

Early Haitian Jewish History

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The earthquake in Haiti and the unbelievable devastation it caused have focused world attention on this island country. Most Haitians lived under substandard conditions before this tragedy, and, sadly, they are now even worse off than before. No one is sure precisely how many have perished; the Haitian government recently reported about 230,000 deaths. Many of the survivors have been seriously injured, and perhaps as many as a million Haitians were left homeless due to this cataclysmic event. It will certainly take years before any sort of normalcy returns to this island.

When reading and hearing about the tragedy in Haiti, one may wonder about the early history of this Caribbean country. This article gives some of the general historical background of Haiti and traces what is known about the early history of Haiti's Jews.

Haitian (Saint-Domingue) History¹

Haiti, formerly known as Saint-Domingue, shares the Island of Hispaniola with the Dominican Republic. Hispaniola is more or less in the center of the Caribbean Islands - with the Turks, Caicos and Bahamas Islands to the North, Cuba and Jamaica to the west, Puerto Rico and the Leeward Islands to the east, and South America to the south.

"*Ayiti (land of high mountains)* was the indigenous Taíno or Amerindian name for the mountainous western side of the island. The country's highest point is Pic la Selle, at 2,680 metres (8,793 ft). The total area of Haiti is 27,750 square kilometres (10,714 sq mi) and its capital is Port-au-Prince. Haitian Creole and French are the official languages."²

On December 5, 1492 Christopher Columbus landed on a large island in the region of the western Atlantic Ocean, later to be known as the Caribbean Sea. The island was inhabited by an Arawakan people known as the Taínos. They referred to their island by three names, *Ayiti*, *Bohío*, and *Kiskeya*. Columbus claimed the island for the Spanish Crown and gave it the Spanish name *La Isla Española* ("the Spanish Island"). Others called this island *Hispañola*, and this name was later Anglicized to Hispaniola.

Some members of Columbus' crew opted to settle on this fertile island. However, when Columbus returned in 1493, there was no trace of those whom he had left behind a year earlier. He again claimed the entire island for Spain, leaving his brother Bartolomeo Columbus to establish a second settlement which took root and slowly flourished.

"Following the arrival of Europeans, Haiti's indigenous population suffered near extinction, in possibly the worst case of depopulation in the Americas. A commonly

accepted hypothesis attributes the high mortality of this colony in part to Old World diseases to which the natives had no immunity.”

Some Taínos were able to survive by setting up villages in areas not controlled by the Spanish. With the discovery of lucrative gold and silver deposits in the 1520s in Mexico and South America, Spanish interest in Hispaniola began to wane.

Beginning in 1625 French buccaneers became active in this region of the Caribbean. They survived by pirating Spanish ships and hunting wild cattle. Although the Spanish destroyed the buccaneers’ bases of operations several times, they were unable to rid the area of the French. In 1659 an official French settlement was established at Tortuga, an island off the coast of Hispaniola. This was the beginning of the spread of French influence in and around Hispaniola.

“In 1664, the newly established French West India Company took control over the colony, which it named Saint-Domingue, and France formally claimed control of the western portion of the island of Hispaniola. In 1670 they established the first permanent French settlement on the mainland of Hispaniola, Cap François (later Cap Français, now Cap-Haïtien). Under the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick, Spain officially ceded the western third of Hispaniola to France. By that time, planters outnumbered buccaneers and, with the encouragement of [French King] Louis XIV, they had begun to grow tobacco, indigo, cotton, and cacao [the bean from which chocolate is made] on the fertile northern plain, thus prompting the importation of African slaves.”

The economy of Saint-Domingue gradually expanded; sugar and coffee became important export crops. In 1767 the colony exported 72 million pounds of raw sugar, 51 million pounds of refined sugar, one million pounds of indigo, and two million pounds of cotton. Saint-Domingue became known as the “Pearl of the Antilles” – one of the richest colonies that was part of the 18th century French empire. By the 1780s, Saint-Domingue produced about 40 percent of all the sugar and 60 percent of all of the coffee consumed in Europe.

Thousands of slaves were used on the plantations that produced these crops. These slaves were so badly overworked and mistreated that thousands died every year, making it necessary to constantly import replacements from Africa. It is estimated that over the years about 790,000 slaves were imported from Africa. At one time Saint-Domingue was receiving a third of the entire Atlantic slave trade!

