

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 11)

A Haven for Jews in New York - I

The Life of Mordechai Manuel Noah (1785 – 1851)

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*Editor's note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from **Mordechai Manuel Noah: A Centenary Evaluation**, by Robert Gordis, Publications of the American Historical Society, Volume 41, 1951, reprinted in **The Jewish Experience in America, II**, pages 110 – 135, Ktav Publishing Company, Inc., New York, 1969. This article is also available at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>.*

In 1825, more than 70 years before the First Zionist Congress was held in Basel, Switzerland, Mordechai Manuel Noah startled the world by proposing a concrete plan for the establishment of a Jewish city of refuge in North America. "In the Niagara River, opposite the frontier town of Buffalo, New York, lay Grand Island, a wooded tract of land, which, Noah felt, could serve as the center of a Jewish republic." (Page 119) Who was this dreamer who dared to make such a proposal to the world during the first part of the Nineteenth Century? In this article we shall sketch the life of M. M. Noah. Next month's column will deal with the details of Noah's attempt to establish the city of Ararat in New York State.

Mordechai Manuel Noah was born on July 19, 1785 to Manuel M. and Zipporah Phillips Noah. Zipporah Noah was a great, great granddaughter of Dr. Samuel Nunez, a Marrano who made a daring escape from Portugal and settled in Savannah, Georgia in 1732. (The story of this escape was told in "Escape from the Inquisition," Glimpses Into American Jewish History, Part 9, the Jewish Press, December 2, 2005 page 71 [http://www.jewishpress.com/news_article.asp?article=5755].)

"When Noah was less than seven years old, his mother died and his father disappeared, never to reappear until decades later." (Page 112) Young Mordechai and his younger sister, Judith, were raised by their maternal grandparents, Jonas and Rebecca (Machado) Phillips. The Phillips' home must have been a bustling place, given that the Phillips brought into the world no less than twenty-one children in thirty years!

"The dominant influence on the lad (Mordechai) was his grandfather, who imbued him with a deep-seated reverence for American liberty and its great protagonists who were all alive at the time, and with an equally staunch pride in his people

and religion." (Page 112) Jonas Phillips "was born in Rhenish Prussia, but had been reared in London. He must have received a better than average Jewish education, since he was trained as a *shochet*." (Page 111)

At a relatively early age Noah became interested in drama, and before long he tried his hand at being a playwright. His first play, *The Fortress of Sorrento*, appeared in 1808. Other plays followed, and he won an honored place among the most important American dramatists of the Nineteenth Century.

In 1811 Noah moved to Charleston, South Carolina, a city with one of the largest Jewish communities in North America at that time. He threw himself into the political arena, and published a series of articles dealing with politics. These, together with three duels (two of which were called off at the eleventh hour by the other side), gave him considerable recognition. By 1813 his reputation had grown sufficiently for him to receive the post of American Consul to Tunis. "At twenty-eight, Noah was on the highroad to success, or so it seemed." (Page 113) "Then he was personally touched by anti-Semitism."¹

Noah had been given a special mission to Algiers in which he distinguished himself by rescuing several Americans who were being held as slaves in the Barbary States. However, while in the middle of negotiations, he received a sealed letter from the Department of State which read in part,

At the time of your appointment, as Consul at Tunis, it was not known that the RELIGION which you profess would form any obstacle to the exercise of your Consular functions. Recent information, however, on which entire reliance may be placed, proves that it would produce a very unfavourable effect. IN CONSEQUENCE OF WHICH, the President has deemed it expedient to revoke your commission. ... There are some circumstances, too, connected with your accounts, which require a more particular explanation, which, with that already given, are not approved by the President.

I am, very respectfully, Sir,
Your obedient servant,
[Signed] JAMES MONROE. (Page 114)

Noah was also accused of financial malfeasance. He returned to the United States to fight for his vindication and eventually succeeded. His personal experience of anti-Semitism apparently stimulated him to develop a genuine interest in the problems of his own people.

Noah then became involved in a variety of activities. "His versatility was marvelous – sometimes, perhaps, audacious . . . Sheriff, judge, major, consul, politician, dramatist (or rather playwright) and journalist, with a style racy, easy, genial, and humorous."²

In 1817 Noah became the editor of the *National Advocate*, a New York newspaper sponsored by the Democratic political group Tammany Hall. “Noah quickly succeeded at his new job. Copying techniques he had used in Charleston, he introduced humor and lighthearted articles into his newspaper. He appealed to women with articles on domestic economy and feminine virtues. He spiced political articles with bons mots, caricatures, and satires. And, he delighted in fierce controversy and scandalous revelations about his opponents.”³

Noah became heavily embroiled in politics, and, eventually, a leader of Tammany Hall. Over the course of his tumultuous career he made a number of powerful enemies. Financial considerations led him to become the editor of several newspapers and to change political alliances. There was, however, one constant in all his activities. He was a proud Jew who did his best to further the welfare of his brethren.

In 1821 Noah used his political connections to become Sheriff of New York County. An incident that occurred in 1822 during his short term as Sheriff sheds light on his character. “A plague of yellow fever broke out in New York. Noah could not bear to see the inmates of Debtor’s Jail being exposed to the ravages of the disease. Heedless of the legal consequences, he threw open the gates of the jail and thus became liable for the combined debts of all the prisoners. One of Noah’s biographers tells us that as a consequence Noah paid out nearly \$200,000, a sum greater than he probably earned throughout his lifetime. But even without these embellishments, the incident is impressive.” (Page 118)

In 1827, at the age of forty-two, Noah married seventeen-year old Rebecca Esther Jackson. She was a young woman of “extraordinary personal beauty who came from a well-respected family.”⁴ Her father, Daniel Jackson, was a prominent member of New York’s Jewish community and a well-known political activist.

For a number of years Noah was viewed as *the* leader of the New York Jewish community. According to Robert Gordis, Noah “remained loyal to the Sabbath and the dietary laws as well as he was able, and time and time again lamented the widespread laxity with regard to observance.” (Page 133) However, Jonathan Sarna paints a different picture of Noah’s religious observance in a chapter entitled “A Jew in a World of Christians.”⁵ He brings evidence to show that Noah, while always being proud of his Jewish heritage, was affected in many ways by the Christian environment in which he lived.

If the above were all that there was to the life of Noah, he “would have rated a footnote as a versatile and energetic figure in early nineteenth century America, but definitely of minor dimensions. Noah’s claim to fame rests neither upon his varied occupations nor his several avocations, but upon another aspect of his life. Noah possessed one more interest, remote and impractical enough to stamp

him as an eccentric for well nigh one hundred years – a life-long preoccupation with the destiny of the Jewish people, and a growing conviction that the Christian world, no less than the Jews themselves, were obligated to facilitate the return of the Jews to an independent national existence in Palestine.” (Pages 118-119)

The story of these efforts will appear in next month’s **Glimpses Into American Jewish History**.

¹ **The Rise of The Jewish Community of New York, 1654 – 1860**, by Hyman B. Grinstein, The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1945, page 453.

² **Jewish Pioneers in America**, by Anita Libman Lebeson, Brentano’s Publishers, New York, 1931, page 274.

³ **Jacksonian Jew, The Two Worlds of Mordechai Noah**, by Jonathan D. Sarna, Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., New York, 1981, page 35.

⁴ *Ibid.*, page 84.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pages 119 – 142.