

there were some exceptions to this. As to young women and girls—girls, after they were twenty or twenty-five years old, were allowed to associate with men who were not very much older than they were, but with the older ones, too. Girls under those ages did not, as a general thing, associate with men who were much under forty years, and then very seldom. They were considered better off, morally and physically, if they were sought after by men fifty and seventy years of age, and in fact were put under moral pressure about it.

Scholars have long speculated about the sexual practices of the Oneida Community, specifically the practice of male continence. With the publication here of Dr. Cragin's candid account as well as of the female rebuttal that Dr. Van de Warker reproduced in his investigation five years after the society's demise, few questions will remain.

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“TIMES CHANGE”: FRANK J. WEBB ADDRESSES
ROBERT MORRIS ON THE PROMISE
OF RECONSTRUCTION

EDITED BY AMBER D. MOULTON

ON 29 November 1869, Frank J. Webb wrote to Robert Morris to announce that he had returned to the United States and hoped to use his antebellum connections to establish himself in a society he believed had been turned upside down by Reconstruction. Webb's letter, although essentially personal, is important not only for the new evidence it offers about his travels and how it maps African American reform networks that spanned the northeastern United States but because it conveys one man's poignant, seemingly

boundless optimism about the future of race relations in postbellum America.

Webb, born in Philadelphia in 1828, married his first wife, Mary, in 1845. The couple supported themselves by selling and tailoring clothing, all the while taking part in Philadelphia's bustling African American intellectual and reform circles.¹ The Webbs' business faltered in 1854, but by 1855 Mary had begun to achieve some renown for the dramatic readings she staged in Philadelphia and Boston.² Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote a dramatization of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, entitled *The Christian Slave*, "expressly for the reading of Mrs. Mary E. Webb," which Webb performed in Boston on 6 December 1855 as part of an antislavery lecture series organized by Samuel Gridley Howe.³ Robert Morris and his wife likely attended the reading. Although neither couple left a written record of their meeting or what they might have had in common, equal rights and black military service were topics dear to both men.

Morris, born on 8 June 1823 to free people living in Salem, Massachusetts, moved to Boston and found work as a servant in the household of abolitionist lawyer Ellis Gray Loring at the age of thirteen.⁴ In 1844 he began reading law in Loring's office, and by 1847 he had passed the Massachusetts bar, after which he dedicated his career to providing legal services to black Bostonians. In 1848 he initiated a lawsuit on behalf of Benjamin F. Roberts and his daughter Sarah, who sought to integrate the city's public schools.⁵ Although the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court decided against Roberts, the case helped to highlight school segregation, which the state legislature finally outlawed in 1855. As a member of the

¹Eric Gardner, "'A Gentleman of Superior Cultivation and Refinement': Recovering the Biography of Frank J. Webb," *African American Review* 35.2 (Summer 2001): 298.

²For Webb's view of his wife's achievements, see his "Biographical Sketch of Mary E. Webb," in *Frank J. Webb: Fiction, Essays, Poetry*, ed. Werner Sollors (New Milford, Conn.: Toby Press, 2004), pp. 425–29.

³Gardner, "A Gentleman of Superior Cultivation and Refinement," p. 299.

⁴For additional information on Morris, see James O. Horton and Lois E. Horton, *Black Bostonians: Family Life and Community Struggle in the Antebellum North* (Teaneck, N.J.: Holmes and Meier Publishers, Inc., 1979); Paul Finkelman, "Not Only the Judges' Robes Were Black: African-American Lawyers as Social Engineers during and after Slavery," *Stanford Law Review* (1994): 161–209; and J. Clay Smith, *Emancipation: The Making of the Black Lawyer, 1844–1944* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

⁵The most extensive study of the Roberts case is Paul Kendrick and Stephen Kendrick, *Sarah's Long Walk: The Free Blacks of Boston and How Their Struggle for Equality Changed America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

integrated Boston Vigilance Committee, Morris helped free escaped slave Shadrach Minkins in 1851.

