

## Elisha Ely Morgan, Saybrook's Most Famous Sea Captain and close friend of Charles Dickens

(By Lamar LeMonte, OSHS September, 2022)

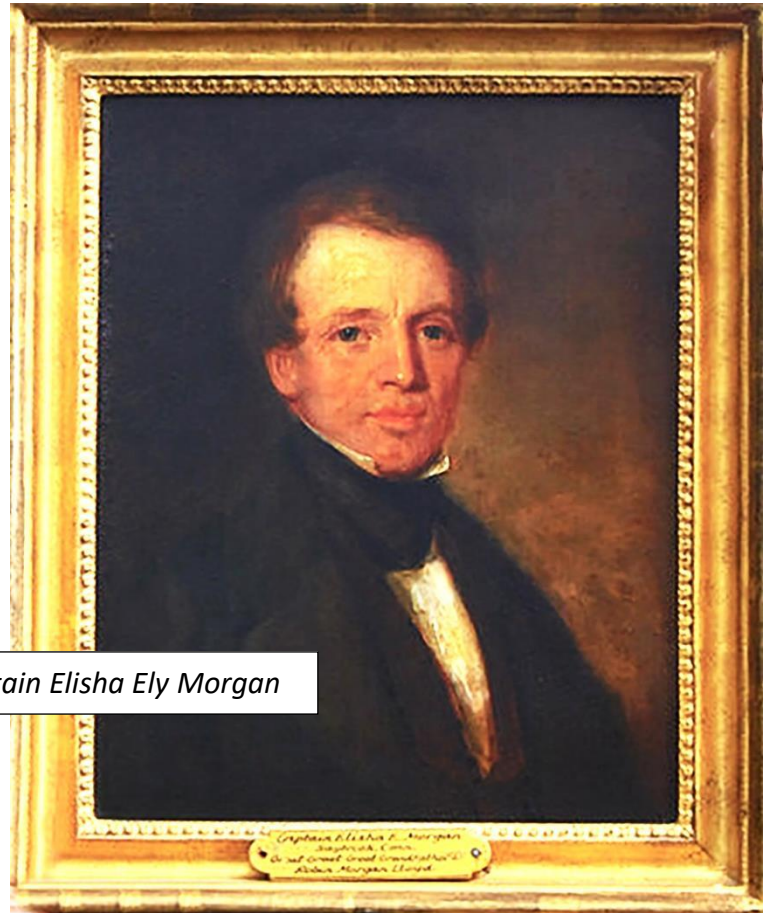
Elisha Ely Morgan lived in this house on the corner of Main Street and Old Boston Post Road, across the street from what is now Old Saybrook's fire station. He spent a considerable amount of his working career in London in the mid-1800s where he met with and regularly entertained luminaries such as reigning Queen Victoria, marine artists Clarkson Stanfield and Charles Robert Leslie, sculptor Sir Edwin Landseer, famous for his carved lions at the base of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, novelist William M. Thackeray, former King of Spain Joseph-Napoleon Bonaparte, the older brother of Emperor Napoleon, and the English novelist Charles Dickens, who became Morgan's close friend. Dickens visited Morgan here at his home while on one of his famous American reading tours.



*The house was originally built around 1800 for the son of Gen. William Hart, wealthy Richard William Hart. When Richard died in 1837 Elisha Morgan bought the home in 1843. After Morgan died in 1864 it was later purchased by H. C. Chapman and converted into Ye Olde Saybrooke Inn. It was demolished in 1950.*



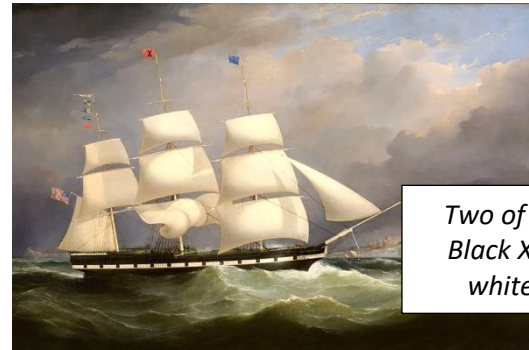
Elisha Ely Morgan was born in either 1795 or 1805 in Lyme, Connecticut near Hamburg Cove. According to his tombstone in Ely Cemetery in Lyme, he died in 1864. He was a successful and very prosperous ship captain and later became head of the Black X Line which sailed packet ships between New York and London.



