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Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center Spotlight

The Two Worlds of Leopold Morse

On August 15, 1831, Leopold Morse was born to Jacob and Charlotte Morse in Wachenheim, Bavaria. In 1849, at age 18, he immigrated to the United States. An older brother, Moses, was living in Somersworth, New Hampshire, and the two brothers moved to New Bedford, Massachusetts, where they worked in a retail store.¹ Leopold soon settled in Boston, where he was later joined by his mother, Charlotte; three sisters; his younger brother, Godfrey² and three other brothers. Leopold established Leopold Morse & Company, a clothier and department store, at the corner of Washington and Brattle Streets.³

At the time, Boston's Jewish community was in its infancy.⁴ During the period of German Jewish immigration (1820–1880),⁵ large numbers of Jewish immigrants settled in New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and smaller cities in the Midwest, but Boston was not initially a popular destination for Jews. Not until 1842, when Congregation Ohabei Shalom was founded, did Boston's Jewish community begin to flourish.

This smaller Jewish community may have affected Leopold's marriage prospects and provided him with fewer opportunities to marry within the faith. However, the increasingly successful Leopold might also have desired a well-connected marriage partner to match his own elevated status within the community.⁶

On February 4, 1864, Leopold married Georgia Louisa Ray, the only child of Peter Woodbury Ray and Amanda (Peart) Ray of Beverly, Massachusetts.⁷ Georgia's background was quite different from Leopold's; she was later characterized as "an estimable lady descended from the old Puritan stock of Essex County."⁸ One of her immigrant ancestors, John Woodbury (c. 1583–by 1641/2), arrived in New England in 1624 with the Dorchester Company.

How the couple met is unknown, but they likely courted for several years before their marriage, as an 1860 note to Georgia from Leopold indicates. Leopold and Georgia were married in an Episcopalian ceremony by Bishop Manton Eastburn,⁹ suggesting that the interfaith marriage was not an issue for either family or the Episcopal Church. The couple had six children, but only the two youngest reached adulthood: Lottie Ray (1864–1865); Leopold Woodbury (1865–1869); George (1868–1873); Bardwell (March–May 1870); Isidore (1873–1932); and Tyler (1875–1933).¹⁰

Leopold's marriage to Georgia may have provided opportunities that otherwise would have been unavailable to him. In 1870 and 1872, Leopold unsuccessfully ran for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives, but a win in 1876 made him the first Jewish congressman elected from Massachusetts. He served five terms, from 1877 to 1885 and from 1887 to 1889.

Regardless of his interfaith marriage, Leopold was openly Jewish. In

Undated image of Leopold Morse.
From Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center archives.



Top: Georgia Morse, 1894. From the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center archives. Bottom: Leopold Morse & Co. Clothiers on the corner of Washington and Brattle Streets, Boston, circa 1900–10. Courtesy of the City of Boston Archives.

one anti-Semitic account of Leopold's congressional service—doubtless meant to be complimentary—the tension between Leopold's Boston Brahmin and Jewish worlds is highlighted: "He has served ten or twelve years in Congress, and though an uncompromising Democrat, has a remarkable facility for carrying impregnable Republican districts. He was the first man of his party who attempted to get into Congress from the old Fourth Boston District . . . which was supposed to contain the *crème de la creams* [sic] of cultured blue blood respectability. It was a shock to the education nerves of that rich constituency to find that Leopold Morse, a full-blooded Hebrew, actually engaged in trade—and the clothing trade at that—should aspire to be a member of Congress from that district. . . . He is a man of short figure, with no evidence of his racial origin in his countenance . . . and one of the best liked members of Congress in Washington."¹¹

Leopold stayed connected to his Jewish roots in part through philanthropy. During his tenure in Congress, Boston began to see larger numbers of Jewish immigrants, primarily from Eastern Europe. The Jewish population of Boston increased rapidly to 40,000, and the demand for welfare services threatened to overwhelm the existing community. Boston's Jewish community, unlike many Jewish communities in other cities, had not previously built an institutional framework to assist newcomers.¹²

The United Hebrew Benevolent Association (UHBA), overburdened by the needs of the new arrivals, delayed funding for other essential services. Frustrated by these delays, some members of the UHBA, in partnership with others outside the organization, formed the Montefiore Home and Aid Society to assist Jewish widows, orphans, and the elderly.¹³ In 1889, recognizing that

the Home needed to be under the purview of the UHBA, Leopold purchased a large house in Mattapan (now in Milton, near Mattapan Square), and selected members of the oversight committee, which squarely put the Home—renamed the Boston Home for Infirm Hebrews and Orphanage—back under control of the UHBA.

Over time, Leopold's store flourished, and he gained an enviable reputation. An obituary would note that "He had by his own exertions attained a position as one of the leading merchants of Boston, his house (Leopold Morse and Co.) being among the most prominent and wealthy in the clothing trade."¹⁴

On December 15, 1892, Leopold Morse attended the Merchants' Association Banquet at the Vendome Hotel, where he suffered "a paralytic shock"¹⁵ and died at home soon afterwards. He was remembered for his generous, kind, and honest spirit. Recalling Leopold, one journalist wrote, "Mr. Morse was a positive man, though so open-handed. The odd swing with which he walked down the street, both coat-lapels flung back and a red carnation in his light



overcoat, made him a picture in the city thoroughfares."¹⁶

The two worlds Leopold seemed to easily traverse throughout his life came together at his Episcopal funeral.

