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Plessinger: "Damn the tyrant's cause!": Primary Source Analysis of the Morris

Andrew Morris, 1797–1871
"Damn the tyrant’s cause!":  
Primary Source Analysis of the Morris Family Letters from 1829 to 1846

Lark Plessinger

FROM 1829 TO 1846, members of the Morris family wrote a series of letters to their brother Jonathan Morris, who remained in Chorley, England, regarding their experiences immigrating to America.¹ This set of letters only includes the correspondence addressed to Jonathan, but it still provides valuable insights about this transitional, frontier period of American history as witnessed by the Morris family. By analyzing the different concerns voiced in these letters, the social, economic, and political world of those who immigrated to nineteenth-century Ohio comes to life.

Work appears as a major theme in the letters. Indeed, the letters reflect a romanticized view of farm work. The Morris family clearly regarded farm labor as more desirable than factory labor. The letters’ focus on work is understandable since economic concerns motivated the family’s migration. Before the majority of the Morris family immigrated to America, the parents and children worked as handloom weavers. But this trade had became obsolete in Lancashire in the 1820s as power looms were adopted. The Morris siblings were out of work and the prospects of new job opportunities in America beckoned. Andrew, Thomas, William, Ann, and Alice, along with their families, left England and eventually bought land on the Ohio frontier. Thomas championed this idea by proudly

stating, "We live in our own house on our own land." Such a feat was not possible in England where they would not have been able to own their own land and would have had little opportunity for self-employment. The Morrices recognized the new opportunities that living in America provided, and perceived living off the land, away from the city, as a better way to live.

The Morris family’s positive view of land ownership was based on a unique perspective about the relationship between the environment and economics. The Morris family viewed their relationship with the land as one that would provide stable prosperity. The family believed the unsettled territory in Ohio was a place of freedom apart from economic uncertainties, taxation, and the harsh world of industrialization. The family correspondence reveals that the Morrices saw agriculture as a way to simplify their lives and create happiness. Their ability to establish a small refuge in the wilderness soon evolved into a desire for more. Andrew wrote to Jonathan about seeking economic stability from his farm that would give him a leisurely lifestyle one-third of the year. Clearly, these family members were ambitious and anxious to see their farming pursuits pay-off. Thomas also built a gristmill and charged his neighbors a fee to use it. Such opportunities allowed these siblings to change their relationship with the environment. They could use the land to suit their needs. Farming the land was seen as an escape route from the unpredictable realities of an industrialized world. Land ownership allowed the family to create a self-sustaining lifestyle; a relationship Jonathan could not hope to cultivate in England.

Another underlying theme in the letters is the importance of family through both good and bad times. The correspondence, for instance, explores how family was essential to taking risks like immigrating to a foreign land. Jonathan said he would never leave Chorley because he did not want to trade “certaintyes for uncertaintyes.” Andrew, William, and Thomas wrote their brother regularly for seventeen years hoping to change his mind. Despite the distance, family was clearly important to them. Their family bond was built on trust and respect for each other, as shown by opinions and personal experiences they shared—whether it was about the latest harvest or current economic conditions. The Morrices

2 Letter from Thomas Morris, Aurelius Township, to Jonathan Morris, Heath Charnock, near Chorley, Lancashire; 7 February 1832, 4.
3 Letter from Andrew and Jane Morris, Aurelius Township, Jonathan Morris, Hindley, Lancashire; 13 August 1842, 2.
4 Letter from Andrew and Jane Morris, Aurelius Township, Jonathan Morris, Hindley, Lancashire; 13 August 1842, 2.
5 Letter from William Morris, Barnsville, Ohio, to Jonathan Morris, Tyldesley Banks, Lancashire; 14 July 1841, 3.
living in Ohio continued to emphasize their belief that there was “still a better prospect in America than in England,” but acknowledged it was Jonathan’s choice to join them or not. Long distances may have separated this family, but each of them recognized that family was a bond that should never be broken; it was a value revealed by the nearly two decades of surviving correspondence.

This faith in family motivated the Ohio Morrices to try multiple techniques of persuasion that would appeal to Jonathan’s self-interest and convince him to immigrate. One of Jonathan’s primary concerns seems to have been equipping his family with the best life possible. Anytime one of the Morrices mentioned political, social, or economic conditions in America, they emphasized the excellent “prospects for both the present and rising generation.” For instance, Thomas wrote to Jonathan that he owned 120 acres of land in Ohio and harvested cash crops like tobacco that paid for opportunities for his children. Andrew, Jane, Ann, and William also explained that they had found various opportunities such as opening a blacksmith shop, building a gristmill, and other prospects that were never within reach in England. The Morrices wanted the best future they could give to the next generation and hoped all of their family could find the same success. To this end, they praised the social and economic advantages of immigrating to America and presented the country to their brother as a place where he, like they, could give their children a brighter future.

Throughout the correspondence, the Morris family also explained the political disadvantages of staying in England to their brother. They seem to have seen this as an important persuasive technique that might convince him to immigrate. They encouraged Jonathan to have faith in their opinions and experiences. Although Jonathan’s responses to his brothers about the political situation in England are lost, the persistent mention of politics in the letters demonstrates its importance to the new Americans and their assessment of their life situation. William declared to Jonathan that he needed to leave the “oppressive tyrants of the King” behind and witness the freedom of America. Ann’s husband, John, also told Jonathan, “Damn the tyrant’s cause!” that kept the poor man subject to the rich. John urged Jonathan to come to Ohio where a man could “carry his gun and shoot game of his fancy and choice,” walk where he pleased, and find

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6 Letter from Andrew and Jane Morris, Aurelius Township, to his brother Jonathan Morris, Hindley, Lancashire; 13 August 1842, 1.
7 Letter from Andrew Morris, Aurelius Township, Jonathan Morris, Bolton, Lancashire; 21 February 1846, 3.
justice in the law. John and William wanted to expose the political injustices of their home country by contrasting it with the freedoms they had discovered in America. They did this in an attempt to persuade their brother to move to a place with better laws and more expansive rights for mankind. Such a move, of course, would also have brought him physically closer to them.

The information in these letters was written out of concern for the family members left behind in England and with a hope that they would one day be reunited with them. Every historical source presents unique ways to approach history and some sort of bias. However limited a particular source may be, it is still valuable to our understanding of history. Whether a family letter is boasting about acres of farmland or spouting political rhetoric like, “Damn the tyrant’s cause!” it can tell us something about the past and the people who wrote it. The Morris family correspondence provides a window for scholars to gain a better view into the social, political, and economic world of immigrants on the Ohio frontier during the 1800s.

Lark Plessinger is double majoring in history and communications with a minor in political science at Brigham Young University. She grew up on a farm in Saint Thomas, Pennsylvania and has always enjoyed history and making connections across generations since her first trip to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Her interest in the Morris correspondence occurred while studying at King’s College in Cambridge, England. Her supervisor, Dr. Peter Martland, introduced her to the letters discovered by his colleague, Dr. Charlotte Erickson. Lark continued this research to find more records indicating the Morris family’s footprints in the 1800s. Although studying history remains a hobby, Lark is pursuing a career in public relations and plans to return to the East Coast.