

2024 Quest Club Presentation

Belle da Costa Greene, Personal Librarian of J.P. Morgan

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**Presented
November 8, 2024**

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Overview

Belle da Costa Greene was born Belle Marian Greener in Washington DC on November 26, 1879, in a upscale black neighborhood. Belle was the daughter of Genevieve Ida Fleet and Richard T. Greener, both were descendants of slaves.

Her mother Genevieve, a musician and teacher, was from a distinguished black family that had been free from slavery since the early 1800s.

Her father, Richard T. Greener, from a working-class family, was an educator, diplomat and activist for racial justice and the first African American to graduate from Harvard University in 1870. Richard's acceptance to Harvard in 1865, was part of a Post-Civil War education program. Greener also served as secretary of the Ulysses S. Grant Monument, at the same time that J. Pierpont Morgan served as treasurer.

By 1905 Belle da Costa Greene was residing in Princeton, New Jersey, and working in the Princeton University Library. Her mother, and siblings were living and struggling in Manhattan as they had for over a decade since her father left.

Belle had an appetite for knowledge and money which was needed to help support her two younger sisters and brother in graduate school. Belle was determined, ambitious and sought intellectual growth. During her time at Princeton she began to study illuminated manuscripts and rare books and eventually caught the

attention of Junius P. Morgan, J.P. Morgan's nephew.

Junius had an interest in early books and was helping his Uncle with the idea of developing a library which then consumed his homes in New York and London and a storage room at the Lenox Library.

Belle di Costa Greene, J.P. Morgan's Personal Librarian

On a late winter day in 1905 a 26 year old Belle da Costa Greene, claiming to be 22 years old and unknown to New York society and the world of art, found herself approaching the new building at Madison Avenue and 36th Street for an interview with the wealthy financier J.P. Morgan.

During that first decade of the 20th Century the physical and architectural landscape of New York was changing rapidly. New structures like the Singer Building, at 47 stories, was soon followed by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company Tower.

New York's population growth was fueled in 1903 by immigration and urbanization. It presented challenges for housing, and public services not to mention social challenges.

The opening of the Hudson and New Amsterdam Theatre in 1903, established the Broadway Theatre District and the city's growing interest in the performing arts.

The construction of Grand Central Station led to the rapid expansion of New York's subway system in 1904 and connected the city's growing and diverse neighborhoods.

The construction and opening of the New York Public Library in 1911 celebrated the city's dedication to cultural enrichment and knowledge.

New York's ever-changing skyline and growth of the early 20th century was mostly financed and built by New York millionaires like J.P. Morgan.

John Pierpont Morgan was born in 1837 in Hartford Connecticut, and was educated in Boston and the University of Gottingen, Gottingen Germany. Morgan started his financial career as an accountant with the banking firm of Duncan, Sherman and Company which represented the London based firm of George Peabody and Company. He joined his father's banking company in 1861 and later joined Dabney, Morgan and Company until 1871, when he became a partner in the firm of Drexel, Morgan and Company, which was the source of most US Government financing.

The firm later re-organized as the J.P. Morgan and Company where Morgan became helpful in identifying and getting capital for developing industries and industrial companies from British banks.

In 1885, J.P. Morgan reorganized the largest two railroad concerns in the country (New York Central and Pennsylvania Railroad) helping to mitigate the effects of a dangerous rate war. As a result Morgan gained a great deal of influence over the US rail industry and eventually became an influential railroad magnate.

In 1891 he fostered the merger of Edison General Electric and the Thomson-Houston Electric Company to form General Electric. Morgan formed a syndicate after

the Panic of 1893 with \$62 million to replenish the US gold reserve to alleviate the Treasury crisis and financed the Federal Steel Company in 1898 which he helped merge with Carnegie Steel and smaller steel companies to create United States Steel Corporation.

In 1902, Morgan purchased several leading agricultural equipment manufacturers to form International Harvester Company. Morgan was considered one of the most successful and influential capitalist of his time and a significant private collector of rare books, illustrated manuscripts and works of art.

