

The Canary in the Coal Mine?

American Jewry 1654-1770

by Jerry Klinger

Petition to the Governor General Peter Stuyvesant and Council of New Amsterdam - 1655. We, Jacob Barsimson and Asser Levy, members of the Jewish community wish to be included not exempted or excluded from Military Service in the common defense of New Amsterdam.

The great oak trees of Anti-Semitic prejudice and disdain though transported to the New World was not able to sink deep roots. The concept that Jews should serve as soldiers in the common defense in the 1655 world of New Amsterdam was rejected with a sneer and a heavy tax - less the Jews should benefit with no cost. But just two years later, 1657, the point was moot. The tax was a not enforced.

Asser Levy and other Jews were serving side by side with Christians in the defense of their common homeland. The rights to trade, act as retail merchants, achieve the rights as Burghers or citizens, own land, were not simply granted but were struggled for one by one. Each step forward was met by resistance toward the Jew but each step forward toward equality opened the world to New Freedoms for all people. It was not that the anti-Semitic European mindset with all its preconceptions, discriminations and limitations were not there but the realities of the American frontier did not permit the European world to be readily transplanted.

New Amsterdam, as did eventually all the English Colonies of North America, became a center of attraction to immigrants from all cultures and religious interpretations. As the Colony grew larger and expanded the ability of the central government and church to control what happened in outlying areas declined. The human character of New Amsterdam was organic and changing as new peoples came and trade expanded between the Caribbean, North America, Europe and the Indians.. The single most powerful pull that shaped the world of New Amsterdam was the open, alluring call of land and opportunity for the brave, for the adventurous, for all who wished to reach for their dreams in the dark interiors of America to the West. In the West there was room for all, Christian and Jew, there was room for all, except for the Native American.

Dutch New Amsterdam vanished September, 1664, just ten years after the first Jewish refugees had landed. New Amsterdam became a possession of England and was renamed New York, after its proprietor James the Duke of York. North America, from French Canada to Georgia became a unified, virtually unpopulated, undeveloped wilderness under the King of England - an open door of potential.

Individual Jews had been part of the American experience long before the establishment of the community of New Amsterdam in 1654. Jews were part of the failed settlement efforts of the infamous "Lost Colony " of Roanoke Island, Virginia in 1597 under Sir Walter Raleigh. Jews arrived on the second boat after the Pilgrims landed in Plymouth, Mass. In 1607. Jews were part

of the early colonial efforts at Jamestown, Virginia - 1620's. By 1700 there were an estimated 250 identifiable Jews in American English colonies.

The Dutch Burghers of New Amsterdam made a fundamental demand on Jews living in New Netherland and that was that they should not become financial burdens on the greater Christian community. Jews had to establish themselves economically. Within a year of 1654, Jewish fur traders had ventured as far South as present day southern New Jersey and Delaware and North, high up the Hudson river.

Luis Moses Gomez, a Jew of Sephardic background, purchased 6,000 acres of land on the frontier in 1714; Shortly afterward he built his home as a trading center there. The home is five miles from present day Newburg, N.Y. where he and generations of his descendents lived. The Gomez house is still occupied today 284 years later. The house is on the National Registry of Historic places as the earliest surviving Jewish residence in North America.

Religious toleration and freedom for Jews were not defined in Jewish terms but rather American. Jewish Political freedom and inclusion was even longer and more difficult in coming. Political equality was not to be universally realized until well into the second half of the 19th century - long after the American revolution when the 14th Amendment was added to the U.S. Constitution. It was freedom of conscience and differing religious views between Catholic and Protestant, Protestant and Protestant, Atheist, Agnostic and Freethinkers that created the tensions that eventually resulted in toleration of Jewish religious expression.

The earliest request of the New Amsterdam Jewish community was for burial grounds. The approval was given reluctantly. The question of a Jewish permanent house of worship was out of the question for the Dutch ruling council. The English struggled with the same issue in the late 1680's and 1690's but essentially restricted open Jewish Religious worship to private homes and only if kept modest and quiet. It was not until 1730 that the Jewish community was permitted to buy land and build a small simple structure - the first permanent Jewish House of Worship in North America. The synagogue known as the Mill Street Synagogue is better known as Shearith Israel, the Spanish and Portugese Synagogue of New York City. Today, the important original historic site is almost forgotten, marked by a parking garage in a canyon of dark forbidding, soot covered buildings.

The path to American freedom of Religious expression was not easy. The founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, known as the Puritans, were themselves religiously persecuted. They established themselves in Massachusetts pushing the frontier westward and pushing the Native Americans further west as the two cultures collided while at the same time forcing out non conformists for their religious interpretations.

