

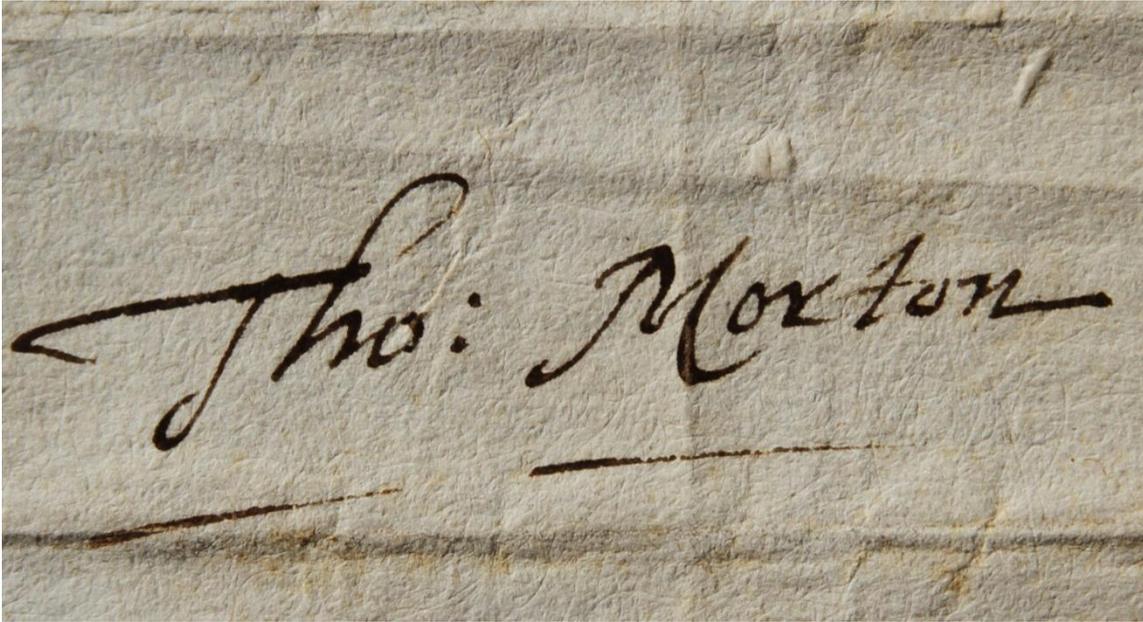
Morton, Thomas (c. 1580 -1647, fl. 1622 – 1647) adventurer, colonist, historian, **Rare pair of Autograph Letters to his sister, Elizabeth Morton, later Elizabeth Appeley, London and Breda, circa 1620? - 1622**

Folio, two letters, two pages, written on seventeenth century laid paper, old folds, otherwise in very good, clean and legible condition. One letter is dated January 1622, sent to Mrs. Elizabeth Appeley, the other letter is undated, sent to Elizabeth Morton, written apparently before her marriage.

Pair of rare letters likely written by Thomas Morton colonist of “Merry Mount” fame, and the nemesis of Puritan authority in all forms. These letters were written two years before Morton arrived in New England, and discuss family matters, they may be Morton’s only surviving letters.

The letters were clearly written by a “gentleman” (which Morton was) to a “gentle lady.” The letters were sealed with a signet ring, being small in size, like that made by Morton on his will. The wax, however, is cracked making it very difficult to make out the impression. (Morton’s seal on his will bears the charge of a goat’s head). The signatures bear strong similarities to the only known signature of Morton, which appears on his will written over twenty years later, before leaving for America for the third and last time. Morton’s will dated August 23, 1643, was likely written by a legal scribe, but is signed by Morton and the witnesses, William Woodward and Thomas Fryer. Since it was a legal document, it is signed: “Thomas Morton”, these letters, informal, familial, to his sister are signed “Tho: Morton”. Little

is known about Morton, or his family, at the time he wrote his will, he mentions neither wife, nor child, but does leave property to a cousin and a niece, a Sarah Bruce.

A close-up photograph of a handwritten signature in cursive script on aged, textured paper. The signature reads "Tho: Morton" and is written in dark ink. The paper shows signs of wear, including some staining and a horizontal crease.

