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Unusual American Jews of the 18th and 19th Centuries

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I. Spanish Jewry

A. The land of opportunity for Jews -- from the 8th to the 12th century -- was Spain.

B. The Jewish paradise in Spain ended abruptly when a cruel Muslim Berber Dynasty -- Almohades -- came to power in the 12th century.

C. In 1212 Christians gained control of peninsula

II. History of the Spanish Inquisition –

A. The Inquisition had jurisdiction only over those who professed to be Catholics, not over professing Jews.

B. Ferdinand and Isabella appointed [Tomás de Torquemada](#) in [1481](#) to investigate and punish [conversos](#): [Jews](#) and [Muslims](#) who claimed to have converted to Christianity but continued to practice their former religion in secret. *Conversos* were common in Spain. Some disguised Jews had been ordained as priests and even [bishops](#). Detractors called converted Jews *Marranos*, a pejorative word that can also be translated as "pigs".

C. In total, more than 13,000 *conversos* were tried from 1480-1492. The Inquisition against the *conversos* culminated in the expulsion of all of the Jews from Spain in 1492.

D. The reason alleged for this action in the preamble of the edict was the relapse of so many *conversos*, owing to the proximity of unconverted Jews who seduced them from Christianity and kept alive in them the knowledge and practices of Judaism.

E. Over 200,000 Jews were eventually expelled. Many fled to Turkey or [North Africa](#), but most went to other Christian countries, and thousands died during the expulsion.

II. Portugal – perhaps 100,000 (>150,000) Jews fled here.

“The story of the 1492 expulsion of the Jews from Spain is well known. Not so well known is what happened five years later in the neighboring country of Portugal. Of those Jews who chose to flee Spain in 1492, large numbers went to Morocco, Italy and to the Ottoman Empire. But, the greatest number, perhaps half of the total went to Portugal. King João II, of Portugal, allowed them to enter. He was preparing for war against the Moors, and he needed the taxes collected from these Jews to finance that war.

“Permanent residence was granted only to 630 wealthy families who were allowed to establish themselves in several parts of the country upon payment of 100 cruzados. Others were allowed to settle for only eight months upon payment of eight cruzados for each adult. The king then bound himself to provide shipping so that they could leave. One hundred thousand refugees may have entered under these conditions. At the end of eight months, however, the king saw to it that little shipping was available and few could leave. Those left behind were declared forfeit of their liberty and were declared slaves of the king.”

The situation of the Jews continued to deteriorate. Pressure was exerted upon them to convert to Christianity. Those who did not were told that they had to leave Portugal. However, in the end, the vast majority of Jews were not allowed to leave, and any who had not undergone conversion were forcibly converted. “Holy water was sprinkled on them and they were declared to be Christians. King Manoel (the successor to King João II) then informed the Catholic Kings of Spain, “There are no more Jews in Portugal.”

III. While many of the New Christians accepted their religion, many chose to continue practicing [Judaism](#) behind closed doors, while publicly practicing Catholic rituals; they became known as Marranos or crypto-Jews.

“If any of these New Christians, as the Portuguese contemptuously designated them, thought to find security in their new status, events proved them frighteningly mistaken.” Even two centuries later those ‘of the Jewish race’ in Lisbon still had occasion to dread the threat of persecution. A day of wrath dawned for one of their number on October 19, 1739, some 203 years after the establishment of the Inquisition in Portugal.” On that day, Antonio José da Silva, one of Portugal’s outstanding poets and dramatists, was garroted (strangled) and burned in an *auto da fé* (the burning of a heretic). The “crime” that led to his death was his heresy for secretly “observing the Mosaic laws.”

Despite the obvious dangers that New Christians who secretly practiced Judaism were subjected to, hundreds of years after their forced conversion in 1497 one could still find families tenaciously clinging to the faith of their fathers and willing to risk their lives for Judaism.

A. Portuguese Inquisition – 1531

IV. Jews did their best to flee Portugal – Amsterdam, London, New World

V. Dr. Samuel Nunez –

A. Diogo Nunes Ribeiro (Dr. Samuel) b. 1668 - married Gracia (Rebecca) de Siquera b. 1678

B. Escape from the Inquisition

http://www.jewishpress.com/news_article.asp?article=5755

C. Circumcised in London, remarried wife according to Jewish Law.

D. Savannah – July 11, 1733, wife Nov. 12, 1733 – not welcome, epidemic

[http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/5714/Glimpses Into American Jewish History \(Part 10\).html](http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/5714/Glimpses%20Into%20American%20Jewish%20History%20(Part%2010).html)