Well before the outbreak of the American Civil War, Morris joined with other Massachusetts equal rights activists to petition the state and federal governments to allow African American men to participate in local militias. In 1853 he spoke before the state legislature's Committee on the Militia, outlining a legal argument for state support for creating a proposed black unit, the Massasoit Guards. He continued his fight until at least 1856, when the legislature flatly refused to fund a black militia.⁶ It is a cause to which Frank Webb also subscribed, having delivered a lecture in Philadelphia on "The Martial Capacity of Blacks" in 1854.⁷

Throughout his legal and political career, Morris established a network of prominent colleagues, in particular abolitionists and politically and socially active free people of color across the northeast. His papers contain correspondence with Charles Lenox Remond, Samuel Ringgold Ward, John V. DeGrasse, Charles W. Dennison, Ellen Craft, Frederick G. Barbadoes, and, of course, Frank J. Webb.

In 1855 and 1856, Frank Webb accompanied his wife throughout the northeast and England, during which time they forged vital patronage relationships with a number of prominent antislavery and equal rights advocates. Also during these years, Webb wrote a novel, *The Garies and Their Friends*, published in 1857 by George Routledge and Company with prefaces by Stowe and Lord Brougham and a dedication to Lady Byron. The international tour took a severe toll on Mary's health, and when her doctors recommended that she move to a more temperate climate, Webb's British friends worked to secure him a job with the postal service in Kingston, Jamaica, where the couple relocated in 1858. Mary died on 17 June 1859. Webb remained in Jamaica, in due course marrying a young Jamaican woman, Mary Rodgers, and fathering four children with her between 1865 and 1869. The needs of his rapidly growing family drew Webb back

⁶"Speech of Robert Morris, Esq., before the Committee on the Militia, March 3, 1853," F9: Massasoit Guards, Robert Morris Papers, Boston Athenaeum.

⁷Phillip S. Lapsansky, "Afro-Americana: Frank J. Webb and his Friends," *Annual Report of the Library Company of Philadelphia for the Year 1990* (Philadelphia: Library Company of Philadelphia, 1991), p. 36. For additional biographical notes on Webb, see Allan D. Austin, "Frank Webb," in *Encyclopedia of African-American Culture and History*, ed. Jack Salzman, David Lionel Smith, and Cornel West, vol. 5 (New York: MacMillan, 1996), p. 2796, and Eric Gardner, "Frank J. Webb," in *African American National Biography*, ed. Henry Louis Gates and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, vol. 8 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

to the United States at a time when Reconstruction seemed to offer the promise of hitherto unfathomable opportunities for political influence and professional enterprise.

I discovered the letter below while conducting research in the Robert Morris Papers at the Boston Athenaeum.⁸ I am grateful to Curator Stanley Cushing and the Boston Athenaeum for permission to share it with the readers of *The New England Quarterly*.



Nov 29, 1869 Washington, DC

MY DEAR MORRIS,

This letter will seem to you I am sure, almost like a voice from the grave, and indeed it seems difficult even to myself to realize that I am once more in the land of my birth.

I have been here about two weeks. I see Fred every day and we have many a chat over old times.⁹

I saw, copied into a Jamaica newspaper, an announcement of your arrival in Boston, with your son, who had just graduated at Paris.¹⁰ You would hardly believe the pleasure it afforded me, to read it. I felt alarmingly old in consequence, as I left your son quite a shaver.

How everything is changed; and I am changed also in appearance, it took Fred some time to recognize me. I am burnt frightfully, but that is of not the slightest consequence now, black being a much more fashionable colour than it was when we parted.

⁸Frank J. Webb to Robert Morris, 29 November 1869, F14: James L. Sherman, etc., 1866–69, Robert Morris Papers, Boston Athenaeum.

⁹He could be referring to Frederick Douglass, an old friend with whom biographers have noted he had a falling out in the 1870s, after Douglass took over the editorship of the *New National Era*. Biographers note that “Douglass was spending more and more time in Washington,” working on the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment and later as a sponsor for the new *National Era* newspaper, but his speaking schedule pulled him away frequently. In the last two weeks of November 1869, Douglass was in the mid-Atlantic, with only a few speaking engagements in Pennsylvania and Ohio. See *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates and Interviews*, vol. 4: 1864–80, ed. John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. xxvii; William S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York: Norton, 1991), p. 270; Charles W. Chesnutt, *Frederick Douglass: A Biography* (Boston: Small, Maynard & Co., 1899), p. xvi.

