

## Searching for Morrison, Finding Morison



*Samuel Eliot Morison (center) with his colleagues Walter Pettitt (left) and Stuart Montgomery (right) at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 (Photo courtesy of Cameron Beck)*

*Estonia Thanks* – the Estonian Government's official list of everyone who has won state awards – includes a curious entry that reads: “Morrison, reporter on the Estonian question at the Paris Peace Conference.” This short entry is all the more curious as this “Morrison” received one of Estonia's highest honors: the Cross of Liberty. Morrison is listed as one of the eight U.S. diplomats who earned the highest award from the Estonian Government for their contributions during the Estonian War of Independence (1918-1920) or for their help with the development of the new Estonia state. Thirty-five U.S. Army officers also received the Cross of Liberty for their military services.

Wondering who this mysterious Morrison might be, we set off in search of a first name and some biographical information. And just in the same way that Estonia played a key role in the early careers of other notable Americans such as George F. Kennan, Charles E. Bohlen, Loy W. Henderson, and Virginia Hall, we discovered that the “reporter on the Estonian question at the Paris Peace Conference” was no random Morrison. In fact, he was not a Morrison at all but a Morison (with just one r) and his first and middle names were Samuel Eliot. This Samuel Eliot

Morison was the U.S. Government's first advocate for Estonian independence, successfully arguing for food aid and other forms of humanitarian assistance to the nascent Estonian republic starting in February 1919.

### *Origins of an Advocate*

Samuel Eliot Morison was born in Boston, Massachusetts on July 9, 1887. He grew up in New England and attended Harvard University, from which he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1908. Before he went on to earn his doctorate at Harvard in 1912, Morison studied for a year at the *École Libre des Sciences Politiques* in Paris, France. While studying in graduate school, he married a fellow Bostonian named Miss Elizabeth (Bessie) S. Greene in 1910. After a few years of teaching history at the University of California in Berkeley, Morison returned to Harvard in 1915 as a lecturer in history.

After the U.S. entered the First World War in April 1917, Morison enlisted in the U.S. Army but was never sent overseas as he was still in training to become a sergeant when the war ended. Before he even joined the army, Morison contributed to U.S. war efforts by preparing reports for *The Inquiry*, a group of well-known scholars assembled by one of President Woodrow Wilson's advisers. Colonel Edward House brought together this group for the State Department in order to research those topics on which decisions would have to be made at the successful conclusion of the Great War in Europe. Morison's outstanding reports on the situations in Finland and Albania for *The Inquiry* would eventually earn him a position with the U.S. delegation at the Paris Peace Conference.

After the Armistice was signed on November 11, 1918, Morison was released from his U.S. Army base at Camp Devens and returned home in order to continue gathering information for the upcoming peace conference. On November 29, Morison formally asked if his services might be needed by the U.S. peace mission preparing to go to Paris. On December 9, the recently created American Commission to Negotiate Peace informed him that unfortunately they had already selected all the staff that they would need. As a result, Morison made preparations to return to his teaching job at Harvard.

The spring 1919 semester had just begun when Morison received a call from his wife Bessie on January 14 with the news that he had just been appointed to the American Commission. He quickly made plans to take another leave of absence from Harvard and found fellow professors willing to take over his two history classes. To further complicate matters, Morison also needed to obtain an official discharge from the U.S. Army in addition to a U.S. passport and a French visa – all in a matter of days. In his annotated diary Morison wrote, “It was considered a great joke at army headquarters that a 'Harvard Professor' couldn't get out of the army in time to help make peace, but it looked pretty desperate for me.” Fortunately, Morison was able to complete all the necessary paperwork with relative ease. He arrived in France on February 7, 1919 – about three weeks after the Paris Peace Conference had officially started.