VI. 6 children - daughter - Maria Caetana (Zipporah) b. 1714

A. Married Rev. David Mendes Machado – Shearith Israel

B. Daughter - Rebecca b. 1746

C. Zipporah said special prayer every time clock struck for deliverance from Inquisition

VII. Married Jonas Phillips in 1762

http://personal.stevens.edu/~llevine/rebecca_phillips.pdf

In 1762 at the age of sixteen Rebecca married Jonas Phillips (1735 – 1803), who was eleven years her senior. Phillips, of Ashkenazic descent, was born in Rhenish Prussia, but had been reared in London. He must have received a better than average Jewish education, since he was trained as a *shochet*. “For Jonas, marriage to Rebecca would have symbolized social upward mobility, since Sephardim were associated with nobility and culture. Conversely, many eighteenth century Sephardim scorned German Jews as ‘ill-bred and uncouth.’ These attitudes help to explain the fact that until the early 1800s, all American congregations followed the Sephardic rite, although by around 1730, Ashkenazim were more numerous than Sephardim in a number of cities, including New York.”

Shortly after their marriage, Rebecca and her husband moved to New York, where Jonas resumed his activities as a businessman. By the next autumn, Rebecca had given birth to the first of their twenty-one children.

In addition to childbearing and childraising, Rebecca, like most eighteenth century women, manufactured cloth, clothing, soap, candles and prepared processed comestibles to serve as their winter food supply. The members of the Phillips family were, of course, observant Jews. Rebecca supervised her kitchen to make sure that all was done according to Halacha. N. Taylor Phillips, family historian and direct descendent of Rebecca, wrote in 1927 (quoted on page 374)

No matter how well off they were, how rich they were, whether they were Gomez or Machado, or who they were, the women either did the cooking themselves or superintended it. It was not left to the slaves, or to the Negroes. If it was, it was a *treifa* house, that is, the house that permitted the servants exclusively to run the kitchen. People would not eat there, and, therefore, the woman of the house either had to do it herself or had to be on the job and see that it was properly done. If she had a lot of servants, she directed them or could give the final O.K. that everything was according to “Hoyle,” but she had to be there personally.

During the last ten years of her childbearing years, if not earlier, Rebecca began to adopt an active role in both Jewish and non-Jewish public affairs. In 1801, at the age of fifty-five, Rebecca was one of the founding members of the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances. This Philadelphia organization, in which Gentile and Jewish women joined efforts, was dedicated to assisting yellow fever victims in Baltimore, supporting a “soup house” for the poor, and generally providing food and clothing to indigent women and children. Only two years later, Rebecca was widowed, leaving her a single mother of as many as sixteen children.

Rebecca's personal piety and dedication to her people shone particularly during her widowed years. In 1820, at the age of seventy-four, Rebecca, now widowed for seventeen years, served as first directress and one of thirteen managers serving on the board of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society of Philadelphia. The society, founded in 1819 to assist the Jewish indigent, was the first non-synagogue-related charitable society in America.

Rebecca Phillips embodies both the exceptional and the mundane. Her duties as wife and mother are typical of the colonial and early American experience. Yet these duties must be considered extraordinary, for they were carried out as Rebecca bore twenty-one children and raised two of her grandchildren, exceeding the count of even the largest known American Jewish families of her time. Rebecca's pioneering activities as a communal activist and philanthropist in both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities were extraordinary for her time. Yet these endeavors would be considered, by the end of the nineteenth century, not only the common domain of the American woman, but increasingly and in many important respects, her 'natural' domain. Rebecca's pioneering exceptionalism thus foreshadowed that which would soon become commonplace.

VIII. Grandson – Mordecai Manuel Noah

([http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/7153/Glimpses Into American Jewish History \(Part 11\).html](http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/7153/Glimpses%20Into%20American%20Jewish%20History%20(Part%2011).html)) and

[http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/8572/Glimpses Into American Jewish History.html](http://www.jewishpress.com/page.do/8572/Glimpses%20Into%20American%20Jewish%20History.html))

Tumult, Duals, Consul to Tunis

Noah had been given a special mission to Algiers in which he distinguished himself by rescuing several Americans who were being held as slaves in the Barbary States. However, while in the middle of negotiations, he received a sealed letter from the Department of State which read in part,

At the time of your appointment, as Consul at Tunis, it was not known that the RELIGION which you profess would form any obstacle to the exercise of your Consular functions. Recent information, however, on which entire reliance may be placed, proves that it would produce a very unfavourable effect. IN CONSEQUENCE OF WHICH, the President has deemed it expedient to revoke your commission. ... There are some circumstances, too, connected with your accounts, which require a more particular explanation, which, with that already given, are not approved by the President.

