Robert Morris and John Jay on Education: Two Letters

In October of 1781, Robert Morris decided to send his two eldest boys abroad for the completion of their schooling. "The Interruption given to the Progress of Learning, the Distresses which the several Seminaries in this Country, have undergone, the various lucrative Employments, to which the Masters, and Tutors, have been invited, in the Progress of the present War; [he wrote to Benjamin Franklin] are Circumstances, which operate powerfully to the Disadvantage, of the present race of American Youth, and which have induced me, to take the Determination, of Educating my two Eldest Sons, Robert and Thomas, in Europe."[1]

Robert Morris Jr., was then not quite twelve and Thomas still four months short of eleven.[2] They were entrusted to the care of Matthew Ridley, an intimate business associate of their father and member of the Baltimore firm of Ridley and Pringle, who was about to set out for Europe and had offered his services as guardian. Morris secured passage for them aboard a departing French frigate from the Comte de Grasse's squadron then harbored in Chesapeake Bay,[3] and the party of three sailed on November first.[4]

[3] Morris enlisted the good offices of the Chevalier de Chastellux and the Comte de Rochambeau in obtaining this favor from de Grasse, to whom he had previously written on the matter. He stressed, in these letters, the reciprocal advantages to both countries from international friendships formed in youth. Draft of letter from Robert Morris to Chevalier de Chastellux, Philadelphia, Oct. 18, 1781; draft of letter from Robert Morris to Comte de Rochambeau, Philadelphia, Oct. 18, 1781, Papers of Robert Morris, Ac. 1805, Library of Congress; hereafter cited as Morris Papers.
Ridley was to be guided in his arrangements by a long letter from Morris, describing in detail the kind of training he wished his sons to have. It is a revealing exposition of the educational views of the great financier, and appears to have been unavailable to Ellis P. Oberholtzer, for it is not cited in his *Robert Morris: Patriot and Financier*. In the following draft of this letter, the insertions enclosed in brackets (mine) are in the unmistakable handwriting of Gouverneur Morris, who served not only as Assistant Superintendent of Finance, but as assistant in many private matters as well.

*Robert Morris to Matthew Ridley*

Philad * October 14, 1781

Dear Sir

Having long meditated and finally concluded, on, sending my Two Eldest Sons to Europe for their Education, you must naturally suppose that I esteem your offer to take charge of them on the passage and untill placed under proper Tutors & Guardians at the Schools where they are to be Educated, in the most Friendly light. I fear you will bring upon yourself thereby a scene of Trouble which I should never have thought of involving you in, but, as I have a proper Value for your Friendship and feel myself justified in accepting this offer, by the reciprocal disposition to render you agreeable Services, I shall only observe that the Confidence I place will prove my good opinion of your temper Tenderness & attachment, for be assured I woud not commit them to any man (as I do to you) if I did not believe he would treat them with that good natured attention, which Friendship would dictate & their infant years require. Under these Ideas my Sons Robert & Thomas are to depart with you from this City for the Chesapeake in order to take passage onboard one of His Most Christa Majestys Ships of War for France where I hope you may soon & safely arrive, but shoud it happen otherwise and you shoud be Compelled to Visit any of the British Territories in your way, I enclose herein a list of some of my former Correspondants at different places who I flatter myself will on such an Occasion if necessary advance so much Money as will enable you to maintain my

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*5 Ellis P. Oberholtzer, Robert Morris: Patriot and Financier* (New York, 1903).

Sons until you can get them to France, or in case of long detention to place them at School & but discarding this Idea of Capture I will suppose you safely landed in France and that you proceed immediately to Paris.

You will then take my Boys to pay their respects to Doctor Franklin and deliver him the enclosed letter,\(^7\) which being left open for your perusal I need not repeat the Contents. I hope & believe the Doctor will assist you to determine on the best Schools for Educating them and assist you in placing them there on the most advantageous & agreeable terms, indeed I have not a doubt but he will shew them every Mark of regard which their situation and years require—I also deliver you another letter directed to Messrs Le Couteulx & C° Bankers in Paris. I hold these Gentlemen in great estimation and Consider them as of the greatest solidity, and as the Boys are to be supplied with Money through their channell I would choose they should pay their Compliments to them. I make no doubt but Messrs Le Couteulx & C° will give every facility in their power to the measures necessary to be taken during their residence in Europe, but if you find they are not so disposed you will drop me a line, because if the part allotted to them is not agreeable I would by no means desire them to act longer than I can fix on a Banker who would have no objection to it—You will remember that it was my first design to place these Boys at Geneva where (as Books & Men inform us) there are most of learning and it is owing entirely to an account of some late disturbances at that place, that I have been led to think of any other, but doubts being once started, fancy pursues new objects, and therefore it is that I request of Doctor Franklin & yourself to Consult whether that or any other place is best Calculated for the Education of my Sons. I rest the determination on him & you.\(^8\)

