

Glimpses Into American Jewish History Part 26

The Jews of Nevis and Alexander Hamilton

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The sister islands of the Federation of St. Kitts and Nevis lie about 225 miles southeast of Puerto Rico in the Leeward Islands in the Eastern Caribbean. Nevis, the smaller of the two islands, is elliptically shaped and has a land area of approximately five by seven miles. When Christopher Columbus spotted this eight-mile-long island on his second voyage to the New World in 1493, he mistook its cloud-shrouded mountains for icy peaks and named it Nuestra Señora de las Nieves (Our Lady of the Snows).

“St. Kitts and Nevis, like no other islands in the Caribbean, seem to embody a kind of lush tropical paradise usually associated with the South Pacific. The atmosphere here is palpably luxuriant, an intoxicating blend of sunlight, sea air and fantastically abundant vegetation. And yet nature is only a small part of the wonder of these small, relatively undiscovered destinations. Long ago, St. Kitts and Nevis were the pearls of the British Caribbean, rich and enormously important islands that were celebrated throughout Europe. Nevis, the ‘Queen of the Caribbees,’ possessed unimaginable wealth from its super-productive sugar industry, while on St. Kitts the impregnable fortress of Brimstone Hill stood as the Gibraltar of the West Indies.”¹

Both islands are rich in New World American history. Indeed, some readers may know that Alexander Hamilton, whose likeness appears on the ten dollar bill and who was the first Secretary of the Treasury of the United States, was born on Nevis. However, most readers will probably be surprised to learn that Nevis at one time contained a vibrant Jewish community with a synagogue and Jewish cemetery.

“For a period during the late seventeenth century this small town [Charlestown, Nevis] served as the point of embarkation not only for the products of Nevis, but for all English goods being shipped out of the Leeward Islands. At the same time Charlestown also functioned as the slave depot of the Royal African Company in the Leeward Islands. All of this commercial activity made Charlestown a major port of the late-seventeenth-century British Caribbean, and it was during this period that the first Jewish merchants began to arrive on the island.”²

“The earliest known reference to a Jewish presence on Nevis is a 1677-1678 muster roll for the island that identifies Isaac Senyor (Senior), Abraham Reysure

(Levy Rezio), Solomon Israel, Daniel Mendez, Rachel Mendez, and three children as 'Jewes'. It is not certain when these individuals arrived on Nevis, but Sephardic Jews probably first came to the island as traders from Barbados sometime after the 1654 emigration from Portuguese Brazil.

"What is certain is that by the late 1670s the Nevis Jewish families recorded on the muster roll had created a community of permanence, as evidenced by their desire, and ability, to consecrate a piece of land for a separate burial ground. The oldest surviving grave marker in the cemetery is the stone of Ester Marache. Her stone indicates that she died on February 20 of 1679 in the Hebrew month and year of Adar 5439.

"By the end of the century at least twenty-seven Jewish individuals, representing approximately seventeen households, were recorded on Nevis. As seventeenth-century records for Nevis are scarce, the total number of individuals in the community at this time cannot be determined with certainty."³

By today's standards this number of Jewish households seems small indeed. "Nonetheless, the total of at least seventeen households is on par with the Jewish communities of the largest British colonies in the West Indies during this period. The 1680 census data for Port Royal, Jamaica, indicates twenty Jewish households, whereas Speightstown, Barbados, had fourteen, and the leading port of Bridgetown, Barbados, had fifty-four. While the number of Jewish individuals on Nevis paled in comparison to the total white population of the island (3,521 individuals in 1678), the number of Jewish households demonstrates that they were more than a minute Jewish presence."⁴

By the late seventeenth century this Jewish community was an established enclave complete with the communal necessities of a cemetery, a synagogue and a Jewish school.

