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Robert Morris (1823-82) was the second African American to pass the bar exam in the United States. An ardent abolitionist, during the 1840s he was the only practicing black lawyer in Boston. In 1849 he represented Benjamin Roberts, whose daughter had been denied entry to the white public schools. Charles Sumner eventually argued this case before the Massachusetts Supreme Court. During the 1850s Morris participated in three daring rescues of fugitive slaves who were being held in custody for return to the South. After the Civil War he converted to Catholicism, which was then dominated by the Irish. Both before and after the war a majority of Morris' clients were Irish. (Photo courtesy of the Social Law Library, Boston)

Black and Irish Relations in Nineteenth Century Boston: The Interesting Case of Lawyer Robert Morris

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Abstract: *This article examines the life of Robert Morris (1823-82), Boston's first African American lawyer and a noted abolitionist. In the 1850s Morris was active in efforts to desegregate Boston's public schools and aid fugitive slaves. His law practice had many Irish Catholic clients at a time when relations between the two groups were poor. After the Civil War, Morris converted to Catholicism, dominated by the Irish in Boston, and became an active member of the Jesuit-run Immaculate Conception church in Boston's South End until his death. His legal work on behalf of his Irish clients and his conversion suggest the need to reexamine black and Irish relationships during this period.*

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On Saturday morning, February 15, 1851, Frederick Wilkins, better known as Shadrach, was arrested in Boston, charged with being a fugitive slave. He was in custody by noon appearing before a federal magistrate. By 2:00 p.m. Shadrach was freed by a group of mostly black Bostonians led by Robert Morris, the city's first African American lawyer and a

resident of nearby Chelsea. According to those present, Morris chuckled and smiled “as if something pleasing or funny was about to take place.” He then disappeared from the room. Moments later, a door was thrown open, most likely by Morris. Thirty or forty people seized Shadrach, removed him from the courthouse, and spirited him toward the West End of Boston where the majority of black Bostonians lived. Morris and several others were quickly arrested for their part in the release.¹ At their trial, several witnesses placed Morris at the scene of the rescue and subsequently in the company of Shadrach on Southac Street. Despite these testimonies, Morris and the others were acquitted of aiding in the daring rescue.²

For his part in the plot and his abolitionist activities, the *Pilot*, Boston’s Irish Catholic newspaper, vilified Morris. The paper called the conspirators “deluded blacks” who “laughed at our city government, bullied our U.S. officers, nullified the laws of Congress, trampled on the Constitution, and erected themselves into we, the de facto government.” It urged emigration to Africa or even to the slave-holding South where, the *Pilot* felt, blacks would be better off. The newspaper also proudly noted, “Catholics have no part in it [abolition]” and that “no where has treason been preached in a Catholic journal or praised by a Catholic speaker.”³

Thirty-one years later, in 1882, Morris died quietly at his home in Boston. In between he enjoyed a successful law practice and earned considerable notoriety within both the black and Irish communities. He also converted to Catholicism, a faith which in Boston was overwhelmingly dominated by the Irish. Morris’ life, career, and conversion suggest that some African Americans and Irish were able to overcome the mutual animosity which usually existed between the two groups.

The conflicts between these two groups are an integral part of the histories of African Americans and Irish in both Boston and the nation.⁴ In Boston, Morris played a prominent role in many of these events.

¹ Shadrach was spirited to neighboring Watertown and then on to New Hampshire, where he boarded a train to Canada.

² Siebert, *Underground Railroad*, pp. 46-47.

³ “The Black Insurrection,” *The Pilot*, March 15, 1851, p. 6.

⁴ See Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (London: Routledge, 1995); James Oliver Horton, *Black Activism in Boston, 1830-1860* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1991); George August Levesque, *Black Boston: Negro Life in Garrison’s Boston, 1800-1860* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1983); Alan Lupo, *Liberty’s Chosen Home: The Politics of Violence in Boston* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977); Thomas H. O’Connor, *Civil War Boston: Home Front and Battlefield* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1997) and “The Pilot and the Slave,” *The Pilot*, February 29, 1999, pp. 1-4 .

In the end, he put aside his distrust of the Irish and their opposition to abolition and black civil rights, eventually working and even worshipping with them. Over the years, some Irish grew to accept and respect him. Morris' legal career, which depended upon Irish clients, along with his conversion to Catholicism, suggests that black/Irish relations were not as strained as most of the research has suggested. Given Morris' life, we need to reexamine black/Irish relations in Boston if we are to have a more complete and nuanced history of the two groups. At least one educated, successful, and middle-class African American succeeded in bridging the gap between the Irish and black communities of Boston, and his post-Civil War conversion to Catholicism only deepened this bond. Nevertheless, Morris remains the exception to the rule. There are no other examples of a black professional making such inroads or connections into Boston's nineteenth-century, Irish Catholic community.⁵

Robert Morris was a staunch abolitionist and integrationist; the overwhelming majority of Irish in Boston were not. Most only grudgingly accepted emancipation. As a whole the Irish looked down on black Bostonians. They were disdainful of their accomplishments and feared that they would compete with them for jobs. It is safe to say that Morris and the Irish had little in common. Morris' upbringing and values suggest he would have had few positive interactions with Irish Bostonians – yet Morris defended, represented, and worked on behalf of his Irish clients, even while they were disdainful toward the “nigger Morris” and opposed his work on behalf of Boston's black community.⁶

* * * *

⁵ It seems that Morris was the only African American Catholic who made such inroads into the Irish Catholic community during the nineteenth century. That is not to say there were not successful, educated, and respected African American Catholics. Robert Ruffin, also a convert to Catholicism and an extended member of a prominent black family in Boston, became a leading spokesman for the nation's and Boston's black Catholic population. Ruffin was a leading figure in the Congress of Colored Catholics, a lay organization, which emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century. He was also a leader in the efforts to organize Boston's black Catholic population. Moreover, with abolition and the advent of John Boyle O'Reilly as the editor of the *Pilot* in 1870, tensions between black and white Bostonians lessened and entered a less volatile phase until the later twentieth century. The lessening of tensions between the larger white and black communities helped diminish the conflict that Boston's small number of African American Catholics must have felt within the larger Catholic community. However, it did not lead to greater interaction and integration between black and white Catholics.

