

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 50)

N. Taylor Phillips (1868 – 1955)

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Introduction

Naphtali Moses Taylor Phillips, generally known as N. Taylor Phillips, was a descendent of one of America's "First Jewish Families." His great-great-great grandfather, Dr. Samuel Nunes (Nunez) Ribeiro (b. 1668), and his great-great grandmother, Zipporah (1714 – 1799), were amongst the first group of Jews to arrive in Savannah, GA in 1733. Zipporah married David Mendes Machado (1695 – 1747) who served as the Hazzan of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York from 1737 until his passing in 1747.

Zipporah's daughter, Rebecca (1746 – 1831), married Jonas Phillips (1736 – 1803) in 1762. Jonas was a member of the Philadelphia county militia during the Revolutionary War and at one time was employed by Congregation Shearith Israel of New York as a shochet. Their son Naphtali Phillips (1773 – 1870) was a grandfather of N. Taylor Phillips. [One should not confuse the grandfather, Naphtali Phillips, with the grandson, Naphtali Moses Taylor Phillips.] In 1796 it was Naphtali Phillips who took the first copy of George Washington's farewell address that came off the press of the **American Advertiser**, a leading Philadelphia newspaper. In 1848 this document was placed in the cornerstone of the Washington Monument in our national capitol.

On July 5, 1797, Naphtali Phillips married Rachel Hannah (1773 – 1822), daughter of Moses Mendez Seixas, a prominent Newport, RI, merchant and banker and a brother of Gershom Mendez Seixas, known as "the patriotic Jewish minister of the American Revolution."

[Naphtali] Phillips always took a deep interest in the affairs of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue Shearith Israel. He was its President as early as the year 1816 and served for fourteen terms in that office. He was also trustee of the congregation for many years; his entire official service covering a period of long over half a century. He was for many years prominent in the affairs of the Democratic party in New York City and served on many political committees.¹

On June 16, 1812 Rachel Hannah gave birth to her fifth child, Isaac. Isaac Phillips (d. August 4, 1889) also served as president of Congregation Shearith Israel.

He [Isaac Phillips] was one of the founders of Mount Sinai Hospital and was the last surviving member of the charter board. He was, according to the strictest sect,

an Orthodox Jew until the day of his death. His first wife dying in 1855, he married in 1856 Miss Miriam Trimble [1839 – 1882], a Gentile, who became a convert to Judaism before her marriage.²

Miriam Trimble Phillips gave birth to N. Taylor on December 5, 1868.

Sketch of Life of N. Taylor Phillips

Naphtali Moses Taylor Phillips attended Columbia Grammar School and then Columbia University, from which he graduated in 1886 at the age of 18 with the degree of LL.B! At 21 he was admitted to the bar of the Supreme Court of NY, and three years later to the bar of the United States Supreme Court. He held various political offices. He was a member of the New York State legislature (1898-1901), serving on the judiciary and other committees and as a member of the Joint Statutory Revision Commission of that body (1900). He served as deputy comptroller of the City of New York from 1902 to 1910. Mr. Phillips was a leader in Democratic politics for many years.

As a result of his distinguished lineage, N. Taylor was a member of the Sons of the American Revolution. On March 9, 1892, Mr. Phillips married Rosalie Solomons, daughter of Adolphus S. Solomons and Rachel Mendez Seixas Phillips Solomons. Rosalie was active in Jewish affairs as well as in politics. She served as Tammany co-leader of the Seventh Assembly District, from 1918 – 1939. Rosalie Solomons Phillips passed away in 1946 at the age of 79.

One of the outstanding characteristics of Naphtali Phillips was a phenomenal memory through which he consistently endeavored to carry on the traditions he inherited from the past. It was this loyalty to his American and Jewish family traditions which stimulated his enduring interest in the American Jewish Historical Society. He was one of its founders, and a director of it since 1893. For many years he was its treasurer, and later its honorary vice-president. In its Publications there are printed no less than ten articles from his pen, several of which characteristically tell the story of families of his American forebears from Colonial times, while others are centered on historical aspects of New York's Congregation Shearith Israel with which ancestors of his had been prominently associated for over two centuries.

This conscious identification with his past made him one of the leading spirits fifty years ago in organizing and making effective the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary celebration of the settlement of the Jews in this country. It was also expressed by his being a life member of the New York Historical Society.

When the United States entered the first World War, N. Taylor Phillips, a Son of the American Revolution, was determined in his generation also to give military service to his country. At the time he was nearly fifty years of age, and he found difficulty in being accepted in the armed forces. But he persisted in his purpose

and eventually he was able to enter the army. He became a captain and served in Washington throughout the war.

His loyalty to the past was expressed most penetratingly through his synagogue. He loved it passionately. N. Taylor Phillips served as its president for eight years.

In 1897 when Congregation Shearith Israel dedicated its present synagogue building, it was N. Taylor Phillips who wrote a valuable history of the congregation as his grandfather Naphtali Phillips had done three generations earlier. This was published in the *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* and in the *American Hebrew*. In the fall of 1954 when he was eighty-five years old he was one of the two men who opened the doors of the synagogue for its solemn service of reconsecration at the beginning of the national tercentenary celebration of the settlement of the Jews in the United States, just as almost a century earlier his grandfather, Naphtali Phillips, then eighty-seven years of age, had formally opened the doors for the dedication of the newly built synagogue of the congregation on Nineteenth Street.

He would chant the Book of Jonah in the afternoon service of the Day of Atonement. He did this with special love because he knew that his great-grandfather, Jonas Phillips, had similarly chanted the Book of Jonah in the synagogue at the time of the Revolution. His seat in the synagogue was in the same position in the present synagogue as that of his father and grandfather in the earlier synagogue of the congregation.

In all such ways he deeply cherished the historic traditions of his fathers. It was this loyalty which made him so constant and so devoted a member of the American Jewish Historical Society for nearly two-thirds of a century from its foundation in 1892.³

N. Taylor Phillips passed away on April 30, 1955 at the age of 87. He was considered the Phillips family's unofficial historian and published many articles about the history of the Jews of New York during the 17th and 18th centuries. In a future article we shall present some of his fascinating historical recollections.

¹ **Naphtali Phillips**, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (1893-1961); 1913; 21, AJHS Journal, page 172 ff. (Available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>)

² Obituary of Isaac Phillips, the **New York Times**, August 6, 1889.

³ **Necrology N. Taylor Phillips 1868-1955**, by D. De Solo Pool, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (1893-1961); Sep 1955-Jun 1956; 45, 1-4; AJHS Journal, pages 64 – 66. (Available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>)