Thomas Morton, colonist and writer, was probably born in the West Country of England, likely in Devon, sometime between 1580 and 1595, his birthplace and parents are unknown. He was certainly one of the most entertaining characters in early New England history and was a constant thorn in the side of all Puritan authority. His identification on the title page of his *New English Canaan* (1637) – as “of Cliffords Inne gent” – shows that he had studied law. In his book he refers to himself as the son of a soldier and identifies himself as “having bin bred in so genious a way” that he “had the common use” of hunting hawks. Almost nothing is known of his parentage or rearing, and very little before he came to New England. Morton was a traveler, for, in addition to his trips to New England in the 1620’s and 1640s, he reports that he had been so near the equator that “I had the sun for my zenith.” On 6 November 1621 he was married to Alice Miller, a widow. He helped represent her in legal battles against her son George Miller in the spring of 1622. Other evidence shows that he was, according to the social standards of his day, a gentleman and a person of means.

It was long surmised that Morton first came to America in 1622 with Thomas Weston’s contingent of colonists. Thomas Weston (c.1575 – c. 1644), merchant, adventurer and colonist, was largely responsible for financing the first voyage of the *Mayflower* in 1620. Weston in the course of his business had become acquainted with the group of separatists living in Leyden, Holland and agreed to finance their travel to America. After disagreements with the separatists he financed another expedition in 1622 which arrived at Plymouth in June of that year. However, it has been shown that Morton, in the spring of 1622, was involved in a series of legal actions with his wife against her son, including appearances in the Court of Star Chamber. Morton’s presence at these actions would have been required and therefore he could not have been aboard a vessel bound for New England. This misconception stems from what must have been typographical errors in Morton’s book *New English Canann*. Historians accepting this 1622 date as fact and concluded that Weston’s vessel, the *Charity*, was the only vessel which came to New England in June 1622, and that Morton was on it. However, there is no factual evidence to support Morton’s 1622 visit to New England.<sup>1</sup>

Morton's first voyage to New England was in fact undertaken in 1624. In the spring of 1624, Morton traveled to America aboard the *Unity*, under a Captain Wollaston, as a partner in Wollaston's settlement at Passonagesit. Later the site of Quincy, Massachusetts. His arrival was recorded in a record of ships arriving in New England in the spring of 1624, and again in a later 1628 entry by William Bradford himself, in his chronicle of Plymouth, noting Morton's arrival some 3 or 4 years before. The colonists first named it Mount Wollaston for the ship captain. It was located about thirty miles from the Plymouth colony and not far from a group headed by Captain Robert Gorges at Wessagusset. Over the next four years he explored New England, turning his keen eye on the land itself as well as its Native American and European inhabitants. Early in 1626 Wollaston left for Virginia with some servants. By the summer Morton was in command of the settlement and the six or seven men that remained.

1. Connors, Donald Francis, Thomas Morton of Merry Mount: His First Arrival in New England *American Literature*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (May, 1939), pp. 160-166, Published by: Duke University Press <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2920641>

Morton renamed the colony Ma-re Mount, (perhaps signifying a hill by the sea), or Merrymount. Here Morton established a system of trading by which the Native Americans were given spirits and firearms in exchange for highly valued furs. On May 1, 1627, Morton's men raised what would be a famous maypole to celebrate the site's new name. They performed "Revels and merriment after the old English custom." The Native Americans of the area also took part. Morton later recorded the events, including the text of a poem prepared for the occasion. A less sympathetic account appears in William Bradford's (1590-1657) *Of Plymouth Plantation*, in which Bradford explains that the Plymouth colonists were so distressed by Morton's supplying the Indians with firearms that in 1627 they rallied other colonists and collectively reprimanded the Ma-re Mounter's. When their protest was ignored, Morton was forcibly taken to Plymouth the following year and then shipped back to England to be prosecuted for his offensive behavior.

The Puritan's viewed Morton as an irresponsible libertine, attempting to create a fanciful version of some classical pagan paradise, and wrapping himself in a disguise of orthodox "Anglicanism. His settlement was seen as composed of "brawling drunkards and unscrupulous traders." Bernard Bailyn, in *The Barbarous Years*, describes Morton as "one of the strangest, most flamboyant, and most belligerently impious people ever to wander into the coastal scene," a "nature lover, pleasure seeker, and a Rabelaisian celebrant of secular rites." Morton was the diametrical opposite of the Puritans, who after 1627, began a protracted campaign to exile him from America. Morton's English background was "vague", as Bailyn phrased it, and his reputation "was said to be rather shady." This was certainly the opinion of the Plymouth leaders of this man who sold arms to the Native Americans and encouraged liquor fueled carousing and cohabitation between the natives and the colonists. Moston was viewed as a threat to both the souls and the fortunes of the Plymouth colonists.