⁶ Thomas S. Harlow, *In Memoriam – Robert Morris, Sr., June 8 1823-December 12, 1882* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1883), p. 20.

Born in 1823, Robert Morris was the son of York and Mercy Morris of Salem, Massachusetts. The family had ties to Boston's North Shore stretching back to the pre-Revolutionary war era. Robert's grandfather, Cumono Morris, had been brought to Ipswich as a slave when he was young and became a respected carpenter in the city.⁷ Robert's father, York Morris, was born in 1786 and stayed in the Salem area his entire life. He was a member of the African Society, one of Boston's oldest black organizations, and the possible progenitor of the first black church in Boston, the African Meetinghouse, in 1805. Robert's mother, Mercy, was an enthusiastic supporter of abolition and was a member of the Victory Committee of the Colored Female Religious and Moral Society of Salem.⁸

Morris lived at home for the first thirteen years of his life. He was then sent to live with and work as a waiter for a wealthy white family, the Kings, in Salem. This position led to his chance encounter with a man who proved instrumental in Morris becoming one of Boston's leading black citizens. As had been their custom, Mr. and Mrs. Ellis Gray Loring, from Boston, visited the King family in Salem. Upon meeting the young Robert Morris, the Lorings took a liking to the young man, and he soon found employment in their home in Boston.⁹

Mr. Loring was a distinguished lawyer and noted anti-slavery advocate, having become a member of the New England Anti-Slavery Society in 1833. The society attracted both whites (although no Irish Catholics) and blacks to its cause, and it "immediately entered upon an aggressive campaign of agitation," according to John Daniels, an early historian of Boston's black community. The society also served as a model for other anti-slavery organizations around the country. Although white men dominated the society at first, African Americans eventually became more prominent on its board and in the organization. The society was one of the first integrated abolitionist organizations in the country.¹⁰

Over time, Loring became increasingly impressed with Morris' abilities, intelligence, and, notably, his penmanship. He eventually asked Morris to help as a "copyer" in his law office. Loring also encouraged Morris in his education, suggesting to him one day that "when you get

⁷ James Oliver and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (New York: Holmes & Meirer, 1979), p. 56.

⁸ John Daniels, *In Freedom Birthplace: A Study of the Boston Negroes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), p. 21; Adelaide M. Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins: Boston's Black Upper Class, 1750-1950* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1994), p. 43.

⁹ Hortons, *Black Bostonians*, p. 56; Pauline E. Hopkins, "Famous Men of the Negro Race: Robert Morris," *Colored American Magazine* III, p. 338.

¹⁰ O'Connor, *Civil War Boston*, p. 16; Daniels, *Freedom's Birthplace*, pp. 42-43, 47.

through with your work, spend your time in a useful way; go down to the office and study.” Morris took him up on the offer. Impressed with his abilities, Loring reportedly declared: “Robert, you are capable of making something of yourself. Do you wish to learn a trade, or do you wish to study law?” Morris chose the law. Under Loring’s guidance, he passed the Massachusetts bar in 1847, becoming only the second African American lawyer in the country and the first in Boston.¹¹

Morris’ law practice was successful. He enjoyed widespread patronage among whites – mainly poor and working-class Irish – and some blacks, including Lewis Hayden, the noted abolitionist.¹² Edwin G. Walker, son of incendiary abolitionist David Walker and himself a lawyer, observed that the Irish were responsible for Morris’ success, estimating that three quarters of his clients were from the Irish working class. There were few Irish lawyers in Boston until the late nineteenth century.¹³ It seems that most Irish avoided the city’s white Protestant lawyers who dominated the profession. Given the animosity for and discrimination against the Irish by Boston’s elites, this is not surprising. It also seems likely that the city’s white Protestants did not patronize Morris’ practice. Thus he became the lawyer for Boston’s poor Irish and black communities.

Interestingly, he was not remembered as a particularly good lawyer, even by some of his closest friends and fellow lawyers.¹⁴ Why he had this reputation is unknown. He won his first case, in which he represented a black client who had sued a white man. The opposing lawyer ridiculed him because of his race. The episode brought Morris to tears: “I went to my office,” he recalled. “I sat down and cried. I thought of the mighty odds against which I must contend, and then it was that I made the vow I have never broken. It was this: I would prove myself to be a man and a gentleman, and succeed in the practice of law, or I would die.” When the favorable verdict came in, his “heart bounded up, and my people in the court room acted as if they would shout for joy.”¹⁵ Morris handled a variety of civil and criminal cases throughout his career.¹⁶

¹¹ Hopkins, “Robert Morris,” p. 338-339; Another black, Macon B. Allen, passed the bar in 1845 although not much is known about him.

¹² “Morris Account Book, 1854,” CHS.

¹³ Edwin G. Walker, *In Memoriam*, pp. 34-35. Oscar Handlin, *Boston’s Immigrants, 1790-1880*, (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 262.

¹⁴ George W. Searle, *In Memoriam*, p. 17; “Men and Things in Brief,” *American Catholic Tribune*, (hereafter ACT) November 24, 1888, p. 1; “Men and Things in Brief,” ACT, April 20, 1889, p. 2.

¹⁵ Hortons, *Black Bostonians*, pp. 56-57; Hopkins, “Robert Morris,” p. 339.

¹⁶ Stephen Kendrick and Paul Kendrick, *Sarah’s Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle for Equality Changed America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), pp. 208; “Robert Morris Scrap Book,” CHS.