Jewish influence was limited to the Old Testament, respect for the Hebrew language and an occasional accidental Jewish traveler. Generally, Jews were not welcome in Massachusetts Bay Colony and would not be welcome in reality in Massachusetts until well into the 19th century. Puritan intolerance to alternative Protestant thinking banished Roger Williams, himself a Puritan minister, from the village of Salem, Massachusetts in 1635. Williams proposed a heretical belief

to the Puritans, *"A permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-Christian consciences and worship be granted to all men in all nations and countries."*

Williams proposed toleration of other religious beliefs. Driven from Massachusetts, Williams established Rhode Island and created the American precedent that would be carved in stone letters later in the American constitution - religious toleration and the separation of Church and State. Jews would find a home in Rhode Island. The Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island traces its origins to 1658 when Mordecai Campanal and Moses Pacheco arrived from Barbados. They sent back favorable reports to the British West Indies and were soon followed by 15 Jewish families looking to relocate to the tolerant religious and opportune economic environment of Newport.

Congregation Jeshuat Israel, formed in 1702, dedicated its permanent house of worship in 1763 in Newport. It was built with a secret escape passage behind the bema if needed. The building is still in use today as a synagogue. It is the oldest standing permanent Jewish House of Worship in North America.

In all of the English colonies as well as the earlier, Dutch and Swedish colonial experience, the problems were the same, how to attract settlement. The focus was to develop the land and increase the wealth not just of the inhabitants but also of the proprietors of the colony and of the Crown. Restricting immigration, denying economic development because of European bigotry was counter productive in an increasingly "enlightened" period of thought in the 17th and 18th centuries. How can people be encouraged to go live in the colonies?

The second colonial charter of South Carolina, 1665 was heavily influenced by the English philosopher John Locke. The charter called for religious toleration of Jews and protected them from attack or libel because of their faith. The charter was rejected five times by the local legislature. Essentially the ideal of toleration was adopted by the people; they simply ignored official discrimination. The practical need for people and human resources was too great. The earliest record of Jewish presence dates from the 1695. Kehilat Kadosh Beth Elohim organized in 1749 dedicated its synagogue in 1797 in Charleston, South Carolina.

The Colony of Georgia was not chartered until 1732 under Governor Ogelthorpe; His problem was the same as in all the other colonies, how to get people to come. Georgia was partially populated as a dumping ground for the petty criminals of London's jails. The Jewish community of London viewed the opportunity of Georgia in much the same way.

In 1733, the Jewish community of London feeling threatened by the burdens of caring for an increasing influx of poor German and Polish Jews sent 83 of their brethren to Georgia. When the ships arrived the 83 Jews represented almost 20% of the total population of Georgia.

Congregation Mikve Israel, Savannah, Georgia, dates from July, 1733 but did not build a permanent synagogue until years later. From almost the beginning of Jewish settlement in Savannah conflicts between Ashkenazik and Sephardic Jews erupted into extreme tensions that refused to form a united Jewish community. This characteristic tension between the "common" Ashkenazik Jew and the "aristocratic" Sephardic Jew presaged another 250 year struggle within the Jewish community for definition as to who is and what is an American Jew.

The earliest Jewish presence in Pennsylvania dates from the early 1710's when Isaac Miranda settled near Lancaster and became an Indian Trader. Though one of the earliest colonies it was late to develop a Jewish community. Philadelphia because of its physical location far up the Delaware River was the furthest west of the major colonial American cities. Philadelphia soon not only became a major port city but became the gateway to the west. Business and opportunity gravitated to Philadelphia so much so that it quickly became one of the biggest cities in Colonial America.

The first Jew to live in Philadelphia was Nathan Levy in 1735, who came as a merchant and shipper. Levy acquired a small piece of land between 8th and 9th streets on the North side of Walnut Street which became the first Jewish cemetery in Pennsylvania. During the revolutionary war the British continued the European custom of executing deserters at the gates of Jewish cemeteries. The gate of the Walnut Street cemetery still has the marks of British bullets.

The first minyan in the American West was held at the home of Joseph Simon in the frontier community of Lancaster in 1743. Simon himself a frontiersman and Indian trader and one of the largest land owners in Pennsylvania employed expeditions led by the famous Daniel Boone to open the Western trading routes. Simon entered into partnerships with William Henry who developed the famous Henry frontier rifle. At the Simon and Henry forge, the young Robert Fulton learned the metal trade that helped him develop the first steam powered boat in history. In 1752, the famous American Liberty Bell was brought over on the Myrtilla, a ship owned by the Jewish firm of Simon, Levy and Franks of Philadelphia. A permanent Jewish house of worship in Pennsylvania, Mikve Israel, was not dedicated until 1782.

Jewish immigration to Colonial America was not planned or systematic. It was random as opportunities were presented to individuals or small groups of Jews in Europe and the Caribbean. For the most part, the small Jewish American communities that were developing along the British Eastern seaboard enjoyed remarkable freedom of religious expression and economic opportunity. Jews in colonial America enjoyed freedoms that had not been realized for over two thousand years. That is not to say that Jews were welcomed and loved wherever they went but rather the explosive growth of the frontier and the American economy did not focus on the Jews.

Political repression of the Jew as well as the Catholics and many other religious and non-conformist sects were to continue as part of the American struggle long after the American revolution had been fought. Some argue that political freedom was not achieved by Jews until after the second American Revolution (the Civil War 1861-1865). The first American Revolution was yet to be fought in 1770.