By 1789 the slave population on the island totaled about 500,000 and was controlled by approximately 32,000 whites.

“At all times, a majority of slaves in the colony were African-born, as the brutal conditions of slavery prevented the population from experiencing growth through natural increase. African culture thus remained strong among slaves to the end of French rule, in particular the folk-religion of Voodoo, which commingled Catholic liturgy and ritual with the beliefs and practices of Guinea, Congo, and Dahomey. Slave traders scoured the

Atlantic coast of Africa, and the slaves who arrived came from hundreds of different tribes, their languages often mutually incomprehensible.”

It was inevitable that such brutal oppression would lead to rebellion. Beginning in 1791 slave uprisings broke out, leading to several years of bloody fighting. Finally, on January 1, 1804, the slaves won their independence, and Saint-Domingue, which was renamed the indigenous Taíno name of Haiti (“Land of Mountains”), became the first black led republic in the world.

Early Jewish History of Haiti³

“The question whether Jewish communities existed during the colonial period in Saint Domingue (Haiti) arises owing to the fragmentary nature of evidence found so far concerning the existence of an organized or structured Jewish society on this Caribbean island. At first sight, it is rather surprising that Jews should have come and settled in French-controlled, strictly Catholic, possessions at all; the Papal Inquisition and, in some important instances, a national Inquisition, as in Spain and in Portugal, were at work seeking suspected insincere conversos (pejoratively known also as ‘Marranos,’ or otherwise, as Crypto-Jews) to be judged and burned at the stake.”

France, despite being a Catholic country, never allowed the Inquisition to operate on her soil or in her overseas possessions. Still, things were not particularly good for Jews in places that were under French control. The order of Jesuit Priests, which harbored great dislike for Jews, was very influential at the Versailles Court during the second part of the seventeenth and throughout the eighteenth century. As a result, in 1685 during the reign of Louis XIV, Jesuit priests were instrumental in the drafting of a document known as Code Noir. Ostensibly it was intended to regulate procedures regarding slaves. However, Article One prohibited Jews from living in any French colony. Furthermore, those Jews who were already living in these colonies were to be expelled.

Despite the existence of such a discriminatory law, some Jews and/or conversos did manage to reside in French Guyana, Martinique, and Saint Domingue. This was possible because, “1). The Code was not always and everywhere fully enforced. Although Jews had been banished from Martinique in 1683, others, by bribing and making use of the loopholes in the implementation of the law, took the risk and went to the French colonies. 2). Similar to what happened in the ‘Portuguese Nations,’ those Sephardic Jewish communities along the southwest coast of France, the newcomers did not appear at first as Jews. Instead, some were disguised as Christians, but were quickly identified and labelled as ‘Nouveaux Chrétiens’ or conversos, including even those among them who had genuinely converted and were living as true Catholics.”

Given that Saint Domingue was a most prosperous and rich colony, it is not surprising that it held strong appeal for Jewish merchants who were always on the lookout for places that provided economic opportunities. “From all that is known now, the influx of almost exclusively Sephardic (or Iberian) Jews, whether directly from France, from neighboring Caribbean islands, or from other established Portuguese-Spanish

communities, was rather slow and gradual. It seems that the seventeenth century saw but a trickle of Jewish arrivals. Only in the eighteenth century did a greater number find their way into the 'French island and coast of Saint Domingue in America,' as the name of the colony appears in contemporary official Acts.

"Contact without permanent settlement during the seventeenth century seems to account for Jewish names given to at least two sites on the southeastern shore of Saint Domingue. Seventeenth century French maps give the toponyms (place names) of Anse-a-Juif (Cove of the Jew) and Pointe-a-Juifs (Point of Jews)."

Eighteenth Century Haitian Jewry

Somewhat more is known about the Jewish life in Saint-Domingue during the eighteenth century. There is evidence of Jews living in several areas - in the north at Cap Francois and Port-de-Paix; in the southwest at Jeremie and surrounding places; in the southeast at Cayes, St. Louis de Sud, Aquin, and Jacmel; and on the western coastal tip of the island at Port-au-Prince, Leogane, and Petit-Goave. A description of what we know about Jewish life in each of these areas is given below.

