

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part __)

Jonas Phillips: Orthodox Colonial Jewish Businessman Part I

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Note: All quotes are from **Portraits Etched in Stone, Early Jewish Settlers, 1682 – 1831** by David de Sola Pool, Columbia University Press, New York, 1952, pages 191 – 297.

There were Jews who came to America from Europe during the eighteenth century who were businessmen, were actively involved in American life, and also remained observant. Jonas Phillips is one such person.

“In the early part of the eighteenth century the Jews of Germany rarely bore family names. In 1735 a boy was born in Buseck, a village in Oberhessen, Rhenish Prussia, to whom his father gave the name Jonah. The father was generally known to his friends as Phaibush, a name which he may not have recognized as none other than that of the Greek god of the sun, Phoebus Apollo. This Phaibush had fair title to the name, since his official Hebrew name was Aaron Uri, and Uri, meaning ‘fiery,’ was translated into Judaeo-German as Phaibush. In the course of time this name Jonah son of Phaibush became Anglicized into Jonas Phillips. This was an apt transformation, since Phillip, which in Greek means lover of horses, is fittingly associated with Phoebus - Apollo, driver of the chariot of the sun.

“Jonas Phillips was twenty-one years old when in November, 1756, he arrived at Charles Town, S.C., on the Charming Nancy. He came, as did so many of the settlers in those days, as an indentured servant. In London, three months before the sailing of the ship, Moses Lindo had engaged Jonas Phillips in his service ‘to come with him to this Province.’ Moses Lindo subsequently declared that they

arrived together in the same vessel here, the said Jonas Phillips lived with him some months and that the said Jonas Phillips was in his employ and that he did behave and deport himself faithfully and honestly ... the said Jonas is trustworthy even to Gold untold.

“After Phillips had completed his term of service with Moses Lindo, he moved northward from Charleston, and we next find him settled in Albany. There he became a freeman of the city on August 13, 1759. He was in business as ‘Retailer’ or ‘Merchant’ “opposite the Fort next door to Mrs. Moores.’ But he felt the difficulties of living away from a Jewish community, and while in Albany he maintained connections with the city of New York. For it was at this time, in 1760, that he appears as a master mason in the Trinity Lodge #4 F. & A.M.” Eventually he decided to leave Albany [and did so in 1761].”

“We may well believe that one of the main reasons for his leaving Albany was Rebecca¹, daughter of the late hazan of the New York community, David Mendes Machado, and his wife Zipporah Nunes Ribeiro². For a year later in Hickory Town, Plymouth Township, Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, on November 10, 1762, Jonah the son of Phaibush of Buseck, Charleston, and Albany, married this daughter of the families of Nunes Ribeiro and Mendes Machado. Between 1763 and 1786 she presented him with an annual addition to his family, bearing him in all 21 children in 23 years.

“While Jonas Phillips' domestic business of founding a family grew steadily, his commercial affairs were not at first successful. England's restrictive policy on Colonial trade made the conduct of business very difficult, and soon after his marriage his business went to pieces. On May 2, 1764, he obtained from the Supreme Court of the State of New York a warrant for his release as an insolvent debtor, he having assigned all his estate to Hayman Levy, John Alexander, and David Shaw for the benefit of his creditors. His honesty was unquestioned; had not Moses Lindo, his first American employer, testified that he was ‘trustworthy even to Gold untold’? He was also a loyal and informed Jew; so the Jewish community of New York was glad to appoint him as shohet and bodek (ritual slaughterer and examiner of meat), a position in which religious loyalty and complete trustworthiness were a *sine qua non*. His duties were

to use his best endeavors to keep the Markets sufficiently furnish'd with Meats for Supplying of this Congregation . . . he is not to make any Quantity of Beef, without first obtaining the Consent of the Parnassim and adjuntos ...

This position he held from April 22, 1765, to the end of March, 1770. His family obligations were increasing so substantially that it is not surprising to read that on May 16, 1768, he complained that ‘his Labor is very Heavy and the sallary [£ 3 5 a year] Small and no perquisites.’ The community, however, did not see its way clear to increasing his allowance by more than ten pounds for wood on Rosh Hashanah, and even that, by consent and agreement of all parties ‘was Relinquished, and he is only to Receive his Sallary as formerly.’ Therefore, when in the following year he described his family as ‘poor, but honest,” we can well give credence to both the adjectives though we may question the conjunction.

“Seeing no prospect of financial advancement in the service of the community, in 1769 he gave up the position of shohet and bodek and entered business once more. Like many of his contemporaries, he went through some hard years, but eventually he earned the rewards of his perseverance and integrity. A year and a half later, on April 25, 1771, he became naturalized, Myer Myers testifying to his seven years of residence. The years 1770 and 1771 were for him and his wife years of trying bereavement. On June 28, 1770, their daughter Sarah died. Three months later, on September 19, another daughter, Judith, passed away, while a third daughter Hindlah was claimed by death some nine months later, on June 17, 1772.

“Sometime thereafter he moved to Philadelphia, his address in 1774 being 110 North Second Street. Again he went into retail business, at one time at the upper end of Third Street, and later on Market Street.”

Phillips sold a variety of goods including dry goods, brandy and wine, raisins, spices, beaver and raccoon skins, fine and coarse linen sheeting, pins and needles, writing paper, and Scotch snuff.

“Jonas Phillips was an ardent American patriot. While he was still in New York his name appears among the signatories of a letter in the *New York Gazette* of January 23, 1770, asking that the Non-Importation Agreement of the colonists be made more stringent. On October 31, 1778, this father of a numerous family joined the Philadelphia militia as a private in Captain John Linton's Company of Col. William Bradford's Battalion. In July, 1783, he was one of the 800 Philadelphia citizens who signed an address to Congress declaring their loyalty and urging Congress to return to Philadelphia.”

Phillips passed away on Shabbos, January 29, 1803. At the time he was residing in Philadelphia, but at his request he was buried in Congregation Shearith Israel's cemetery in New York.



¹ For information about this remarkable woman see "**Rebecca (Machado) Phillips (1746-1831): Colonial Jewish Matriarch**" *The Jewish Press*, April 7, 2006, pages 41 & 46, *Glimpses into American Jewish History*.

² See **"David Mendes and Zipporah Nunes Machado" The Jewish Press**, July 6, 2007, pages 32 & 69. **Glimpses into American Jewish History**