While many of Morris' Irish clients looked down upon him, it did not stop them from seeking his services nor he from taking them on as clients. They separated their dislike of his advocacy of black causes from their need for a lawyer. According to Thomas S. Harlow, a friend and a member of the Suffolk Bar, Morris "was not at all thin-skinned, or sensitive to jokes upon his color." Harlow describes having seen Morris' "eyes sparkle with fun as he told how his Irish clients, who were not supposed to look with any special favor upon his race, would, when they got into trouble, go, as they said, 'straight up to nigger Morris.'" Harlow also noted that due to Morris' success and frugality, "he had amassed a comfortable competency, and could afford to live without work" for much of his later life. At the time of his death in 1882 Morris' estate was worth over \$1500 and he owned his own home.¹⁷

Morris was no stranger to discrimination. In 1847 he had attempted to purchase a home in the nearby suburb of Chelsea, but was temporarily stopped because of non-Irish white opposition. He would remain in Chelsea until 1871. He then moved to 78 West Newton Street in Boston's South End, a changing neighborhood once thought to be the city's next Beacon Hill but which never lived up to its promise. By the time Morris moved there, the area was quickly filling with first-generation Irish of various economic classes, some African Americans, native born whites, and eventually immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe. Interestingly, he chose not move to the West End or north slope of Beacon Hill where the majority of the city's black population lived, instead opting for the middle-class respectability of the South End. He spent the final decade of his life in this racially-mixed neighborhood.¹⁸

STRUGGLES AGAINST SEGREGATION

Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, Jim Crow was a fact of life for black Bostonians. Segregation and discrimination were rampant. Boston's economic situation had deteriorated and race relations had worsened along with it. "Blacks were segregated into a few highly concentrated areas of the city," according to historians James and Lois Horton, and "restricted to Jim Crow accommodations on public transportation, isolated in schools that were rapidly deteriorating and scholastically inferior, excluded from juries, and seated apart in white

¹⁷ Thomas S. Harlow, *In Memoriam*, p. 20; "Robert Morris Will."

¹⁸ Levesque, *Black Boston*, p. 129; Chelsea City Directory, 1847-1848; Boston City Directory, 1871 to 1883.

churches, lecture halls, and places of entertainment.”¹⁹ In addition to overcoming the obstacles placed in front of him as a lawyer and resident, Morris attacked discrimination whenever he could. He tested the city’s commitment to integrate its public establishments and institutions, from theaters and lecture halls and eventually to its public schools. He also managed to serve as a justice of the peace.²⁰

In time, African American activism made progress on many fronts. In 1843, the law against interracial marriage was repealed by the legislature. In the same year, conditions on public transportation also improved with the end of segregated railway cars. Morris had been actively involved in the fight to integrate the railway cars and “availed himself also of every opportunity that offered to annoy the railroad companies.”²¹

Despite these signs of progress, Boston’s school system remained one of the most segregated institutions. For Morris, the school issue took center stage in the struggle for integration. Boston’s schools had been *de facto* segregated from the beginning. While not legally segregated, few black children attended school before 1800. “The experience of those who did,” according to James and Lois Horton, “was characterized by discrimination, mistreatment, and public ridicule from white students and teachers.” To correct these problems, some black parents petitioned the Boston school committee to establish a separate school for blacks. The committee repeatedly denied their requests.²²

As a result, African Americans opened their own school. By relying on private support, and not the city, black parents effectively controlled the school and remained outside the school committee’s jurisdiction. Management of the black schools would prove to be the most contentious issue between the city’s black parents and the school committee. Beginning in 1812, the school committee, fearful of an independent school being established, contributed \$200 to the endeavor. With this donation came oversight.

Before long, the school committee was effectively running what had become known as the African School on Belknap Street on Beacon Hill. Authority over the school came in 1815. Abiel Smith, a wealthy white Bostonian and advocate of black education, died and left money for the

¹⁹ Donald Martin Jacobs, *A History of the Boston Negro From the Revolution to the Civil War* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1990), p. 33; Hortons, *Black Bostonians*, p. 67.

²⁰ Harlow, *In Memoriam*, p. 12.

²¹ Hortons, *Black Bostonians*, pp. 69-70; Hopkins, “Robert Morris,” p. 341.

²² Hortons, *Black Bostonians*, p. 70.

school with Boston's selectmen as trustees. Using the money as the means of control, the school committee took charge.

Black children wishing to attend the school were told they had to go to the African Primary or Grammar schools, which had grown out of Smith's bequeath. In 1834 the school committee decided to build a new schoolhouse for blacks. In 1835 the Smith School, named in honor of Abiel Smith, opened.²³ The Smith School established two separate systems. While separate, it was anything but equal. What began as an effort by black parents to gain control over their children's education ended in their total loss of control and an inferior education for their children. The black community was itself divided over the issue of separate schools. Integrationists, like Morris, argued that a quality education could only come from an integrated environment. He called upon African Americans to raise "their voices and use their votes against the longer continuation of exclusive schools for colored children."²⁴

Others in the African American community did not object on principle to separate schools, as long as they had control and management over the schools. In fact, the majority of parents felt this way initially. This attitude changed over time, often with Morris' urging. The inferior education African American children received eventually led many parents to organize and petition the school committee for integration. They wanted their children to be able to attend the nearest school, and the Smith School was out of the way for many African Americans from other parts of the city. For some parents, this distance meant spending excessive funds on ferries and other transportation. William C. Nell, John T. Hilton, and Jonas Clark organized a committee to integrate Boston's schools in a hope to end the discrimination. Morris, still a law student at the time, served as one of its secretaries. The school committee continually denied their numerous petitions.²⁵

The petitioners had better luck with the state legislature. In 1845 the legislature passed a law which allowed any child unlawfully excluded from public school to recover damages from the city. The law also stated that students should attend the school closest to their homes unless other provisions had been made.

Rebuffed by the school committee, the petitioners filed suit on behalf of Benjamin Roberts, whose daughter had been denied entry to the white

²³ Levesque, *Black Boston*, pp. 165-175.

²⁴ Walker, *In Memoriam*, pp. 36-37.