Morgan's and other collectors' interests in collections of rare books, manuscripts and works of art grew significantly when the world's financial interests shifted from London and the rest of Europe in the 1890s to New York. This left many European Aristocrats strapped for cash, but wealthy in terms of their possessions, including fine art, books and manuscripts.

Wealthy Americans like Morgan began purchasing significant art collections, artifacts, manuscripts and rare books. It is estimated that Morgan spent \$1.5 Billion on works of art during his life time.

Morgan maintained most of his art collection at his London home due to the 20% tariffs imposed by the United States on art and artistic imports.

With the help of his nephew Morgan started planning for the construction of his private library next to his brownstone at Madison Avenue and 36th Street around 1900.

When the tariffs were finally lifted on art and artistic imports in 1909, it gave American collectors like Morgan the ability to legally bring their collections into the United States.

As the library neared completion, artworks, manuscripts and rare illustrated manuscripts started arriving from Morgan's homes and storage room at the Lenox Library. It was quite a jumble and Morgan realized his need for a private librarian to catalog and organize the collection. The library building was completed in 1906.

During the 1870s and 1880s talented and motivated Black American elites had been drawn to Washington DC. Purposely working to establish themselves and believing that acting in a refined and dignified manner would bring them respect. And, that respectability would first be recognized by one's attire, and good manners.

They believed it was their responsibility to use their standing to improve the lives of the race; by leading and acting as role models to gain respect and acceptance in the white community.

Belle's parents were racially mixed and light skinned but their experiences and life-views were different which likely impacted their individual expectations and aspirations. Genevieve's life had been privileged and that provided some protection from racism and prejudice. Richard's life-view was the result of his working class upbringing; his goal was to use his education and position to advance equality for the whole race.

Belle Marian Greener was born in Washington DC, as a member of an elite and established black neighborhood where family, education, and culture was at the center. She was surrounded by her brother and two sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins. She was accustomed to being the center of attention, which she reportedly loved and expected, even as an adult. It was in this setting that Belle learned the reward of hard work, and the importance of self respect. She learned the imperatives of politeness, and moderation in dress and actions as a young black woman to survive and succeed as a member of the first generation of post-slavery men and women.

Belle's parents, like other parents, worked hard to teach their children the characteristics of acceptance and polite society and to not draw negative attention to themselves or others.

In 1883, the United States Supreme Court overturned the public accommodations sections of the Civil Rights Act of 1875. Richard Greener started sharing his disdain for the ruling publicly and joined Fredrick Douglas, an abolitionist and lawyer and other black leaders where for the first time he felt the sting of exclusion when he was denied first class seats on trains and overnight lodging accommodations. The progressiveness of past years was being replaced by racial separation and white privilege.

At about the same time, members of his own community were becoming hostile toward him because of his light skin color and perceived desire to be white.

By 1885, Richard Greener was offered an opportunity to leave Washington, the political stage, and at times his family, to take the job as Secretary of the Ulysses S.

Grant Monument Association. Grant died in 1885 after completing his memoir, but because of his role as Commanding General in the Civil War, monument organizers thought the black community should be represented on the committee.

This new position gave Greener the opportunity interact with New York's upper class. While the family remained in Washington, Greener struggled to maintain the two households, a second son was born in August but lived only three months. Greener joined his family for Christmas, as he always did, and when he returned to New York his family went with him.

New York was booming with people and innovation and the city was becoming the country's cultural, financial and industrial capital. Immigrants from around the globe were streaming into the city, black southerners were heading north to the city to seek opportunity in the factories and to escape bigotry and racism in the hope of a better life and freedom.

Belle's parents were not unlike many free-born bi-racial and black African Americans of the 19th Century. Their history was her history and most certainly impacted her understanding of race, opportunity, society and how she chose to identify. Although Belle's activities and work following high school are generally obscure.

In 2021, Fiona Rose Foner, Research Associate to the Director at the Morgan Library posted information found in two letters about Belle's early education. The first letter, written in July 1, 1896, was seeking support of the application made by the seventeen year old Belle and her mother, Mrs. Greene, to be admitted to

the Northfield Seminary for Young Ladies in Massachusetts.