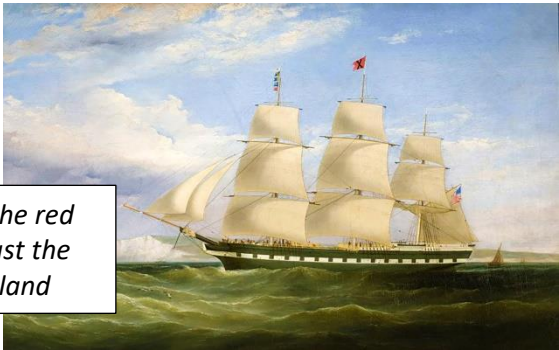
*Captain Elisha Ely Morgan*



Morgan had started as a Black X Line cabin boy in 1822, became first mate in 1829 and captain in 1831. He made his last transatlantic crossing in 1851. He gave up seafaring to become a director of the Black X Line, and he eventually acquired sole ownership and operated the line under the name of E.E. Morgan & Sons with his oldest son, William Dare Morgan (1838-1887). By 1855 his personal fortune was estimated to be \$8-million in today's money which was a considerable amount of money for a retired sea captain living on Main Street in Old Saybrook. He raised four children, William Dare Morgan (1838-1887), Ruth Morgan (1841-1883), Mary Frances Morgan (1844-1903) and Charles Leslie Morgan (1847-1895). Mary Frances and William Dare are both buried in the town's Cypress Cemetery.



The Black X Line sailed from 1824 to 1868.



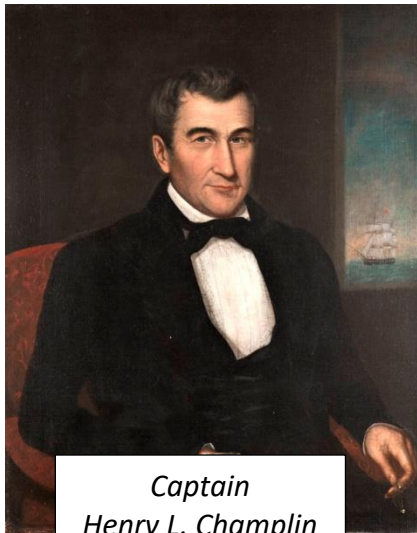
*Two of the 12 ships flying the red Black X pennant, sailing past the white cliffs of Dover, England*

One of his local contemporaries was fellow Black X Line Captain Robert Harper Griswold (1806-1882). Griswold became acquainted with novelist Herman Melville, author of Moby Dick. But unlike Morgan's acquaintance with Dickens, Melville did not make Griswold famous. Griswold was also not as prosperous as Morgan. When Griswold died his only major asset was his home in Old Lyme. His daughter Florence Griswold had to eventually convert it into a boarding house

and take in traveling artists to maintain the house and pay the bills. Today it is an art museum.



*Captain Robert H. Griswold  
(Image courtesy  
Florence Griswold Museum)*



*Captain  
Henry L. Champlin*

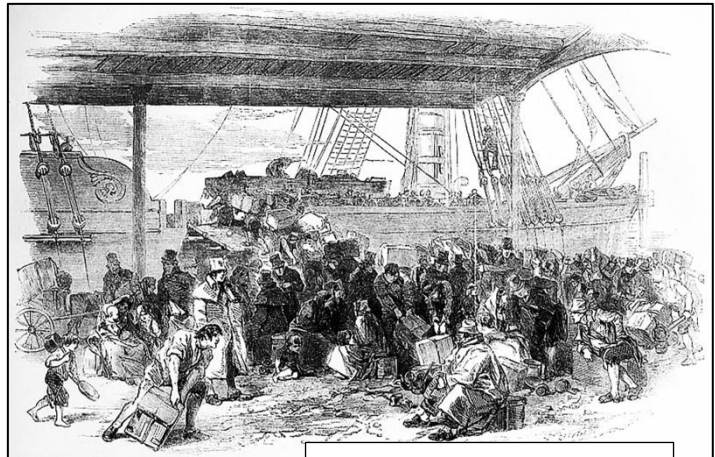
Another Black X Line contemporary was the very prosperous Captain Henry Lay Champlin (1786-1859). His stately home on Champlin Square in Essex still stands. Later he was among the co-founders and also the first president of the Essex Savings Bank. All three local Black X Line ship captains undoubtedly knew each other, living within 4 miles of each other.

### **Packet Ships**

Packet ships were stout, hearty sailing ships of the early 1800s which launched a novel business concept; they departed from port on a fixed, regular, published timetable. One left New York the same time as one left Liverpool or London, fully loaded or not. Previously, trans-Atlantic passengers would arrive at the wharf and wait, sometimes weeks, until the ship was fully laden with cargo and ready to sail for maximum profit. Regular sailing schedules were unheard of until the packets.

European immigration increased steadily during the 1800s and the packet ships took advantage of this early and fast-growing phenomenon. The average trip of a packet ship took 35-40 days to cross from New York to England. The shortest recorded took 25 days, which was an anomaly. These ships were not the sleek, faster clipper ships which came slightly later. Those narrow clippers carried relatively little freight. As a result, they were used only for high value cargo, such as China silk, spices, and tea and were famous for transporting settlers around Cape Horn to the west as part of the California Gold Rush starting in 1848.

