

# JOHN GOTTLIEB MORRIS (1803-1895): FIRST PRESIDENT OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE HISTORY OF THE GERMANS IN MARYLAND

America went through a profound social, economic, and cultural transformation during the course of the nineteenth century. The demands of nation-building brought to the fore innovators and leaders of every variety. Among these leaders, John Gottlieb Morris of Baltimore played a major role in the arena of cultural transition. Though little known today, the Baltimore pastor and civic leader collaborated intimately in changing the nature of Lutheranism in America, creating several major cultural institutions, including the Society for the History of Germans in Maryland, and materially aiding the rise of professional science.

John G. Morris' long, productive life (1803-1895) and diverse intellectual interests involved him in numerous battles which contributed to the shaping of American cultural identity. From the relationship between geology and biblical revelation to the need for American leadership in American science, he fought for principles that he believed advanced knowledge, culture, and morality.

Among Morris' achievements which had the most long-term significance was his role in founding and leading the Society for the History of Germans in Maryland. Though he began this venture late in life (in 1886 when he was 82 years old), the Society has flourished for 109 years along the lines which Morris and his colleagues laid out. To understand Morris' pioneering efforts in founding the Society, we must first begin with a biographical sketch of this strong-willed and determined man.

## Biographical Sketch<sup>1</sup>

John G. Morris, born in York, Pennsylvania on 14 November 1803, was the last child and third surviving son born to John Samuel Gottlieb Morris and Barbara Myers Morris. Morris' father had come to America as a German immigrant to fight for the Revolution and later settled in York as a successful physician. Morris' mother, Barbara Myers, was a native of Bal-

timore County, Maryland and a life-long Lutheran, as was her husband. Though the elder Morris died when the boy was only five years old, John Gottlieb received an excellent education for his era, in large part because of his father's substantial estate, and because of the great interest his mother and oldest brother, Charles, took in his development.

John Gottlieb's mother and his oldest brother were the dominant influences of his early years and long after. Charles Morris, who served briefly as a Lutheran minister and founded a successful pharmaceutical company in York, was the young John Gottlieb's guardian. Under Charles's direction, John Gottlieb studied at York Academy and attended college, first at Princeton and then graduating from Dickinson in 1823. Intellectually gifted, with a strong aptitude for foreign languages, Morris mastered German, Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and French. He loved books and plays and read voraciously. In addition to his intellectual skills, Morris' potential for success was bolstered by his "companionable" nature, a trait he later noted in his autobiography, *Life Reminiscences of an Old Lutheran Minister?*

In deciding on a career, the twenty-year-old graduate was strongly influenced by his family's Lutheran roots, particularly by his mother's piety and the ardent desire of Charles Morris that he become a minister. But Morris' description in *Life Reminiscences* of his decision to go into the ministry is a far cry from the intensely emotional "conversion" experiences typical of American Protestant evangelicalism in the 1820s:

The Lutheran church, Morris noted, "had less than 300 ministers at that time, and her sphere of activity was constantly enlarging, whilst the ministry was not multiplying in proportion. Providence had cast my lot within her sphere, and I concluded that this was the field for me to work in, and I entered .... The church needed my services. I thought, and I cheerfully offered them. I regarded her need

as equivalent to a call from her, and hence I concluded it was the divine will."<sup>3</sup>

Morris' decision was rational, though undoubtedly sincere, and was marked by emotional restraint and intellectual balance, qualities which became hallmarks of his life and career.

Because the Lutheran church did not have a seminary, Morris' theological training was eclectic and spotty, an experience typical for many clergymen of the period. For two years, he studied in New Market, Virginia with Samuel Simon Schmucker, perhaps the best educated Lutheran clergyman of the day. He next studied briefly with the Moravians in Pennsylvania and then spent seven months at the Presbyterian church's Princeton Seminary. He spent a brief time in the fall of 1826 at the new Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg before he received a call from a recently organized, struggling church in Baltimore, First English Lutheran Church.

Within a year after coming to Baltimore, Morris married Eliza Hay, daughter of a prominent York family. Devoted to his family, the Morrises had ten children, of whom four daughters survived to adulthood. Eliza Hay Morris died in 1875 at the age of sixty-eight.

Referred to as the "Nestor" of progressive, English-speaking Lutheranism in Baltimore, Morris was primarily responsible for the transformation of the church's image in the eyes of Baltimoreans. In his thirty-three years of service at First English (1827-1860), Morris increased the congregation from a few dozen to an average of 260 communicants. He helped found two other English-speaking churches before the Civil War (Second and Third English). In the decades after he left First English, Morris continued active parish work with part-time calls to Third English and to St. Paul's in Lutherville, which he had helped organize in 1856.

