Paul Morphy, The Pride and Sorrow of Chess

Everyone of late has been enthralled by the popular seven-episode Netflix miniseries *Queen's Gambit*. Anya Taylor-Joy plays Beth Harmon, a chess prodigy in the 1960s who learns the game from the janitor in the basement of her orphanage and goes all the way to the Soviet Union to play the world's best Grandmaster by the time she's 20. In this well-told fictional story, mention is made of another child chess genius: Paul Morphy of New Orleans.

Anya Taylor-Joy makes chess seem smart, stylish and suspenseful in the Netflix hit miniseries Queen's Gambit.

Paul Charles Morphy (June 22, 1837 – July 10, 1884) has the distinction of being honored as the most brilliant chess master of his era and considered unofficially as the second World Chess Champion for the years 1858-1860. As revealed in *Queen's Gambit*, he was known as "The Pride and Sorrow of Chess" due to the fact that this impressive chess prodigy experienced such a stellar international chess career, yet soon afterward retired from the game while still young.

Born in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Morphy's family had its roots in Saint-Domingue, refugees who'd escaped the Haitian Revolution. Among other fields of endeavor, these émigrés and their descendants were successful in music, printing and the law. Paul's

father, Alonzo Michael Morphy (of Spanish, Irish and Portuguese ancestry), served as a Louisiana state legislator, attorney general and a Louisiana State Supreme Court Justice. Morphy's mother, Louise Thérèse Félicité Thelcide LeCarpentier, was a French Creole, known for her contributions to the local opera community.

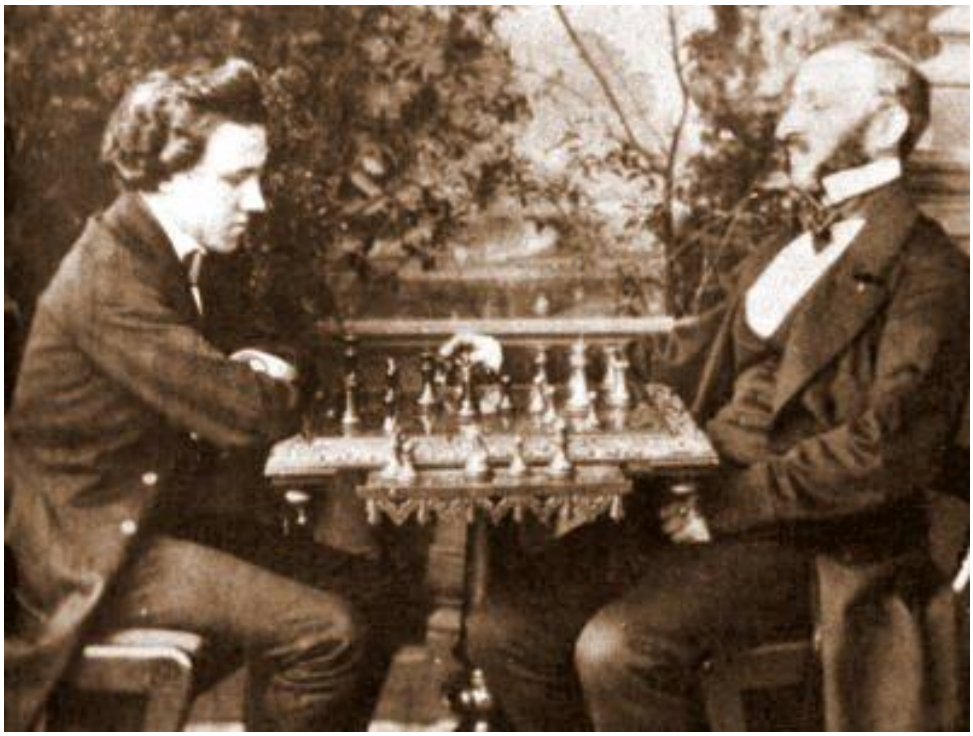
The LeCarpentier residence is today known as the Beauregard-Keyes House. This mansion, where Paul was born in 1837, is one of the most historic buildings in the *Vieux Carré*. The Morphy family lived there until 1841 when they moved to 89 Royal Street (later re-numbered to 417 Royal Street), today home to Brennan's Restaurant.