In contrast to the clippers, the packet ships were wider, with blunt bows, large holds and limited space for only about 20 to 30 well-to-do, luxury passengers. All other passengers sailed as “steerage” class. If passengers didn’t fill the steerage holds, the same space held cargo. These three-masted, wooden sailing vessels were about 150 to 200 feet long, perhaps 35 feet wide, and could carry 300 to 400 passengers, sometimes more. But there were two very distinct classes of passengers.



*Depiction of steerage passengers loading their belongings onto a packet*

The largest class was steerage and it was generally crowded, dark and damp, with limited ventilation and sanitation. Rats, insects and disease were common problems. These passengers slept, ate, and socialized in the same spaces, separate from the luxury passengers. They brought their own bedding. Although food was provided, passengers had to cook it themselves. Complaints about overcrowding, poor food, abuse, and disease on immigrant ships led the United States and countries in Europe to enact new laws in the 1840s and 1850s.

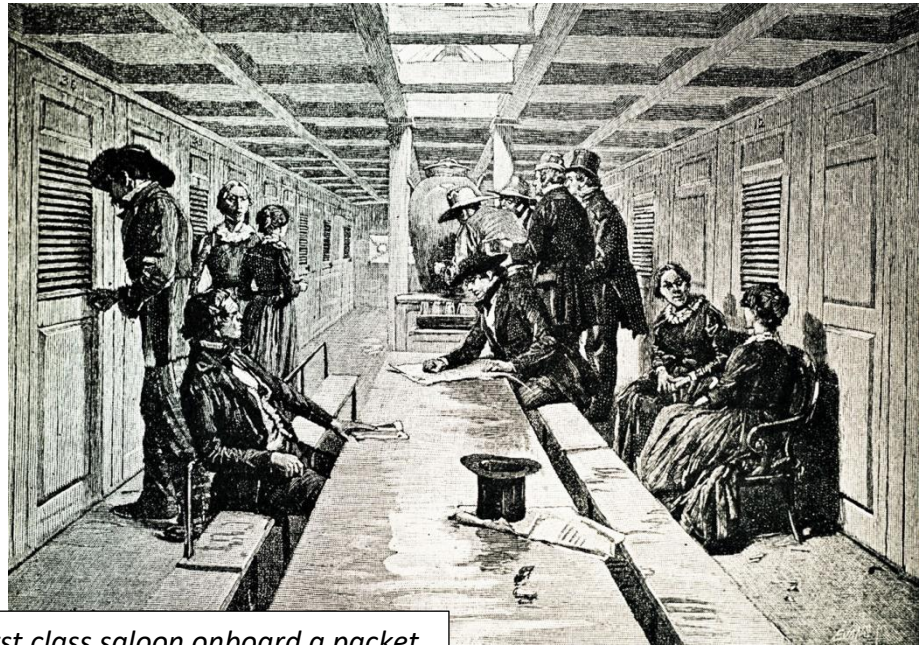


*Depictions of dining in steerage onboard packets*



The 1855 U.S. Passenger Act required ship owners to provide a certain amount of space, food and water. For example, each passenger was given rations including sixty gallons of water, 3 pounds of biscuits, a pint of vinegar and ten pounds of pork. Often added to this was a small supply of oatmeal, flour, rice, sugar, molasses or tea. Steerage passengers were obliged to cook meal themselves in a small, below-deck cook shop, weather and seas permitting.

In dramatic contrast to the steerage passengers were the luxury or first-class cabins for the 20 or 30 wealthy customers. For these passengers, the reliable sailing-schedules of the packets were the only way to cross; for them the packets were the luxury liners of their day.



*Depiction of a typical first class saloon onboard a packet*

Their portion of the ship was lavishly arranged with ventilated staterooms which opened directly onto a saloon, a common area for eating and socializing. Meals were cooked for them. There was fine wine and usually ducks, hens, and a cow onboard to provide meat, fresh eggs, and milk. Whale-oil lanterns and silver service supplemented the often luxurious dining experience. On most ships, the captain dined with these first class passengers. That is where these captains met and often formed social ties with these wealthy, often powerful and influential passengers. That is not surprising since they would



*Depiction of a first-class packet dining saloon*

spend a month or more in very close quarters, with nothing else to do but eat, drink, and converse. There were some games to play as entertainment but mostly there were daily exchanges about current events, politics, arts and letters, and certainly the pending American Civil War and its implications.