During his sixty-nine-year career as a clergyman, John G. Morris was elected president of the Maryland Synod seven times and twice chosen head of the first national Lutheran church body, the General Synod. Morris also served almost fifty years on the governing boards of the

two Lutheran institutions at Gettysburg, the Seminary and Pennsylvania College (today known as Gettysburg College). He remained closely identified with the cause of Lutheran education throughout his career. Morris played a prominent role in the "new measures" controversy and in the bitter struggle over the nature of "American Lutheranism," eventually leading the moderate conservatives in the General Synod to victory over revivalists in the confessional battle.

John G. Morris' civic and intellectual pursuits reflected his multi-faceted talents and interests. An early member of the Maryland Historical Society, he established the Society's library and extensive natural history collection. Morris served as the first librarian of George Peabody's new philanthropic institute in Baltimore and, within six years, he created a 25,000-volume research library which combined the best European and American works.

With a personal library of over 300 volumes, Morris kept apprised of the latest developments in German theology, science and culture. His wide-ranging intellect and curiosity manifested themselves in the hundreds of books, pamphlets and articles, which he wrote on a number of topics. The topics included Luther, the Reformation era, German contributions to western civilization, Maryland history, and that recurrent nineteenth-century debate, science and religion.

Let us turn now to those activities of cultural leadership which culminated in Morris' founding of the Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland.

### **Culture's Builder**

As urban life in America steadily developed and expanded throughout the nineteenth century, one major aspect of this maturation was the establishment and growth of important cultural and educational institutions. Throughout the decades of his active church work, John G. Morris carried out a significant role in local, regional, and national cultural life. As a civic leader, collector, and author, Morris became intimately involved with educational institutions (the Seminary and College at Gettys-

burg), historical societies (the Lutheran Historical Society, Maryland Historical Society, Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland), and research institutions (Peabody Institute, Smithsonian Institution).

John G. Morris' avid interest in natural history, particularly in the entomological study of butterflies, formed much of the basis of his work at the Seminary and College at Gettysburg. Between 1844 and 1848, Morris taught at the College as a part-time zoology instructor. He worked to obtain the scientific apparatus and specimens he needed for his lectures. He wrote to Spencer F. Baird, his friend and, at that time, professor of natural history at Dickinson College, about his efforts and the reason for them. "I arrived here [Gettysburg] last Monday," Morris informed Baird, "and have ever since been laboriously engaged in arranging minerals, shells, and *diversairia* of the cabinet. . . . I lecture one hour each day in zoology and have succeeded thus far in interesting the youngsters very much."<sup>4</sup>

Morris' commitment to awakening student interest in natural science never faltered. He delivered numerous natural history lectures at the College during the 1860s and 1870s, and for over a quarter of a century, he gave the Seminary students a yearly series of lectures on "The Relations between Physical Science and Revealed Religion."<sup>5</sup> Morris' efforts to integrate natural science into the curriculum of the College and the Seminary reflected a national trend, which sought to make this branch of science a basic component in the liberal arts education provided by medium- and small-sized colleges. Morris and other like-minded educators hoped this would eventually stimulate interest in science throughout the nation.

In creating Pennsylvania College's natural history collection, John G. Morris devoted countless hours to acquiring and classifying numerous specimens. Within a year of commencing his efforts, Morris had acquired sixty-five bird specimens, ninety-two reptiles, ninety-seven fish and crustacea, 900 shells and 1100 insects.<sup>6</sup> Working on the collection expanded his knowledge of invertebrate animal anatomy and provided excellent illustrations for his lectures.

Morris' quest to understand the natural world included creating his own sizable collection through gathering, purchasing and exchanging specimens. He collected shells, fish and bird specimens, and many insects, particularly his beloved butterflies (lepidoptera). Morris attributed his stamina and good health to "my frequent ramblings in the fields and woods" in search of specimens.<sup>7</sup> In addition to his own efforts, Morris received substantial assistance from another Lutheran clergyman and scientist, John Bachman of Charleston, South Carolina. When the General Synod met at Charleston in April 1850, Bachman gave Morris all his folio volumes of botanical specimens.<sup>8</sup> By the end of his life, Morris' collection had grown to over 7,000 items — a rich source of scientific knowledge.