The request was written to Emma Charlotte Revell Moody, wife of Dwight Lyman Moody founder and preacher of the Northfield Seminary by a well known philanthropist and social welfare advocate, Grace Hoadley Dodge. The following day Mrs. Moody sent the letter to Evelyn Sarah Hall, Northfield's Principal.

The letter emphasized that Mr. Moody was in support of acceptance mostly due to the support and philanthropy of the Dodges to Northfield. This was of course unless she, (Miss Hall) had additional information and was not in favor of accepting Belle. The letter emphasized that Mrs. Greene was white but had "married a man with Spanish Cuban and Negro blood a lawyer who graduated at the top of his class at Harvard: He turned out clever but bad and after terrible experiences she left him and has been supporting her five children with terrible struggle. Belle is bright and quick to learn, easily influenced, full of fun and energy - She has been employed as helper in the Office of Teachers College but we realize she should go away from New York and be under strong Christian influence. While the trace of Negro blood is noticeable Belle has always associated intimately with the best class of white girls and at the College was a great favorite of many - The Mother wants to make the girl a true noble woman and she has the qualities for such if under such influence as Northfield."

Mrs. Moody ended the letter with an offer to pay for Belle's tuition and offered that Mrs. Greene was "a white woman with good ancestry and as such Belle had inherited ability and intellect."

Belle was accepted to Northfield and attended for three years. She did not graduate. However the acceptance letter also indicated that Mrs. Greene did not graduate from Mount Holyoke as she said she had, but had attended a two year program at Oberlin. The letter revealed that Belle's parents were no longer together and that Mrs. Greene had changed the family's last name from Greener to Greene; and claimed Portuguese ancestry and was passing as white.

The letters suggests that Mrs. Dodge, a Trustee of the Teacher's College, was likely to have come in contact with Belle and learned of her bi-racial status. Interesting too, that the Dodges were part of the same social circle and a neighbor to J. P. Morgan. In fact Mrs. Dodge's grandparents lived in the townhouse adjacent to Morgan's own home and in 1903 Morgan purchased the Dodge townhouse and tore it down to install the gardens at his home. It would seem unlikely then, given the close connections between the Dodges and Morgans, that J. P. would not have been aware of Belle's closely guarded family secrets and history.

Perhaps this shrewd capitalist cared more for ability, intelligence and capacity than family background or education?

Belle claimed that she attended Teacher's College but the letter confirms that she was an employee. Belle did attend a summer course at Amherst College in 1900. Although, this does little to explain her success and accomplishments and emergence as an expert on fifteen century books, works of art and artifacts or explain how she became a formidable and strategic negotiator in the art world.

Prior to her work at the Morgan, Belle spent three years working at the Princeton University Library. There is little mention of Belle in the library archives or details of her social life while at Princeton. It is known that at the time she took the position at Princeton she and her family, were living as white without her father in New York. And that Belle rented rooms from John Martins whose daughter, Charlotte Martins, worked at the Princeton Library and had for over twenty years.

While living with the Martins and Charlotte's widowed sister, Belle and Charlotte became very close. Belle referred to Charlotte as her "Aunt Lottie", while Charlotte addressed her correspondence to Belle as Darling Bella.

Princeton was an interesting choice for Belle since it was much more culturally southern, than its location suggested and the only Ivy League school to exclude black students. Princeton maintained its white only policy from 1902 until 1910, even so, the first black students were not admitted until the 1940s. Belle loved Princeton's social opportunities and she often attended socials, events and graduations and continued to do so into the 1940s.

It must have been complicated for Belle, living and working as a black woman in the knowledge of Princeton's practices of segregation and discrimination. Not much is known about her thoughts or connection to the black community or the individuals who worked in service to the University and would surely encounter on a daily basis.

Did she have thoughts of guilt or was her choice to live as a white person an act of

self-preservation, opportunity or even survival?

