

The Sgian Dubh

Clan Morrison Society of North America

<https://clanmorrison.net/>

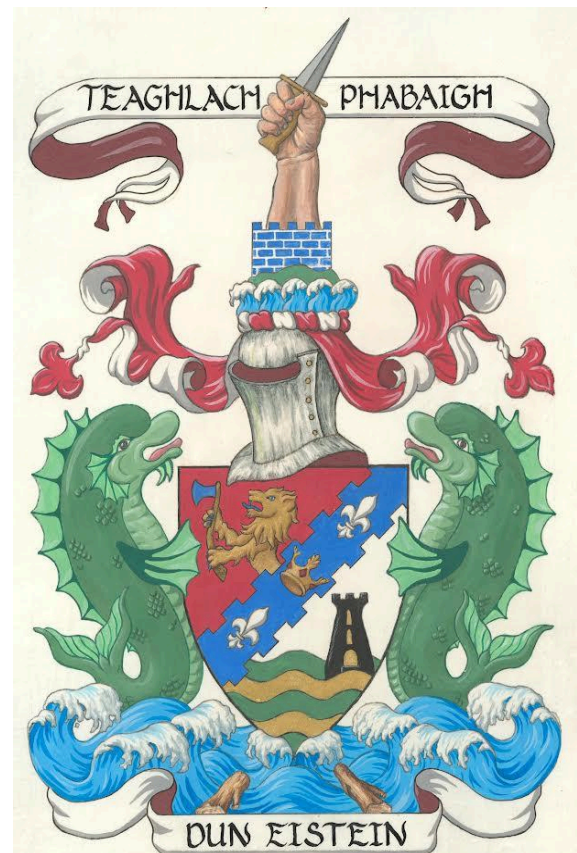
Morrison, Morison, Murison, Gilmore, Gilmour, Brieve, MacBrieve, Judge

The power of myth and Olaf the Black

Did George Washington ever tell a lie? (Yes. He was America's first spymaster.) Did Sherlock Holmes ever say, "Elementary, my dear Watson?" (No. That was a line from a movie, not from a Conan Doyle novel.) The struggle between myth and fact is fundamental to much art and literature. The story of Olaf the Black and Clan Morrison is one of those.

I have been involved in Clan Morrison activities since the 1990s. At the Virginia Scottish Games, I would eagerly hand out leaflets describing the origins of the clan. It began:

"Eight centuries ago, a Norse ship struggled in heavy seas off the Scottish island of Lewis. A proud Kintyre noblewoman named Lauon stood on the deck cradling her new-born infant son, Gillemorrie, in her arms while her husband, Olaf the Black, shouted orders to the crew. Despite his Herculean efforts the ship foundered.



The coat of arms of the Clan Chief

Olaf, Lauon and their son plunged into the frigid waters and clung to a piece of driftwood floating near their sinking vessel. Fortune smiled upon the shipwrecked trio, and they were deposited safe but wet upon the stony Lewis shore.”

*In this article, Andrew Morrison, Viscount Dunrossil – North American chieftain of Clan Morrison and a former classical scholar – explores the reality behind the legend of the medieval Scottish nobleman shipwrecked off the Isle of Lewis. – **editor’s note***

By Andrew Morrison

Looked at purely in terms of numbers, a picture clearly emerges of the Morrisons as one of the leading Highland Clans, with a main base of operations in the Outer Hebrides. Morrison is the 18th most common name in Scotland, but the eighth or ninth most common in the Highlands (more common even than Smith or Brown) and the third most common in the Outer Hebrides. The greatest number of Morrisons in the Islands live in the Ness district in the north of Lewis, while the highest concentration of Morrisons in percentage terms live in Harris.

The Outer Hebrides were settled by migrants from Scandinavia in the ninth and tenth centuries and even today 98 percent of the place names there are in Old Norse. These new arrivals intermarried with the local population, forming a mixed-race people known as the “*Gall-Ghaidheal*.” In time the principal language spoken by these people changed to Gaelic from Norse.

There are very few records of the Morrisons from the period of major clan activity on the mainland, roughly 1400 to 1750. They are almost invisible and are omitted on many popular clan maps altogether.