Chess genius, Paul Morphy of New Orleans

Paul Morphy had no formal training in chess, but learned on his own as a child simply from watching the playing of others, especially his father and uncle. "Uncle," he once said, "you should have won that game." The young Morphy explained the necessary moves needed to achieve that result, and he was indeed correct. By the age of nine Morphy was already considered one of the best players in the city.

Around that time Major General Winfield Scott, with a reputation as a skilled chess player, visited New Orleans in 1846 *en route* to the Mexican War and asked an acquaintance to find him a challenging opponent. He thought it was some sort of practical joke to find the young Morphy sitting across from him in velvet knickerbockers and a lace shirt. Upon assurances that the young man was indeed a worthy challenger, the general found himself easily beaten, not once, but twice - the second time by a forced checkmate after only six moves. Many will remember Scott as the Union general who proposed the Anaconda Plan, a naval blockade strategy against the South formulated by him at the outbreak of the Civil War.

At only twelve years of age, Morphy decisively defeated the Hungarian master Janos J. Löwenthal during his visit to New Orleans in 1850.



12-year-old Paul Morphy and Hungarian chess master Janos Löwenthal

After 1850, Morphy decided to take a break from chess, not playing that much. He instead devoted himself to his studies, graduating from Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama, in 1854. With a slight, 5-foot-4 frame, and apart from briefly studying fencing, he did not take up sports. After remaining an extra year at Spring Hill, studying mathematics and philosophy, he was awarded an A.M. degree with the highest honors in May 1855.

Paul Morphy (left) and another young chess player

Back in New Orleans, he received an L.L.B. degree on April 7, 1857 from the University of Louisiana (now Tulane). It has been reported that during this time Morphy memorized the complete Louisiana Civil Code.

But the practice of law had to wait, since he was not yet of legal age. With time on his hands, he received an invitation to participate in the First American Chess Congress, to be held in New York during October and November of that year. At first he declined, but his uncle urged him to participate. He went on to defeat each of his rivals.

In Paris, Morphy won an entire tournament "blindfolded". He was seated in one room of the *Café de la Régence* while his eight opponents sat in another. They had their chessboards, along with a retinue of other players who could give them advice. Morphy, facing

only a bare wall with no chessboard, had the moves called out in French. With neither food nor drink, he played for 10 hours and defeated them all. The *New York Times* reported, "Such a mind never did exist, and, perhaps, never will again."

Paul Morphy's "blindfold" exhibition

One true competitor was German immigrant Louis Paulsen, who managed to aggravate Morphy by taking as long as 75 minutes on a move and winning their third game. Before the sixth game, while dining with a fellow player, Morphy vowed, "Paulsen shall never win another game from me while he lives." Morphy beat him five times and won the competition, then spent the following month in New York being feted like a king.

Returning to New Orleans in late 1859 at age 22, having triumphed over virtually all serious opposition, his attempts at setting up his embryonic law practice was disrupted in 1861 by the outbreak of the Civil War (during which time he may have been on General

Beauregard's staff, although Morphy's war years are somewhat of a gray area). It is interesting that the house on Chartres Street in which Morphy was born was later the general's residence.

Morphy was not very successful in establishing his law practice after the war's end, as his would-be clients invariably wanted to chat about chess instead of legal matters. His family fortune provided him with the financial security, however, to essentially spend the rest of his life in idleness - even refusing to return to chess competition. He saw it as more of an amateur pursuit and not a serious occupation. Although he did frequent the rooms of The Chess, Checkers and Whist Club in New Orleans (founded 1880), which was in operation for over 50 years until the Great Depression and heavy debt took its toll. In 1883, Morphy witnessed the Club's move to handsome new quarters at the corner of Canal and Baronne, where it remained until 1920 (with the exception of fire destroying the club building in 1890 and being immediately rebuilt). The city's world-renowned chess genius, continued to visit the Club until his death from a stroke in 1884, at only 47 years of age.

Simpson's-in-the-Strand, London, with its chessboard entrance

Back in 1976, before taking in a play in London's West End, this author dined on roast beef at one of London's oldest traditional English restaurants, Simpson's-in-the-Strand, also famous for its chess

history. During the nineteenth century, almost all the top players competed there at some point, including (I was delighted to discover) New Orleans' own Paul Morphy.