²⁵ Hortons, *Black Bostonians*, p. 71-72; Alan Lupo, *Liberty's Chosen Home: The Politics of Violence in Boston* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977), p. 127-129; Carleton Mabee, "A Negro Boycott to Integrate Boston Schools," *The New England Quarterly* XLI (September 1968), p. 343.

public schools. Their suit attempted to use the 1845 statute to recover damages from the city for its “refusal to receive her in the general public schools.” Morris, selected by Charles Sumner, served as assistant counsel for the plaintiff. The Supreme Judicial Court took the case on appeal. In a unanimous decision which stunned many, the court upheld the city’s right to maintain a segregated system. Despite Sumner and Morris’ arguments that a dual system of education was inherently inferior and that “segregated schools and equality of education were mutually exclusive” (an argument eventually adopted by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954), the court maintained that the laws of the Commonwealth entrusted the school committee with “the general charge and superintendence of all the public schools.” It further found that the law made no provisions about the size, quality or location of schools, and the court was not going to intervene. Undeterred, Morris, Roberts, and others eventually founded the Negro School Abolition Society in 1848 to work for integration.²⁶

Despite the 1845 Supreme Judicial Court ruling, school desegregation advocates successfully petitioned the “Know Nothing”-dominated legislature to change the law to make it explicitly illegal to segregate school children in Massachusetts. By 1855, Boston was the only city in the commonwealth with segregated education and was clearly the main target of the proposed bill.²⁷

Even many Irish Catholics were willing to accept school desegregation. The *Pilot* supported the new law and proudly noted that Catholic parents had no objections to their children being part of the integration effort. This was the last time that the *Pilot* and the city’s black community would agree on such a racially charged issue for some time. Why the Irish supported desegregation is not completely clear. Most likely, both the Irish and black communities saw a common enemy in the school committee. The law outlawed discrimination in school assignment on the basis of both color and religious affiliation, thereby protecting both Irish Catholics and African Americans. The school committee was not favorably disposed toward either group. It often dictated curriculum that Catholics found offensive, and it actively tried to undermine Catholic education in the city.²⁸

²⁶ Daniels, *Freedom’s Birthplace*, p. 448; Levesque, *Black Boston*, p. 206; Hortons, *Black Bostonians*, p. 721.

²⁷ Daniels, *Freedom’s Birthplace*, p. 448.

²⁸ Thomas H. O’Connor, *Fitzpatrick’s Boston, 1846-1866: John Bernard Fitzpatrick, Third Bishop of Boston* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1984), p. 173; Thomas H. O’Connor, *Boston’s Catholics: A History of the Church and Its People*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998), pp. 91-93.

1850s CONFLICTS OVER SLAVERY AND FUGITIVE SLAVES

Another major issue that divided the city's African American and Irish communities was slavery and the status of fugitive slaves. By the early nineteenth century, Boston had emerged as the nation's leading abolitionist center, and Morris once again took an active role. His actions were vehemently opposed by many of Boston's Irish Catholics and their newspaper. With the huge influx of Irish Catholics into Boston beginning in the 1840s, tensions mounted between many Irish and African Americans, chiefly around the issue of employment. Because Irish immigrants and blacks often occupied the same low-rung of the wage ladder in Boston and often competed for the same jobs, the Irish believed that this competition would only be exacerbated by abolition. White abolitionists, overwhelmingly from Boston's upper-crust Protestant elite, looked upon the newly arrived immigrants with disdain because of their poverty and their faith. Many Irish immigrants believed that abolitionists cared more about slaves and free blacks than about the problems facing the new immigrants. The intersection of these issues made Boston's black and Irish communities suspicious and hostile towards each other from the beginning.

As early as 1846, Morris, with others, established the Committee of Vigilance to warn fugitive slaves when slave hunters were in the city.²⁹ The vigilance committee even posted flyers describing the slave hunters so they could be avoided.³⁰ Anti-slavery activity and the committee's resolve stiffened after the Compromise of 1850 and the enactment of the Fugitive Slave law, which prompted many escaped slaves to flee to Canada, outside the United States' jurisdiction. A number of runaways had been hidden in Boston, a stop on the Underground Railroad, and decided it was time to leave.³¹ At least fifteen families from Boston went to Canada. Many people in Massachusetts, Morris included, were outraged and set about to undermine the law's effect. Massachusetts strengthened its personal liberty laws in an effort to circumvent the Fugitive Slave law. However, it was toughened again in 1855 in response to a number of incidents involving the arrest and rendition of fugitive slaves.

²⁹ Hortons, *Black Bostonians*, pp. 75, 99-100; Benjamin Quarles, *Black Abolitionists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 153.

³⁰ Wilbur H. Siebert, *The Underground Railroad in Massachusetts* (Worcester, Massachusetts: American Antiquarian Society, 1936), p. 45.

³¹ Daniels, *Freedom's Birthplace*, pp. 57-61; Siebert, *Underground Railroad*, pp. 40-41.

Three of these cases aroused Boston in the 1850s, including the Shadrach case which was described earlier; the other cases involved Thomas Sims and Anthony Burns. Morris was involved in all three episodes as either rescuer, lawyer, or member of the Committee of Vigilance. Morris was so dedicated to the abolitionist cause that he “threw hope, ambition and discretion to the winds, [and] he offered life itself for the rescue of his fugitive black brother,” according to Pauline E. Hopkins, author of a short biographical piece on Morris for the *Colored American Magazine*.³²

After Shadrach’s rescue, federal authorities became increasingly security-conscious. During the trial of Thomas Sims, a fugitive slave from Georgia, they encircled the courthouse with heavy chains, and “extra police officers were stationed inside and outside the building.” According to Hopkins, Morris was present throughout the proceedings “to encourage and sustain” Sims. However, the rescue plan failed and Sims was returned to slavery in Georgia, which only heightened the resolve of the Vigilance Committee.³³

In May 1854, Anthony Burns, a fugitive slave, was arrested after a brief struggle with police. Burns lost his court battle despite the assistance of several lawyers, including Morris. Many in Boston were outraged. This outrage quickly turned to deadly violence. In an attempt to free Burns, protesters used a battering ram to break into the courthouse, resulting in the death of a deputy. Many Bostonians would not stand for his being returned to slavery. Morris, Leonard A. Grimes, and other members of the Vigilance Committee led a meeting at Faneuil Hall to protest Burns’ arrest. Eventually the state’s militia had to be called in to secure Burns’ return to slavery in Virginia. Fifty-thousand spectators watched as Burns was escorted down the street past buildings draped in black to the wharf where a ship waited to take him back to Virginia. A year later, the Massachusetts legislature passed a more comprehensive personal liberty law which made the Fugitive Slave Law virtually meaningless in the state.³⁴

Morris and other abolitionists continued their efforts into the late 1850s, particularly after the infamous 1857 Supreme Court decision in the *Dred Scott* case. Morris argued “that the decision should be trampled upon,” and that he “doubted whether the Massachusetts courts would enforce it.” He

³² Pauline E. Hopkins, “Famous Men of the Negro Race: Robert Morris,” *Colored American Magazine*, III, p. 341.