The MacLeods and murder

One explanation for this seems to be the violent takeover of the island of Lewis by Torquil MacLeod around 1350 and the MacLeods’ domination of the area for the next 250 years. With the ascendancy of the MacLeods and the MacDonalds to their south the Morrisons’ powers were restricted both geographically and functionally. And in about 1600 the last Morrison Brieve (effectively, chief) was murdered by

MacLeods after they had obtained a mandate from King James VI for that purpose.

If we are to say their powers were restricted or reduced, we must believe they were greater beforehand. Evidence for this is tantalizingly small, but it was what motivated the founders of the clan society in its early days.

They were not just playing the fashionable Victorian game, whereby every Scot had to have a clan, a chief and a tartan. They wanted recognition that they had an illustrious history, even if it was distant and remote, and even if they had fallen on harder times.

Soon after the Clan Society was formed in 1909, Hew Morrison, who was principal librarian at the Carnegie Library in Edinburgh from 1887 to 1921, was asked to give an address on the clan and its origins.

First, he cited John Morison of Bragar, known as the “Indweller,” who wrote a *Description of Lewis*, some time between 1678 and 1688. Morison



Chief Alasdair Morrison

states that the first inhabitants of the island were three men of different races: “the first was Mores, son of Kennanus, whom the Irish (i.e. Gaelic) historians call Makurich.” Mores was one of the sons of the King of

Norway, “and all Morrisons in Scotland may challenge their descent from this man.” The second was Iskair, son of Aulay, a Gael, ancestor of the MacAulays of Uig, and the third Macnaicle (MacNicol or Nicolson).

He goes on to say that Torquil Macleod of Skye “violently espoused” the daughter of MacNicol, murdered her family, and thus “possessed himself of all the lands they had in Lewis.”

The Norse origins

This Norse origin was clearly an important part of the folk memory of the Lewis Morrisons, and Hew Morrison thinks it is significant that the form of the name up there has almost always been Morrison, not the Gaelic mac Ghillemuire. This would seem to run counter to the title that the Morrisons of Ness held, that of Brieve or *breitheamh*, someone who administered the Celtic brehon law. Certainly, in later years Brieves were going to Ireland to study. The law they practiced by the 16th century was purely Celtic, but this does not need to have been the case early on. Hew Morrison suggests that their original role was that of Deemster and that the law they judged was Norse.

Either way, Sir Robert Gordon in his *History of the Earldom of Sutherland*, stated that the Brieve is a kind of judge among the islands, who held an “absolute *judicatorie* and to whose authority and censure they willingly submit themselves, when he *determineth* any debatable question between party and party, and they never do appeal from his sentence when he *determineth*.”

The learned Hew speculates that the authority of the early Brieves, or deemsters, was more extensive even than that. In the absence of written records, he quotes an old Gaelic rhyme, which had been chanted to his father by the old woman who nursed him, indicating that the Morrisons would yet rule (*riaghlaidh*) from the *Tigh na Cise* (the parliament in either Man or conceivably Edinburgh) to *Tigh na Grot*, John O’Groats, in Caithness. The implication was that they had done so before, when

the Norse ruled Caithness and the Kingdom of the Isles.

My purpose here is not to endorse what Hew Morrison said and believed but rather to lay it out as the thinking of those Morrisons involved in starting



Former Chief John Ruairidh Morrison

the search for a chief and liaising with the Lord Lyon King of Arms. This was the story, the narrative, that Morrisons were raised believing.

Before a chief had been formally identified, the Lord Lyon Innes of Learney had already had conversations in principle with the clan society about the arms that would be appropriate for a chief of the clan. These, he said, should include the royal lion of Norway with a sword and a castle to indicate Dun Eistein, the fortress of the Morrisons of Ness.

They should also not include any Moors' heads, as had been depicted in the arms of certain mainland Morrisons and of the clan society.

Such, then, is the foundation myth that had been passed down through generations of Morrisons, from John Morison of Bragar and Hew Morrison to my Grandfather, Shakes, and his brother, our first chief, Dr. John Morrison.

DNA vs. the myth

Modern DNA studies have not been kind to this myth. They indicate that all Morrisons may not, in fact, “challenge descent from” this Mores, son of Norway. We appear to be a disparate clan, of diverse origin, just as Scotland is a diverse nation.

Clan tradition and modern science have contradicted each other elsewhere, too: the MacNeils of Barra, for instance, had always claimed descent from King Nial of the Nine Hostages, a famous King of Ireland, but DNA has shown they are Norse. On the other hand, a clan, like a nation, is both a legal entity and a fictive construct.

