

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part)

Colonel Mordecai Sheftall – Revolutionary War Patriot

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In Savannah, GA, there is a memorial to the American Revolution called Battlefield Memorial Park. One of the markers there reads

Colonel Mordecai Sheftall
1735 – 1797

As Deputy Commissary General of Issues for Georgia and South Carolina, Colonel Sheftall was the highest ranking Jewish officer in the Revolutionary War. Captured by the British in the Battle of Savannah, Dec. 29, 1778, Sheftall was imprisoned for two years at Antigua and later released in an exchange of prisoners.¹

Who was this man who contributed so much to America's fight to gain independence from England?

Sketch of Mordecai Sheftall's Life

Mordecai Sheftall's parents, Benjamin (1692 -1765) and Perla, were amongst the first 42 Jews to arrive in Savannah on July 11, 1733. Mordecai was born on December 2, 1735. His mother passed away the following October, and his father then married Hannah Solomons in 1738. In 1739 Hannah gave birth to Mordecai's half-brother Levi.

The Sheftall's were Orthodox Jews, despite the difficulties of maintaining religious observance in a city like Savannah that had a very small Jewish population.

When Mordecai became Bar Mitzvah his father did not have either a siddur or *Tephillin* for him. Such religious items had to come from abroad, and King George's War [1740 – 1748] had made it very difficult for British ships to come to Georgia.

Benjamin's anguish at the thought that his son would not be properly prepared for full-fledged membership in the Jewish community is reflected in a note to his friends in England [The spelling and wording of the original has been preserved.]:

As I have received some letters five days ago from one of our relation, Samule, who writes me that you was so good as to send mee some books and other things, which I to my misfortune never have received, and as I do not no [know] which way they wear [were] sent, nor no [know] the name of the captain or the name of

the ship, so I can't enquier for them. I hope your honour will soon find it out wether that ship is taken by an enemy or lost at sea.

If she is not taken nor lost, I hop your honour will let me no [know] where to inquier for them. I live [leave] your honour to guess in what grife I am in to be so misfortenabel, my eldest son binq [being] three months ago thirten years of age and I not to have any frauntlets [phylacteries] nor books fit for him. I won't troubel your houner with much writing, for my heart is full of grife.

No more at present, I am
Your humbel servant
Benjamin Sheftall

Savanah in Georgia, March... 1748.²

This letter demonstrates Benjamin's determination to raise his children as observant Jews, despite the obstacles of living in a place where there were few Jewish families and no formal Jewish education. Amazingly, he was successful. His sons Mordecai and Levi lived their lives as practicing Orthodox Jews.

[Mordecai] Sheftall was only eleven years old when his formal education ended, for lack of schools. By the time he was seventeen, he had begun what was to be a highly successful career as a merchant, buying and tanning deerskins to sell at a profit. When he was just eighteen years old, he had accumulated enough money to purchase fifty acres in Vernonburg, near Savannah.

Throughout his life, Sheftall speculated in real estate. His pre-Revolution holdings were immense. Well-connected with friends and family in mercantile and shipping in England; the Caribbean; Charleston, South Carolina; and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, he developed a network of contacts to help build up his own business by his mid-twenties. Sheftall married Frances Hart, the sister of one of his Charleston merchant contacts, in 1761. The couple had six children, all but one living to adulthood. A year after their marriage, they owned 1,000 acres of land and nine slaves. Sheftall took up cattle ranching, acquiring another 1,000 acres in St. George Parish (later Burke County) in 1767 for grazing and timber harvesting. The cattle business led to his building a tanning facility with his half-brother Levi, and in 1768 the Georgia Houses of Assembly appointed him Inspector of Tanned Leather for the Port of Savannah.

[Mordecai] Sheftall was an Orthodox Jew, recognized by his fellow congregants in Savannah as an outstanding leader. In 1772 he donated one and a half acres of land for the establishment of Georgia's first large Jewish cemetery. Known familiarly as the Sheftall Cemetery until the mid-1800s, it was open to all Jews in good standing with their community.³

His Role during the American Revolution

Beginning in 1763 the American colonies and the mother country England began to have serious differences which led to the Revolutionary War. Mordecai, who was by nature a political activist, strongly supported the rights of the colonies and played a key role in the political affairs of Georgia.

