



Smithsonian
National Museum of American History
Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the James Beall Morrison Correspondence

NMAH.AC.0442

Craig A. Orr

1992

Archives Center, National Museum of American History
P.O. Box 37012
Suite 1100, MRC 601
Washington, D.C. 20013-7012
archivescenter@si.edu
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/archives>

Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
Arrangement.....	3
Scope and Contents.....	2
Biographical / Historical.....	2
Names and Subjects	3
Container Listing	4

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	James Beall Morrison Correspondence
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0442
Date:	1869-1873
Extent:	10 Items
Creator:	Morrison, James Beall, ?-1917 Reynolds, Roger Reynolds, Allene Medical Sciences, Division of, NMAH, SI. Garrett, H. S. Tomes, Charles S. Sercombe, Edwin
Language:	English
Summary:	Ten letters from London dentists to Morrison, a dentist and inventor, discussing his improved dental engine and improved dental chair. Eight letters are from Edwin Sercombe, with one from H. S. Garrett and another from Charles S. Tomes.
Digital Content:	Image(s): James Beall Morrison Correspondence: 1869-1873

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Collection donated by Roger and Allene Reynolds, 1991, November 21.

Provenance

These letters were among items in a suitcase found by a construction worker during the demolition of a bank building in Kansas City, Missouri. The suitcase, unclaimed following a fire in the bank, had evidently belonged to one of Dr. Morrison's daughters; other items in the suitcase were identified as having belonged to Dr. Morrison. The Morrison items were donated to the Division of Medical History, November 1991, then transferred to the Archives Center, January 1992.

Processing Information

Collection processed by Craig Orr, 1992

Preferred Citation

James Beall Morrison Correspondence, 1869-1873, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Restrictions

Collection is open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

Collection items available for reproduction, but the Archives Center makes no guarantees concerning copyright restrictions. Other intellectual property rights may apply. Archives Center cost-recovery and use fees may apply when requesting reproductions.

Biographical / Historical

Dr. James Beall Morrison began his study of dentistry in Steubenville, Ohio, in 1848, by apprenticing in the office of two established dentists. After a year or so, he formed a partnership with one of them and they set up a travelling practice among the towns in the area. By 1857, Morrison had gone to St. Louis, Missouri, where he practiced dentistry with his brother, William, until 1861 or 1862. He then went to practice in Paris for about a year, which he followed with six years of practice in London. He then returned to Missouri, where he practiced dentistry and worked at improving dental equipment until his death in December 1917.

Morrison had developed an aptitude for the mechanical side of dentistry early on, particularly during his apprenticeship in Steubenville. An example of his denture work, exhibited before the Ohio State Board of Agriculture in 1852, had been awarded a first prize. His first major contribution to dentistry came in 1871, when he developed and patented the first practical dental engine. Morrison's "bracket engine" consisted of a moveable arm and handpiece, both of which could be operated by either foot power or other (belt driven) energy source. This was the pioneer of power driven dental tools. Later, in 1887, Morrison patented an improved dental operating chair which provided a wide range of movement.

Scope and Contents

This collection consists of ten letters, arranged chronologically, received by Dr. Morrison between 1869 and 1873. All are from dentists in London and all but two are from Dr. Edwin Sercombe, Morrison's good friend and leading advocate on his behalf in England. Sercombe's letters are the most interesting. He writes about Morrison's dental engine and its warm reception in London: "All who have it are delighted with it and I hope before long every man of any claim to consideration must have it" (February 11, 1873). Although he suggests minor improvements in some of its features, Sercombe was pleased with how well it worked. Without prior approval, but on Morrison's behalf, he even entered the engine he was using in his own practice into an International Exhibition held in London in the summer of 1873.

Sercombe also describes alterations he made to his own dental chair and writes that he was eagerly awaiting Morrison's new and improved chair; he repeatedly requests Morrison to send him one, without delay. These letters indicate that Morrison was actively working on his dental chair long before it was patented in 1887. In addition, Sercombe writes about his own practice and about dentists whom both he and Morrison knew. Among the latter was Dr. Thomas Evans, the American dentist who rescued the

French Empress from Paris during the Franco Prussian War of 1870. Sercombe evidently did not like Dr. Evans, referring to him as "your friend" in one letter and criticizing his dental work in another!

Arrangement

Arranged chronologically.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Dental technology -- History
- Dentistry
- Dentistry -- History
- Dentists
- Inventions -- 19th century
- Inventors -- 19th century

Names:

- Medical Sciences, Division of, NMAH, SI.

Container Listing

	Sercombe, Edwin (41 Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, London), 1869-12-23
Box 1	Sercombe, Edwin (41 Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, London), 1871-02-01
Box 1	Sercombe, Edwin (41 Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, London), 1871-03-21
Box 1	Garrett, H. S. (42 Finsbury Square), 1872-10-10
Box 1	Sercombe, Edwin (41 Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, London), 1872-12-05 Image(s)
Box 1	Sercombe, Edwin (41 Brook Street, Grosvenor Square, London), 1873-02-11
Box 1	Sercombe, Edwin (59 Gloucester Gardens, Hyde Park), 1873-02-24
Box 1	Sercombe, Edwin (59 Gloucester Gardens, Hyde Park), 1873-05-18
Box 1	Tomes, Charles S. (Upwood Gorse, Caterham), undated