Foundation myths perform a service in binding the people together, whatever their origins. A narrative has value and meaning now, not merely as a record of something past. It is what gives us, and has given our ancestors, our sense of identity.

In Scotland it was the job of a chief’s bard and seanachie to compose such stories and genealogies, to bring glory to the family of the chief and to bind his people together into a common force, built on the notion that they were all kin. Regardless of what the DNA might indicate, all Morrisons today are united in law into a single clan with a “chief of the name and arms.”

Law is one thing, but it is our tradition and our foundation myths that make us a community. This tradition is what is enshrined in our coats of arms and in our understanding of who we are. This is our story and our identity as Morrisons.

What is this story? It states that all Morrisons and Gilmores are indeed descended from the kings of Norway and from the Brieves, and that a young student at the University of Glasgow, Alasdair Morrison, our chief, is their heir.

Chief corrects a spelling mistake in arms



On March 22, our Chief, Alasdair Morrison of Ruchdi, turned the grand old age of 21. Around the same time news leaked out that he had new arms granted by the Lord Lyon. Some wondered if these things were connected.

They're not, and they're not really new arms. He "re-matriculated" his arms and made one important alteration - essentially, correcting a spelling mistake.

As many of you know, there is no such thing as a clan or family coat of arms. Individuals, called armigers, have arms. A clan chief is said to possess "the undifferenced arms" of the original bearer or the eldest lineal descendant. When his father, Chief John Ruairidh Morrison (known as Ru), died, young Alasdair became chief and owner of the undifferenced arms.

However, the Lyon Court recommends that every house "re-matriculate" the arms roughly every third generation. Ideally, Ru would have done that himself, but his untimely death made that

impossible. Ru was also planning to correct a spelling mistake on his motto. Alasdair has now taken care of both.

The spelling mistake is in the motto which had been written, “Teaghlach Phabbay,” the family of Pabbay. The trouble is, the motto is in Gaelic and the Gaelic name for the island is not Pabbay but Pabaigh. Thus, the motto has now been correctly rendered as “Teaghlach Phabaigh.”

Chief Alasdair, a student of robotics and artificial intelligence at the University of Glasgow, is growing rapidly into the role. Right now most of his time is spent on his studies, but he maintains a keen interest in clan matters and is part of the CMSNA board discussion forum.

We wish him success with his studies and many congratulations on turning 21! – *Andrew Morrison*

The Chairman’s message

The Board considers constitutional changes for the next generation

By Michael Morrison

Chairman, Clan Morrison Society of North America

I hope 2025 is treating everyone well thus far. As always the board of directors is working diligently to ensure the society is running smoothly as it endeavors to rebuild itself to its former glory.

We are enacting changes to make sure that the society is current with the times. To that end we are transitioning from paper to a digitally based organization. It is imperative that we make changes that allow ease of operation for the next generation of officers and members.

The board of directors is working on changes to the CMSNA constitution. This is not a simple process. The constitution requires all changes to be proposed in writing, submitted to the board for approval, disseminated to and voted upon by the general population of the society

membership before those amendments can be made official. It is very important that all members of the Society use their membership privilege and vote for or against the soon to be proposed changes.

Another massive proposal that the board of directors is looking into is to reduce the costs of Lifetime Memberships.

CMSNA new membership and renewals is at an all time low and without taking drastic measures it is entirely possible that within a decade there will not be enough members to justify the continued operation of the society.

The Board of directors is looking into reducing the price of new lifetime membership costs. Hopefully a new lower price point may entice new members.

We are also looking into the possibility of partially sponsoring memberships for any new members who agree to convene highlands games tents for a set period of time.

If you have any suggestions on what we might do to increase membership please reach out directly to me at clanmorrison2019@gmail.com



Michael Morrison with his Harris's Hawk named Kearnan. Michael, a falconer, is at the Tallahassee, Fla., games.

Outside the box

North Carolina divided during American Revolution

By Buddy Morrison

Genealogist

Our family tree has many stories of resilience, hardship, and triumph. For those with roots in North Carolina, 1775 was a defining moment, as the colony was on the verge of revolution. Understanding what our ancestors endured during this time helps us appreciate their legacy.