I am, very respectfully, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

[Signed] JAMES MONROE. (Page 114)

Noah was also accused of financial malfeasance. He returned to the United States to fight for his vindication and eventually succeeded. His personal experience of anti-Semitism

apparently stimulated him to develop a genuine interest in the problems of his own people.

If the activities of Noah described in Part 11 were all that there was to his life, he “would have rated a footnote as a versatile and energetic figure in early nineteenth century America, but definitely of minor dimensions. Noah’s claim to fame rests neither upon his varied occupations nor his several avocations, but upon another aspect of his life. Noah possessed one more interest, remote and impractical enough to stamp him as an eccentric for well nigh one hundred years – a life-long preoccupation with the destiny of the Jewish people, and a growing conviction that the Christian world, no less than the Jews themselves, were obligated to facilitate the return of the Jews to an independent national existence in Palestine.

Haven for the Jews

Noah’s announcement of the founding Ararat was done with great pomp and splendor. “At daybreak of September 15, 1825, the inhabitants of the frontier village of Buffalo were startled out of their slumber by a loud detonation booming from the front of the Court House and reverberating across the Lake. Canon, in many mouthed celebration, were to roar before that historic day was done. Today, in the fiftieth year of American independence, was to be founded a republic within the republic, -- a haven of religious freedom within the haven of political liberty. A new, if self-appointed, redeemer had arisen in Zion.”

A huge spectacle of pageantry began at 11 o’clock with a parade led by Grand Marshall Colonel Potter on a prancing steed. He was followed by a band, “the tramp of soldiery, of national, state and municipal officers, stewards, apprentices, and representatives of their associated crafts, master masons, senior and junior deacons, masters and past-masters of Lodges, members of the reverend clergy, more stewards bearing the symbolic corn, wine and oil, and a principal architect, with square, level and plumb, flanked on either side by a Globe, and backed by a Bible.”

The architect was followed by Mordechai Manuel Noah, Governor and Judge of Israel, resplendent in black, wearing judicial robes of crimson silk, trimmed with ermine, with a richly embossed golden medal suspended from his neck. “It was a striking rig-out, and he himself, with a practiced theatrical eye, has designed it.”

When this amazing procession reached the church door, the troops opened to the right and left, and the participants entered the aisles while the band played the Grand March from Judas Maccabeus. On the communion table lay the cornerstone for the city, designed, of course, by Noah. The inscription contained the words of Shema in Hebrew followed by “Ararat, A City of Refuge for the Jews, Founded by Mordechai Manuel Noah, in the month of Tizri 5586, Sept. 1845 & in the 50th year of American Independence.” Silver cups with wine, corn, and oil lay on the stone.

A morning service conducted by Rev. Addison Searle of the Episcopal Church then followed. Hymns were sung and selections from the Bible were read. One Psalm was read in Hebrew. At the conclusion of this “non-denominational” service, “Judge” Noah delivered his “Proclamation to the Jews.” It called for the establishment of Ararat, appointed a number of well-known personalities from various countries to official positions, levied a tax on all Jews throughout the world, and a plethora of other edicts dealing with the Jewish people. Ararat had, at least in theory, been launched!

What was the net result of all of these theatrics? In truth, nothing! Noah had written about his proposal to many well-known personalities throughout the world, but he did not wait for their responses before proceeding with the ceremony in Buffalo. If he had, he might never have held his spectacle. To put it mildly, his proposal of a Jewish asylum in America was supported by virtually none of the people he had counted upon to make it a reality. Thus, the Ararat project ended in failure, its only visible remaining aspect being the cornerstone. Nonetheless, Noah continued to advocate the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine until the end of his life. History was to prove that he was not wrong, just too far ahead of his time.

IX. Aaron Lopez – Colonial Merchant Prince

(http://www.jewishpress.com/news_article.asp?article=5492)

What sort of a Jew was Aaron? He lived in the world of eighteenth-century American Sephardic orthodoxy and simultaneously in the world of the eighteenth-century Gentile milieu. He belonged as much to the one as to the other, and he appears to have been conscious of no inevitable conflict between the two. ‘All who knew him agree,’ wrote a Massachusetts journalist shortly after Aaron’s death, ‘that he was, in the fullest import of the words, a good citizen and an honest man.’ Nearly all we know or can surmise of Aaron’s life lends substance to this observation.”

Ezras Stiles believed “him to have been ‘without a single enemy and the most universally beloved by an extensive acquaintance of any man I have ever knew.’ Aaron’s ‘beneficence to his fam[ily] and connexions, to his nation [the Jews], and to all the world is almost without parallel.’ Such was the *buena fama* of Aaron Lopez.”