

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

Adolphus S. Solomons: Forgotten 19th Century Communal Activist

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Introduction

There are many observant Jews who contributed much to secular and Jewish life in America and yet have, unfortunately, been essentially forgotten. One such man is Adolphus Simson Solomons (1826 – 1910). Solomons was a founder of the American Red Cross, a close friend of Abraham Lincoln, a founder of Garfield Hospital, took an active part in the development of Washington, DC, declined President Grant's request to serve as Governor of Washington, D.C. (during a brief period of self-government) because the position required work on Shabbos, and was active in a plethora of other communal causes and organizations.

(Note: The material below is taken from **Necrology** by Louis Marshall, **Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society**, 20, 1911, pages 166 – 170.)

Adolphus S. Solomons was one of the finest exemplars of a Jew of American birth, being distinguished alike for unswerving loyalty to his faith and to his country. He was born in the city of New York on October 26, 1826. His father, John Solomons, came to the United States from England in 1810, and was associated with James Watson Webb in conducting the New York Courier and Enquirer. His mother was Julia, a daughter of Simeon Levy.

He received his education at the University of the State of New York. On his graduation he engaged in mercantile pursuits, in which he continued for many years, finally establishing the publishing house of Philp & Solomons in Washington. At the age of fourteen he enlisted as a color guard in the Third Regiment of the New York State Militia, known as the Washington Greys, and later became a sergeant. In 1851 he was appointed by Daniel Webster, then Secretary of State, as a special bearer of despatches abroad. On his return he took an active part in the organization of the Jewish Hospital of New York, which had been founded by Sampson Simson, from which developed the palatial Mount Sinai Hospital of to-day.

On his removal to Washington, he took an active part in the development of that city, and in 1871 became the chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means of the District of Columbia. He became prominent in all public activities at the Nation's capital, and was on terms of cordial friendship with Abraham Lincoln, the last photograph of the martyred President having been taken at Mr. Solomons' place of business.

He was one of the founders of the Garfield Hospital, established in commemoration of the President, and continued an active director of that institution until his death. He projected the free night lodging-house for men, which is now the Municipal Lodging-House of Washington. For fifty years he was a member of the board of directors of Columbia Hospital, and for many years was in the directorate of the Providence Hospital at Washington. He was the organizer of the first training school for nurses in the District of Columbia. The Red Cross Society held its first meeting at his home, being called into existence as the result of his initiative. For seventeen years he was an active member of the National Association of the Red Cross, and one of its two vice-presidents. President Arthur appointed him, with Clara Barton, to represent the United States Government at the International Congress of the Red Cross, which was held at Geneva, Switzerland, in 1881, and he was elected vice-president of that Congress. He was one of the five original members of the New York Executive Board of the Red Cross Relief Committee. He was regarded by men of every shade of thought as one of the first citizens of Washington.

Early in its history he became affiliated with the Alliance Israelite Universelle, and continued to be the American representative of its Central Committee, and its treasurer for the United States, until his death.

On the occasion of the one-hundredth anniversary of the birth of Sir Moses Montefiore, he advocated the establishment of the Montefiore Home for Chronic Invalids in the city of New York, to commemorate that occasion, and he ever after continued to be a member of the board of that great benefaction.

From the time of the organization of the Jewish Theological Seminary Association of New York until it became merged with the Jewish Theological Seminary of America¹, he was a trustee of that organization, being its acting president at the time of the merger. He was largely instrumental in the formation of the present Seminary, and was one of its charter members and life directors. His interest in that institution was unflagging and intelligent, and it was largely due to his sincere devotion for what he considered a sacred cause that it became revived and powerful. It was solely due to his initiative that the Teachers' Institute of the Seminary was formed for the training of Jewish teachers, and one of the greatest joys of his last days on earth was afforded by the realization of his desire that such a school be established.

In 1891 he became the general agent of the Baron de Hirsch Fund and the director of its many activities in America; and continued in charge of that responsible work until 1903, when he became its honorary general agent. His work in this important position was fruitful of results, and much of the success of that philanthropy is due to his fidelity to the trust reposed in him, and to his creative energy.

To whatever work he undertook, he gave the best that was in him. He dedicated himself to it heart and soul. He never wearied, and he never doubted. He was an inspiration to his associates and filled them with that wholesome optimism which permeated his entire being. He was, withal, a man of the greatest modesty. Though possessed of the grandeur

of soul which pertains to a saint, his was the simplicity of a child. He believed in the sacred duty of personal service, and he performed that duty as a religious act, with cheerful heart, serious mind and willing hand, thoroughly and not perfunctorily. Though possessed of the creative intellect of a leader, he did not hesitate to follow. Though firm in his convictions, he never obtruded his beliefs. Warmth and geniality, radiated from an attractive personality.

He was not only distinguished as a Jew in his communal, charitable and philanthropic aspects, but he was a deeply reverent observer of the faith as it came to him from his ancestors. He was deeply imbued with all the high ethical concepts of Judaism. It was a part of his innermost being. It was inseparable from his daily conduct, and was the polar star by which he steered his path. With all of his modernity and his unquestionable Americanism, he adhered, not only to the principles, but to the forms and ceremonies of historic Judaism without murmur, complaint or hesitation, and his life was one of happiness. There was never an occasion when he felt that there could be an inconsistency between his religion and his citizenship. Though at all times he mingled with non-Jews of all kinds and conditions, it was never brought to his notice that they recognized the need on his part of resorting to that form of assimilation which would destroy, suppress or lead him to conceal or apologize for his Jewish convictions. If such an attitude had been indicated, it would have disappeared in the presence of his pitying smile.

His was a life replete with moral beauty, one which it would be well for his contemporaries to study and to emulate. When he died, on March 18, 1910, in his eighty-fourth year, he was gathered to his fathers, a faithful custodian of the noble traditions of his people, and a saintly champion of the deathless mission of Judaism.

¹ Readers are reminded that JTS was originally founded as an Orthodox institution of higher education.