

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 51)

Early Jewish Religious Observance in New York

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Note: All quotes are from **Unwritten History, Reminiscences of N. Taylor Phillips**, The American Jewish Archives, 1954, **6**, pages 77 – 104.

In 1927 Captain N. Taylor Phillips¹ delivered an address before Congregation Shearith Israel in New York in which he recalled some of the history and traditions of early NY American Jewry. His recollections give fascinating insight into Jewish religious life in America when the Jewish community was still in its infancy.

The Synagogue

The majority of Jews who resided in New York during the 17th and 18th centuries were of Portuguese descent.

The people who were then interested in the congregation were those who had come mostly, mediately [sic] or immediately, from Portugal, and they were Marranos or secret Jews. Nearly all of them were Marranos. In fact, when they came to New York, the early records of the town spoke of them as the “Portuguese nation” whenever they wanted to talk about the Jews. They spoke about the “Portuguese nation” because all the Jews, practically, were Portuguese. As I said a moment ago, most of them were Marranos. There were a few Spanish among them, the Gomez family and a few others, but the majority of them were Portuguese Marranos.

The Gomez family came to America around the year 1700. The family was not just wealthy, but also highly cultured.

But the Gomez family from the very first time they came here were people of prominence and influence, and they had commissions [papers of denization] related to England, very important commissions, and they enjoyed a great many rights as freemen and all sorts of things. They were the real thing—there is no doubt about that.

And the Gomez family was the mainstay of the congregation at that time, before the building of the first synagogue in Mill Street in 1728 and 1729, consecrated in 1730. They were very influential in the congregation; what they said went in every way. And, in fact, I have heard it said that they were surrounded with all

sorts of affluence and wealth, and when they came to the synagogue—these are the personal touches that I am giving you—when they came to the synagogue on the Sabbath or on a Holy Day, they had their slaves walking behind them through the streets carrying their prayer books and talethim [prayer shawls]. They would walk into the synagogue auditorium with this retinue behind them, and the slaves would deposit their books and talethim on the seats and bow themselves out. That was a regular ceremony every Saturday morning.

Jewish Religious Observance in the Home

At one point in his speech N. Taylor Phillips described how Yahadus was observed in the homes of Jews during colonial times. Religious observance was an integral part the lives of colonial Jews. Maintaining a kosher home fell, of course, primarily to the women.

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.

The Jewish community of New York was quite small from its inception in 1654 through the first quarter of the 19th century. In 1695 it numbered about 100 souls and increased only to about 500 Jews in 1825.² The result was that it was close-knit, and there was a good deal of social interchange amongst the Jews. Naturally, food was a key part of this social interaction.

The different families of the congregation got to be known for their specialties in the culinary art. One house would be celebrated for the pound cake that was made there, another for the “stickies,” those masses of dough with sugar stuff over them—my descriptions of the mysteries of the cuisine are not very good, but I am doing the best I can. And still another woman would be famous for her *sopes peridoes* -- which was a sort of French toast with a syrup of sugar, water, etc., poured over it, which they ate at Purim. Some women would be celebrated for the way they made them, and when Purim came everyone rushed to their houses to get the last word in *sopes peridoes*.

Passover Observance

Pesach preparations began right after Purim, just as they do in many homes today. “It was a four weeks’ job, carrying up the plates and cleaning and polishing and dragging and hauling and making life unbearable for the women.”

Unfortunately, one woman actually died as a result of her efforts to prepare for Pesach. Captain Taylor related,

One of my ancestors, the wife of Samuel Lopez, was vigorously engaged about a hundred years ago in supervising the kashruth of her home. She went up on a stepladder to see that there wasn't anything wrong with dishes, etc., or something of that sort—that was the way they went at it—when she fell off the stepladder and was killed. She lost her life in an effort to keep her louse strictly according to Jewish law, but, as I say, this is only an illustration of the vigor with which they cleaned up.

No member of the congregation during colonial times used butter on Pesach, but they did use milk. However, they made sure that the milk they used did not come in contact with any Chometz.

Before the Revolution, considerably before it, the cow would be brought around to the house and milked into the can of the house owner, and then later on, after the Revolution, when that was no longer possible, the children would be sent up to the farms, up around what is now Greenwich Village. I have heard my father say that in his boyhood, at Passover time, he would walk up Greenwich Street, carrying a can. Then the woman who kept the farm milked the cow into the can [he had brought] and he went back [carrying the milk all the way home]. As I have stated, the reason was that they would not allow anybody's cans but their own to be used, because the others were not *pesachdech* [fit for Passover food]. These little things just give you an idea of how they lived.

These vignettes from Captain Taylor give us some insight into the religious commitment of the New York Jewish community during its infancy.

¹ For information about the life of N. Taylor Phillips, please see [N. Taylor Phillips: Scion Of One Of America's First Jewish Families](#) **The Jewish Press**, May 1, 2009, page 23.

² **The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York** by Hyman B. Grinstein, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945, page 469.