Two hundred and fifty years ago, North Carolina was a turbulent place. The British crown had reached a boiling point, especially in Boston. The Stamp Act of 1765 and the Tea Act of 1773 had already fueled resentment in many of the 13 colonies; however North Carolinians, whether wealthy landowners or struggling farmers, found themselves

choosing sides. The state was deeply divided, with loyalists supporting British rule and patriots demanding independence.

Discovering our ancestors' role in this conflict can be enlightening and surprising for those of us using genealogy. Did your ancestors support King George III or join the cause with the Sons of Liberty? Military records, tax lists, and land grants from the 1700s can provide clues about where our families stood during these uncertain times.

Daily life in the colony

Most of the middle and western North Carolina population were farmers, working and toiling on land to produce crops such as tobacco, corn, and wheat. For those of

affluent descent, life revolved around plantation work, trade, and community. However, not all North Carolinians lived freely. Enslaved Africans and indentured servants formed a significant portion of the population. Our ancestors' stories are often difficult to trace through traditional genealogical records but crucial to North Carolina's history. For ancestors with African ancestry, researching wills, property records, and church archives may help uncover hidden family histories.

Women played an often-overlooked role in society. They were noted in history, showing that they managed households, raised children, and even ran family businesses while their husbands were on military duty. Diaries, letters, and court records can provide great insights into their lives and property, offering a glimpse into the strength and perseverance of our foremothers.



Conflict and unrest

By 1775, North Carolina was already experiencing skirmishes between patriots and loyalists. The Provincial Congress assembly rejected British authority and set the stage for the colony's eventual declaration of independence. If our ancestors were politically active, they may have been part of this revolutionary movement, serving in militia groups or participating in local resistance efforts. Their stories can be found in minutes and other historical records.

Our story takes a different turn for those like my ancestors with Scottish Highland ancestry.

Many Highland Scots who settled in North Carolina remained loyal to the British crown. If your ancestors were among them, you may find records detailing their participation in the Battle of Moore's Creek Bridge in 1776 and other local skirmishes. These crucial patriot victories would eventually shape the future of North Carolina.

Finding your ancestors

Genealogical research in North Carolina can be an incredible and yet challenging task. Early census records, church documents, and land deeds can help trace your family lines. Organizations like the North Carolina State Archives and the Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution maintain extensive historical records that can assist in uncovering our ancestors' lost histories and stories.

I am happy to help you find your heroes, ancestors, and heritage from your past. As a registered Genealogist with the National Genealogical Society and a member of several organizations, I can help you dig "outside the box" and find your family's story to share with your new generations. Feel free to contact me at SouthernShoresGenealogy.com (my website) or by email at SouthernShoresGenealogy@gmail.com.

"We are the Ancestors of tomorrow, so we must ensure we pass on our stories today. "

Other places you can search for connection to our roots can be as simple as visiting historic sites such as Tryon Palace, Old Salem, and Alamance Battleground, along with sites close to here in South Carolina. These locations can provide a tangible link to the past. Walking the same paths your ancestors once did adds an unbelievable dimension to genealogy, turning names on a family tree into the locations where our ancestors lived, struggled, and shaped history.

Preserving their legacy

The sacrifices and experiences of our ancestors in 1775 shaped the North Carolina we know today. Whether they were revolutionaries fighting for independence, loyalists defending their way of life, or enslaved individuals struggling for freedom, their stories deserve to be remembered.

Hal's salsa, a spicy legacy

Many of us who knew Hal Morrison remember him as one of the society's most beloved and influential members, and we will never forget his salsa. When you want to honor Hal, who died in December, fix up a batch of his spicy salsa and serve it at Scottish festivals.

First, select your favorite hot peppers. Remove seeds and skins. Cut into small pieces, and then follow the rest of this recipe. Make it as hot or mild as you like. Here is Hal's recipe he shared with his friends:

1Tbl Salt
½ Cilantro - Head
½ Parsley - Head
2-4 Lemons – Juiced (use 2 for 8 people or less)
2-4 Limes – Juiced (use 2 for 8 people or less)
1 Pineapple
2 Mango & or Papaya
3-5 Tomato
2 Cucumber
1 Grapes - Bunch
1-2 Tangerine
1-2 Apple