On one of Herman Melville's voyages on a Black X Line ship in 1849, he described the first class stateroom afforded him by Captain Robert Griswold: *To my great delight, the promise that the Captain had given me at an early day, he now made good and I find myself in the undivided occupancy of a large state-room. It is as big almost as my own room at home; it has a spacious birth, a large wash-stand, and sofa. I am the only person on board who is thus honored with a room to himself.*



Typical  
captain  
quarters  
aboard a  
packet

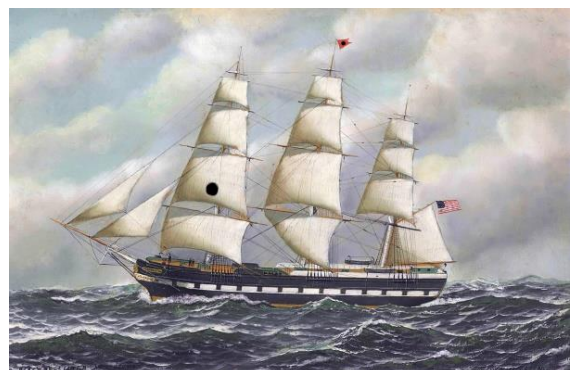
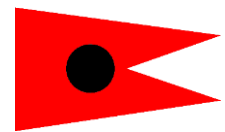


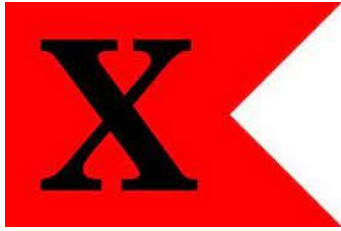
Typical of many first class passengers, Melville got to know Captain Griswold and described him in his diary: *The Captain is a very intelligent & gentlemanly man, converses well & understands himself. I never was more deceived in a person than I was in him.* Their social relationship continued after the ship docked in London. Melville described a lavish meal and an “exceedingly diverting” pub visit: *Had a noble dinner of turtle soup, pheasant with glorious wine. At 10 o'clock, left with the Captain & the rest of the company for the 'Judge & Jury' Bow Street. Exceedingly diverting but not superlatively moral.* Melville later gave Captain Griswold a book as an expression of gratitude and received a note of appreciation in return. Their contact ended with that voyage. That was not the case with a similar meeting between Charles Dickens and Captain Elisha Ely Morgan.

### The Black Ball Line and the Black X Line

The packet ships were the luxury liners of their day and they made fortunes for their owners. The Black Ball Line started it all in 1818.

The line was founded by four men working in New York as textile importers. They started with four ships, which were distinctly marked with a large black ball sewn into the cloth sails of their ships. The line was immediately successful and numerous competitors quickly joined them, including the Black X line.





The Black X Line was formed 6 years later in 1824 and their ships joined the many others competing in this lucrative trans-Atlantic trade. Before long there were scores of competing Atlantic lines established in not just New York but other major East Coast ports, including Savannah, Philadelphia and Boston. New York, however, remained the center of the packet service.

At any one time as many as five hundred sailing vessels might be crammed side by side along the Manhattan waterfront.

The packets prevailed for the next 50 years, even during the perilous Civil War years and despite the growing use of steam-powered sailing vessels. But each year, larger, faster steam powered ships, capable of sailing across the Atlantic despite the wind, eroded the packet ship era. By 1880 the packet era was over and the golden age of steam-powered luxury liners was beginning.

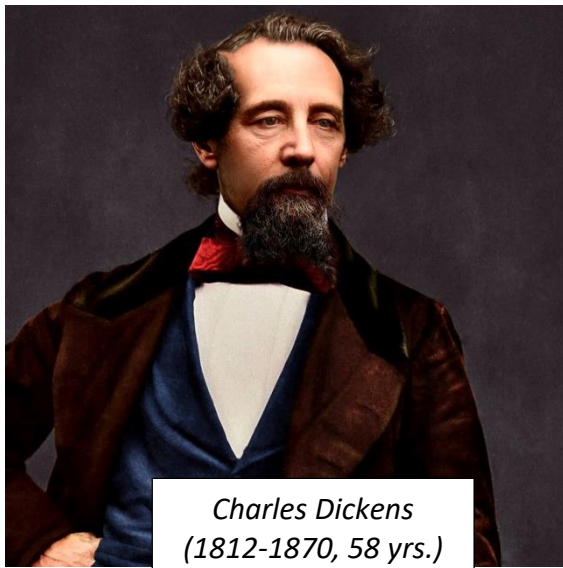


*(Below): Victoria, one of the six packets Morgan commanded. Built in 1844 and named after the reigning queen, who joined Morgan onboard when it reached London. At 1,000 tons, it was the largest of the Black X Line's 12 ships. (500 tons was average)*