³³ Hopkins, “Robert Morris,” p. 341; Hortons, *Black Bostonians*, pp. 106-107.

³⁴ Daniels, *Freedom’s Birthplace*, pp. 63-64; Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, pp. 207-208; Siebert, *Underground Railroad*, pp. 60-61; Hortons, *Black Bostonians*, pp. 107-108. See also Albert J. von Frank, *The Trials of Anthony Burns: Freedom and Slavery in Emerson’s Boston* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998).

maintained that to abandon the abolitionist struggle would be a “serious mistake.” “No young man has any right to go off,” he declared, “and leave us to fight the battle alone.” Abandoning his usually moderate tone, Morris also argued that slavery would yield only to “the strong arm” and urged blacks to resist when confronted.³⁵

In 1852, Morris testified before the legislature’s Committee on the Militia, supporting the formation of an African American militia unit. He noted that the Irish were granted the right to form a militia company even though many of them were not “native born.” He told the committee he “confidently [expected] you will grant a charter to us who are native born citizens.” When Boston’s African American community met in 1858 to celebrate the anniversary of West Indian emancipation, they, along with Morris, decried efforts to promote colonization – which the *Pilot* advocated – back to Africa or Jamaica. When the Civil War broke out, Morris went again to the State House and requested that African Americans be permitted to organize a regiment with African American officers. This request was rejected, as it had been earlier. After this last rebuff, Morris counseled African Americans not to enlist, a controversial stance but consistent with his uncompromising integrationist beliefs.³⁶ For Morris, it was all or nothing.

THE CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO SLAVERY AND ABOLITION

If integration was paramount in Morris’ mind, why did he eventually join a religion which accepted slavery’s existence and had itself practiced and endorsed segregation? For centuries the church had accepted slavery’s existence as part of the natural order. Roman Catholic moral teaching concerning slavery was not formally clarified until 1965 when it was officially condemned as outside the natural order at the second Vatican Council, one hundred years after slavery’s demise in the United States. The history of the church and slavery can be found in numerous secondary sources. There is no need to recount its entire history here. The church accepted a form of slavery which recognized the right to own the work and production of another, but did not recognize ownership of the person’s soul. The church separated the question of a slave’s intrinsic moral worth and dignity from the institution of slavery and the slave-trade. It instructed

³⁵ Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, p. 231; Levesque, *Black Boston*, pp. 333-334.

³⁶ Quarles, *Black Abolitionists*, p. 230; Hopkins, “Robert Morris,” p. 341; “Address by Robert Morris Before the Committee on the Militia, March 3, 1853,” Robert Morris Papers, folder 15, The Boston Athenaeum.

its members to care for the spiritual well-being of their slaves while preaching that slavery was not contrary to the rule of God.³⁷

In the United States, immigrant and native-born Catholics accepted the American institution of slavery for a number of reasons. First, it was seen as part of the natural order and part of American society, custom, and law. Most Catholics accepted American customs and norms regarding this matter. Historian Stephen J. Ochs has argued that “accommodation to prevailing social and economic conditions, and interpretation of traditional church teaching accounted for American Catholic toleration of the ‘peculiar institution.’”³⁸ The Roman Catholic hierarchy was never put in a position of having to confront slavery’s moral legitimacy, unlike many Protestant churches which split over the issue. Many early Catholic historians “hailed the church’s neutrality” on slavery.³⁹ The hierarchy had a choice to make between condemning slavery and remaining silent. They chose silence over confrontation. As Cyprian Davis has concluded, “It can be said that the American Bishops in the period of slavery made a bad choice.”⁴⁰ Given racial attitudes, American slavery was easily accepted and many white Catholics, like most white Americans, were anti-black.⁴¹

As these tensions between African Americans and the city’s Irish increased throughout the 1850s, both communities grew increasingly suspicious of one another. Many Irish saw blacks as racial inferiors, as did most of Boston’s white citizens. Catholics associated abolitionism with nativism and the anti-Catholic Know-Nothing Party. Boston’s black community, overwhelmingly Protestant, was suspicious of Irish Catholics. Irish opposition to abolition and the rights of African Americans infuriated both Boston’s black community and white abolitionists (many of them nativist), leading to an uneasy coexistence between the two groups.⁴²

³⁷ John Francis Maxwell, *Slavery and the Catholic Church: The History of Catholic Teaching Concerning the Moral Legitimacy of the Institution of Slavery* (Chichester: Barry Rose Publishers, 1975), p. 13, 78.

³⁸ Stephen J. Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p. 18.

³⁹ David W. Southern, *John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism, 1911-1963*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996) p. 65.

⁴⁰ Cyprian Davis, O.S.B., *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990), p. 117.

⁴¹ See Madeleine H. Rice, *American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).

⁴² For a good overview of race relations in Boston between blacks and Irish Catholics, reflected in the city’s Irish Catholic newspaper, *The Pilot*, see Thomas H. O’Connor, “*The Pilot and the Slave*,” *The Pilot*, February 29, 1999, pp. 1-4.

Two of the city's newspapers, the Boston *Pilot* and the *Liberator*, are helpful in ascertaining the feelings of both communities. The *Pilot*, as noted, was an Irish Catholic newspaper. Their editorials were almost always aligned with Catholic doctrine. The *Liberator* was an abolitionist newspaper but also served as the black community's newspaper to some degree. Both the *Pilot* and the *Liberator* are important because they reflected the views of their readers.