Undoubtedly Belle would have been aware of the actions of discrimination, racism and exclusion of Black Americans for educational and employment opportunities. Perhaps these realities made Belle da Costa Greene even more determined to live and succeed in a white society.

At Princeton Belle was known for her friendly demeanor toward the entire Princeton community. One might wonder if this was an effort to mimic white society or had she developed an indifference toward people of color as a way to promote herself as white?

Belle, by all accounts, was an excellent student of Charlotte, learning all that she could and developing a love of old manuscripts. She eventually caught the observations of Junis Pierpont Morgan who was then a student employee at the University library, a bibliophile and advisor to his uncle J.P. Morgan.

Through her experience at Princeton, Belle perfected her skills as a librarian and love of rare books, manuscripts and artwork. She reportedly told people that she had apprenticed under the tutelage of Ernest Cushing Richardson, a graduate of Amherst College and Princeton's Librarian from 1890 until 1925. Richardson is known for creating a library cataloging system and the National Union Catalog of the Library of Congress.

Perhaps it was the catalog system or the opportunity at Princeton that helped Belle gain the experience and expertise that would be needed at the Morgan.

I found no evidence that Belle apprenticed under Richardson although she would have most certainly benefitted from his influence and innovation; giving her the opportunity to acquire useful and innovative library experience.

Richardson spent a good deal of time in Europe exploring museums, and accumulating original and facsimiles of rare books and artwork. His goal was to raise America's intellectual standing by providing a broader understanding of European artworks, culture and the intellectual significance of early, and rare manuscripts.

Belle liked and supported Richardson's efforts and views. But Belle had her own plans too, and started traveling to Europe with similar goals, once her finances could support the expense.

One might wonder if Belle was passion-driven or uniquely aware of how her work at Princeton would position her as a successful white female librarian and expert, leading to acceptance in New York's emerging world of art, culture and high society.

Belle and Junis developed a deep and respectful friendship while she was at Princeton. Perhaps Junis too, was strategic in introducing Belle to his Uncle since she would play a significant role as a fellow bibliophile in the development of Morgan's book collection. Perhaps he was thinking about the potential for his input and impact on the project with a hand-selected and loyal friend at the helm. An emerging expert that he had trained, and was loyal to him and his family. For Belle, she would have access to

unimaginable and invaluable treasures.

When Belle interviewed with Morgan she did not bring a long and inspiring resume or credentials from an accredited institution. This was not uncommon for the time or the work. Neither Richardson or her father who became the Librarian of the University of South Carolina had formal library training. Although Richardson believed, as Belle, in a formal education for librarians and had studied with Melvil Dewey, Amherst Librarian and creator of the Dewey Decimal System.

Junis Morgan and his Uncle were members of the Grolier (Grow-yer) Club which was founded in 1884 to explore and study book production. Junis Morgan was an 1888 Princeton graduate, bibliophile and advisor to J.P. Morgan regarding the purchase of his early acquisitions of pre-printing-press books and early printings following the invention of the printing press.

While Junis was supportive and recommended Belle for the position of Personal Librarian for the Morgan, she was not his first choice. The Grolier Club Librarian, Henry Watson Kent was offered the position for \$3,000 a year first. With no degree or formal education in library management or experience, compared to Kent, Belle was not as well, prepared or qualified for the position. Kent refused the offer for a position with the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

By the time Belle found out that Kent had been offered a salary at least three times her salary, it didn't matter. She had been hired for some time and was making \$10,000 annually and had proven herself to Junis and J.P.

Belle did speculate, however, that Kent might be making \$5,000 and realized with his education from the Columbia Library School it was likely he would become director of the museum. Kent joined the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1907 as Supervisor of Museum Instruction, he was appointed Secretary in 1913 and remained there until 1940, although never appointed director.

When Junis Pierpont Morgan brought Belle da Costa Greene to meet his financier Uncle, it must have been a striking scene. Morgan a large man and the fashionably attired young woman in front of him. Imagine the two of them sizing each other up as Morgan sat behind his desk in the grand and newly constructed building on Madison Avenue.