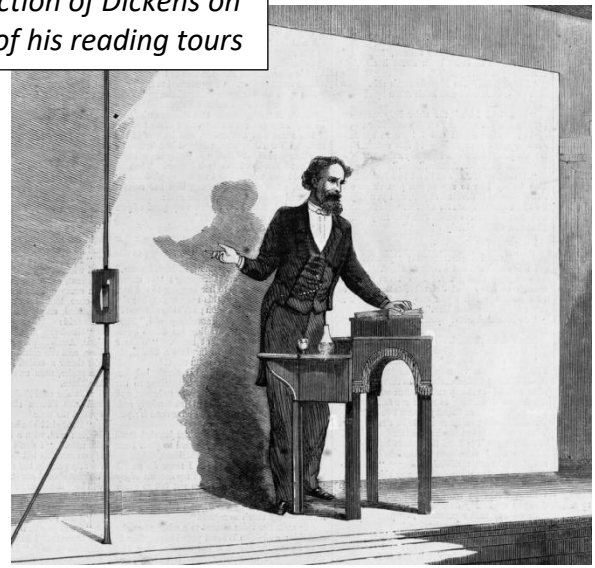
## Charles Dickens and Captain Elisha Ely Morgan

Like Herman Melville and Captain Griswold, Charles Dickens met Captain Morgan while crossing on a Black X Line ship. This was in 1841 and at this time Dickens was unquestionably the literary toast of London. It is difficult to underestimate the high state of social prominence held by Dickens among London's rich and famous and powerful. He had already published to grand critical acclaim *The Pickwick Papers* 1836, *Oliver Twist* 1837, *Nicholas Nickleby* 1838, *The Old Curiosity Shop* 1840 and *Barnaby Rudge* 1841. Shortly after his meeting Morgan he published *A Christmas Carol* 1843, *David Copperfield* 1849, *A Tale of Two Cities* 1859, and *Great Expectations* 1860. Dickens was an extrovert and according to two of his American admirers, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Dickens was a magnificent writer but also a grand performer." As such, he was well paid for his famous reading tours which he performed across Europe, England and America to admiring audiences.



Charles Dickens  
(1812-1870, 58 yrs.)

Depiction of Dickens on  
one of his reading tours



After meeting Dickens, Morgan was introduced to other prominent people in the London world of arts and letters and politics. Knowing Charles Dickens and becoming his close friend undoubtedly facilitated these acquaintances. But it was also Morgan who frequently invited Dickens to join him for London gatherings with luminaries who had crossed the ocean with Morgan. Many were noted painters and through them Morgan was even admitted, in an honorary capacity, to the London Sketching Club. The only other honorary member was Queen Victoria. Club members included the wealthiest and most famous artists in London as well as the noted illustrators of Dickens' numerous novels.



Morgan's hospitality when docked in London became legendary. Local London newspapers wrote about Morgan's invitations to the lavish breakfasts and luncheons he would hold when he was docked there. Guests ranged from Queen Victoria to Charles Dickens to Joseph Napoleon Bonaparte. Captain Morgan was not only an entertaining host but also a savvy promoter of the Black X Line and knew well the value of courting the rich and famous.

*(Right): Joseph Bonaparte living in exile on his New Jersey estate. He gave Capt. Morgan many gifts, including a set of gold tableware and objects owned by his brother Napoleon. He also chartered Morgan's ships three times while living in New Jersey.*



*Joseph Bonaparte, (1768-1844, 76 yrs.) King of Naples and later King of Spain*

Morgan and Dickens became close personal friends.

Dickens also became a close friend of Morgan's eldest son, William Dare Morgan, who worked with his father and who was stationed in London for several years before and during the American Civil War. William grew up in Saybrook and after graduating Yale had joined his father's shipping business. Morgan carried both Dickens and his children several times on his line and Dickens asked Morgan's son to help employ his son and to escort him to America on one occasion.

Dickens found Morgan an affable companion. Dickens' daughter fondly remembered Morgan: *His humor was of the dry Yankee type, and his jokes and stories, of which he always had an unfailing supply, had always a flavor of the keen New England air.* Clearly this was part of what attracted Dickens, who would use a funny story told to him by Morgan in several of his public speeches. In Dicken's short story, *A Message From The Sea*, a fictional protagonist named Captain Jorgan was Dicken's description of Elisha Ely Morgan: *He was an American born, was Captain Jorgan – a New Englander – but he was a citizen of the world, and a combination of most of the best qualities of most of its best countries.*

After Morgan's retirement back in Old Saybrook he continued to correspond with Dickens and the two would continually exchange gifts. One biographer relates the following: *His (Morgan's) English friends missed him, though he kept in touch by letter, and sent them gifts, such as barrels of apples, and cigars, which Dickens called his 'Morgans'. The cigars in particular were an important reminder for Dickens of his strong bond with Morgan, and of how deeply the Captain penetrated his emotional and creative life. This may be seen in Dickens's pledge to Morgan that he would inaugurate the first chapter of his next book by fumigating the manuscript with a cigar 'reserved from this very box of yours.'*



Charles Dickens

Dickens wrote to Morgan in December 1852, to say: *All your friends here have been quite amazed at your not sailing over the salt sea, backward and forward, perpetually. For when you began to talk about retiring from the watery plough, we all said "Lord bless you, he is going to begin to be always aboard ship now." But our wisdom was at fault.*

Later in another letter Dickens wrote to Morgan: *We have always been expecting to receive some intelligence of your son. Pray let me know whether he has come to London, or is coming.* William Dare Morgan celebrated Christmas and New Year 1862-3 at Gads Hill in England, the country home of Charles Dickens.

