

## Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 92)

### The Hays Family of Westchester County

**Dr. Yitzchok Levine**  
**Department of Mathematical Sciences**  
**Stevens Institute of Technology**  
**Hoboken, NJ 07030**  
[llevine@stevens.edu](mailto:llevine@stevens.edu)

*Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **The Hebrews in America, A Series of Historical and Biographical Sketches**, by Isaac Markens, published by the author, New York, 1888 pages 28 - 32.*

Early American Jewish history is unfortunately replete with examples of observant families who came to America and, within a relatively short period of time, not only abandoned much of their commitment to religious observance but even had the sad experience of having some of their children intermarrying and assimilating. One family that did not follow this trend was the Hays family.

Michael Jechiel Hays (originally de Haas), who died in August 1740, emigrated with his wife, six sons and daughter from Holland during the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

An extract from the obituary of Benjamin Etting Hays [a great grandson of Michael Jechiel], written in 1858 by Jacob da Silva Solis-Cohen, said that “his forefathers immigrated from Holland with the first settlers. They came in their own vessel with their own cattle and agricultural implements to till the soil as had been their occupation at home.” The extract continued, “Settling near New Rochelle, they remained plain, unassuming farmers adhering rigorously to the Jewish laws, highly esteemed for their wealth, industry and integrity, as well as for the assistance given their adopted country even before called upon.”

Michael Jechiel Hays, who is believed by some family members to have married twice, had six sons: Jacob, Solomon, Isaac, Judah, Abraham and David. Jacob Hays is the first member of the family of whom there is any record, the family papers say, and in 1721, with Titus Beekman of New York, he leased 40 acres in Rye “to work mines thereon” - referring to iron deposits.<sup>1</sup>

Jacob Hays, who was naturalized in about 1723 and died in 1760, was among those active in the erection in 1730 of the first building of New York City’s Congregation Shearith Israel.

Jacob’s children were Michael, David, Benjamin, Moses, Charity and Abigail. Michael was a farmer in North Castle, Benjamin ran a tavern in Bedford, and David ran a general store across the common from the tavern. David’s wife, Esther [Etting], is recalled by family members in heroic terms.<sup>2</sup>

## **Patriotic Fervor**

Jacob's children were strong supporters of the colonists during the American Revolution, despite the fact that there was considerable Tory support in Westchester County where they resided.

While David was serving with the American forces on Long Island in the Revolutionary War, the British burned the Hays home in Bedford, and then burned the entire village. In bed with a newborn infant, Esther Hays had refused to disclose the whereabouts of a party of patriots attempting to drive a herd of cattle through the British lines to the American camp at White Plains.

Servants removed Esther and her infant and hid them in the woods until they could be rescued. Among the young boys engaged in moving the cattle through enemy lines was a son, Jacob, then 7 years old. Jacob later became New York City's High Constable, or chief of police, for nearly a half-century.<sup>3</sup>

## **Two Letters<sup>4</sup>**

In 1785 Michael Hays, David's oldest brother, purchased a farm and manor in Mount Pleasant. He never married, and, when he died in 1799, left all his property to David.

Between Michael Hays and his brother David there existed a profound love, evidenced not only by the terms of Michael's will, but by many letters not of public interest. Two letters, however, may be quoted [with spelling and punctuation as they appear in the originals], as illustrative of the firm affection with which the scattered families of Jews in the early days of our country clung to the observances of their religion; and it will be remembered that these were men and women all of whom proved not by mere words, but when occasion demanded by brave deeds, their intense love for country - men and women, who above all others are entitled to be termed American Jews.

To Mr. Michael Hays, Merchant In North Castle

Bedford Septemb' 22. 1784.

Dear Brother

I send you by Jacob 1/4 mutton kil'd yesterday, also your Deed; & wish you a good fast Shabos [Yom Kippur occurred on Saturday, September 25 in 1784.] also Monday is yorsitet [Yahrtzeit] for Mother. Esther & Family Desire to be remembered to you & wishes you would Come & Keep Yomtob with us. Next thursday 31<sup>st</sup> of Septembr & friday ye [the] 1<sup>st</sup> of October is the two first Days of Sucoth; wednesday Oshinarabah [Hoshanah Rabbah] the 6 & thursday & friday the 7 & 8<sup>th</sup> of October is the 2 last Days. I write this for fear you wont Come; but it will Please us all very much to have you here then. In haste as Jacob is waiting -

from your aff

Brother David Hays.

To Michael Hays In North Castle

Bedford february 20th. 1785.

Dear Brother,

I hope this may find you well as we are at Present. I just let you know that thursday ye. 24 is Purim and we shall Be glad to see you here; also that Saturday March the 26<sup>th</sup> is Pisack [Pesach] and would also be glad of your Good Company then. We all joyn In love to you

from your afft. Brother-

David Hays

### **High Constable Jacob Hays**

High Constable Jacob Hays [the oldest son of David and Esther Etting Hays mentioned above] was one of the unique characters of New York many years ago. Born at Bedford, Westchester County, N. Y., in 1772, he came to the metropolis [New York City] in 1798, and was appointed by Mayor Varick as one of the marshals of the city. Four years afterwards he was appointed by Mayor Livingston High Constable of the city, corresponding to the present office of Chief of Police. So faithfully were his duties performed that he occupied the position up to the time of his death in 1850, discharging for some years also the duties of Sergeant-at-Arms of the Board of Aldermen and Crier of the Court of Sessions. New York never had a more vigilant, industrious or efficient head of police. During his long public career of forty-eight years he slept, on an average, not more than six hours out of twenty-four. The cry of "Set old Hays on them!" always sufficed to quickly disperse the unruly element. In hunting down and bringing criminals to justice he had no equal. The first on hand at all signs of disturbance, the "Terror of Evil Doers" promptly restored order out of chaos by the magic of his presence. His fame as a detective was known all over the world.

### **"Uncle Ben" (Benjamin Etting) Hays**

Benjamin Etting Hays (1779 – 1858) inherited the large farm that had been left to his father David by David's brother Michael.

"Uncle Ben," as he was known throughout the country, was the only Hebrew farmer in Westchester County in his day. He was strictly orthodox in his religious belief and adhered closely to all the forms and ceremonies observed by the most

pious and devout of his race. In order to conform to the prescribed dietary laws he obtained a certificate, authorizing him to kill his own meat.

This pious Hebrew, though living in a comparatively remote section and completely isolated from his co-religionists, observed the Mosaic law as strictly as though he lived in their midst, and enjoined upon his children a like observance. On his extensive farm he contented himself by going over the fields a single time in garnering the hay and the grain, their leavings, together with the fruit that fell to the ground, being left for the benefit of the poor, thus following out the Biblical injunction. "Uncle Ben" was universally loved and respected. An old Quaker once assured him that he was "the best Christian in Westchester County." He was also a man of generous impulses, and among his charities may be mentioned the donation of a piece of land to the Trustees of the School District, on which to build a school, the sole proviso being that the school should be free to all without discrimination.

---

<sup>1</sup> **A Family's History in Letters, Ledgers and Deeds** by James Feron, *The New York Times*, April 22, 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> These letters are quoted in **Note Concerning David Hays and Esther Etting His Wife, and Michael Hays and Reuben Etting, Their Brothers, Patriots of the Revolution** by Solomon Solis-Cohen, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961)*; 1894; 2, AJHS Journal. Available at <http://www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm>