

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Bilhah Abigail Franks

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **Early American Jewry, The Jews of New York, New England and Canada, 1649 – 1794, Volume I** by Jacob Rader Marcus, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951, pages 58 – 72.

Introduction

In general little is known about the Jewish women who resided in America during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Two exceptions are Rebecca Machado Phillips¹ and Rebecca Gratz². Another is Bilhah Abigail (Levy) Franks. “She was not a remarkable woman... but an interesting one.”

Abigail was born on November 26, 1696 to Moses (Raphael) and Richea (Rycha) Levy. Levy was born in Germany in 1665 and moved to London when he was a young man. There he had some success as a merchant, but felt there were more opportunities in the New World, so he decided to come to America, arriving in New York City in about 1705. Moses Levy became a substantial merchant in New York and owned a number of ships that transported goods between America and Europe. Moses Levy became an active member of Congregation Shearith Israel and served for several years as *Parnas* (President) of the synagogue.

Jacob Franks

“When he [Moses Levy] emigrated to this country there came with him a man younger than he, but who was destined to play an important part in the affairs of the congregation as well as the city of his adoption. This was Jacob, the son of Naphtali Franks, who was born in Germany in the year 1688, and went from there to London to seek his fortune. He also thought that the New World would offer to him an enlarged field, and while his tastes were literary rather than mercantile, like many others before and since, he realized perhaps that the road to wealth was more rapid through the avenues of commerce than through the efforts of the pen.”³

Jacob Franks had an intellectual bent, was learned in Jewish Law, spoke a number of languages, and was called “rabbi” by members of Congregation Shearith Israel. In 1712 at the age of 25 he married Abigail Levy, who was then 16 years old. Jacob became a prosperous New York businessman.

“The Frankses had nine children, born between 1715 and 1742. [Two died before the age of seven.] The family was active in New York’s Jewish life—they belonged to congregation Shearith Israel, where Jacob Franks was one of four men to lay the cornerstone of the new Mill Street synagogue in 1729 and where he served as *syndic* [president] in 1730—and they were active in broader Christian society, among whose women Franks counted her best friends. Franks reveled in the openness of New York society, rejoicing in the ‘Faire Charecter’ the family enjoyed among both Christians and Jews.”⁴

“Jacob and Abigail's oldest child was Naphtali, which Jewish tradition, based on Gen. 49: 2 I, takes to mean ‘stag’ or ‘hart,’ and hart in German is Hirsch. Like other German-Jewish families, the Frankses called their son Hirsch or Hart; Abigail called him ‘Heartsey.’ Sometime before 1737 Naphtali ‘Heartsey’ Franks was sent to London, where he was thoroughly prepared for the business world by the numerous brothers of his father. Young Franks left home probably in his teens; as far as we know, he never returned to the colonies. Ultimately he became a rich and powerful figure in the London Jewish community. Abigail kept in constant touch with her firstborn through letters.”

“Thirty-seven letters of the Franks family are known to survive, dating from May 7, 1733, to October 30, 1748. All are addressed to Naphtali Franks in England. Thirty-four are from Abigail, one is from Jacob, and two are written by his brother David. They discuss local politics, family and community activities, and aspects of the Franks family’s trans-Atlantic business. But Abigail Franks’s letters are most significant as an early American Jewish woman’s extended thoughts on the fit and fate of Judaism in colonial New York.”⁵

Bilhah Abigail Franks

It is from these letters that we know the following about Abigail.

“Abigail Levy Franks was never called upon to play a heroic role. She was the daughter of a substantial merchant, married to a prosperous businessman who daily grew in prestige and who, apparently, never experienced any serious financial reverses. She was born in an England which now gave its Jews every opportunity to rise, at least in the economic world. A child of the British world with its budding tolerance and of the English colonial lands with their ever-expanding liberties, she faced the future. Her tongue was English, her script the roman, and she knew and quoted Dryden, Montesquieu, and Pope. She devoured the newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets of the day, read books, and enjoined upon her sons the duty of reading and studying every day while they were still young and the leisure was theirs. She saw that they were taught the painting and the music and the good manners that were expected of the children of the wealthy who moved in the magic circle of the titled and the politically powerful.

“Her children were her life, and if, unlike many women in the ghettos of continental Europe, she did not have to labor for them, she loved them no particle less. She lived and

worried for her children with all the intensity of the traditional Jewish mother. Though apparently untutored in Hebraic and Yiddish sources, she was no less intensely Jewish.”

Intermarriage

“Unflinchingly loyal to her faith, she [Abigail] was ready to sacrifice herself by sending her beloved children across the sea, to distant England, to a large Jewish community, rather than expose them to intermarriage with Gentiles . . . yet her closest friends were Christians and she was a welcome guest in their homes. She wrote of herself as a ‘patriot’; this land was ‘our country,’ but she could never reconcile herself to intermarriage; she was determined to live and die a Jewess.”

However, it was not possible to send all of their children to England, and in 1742 their oldest daughter Phila eloped with Oliver DeLancey, who was from a prominent Christian family.

“The flight of their daughter and the disclosure that she had been secretly married for six months shocked Jacob Franks and his wife Abigail; they were observant, Orthodox Jews, and objected strenuously to intermarriage.”

In a letter to “Heartsey” dated June 27, 1743 Abigail wrote [the spelling is hers]

“My spirits was for some time soe depresst that it was a pain to me to speak or see any one. I have over come it soe far as not to make my concern soe conspicuous but I shall never have that serenity nor peace within I have soe happily had hitherto. My house has bin my prison ever since. I had not heart enough to goe near the street door. Its a pain to me to think off going again to town and if your father's buissness would permit him to live out of it I never would goe near it again. I wish it was in my power to leave this part of the world; I would come away in the first man of war that went to London.”

“This was not the last hurt she would feel. [In 1743] son David married Margaret Evans, a Christian daughter of one of Abigail’s close friends. Her younger children seem never to have married at all. Of Jacob and Abigail Franks’s more than two dozen grandchildren, not one of them appears to have passed on Judaism to his or her descendants.”⁶

We know that what happened to the descendents of the Frankses was sadly not an isolated event in American Jewish history.

¹ See **Rebecca (Machado) Phillips: Colonial Jewish Matriarch, The Jewish Press**, April 7, 2006, pages 41 & 46. (<http://www.jewishpress.com/pageroute.do/17894>)

² See **Rebecca Gratz: Champion Of The Unfortunate, The Jewish Press**, December 1, 2006, pages 39 & 69. (<http://www.jewishpress.com/pageroute.do/20057>)

³ **The Levy and Seixas Families of Newport and New York** by N Taylor Phillips, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961)*; 1896; 4, AJHS Journal. pages 189 ff.

⁴ Bilah Abigail Franks <http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/franks-bilhah-abigail-levy>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.