Sandy Hook lighthouse in New Jersey and was then “selected by the Department of the Interior as chief engineer of the Potomac Water-Works and charged with the duty of superintending the finished portion of the Washington Aqueduct,” (*Annals of the Army of the Cumberland*, page 181). The Navy Department, in 1860, assigned Morton to “lead an expedition to Central America to explore the Chiriquí area for construction of a railroad or canal,” (West) through the isthmus. During this trip, Morton first contracted malaria which affected him from time to time until May 1862 when he was assigned Chief Engineer of General Don C. Buell’s Army of the Ohio.

From June to October 1862, Morton was “busily engaged in superintending the building of bridges, stockades and other defenses upon railroads and pikes between Nashville and Huntsville,” (*Annals of the Army of the Cumberland*, page 182). After October, he designed and oversaw the building of Fort Negley: “the complex work of polygonal shape [and] the largest inland masonry fortification of the Civil War,” (BONPS). According to John Fitch, provost judge of the Army of the Cumberland, “he pushed forward their construction most vigorously, employing the soldiery, and ‘pressing’ the negroes of Nashville and vicinity, and teams of all kinds, without stint or scruple. The colored population of that city have probably not yet forgotten the suddenness with which his men gathered them in from barber-shops, kitchens, and even churches, and set them at work upon St. Cloud Hill, where was then a combination of rock and forest, but where now rise the frowning battlements of Fort Negley, commanding the entire city and surrounding country,” (West).

General Buell was replaced by Major General William S. Rosecrans, and Rosecrans quickly created a new regiment, the Pioneer Brigade, which Morton, promoted to brigadier general of volunteers, commanded. This regiment built bridges, roads and fortifications and repaired railroads. From January to June 1863, Morton built and supervised construction of Fortress Rosecrans. According to West, after the Union’s defeat at Chickamauga on September 19 and 20, 1863, “Morton and his Pioneer Brigade were criticized by major General Alexander McCook for being non-responsive and generally for being in the way,” and Morton first requested a transfer and when that was rejected, “made the rare request that his rank be reduced from brigadier general of volunteers to his Regular Army rank of major of engineers,” (West).

In May 1864, he served as General Ambrose Burnside’s IX Corps chief engineer at Petersburg, Virginia. David Callihan writes that on June 17, 1864, Morton was “mortally wounded in the chest while performing reconnaissance work at Petersburg preparatory to a Union assault that day” (Callihan, page 49) at the age of 34. Morton’s “principal characteristic ... is his indomitable energy, coupled with extensive information and practical experience,” (*Annals of the Army of the Cumberland*, page 183).

Bibliography:

American Philosophical Society. Samuel George Morton Papers, 1819-1850, Mss.B.M843, Background Note.

An Officer. *Annals of the Army of the Cumberland*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1864.

Battle of Nashville Preservation Society, Inc. “Brief History of the Fort.” <http://www.bonps.org/negley121004.htm> (accessed April 23, 2010).

Callihan, David L. *They Did Their Work Bravely: Civil War Generals Buried in Pennsylvania*. Westminster, MD: Heritage Books, Inc., 2004.

Meigs, Charles D., M.D. *A Memoir of Samuel George Morton, M.D., Late President of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia*. Philadelphia: T.K. and P.G. Collins, Printers, 1851.

West, Mike. “Fabulous military career cut short,” *Murfreesboro Post*, May 25, 2008.

Wood, George B., M.D. *A Biographical Memoir of Samuel George Morton, M.D.* Philadelphia: T.K. and P.G. Collins, 1853.

Scope and Contents

This collection contains the papers of Samuel George Morton of Philadelphia, a physician, ethnologist, and professor of anatomy at Pennsylvania Medical College. The papers date from 1832 to 1851, when Morton devoted his research efforts almost exclusively to ethnology and to the collecting of human skulls for comparative studies. The bulk of the papers consist of incoming correspondence, relating to ethnology and other related interests such as anthropology, craniology, paleontology and Egyptology. His collecting efforts in the field of crania resulted in extensive correspondence on the subject, which is also included here. The collection is particularly valuable in illustrating the publication process of Morton's technical publications, as it includes extensive notes, annotations, sketches, research and reviews of his published work. There is also a small grouping of documents related to Morton's son, James St. Clair Morton. The collection is arranged into six series: "Correspondence," "Notes," "Pennsylvania Medical College," "Writings," and "James St. Clair Morton."

