

Glimpses Into American Jewish History

Jacob da Silva Solis – Advocate for Orthodox Judaism

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*Note: All quotes are taken from **The Early Jews of New Orleans** by Bertram Wallace Korn, *American Jewish Historical Society*, 1969, pages 192 – 195 and **Jacob S. Solis: Traveling Advocate of American Judaism** by J. Solis-Cohen, Jr., *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* (1961-1978); Sep 1962 - Jun 1963; 52, 1-4. This last article may be downloaded at no cost from <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm> .*

Introduction

Jacob da Silva Solis was born into London's Sephardic Community on August 4, 1780. He referred to himself as Jacob S. Silva. Arriving in America on October 25, 1803, Jacob almost immediately affiliated with the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue Shearith Israel, and, on April 24, 1811, married Charity Hays (1782 – 1839), daughter of a Westchester County farmer. They had seven children, the eldest born in 1813 and the youngest in 1827.

Jacob S. Solis was an observant Jew.

In his brief career of less than fifty years, he left his imprint on several communities. In business at one time in Wilmington, Delaware, he ran an advertisement in the local newspaper which included the information “No business transacted on the 7th day.” [Solis – Cohen]

The Solises settled in Mt. Pleasant, NY. Jacob studied *shechita* so that he could provide kosher meat for his family while they lived in Mt. Pleasant.

Jacob S. Solis moved from Mt. Pleasant, New York, to Wilmington [DE] about 1814 and lived there approximately seven years. Together with his brother Daniel, he opened a wholesale dry goods store in Wilmington and, according to his daughter, also manufactured quill pens, used in transcribing deeds, mortgages, wills, and the like. [Solis – Cohen]

This Wilmington venture lasted for about five or six years, after which Jacob returned to Mt. Pleasant. He apparently had not done very well in Wilmington, because in 1822 he applied to Congregation Mikveh Israel of Philadelphia for the relatively low paying position of congregational *shochet*, only to be informed that the position had already been filled by.

In 1826 he was attempting to promote the establishment of an academy for Jewish boys and girls where farming, crafts and domestic skills would be taught in addition to the Jewish traditions; the school and its attendant workshops would be supported by prosperous, Jews because the institution was designed particularly for the benefit of Jewish orphans. Solis was obviously concerned with Jewish welfare and public service, but he was just as obviously in search of a way of supporting his growing family. [Korn]

The following item appeared in the June 7, 1826 issue of the newspaper *Intelligencer*:

SOCIETY FOR IMPROVING THE CONDITION OF THE JEWS

Jacob S. Solis, of Mt. Pleasant, Westchester County in this state, is forming an institution for educating Jewish Youths, and for teaching them trades, and mechanical arts, agriculture, etc. He intends to erect factories, under his own immediate inspection to be located in the same place, also to be an asylum for orphans of Israel. He intends soliciting assistance to forward the establishment. We understand his plan is generally approved of.

New Orleans

This trade school venture never materialized, and Jacob must have found himself in severe financial straits, because in either 1826 or 1827 he came to New Orleans without his family and opened a store. New Orleans at this time was a “Jewish desert” where intermarriage had become more the norm than the exception. Indeed, some of the “leaders” of the Jewish community were married to non-Jewish women.

Solis must have heard of the then booming economy of the city and felt he had no choice but to go there.

Jacob S. Solis’ business in New Orleans prospered and he purchased two blocks of land as a speculation or investment. He also founded a synagogue in this community, baked his own matzot, prepared a lunar Jewish calendar, wrote an interesting constitution for the Congregation, which was printed, and copies of which are in the family archives and in various Jewish libraries. The name of this Congregation was *Shanarai-Chasset* [Gates of Mercy]. Its origin, according to family tradition, was due to the circumstance that, before the Passover in 1826, Solis found himself in New Orleans with no matzah to be had. He was forced to grind some meal and he, himself, prepared the unleavened cakes.

This experience made him determine to bring about the establishment of a synagogue in New Orleans. According to the printed records, the synagogue was founded by Jacob S. Solis of the State of New York, December 20th, 1827. A booklet about the Congregation was printed in English and French by F. Delaup, Printer of the Congregation, 1828, giving the list of the donors to the

Congregation, the constitution, and a Jewish calendar calculated from September 9, 1828, to August 16, 1852.

The calendar has the following heading: Calendar of the Festivals and Lunar months of every year observed by the Israelites, commencing A.M. 5589 and ending in the year 5612, being a period of 24 years (Sept. 9th, 1828, and will end August 16th, in the year 1852) by Jacob S. Solis. [Solis – Cohen]

The booklet also gives the names of the officers for the year 1828, and Manis Jacobs is listed as president.

The following incident gives some idea of the state of Yiddishkeit in New Orleans at this time.

Jacob Solis had returned to New York in June of 1828 when he received copies of the *Shanarai-Chasset* constitution sent to him by synagogue president Manis Jacobs. He was stunned when he read the following stipulation in one of the by-laws:

No Israelite child shall be excluded either from the schools, from the temple or the burial ground on account of the religion of the mother.

In other words, the constitution was saying that the child of a non-Jewish mother and Jewish father was to have the same rights as someone with a Jewish mother. This was unheard of, even in America, where intermarriage was all too common. In order to discourage intermarriage, it was common practice in all synagogues at this time to forbid a Jewish man married to a gentile woman burial in the synagogue's cemetery and to not allow his children to attend the synagogue's religious school. By the inclusion of this sentence *Shanarai-Chasset* was actually explicitly condoning intermarriage!

The reason why Manis Jacobs had this clause included was because he himself was married to a French Catholic woman, Angelique-Charlotte Jacinthe Verneuille. Jacobs, the synagogue president, wanted the two children he had with his non-Jewish wife to be accepted as full-fledged Jews.

Jacobs, however, wanted even more than this. He felt that his ability to read and write Hebrew should qualify him to have the title "Rabbi." On official documents he always signed his name in English added to this his Hebrew name "Menachem" written in Hebrew letters. He even served as Chazan for the first High Holy Day services conducted in New Orleans. Such was the pitiful state of Yiddishkeit in New Orleans at this time!

Jacob S. Solis died suddenly at Mt. Pleasant, New York, on December 29, 1829, at the age of forty-nine and is interred in the 21st Street Cemetery of Congregation Shearith Israel. After his death, his widow received a beautiful letter from the New Orleans Congregation which passed the following resolution.

Resolved: that in consequence of the death of our much lamented fellow member, Jacob S. Solis, and in consideration of his many virtues and the effectual service rendered to this institution in its formation, the officers wear crepe on their left arm for the space of thirty days from the date of this meeting.

His career emphasizes the saying of a Hebrew sage "A good name is better than great riches." [Solis – Cohen]