

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Moses Raphael Levy – Wealthy Colonial Jewish Merchant

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For centuries Jews believed America to be a land of freedom and financial opportunity. One such Jew was Moses Raphael Levy (1665 – 1728) who achieved tremendous financial success as an American colonial merchant.

Levy was born in 1665 in Germany to Isaac and Beila Levy. He relocated to England and his marriage to his first wife, Richea (Rycha) Asher, took place in 1695¹ in London's Bevis Marks Synagogue. Three children were born in London – Bilhah Abigail (b. 1696), Asher (b. 1699), and Nathan (b. 1704). According to family tradition, Moses enjoyed some financial success in England. "After accumulating something of a competency in London, he thought he saw in the New World opportunities for adding to it, and about the year 1705 landed in New York City."² The Levys were accompanied by Moses' brother, Samuel, and his wife, Rachel Asher who was Beila's sister. (The practice of brothers solidifying family and business ties by marrying sisters was not uncommon at this time.) A young man named Jacob Franks, who would eventually marry Bilhah Abigail, also came with them.³

"As Ashkenazim, the Levys found themselves outnumbered. New York had been settled by Sephardim, who constituted a majority of its Jewish residents. Because there was no organized Ashkenazic community in New York until the nineteenth century, the Levys had no choice but to turn for communal support to the Sephardic establishment. They were allowed to join the Sephardic community with the understanding that they would conform to Sephardic customs. They did, and gradually became accepted as "naturalized" Sephardim."

Moses Levy took an active interest in New York's Congregation Shearith Israel and served as its *Parnas* (President) for several years. Indeed, he was serving that office when he passed away on June 14, 1728.

However, his main interests were financial.

"Taking full advantage of business and family connections in London and the West Indies, Levy soon became so successful in exporting beaver pelts and grain and importing a variety of manufactured goods that he controlled a fleet of ships, one of which he named after his daughter, Abigail. With the emergence of a thriving American export economy of grains, furs, and hides, Levy became ever more involved in commerce and trade. Business was so good that in 1711 Levy joined several other wealthy Jewish

merchants in contributing to a fund for the completion of a spire on Trinity Church on Broadway and Wall Street, making the church the tallest man-made structure in the city. It was an investment that paid off. Four years later, the New York Assembly passed a bill naturalizing all resident landowners of foreign birth, regardless of religion. This law entitled Levy and his heirs to the same rights and obligations their Gentile neighbors enjoyed.

“In 1716 Levy’s wife Richea died, leaving Levy with five children. Two years later, in London, Levy married Grace Mears of Spanish Town, Jamaica, where a Sephardic community had existed for over half a century. Grace bore Levy seven children.”⁴

Their first child Rachel was born in London in 1719. She was the mother of Gershom Mendes Seixas, who served as Hazzan of Congregation Shearith Israel from 1768 to 1776 and again from 1784 until his passing in 1816. (Shearith Israel did not function during the Revolutionary War, since many of New York’s Jews left the city rather than live under the British when they captured the city. Seixas led this exodus and is often referred to as the Revolutionary War Hazzan.)

Some of Levy’s twelve children “became the ancestors of very distinguished Jews in the generations to follow. One of his sons was the real founder of the Philadelphia Jewish community, another was one of the first Jews in Baltimore. A grandson of his, likewise named Moses Levy, was considered by Jefferson for a cabinet post.”⁵ The Liberty Bell was transported to America on the ship *Myrtilla* which belonged to Nathan Levy, Moses’ eldest son.

Levy did suffer the ups and downs of the business world in his many financial endeavors. “That the merchant-shipper of that generation only too frequently suffered reverses is eloquently demonstrated in Levy’s relations with Isaac Naphthaly, a Rhode Island butcher who also aspired to be a merchant. By 1705, Naphthaly, now in New York, had been granted the freedom of the city; the following year, while engaged in litigation of some sort, he succeeded in inducing Levy to become his bondsman. Two years later Naphthaly ran up a debt with Levy in a commercial deal and then fled the country. He was probably hopelessly bankrupt and ran away to escape imprisonment for debt. Levy was now compelled to pay the bond and the costs of the suit, and he lost what he himself had advanced in goods and credits. All told, the fugitive cost him over £ 176, to say nothing of incidental expenses in the affair. Years later Levy heard that Naphthaly had passed away, ‘in parts remote ... beyond the seas, intestate,’ but he also heard that he did leave some small effects in New York. Accordingly, Levy petitioned Governor William Burnett for letters of administration as principal creditor, and received them; he probably salvaged very little of the original credits now due for almost fifteen years.”⁶

Nonetheless, Moses Levy’s immigration to America, the land of opportunity, paid off handsomely, as the following incident shows. Levy took out an ad in the April 14, 1726 issue of the New York **Gazette** in which he announced that he wanted to sell “a house in the town of Rye, with about sixty or seventy acres of upland and about five acres of meadow, together with part of mansion, formerly belonging to John Heward and now to Moses Levy, in New York, or any part thereof, on reasonable terms to any person that

has a mind to purchase the same.” He added that he may be found “over against the Post-office.”⁷

“Moses Levy’s personal stature, civic attainments and early Americanization are best captured in the portraits (all in the collection of the American Jewish Historical Society) not only of himself but also of his daughters Rachel and Abigail, his son-in-law Jacob Franks, and his grandchildren David and Phila Franks. It is by far the most complete visual record we have of an early colonial American Jewish family. Decked out in an imposing powdered wig and a greyhound at his side symbolizing his landowning status (unattainable for a Jew elsewhere in the Christian world) Levy radiates the well-fed comfort and well-bred confidence of a successful merchant-landowner.”⁸

¹ **First American Jewish Families: 600 Genealogies, 1654-1988** by Malcolm H. Stern, Third Edition, American Jewish Archives, 1991, page 154. (<http://americanjewisharchives.org/FAJF/intro.php>)

² **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, page 189 (Available at <http://www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm>)

³ See "Bilhah Abigail Franks: Early American Jewish Matriarch" **The Jewish Press**, October 7, 2011, pages 24 & 26.

⁴ **The Seixas-Kursheedts and the Rise of Early American Jewry** by Kenneth Libo and Abigail Kursheedt Hoffman, Bloch Publishing Company in conjunction with the AJHS, 2001, page 3.

⁵ **Early American Jewry, The Jews of New York, New England and Canada, 1649 – 1794** by Jacob Radar Marcus, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1951, page 51.

⁶ Ibid., page 52.

⁷ **The Levy and Seixas Families of Newport and New York**

⁸ <http://sephardicoralhistory.org/education/essays.php?action=show&id=37>