## *The Paris Peace Conference*

In Paris, Samuel Eliot Morison was assigned to the Russian Section of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace. Robert H. Lord, a professor at Harvard, was his new boss. In addition to its clerical staff, the Russian Section included two U.S. Army military intelligence officers – Captain Walter W. Pettitt and Second Lieutenant Adolph A. Berle (a future Assistant Secretary of State and U.S. Ambassador to Brazil) as well as a U.S. Army historian named Sergeant Joseph Fuller (an assistant at Harvard). Another U.S. Army officer named Stuart Montgomery (a Harvard graduate) also served on the staff. Morison's new job was to become the master of all issues related to Finland and the Baltic region. In addition to dealing with reports sent in from the field by men such as Lieutenant Colonel Warwick Greene (a Harvard alumnus) and Captain August A. Krantz of the U.S. Army as well as Lieutenant Commander John A. Gade of the U.S. Navy (yet another Harvard alumnus), Morison was charged with writing reports and recommendations on the future of Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania for the Commission. He was also assigned to keep in constant touch with the delegations of these four countries who were attending the Paris peace talks.

As early as February 18, Morison met with the representatives of “Esthonia” (as it was known at the time): Kaarel Robert Pusta, Jaan Poska, and Ants Piip. On the evening of February 20, they shared their first of many meals together. Morison would become a close ally of these three men and a vocal supporter of Estonia's emerging independence. In his 1941 comments on his 1919 diary, Morison described Piip as “a swarthy, excitable little man.” Piip went on to become the first Estonian Ambassador to the United Kingdom and then the United States in addition to serving as Estonia's State Elder, Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and a five-time Minister of Foreign Affairs. Poska, whom Morison thought of as “a university professor rather bewildered,” was the head of the delegation as he had already served as Estonia's first Minister of Foreign Affairs. But it was Pusta who was Morison's favorite. Morison would refer to Pusta as “my best friend among the foreign delegates in Paris.” Pusta, a “young idealist, eager to do the right thing” would become the first Estonian Ambassador to France upon its recognition of Estonia. Pusta would later go on to serve twice as Estonia's Minister of Foreign Affairs – once in 1920 and then again in 1924-1925 – when his friend Morison would be awarded the Cross of Liberty.

From his very first meeting with the Estonian delegation, Morison was moved by the strong case that these three men made on behalf of Estonia. In his regular reports to the Peace Commission, Morison recommended sending humanitarian relief to Estonia and lobbied for Estonian independence. Morison wrote a report to future U.S. President Herbert Hoover (who was serving at that time as the Director of the American Relief Administration) about recognizing Estonia and on granting food aid to Estonia. When he learned that Estonia had been added to Hoover's ARA list, Morison dubbed this his “first diplomatic victory.” But, Morison's willingness to help Estonia did not stop there. In a later entry he wrote, “Pusta came in hungry looking as usual and I ran around starting wheels moving to get some salt fish to Esthonia out of Norway.”

Morison began his work at the Commission full of hope, believing along with many others that President Wilson had the Peace Conference “in the hollow of his hand.” However, he soon realized that each country at the Peace Conference – and particularly those in the Council of Five (the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy, and Japan) – had their own divergent interests and agendas. One of the major issues faced by the Council of Five was the situation in Russia – in particular the ongoing civil war between the Reds and Whites – which no one could agree how to handle. The Russian Revolution led by Vladimir Lenin and his Bolsheviks meant that no one knew exactly who controlled Russia.

While Morison never once saw “anything good” about the new Soviet system, he believed that the Bolsheviks would eventually establish control over Russia. As a result, he thought it would be best to negotiate with them and try to free the Baltic states in the process. Because the delegates at the Peace Conference could never agree on how to deal with Russia, any decision on the final status of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania was put on hold. In his annotated diary Morison lamented, “I could never get the Conference or our government to do anything for the border states because everyone hoped to wake up some day and learn Russia had gone 'democratic' again, when she would reproach us for helping dismember her.” But his lobbying for formal recognition of Finnish independence eventually bore fruit. On May 6, Morison drafted U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing's statement recognizing Finland's independence.