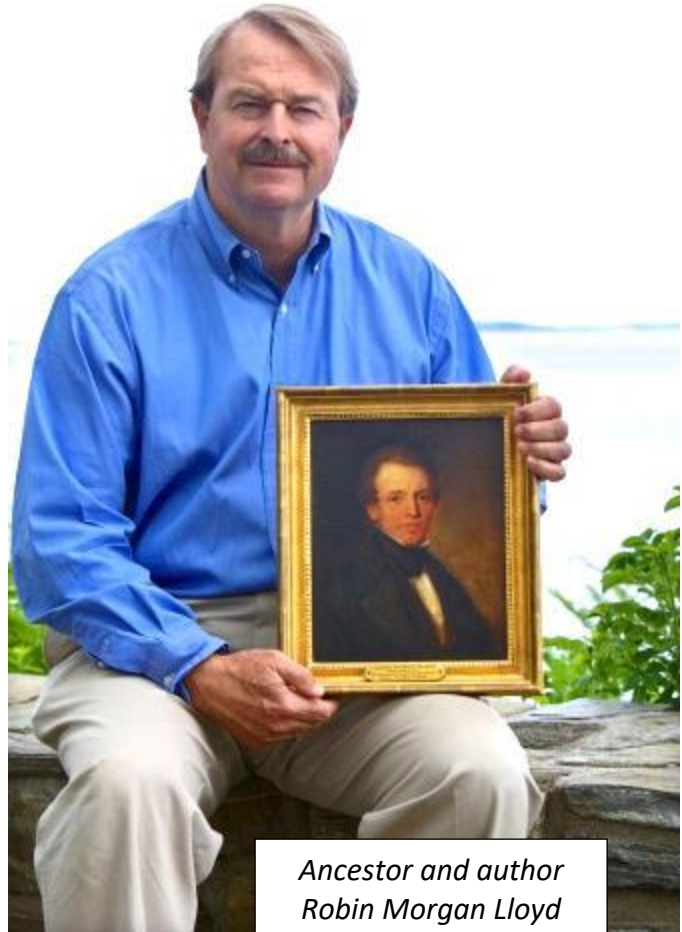


Gads Hill Place, the country home of Charles Dickens

Elisha Ely Morgan, close friend of Dickens, died the next year in Old Saybrook and was buried near Hamburg Cove in Lyme, Connecticut.

