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## THE FIRST JEW TO LIVE IN NORTH AMERICA

**Dr. Yitzchok Levine**

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The year 2004 marked the 350th anniversary of Jewish settlement in America. In 1654 the first Jews arrived from Brazil to take up permanent residence in New Amsterdam (New York). When the Portuguese re-conquered Pernambuco, a portion of northern Brazil, from the Dutch, the Jews residing there fled because they feared the return of the Inquisition. In 1654 most of the Jews living in Pernambuco sailed from Recife, Pernambuco's capital city. Twenty-three of these Jews eventually settled in New York.

However, the Jews who founded a community in New York were by no means the first Jews to arrive in North America. In 1581 Joachim (Jeoachim, Jochim) Gaunse (Gaunz, Ganse, Gans), a Jewish metallurgist and mining engineer from Prague, was invited to England by the Royal Mining Company.

"In 1584 Britain was preparing for war with Spain and desperately needed copper, a critical element in the production of bronze."<sup>[1]</sup> The English used bronze to manufacture "accurate cannons that gave their warships an advantage over the cast iron cannons of the Spaniards. This superior firepower provided by bronze cannonry proved crucial and was responsible in 1588 for the English navy's victory over the much larger Spanish Armada."<sup>[2]</sup>

"Gaunse's contributions to English bronze manufacture were monumental, and he was able to revolutionize their manufacture of bronze. He reduced the time needed to purify copper ore from 16 weeks to 4 days. In addition, he found a way to use the impurities removed from the ore in textile dyes. In an age when many still believed in alchemy (the 'science' of turning base metals into gold), Gaunse was a pioneer in the use of modern scientific research methods."<sup>[3]</sup>

Sir Walter Raleigh (1554-1618) was a British poet, historian, explorer, and soldier. Since he was a favorite of Queen Elizabeth I, in 1584 he received a royal patent to explore the Virginia territory in the New World and found a permanent settlement. The queen hoped that the colonists would discover copper, silver and gold, or at least find a passageway to the Orient. Sir Walter recruited Gaunse to serve as metallurgist and mining supervisor to this Roanoke expedition. "Gaunse thus became the first recorded Jew to set foot on English soil in North America."<sup>[4]</sup> Centuries later, archaeologists attributed the lumps of smelted copper and goldsmith's crucible found in the Roanoke site ruins to Gaunse. <

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The Roanoke colony did indeed succeed in discovering copper, but failed to endure the harsh new environment. The Roanoke colonists were homesick, physically challenged, fearful of the Indians, and discouraged by the failure of the Royal Mining Company to send additional supplies. The colonists accepted an offer from Sir Francis Drake, whose fleet was passing nearby, to carry them back to England. Joachim Gaunse and his comrades left the New World.<sup>[5]</sup>

### Return To England

"Upon his return from the expedition, however, Gaunse faced anti-Semitism."<sup>[6]</sup> Soon after he arrived back in England, Sir Walter Raleigh fell into Elizabeth's disfavor, in part at least because many believed that he did not accept a fundamental tenet of Christianity. "As a member of Raleigh's circle, Gaunse attracted unfavorable attention. After moving to the town of Bristol, Gaunse gave Hebrew lessons to English gentlemen who wanted to read the Bible in its original tongue. This was not well received by some, and in 1589 Reverend Richard Curteys visited Gaunse. It became immediately apparent to Curteys that Gaunse was a Jew. Curteys asked Gaunse, 'Do you deny Jesus Christ to be the Son of God?' Gaunse replied, 'What needeth the almighty God to have a son, is he not almighty?'"<sup>[7]</sup>

He was not afraid to openly state his commitment to Judaism despite the risks.

"Gaunse had spoken what was considered "blasphemy," and he was brought before the mayor

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and aldermen of Bristol. There is no question that if he had been a Christian he might have been burned at the stake as a heretic. As the archival record indicates, however, Gaunse 'affirmeth and sayeth that he was circumcised and hath been always instructed and brought up in the Talmud of the Jews and was never baptised.' Therefore, by definition, he could not be a heretic. Instead, Gaunse was simply considered to be an infidel, a non-believer, much like a Muslim or a Confucian. One should keep in mind that in 1290 Edward I had expelled the Jewish population of England. However, by the time of Elizabeth's reign, enforcement of the expulsion decree was greatly relaxed. Rather than deal with this Jew who was connected to the Royal Mining Company, Bristol's town fathers referred his case to the queen's Privy Council, which was composed of the mining company's major investors. Gaunse was transported back to London for judgment."<sup>[8]</sup>

Unfortunately, the historical record simply ends at this point. We do not know the result of the deliberations of the Privy Council regarding Gaunse's case. "Historians speculate that Gaunse was probably protected by his friends on the Privy Council, for whom his metallurgical innovations had reaped rewards. He might have remained quietly in England or he may have returned to Bohemia. There is no record that Gaunse was punished further, and his name drops from the public record.

"Joachim Gaunse's experience foreshadowed that of many American colonial Jews: he was simultaneously an insider and an outsider, useful as a scientist but unfit for full rights in a Christian society. Recruited to America by Raleigh for his expertise, protected by the Privy Council for the money he earned its members, Gaunse was apparently accepted among the tolerant explorers of Roanoke. He was challenged, however, by orthodox Christians.

"Gaunse revolutionized English metallurgy and helped England defeat the Spanish Armada, but a year later he was charged with blasphemy and forced to withdraw from public - and the historical record. Despite his contributions to English and American history, Gaunse remained on the margins of society simply because he was a Jew."<sup>[9]</sup>

[1] Joachim Gaunse [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Gaunse.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Gaunse.html)

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] The First Jew in America [judaism.about.com/od/americanjewry/f/firstamjew.htm](http://judaism.about.com/od/americanjewry/f/firstamjew.htm)

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Joachim Gaunse [www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Gaunse.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/Gaunse.html)

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

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