Morris also led students from the College and Seminary in forming the Linnaean Association, one of the first college natural history societies in the country. Under Morris' leadership, the Association enjoyed a decade and a half of achievement before the Civil War disrupted its activities.<sup>9</sup> A major accomplishment involved construction of a building on the College's campus devoted to the study of natural history. As Morris noted, the first such building "conceived, designed, erected, and completed through the agency of the students."<sup>10</sup> Morris' other achievements while directing the Association included editing an outstanding journal, *The Literary Record and Journal*, which provided a forum for getting scientific articles before educated segments of the American public; and creating a collection of natural history specimens, that Morris used in teaching and in furthering his own understanding of comparative anatomy.

Morris' election in 1851 to membership in the Maryland Historical Society marked the beginning of a long and fruitful relationship and signified recognition of his position as a civic leader. He held numerous positions and was elected president in 1895. Morris spoke for other men of his class when he expressed his belief that the proper role of an historical society was to "verify doubtful facts, develop and record unwritten events, correct popular er-

rors, authenticate disputed dates . . . delineate the character and deeds of illustrious men."<sup>11</sup>

Morris' principal service at the Maryland Historical Society was to expand and improve the Society's library and natural science collection. For decades, Morris and his colleagues on the library committee worked assiduously to increase the holdings through a merger with the Library Company of Baltimore, purchases, and donations. By 1885, the library had grown to an impressive collection of over 20,000 volumes and pamphlets.<sup>12</sup> A valuable collection open to the 500 members of the society and to interested Baltimoreans in general.

While working to build the library, Morris led the effort to create a natural history collection. He directed the Society's efforts to document the state's flora and fauna by acquiring animal, plant, and mineral specimens. Morris' work aided scientists in studying the state's geologic history and exploring the interaction between native plants and animals.

From the 1850's onward, John G. Morris became involved with yet another emerging cultural institution, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. In addition to periodic lectures, Morris began publishing his major scientific works through the Smithsonian. His most valuable scientific publications, *The Catalogue of the Described Lepidoptera of North America* and a subsequent *Synopsis* describing lepidoptera active during the daytime and twilight hours, reflected Morris' abiding fascination with butterflies and his keen sense of the need for American scientists to study their country's natural history. These two works, published by the Smithsonian Institution in 1860 and 1862 respectively, show Morris' scholarly abilities at their best. Morris supplemented information, gleaned from studying and classifying his own specimens and from research in European and American reference works, with data his fellow entomologists shared with him. From these sources, he pulled together all the information then known about species of the North American lepidoptera.

As Morris divided the order of lepidoptera into its various families, genera and species, he followed commonly accepted scientific classifi-

cation schemes in organizing his material, carefully listed the authority for each item under review, and noted any reference work which described the item. The *Catalogue* and the *Synopsis* listed several thousand species previously described in a myriad of sources, and proved tremendously valuable reference tools."

Morris' peers in the scientific community acclaimed his compilations for their scholarly accuracy and practical usefulness. A fellow pioneer entomologist, William Henry Edwards, believed that "this [Morris' works] gave a start to American collectors and the work of describing new species went on brisker. " Herbert Osborn, professor of natural history and president of the Entomological Society of America, recognized the *Catalogue* as the only work of its era available to American students. Osborn expressed his debt to Morris when he wrote, "For many years it was the only work by which I could attempt to identify species after the few that were figured or described in popular works were covered."- Augustus R. Crote, a later expert on the lepidoptera, credited Morris' work with first acquainting him with the principles of taxonomy." These two works constituted John G. Morris' greatest scientific achievement.

Over the many active years of his career, John G. Morris received numerous marks of respect for his work as a scientist. Chosen as a founding member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1848, he served for many years as the head of the Association's Entomology Section. Numerous scientific societies in American and Europe honored him with election as a member. The most prestigious included the American Philosophical Society, the Society of Natural History in Nuremberg, Germany, the Society of Northern Antiquarians in Stockholm, and the Royal Historical Society of London.

During the tumultuous Civil War period, John G. Morris remained a staunch Union supporter. During the difficult years of the 1860's, he embarked on another venture, which he hoped would strengthen cultural bonds in the city and state. In July 1860, he left his pastorate at First English and became the first librarian of the newly established Peabody Institute.

An avid supporter of George Peabody's dream of creating a major cultural center in Baltimore, Morris labored for years to build a premier research collection. When the library formally opened to the public in 1866, it had over 25,000 books and thousands of pamphlets. Through his diligence and skill, Morris ensured the success of a major component of George Peabody's temple of culture. The library, operating in accordance with Morris' directives on cataloguing and preserving books, was on its way to becoming a major research facility.

In the decade following the Civil War, Morris devoted much of his energy to two historical societies which meant a great deal to him. As an ardent Lutheran, who hoped to see the badly divided church eventually reunite, John G. Morris put great store in the power of historical memory to serve as a unifying force. A founding member of the Lutheran Historical Society in 1843, he served as president from 1874 until his death in 1895.