The allegations against Morton were unsubstantial, and in 1629 Morton returned to Plymouth, to William Bradford's extreme irritation. He returned to Plymouth Colony as scribe to its agent Isaac Allerton and then after serving Allerton for some weeks, he returned to Ma-re Mount, where he resumed his profitable beaver trade. Late in 1629 John Endecott, leader of the advance party of the Massachusetts Bay Company, and John Skelton drew up articles for all the planters to sign. The main provision was that they agree to follow the rule of God's word as law in both political and ecclesiastical matters. Morton refused to sign unless a passage was added 'so as nothing be done contrary or repugnant to the Lawes of the Kingdom of England'. Morton also refused to agree that the trade in beaver skins was to be a company monopoly. For a time, he continued to trade separately from the rest of the colony. But once the substantial body of Massachusetts Bay colonists under Governor John

Winthrop (1588-1649) arrived in 1630, Morton was brought before the first session of magistrates and Governor John Winthrop ordered that his goods be confiscated, his house burned, and that he be imprisoned, put in the stocks, and sent as a prisoner to England. His crimes, ironically, were 'his many injuries offered to the Indians, and other misdemeanors.'

Morton remained in England for twelve years, working for Sir Ferdinando Gorges to challenge the authority of the Massachusetts Bay Company, an effort that continued until civil war in England spoiled their plans.

Morton then settled on alternative plan: the writing and publishing of his *New English Canaan*, written between 1633 and 1634, the work tells Morton's side of his conflict with the pilgrims and puritans with humor, indignation, and a profound admiration of New England and its native inhabitants. He hoped that his detailed reports on the Puritans' radical departure from the established practices of the Church of England would result in the revocation of the colony's charter. Agents of the Bay Company apparently were able to make it difficult for Morgan to have his book published. The first printing was seized before publication, and only two copies survive. The book was ultimately printed in 1637 in Amsterdam, where agents of the Massachusetts Bay Company could not interfere.

*New English Canaan* contains three sections. The first focuses on the Native Americans, 'their manners, and Customes, with their tractable nature and love towards the English'. The second describes the land, flora, and fauna. The last describes the colonists, 'what remarkable Accidents have happened there ... what Tenents they hould, together with the practice of their Church.' Morton aimed to encourage English settlement, to teach settlers to learn from the Indians, and to convince those in power in England of the ineptitude of the pilgrims and puritans. These three objectives came together in an elaborate metaphor in which he depicted the land as a woman whose fertility needed to be fulfilled by men. In the poem *Rise Oedipus* he told the story of the land whose careful and virile husband, the Indians, had died and left her bereft. Her new lover, the pilgrims, was not skilled enough to fulfill her fertility. His poem was attached to the maypole erected at Ma-re Mount and was part of the challenge he issued to the pilgrims, claiming that he, and not they, had the skill and industry necessary to be a successful husband to the land. Although he celebrated the plague that had decimated the Indians, thereby freeing the land for settlement, he also saw them as the land's former husband and respected their skills. He viewed the pilgrims and puritans as unfit to settle New England because they were not wise enough to copy the Indians and therefore were unable to make full use of the land's bounty.

In summer 1643 Morton returned to New England, his last. He returned to Plymouth and remained through the winter. Though he was so poor that he had no beer to drink, he was still trying to interest people in settlements. His 1643 will bequeathed large tracts of New England land, from Rhode Island to Maine, to his cousin and niece. He may have had these tenuously held tracts in mind for the settlements he proposed. On leaving Plymouth, he traveled to Maine, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island, perhaps checking on the land he claimed. In September 1644 he appeared before the court of assistants in Massachusetts, accused of complaining to the English privy council and writing a book against the colonists. He was kept in prison for a year, supposedly awaiting additional evidence from England. No evidence came, and he was fined £100, which he could not pay, and freed. John Winthrop wrote that 'he was a charge to the country, for he had nothing, and we thought not fit to inflict corporal punishment upon him, being old and crazy'. They gave him opportunity to go out of the jurisdiction, as he did soon after, and he went to Acomenticus, and living there "poor and despised, he died within two years after.' Nevertheless, his legal skills were welcomed in Acomenticus (present day York, Maine), and he practiced there for a year or two, He died in 1646 or 1647, asserting, 'his hard usage in prison.' He was buried in Clark's Lane by the Agamenticus River.

Morton's story provides an important counterpoint to the better-known puritan version of the settlement of New England. Depictions of Morton in literature and history have ranged from celebration to condemnation. In literature his treatment has reflected changing views on religion, sexuality, and colonization. Among historians he has been seen as a defender of the church by nineteenth-century Anglicans, as a misfit and villain by those sympathetic to the puritans, and as a useful corrective to puritan and pilgrim narratives by historians of the late twentieth century, particularly those interested in Native Americans. The latter group has also recognized that Morton's conflict with the pilgrims and puritans disguised deep similarities, since both had the ultimate goal of settling the land.

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