My Sons have for some time past been reading Latin, but as they have already been under different Tutors, their progress has been Retarded, and so it will by every change; however I want them to be well grounded in the learned languages. Their writing has been much Neglected at the grammar Schools, and I could wish a proper portion


\(^8\) Lined out in the original copy: "but if you have opportunity of Consulting Mr. Deane or Doctor Bancroft or any other persons of Experience you may benefit of their observations & information."
of time were allotted to their improvement in this Art, under a Master capable of forming their hands in the English manner of writing which is most used in this Country. I would also choose that they should be supplied from time to time with English Books suited to their age & genius, so that they may be tempted to read and Retain the knowledge of their Native Language. They will of necessity learn French practically, they must also be taught [it] grammatically. [I wish them also to learn such] other of the living languages, [as] they [may] discover a facility in acquiring or are led to by inclination, taste or accident. I esteem the Mathematics a most essential part of Education and think they cannot be too well grounded therein. Indeed it is necessary that Youth should be instructed in every Science, in order that they may discover to their Tutors or what is of infinitely more consequence, to themselves the bent of their own Genius & be able to indulge its pursuits. Attention should be paid to the Books they read, such as excite an avidity to read are perhaps the properest to begin with and when once the habit of reading is acquired, they may be directed to Authors best calculated to instruct their understanding & form their Taste. These young Gentlemen are expected to pass their days in America under Republican Governments, where, if their Education, Genius & abilities, support other Circumstances, they may probably be of some Political Consequence, the oldest of them, I am inclined to place in a Mercantile character but in my humble opinion a liberal & well grounded Education is as necessary to this as to any other & particularly in a Country where that very Character has a tendency to lead a Man into the Senate & a liberal Education has its use in every Station of Life and I am very anxious that my Boys shoud learn every thing that can possibly be useful to them. The second Master Thomas I intend for the Study & practice of the Law, provided he discovers as he grows up, Talents to promise Success his reading [therefore] may be directed [with great Propriety to the Law of Nature and Nations a Science which I would wish his elder Brother to be by no Means unacquainted with.]

From what I have said you will perceive my Strong desire to have these Boys well grounded in every branch of learning. The Polite

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9 Lined out in the original copy: “History must ever be agreeable, the Law of Nations, Civil Law The.”
accomplishments must not be neglected, they must learn to dance, Fence & Ride Gracefully.⁠¹⁰ But above all things, altho mentioned the last, it is first in my Mind, let them be placed under the [Superintendence] and direction of some person [who] will take care of their Morals. They are very good & tractable Boys, already well grounded in good principles as far as their tender years can have received Impressions. I hope their Guardian will attend to their behavior & Conduct always teaching them the advantages of honesty & the sweets of Integrity, the gratifications resulting from a Conduct inspired & guided on every occasion by a pointed & high sense of Honour and the internal peace & satisfaction that must ever result from a rigid adherence to the principles of Justice, softened only in such instances as a generous Temper a beneficent Soul or a Humane disposition cannot resist.

I think it of infinitely more Consequence that they shoud be good Men, than learned or great Men and therefore I shall feel myself under infinite obligations to those who form their Virtues, at the same time that they are requiring knowledge and on this Account I prefer Geneva where as I am told, the Manners of the People are favourable to the practice of Virtue, and being a republic, I should suppose the Stile of living may partake of that plainness & simplicity best adapted to such Governments—The more plain & Simple the food of Youth the better, their cloaths & stile of living should accord entirely to that of the general run of Boys at the same Schools, and their allowance of Pocket Money as well. other expenses must be regulated by the same Rule. Nothing limits a generous Spirit more than finding itself bounded within Narrower limits than its associates and nothing is more pernicious than to breed Youth up in profuseness & extravagance I shall be very thankful if you will arrange this matter of Expense on the proper footing empowering the person under whose immediate care you place the Boys to draw on Mons' Le Couteulx & C° for the Money as wanted and administer it to the relief of their Necessities in proper time & proportion—informing said Bankers & myself of all that you do in this respect and you will be kind enough to inform me also of what may probably be the Annual Expence I hope the Gent⁠¹ⁿ [who] undertakes the care of the

⁠¹⁰ Lined out in the original copy: “Should they have Talents or Taste for Music I have no objection to their pursuing it as Gentlemen.”
Boys will write me Monthly or quarterly an account of their behaviour & [illegible] [together with] such information as he may think necessary & also make them write that he may enclose their letters, which may be forwarded to the care of our Minister at the Court of France, to Messrs Jon Nesbitt & Co at L'orient, Messrs Patrick [illegible] Nephew & Co at [illegible] Messrs Wallace Johnson & Muir at Nantes Messrs Harrison & Co at Cadiz or to yourself to be forwarded to me.