With few resources at hand, Morris successfully encouraged the many synods and national church bodies to send copies of minutes, reports, and other church papers to Gettysburg for safekeeping by the Lutheran Historical Society. He scoured newspapers and journals looking for publications by Lutheran ministers suitable for the Society's collection. By 1895, the collection had grown to over 1,998 bound volumes (books, sermons, addresses, ecclesiastical document,) and 1,000 unbound pamphlets, manuscripts, and letter<sup>17</sup> With the assistance of his nephew, Seminary professor Charles A. Hay, Morris had created the best collection of Lutheran documentary materials in America.

### **Founding of the Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland**

In the last decade of his life, the indefatigable John G. Morris' most notable venture reflected another of his life-long concerns. From his beginnings in a German-American family through his long involvement with the German language issue in the Lutheran church, Morris always cared about German acceptance into

American society. He tried to foster this by showing German contributions to history in general and American society in particular.

For example, Morris read a paper before the Maryland Historical Society on the contributions of the Nuremberg astronomer, Martin Behaim, in the Age of Discovery. Morris' most original historical piece was on "The Young and German Luther," which appeared in the *Lutheran Quarterly*. From the traditional Protestant perspective, Morris saw Luther's work as an act of Providence, a "predestinated" fact, conceived and controlled by God. At the same time, he showed an understanding of historical causation and human psychology reflective of new trends in historical scholarship by tracing the political, intellectual, and religious dissatisfaction widespread in Europe on the eve of the Reformation. Morris understood the detestation sixteenth-century Germans felt for Italian and papal control of the church. As historians do today, he analyzed the patronizing attitude of the Italians toward the Germans and the resentment that resulted.<sup>18</sup>

In the article, Morris expressed an interesting psychological perspective: "Most great events in Church, state, literature, art and science, etc., have been conceived and advanced by young men." His point was that, if Luther had been twenty years older, he might have recanted or at least not continued the fight; breaking away from the heavy emotional investment of Luther's increasingly prominent role in the Augustinian Order might have caused him too much stress.<sup>19</sup>

To further the cause of integrating Germans into American society, Morris did what had become second nature to him, he began a new cultural venture. On the evening of January 5, 1886, Morris helped create a vehicle to further this cause. Meeting in the rooms of the Maryland Historical Society, Morris discussed with other prominent Baltimore German-Americans, such as Louis P. Hennighausen, Edward F. Leyh, and Charles F. Raddak, the feasibility of establishing a new historical society. After some debate, the men decided to draft a constitution for an organization "to collect and preserve material for the history... of the Ger-

mans in the growth and development of the American Nation, especially in Maryland."<sup>20</sup>

A month later on February 16, twenty-three men gathered, approved the draft constitution, and elected John G. Morris as the first president of the Society for the History of Germans in Maryland. Despite his devotion to his German heritage, Morris' primary identification as an American came through when he successfully argued for recording the minutes of Society meetings in English.<sup>21</sup> Within a year, membership grew to seventy-two. Until his death, the old scholar presided at the Society's nine monthly meetings each year and "discharged his duties faithfully."<sup>22</sup>

President Morris stimulated interest in the Society through a stream of papers he read at the monthly meetings. In one noteworthy paper, on the Egyptologist Gustavus Seyffarth Morris explained to members that the Society also had a duty to "exhibit the career of German individuals who have distinguished themselves in any department of human effort." With obvious pride, Morris observed that he had entertained the eminent scientist in his home.<sup>23</sup>

As he did in all his scholarly ventures, Morris prepared a compilation—this one a list of all printed descriptions of America published by German settlers and visitors prepared from 1673 onward. Morris also donated books on German-American topics to build up the Society's fledgling collection. In the years remaining to him, Morris continued to use the Society to build bridges with other Americans. In the many papers he presented, Morris returned over and over to the theme of German cultural and patriotic contributions to the nation. He made his points in biographical essays on the Muhlenbergs, Conrad Weiser, and Baltimore pastor John Ulhorn, among others. He explored for his listeners the treatment of black slaves by Germans, the German experience in Baltimore, along with translations of numerous articles and essays.<sup>24</sup>

### **Evaluation**

Active to within three weeks of his death on October 10, 1895, John G. Morris was memo-

rialized for his "intense patriotism" and "love of historical detail."<sup>25</sup> Whether in secular or religious arenas, he fought to raise the level of public appreciation for American science, American history, and the American experience in general. Essentially a man of the antebellum era, Morris believed that gentlemen of education and means had a responsibility to combat social disorder and elevate the character of public discourse.