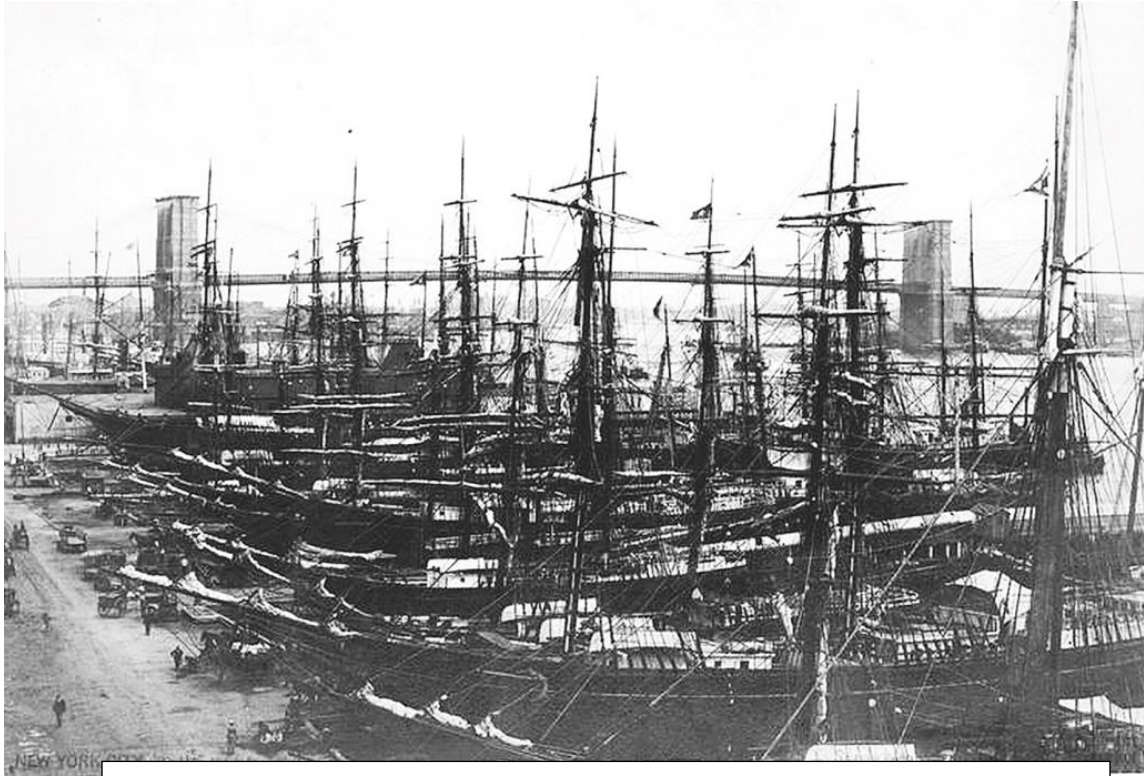
**Footnote:**

Seven new letters from Dickens to Captain E.E. Morgan, and to his son William Dare Morgan have come to light. Their existence was brought to the attention of the Dickens Letters Project by Robin Morgan Lloyd, a descendant of the Captain, who researched Morgan's history in order to inform his work of historical fiction, *Rough Passage to London: A Sea Captain's Tale*, published in 2013. The letters, which are now in the possession of several Morgan descendants, provide new and vital information concerning the nature of Dickens's relationship with the Morgan family.