¹⁰To avoid racial discrimination in New England’s elite high schools, Robert Morris Jr. was sent to France for his education. He would return to attend Harvard Law School and was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1874.

I am married again and have four charming children whose future welfare has brought me here a "Carpet Bagger."¹¹ I shall eventually settle in some southern state, most probably North Carolina.¹²

What has become of Nell[?]¹³ If he is still alive, pray give him my kindest regards, and tell him, I have a lively remembrance of his many kindnesses.

I see and hear things every day that make me open my eyes, matters are so changed the last time I was in Washington, I walked out at night in fear and trembling lest some watchful guardian of the public peace should lick me up, a black man from the north, loose in Washington, in those days, being considered a highly dangerous thing.¹⁴ Now, were I arrested, the chances are that I might fall into the hands of a black policeman[.]¹⁵ "Times change[.]"

Do me in your reply to this a kindness. Inform me if Geo S. Hillard, the lawyer, is still in Boston, and on what side of the political fence he stands, his address and whether I have spelt the name correctly.¹⁶ We used to be very good friends.

¹¹The four children were Frank, Evangeline, Ruth, and Clarissa (or Clarisse). See Gardner, "A Gentleman of Superior Cultivation and Refinement," p. 302.

¹²North Carolina in 1869 might have struck Webb as an optimal choice thanks to its Republican governor William W. Holden, its recent ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, Union League activity, including a push to gain ownership of abandoned lands, and its substantial number of African American state officeholders. By 1871, however, the Ku Klux Klan would be active and influential in the state, and the Democratic Party would resume control. See Eric Foner, *Short History of Reconstruction, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), pp. 126, 128, and Steven Hahn, *A Nation under Our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 124.

¹³Webb refers to William Cooper Nell, who died in 1874. Like Webb and Morris, he was active in the movement to repeal Massachusetts' ban on black military service in the 1850s. See Robert P. Smith, "William Cooper Nell: Crusading Black Abolitionist," *Journal of Negro History* 55 (1970): 182–99, and *William Cooper Nell, Nineteenth-Century African American Abolitionist, Historian, Integrationist: Selected Writings from 1832 to 1874*, ed. Dorothy Porter Wesley and Constance Porter Uzelac (Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2002).

¹⁴Enslaved people were emancipated (and slaveholders compensated) in the District by an act of Congress in April 1862. In 1869 African Americans in Washington were voting, attending independent schools and churches, and mobilizing for social reform. See Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *First Freed: Washington, D.C., in the Emancipation Era* (Washington: Howard University Press, 2000), and Ernest B. Ferguson, *Freedom Rising: Washington in the Civil War* (New York: Knopf, 2004).

¹⁵See W. Marvin Dulaney, *Black Police in the United States* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 13.

¹⁶George S. Hillard was U.S. Attorney General for Massachusetts between 1868 and 1870.

Remember me kindly to Ms. Morris. I may come to Boston during the winter if everything goes on as I wish.

With kind regard

Sincerely yours,

FRANK J. WEBB

P.S. Do you know B. F. Butler well enough to give me a line of introduction to him[?]¹⁷ Gen Howard and some friends (Langston among them) are trying to get me a Congressional clerkship and I am told *he* can help me materially.¹⁸

W.



It is not clear what (if any) action Morris took after he received Webb's letter. Still, by the first week of January 1870, Webb held a position as clerk for the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (the Freedmen's Bureau), the agency formed to provide federal oversight and legal support for Reconstruction throughout the South, and in early 1870, Massachusetts governor William Claflin sent a letter of recommendation on his behalf to the secretary of war, General Belknap.¹⁹ While in Washington, Webb published a handful of novellas and essays in the "Colored American National Journal," the *New Era*. In "An Old Foe with a New Face," he writes as a man who believes he lives in a "new era" of American history in which African Americans "have attained the full statue [*sic*] and dignity of American citizens." And he all but mocks Democrats' attempts to navigate the new political landscape in which "this long-despised coloured man has become a power in the land; that he can materially influence

¹⁷Benjamin F. Butler passed the Massachusetts bar in 1840, just a few years before Morris did. A controversial commander of Union forces at Fort Monroe in Virginia in 1861 and later occupying forces in Louisiana, Butler was one of the first Union officers to implement a policy of refusing to return enslaved people to slaveholders, claiming them as "contraband" of war. He later distinguished himself as a Radical Republican congressman between 1867 and 1879.

