

## Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 24)

### The Gomez Family

**Dr. Yitzchok Levine**  
**Department of Mathematical Sciences**  
**Stevens Institute of Technology**  
**Hoboken, NJ 07030**  
[llevine@stevens.edu](mailto:llevine@stevens.edu)

The Gomez family was one the foremost Jewish families in New York during colonial times. Luis (Louis, Lewis) Moses Gomez (1654/60 – 1740) and his wife, Esther Marquez (Marchaze) (? – 1718) arrived in New York in either 1696 or 1703.

Luis was born with the proverbial “silver spoon in his mouth” in Madrid, Spain to a very wealthy secret Jew, Isaac Gomez. He was originally named Moses, but, according to his great-great-grandson, Moses acquired the name Luis in respect to the King of France, the country that granted asylum to the family. Realizing that being a secret Jew during the Inquisition was very dangerous, Moses and his mother were sent to France. His father was eventually jailed for fourteen years. Upon his release, Isaac joined his wife and son in France. When religious conditions became unbearable in France, the Gomez family moved to England.

Although respected as a prominent family while living in England, they did not have the rights and advantages accorded to Christians, so the family traveled once again and settled in Jamaica. There Luis met and married Esther by prearrangement with her family. She was the daughter of another prominent Sephardic family. They became the parents of six sons - Jacob, Mordechai, Daniel, David, Isaac, and Benjamin.

Shortly after his arrival in New York, Luis opened a store in Manhattan that sold general merchandise. “He recognized an opportunity to export commodities, and he soon began to trade in wheat across the Atlantic. It proved to be a highly profitable product, one that made him a rich man.”<sup>1</sup> “The Gomez Caribbean connection was pivotal to the family’s economic success story. Its ledger books contain frequent references to Caribbean correspondents—Isaac Abenater of Curacao, Isaac de Silva and Jacob Rodrigues of Jamaica to name but a few. Moreover, such business contacts paved the way for Gomez’s sons to find Jewish brides and bring them back to New York.

“The Gomezes prospered to such a notable degree that by 1711 they were one of the six Jewish merchant families to contribute to the building of Trinity Church’s steeple at Broadway and Wall Street—one of the tallest man-made structures then standing in North America. By 1720 the Gomez home in the East Ward of Manhattan had a higher assessment than any other Jewish residence.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1705 the family, using its contacts and prominence and for an appropriate fee, was able to obtain a Denization from the Crown of England. This document granted the equivalent of what we know today as legal alien status, and gave Luis the same privileges granted to Englishmen residing in New York.

“The denizen papers proved a quantum jump in Jewish civic and economic freedom in America; in effect, serving as a kind of a preview of the Bill of Rights, providing not only refuge but an expanding realm of equality in the Diaspora. As a denizen, Luis Gomez, the son of a [forced] convert to Christianity acquired under rights of patent several thousand acres of land in Orange and Ulster County.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1714 Luis and his sons established an Indian trading post six miles from Newburgh. They were soon involved in bargaining with the Indians over how much whisky or how many tomahawks or trinkets constituted a fair price for a beaver, a mink, a muskrat or a sable. Their involvement in this trade soon gave them the financial clout to further expand their land holdings and to construct what is today the oldest Jewish house in America. It is known as the Gomez Mill House and is located in Marlboro, NY about 6 miles from Newburgh. (See <http://www.gomez.org/> for details about visiting the historic site.)

In 1729 Luis used his right to own land to purchase a plot in lower Manhattan. This became the first cemetery of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel. At about that same time, Luis Moses Gomez was elected President of Shearith Israel. He became a philanthropist and gave considerable support to the community and the synagogue.

“For many years the Gomez family constituted a Jewish community unto itself, with one son, David, serving as family shochet (ritual slaughterer), and another, Benjamin, officiating as mohel (circumciser). In the late 1720s, as head of a rapidly growing clan, Gomez solicited support from Sephardi communities in the Caribbean for the establishment in 1730 by Congregation Shearith Israel on Mill St of the first building in New York constructed as a synagogue. Indeed, during most of the eighteenth century, the Gomez family effectively controlled Shearith Israel, with Luis and his sons serving repeatedly as parnassim (presidents).”<sup>4</sup>

“But for all their welcome and success, the Gomezes were confronted with local anti-Semitism. In 1737, during an argument that arose over the outcome of a New York Assembly election in which members of the Gomez family and other Jews held the swing vote, William Smith, the future Chief Justice of New York, declared in an impassioned speech that an apparent majority gained through Jewish votes was by necessity illegal as Jews were responsible for the death of Christ and thus should not have been allowed to vote in the first place. Without further ado, the Assembly passed a resolution that Jews “ought not to be admitted to vote for representatives in the colony.” For decades this resolution cast a pall over New York Jewry.”<sup>5</sup>

## Benjamin Gomez — Bookseller

In 1791 the first American Jewish book dealer opened his shop. Benjamin Gomez (1769 – 1828), the owner, was a man of intelligence and high character. He was also the great grandson of Luis Moses Gomez.

Benjamin Gomez first appeared in the New York directory of 1791 as a bookseller, when he was located at 32 Maiden Lane "near the Fly Market," where his brother Isaac Gomez, carried on business as a broker. Gomez was one of the biggest booksellers of the day and also sold stationery. A few months after he opened his shop, Gomez ran a full page notice in a local paper to say that he had many volumes for sale including some "just imported from Dublin." Although there were no detective stories and novels in his shop, he offered a wide choice of books. All were on religious, historical, or scientific subjects, ranging from the Bible, Shakespeare, and Arabian Nights to books on anatomy. The following year he extended his activities to include publishing. Twenty-one of the books he published are still known to us. They include Hugh Gaines' edition of Pilgrim's Progress (1794), an abridged edition of Robinson Crusoe (1795), Captain Cook's Third and Last Voyage (1795), as well as The Sorrows of Werther (1795).<sup>6</sup>

Today the books that have the faded mark 'Printed by Benjamin Gomez' are almost as scarce as knowledge about the young man who in the second decade after the Revolution offered these hostages to oblivion. And yet, he must have been fairly well known in the New York that was steadily pushing its streets northward into the wide salt marshes and farming lands of Manhattan Island. Aaron Burr could hardly have avoided stopping in Maiden Lane to look over the new books Benjamin Gomez had received by the latest sailing ships from Europe. Occasionally that fiery duelist might encounter in the Gomez bookshop the gentleman he was later to refer to as 'My friend Hamilton, whom I shot.'<sup>7</sup>

The male line of Luis Moses Gomez's direct descendents ended in 1833 when Benjamin's son, Matthias, was killed in a duel in New Orleans. Nonetheless, it is worthwhile to keep in mind that the Gomez family contributed much to Jewish life in colonial New York, given that seven of its members served as Parnas (President) of Congregation Shearith Israel between 1730 and the Revolutionary War.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jewishgen.org/jhscj/Feature.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.cjh.org/education/essays.php?action=show&id=11>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.cjh.org/education/essays.php?action=show&id=11>

<sup>6</sup> **The Firsts of American Jewish History** by Tina Levitan, The Charuth Press, Brooklyn, NY 1957, page 73.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.gomez.org/gomez03.html>