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THE JEWISH SETTLEMENT OF SAVANNAH, GEORGIA

Dr. Yitzchok Levine

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Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from New Light on the Jewish Settlement of Savannah, Malcolm H. Stern, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, volume 52, 1963. Reprinted in The Jewish Experience in America edited by Abraham J. Karp, Ktav Publishing House, New York, 1969, pages 66 -92. (Referred to as NL.)

London, in the late 1720's was overflowing with peoples of many origins. Despite the presence of great wealth, there were also immense poverty and unemployment. The debtors' prisons were crowded with inmates, and even when these unfortunates were released, they were without support and often could find no gainful employment. Their plight moved James Edward Oglethorpe, Member of Parliament, and some of his friends, including John, Lord Viscount Perceval (later, Earl of Egmont), to push for the establishment of a philanthropic colony in the territory south of the Savannah River chartered to the Carolinas but bordering on the Spanish possessions in Florida. On June 9, 1732, King George II, after two years of Parliamentary red-tape, issued the charter for the colony of Georgia.

"Some months before, interested parties began besieging the Trustees for the colony of Georgia for appointments as Commissioners to raise funds for the sending of colonists. Among these were the leaders of London's Sephardic Congregation in Bevis Marks." (NL pages 69-70) The synagogue appointed three commissioners who were to "interest themselves with those who have permission to arrange settlement in the English colony north [sic!] of Carolina "[1] "From the outset, the three Jewish Commissioners had as their one aim the lifting of some of these poor Jews from the relief rolls of London Jewry." (NL pages 70-71) Initially their request to send Jews to Georgia was rejected, but in January, 1733 permission was granted.

"The three Jewish commissioners reacted swiftly. They hired a ship (whose name has not come down to us) under a Captain Hanson and shipped forty-two Jews to the new colony. Although the ship left London in January, it was July 11 before she arrived at Savannah." (NL page 71) The forty-two Jews aboard this ship included Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribiero (known in America as Nunes or Nunez) and his family. (See "Escape From The Inquisition" The Jewish Press, December 2, 2005 page 71 for the story of how Dr. Nunez and his family escaped from Portugal and came to England in 1726.) "The Savannah community already boasted about 275 inhabitants. On July 7, 1733, with formal ceremonies, the town was laid out into wards and streets. The arrival of forty-two Jews, four days later, precipitated considerable consternation. Oglethorpe (who had come earlier with the first settlers who founded Savannah and served as the group's leader) consulted legal authorities in Charleston. Since the Georgia charter excluded only "papists," the Charleston lawyers ruled that the Jews had to be admitted. The news reached London several months later and evoked this strong statement to Oglethorpe, dated October 18, 1733: 'The Trustees have heard with concern of the arrival of Forty Jews with a design to settle in Georgia. They hope they will meet with no sort of encouragement, and desire, Sir, you will use your best endeavours that the said Jews may be allowed no kind of settlement with any of the grantees, the Trustees being apprehensive they will be of prejudice to the Trade and Welfare of the Colony.'" (NL page 74)< BR>

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This letter crossed one from Oglethorpe, written in August, which reached the Trustees in November, reporting an outbreak of contagious disease in the colony that killed twenty, and reporting that Dr. Nunez had put a stop to the epidemic. "This contribution somewhat mollified the Trustees. They replied to Oglethorpe in November: 'The Trustees are very much pleased with the Behaviour of the Jewish Physician and the Service he has been to the Sick: As they have no doubt you have given him some Gratuity for it they hope you have taken any other Method of rewarding him than in granting of Lands.' Nunes' achievement was not great enough to make Jews

welcome in the eyes of the Trustees." (NL pages 75) Indeed, the Trustees wanted nothing less than "that the said Jews be removed from the Colony of Georgia." However, by the time this view was received in the colony, "Oglethorpe, long since acting under the Charleston

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opinion, had already granted lands to the heads of the Jewish families." (NL page 76)

The Jewish population of Savannah increased slowly with the arrival of new immigrants and, of course, the birth of children. On November 12, 1733 a ship arrived from London bringing a "total of thirty-nine additional immigrants." There were twenty-one births by 1742, although, as was common during these times, some of these children did not survive infancy. "In addition to these infant deaths, the community lost nine adults." (NL page 79)

"The religious needs of the community had been thought of before the departure from London." Benjamin Sheftall, an Ashkenazic Jew who was one of the original forty-two immigrants, kept a record (originally in Hebrew and then later translated into English by him for his son) of the early history of Savannah Jewry. In this document he wrote, ".they brought with them a Safertora, with two Cloatus [covers?] and a Circumcision box which was given them by Mr. Lindo a merchant in London for use of the congregation they intended to establish."

However, it was not until July 1735 that a congregation, named "K-K. Mikva Israel," was actually established. This was done partially in response to "some proselytizing activity on the part of Christians (that) was in progress, and not without success." (NL page 80) Despite their small numbers, the Jews of Savannah were split into two distinct groups - the ghettoized Ashkenazim and the assimilated ex-Marrano Sephardim. The differences were considerable.

We have here two sorts of Jews, Portuguese and Germans. The first having professed Christianity in Portugal or the Brazils, are more lax in their way, and dispense with a great many of their Jewish Rites, and two young men, the Sons of a Jew Doctor, Sometimes come to Church, and for these reasons are thought by some people to be Christians but I cannot find that they really are So, only that their education in these Countries where they were oblig'd to appear Christians makes them less rigid and stiff in their way. The German Jews, who are thought the better sort of them [i.e. better Jews], are a great deal more strict in their way and rigid observers of their Law.[2]

Therefore, it is not at all surprising that "the Congregation was split by strife." Indeed, in 1740 and 1741 many Jews left Savannah for the larger Jewish community of Charleston, South Carolina, and the synagogue ceased to function. However, it was reestablished in 1774, when it began meeting in the house of Mordechai Sheftall, a son of Benjamin Sheftall. "He was a man of exemplary piety, and adhered closely to all the rites and ceremonies of his faith. He had fitted up a room in his house, at his individual cost, for the accommodation of the congregation." [3] Thus began a new chapter in the history of the Jews of Savannah.

[1] The Sephardim of England, Albert M. Hyamson, Methuen, London, 1951, page 156.

[2] The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia, volume XX.

[3] The Occident and American Jewish Advocate, volume I, No. 10 (January 1844)
(<http://www.jewish-history.com/Occident/volume1/jan1844/savannah3.html>)

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