When John Brown led his ill-fated raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859, the *Pilot* labeled him a "radical insurrectionist," out to destroy the government, and their editors proudly noted that no Irish names were to be found among the list of conspirators involved in the attack.⁴³ Abolitionists, including William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the *Liberator*, were favorite targets for the *Pilot* because they were seen as revolutionaries, hell-bent on ending slavery at any cost, even if it meant destroying the Union.

Garrison and the *Liberator*, to which Morris subscribed, responded with attacks upon the Irish: "We may dislike those who differ with us in politics, or religion, but our contempt is reserved for the mean and the base . . . These things Irishmen have done and are doing daily in America, so that no faith can be placed in their manliness and honor." Garrison continued by accusing the Irish of always taking the side of the slave holder "against the colored man." He drew a distinction between disliking the Irish and hating Catholicism, however. A distinction Morris certainly seems to have adopted. "It is alleged that the Americans hate Irishmen," Garrison wrote, "because they are Roman Catholics. I do not believe that is the case." He blamed the Irish – but not their faith – for African Americans' problems, noting that "the real ground for dislike may be traced to the fact that Irishmen have disgraced themselves; they have made themselves the tools of faction, [their loyalty to the Democratic Party] and are ever to be found doing the dirty work of the oppressor, and hunting the oppressed to death." Garrison even accused them of having brought dishonor to their faith, writing that "if I were a Roman Catholic, I should feel deeply that a disgrace had been brought on my profession by the criminal conduct of so many who held it."⁴⁴

Many Irish, like the *Pilot*'s editors, feared that emancipation would lead to increased competition between white and black laborers. The *Pilot* consistently argued that if saving the Union meant keeping slavery, then

⁴³ O'Connor, *Civil War Boston*, p. 36.

⁴⁴ "The Irish in America," *The Liberator*, May 9, 1856, p. 1.

so be it.⁴⁵ The majority of the city's Irish readily agreed. The *Liberator* often printed a column titled "Refuge of Oppression" in which it reprinted newspaper columns from opponents of abolition. Articles from the *Pilot* were prominently and numerous reprinted, particularly after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect on January 1, 1863.⁴⁶ The *Pilot* took notable exception with the proclamation, arguing that it would result in increased black migration to the North and the displacement of white workers.⁴⁷

The *Pilot* accused white abolitionists of "Niggerology," of having "nigger on the brain," and of being fanatics who were the most "pestiferous incendiaries of this country."⁴⁸ When Congress finally authorized the raising of black regiments to fight for the North, the *Pilot* opposed the bill because "blacks will neither bring up the rear with decency, nor lead at the front with honor; nor hold the middle with respectable firmness. They are not yet fit to lead."⁴⁹ In short, no love was lost between African Americans, abolitionists and the majority of the city's Irish Catholic community.

Boston's Catholic Bishop Fitzpatrick at the time said little about slavery and had remained neutral during the debate over the Compromise of 1850. Fitzpatrick was content to let the *Pilot*, and its anti-abolition message, speak for him. Throughout the United States, the Catholic hierarchy remained silent on these issues until actual hostilities broke out. Once war came, Catholics and church officials throughout the country rushed to prove their loyalty to either the Union or the Confederacy. While many Irish Catholics were willing to fight and die for the Union, many resented and opposed the Emancipation Proclamation and the implications inherent in its adoption, and they were upset when the war became a war to end slavery, as evidenced in the draft riots in New York in 1863 and the near riots in Boston that same year.⁵⁰

Bishop Fitzpatrick appeared not to overtly harbor racial prejudice, if his support and promotion of James Healy and his two brothers, Sherwood and

⁴⁵ Robert H. Lord, John E. Sexton, and Edward T. Harrington, *History of the Archdiocese of Boston in the Various Stages of Its Development, 1604-1943, In three Volumes* (Boston: The Pilot Publishing Company, 1945), v. ii, pp. 704-705.

⁴⁶ "Refuge of Oppression: President Lincoln's Proclamation," *Liberator*, January 2, 1863, p. 1; "The Emancipation Proclamation," January 16, 1863, p. 1; "The Emancipation Proclamation," January 23, 1863, p. 1; "Wendell Phillips," February 6, 1863, p. 1; "The Peace Democrats," April 10, 1863, p. 1; "Drafting Clergymen," August 14, 1863, p. 1.

⁴⁷ "The President's Proclamation," *The Pilot*, October 4, 1862, p. 4.

⁴⁸ "Refuge of Oppression: Niggerology," *Liberator*, November 21, 1862, p. 1; "Refuge of Oppression: Harper's Weekly on Negroes," August 28, 1863, p. 1.

⁴⁹ "The Negro Army of the North," *Liberator*, May 15, 1863 p. 1.

⁵⁰ O'Connor, *Fitzpatrick's Boston*, pp. 128-129; O'Connor, *The Boston Irish*, pp. 88-90.

Patrick (legally born slaves in Georgia and mixed race), to the priesthood is any indication of his feelings. Fitzpatrick also remained friendly with leading abolitionists like Senator Charles Sumner.⁵¹ Fitzpatrick's private views contrast with the public position taken by the church and the majority of Catholics in the country. Catholics, largely, wanted to avoid the divisive issue of abolition, seeing their own acceptance as Americans as more important. Fitzpatrick, along with the rest of the American hierarchy, accepted slavery as a given not to be challenged. Fitzpatrick never supported abolition.⁵²

MORRIS' 1870 CONVERSION

Given the general animosity between Irish Catholics and blacks, it is a wonder why Morris left the black Protestant Church and converted to Catholicism in 1870. This question is not easily answered: no references or information on the subject could be gleaned from his extant papers. Morris spent most of his adult life working for causes which the majority of the Boston's Irish Catholics opposed. However, his association with Catholics appears to have been extensive as a result of his law practice. According to Father Charlier, Morris' spiritual advisor, Morris' conversion was an inner spiritual change of heart. He claimed that "upon much reflection, prayer, and investigation he [Morris] decided that if he would save his soul he must make his submission to the church."⁵³ Morris was able to separate any personal animosity he may have felt towards Irish Catholics from his desire to convert to a church dominated by them.