John G. Morris, like others of his class, sought to counteract the economic, social, and political pressures tearing city, state, and nation apart. Cultural institutions were the principle vehicles in the struggle to achieve national identity and cohesiveness. What John G. Morris built as a cultural leader endures. An English-speaking Lutheranism rooted in America is a reality. The collections of the Maryland Historical Society and the Peabody Institute represent major steps in making knowledge and culture more accessible to society at large. The Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland continues to recognize and honor German cultural contributions to the nation.

John G. Morris shone in that tier of talented and ambitious men who created the research collections and built the scientific and historical societies. His life work contributed significantly to the cultural journey of nineteenth-century America and in no small measure molded the era that followed. It was an enduring legacy left by the first president of the Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland.

— Michael J. Kurtz  
The National Archives

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Michael J. Kurtz, "Being a Renaissance Man in Nineteenth Century Baltimore: John Gottlieb Morris," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, Vol. 89 (Summer 1994): 156-158; Michael J. Kurtz, "John G. Morris: The Scientist Informed by Faith," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin*, Vol. 71 (Fall 1991): 51-52.

<sup>2</sup>John G. Morris, *Life Reminiscences of an Old Lutheran Minister* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1896), 26, 28.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, *Life Reminiscences*, 47.

<sup>4</sup>John G. Morris to Spencer F. Baird, 18 July 1844, Papers of John G. Morris, Lutheran Theological Seminary, Gettysburg, PA.

<sup>5</sup>Abdel Ross Wentz, *History of Gettysburg Theological Seminary, 1826-1926* (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication House, 1926), 245.

<sup>6</sup>John G. Morris, "Cabinet of the Linnaean Association," *The Literary Record and Journal of the Linnaean Association of Pennsylvania College*, 1 (November 1844): 3-52.

<sup>7</sup>Morris, *Life Reminiscences*, 166-167.

<sup>8</sup>Raymond M. Host, "John Bachman, Man of Faith, Man of Science," *Lutheran Quarterly* 2 (Summer 1988): 218.

<sup>9</sup>Charles H. Glatfelter, *A Salutary Influence: Gettysburg College, 1832-1985* (Gettysburg: Gettysburg College, 1987), pp. 103-111.

<sup>10</sup>John G. Morris, *An Address Delivered Before the Linnaean Association of Pennsylvania College, September 14, 1847* (Gettysburg: H. C. Neinstedt, 1847), 3.

<sup>11</sup>*Annual Reports of the Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland, 1894-1896* (Baltimore: C. W. Schneidereith and Sons, 1896), 4.

<sup>12</sup>*Annual Report of the Officers and Committees of the Maryland Historical Society for 1884-1885* (Baltimore: John Murphy and Company, 1885), 8-10.

<sup>13</sup>John G. Morris, *Catalogue of the Described Lepidoptera of North America* (Washington, B.C., Smithsonian Institution, 1860); John G. Morris, *Synopsis of the Described Lepidoptera of North America, Part I: Diurnal and Crepuscular Lepidoptera* (Washington, DC, Smithsonian Institution, 1862).

<sup>14</sup>"Entomological Reminiscences of William H. Edwards," *Journal of the New York Entomological Society*, LIX (June 1951): 135-136.

<sup>15</sup>Herbert Osborn, *Fragments of Entomological History, Including Some Personal Recollections of Men and Events* (Columbus, OH: The Author, 1937), 167-168.

<sup>16</sup>Arnold Mallis, *American Entomologists* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971), 304-308.

<sup>17</sup>*Proceedings of the General Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States*, 5-13 June 1895, 203.

<sup>18</sup>John G. Morris, "The Young and German Luther," *Lutheran Quarterly* (January 1882), 7-12.

<sup>19</sup>Morris, "The Young and German Luther."

<sup>20</sup>*First Annual Report of the Secretary of the Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland* (Baltimore: Isaac Friedenwald, Printer, 1887), 15.

<sup>21</sup>*Report of the Secretary*, 16-17.

<sup>22</sup>*The Second Annual Report of the Secretary of the Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland* (Baltimore: Theo. Kroh and Sons, Printers, 1888), 9.

<sup>23</sup>*The Third Annual Report of the Secretary of the Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland* (Baltimore: Theo. Kroh and Sons, Printers, 1889), 17-20.

<sup>24</sup>*The Fifth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland* (Baltimore: C. W. Schneidereith and Sons, 1891, 1893, 1896), 4, 3-4, 11-19.

<sup>25</sup>Maryland Historical Society, *Minutes of Society Meetings*, 11 November 1895.