The "Correspondence" series comprises nearly two thirds of the collection and contains more than 400 letters received by Dr. Morton from his colleagues and other science enthusiasts. The incoming correspondence, which dates from 1832 to 1851, relates to ethnology and other interests such as anthropology, craniology, paleontology and Egyptology. The correspondence is most comprehensive for the years 1844 to 1851. Some letters include hand-drawn illustrations of human skulls. Of particular interest are the frequent letters from George Robins Gliddon, Anders Retzius, Benjamin Silliman, Jr., Asa Gray, Josiah Clark Nott and possibly Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr. that reveal the intensely collaborative nature of Morton's collection of crania and research. There is occasional correspondence from West Point concerning the academic progress of Morton's son, James St. Clair Morton, as well as a few letters written in French from scientific societies and colleagues in Europe. The letters are arranged in loose chronological order. As such, files often contain letters from more than one individual, and researchers interested in particular correspondents will have to review multiple files. The topical content of individual letters was taken directly from original catalog cards, and therefore, additional topics, beyond those listed, may be included in letters.

The "Notes" series consists of three volumes and about 100 loose papers of research notes, spanning the years 1839 to 1850. Of special interest are the bound handwritten research notes relating to two technical works Morton published based on his collection of crania: *Crania Americana* (1839) and *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844). Included in the bound notes for *Crania Americana* is a newspaper clipping of a book review for the final published work. There are also notes concerning Morton's research on hybridization in plants and animals, the findings of which he later published in Benjamin Silliman, Jr.'s *American Journal of Science and Arts* (1847). The series is arranged chronologically.

The series "Pennsylvania Medical College" contains manuscript copies of ethnology lectures "on the varieties of the human species," presented by Morton at Pennsylvania Medical College around 1840. The lectures feature mostly handwritten annotations with some printed material and are loosely bound with ribbon into four sections. The series also contains one bound volume of minutes of faculty meetings and miscellaneous financial accounts of the Pennsylvania College medical department, dating from 1841 to 1843. The series is arranged chronologically.

The series “Writings” contains four volumes and eleven folders of written material, mostly about Morton’s ethnological research, dating from 1829 to 1853. Included in the series are incomplete bound printer’s manuscripts of Morton’s published work *Crania Americana*. The series would be of particular value to those interested in the writing and drafting process of published technical works, as many of the papers contain Morton’s handwritten annotations and corrections. The series also includes posthumous works written by Morton and by others about Morton’s work, including a chapter and the memoir section from the 1855 book *Types of Mankind*, written by Josiah Clark Nott and George Robins Gliddon, which was inspired by Morton’s life’s work on ethnology. The inclusion of the posthumous papers in this collection further emphasizes the importance of collaboration in Morton’s work on ethnology and highlights the lasting impact that Morton’s work made on the social sciences community at the time. The series is arranged alphabetically by title.

The series “James St. Clair Morton” documents James St. Clair’s military career as an engineer and his expedition in Central America. The series contains five volumes and three folders dating from 1847 to 1862. The volumes and folders vary in content, including a certificate of admission to West Point, accounting books from his work as an engineer, surveying journals and correspondence. Of interest are the two volumes documenting the Chiriquí Expedition in Central America, which includes compass and level notes of the survey of Cañon Caldera, kept by Morton’s surveyor and leveler, and the surveying journal kept by Morton. These volumes document some of the observations and information gained during the expedition that James St. Clair Morton reported to the Navy Department, which was seeking information about the potential for railroad construction at the location. The surveying journal contains sketches, observations about the land and wildlife, and information about the camps, food the surveying party ate, and the Native Americans the party encountered. James St. Clair Morton’s work surveying is also documented in his surveying notebook used at Fort Jefferson in Florida. This book contains information such as antidotes for snake bites, sketches of Fort Jefferson, and landscape sketches. The volume of correspondence in the series is incomplete, housing mostly outgoing correspondence to the Chief Engineer of Washington, D. C. The volume also holds information about his work as an engineer and includes information on defending and upgrading Fort Mifflin in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The folder titled “Extract from the report of Dr. M. W. Dickeson,” by Albert Stein is a report on the Mississippi River’s water quantity and characteristics. This work does not appear to be explicitly titled to James St. Clair Morton, but given its date (1849) and its topic, it is possible that this work was James’. With the exception of the latter volume, which is located at the end of the series, the records are organized chronologically.