Once hired, Belle's job was to organize the collection and care for the books, illustrated manuscripts and incunabula. (ink-can-nab-bula) Once the building was completed in 1906, Belle went to work sorting through the crates and boxes literally stacked throughout the building with more arriving daily.

After Belle went to the Morgan, the 1906 Princeton Library Annual Report noted the departure of two librarians, although no mention of Belle's departure, nor did her new position at the Morgan Library warrant outside mention. Belle's rise in stature at the Morgan, in New York society and among significant collectors, artists and entertainers was yet to be.

By 1907 Belle was screening potential purchases, building relationships with sellers and collectors alike. A staff was in place at the library, giving Belle opportunities to

respond to correspondence, offer insights on purchases and take part in long conversations with Morgan.

Their relationship became one of mutual trust, admiration and confidentiality. In fact Belle often declared her love for Morgan publicly and Morgan reportedly once said “Belle was the most important person in his life.” This was relayed to Belle by one of Morgan’s three mistresses, Lady Alan Johnstone.

For Belle’s part, remarks of love and admiration were not unusual. Belle often made random and strikingly public declarations of love and attraction for the art collectors and dealers, artists and actresses and men in her life, which undoubtedly added to her allure and mystic.

When Belle’s responsibilities and influence grew, so did speculation and perhaps gossip about the state of her relationship with Morgan. After all, Morgan’s reputation for his relationships with women was well known in New York society.

As Belle’s income grew so did her appetite for New York high-society and night-life. She became friends with New York ’s most wealthy art collectors, performers and socialites. She was often invited to the homes and events of the most wealthy and influential in the city. New York’s elites and socialites saw Belle da Costa Greene as an extension of J.P. Morgan. She traveled all over Europe negotiating on behalf of her boss, often out-smarting her competitors for the prized artifact, artwork or rare book. She spent millions of dollars purchasing significant artifacts and works of art. Belle’s notoriety and reputation grew as a knowledgeable expert who

represented J. P. Morgan's interests in the US and abroad and in the process became a significant collector herself.

Yet often, after a grueling day at the Morgan, she loved the nightlife and was often seen at the Met, gallery shows and theatre productions or enjoying the New York nightlife with notable artists, actresses and actors in the village. In the heat of summer she joined other upscale and wealthy New Yorkers at upstate beaches; renting a summer retreat so she and her family could escape the heat of the city.

By 1912, Belle was earning \$10,000 a year. In today's money that would equal about \$250,000 a year. Morgan left Belle \$50,000 in his will, which in today's money would equal about \$1.6 million. Not bad for someone making \$75 a month when she started.

Following J.P. Morgan's death in 1913, his son, John Pierpont Morgan, Jr., took over the Morgan Investment Banking company and the Morgan Library, donating over 7,000 objects from the collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He inherited the business and the bulk of Morgan senior's estate valued at \$118 million including his art collection valued at \$50 million.

Belle da Costa Greene remained at the Morgan until her retirement in 1948, two years before her death. She was named director of the Morgan Library in 1924 when John Pierpont Morgan, Jr. opened the library and museum to the public.

Belle, always claimed to be several years younger than her actual age. This along with

her unique beauty intrigued and impressed those she came in contact with during her dealings. She was known for her shrewd negotiating ability, witty comments and outspokenness, often alluding to having black heritage. Perhaps this was a sub-conscious attempt at maintaining an emotional relationship with her black roots and community.

Sometime in 1909 Belle, who never married, was introduced to notable art collector and dealer, Bernard Berenson. Berenson and his wife Mary lived in Italy, but frequently visited New York for business and pleasure. They were devoted to each other but had what we might call an open marriage.

Belle and Berenson maintained a long-standing and long distance relationship. He in Europe mostly and she in New York. During one of Belle's many trips aboard they made arrangements to meet and travel through Italy with the approval and knowledge of Berenson's wife Mary. Although for Belle's part she went to some lengths to keep the details of her travel from her employer.