Morris' personal connections to the Catholic Church seem to have begun when his wife, Catherine, converted to Catholicism on January 1, 1856. Little is known about her or her motives for converting. Morris and Catherine had one son, Robert Jr. Interestingly, after the Civil War they sent Robert Jr. to the College of Montpelier, France's military institution, where he graduated "with highest honors" in rhetoric and philosophy in 1868. The college, unlike the Union army during the Civil War, did not discriminate against African Americans. Robert Jr. went on to become a

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 205. Fitzpatrick promoted, facilitated, and supported the children of Michael Morris Healy, a slave owner who had 10 children with one of his slaves, Mary Eliza. Fitzpatrick met Michael Healy in 1844 and helped him bring four of his sons to Massachusetts where they attended Holy Cross. One daughter moved to Boston and stayed with Fitzpatrick's relative. See James M. O'Toole, *Passing for White: Race, Religion, and the Healy Family, 1820-1920* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002) for a complete history of the Healy brothers and their larger family.

⁵² O'Connor, *Fitzpatrick's Boston*, p. 162; See also, O'Connor, "The *Pilot* and the Slave."

⁵³ Charlier, *In Memoriam*, p. 8.

lawyer, passing the Massachusetts bar in 1874. Unfortunately, not much is known about his brief legal career. Although he would have inherited his father's practice, he died only two weeks after Robert senior.⁵⁴

Father Charlier noted that Catherine's conversion came as a shock to Morris. According to Charlier, it was Morris'

misfortune to have been brought up in strong prejudices against the Catholic Church; these prejudices developed into hostility when his wife, called by grace, asked and obtained admittance into the church's pale. He was thereupon decidedly opposed to the observance of Catholic practices in his family; he would not hear of it.

Despite his initially strong hostility, over time Morris "softened his unfriendly feelings" toward the church and converted.⁵⁵ Thus, it seems that his wife's conversion was the catalyst for his own and eventually he relented. Practically speaking, given his strong abolitionist beliefs, he only considered such a step after the Civil War. The timing of his conversion suggests that he waited until slavery was successfully abolished before he converted to a church which doctrinally accepted slavery as part of the natural order. Unfortunately, his papers contain nothing that would shed light on this issue.

Converting to Catholicism also reflected his integrationist beliefs. Throughout the nineteenth century, Boston's African American community had become increasingly segregated in worship. It is quite possible that Morris did not want to be affiliated with an all-black church. In the first half of the century, the Catholic Church had abandoned its segregated seating for African Americans previously practiced at the Cathedral. Subsequent parishes in the diocese never adopted the practice of segregated seating. White and black Catholics worshipped together whenever they lived within the same parish, mostly at the Cathedral, but also at St. Joseph's in the West End and then later in the century at Immaculate Conception in the South End, where Morris eventually became a member.⁵⁶ The

⁵⁴ Marriages and Births, 1850-1867, St. Rose of Lima, Archives of the Archdiocese of Boston, (hereafter AAB); *Boston Post*, February 16, 1869, "Robert Morris Papers," Folders 12 and 17, The Boston Athenaeum; J. Clay Smith, Jr., *Emancipation: The Making of the Black Lawyer, 1844-1944* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), pp. 99-100.

⁵⁵ Marriages and Births 1870, Church of the Immaculate Conception, AAB; Walker, *In Memoriam*, p. 31; Charlier, *In Memoriam*, p. 8.

⁵⁶ Daniels, *Freedom's Birthplace*, p. 229.

archdiocese's charitable and educational institutions also appear never to have had any official discriminatory policies. The *Pilot* noted that "all poor, homeless, and friendless children . . . are received and sheltered without any distinction of race, color, or religion."⁵⁷ This obviously appealed to Morris, given his sense of justice and opposition to segregated institutions. His refusal to join all-black abolitionist organizations or promote their establishment earlier in his life is indicative of his beliefs.⁵⁸

* * * * *

By the time Morris died in December 1882, he had been a "prominent member of the congregation" at the Jesuit-run Church of the Immaculate Conception on Harrison Avenue in Boston's South End for over a decade. The church was only a few blocks from Morris' home on West Newton Street and right next door to Boston College, the city's first Catholic College. Morris became a life member (#304) of the church. Interestingly, Morris did not join the newly-opened Cathedral of the Holy Cross on Washington Street, also only a few blocks from his home. He made a conscious decision to join the Jesuit-run church. When his wife died after him in 1895, she left what remained of their estate to the church.⁵⁹

Morris' funeral was a grand affair, attracting prominent members of both the black and Irish communities. Pall-bearers included George T. Downing; Edwin G. Walker, son David Walker; his uncle George L. Ruffin; Patrick Collins, newly elected to the House of Representatives and later elected mayor of Boston in 1901; and Lewis Hayden, a prominent black merchant. Numerous members of the city's Irish Catholic clergy were also present, including Jeremiah J. O'Connor, S.J., president of Boston College. The *Pilot* also noted Morris' passing, calling him "a well-known colored Catholic lawyer" but failing to mention his abolitionist activities.⁶⁰ Morris' spiritual advisor, Father Charlier, said the funeral Mass. According to Father Charlier, Morris was deeply devoted to his religious duties, just as he had been to his race and profession. He commented that Morris' religious life was characterized by "fidelity to duty." After his conversion, Morris had attended church "twice every Sunday" where he

⁵⁷ "Immaculate Conception Church Clipping Scrapbook, 1883-1906," box 8, folder 1, Archives of the New England Province Society of Jesus, Holy Cross College.

⁵⁸ Hortons, *Black Bostonians*, p. 101.

⁵⁹ "Membership Card," Robert Morris Papers, folder 1, The Boston Athenaeum "Catherine Morris Will," Suffolk County Courthouse.