Administrative Information

Library Company of Philadelphia
Finding aid prepared by Megan Atkinson and Christiana Dobrzynski Grippe.

Sponsor

The processing of this collection was made possible through generous funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, administered through the Council on Library and Information Resources' "Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives" Project.

Access Restrictions

This collection is open for research use, on deposit at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1300 Locust Street, Philadelphia, PA 19107. For access, please contact the Historical Society at 215-732-6200 or visit <http://www.hsp.org>.

Use Restrictions

Copyright restrictions may apply. Please contact the Library Company of Philadelphia with requests for copying and for authorization to publish, quote or reproduce the material.

Immediate Source of Acquisition note

Gift of Robert P. Morton, 1883.

Processing Information note

The processing of this collection was made possible through generous funding from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, administered through the Council on Library and Information Resources' "Cataloging Hidden Special Collections and Archives" Project.

This collection was *minimally processed* in 2009-2011, as part of an experimental project conducted under the auspices of the Philadelphia Area Consortium of Special Collections Libraries to help eliminate processing backlog in Philadelphia repositories. A minimally processed collection is one processed at a less intensive rate than traditionally thought necessary to make a collection ready for use by researchers. When citing sources from this collection, researchers are advised to defer to folder titles provided in the finding aid rather than those provided on the physical folder.

Employing processing strategies outlined in Mark Greene's and Dennis Meissner's 2005 article, *More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Processing Approaches to Deal With Late 20th-Century Collections*, the project team tested the limits of minimal processing on collections of all types and ages, in 23 Philadelphia area repositories. A primary goal of the project, the team processed at an average rate of 2-3 hours per linear foot of records, a fraction of the time ordinarily reserved for the arrangement and description of collections. Among other time saving strategies, the project team did not extensively review the content of the collections, replace acidic folders or complete any preservation work.

Related Materials

Related Archival Materials note

Library Company of Philadelphia: Samuel George Morton ethnological scrapbook;

Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia: Horace G. Richards papers, 1928-1984 and J. Percy Moore papers, 1847-1963;

American Philosophical Society: Samuel George Morton papers

University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology: Samuel George Morton Cranial Collection

Controlled Access Headings

Corporate Name(s)

- Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia.
- United States Military Academy.
- United States. Army of the Ohio.
- University of Pennsylvania. Dept. of Medicine.

Form/Genre(s)

- Correspondence
- Financial records
- Lectures
- Manuscripts
- Notes

Personal Name(s)

- Gibbes, Robert W., (Robert Wilson), 1809-1866
- Gliddon, George R., (George Robins), 1809-1857

- Gray, Asa, 1810-1888
- Maclure, William, 1763-1840
- Morton, James St. C., (James St. Clair), 1829-1864
- Morton, Samuel George, 1799-1851
- Nott, Josiah Clark, 1804-1873
- Retzius, A., (Anders), 1796-1860
- Silliman, Benjamin, 1816-1885

Subject(s)

- Anatomy
- Authors, American
- Craniology
- Egyptology
- Ethnology
- Fossils
- Geology
- Medicine
- Military engineers
- Miscegenation
- Natural history
- Paleontology
- Skull
- United States--History--Civil War, 1861-1865

Series I. Correspondence

Collection Inventory

Series I. Correspondence.

	Box	Folder
Puzos, [M.], regarding sending fossils, 1832 June 20. [7388 F 1].	1	1
Pleasants, Henry, regarding the health of a patient, 1836 July 3. [7388 F 2].	1	2
McCarthy, H., regarding the Irish market, 1837 May 26. [7388 F 3].	1	3
Emerson, Gouverneur, 1837 October 7. [7388 F 3].	1	4
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Burrough, M., regarding his return to New York, 1838 May 21. [7388 F 5].	1	6
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Roberts, W. [S.], apologizing for Mr. Muir's negligence, 1838 October 20. [7388 F 7].	1	8
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Farias, Fermin G., 1844 April 17, 1844 July 11. [7388 F 26].	1	27
Abert, J. J., letter to accompany a small shell, 1844 April 18, 1844 November 27. [7388 F 39].	1	28
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Hall, James, regarding his work in paleontology, 1844 April 29, 1844 September 10, 1844 October 30. [7388 F 37].	1	30
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