During the day they toured the Italian countryside, stayed in chateaus and visited museums, and galleries. Intimate evenings were spent in quaint chateaus enjoying regional foods, wine and of course each other.

Throughout their tour of Italy they encountered acquaintances and members of New York society and colleagues from the world of collecting and selling works of art. When this happened they declared that Bernard was teaching and mentoring Belle on the art of acquiring and collecting valuable and rare works of art. An obvious

attempt to quell wagging tongues and gossip.

For years after their tour of Italy they continued to pledge their fidelity to each other, but Belle often tormented Bernard with her stories of other suitors, lovers and people that she adored and of course her social escapades back in New York, causing him great mental anguish.

They made almost annual commitments of love and plans to meet in New York, London, or Italy. Often their plans were disrupted, delayed or canceled due to Berenson's health, Belle's work and her preferred social activity and obligations. Their long-standing affair and love for each other spanned a decade or more, much of which was conducted through letters.

Belle da Costa Greene, destroyed her personal correspondence prior to her death in 1950, including her letters from Berenson. Berenson reportedly received his last letter from Belle da Costa Greene in 1949.

It is reported that over 600 letters from Belle to Bernard are retained at 1 Tatti, the home of Bernard and Mary Berenson outside of Florence Italy, now home to Harvard University's Center for Italian Renaissance Studies. Bernard Berenson died in 1959 and upon his death donated 1 Tatti to Harvard University.

Berenson was born in Lithuania to a Jewish family that immigrated to Boston Massachusetts in 1875. He studied at Harvard and graduated in 1887. While at Harvard he was introduced to a Boston Art collector, Isabella Stewart Gardner.

Berenson helped Gardner curate and form her collection of Renaissance Art and the collections of other prominent American and European art collectors.

It was on Belle's fourteenth birthday that Belle's Aunt Julia gave her a copy of Bernard Berenson's book, "Venetian Painter's of the Renaissance" which she cherished throughout her life. Maybe that is when she first fell in love with books, works of art and Berenson.

Berenson is recognized as an art historian on the Renaissance. During his lifetime he provided counsel to many wealthy American and European art collectors and authored several books on the subject.

Conclusion

Belle's decision to live as a white person was a double paradox. A black woman, daughter of a well known black activist, living, working and succeeding in a mostly white male world, and a segregated and racist society as a white woman of European ancestry.

It makes one wonder if Belle's privileged childhood steeled her against the realities of black life and the exclusion of black people, giving her emotional immunity from the realization of the racism that existed across the country.

Belle's story and that of her family made me wonder how many Black Americans, when given the opportunity and physical attribute of being light skinned did or would have done so for greater opportunities and acceptance.

The violence, racism and oppression is widely documented in newspapers and written accounts during the late 1800s and early 1900s. For many people of color educational opportunities were denied, most jobs were in-service jobs. Wealth-building, land ownership even citizenship and the right to vote were denied in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

My research discovered post Civil War educational experiments and programs created to support, but also test black people. Many of these programs were abandoned and replaced by exclusion and laws in the late 19th and early 20th Century designed to maintain an attitude of white superiority.

Industrialization created with it job opportunities which drew Black Americans north looking for work, freedom and equality. A chance to experience their own American Dream.

I wondered what life I would have chosen if I had been in Belle's place. By the very life she chose, she was complicated, obviously intelligent and competent. How much did she give up for her spot in History?

Belle da Costa Greene was an energetic woman, who loved attention and the night life, the artists, the parties, high-society and fashion. A beautiful and witty woman who was a knowledgeable and formidable negotiator in a man's world. A world afforded to her by ancestry, the violence of slavery, a decision to pass as white, hard work, intellect, passion and the confidence and support of one of the most wealthy and influential people of the early Twentieth Century, John Pierpont Morgan, "America's Greatest

Banker”.

But, what of the quiet and reflective times? Would Belle Marian Greener or anyone have chosen a different path? How did bi-racial people and light-skinned Black Americans who may have chosen to pass as white, as Belle, her mother and her siblings did, deal with exclusion and racism in a culture that expected them to choose a side?

Thank you.

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