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SAMPSON SIMSON, ECCENTRIC ORTHODOX PHILANTHROPIST

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Posted Aug 03 2011

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(Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from Sampson Simson by Myer S. Isaacs, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893-1961); 1902; 10, AJHS Journal, available online at www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm.

Sampson Simson was born on June 30, 1781 in Danbury, Connecticut and died January 7, 1857 in New York. Sampson's father, Solomon Simson, was also American born. Solomon was partners with his brother Sampson Simson, whom we shall refer to as Sampson the elder.

The Simson firm, known as "Simson's in Stone Street," imported beaver coating and other articles." Sampson the elder "was the owner of several vessels engaged in the foreign trade and he was prominent on important Committees of the Chamber of Commerce - on Arbitration, Coinage and Fisheries. He was a remarkably pious and conscientious Jew, celebrated for his punctuality and strict honesty."

During the Revolution Congregation Shearith Israel was temporarily closed due to the capture of New York by the British. Reverend Gershom Mendes Seixas and many of the prominent Jewish families associated with the synagogue relocated to Connecticut, which was not under British rule. Solomon and Sampson the elder were among those who left New York. Sampson (the younger) was born while the Simsons were residing in Connecticut.

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**Sampson**

Simson studied at Columbia and is said to have been the first Jewish graduate of that college; at his graduation he delivered a Hebrew address which seems to have been written for him by Gershom Mendes Seixas. Then Simson became an attorney in New York, starting his training as confidential clerk to Aaron Burr. When in need of legal help, Shearith Israel occasionally used

Simson's services. In 1813, after he had been severely injured in a nocturnal assault upon him, he retired to a farm in Yonkers, where he stayed for many years, observing Jewish dietary laws and other prescriptions, but isolating himself from all contact with New York and with his fellow - Jews." [*The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York 1654-1860* by Hyman B. Grinstein, Jewish Publication Society of America]

"Sampson never married. His sister, Mrs. Rebecca Isaacks, with her two children Moses and Jochebed (or Jessie) constituted his family. Moses Isaacks was of very retiring disposition, being in wretched health and physically disqualified from active participation in affairs. Jochebed married Rev. Amsel Leo, the well-known and respected Reader of the Greene Street Synagogue (formerly Elm Street) New York - Congregation B'nai Jeshurun. Mr. Simson survived his sister and her children."

Myer S. Isaacs provides the following description of Sampson Simson:

"I can recall Mr. Simson's appearance quite vividly. He affected the old fashioned costume, sometimes wearing knee breeches and buckles. He was above the average height, very stiff and upright in his bearing. His hair was white and worn in long wavy locks. His

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spectacles were of great size. His habitual walk was in short, quick steps and he carried a silver headed cane, upon which he would lean when seated. His voice was not musical and he rarely laughed. He was exacting and even tyrannical - would not endure criticism or contradiction. As he was quite wealthy and of benevolent instincts, he was, no doubt occasionally imposed upon. There were men he did not like and he let them perceive it quickly. He wrote a good hand; his signature was of the John Hancock style."

As mentioned above, Sampson owned a large estate in Yonkers, New York, and resided there in a large house called the Old Homestead. There he employed "several old family servants, some of whom had been slaves."

It has been said that he was an eccentric person with utopian ideas. Perhaps his years of seclusion tended to make his ways peculiar. His ideas were certainly novel and stimulating. Among them was his belief that Jewish societies should not lend their funds at interest to synagogues, as they were wont to do. This view was, of course, based upon the Bible. In line with his belief, he prohibited the North American Relief Society from lending its funds to any Jewish institution. [*The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York 1654-1860*]

Sampson was interested in a wide variety of affairs including prison reform and the politics of Westchester County. He closely followed the religious and charitable activities of organizations that functioned in the vicinity of Yonkers. He was very interested in agricultural affairs and fascinated by new machinery.

"He was a member of the Congregation Shearith Israel, and was a friend of its respected minister, Rev. J. J. Lyons. Occasionally, he was pretty positive in his expression of difference as to the management of Congregation affairs. He was fond of repeating his recollections of the great men of his early days."

Sampson "was always greatly interested in the Holy Land and ready to welcome the messengers that occasionally visited America to carry to Jerusalem the offerings of pious donors."

He founded the North American Relief Society for indigent Jews in Jerusalem with the stipulation that the poor be given assistance to encourage them to become self-supporting so that at some point they would no longer need financial assistance. Only the aged, widows and orphans were to be supported long term.

Sampson "rose very early and spent time at his devotions. He was so particular that he had his Matzos baked in his own house. He had 'the New England conscience' as it is termed; but he was an old fashioned, uncompromising orthodox Israelite whose ancestry had been emancipated from the Ghetto of the Middle Ages, and in whose blood there was no trace of racial subordination to surrounding circumstances. He was unyielding, conscientious in his religious views. The combination of a public-spirited citizen with the conformist Jew was not rare in his days. There was no cause that appealed in vain to his generosity; but to aid a church, whether Protestant or Catholic, or a Synagogue by whomsoever founded, gave him intense pleasure ."

Mr. Simson's will

contains some matters of interest. When he died, in 1857, he left three thousand dollars to Shearith Israel, two thousand dollars to the Beth Hamidrash, the very orthodox synagogue, and one thousand dollars to his alma mater, Columbia. To Amsel Leo, who had married his niece, he bequeathed a *Sefer Torah* (perhaps the one which he had used while on his Yonkers farm). [*The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York 1654-1860*]

The bulk of his estate, fifty thousand dollars (a huge sum in 1857), was set aside for his nephew Moses A. Isaacks, who was to use only the income generated by this money. After Isaacks's death Sampson wanted the principal to be given to the North American Relief Foundation to assist the poor in the Holy Land. However, the children of his niece contested Sampson's will in court, and his intentions were never carried out.

Next month's Glimpses will deal with the key role Sampson Simson played in the establishment of Mt. Sinai Hospital and the hospital's early history.

Dr. Yitzchok Levine served as a professor in the Department of Mathematical Sciences at Stevens Institute of Technology, Hoboken, New Jersey before retiring in 2008. He now teaches as an adjunct at Stevens. Glimpses Into American Jewish History appears the first week of each month. Dr. Levine can be contacted at llevine@stevens.edu.

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