If desired, add the following,



1 Bell Pepper (Red, Yellow & or Green) Roasted/Blackened
1 Onion (Red, Yellow, Spring & or Sweet)
Garlic and Ginger, (Fresh-not salt) to taste
Banana, Chili, & or Jalapeno Peppers, (Fresh, Can, Jar or Powder) to taste
Salt and Pepper to taste

Mix together with a big spoon and then chill for 1 hr., better if overnight
(The citric acid cooks the ingredients as well as your hands - BLISTERS)
Serve with chips of some sort
Plenty of White Spirits
Try this over fish, omelets, or anything that you can think of., Love, Hal

Spring membership report

Life USA	383
Annual USA	85
Life Foreign	15
Annual Foreign	7

Total Membership 490

New Members

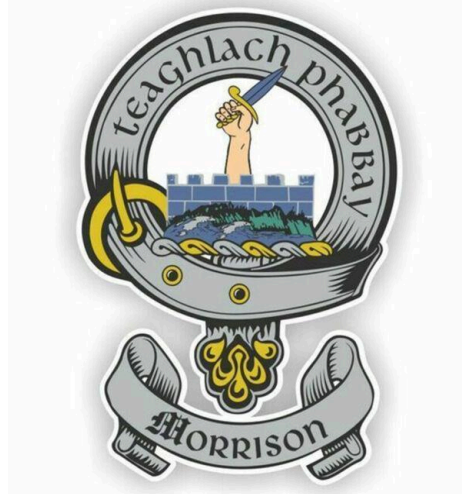
Shelleen Baraldi	Commerce City, CO Life Upgrade
Bart Forbes	Surfside Beach, TX
Charles Raymond Gilmore, Jr.	Godwin, NC
John Henry Moore	Bow, NH Life Upgrade
Bree Juliana Morrison	Lancaster, VA Life Upgrade
E. H. (Buddy) Morrison	Lake Lure, NC Life Upgrade
Gary William Morrison	Sugar Land, TX
Susan Morrison	Denver, CO
Wayne Irvin Morrison	Clover, SC
Jeffrey Allen Perry	Hamilton, VA
Robert Russell Smith	Spruce Grove, Alberta, CN

Deceased Members

Joan Morrison Cuskey	Abingdon, VA 2022 Life Member
Robert C. Gilmore	Simsbury, CT 2016 Life Member
Lois Breur Krause	Pickens, SC 2024 Life Member
Allan Dennis Morrison	Melrose, MA 2012 Life Member
Charles Randall Morrison	Sierra Vista, AZ 2022 Life Member
John W. Strong	Eastampton, NJ 2023 Life Member

The Following Members Generously Donated to the Society

Shelleen Baraldi	Commerce City, CO
David Gilmore	Show Low, AZ
Donna W. McCool	Cochranville, PA
Ronald L. Morrison	Lebanon, PA
Marta Richards	Baton Rouge, LA
Morgan J. Snyder	Greenwich, NY



CMSNA Executive Leadership

The Chief of Clan Morrison: R. Alasdair Morrison of Ruchi

Chairman:

Michael S. Morrison

Vice Chairman:

Vacant

Treasurer:

(Michael S. Morrison, acting)

Membership:

William Broome

Secretary:

Vacant

Historian:

Edmund Potter, PhD

Chaplain:

Vacant

Newsletter Editor:

James Morrison

Scholarship Director:

Robert S. Morrison

Past Chieftain:

Anne M. Morrison

Webmaster:

William Broome

Past Chairmen: Anne Morrison, Chris Gillmore, Arthur Morrison, Edwin F. Holcombe Jr., Jim Morrison, Gerald B. Morrison, Jeffrey Moore, David H. Blain, David R. Gilmour

Members at Large: William Broome, Arthur Morrison

Chairman's Advisory Committee: Edwin Holcombe Jr., Jim Morrison, Robert "Bob" Morrison, David R. Gilmour, Chris Gilmore, Jennifer Wolcott

Clan Morrison Society of North America needs you!

A volunteer organization is only as good as the members who devote their time to make it work. The CMSNA needs members to step forward and help keep the society functioning. Right now we need a vice chairman and a treasurer on the board of directors. We are always looking for conveners to host Clan Morrison tents at Scottish festivals in your areas. You can help by going to the “Volunteer” page on clanmorrison.net. I also need regional correspondents for the quarterly newsletter. Please contact me if you are interested.

— James Morrison, editor

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