"It is unclear if the school was in the synagogue or in a separate building. Curiously enough, we know of the existence of a Jewish school through some of the biographies of Alexander Hamilton, born in Nevis. Hamilton's mother, Rachel Faucett, after her separation from her Danish-Jewish husband John Michal Lavien, cohabited with a Scotsman, James Hamilton, in Nevis and gave birth to Alexander. 'The Anglican Church could not offer full acceptance of the situation... (and) denied Alexander membership or education in the church school. He was enrolled in a private school on Nevis taught by a Jewish head mistress and... soon was fluent in Hebrew and French.'"⁵

"His son later related that 'rarely as he alluded to his personal history, he mentioned with a smile his having been taught to repeat the Decalogue in Hebrew, at the school of a Jewess, when so small that he was placed standing by her side upon a table.'

“Perhaps from this exposure at an impressionable age, Hamilton harbored a lifelong reverence for Jews. In later years, he privately jotted on a sheet of paper that the ‘progress of the Jews...from their earliest history to the present time has been and is entirely out of the ordinary course of human affairs. Is it not then a fair conclusion that the cause also is an extraordinary one - in other words, that it is the effect of some great providential plan?’ Later on, in the heat of a renowned legal case, Hamilton challenged the opposing counsel: ‘Why distrust the evidence of the Jews? Discredit them and you destroy the Christian religion....’”⁶

Nevis’ sugar-based economy and the merchant class that depended upon it collapsed during the eighteenth century for a variety of political and economic reasons. The white populace as well as the Jewish community dwindled as a result of this economic collapse. By the last half of the eighteenth century only three Jewish households remained. “An 1809 letter refers to a piece of land ‘where the Jews Synagogue was formerly,’ indicating that by that date the central building of the community was gone.”⁷

The existence of the Nevis Jewish community was virtually unknown to anyone save the inhabitants of Nevis and the surrounding islands until it was accidentally rediscovered in 1957 by the American Jewish historian Malcolm Stern. Stern happened to be on the first cruise ship to ever visit the island when it docked for a short time at Charlestown, the capital of the island. At the welcoming ceremony one of the officials mentioned that Nevis was the birthplace of Alexander Hamilton. Stern recalled that earlier on the voyage he had heard that Hamilton had received his early education in a synagogue school.

Based on this Stern and his wife approached a Nevisian and asked if he might be shown the Jewish synagogue. They were then shown an almost unidentifiable ruin and told that this was the synagogue. Later archaeological investigations by Michelle Terrell have shown that this ruin was not the Nevis synagogue.

The Sterns were also taken to an overgrown Jewish burial ground. “The cemetery consisted of an open field in which goats grazed amongst the barely visible gravestones. The Sterns spent the remainder of their time ashore recording a total of sixteen epitaphs. Upon returning home, Rabbi Stern wrote a short article about the Nevis Jewish community, its cemetery, and the ruined synagogue for the American Jewish Archives⁸, thereby bringing the forgotten Sephardic community of Nevis to the attention of scholars of Jewish history.

“In response to Rabbi Stern's article, a group of philanthropists led by Florence and Robert Abrahams of Philadelphia set about collecting funds to refurbish Nevis' forgotten Jewish burial ground. Their work culminated in the rededication of the cemetery on February 25, 1971.”⁹

Today this well-maintained cemetery is one of the most popular historic sights on Nevis.

¹ <http://www.geographia.com/stkitts-nevis/>

² **The Jewish Community of Early Colonial Nevis**, Michelle M. Terrell, University Press of Florida, 2005, page 41.

³ **Ibid.**, page 45.

⁴ **Ibid.**, pages 47 – 48.

⁵ <http://www.sefarad.org/publication/Im/035/15.html>

⁶ <http://www.wnyc.org/books/29537>

⁷ **The Jewish Community of Early Colonial Nevis**, page 55.

⁸ **Some Notes on the Jews of Nevis**, Malcolm Stern, American Jewish Archives, 10 (2), 1958, pages 151 – 159.

⁹ **The Jewish Community of Early Colonial Nevis**, pages 3 – 4.