⁶⁰ Howard L. Smith, *In Memoriam*, pp. 5-6; "Robert Morris," *Pilot*, December 23, 1882, p. 1.

was “seen attending the divine service with his family.” Morris also went to confession once a month. Just before his death, Morris had asked for and received the last sacraments of the church.⁶¹

Despite his conversion to Catholicism, Morris’ connection with the black Protestant church seems to have remained intact. The night before his funeral, a meeting was held at the North Russell Street church (Methodist Episcopal) to plan a memorial for him. Prominent members of the African American community and a few notable whites, including Wendell Phillips, Patrick A. Collins (Boston’s second Irish Catholic mayor), and William Lloyd Garrison, Jr., organized a committee to plan the event. John Boyle O’Reilly, editor of the *Pilot*, served as the group’s vice president. On March 5, 1883 a public meeting to commemorate Morris’ life was held at the Charles Street Church, an African Methodist Episcopal Church. Prominent black and white Bostonians attended the service, where they eulogized Morris, commemorating his achievements.⁶² George L. Ruffin, the first African American appointed to the municipal court, and Edwin G. Walker, one of the first African Americans elected to the state legislature, spoke at the meeting along with Patrick Collins and John Boyle O’Reilly.⁶³

Politically, Morris had remained rather independent from the majority of his fellow African Americans and Catholics. According to Howard L. Smith, editor of the *Boston Leader*, “he was neither bound to Republicanism nor to Democracy . . . race interests were paramount to party aggrandizement.”⁶⁴ On the one hand, Morris’ decisions about where to live, his conversion, and his integrationist beliefs could be construed as his abandoning the black community. According to Walker, some viewed Morris as a sort of “Uncle Tom.” On the other hand, Morris’ consistent dedication to and identification with his race, and his opposition to discrimination, segregation, and slavery suggest otherwise.⁶⁵

Morris’ later success among the Irish could have been partly because of his faith, but this does not account for his earlier achievements; the majority of his clients were Irish Catholics both before and after his conversion. The *American Catholic Tribune*, a black Catholic newspaper published in Cincinnati, attributed much of his professional success to “his identification with the Catholic church,” noting that “he enjoyed in

⁶¹ Charlier, *In Memoriam*, pp. 6-9.

⁶² John Monroe Trotter, *In Memoriam*, p. 24.

⁶³ Daniels, *Freedom’s Birthplace*, pp. 99-101; Trotter, *In Memoriam*, p. 24.

⁶⁴ Smith, *In Memoriam*, p. 2.

⁶⁵ Walker, *In Memoriam*, p. 40.

an extraordinary degree the confidence of Irish Americans.” The *Tribune* also believed that the “Irish people make warm and fast friends, and that the Irish Americans of Boston are so earnestly and consistently friendly to their colored fellow citizens is due largely to the great influence exercised by Robert Morris.”⁶⁶

What kind of black Catholic community Morris joined in 1870 is hard to determine. Black Catholics had been part of the church in Boston since the late eighteenth century and continued throughout the nineteenth century. While small, the overall size of this group remained relatively stable throughout the nineteenth century and only picked up in the early 1900s. This was a close community into which Morris entered when he joined the church.⁶⁷ He did legal work after his conversion for John B. Pero and Ann Revinson, two black Catholics and fellow parishioners at Immaculate Conception.⁶⁸

Seven years after Morris’ death, Daniel Rudd, editor of the *American Catholic Tribune*, noted that there was a large community of black Catholics in Massachusetts but did not provide an estimate.⁶⁹ In 1889, a Protestant minister in Boston reported at least 600 black Catholics in Boston alone. J. Gordon Street, a writer for the *Philadelphia Sentinel*, attributed the increase in the number of black Catholics in Boston and the nation to “colorphobia” found in Protestant churches throughout the north and particularly in Boston.⁷⁰

Agents promoting subscriptions to the *American Catholic Tribune* found “large and attentive audiences” of African Americans, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, when they visited Boston and other Massachusetts cities in March 1888. Catholic clergy and laity gave enthusiastic welcomes in Boston, East Boston, Cambridge, Salem, and Lawrence to the editors and agents of the newspaper.⁷¹ When the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament arrived in 1914 to work with the city’s black Catholic population, they

⁶⁶ “Men and Things in Brief,” ACT, November 24, 1888, pp. 1-2.

⁶⁷ “Why are there Separate Cathoic [sic] Churches for the Colored Race?,” ACT, February 17, 1888, p. 1; “The Negro and the Catholic Church,” May 11, 1888, p.2; “Certainly,” April 27, 1889, p. 2; “Negro Catholics,” November 21, 1891, p. 2; Ochs, *Desegregating the Altar*, p. 21; John T. Gillard, S. S. J., *Colored Catholics in the United States* (Baltimore: Josephite Press, 1941), pp. 16; Gillard, *The Catholic Church and the American Negro* (Baltimore: Josephite Press, 1929), p. 47; See William C. Leonard, “Growing Together: Blacks and the Catholic Church in Boston,” *The Historian* 66, no. 2 (2004): 254-277.

⁶⁸ Pero to Morris, Robert Morris Papers, folder 11, The Boston Athenaeum.

⁶⁹ “Certainly,” ACT, April 27, 1889, p. 2.

⁷⁰ “Catholics in Boston,” ACT, July 6, 1889, p. 1.

⁷¹ Untitled, ACT, March 23, p. 2; untitled, April 27, 1888, p. 2; “The Negro and the Catholic Church,” May 11, 1888, p. 2; “Boston, Mass.,” May 18, 1888, p. 1.

estimated approximately 1,000 African American Catholics were in the archdiocese, the vast majority in Boston.⁷²

There certainly was animosity and open hostility between Boston's African American and Irish communities. Morris' life, however, suggests that this animosity was not absolute and could be overcome. There is no evidence that Morris compromised his beliefs nor "sold out" the black community by building ties to Irish Catholic Bostonians. The fact that a noted abolitionist and advocate of black Americans would choose to live, work, and worship with members of the very group which opposed so much of what he stood for challenges and broadens the accepted history of both groups.

HJM

⁷² Drexel to O'Connell, February 12, 1913, Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament Papers, AAB.