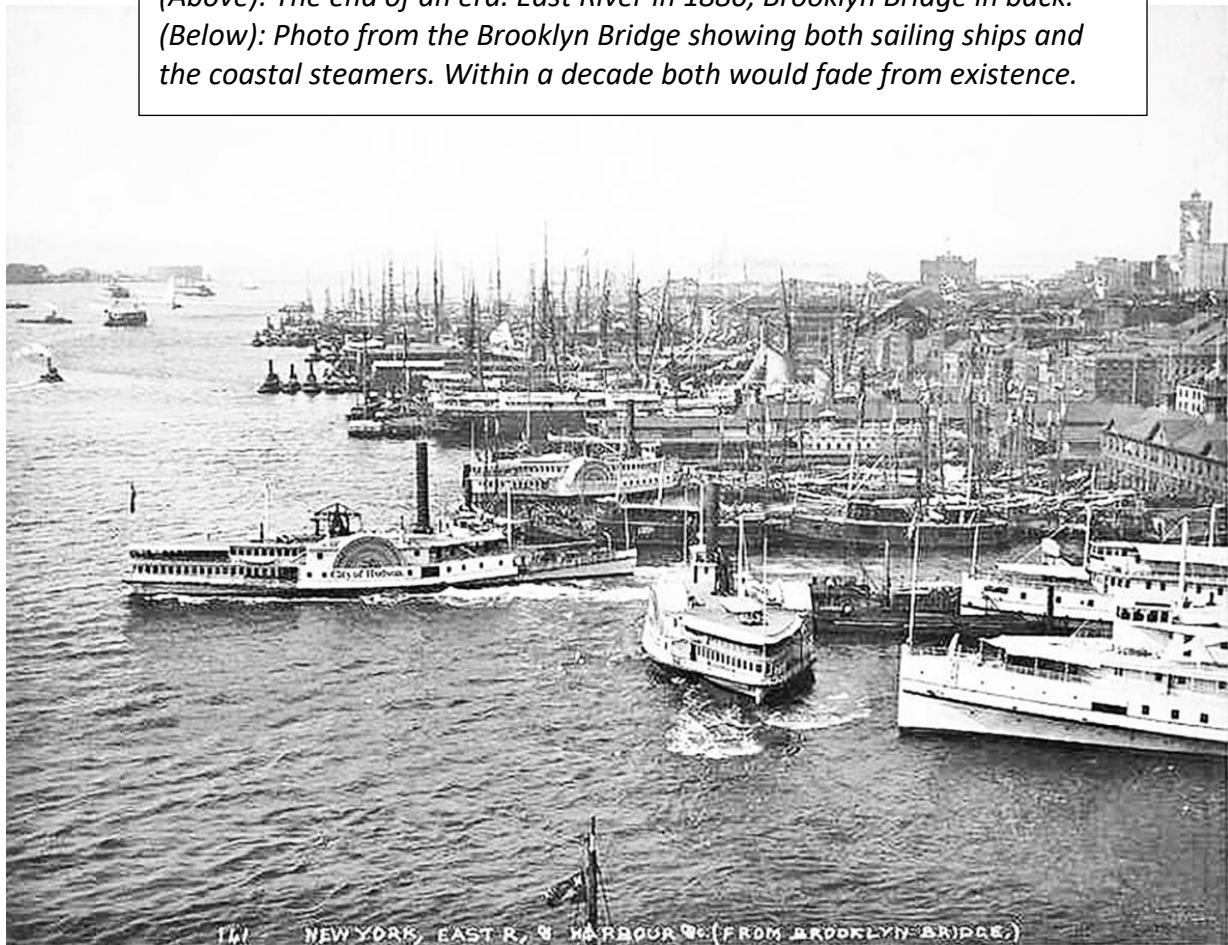


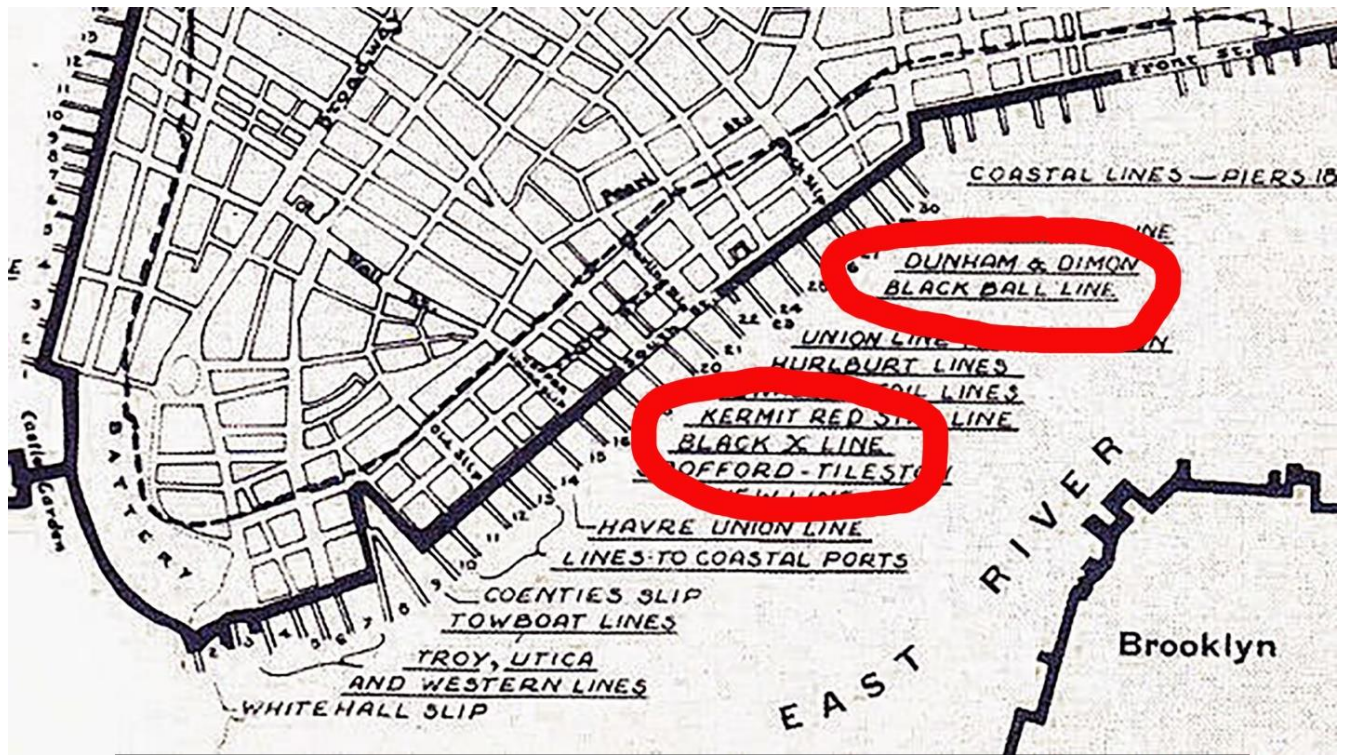
*Ancestor and author  
Robin Morgan Lloyd  
with his portrait of  
Elisha Ely Morgan*

Another ancestor, Ellen McPherson in Washington, DC, wrote to the Old Saybrook Historical Society in 2009 with the following information: *Joseph Bonaparte, older brother of Napoleon Bonaparte, chartered Captain Morgan's ships three different times while he lived in America as an alien. He gave the captain many gifts such as a set of gold knives, forks, spoons and a chessboard used constantly by the Emperor Napoleon on his voyage from France to St. Helena and while in prison there. We have inherited the gold snuff box given by Bonaparte to the Captain as well as ten or so watercolors painted by members of the London Sketching Club. Leslie, Landseer and Turner were among some of the members and they made the Captain an honorary member. The only other honorary member was Queen Victoria.*



*(Above): The end of an era. East River in 1880, Brooklyn Bridge in back.  
(Below): Photo from the Brooklyn Bridge showing both sailing ships and the coastal steamers. Within a decade both would fade from existence.*





(Above): Map of the East River waterfront showing the locations of the established 1880s lines. (Below): Photo of that same waterfront





*(Above): Photo used for the postcard of the "Ye Olde Saybrooke Inn." Originally built for Richard William Hart around 1800. Located on the corner of Main Street and Old Boston Post Road. Bought by Captain Elisha Morgan in 1843. Later purchased by H. C. Chapman after Morgan's death in 1864 and converted into an inn. The house was demolished in 1950, according to historian Marion Hepburn Grant.*