

1863. Samuel F. B. Morse Advocates for Slavery

Sources: <http://www.yaleslavery.org/WhoYaleHonors/morse.html>;

<http://www.morsehistoricsite.org/history/morse.html>; <http://securehosts.com/fecha/morse.htm>

Samuel Finley Breese Morse was born in Charlestown, Massachusetts in 1791 and died in New York in 1872. He is buried in Greenlawn Cemetery in Brooklyn. During his lifetime, he was a well-known artist, a famous inventor, a professor at New York University, twice a candidate for mayor of New York City, an active opponent of immigration to the United States, and a leading defender of slavery. One of his biographers compared him to Leonardo da Vinci because of Morse's involvement in so many fields.

When Samuel F. B. Morse graduated from Yale University in 1810, he became an artist and lived on a plantation in South Carolina with wealthy slave-owning patrons. He later studied art in England and moved to New York City in 1825. He was a professor of painting and sculptor at New York University from 1832 until 1841 and a founder and the first president of the National Academy of Design.

Samuel F. B. Morse is best known today as the inventor of the telegraph and the Morse code. His first working model was probably completed in 1835 and he applied for a patent in 1837. In 1843, Morse secured money from Congress to construct a telegraph line Baltimore to Washington D.C. It was the first telegraph line in the United States. By telegraph lines from Washington reached Boston. The development of the telegraph made Morse a wealthy man and he was able to purchase an estate for his family near Poughkeepsie, New York.

In 1836 and 1841, Morse ran for mayor of New York City on a "nativist," or anti-immigrant, platform and he was badly defeated both times. His major target were the Irish, whom he opposed as foreigners and Roman Catholics. Samuel F. B. Morse also supported the enslavement of African Americans and argued that it was a positive good that should be extended throughout the country.

A. Samuel F. B. Morse (1863). *An Argument on the Ethical Position of Slavery* (NY: Society for the Diffusion of Political Knowledge, no. 12).

1. "Slavery or the servile relation is proved to be one of the indispensable regulators of the social system, divinely ordained for the discipline of the human race in this world, and that it is in perfect harmony . . . with the great declared object of the Savior's mission to earth" (10).
2. "If the servile relation is an essential and indispensable divinely arranged part of the Social System, is not the attempt to blot it out altogether by force in any community, under the plea that it is a sin, an evil, a wrong, or an outrage to humanity, or indeed in any other place, sacrilegious?" (10).
3. "Are there not in this relation [of master to slave], when faithfully carried out according to Divine directions, some of the most beautiful examples of domestic happiness and contentment that this fallen world knows? Protection and judicious guidance and careful provision on the one part; cheerful obedience, affection and confidence on the other" (13).
4. "Christianity has been most successfully propagated among a barbarous race, when they have been enslaved to a Christian race. Slavery to them has been Salvation, and Freedom, ruin" (16).
5. "When the relation of Master & Slave is left to its natural workings under the regulations divinely established, and unobstructed by outside fanatic busybodyism, the result, on the enslaved and on society at large, is salutary and benevolent. When resisted, as it is by the abolitionism of the day, we have only to look around us to see the horrible fruits, in every frightful, and disorganizing, and bloody shape" (17).

B. Samuel F. B. Morse (1914). *Letters and Journals* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin).

1. “My creed on the subject of slavery is short. Slavery per se is not sin. It is a social condition ordained from the beginning of the world for the wisest purposes, benevolent and disciplinary, by Divine Wisdom. The mere holding of slaves, therefore, is a condition having per se nothing of moral character in it, any more than the being a parent, or employer, or ruler” (2: 331).

2. “Conscience in this matter has moved some Christians quite as strongly to view Abolitionism as a sin of the deepest dye, as it has other Christian minds to view Slavery as a sin . . . Who is to decide in a conflict of consciences? If the Bible is to be the umpire, as I hold it to be, then it is the Abolitionist that is denounced as worthy of excommunication; it is the Abolitionist from whom we are commanded to withdraw ourselves, while not a syllable of reproof do I find in the sacred volume administered to those who maintain, in the spirit of the gospel, the relation of Masters and Slaves” (2: 416).