As the conference progressed, Morison – just as much of an idealist as his Estonian friend Pusta – grew increasingly frustrated with the whole process. His reports advocating Baltic independence never seemed to go anywhere. Morison considered resigning more than once, especially after seeing the draft text of the Treaty of Versailles which seemed to compromise President Wilson's principles and his own Wilsonian idealism. Nonetheless, Morison decided to stay on and was appointed the U.S. representative to the Paris peace talk's Baltic Commission which met for the first time on May 15. Along with the four fellow “hard-boiled diplomats” of the Russian Section, Morison continued to make the case for Estonian independence. Morison wrote a memo to President Wilson about the Baltic region and made an appeal about Estonia to U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing. As a result, Secretary Lansing was able to work a compromise with British Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to extend humanitarian assistance to all non-Bolshevik areas including the Baltics – another diplomatic victory for Morison.

While Morison succeeded in obtaining food aid and other humanitarian assistance for Estonia, the fundamental issue of Allied recognition of Estonia's independence continued to go unresolved. Ultimately, Morison decided to resign from the American Commission because it adopted a policy that was “fundamentally opposed to my conception of what is practical toward Russia as a whole, and what is just toward the Baltic states with which I have been especially charged.” In his letter of resignation letter of June 15, 1919, Morison stated: “Under these conditions I cannot honestly or with self-respect remain attached to the American Commission to Negotiate Peace...” Two days later, Morison's resignation was accepted by the Commission and his work at the Conference came to an end. He was the second American to resign, following in the footsteps of William C. Bullitt who would go on to become the first U.S.

Ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1933.

Upon his return to the United States, Morison received many letters of appreciation from Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian groups. The Finnish government made him a Commander of the Order of the White Rose. Back in the United States, Morison continued lobbying for Baltic independence – taking his cause public by writing letters and articles for publication in such places as the *Boston Globe*, *New Europe*, *The Companion*, and *Transcript*. In one letter published in the *New York Times* on December 2, 1919, Morison ended with the words that official U.S. support for Baltic independence “would be an immense stimulus to the Baltic peoples in the last stages of their struggle against Bolshevism and German imperialism, and fortify their morale against the difficult days of reconstruction ahead.” Looking beyond the unresolved political issues of the day, Morison also raised awareness about the humanitarian crisis taking place in the Baltic states. He publicly appealed for donations for children in Finland and the Baltics, arguing that “their sturdy peasant democracies will afford the surest barrier between Russia and Prussia.” The donations he helped collect were turned over to the American Relief Administration European Children's Fund for distribution in Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Finland.

Morison went back to teaching American history at Harvard, occasionally speaking on Russia and the Baltics. During his time at the Paris Peace Conference, Morison experienced what he described as the “brightest hope” and the “blackest despair” on that issue he held closest to his heart: Baltic independence. Long after these ups and downs were behind him, Morison would fondly remember the Estonian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference made up of the “suave Pusta, quizzical Poska and garrulous Piip.” Thanks to their eloquent arguments on Estonia's behalf, Morison became the first American to believe in the idea of an independent Estonia although he never once set foot on Estonian soil. As it turns out, Morison was simply ahead of his time. Three years later, the U.S. Government formally recognized Estonia's independence on July 28, 1922.