Among his pallbearers was fellow German Jewish immigrant and philanthropist Jacob Hecht. The Young Men's Hebrew Association and UHBA sent broken columns, which recognized Leopold's Masonic status. Leopold had become a Master Mason in 1858 and was a member of the Great Lodge of Massachusetts. In freemasonry, a broken column symbolizes the fall of a great Mason and may harken back to the First Temple in Jerusalem, where columns symbolized princes or nobles.

Leopold is buried with his wife, his son Tyler, at least two of his children who died young, and his wife's parents at Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts.¹⁷

On February 6, 1884, Leopold Morse had been elected member of New England Historic Genealogical Society.¹⁸ In 1945, over fifty years

after Leopold's death, a *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* article listed 26 men who clearly demonstrated "the growth and continuing prestige of the New England Historic Genealogical Society" in its second quarter-century. Among these notable men—including Charles Francis Adams, Alexander Graham Bell, Henry Cabot Lodge, and Robert Gould Shaw—was Leopold Morse.¹⁹

Leopold's legacy continues. After his death, the Boston Home for Infirm Hebrews and Orphanage was renamed the Leopold Morse Home for Infirm Hebrews and Orphanage by an act of the Massachusetts State Legislature. This institution later became a founding organization of the Federated Jewish Charities, widely known today as the Combined Jewish Philanthropies. ♦

The Leopold Morse Papers (JHCP-013) is comprised of scrapbook pages and includes a smallpox vaccination record, Mason certificates, U.S. House of Representatives certificates, correspondence, newspaper clippings, and photographs. This collection was purchased by the JHC in 2020. The identity of the Morse family member who created the scrapbook is unknown. The creator was not Leopold, as many of the clippings cover events that occurred after his death. The JHC is actively seeking more materials pertaining to Leopold Morse and his family; please email us at jhcreference@nehgs.org if you have any information.

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NOTES

- 1 Cyrus Adler, "Morse, Leopold," in Isidore Singer, et al. (eds.), *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 9 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1906), p. 31, viewed at jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11026-morse-leopold; Moses Morse, 1850 U.S. Census, Somersworth, Strafford, Co., N.H., viewed at Ancestry.com; *New Bedford, Massachusetts, City Directory, 1852, in U.S., City Directories, 1822–1995*, viewed at Ancestry.com.
- 2 Godfrey immigrated in 1854. Cyrus Adler, "Morse, Godfrey," in Isidore Singer, et al. (eds.), *The Jewish Encyclopedia*, vol. 9 (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1906), p. 30, viewed at jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/11025-morse-godfrey.
- 3 Brattle Street no longer exists; the area is now part of Government Center.
- 4 In 1840, about 40 Jews lived in Boston. In 1861, the population had grown to only 1,000. In contrast, the Jewish population of New York City grew from 7,000 to 40,000 in the same period. Jonathan D. Sarna and Ellen Smith, eds., *The Jews of Boston* (Boston: Combined Jewish Philanthropies, 1995), 5.
- 5 The German Jewish immigration period also included Jews from Alsace, Lithuania, Poland, parts of Russia, Galicia, Moravia, Bohemia, and Hungary. Hasia R. Diner, "German Immigrant Period in the United States," *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia*, February 27, 2009. Jewish Women's

Archive; jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/german-immigrant-period-in-united-states.

- 6 In his essay, "Intermarriage in America: the Jewish Experience in Context," Jonathan Sarna quotes sociologist David M. Heer's central factors to understanding intermarriage, (which include the availability and attractiveness of suitable marriage partners and a lack of barriers). From Stuart Cohen and Bernard Susser, *Ambivalent Jew: Charles Liebman in Memoriam* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 2007), 128.
- 7 Peter Woodbury Ray and Amanda Peart were married December 21, 1840, in Manchester, Mass. (They were both living in Boston.) *Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1620–1850*, AmericanAncestors.org/DB190/i/7740/205/142397103.
- 8 Charles Levi Woodbury, "Hon. Leopold Morse" entry in "Necrology of the New-England Historic Genealogical Society," *The New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 48 (1894):85–86. Viewed at AmericanAncestors.org.
- 9 Massachusetts: Vital Records, 1841–1910. From original records held by the Massachusetts Archives. AmericanAncestors.org/DB191/i/10507/14/127963248.
- 10 Tyler Morse graduated from Harvard in 1898. He became a lawyer, and practiced law with his uncle Godfrey Morse. In January 1906, he married Allon (Fuller) Black, and moved to New York City. From

Backbayhouses.org/203-commonwealth. The couple had no children.

- 11 From an undated and unsourced newspaper article in the Morse scrapbook, in the Leopold Morse Papers at the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center.
- 12 Barbara Solomon Miller, *Pioneers in Service: The History of the Associated Jewish Philanthropies of Boston* (Boston: Associated Jewish Philanthropies, 1956), 16.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Woodbury, "Hon. Leopold Morse" [note 8], 85.
- 15 This attack was Morse's second incident of paralytic shock in two years; based on other symptoms described, he likely suffered a stroke.
- 16 From an undated and unsourced newspaper article in the Morse scrapbook [note 11].
- 17 Findagrave.com: Leopold Morse, 7499873, Mount Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, Middlesex Co., Massachusetts. Son Isidore moved to England in 1895. He died in 1932 in Lisbon, Portugal, aged 59, and was buried in England. Isidore was survived by his wife, Nina. They apparently did not have children. *England & Wales, National Probate Calendar (Index of Wills and Administrations), 1858–1995*. Viewed at Ancestry.com.
- 18 Woodbury, "Hon. Leopold Morse" [note 8], 85.
- 19 William Carroll Hill, "A Century of Genealogical Progress," *Register* 99 (1945):92. Viewed at AmericanAncestors.org.