

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 13)

Rebecca (Machado) Phillips (1746-1831)

Colonial Jewish Matriarch

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Introduction

Little has been written about the lives of Jewish women who lived during colonial times. In general, historians have focused on the lives of men who were noteworthy during those times, primarily because more information is available about men who were publicly active than women who, more often than not, devoted the majority of their efforts to the home scene. While Rebecca (Machado) Phillips did indeed devote a great deal of her time to her family, she also was involved in activities outside her home. Fortunately, there exists a record of her domestic as well as non-domestic achievements. Given that she gave birth to no less than twenty-one children over a span of twenty-nine years, it is all the more remarkable that she had time for both a “public” and a “private” life!

Family Background

“Rebecca Machado was born into an eminent Jewish family of Portuguese descent. Her parents, Zipporah Nunes Ribeiro (1714-1799) and David Mendes Machado (1695-1747) were former secret Jews and refugees of the Portuguese Inquisition. Their respective families had lived as crypto-Jews in the Iberian Peninsula for centuries, and it was the harrowing events of the first and second decades of the eighteenth century that finally compelled them to flee. According to Rebecca’s mother, Zipporah, we know that many members of Zipporah’s family, including her father, Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribeiro, a prominent court

physician in Lisbon, were arrested by the Inquisition for Judaizing in the early 1700s. David Machado's older brother was also arrested by the Inquisition and burned at the stake for publicly mocking Christianity at his trial. Zipporah transmitted through oral testimony the sensational and ingenious flight of her father, Dr. Nunes, and his family from Lisbon to London." (page 366.) The amazing story of this flight was told in Glimpses Part 9 http://www.jewishpress.com/news_article.asp?article=5755.

"A family oral tradition reveals that the Nunes women were so conditioned to leading a double life that for years after their move to America they continued to recite their Hebrew prayers with the aid of the Catholic rosary. Rebecca's grandson, Mordecai Manuel Noah (1785-1851), recounted that Rebecca's mother, Zipporah Nunes, 'was observed, whenever the clock struck, to repeat a silent prayer, which had some reference to her imprisonment in the Inquisition.'" (page 367)

Marriage, Motherhood and Domestic Duties

In 1762 at the age of sixteen Rebecca married Jonas Phillips (1735 – 1803), who was eleven years her senior. Phillips, of Ashkenazic descent, 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*. "For Jonas, marriage to Rebecca would have symbolized social upward mobility, since Sephardim were associated with nobility and culture. Conversely, many eighteenth century Sephardim scorned German Jews as 'ill-bred and uncouth.' These attitudes help to explain the fact that until the early 1800s, all American congregations followed the Sephardic rite, although by around 1730, Ashkenazim were more numerous than Sephardim in a number of cities, including New York." (page 370)

"Shortly after their marriage, Rebecca and her husband moved to New York, where Jonas resumed his activities as a businessman. By the next Autumn, Rebecca had given birth to the first of their twenty-one children. The early years of marriage were financially strained. Phillips's business dealings were complicated by England's restrictive colonial trade regulations, and he became an insolvent debtor in 1764. The following year, he secured a position as a ritual slaughterer and examiner of meat (*shochet* and *bodek*) for Congregation Shearith Israel, in which capacity he served until 1769."

"The financial hardships the Phillips family endured early on were augmented by personal tragedy. From 1763 to 1772, four of Rebecca's children, including her firstborn, died before the age of one year. The years between 1770 and 1772 were particularly trying; over the period of these two years, Rebecca and Jonas lost three daughters. Although in these early years they faced dire financial straits, struggled to raise a growing family, and endured the death of a number of

their babies, in the long run, Rebecca and Jonas were fortunate. Perhaps the majority of their children survived into adulthood.” (pages 370 and 371)

In addition to childbearing and childraising, Rebecca, like most eighteenth century women, manufactured cloth, clothing, soap, candles and prepared processed comestibles to serve as their winter food supply. The members of the Phillips family were, of course, observant Jews. Rebecca supervised her kitchen to make sure that all was done according to Halacha. N. Taylor Phillips, family historian and direct descendent of Rebecca, wrote in 1927 (quoted on page 374)

No matter how well off they were, how rich they were, whether they were Gomez or Machado, or who they were, the women either did the cooking themselves or superintended it. It was not left to the slaves, or to the Negroes. If it was, it was a *treifa* house, that is, the house that permitted the servants exclusively to run the kitchen. People would not eat there, and, therefore, the woman of the house either had to do it herself or had to be on the job and see that it was properly done. If she had a lot of servants, she directed them or could give the final O.K. that everything was according to “Hoyle,” but she had to be there personally.

Communal Activism

Jonas Phillips gave up his position as *shochet* for Congregation Shearith Israel in 1769 and went into business. “In 1774, he transferred his family and business to Philadelphia, where Rebecca’s family resided after the occupation of New York by the British army. Philadelphia, the only city in America to escape siege or occupation by the British, was a central refuge for Jewish Whigs, and its Jewish community, like that of Charleston, (and) emerged from the war larger and organizationally improved.” (page 372) Here the family became quite prosperous and contributed generously to Congregation Mikveh Israel. “Phillips was elected Trustee of Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia in 1782 and also served as president and parnas of the congregation in that year, no doubt strengthening the family’s ties to the synagogue.” (page 373)

“During the last ten years of her childbearing years, if not earlier, Rebecca began to adopt an active role in both Jewish and non-Jewish public affairs. Rebecca Phillips and Grace Nathan seem to have been involved in fundraising and the collection of funds for the purchase of synagogue ritual objects. In the next several years, her communal activism was to extend to the non-Jewish community as well. Rebecca’s most impressive communal contributions came in the early 1800’s.”

“In 1801, at the age of fifty-five, Rebecca was one of the founding members of the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances. This Philadelphia organization, in which Gentile and Jewish women joined efforts, was dedicated to assisting yellow fever victims in Baltimore, supporting a “soup house” for the poor, and generally providing food and clothing to indigent women and children. Only two years later, Rebecca was

widowed, leaving her a single mother of as many as sixteen children.” (pages 380 – 381)

“Rebecca’s personal piety and dedication to her people shone particularly during her widowed years. In 1820, at the age of seventy-four, Rebecca, now widowed for seventeen years, served as first directress and one of thirteen managers serving on the board of the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society of Philadelphia. The society, founded in 1819 to assist the Jewish indigent, was the first non-synagogue-related charitable society in America.” (page 382)

A Role Model for Others

“Rebecca Phillips embodies both the exceptional and the mundane. Her duties as wife and mother are typical of the colonial and early American experience. Yet these duties must be considered extraordinary, for they were carried out as Rebecca bore twenty-one children and raised two of her grandchildren, exceeding the count of even the largest known American Jewish families of her time. Rebecca’s pioneering activities as a communal activist and philanthropist in both the Jewish and non-Jewish communities were extraordinary for her time. Yet these endeavors would be considered, by the end of the nineteenth century, not only the common domain of the American woman, but increasingly and in many important respects, her ‘natural’ domain. Rebecca’s pioneering exceptionalism thus foreshadowed that which would soon become commonplace.” (page 386)

The portrait below of Rebecca Machado Phillips is courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society.