During the summer of 1775, when the crisis between the recalcitrant colonies and unrelenting Britain was moving steadily beyond the possibility of a compromise solution, Mordecai Sheftall served in Savannah as chairman of the "Parochial Committee," comparable to the county committees of safety in other colonies. Conscientiously enforcing the First Continental Congress's boycott of British goods, Mordecai's committee prevented ships from unloading their cargoes and offered "fresh insults" to British authority everyday.

In October, 1775, "Committee Men," among whom were Mordecai and Levi Sheftall, entered the Customs House and demanded that the officials on duty hand over the ship's papers of the sloop *Charlotte* so that they could send the ship, which customs officials had seized, on its way. When their demand was rejected, the "Committee Men" forced the locks on the desks in the office, rummaged "for the space of two hours," and took the *Charlotte's* papers. According to the customs official who reported the incident, this was not the first seized vessel that had been "violently rescued." No wonder Governor James Wright later referred to the Jews of Georgia as "violent rebels."⁴

The following summer colonial resistance turned into war.

In 1777 Sheftall was appointed commissary-general to the troops of Georgia and to the Continental troops also; in October of the following year he became "Deputy Commissary of Issues in South Carolina and Georgia"; and he figured as a staff-officer in the Continental line of the Georgia brigade during the war [with the rank of colonel, making him the highest ranking Jewish officer on the American side]. When the British attacked Savannah in 1778, Sheftall not only took an active part in its defense, but he also advanced considerable sums of money for the American cause. After the city had been taken he was captured, but he resisted all inducements to give up the cause of liberty; as a result he suffered severely from persecution on the part of the British, and was placed on board a prison-ship. The British appear to have spoken of Sheftall as "a very great rebel."⁵

In 1780 Mordecai Sheftall was freed in a prisoner exchange and then made his way to Philadelphia, where he was eventually reunited with his wife and children. While residing in Philadelphia, he became one of the founders of Congregation Mikveh Israel in 1782.

Unfortunately, the financial situation of the Sheftalls in Philadelphia was not good.

Mordecai was reduced to pleading with Congress to have some consideration for a man who had “sacrificed everything in the cause of his country.” He wanted his back pay, but if he could not obtain that, he was willing to settle for the reimbursement of money he had advanced from his own pocket in the interest of the war effort.

Unbelievably, neither Mordecai Sheftall nor his heirs was ever reimbursed for the huge sums of money that Mordecai had personally expended to support the Revolutionary War effort!

The Sheftalls loved Georgia only a little less than their religion and so on December 11, 1782 returned to Savannah, five months after the British had left.

Mordecai was approaching fifty years of age now, but the ordeal of war, even with the suffering and sacrifice it had imposed, had changed him little. He was still the energetic businessman, the dedicated family man, the political activist, the friend of the poor, the devotee of his religion, and the leader of the Jewish community.

There were about fifteen Jewish families in the Savannah area, and they all looked to Mordecai Sheftall for leadership. In the late summer of 1790 he led the local Jewish congregation, which “was again Established on ... the 7th Day of July, 1786,” to seek a state charter for the purpose of incorporating its synagogue. Succeeding in this endeavor, the Savannah Jews re-constructed themselves as Congregation Mickve Israel, Mordecai, Levi, and Sheftall Sheftall being among the first officers chosen by the congregation.

The Sheftall brothers demonstrated that Jews could do in Georgia what others did, simply by insisting upon their rights as citizens and conducting themselves in such a way as to prove that they deserved no less than others. They bridged the gap between the Jewish and gentile communities, setting an admirable example in race relations and interfaith cooperation. The Sheftalls of Savannah, ambitious businessmen, patriotic Americans, generous humanitarians, and dedicated Jews, left behind them a name worthy of remembrance.⁶



¹ <http://www.hmdb.org/marker.asp?marker=6571>

² **On Love Marriage Children ... and Death** Collected and Edited by Jacob R. Marcus, Society of Jewish Bibliophiles 1965, pages 7 and 9.

³ <http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/ArticlePrintable.jsp?id=h-3183>

⁴ **The Sheftalls of Savannah** by David T. Morgan, *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* (1961-1978); Sep 1972-Jun 1973; 62, 1-4; AJHS Journal. This article is available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>

⁵ **The Jewish Encyclopedia**, available at <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=581&letter=S&search=sheftall>

⁶ **The Sheftalls of Savannah**