The Expenses you will have occasion to pay for these Boys from their arrival in France until you fix them at School Messrs Le Couteulx & Co will answer your drafts to the amt and for those you pay in America please to draw on me. I deliver you herewith forty Guineas—to be applied to the use of the Boys when you shall find it most necessary perhaps this had best be kept on hand for fear of Capture, it may be useful in that case, & if you arrive safe it will apply well in France—Whatever I have omitted to write on this Occasion your Friendly attention will supply, and with the most ardent Wishes for your Safe arrival & Successfull accomplishment of your own plans & Views

I remain with affection
& Esteem D Sir
Your Sincere Friend
RM

Mathew Ridley Esq

A personal misunderstanding, apparently due to unfounded suspicions on Ridley’s part, created strained relations between him and Franklin, but the boys were well provided for. During most of 1782 they were enrolled in a school near Passy and dined every Sunday with Franklin, from whom Morris received brief, but encouraging reports.

They were also frequently entertained by the John Jays in Paris. The following letter about them from Jay to Morris contains a spirited defense of American education as compared with European.

11 Diary of Benjamin Franklin, Jan. 1–3, 1782, Papers of Benjamin Franklin, Library of Congress.
My dear Sir

Wherever and however occupied, I remember my Friends, and always find my own Satisfaction promoted, when I have Reason to think that I am conducing to their’s—This has led me to make you Sons the Subject of this Letter—It is an interesting one to you, & therefore not indifferent to me—

On my arrival here I found them plac’d in a Pension at Passey—My Nephew & Daughter were ill with a hooping-Cough & lest your sons sh’d catch it, we denied ourselves the pleasure of having them with us, till after that obstacle had ceased. I have frequently seen them at Doct’ Franklin’s as well as at my own House—they had promised to dine with us every Wednesday but Mr. Ridley prolong’d it to every other Wednesday. They are fine Boys & appear to possess a full share of natural Talents. I am told that they have made a Progress in French proportionate to the Time they have been learning it—Of this I am not an adequate Judge myself, & therefore must depend on the Judgment of others—The Pension at which they are has been so far well enough—but I think with Mr. Ridley that a better is to be wish’d for, & to be sought—He is at present making the necessary Inquiries, & I have every Reason to believe that the trust you have reposed in him will be conscientiously & faithfully executed.

Mr. Ridley finds it difficult to decide on the Expediency of carrying them to Geneva, & from what I have heard, I think he has Reasons to entertain Doubts on that Head; as I have no materials to judge from, but the Report of others, & those perhaps not altogether well founded, it is difficult for me to form a decided opinion on the Subject—I can only say that I have heard more against, than for it

My opinion may perhaps seem singular & the more so as it cannot properly be explain’d in the Compass of a letter—but I think the Youth of every free civilized Country should, if possible, be educated in it; & not permitted to travel out of it, ’till age has made them so cool & firm, as to retain their National & moral Impressions—Connections founded at School & College have much influence, and are to be watched even at that Period—if judiciously formed, they will often endure and be advantageous thro’ Life—American Youth may

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possibly form proper & perhaps useful Friendships in European Seminaries, but I think not so probably as among their Fellow Citizens, with whom they are to grow up, whom it will be useful for them to know, and be early known to, & with whom they are to be engaged in the business of active Life; and under the Eye and Direction of Parents, whose Advice Authority & Example are frequently of more worth, than the Lessons of hireling Professors, particularly on the Subjects of Religion Morality Virtue & Prudence—

I fear that the Ideas which my Countrymen in general conceive of Europe are in many Respects rather too high—If we sh'd ever meet again you shall know my sentiments very fully on this Head—

But your Sons are here & what is to be done? Mr Ridley is about doing what I think with him is the best thing that can at present be don Viz. to put them in one of the best Pensions that can be found, & to give them the Advantage of such extra Tutors as may be requisite—

Perhaps further Information may place Geneva in a more favorable Light—You shall have frequent Letters from me on this Subject, and while I remain here, you may be assured of my constant Attention to those promising Boys—

Be pleased to present our Compl's & best Wishes to Mr Morris

I am dear Sir with sincere Esteem & Regard

Yr aff'e Friend & Serv'

John Jay

The Hon’ble Rob’ Morris Esq’

Whatever the force of Jay’s observations, they did not apply to Robert Morris’ own sons. Robert, Jr., and Thomas apparently profited from their European education, the last part of which included two years at the University of Leipzig. Upon their return home in the spring of 1788, they both read law with Richard Harrison of New York City and eventually became successful lawyers. Morris’ three younger sons, William, Charles, and Henry, were educated at the University of Pennsylvania. William and Charles developed “wild and idle habits,” and little seems to be known of the career of Henry.14

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14 Oberholtzer, 264–270; Boogher, 37 (note), 38 (note).