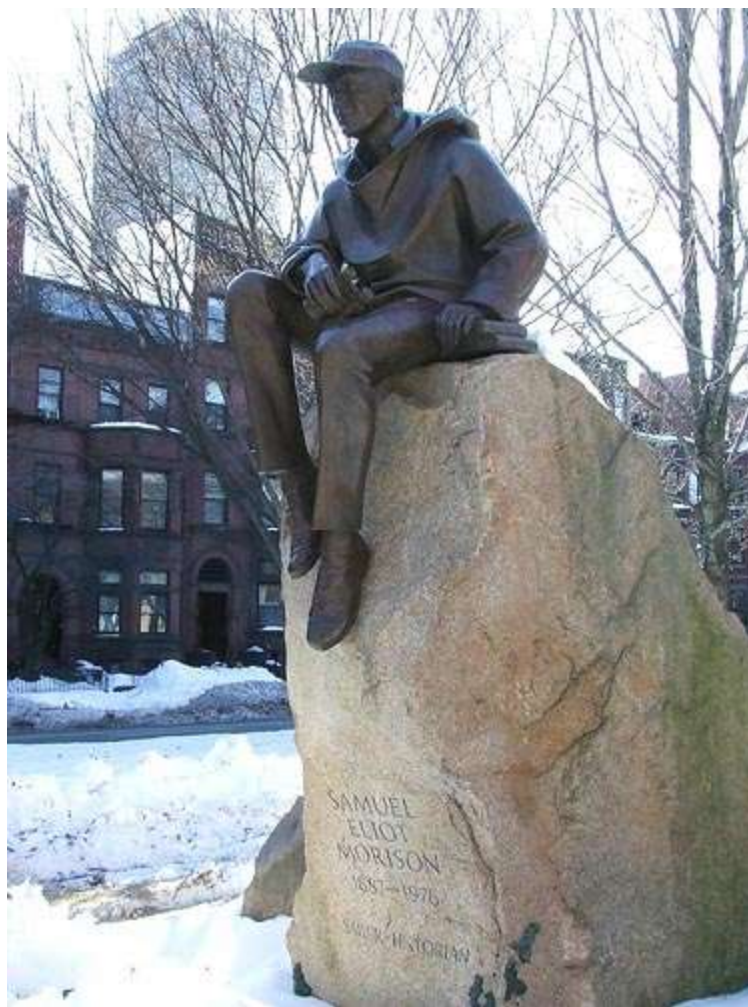
### *A Historian Who Made History*

While Morison would have a significant impact on the successful development of the new Republic of Estonia at the end of the First World War, it would not be until the Second World War that he would leave a lasting mark on the United States. From 1922 to 1925, Morison taught at Oxford as the Harmsworth Professor of American History before becoming a full professor at Harvard in 1925. In 1941, he became the Jonathan Trumbull Professor of American History at Harvard. A few months after the U.S. entered the Second World War in December 1941, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt appointed Morison as the official historian of the U.S. Navy. In this new role, the newly commissioned Lieutenant Commander in the U.S. Navy Reserves would write the definitive fifteen volume *History of the U.S. Naval Operations in World War II*, condensed into the popular and accessible single-volume *The Two Ocean War* (1963). Passionate about his calling, Morison once wrote: "American historians, in their eagerness to present facts and their laudable concern to tell the truth, have neglected the literary aspects of their craft. They have forgotten that there is an art of writing history" (see his

1946 *History as a Literary Art: An Appeal to Young Historians*).

For his eloquent work documenting American naval history, Morison was eventually promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral in the U.S. Navy Reserve. During the course of his long and distinguished career as a writer and as a historian, Morison also earned the Presidential Medal of Freedom (the highest civilian award given by the U.S. President), two Pulitzer Prizes (for his biographies of Christopher Columbus and John Paul Jones), two Bancroft Prizes (for his original works on U.S. history), as well as numerous other honors.

Morison eventually retired from Harvard in 1955, but continued to do research and write for the next twenty years. On May 15, 1976, he suffered a stroke and died at the age of 88. But even after his death, Morison continued to garner accolades. The U.S. Navy named a frigate in his honor in 1980. The FFG-13 *U.S.S. Samuel Eliot Morison* sailed until 2002 when it was decommissioned. And in 1982, Morison's hometown of Boston dedicated a statue to its famous son on Commonwealth Avenue Mall between Exeter and Fairfield streets. Next time you are in Boston, you might want to drop by and say "hello."



(Photo courtesy of Paul Cohen - [www.storyofboston.com](http://www.storyofboston.com))