

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 35)

Moses and Daniel Peixotto

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The Peixotto family played a prominent role in the American Jewish community during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. “Originally from Spain, some of its members migrated by way of Holland to Curaçao, in the West Indies. The original name of this family was Maduro, but while still in Spain a Maduro married a Peixotto and adopted the name of his wife. There are records of the burial in Holland of a child of Joshua Cohen Peixotto (d. April 10, 1625), and of Dona Ester (d. Sept. 21, 1618), wife of Moses Peixotto.”¹

Below we shall sketch the lives of two prominent Peixottos.

Moses Levi Maduro Peixotto (1767 – 1828)

“Peixotto was born in Curacao on February 11, 1767. After the death of his first wife, Rachel, daughter of Isaac Jessurun Sasportas, he went to Amsterdam. There, in 1797, he married Judith, daughter of Samuel Lopez Salzedo. He was ‘a dark featured, square-built, middle-sized man, greatly addicted to snuff taking.’ At the age of forty he came to New York, arriving on June 11, 1807, with his wife and six children. He was a merchant and he went into business, but he found time also to be active as a freemason, a trustee of the synagogue [Congregation Shearith Israel], and occasional hazzan. He was a close personal friend of Hazzan [Gershom Mendes] Seixas (1745 – 1816). After the death of [Reverend] Seixas when Peixotto and Eleazar S. Lazarus took over the hazzan's duties, he continued for four years to maintain his business activities alongside his ministry. But in March, 1820, he wrote to the board of trustees

I hold it undignified to continue the duties of hazan with that of a merchant ... now must make my election either to offer myself as Hazan of this congregation or return to the pursuits of commerce. I do not hesitate to say that I prefer the former.

Needless to say, this man for whom everyone had a good word was elected. He gave up his business, and on becoming the congregation's full-time minister he resigned from membership on its board of trustees. He had then been officiating regularly for four years with great devotion if not with musical distinction. Indeed, so limited were his musical gifts that at points in the service where the congregation had to chant a hymn he would often stop and wait for some member of the congregation to give the key and the melody. On one occasion when a congregant raised a question about his confusingly unmusical

chanting of the Torah, he replied, ‘Please remember that it says in the Torah that the Lord said to Moses or He spoke to Moses, never that He sang to him. The wide popularity of this reader of the services despite his musical limitations indicates wide compensatory qualities.

After becoming officially the hazzan, although in his fifties, he applied himself to the study of the English language. Eventually he was able to deliver sermons in English on Thanksgiving Day and on other special occasions. His son, Dr. Daniel Levi Maduro Peixotto, said of him that

occasional Discourses on moral and Religious Subjects were composed with a facility derived in part from a familiar acquaintance with the language of the Scriptures and from native strength of intellect; but an irrepressible enthusiasm for the cause in which he labored had by far the greater share.

Rebecca Gratz wrote of ‘the humble yet dignified figure of the venerable Mr. Peixotto’ that he ‘has since his clerical appointment studied and become as learned as he is intelligent.’

When he passed away in his sixty-second year, on July 16, 1828, he was given all the honors of a synagogue funeral. This friendly, helpful, modest man had won the affection and respect of all his community. The oration at the memorial service held under the auspices of the Hebra Hased Va-Amet was spoken by New York's most notable Jewish citizen, Mordecai M. Noah.”²

It is interesting to note that Moses Peixotto agreed to serve as hazzan “on the generous condition that the salary and emoluments of the office should go to the family of the late Hazzan Seixas. This offer was gratefully and unanimously accepted.”³

Dr. Daniel Levy Maduro Peixotto (1800 – 1843)

Daniel, the eldest son of Moses, was born in Amsterdam on July 18, 1800 in Amsterdam. He received some education in Curaçao under the direction of Professor Strebeck and came with his father to New York in 1807. He must have been a child prodigy of sorts, because he graduated from Columbia College at the age of sixteen and earned the degree of Doctor of Medicine in 1819! Later in 1825 he earned an M.A. from Columbia.

Prior to taking his degree, he had entered the office of Dr. David Hosack who was an eminent physician of that period? Dr. Hosack was a professor of natural history and materia medica in Columbia College and one of the founders of Bellevue Hospital, the physician to George Washington, and the attendant physician on July 11, 1804 at the duel between Hamilton and Burr. He was also president of the New York Historical Society.

Shortly after Peixotto's graduation, he went to the West Indies where he remained for a few years, and then returned to New York to practice his profession. He was

not only active in the practice of his profession, but interested in all movements tending to its advancement and development, and contributed largely thereto.⁴

In 1822 he published the article “Observations on the Climate and Diseases of the Island of Curacao” in *The New York Medical and Physical Journal*, the first regular quarterly medical journal ever undertaken in the English language. The journal had been founded in the same year. He eventually became one of the journal’s editors. He was a frequent contributor to other periodicals and newspapers of the day. Later on he edited “The True American,” advocating the election of General Andrew Jackson, and he was also connected with the *New York Mirror*.

Among the many offices held by him were the following: secretary of the Academy of Medicine (1825); physician to the City Dispensary (1827); and president of the New York Medical Society (1830-32); he was also one of the organizers of the Society for Assisting the Widows and Orphans of Medical Men.

The title of Professor of the Theory and Practice of Medicine and Obstetrics was given him in 1836, and in the same year he was elected to honorary membership in the Medical Society of Lower Canada. Having accepted the appointment of president of the Willoughby Medical College, he removed to Cleveland, Ohio, where he was dean of the faculty for a number of years. Returning to New York [in 1841], he resumed his practice there, and continued it until his death [from consumption at the age of 43].⁵

“Peixotto married Rachel Seixas, [the daughter of Benjamin Seixas], in 1823. They had 8 children: Judith, Zipporah, Sarah, Moses Levy Maduro II, Rebecca, Benjamin Franklin, Raphael, and Miriam.”⁶

It is also worthy of note that he possessed a broad and deep religious nature and was a firm believer in the Jewish faith as is evidenced by an address delivered by him before the Society for the Education of Orphan Children and the Relief of Indigent Persons of the Jewish Persuasion while he was vice-president of the Medical Society of the City and County of New York.⁷

During the course of his address he said:

The writings of the Hebrews are generally acknowledged to be unequalled for the simplicity and dignity - the strength, conciseness and boldness of their style; the perfect truth to nature of their imagery; their animated eloquence and sublime figures. The conceits and puerile vanities which disgrace much of classical literature are altogether banished from their pages. It may, however, be suggested that these writings were inspired. This assertion is more imposing by its speciousness than forcible by its application. The great truths and sublime doctrines which were inculcated by Moses and the Prophet were undoubtedly derived from immediate communication with the Almighty.⁸

¹ **Jewish Encyclopedia.com**, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=158&letter=P#599>

² **An Old Faith in the New World**, David and Tamar De Sola Pool, Columbia University Press, 1955, pages 174 – 175.

³ Ibid., page 174.

⁴ **Daniel L. M. Peixotto, M. D.**, by Daniel Peixotto Hays, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, 1918, 26, pages 219 ff. Available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>

⁵ **Jewish Encyclopedia.com**, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?artid=158&letter=P#599>

⁶ <http://ech.case.edu/ech-cgi/article.pl?id=PDL>

⁷ **Daniel L. M. Peixotto, M. D.**, by Daniel Peixotto Hays

⁸ Ibid.