

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Colonial Jewish Businesswomen

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Introduction

There is a stereotype that many may have regarding women of the past, namely, “A woman’s place was in the home.” They believe that until relatively recently women spent their time running their homes and raising their children. However, this was not necessarily the case for Jewish women during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Indeed, there were some women during this period who were engaged in a variety of commercial endeavors. Things did begin to change about the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the attitude, “A woman’s place is in the home.” became prevalent.

A working woman of – say - 1760 was considered simply on her own merits. After 1800 or thereabouts, such a woman was self-conscious, and her neighbors critical. She was no longer just an individual trying to earn a living; she was a female who had stepped out of the “graceful and dignified retirement” which so well became her sex. Her emergence might be praised or blamed; it could not be taken as a matter of course.¹

At home most eighteenth-century women were “manufacturers” of cloth and clothing, soap and candles, and the processed food that carried the family through the winter. In the absence of husband, father, or brother they sometimes managed sizable properties and farms, especially in the South, where white female supervision of black men was more socially acceptable than women's directing of white men might have been. Outside the home Colonial women engaged in many occupations that were later to be regarded as “men's work,” including the skilled trades and a variety of mercantile activities. The impression persists that most of these women were spinsters or widows, perhaps because the work of wives, and there must have been many of them, who shared their husband’s business and interests was little noted.²

From this we see that there were a number of women who played significant roles in the world of business during colonial times. This article focuses on some Jewish women who were active in the business world.

Esther and Isaac Pinheiro were married in Amsterdam in 1656. After coming to the New World, the couple lived in New York but eventually settled on the West Indian Island of Nevis,³ which, at one time, was a bustling center of shipping and trade.

For a period during the late seventeenth century this small town [Charlestown, Nevis] served as the point of embarkation not only for the products of Nevis, but for all English goods being shipped out of the Leeward Islands. At the same time Charlestown also functioned as the slave depot of the Royal African Company in the Leeward Islands. All of this commercial activity made Charlestown a major port of the late-seventeenth-century British Caribbean, and it was during this period that the first Jewish merchants began to arrive on the island.⁴

Isaac Pinheiro passed away while in New York on February 17, 1710. In his will he designated Esther as his sole executrix and left much of his property and other holdings to her. Therefore, she took on the responsibility of running her husband's far-flung and rather extensive business interests after his death.

Some sixty years before the American Revolution, Esther Pinheiro, a Jewish woman from the British colony of Nevis in the West Indies, was a familiar figure in the commercial communities of New York and Boston. The widow of Isaac Pinheiro, a Nevis merchant who was also a freeman of New York, Esther had inherited her husband's business and fortune, both of unknown dimensions, upon his death in 1710. From 1716 to 1718, if not before and after those dates, the Widow Pinheiro "was a not infrequent visitor" to the mainland colonies. She sailed from her home in Charlestown, the capital of Nevis, to the ports of Boston and New York in what was presumably her own small sloop, the *Neptune*, but whether or not she was in command of the five-man crew is not clear. She may, rather, have been the supercargo [the officer on this merchant ship in charge of the commercial concerns of the voyage], as well as owner of all or part of the West Indian produce, principally sugar and molasses, with which the vessel was laden. Whether as captain or supercargo, she would have managed the sale of the cargo and assembled a return load of flour, lumber, fish, and goods from Europe.⁵

In Newport, RI, Frances Pollock, with the assistance of her son Jacob, continued running her husband's substantial import-export business after his passing in the 1760's. Mrs. Nathan Simson, who had spent her childhood in America, ran her deceased husband's extensive commercial business from London.

Abraham and Abigail (1698/1701 – 1794) Minis were early residents of Savannah, GA. Abraham developed a fairly extensive mercantile business which Abigail took over after his death on January 13, 1757. In addition, she also ran a plantation to which she eventually added more than a thousand acres.

Nor was that all. On the king's birthday in 1772 she prepared a collation for "over seventy notables in the Savannah courthouse," evidently in her capacity as tavern keeper. The following year she received fifteen pounds, three shillings for provisions and liquors with which she had supplied a joint committee of the Assembly. Jacob R. Marcus, the historian of Colonial Jewry, describes this busy woman as belonging to "the moderately wealthy."

And there was that enterprising New Yorker of the Revolutionary generation, Rachel Pinto [1722 – 1815], spinster, whose precise business is unknown, but whose tombstone records that “by means of industry” she “supported her relatives who looked up to her for aid.” She was also one of the chief benefactors of the Polonies Talmud Torah School of Congregation Shearith Israel, the oldest Jewish school in the United States.⁶

Most Jewish colonial women were, of course, not involved in such extensive business endeavors. However, many of them, both gentile and Jewish, were shopkeepers. The first recourse of a widowed woman forced to support herself and her children was to open a small store in the front room of her home. These female shopkeepers usually purchased the items they sold from local merchants or had local merchants place orders for them with their suppliers. Such shops were to be found in virtually every settlement in colonial America.

Grace Levy, a widowed mother of seven children and five step-children, ran a small store in New York in the 1730s. Mrs. Hannah Moses, who ran a shop in Philadelphia, was a customer of the Jewish merchants Bernard Gratz and Benjamin Clava, while they were in business together from 1755 to 1769. She also took in boarders.

Indeed, running a boarding-house was another thing that a woman could do to support herself and her family.

In 1774, the widow Hetty Hays, who ran what was probably the first Jewish boarding house in New York, bought in the market a piece of meat which had been slaughtered and sealed properly, but which had not been properly examined. The shohet, the parnass and the assistants consulted a certain Rabbi Samuel bar Isaac, who had but lately arrived from London to visit New York, and who seems to have had rabbinical ordination. After due investigation, the shohet was completely cleared; the widow Hays was obliged to make her kitchen ware kosher so that her boarding house might not be considered a “Treffe house.”⁷

The above illustrates the commercial industriousness of a number of colonial Jewish women. It should be considered no more than a sampling of these activities, because there is no question that many other Jewish women were involved in business activities. Unfortunately, we do not have any records of most of these endeavors.

¹ **Career Women of America 1776-1856** by Elizabeth Anthony Dexter, Marshall Jones, Francestown, NH, 1950, page 219

² **The Jewish Businesswoman in America** by Irene D. Neu, *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* (1961-1978); Sep 1976-Jun 1977; 66, 1-4; AJHS Journal, page 137 ff. This article is available at no cost at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>

³ For information about the Jewish community of Nevis please see [The Jews of Nevis and Alexander Hamilton](#) by this author, **The Jewish Press**, May 4, 2007, pages 28 – 29 available at <http://www.jewishpress.com/content.cfm?contentid=21464>

⁴ **The Jewish Community of Early Colonial Nevis**, Michelle M. Terrell, University Press of Florida, 2005, page 41.

⁵ **The Jewish Businesswoman in America** by Irene D. Neu

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ **The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654 – 1860** by Hyman B. Grinstein, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1945, page 299.