

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 49)

Naphtali and Josephine Phillips

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*Editor's Note: Much of this article is based upon **Naphtali Phillips, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, 1913, 21**. This article is available online from AJHS at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>. All quotes are taken from this article unless otherwise indicated.*

Naphtali Phillips, the ninth child of Rebecca Machado and Jonas Phillips, was born in New York on October 19, 1773. His great grandfather was Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribeiro, an escapee from the Portuguese Inquisition¹ who became one of the first Jewish settlers of Savannah, GA.² His maternal grandparents were Zipporah Nunes and David Mendes Machado.³ David Machado also escaped from the Inquisition in Portugal and served for a number of years as the Chazzan and Torah teacher of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York.

His mother, Rebecca Machado Phillips, was a most unusual woman. Not only did she give birth to 21 children, but she was also involved in a variety of Chesed organizations, something that was pioneering for women at the time.⁴ Naphtali's father, Jonas, was a merchant in New York and Philadelphia. He was of Ashkenazic descent and grew up in London, where he must have received a better than average Jewish education, since he was trained as a *shochet*. The Phillipses were observant Jews.

At the age of three, with his mother, brothers and sisters, he was taken to Philadelphia, Pa., by his father, who fled from New York with other patriots after the battle of Washington Heights, November, 1776, into a voluntary exile, during which time New York was in the hands of the British. The older Phillips was an ardent patriot and served as a soldier in the Revolutionary army. The son naturally became a devoted admirer of Washington from earliest youth, and when the latter was inaugurated as first President of the United States in 1789, young Phillip, though only sixteen years of age, was one of those who accompanied the cavalcade which escorted Washington from Philadelphia to New York for that ceremony. After the Revolutionary War he continued to reside in Philadelphia where his father, who was engaged in business, was the President of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue Mikve Israel.

Mr. Phillips voted for General Washington on his second election as President and voted also in every presidential election thereafter until that of General Grant in 1868, a period of 76 years.

Young Naphtali became interested in journalism, and his first job was with the *American Advertiser*, a leading Philadelphia newspaper. "On September 16, 1796, he personally took from the press of that journal the first printed copy of Washington's Farewell Address."

On July 5, 1797 he married Rachel Seixas (1773 – 1822), the daughter of Moses Mendez Seixas, a prominent merchant and banker in Newport, RI.

Mr. Phillips took up his residence in New York permanently about the year 1801, and shortly thereafter became the proprietor of the *National Advocate*, the leading New York newspaper of that period, and continued at its head for many years. He then became an attaché of the New York Custom House, where he remained until failing sight overtook him about the middle of the last [19th] century.

Rachel and Naphtali Phillips had 11 children together. Rachel died from yellow fever during the plague that afflicted New York in 1822. On October 8, 1823 Naphtali married Rachel's first cousin, Esther B. Seixas (1789 – 1872), the daughter of Lieutenant Benjamin Mendez Seixas, a Revolutionary War officer and one of the founders of the New York Stock Exchange. They had 4 children together.

Mr. 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. At his death, which occurred November 1, 1870, in his ninety-eighth year, he was the oldest member of the Tammany Society, having belonged to it for nearly three-quarters of a century. As a mark of respect to his profound piety and long service to his people, his funeral was held at the vestibule of the synagogue of his congregation, the only person in its history of over two and one-half centuries, other than its ministers, who has ever been thus honored.

Reaction to the Assassination of President Lincoln

Editor's Note: All quotes below are from A Personal Tribute to Lincoln by Josephine Phillips, by Phillip Goodman, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, Sep. 1951 – Jun. 1952, 41. This article is available online from AJHS at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>.

Josephine Phillips (1814 – 1896) was either the 6th or 7th child to be born to Rachel and Naphtali Phillips. (Since she had a twin sister, Jochebed, it is not clear who was born first.) She was deeply affected by Lincoln's assassination on April 15, 1865, and wrote a moving letter to her brother-in-law, Adolphus S. Solomons (1826 – 1910) of Washington, D.C. Adolphus was married to her half-sister Rachel Seixas Phillips (1826 – 1881). Louis Marshall called Solomons "... one of the finest exemplars of a Jew of American birth, being distinguished alike for unswerving loyalty to his faith and his country"

Her letter, written only five days after Lincoln's death, expresses her profound grief. The significance of the letter quoted below lies not so much in its confirmation of historical data, as in the fact that it was a typical personal outpouring of grief that was shared by untold numbers of other Jews.

New York, April 20th 1865.

Dear Adolphus

I received your letter last Monday & presume you also got mine containing our mutual sorrow & horror at the sad event that has plunged all in profound grief, never in history has any event in any nation brought forth such real regret, & the loyalty of the people high & low rich & poor is seen mingled with love & veneration for the man "whose heart was warm whose hands were pure whose doctrine & whose life coincident exhibit lucid proof that he was honest in the sacred cause & to such are rendered more than mere respect." These lines from Cowper⁵ are forcibly brought to my recollection as illustrating much of the character of our lamented President. New York is literally clad in black & it is more rare to see a house without it than with it, from the splendid mansion to the smallest Shanty, even the gates of the poorest black or white display their emblem of sorrow; full well I can imagine how badly you feel it was only last week you wrote me about your being at his house & seeing him come out & request the band to play Dixie, & to-day that he appointed to celebrate our victories, his own funeral takes place. I have not yet recovered from the shock of last Saturday. Yesterday we had shool & a very large assemblage, the services were very solemn, the Tabah [Torah reader's desk] was covered with black also the pillars & gallery, to-day we have it again at three o'clock" nothing is thought or talked of to-day no stores are opened & the poorest person will not work. I see by the paper the body will be here on Monday, his poor wife & children what a sad change for them! I am truly glad Mr. Seward & son will recover & also that his assassin is arrested, but it seems strange Booth has yet eluded the vigilance of the police, his Mother I hear resides in 19th St. NY. & is of course in the greatest affliction, what a villain he is!

JOSEPHINE

The morning paper mentions the fact of the synagogues being the first places of Worship that had Prayers for the President.

¹ "[Escape From The Inquisition](#)" **The Jewish Press**, December 2, 2005 page 71. Glimpses into American Jewish History Part 9.

² "[The Jewish Settlement of Savannah, Georgia](#)" **The Jewish Press**, January 6, 2006 page 46. Glimpses into American Jewish History Part 10.

³ See "[David Mendes and Zipporah Nunes Machado](#)" **The Jewish Press**, July 6, 2007, pages 32 & 69. Glimpses into American Jewish History Part 28.

⁴ See "[Rebecca \(Machado\) Phillips \(1746-1831\): Colonial Jewish Matriarch](#)" **The Jewish Press**, April 7, 2006, pages 41 & 46. Glimpses into American Jewish History Part 13.

⁵ Probably William Cowper (1731-1800), an English poet.