Simpson's introduced the custom of wheeling large joints of meat on silver dinner trolleys where the beef is carved in front of the diners, a tradition that began as a way to avoid interrupting the chess players mid-game. The restaurant has continued as a purveyor of traditional English food, popular with patrons including Charles Dickens and Prime Ministers Gladstone and Disraeli. It was also a hit with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his famous literary creation Sherlock Holmes, who once told Dr. Watson, "Something nutritious at Simpson's would not be out of place."

Another chess spot with a truly English ambiance is the Morphy Room at Brennan's Restaurant on Royal Street in the French Quarter, the chess prodigy's former home. This "cozy parlor on the second floor" that "pays homage to the enigmatic man considered one of the world's greatest players" is described by Brennan's as follows:

"The décor evokes the mood of a sophisticated English study, with a red velvet sofa, cocktail table and, of course, a chessboard awaiting a pre-dinner or postprandial match. Rich wine-color lacquered walls have panels of Scottish tartan in salmon, burgundy, and dark green, and are perfectly paired with a checkerboard-patterned rug in matching tones. Above the fireplace's mantle is a portrait of the master himself, surveying the room while rooks, bishops and pawns slide across the board, as if contemplating an elegant checkmate."

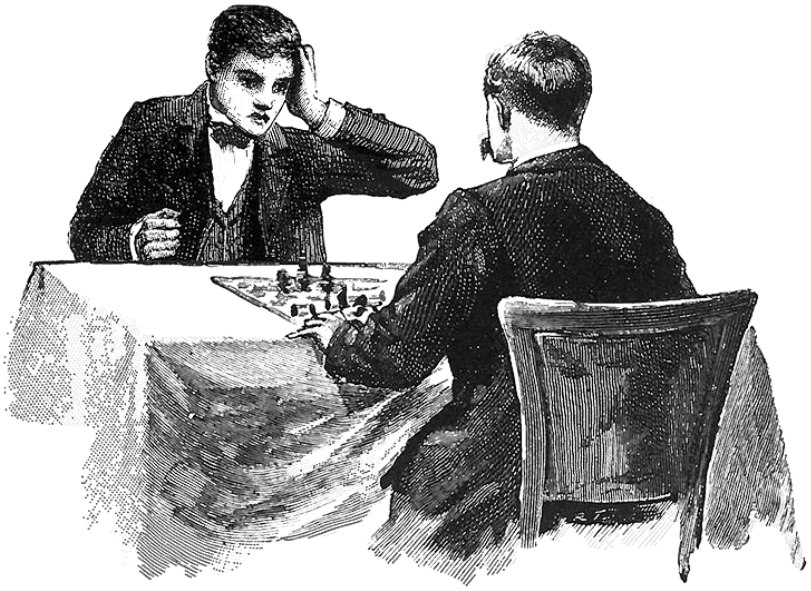
The Paul Morphy Room at Brennan's Restaurant

Over a century after Paul Morphy thrilled the chess world with his mastery of the game, and at the height of the Cold War, Robert James "Bobby" Fischer of the United States, another great chess prodigy, became the 11th World Chess Champion on September 3, 1972, defeating Russia's Boris Spassky in Reykjavik, Iceland.

Fischer (1943 – 2008), American Grandmaster, ranked Morphy among the ten greatest chess players of all time, describing him as "perhaps the most accurate player who ever lived".

Morphy tomb, St. Louis Cemetery No. 1

Paul Morphy lives on today in "The Morphy Chess & Cultural Center", or simply the "Morphy", which celebrated its grand opening in New Orleans on April 5th, 2019.



Located on Earhart Boulevard in the Broadmoor/Marlyville neighborhood of New Orleans, the "Morphy" is the brainchild of New Orleanian Leila D'Aquin and will serve as a community hub for both youths and adults offering not only standard chess club fare, i.e. memberships, tournaments, lessons and camps, but also serving as a place for students to gather after school, where they can receive assistance on their homework and pointers on their chess games.

Was Morphy mad, or simply eccentric? An article in the *Smithsonian Magazine* states, "His family tried to have him committed to an asylum, but he argued his sanity so convincingly that the authorities declined to admit him." Whatever history's verdict may be, it is undoubtedly true that Paul Morphy did not follow the usual rules.

Perhaps in the near future, a twenty-first century New Orleans-born prodigy will become the next international chess sensation. It all depends upon what the next move may be.

Chess, Checkers and Whist Club, New Orleans, old postcard view

NED HÉMARD

New Orleans Nostalgia
"The Pride and Sorrow of Chess"
Ned Hémard