¹⁸Oliver O. Howard, abolitionist Civil War general, was then head of the Freedmen's Bureau. John Mercer Langston was a black lawyer, abolitionist, and equal rights activist. Webb likely knew him in his capacity as Educational Inspector of the Freedmen's Bureau and founder of Howard University's Law Department. See William Cheek and Aimee Lee Cheek, *John Mercer Langston and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1829-1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

¹⁹Rosemary Faye Crocket, "The Garies and Their Friends: A Study of Frank J. Webb and His Novel" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1998), p. 32.

the up-building or destruction of parties.”²⁰ In “The Mixed School Question,” he anticipates that Republicans will soon make integrated schooling the law of the land.²¹

Like so many African Americans during the postbellum era, Webb’s prospects rose and fell with the tide of federal involvement in the former Confederacy. By 1871 Freedmen’s Bureau offices were being closed, and clerks and agents, Webb among them, lost their jobs. The next post he was able to secure was a postal clerkship in Galveston, Texas, to which he brought his wife and four children in late 1872. Attempting to distinguish himself in the field of Republican politics, Webb established a newspaper, the *Galveston Republican*. He rode this wave—federal employment, enfranchisement, and political activism—for a few sweet years before the tide, again, began to turn.

By 1877, the few remaining safeguards against the disfranchisement and segregation of African Americans in the South vanished. By 1878, Webb no longer worked for the postal service. Finally, during the 1880s, he found a niche for himself as the principal of the Barnes Institute, a public school for black children, which would evolve into the West District Colored School, part of Galveston’s expanding segregated public school system.²² No one knew better than Webb what W. E. B. Du Bois would write in 1901 concerning the failure of the Reconstruction project: “For this much all men know: despite compromise, struggle, war, and struggle, the Negro is not free.”²³ Webb continued that struggle for community empowerment until his death in 1894.

But that would all come later. In 1869, as he wrote to Robert Morris, Frank J. Webb radiated a yet unspoiled hopefulness about the state of U.S. race relations during Reconstruction. In truth, he had reason to be optimistic. African American men were voting in states where only a few years earlier they had been enslaved. When voter registration was opened to black men in Washington, D.C., in 1867, the number of African American registrants nearly reached that of whites.²⁴ By 1870, Hiram Revels of Mississippi would become the first African American senator in U.S. history. African American

²⁰F. J. Webb, “An Old Foe with a New Face,” *New Era*, 10 February 1870, p. 1.

²¹F. J. Webb, “The Mixed School Question,” *New Era*, 27 January 1870, p. 1.

²²Austin, “Frank Webb,” p. 2796.

²³W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, “The Freedmen’s Bureau,” *Atlantic Monthly*, March 1901, p. 364.

²⁴Clark-Lewis, *First Freed*, p. 89.

Ebenezer Bassett was appointed the U.S. ambassador to Haiti. Just like the droves of white and black reformers who took up the mantle “Carpetbagger” after the war, Webb hoped to profit from opportunities to acquire abandoned lands and perhaps start a career with the federal government. He betrays no suspicion whatsoever that the coming decade would witness the entrenchment of a white supremacist state that threatened to extinguish his highest aspirations. For the moment, he confidently walked the streets of Washington, looking forward to the hospitable home he would build for his family in the postbellum South.

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LONGFELLOW’S SERENITY AND POE’S PREDICTION: AN ANTEBELLUM TURNING POINT

PAUL LEWIS

We grant him high qualities, but deny him *the Future*.

—Poe, “Review of [Longfellow’s] *Hyperion*,” 1839

Who—but hey-day! What’s this? Messieurs Mathews and Poe,
You mustn’t fling mud-balls at Longfellow so. . . .
Deduct all you can that still keeps you at bay,
Why, he’ll live till men weary of Collins and Gray.

—Lowell, *Fable for Critics*, 1848

This essay builds on a paper written for a panel on Longfellow and modernity at the 2011 conference of the American Literature Association.