Cap Francois

"The presence of a certain number of Jews from Bordeaux (its 'Portuguese Nation') was detected and partly described a century ago by Abraham Cahen. From him, one learned of the material situation of some paterfamilias, their occupations (mostly commercial), and much about the 'contribution' which was extorted from them by the governor, Admiral Charles d'Estaing, under the threat of expulsion. The task of collecting the funds, including its division among fellow Jews, was committed to the one considered at the time the wealthiest of the lot, David Daguilard.

"Further evidence of a different kind comes from the historian-couple Emmanuel, in their well-documented study of one of the oldest Jewish communities in the Caribbean: the island of Curacao in the Netherlands Antilles. They list some eighty Jewish families, originally from Curacao, who settled in apparently permanent residence at Cap Francois, and were connected with trade activities in Saint Domingue."

This community must have been active religiously, because a certain Dr. Isaac Cardozo was brought over from Europe to serve as a religious leader and as Chazzan. Furthermore, the existence of the Cap Francois Jewish community was known to Jews living in North America. "The Jews of Philadelphia, seeking funds for the building of their synagogue, wrote a letter, dated 18 August 1782, which was addressed to 'our brethren in Cap Francois.'"

There is also some evidence suggesting the community established a Jewish cemetery.

Jeremie and Region

“At the northwestern tip of the peninsula, in a region known as La Grand’Anse, there is a lovely township on a high promontory called, somewhat surprisingly, by the Spanish name, Moron. According to a widespread local tradition of long-standing, this name was attributed to the site owing to the presence thereabouts of a ‘rabbi’ having that patronymic [family name].” One Simon Isaac Henriquez Moron, a Portuguese Jew from Curacao and a well-known businessman and planter, resided in this part of Saint Domingue during the eighteenth century. There is some evidence suggesting that Moron built a mikvah here.

Possible further evidence of a Jewish presence in this area is the fact that its capital bears the Old Testament name of ‘Jeremie’ (Jeremiah). At least eighteen families with Jewish sounding names are known to have resided here. However, there is no indication of Jewish communal life.

Les Cayes and Surroundings

“Turning now to the southwestern part of the peninsula of Hispaniola, namely to Les Cayes, capital of the region, Aquin, and Saint-Louis (du Sud) the missionary memorialist, Father I. Le Ruzic, tells of the presence of ‘Depas and Levis.’ On checking, a plantation called ‘Levi,’ and a Charles and a Michel Levi were found. As to the Depas or de Paz family(ies), they were numerous —Jean, Salomon, Pierre, Louise, and others have been recorded.

“In addition to these two well-known families in Aquin —all having Portuguese-Jewish names - a Henriquez, a Cutinho, and a Lindo, could be traced in Saint-Louis. Also in Les or Aux Cayes, as the place is sometimes called, and its vicinity, there were a Nathan, and at least one Silvere, Athias, several Cardozo’s, and a Suarez.”

A branch of the famous Gradis family, who were shippers and military suppliers based in Bordeaux, established a business outpost on the island of Martinique. From there they traveled to Les Cayes, either for purposes of trade or to flee persecution, or both. The existence of some Jews living in the small southwestern port city of Jacmel is noted in some sources. However, no religious or communal activity in any of those places has been documented. “Apparently these were scattered groups, too small to form an independent congregation. If they exercised any Jewish religions (sic) functions at all, they were probably dependent on the congregation in Jeremie, or perhaps even in Cap Francois.”

Port-Au-Prince and the Western Region

Old documents related to the central seacoast area, including the towns of Port Republicain (to become Port-au-Prince, capital of the colony), Arcahaie, Leogane, and Petit-Goave, have been found that contain a few Jewish sounding names. However, here again there is no evidence of Jewish communal life.

Conclusion

From the information above it is clear that Jews had settled in the prosperous French Colony of Saint Domingue (present day Haiti) during the eighteenth century. This is not surprising, given that from the time of the discovery of the New World, Jewish immigration was concentrated in places that presented opportunities for business and trade. Furthermore, the Jewish communities of Curacao and Philadelphia were aware of a Jewish presence in Saint-Domingue. It seems that due to its small size, the community never erected a synagogue. And, as has been the case with most other small Jewish communities that could not support the Torah institutions needed to keep them viable, over time the “Jewishness” of the community’s descendents faded into oblivion.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotes in this section are from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Haiti

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haiti>

³ All quotes in this section are taken from **Were There Jewish Communities in Saint Domingue (Haiti)?** by Zvi Loker, *Journal of Social Sciences*, 45, 2, 1983, pages 135 – 146.