

## Jews in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century America

Jews were part of colonial America's religious diversity in all three colonial regions: New England, Middle, and Southern. The first permanent Jewish community in what would later become the United States was established in 1654 by Jewish refugees from South America. These individuals had lived in a Dutch colony in Brazil where they were free to practice their religion. However, in 1654 the Portuguese conquered the colony. Portugal, at that time, was religiously intolerant and ordered all Jews and Protestants to either convert to Catholicism or leave. Most Jews returned to Holland, but 23 Jews left for the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam, which became New York in 1664 when it was conquered by the English.

The governor of the colony, Peter Stuyvesant, did not want to allow the Jews to remain there. However, the directors of the Dutch West India Company, which oversaw the colony, wrote to Stuyvesant saying that he must allow the Jews to settle in the city. But this did not mean they had full equality. In fact, Jews did not have the right to public worship, which means to pray in a house of worship, for more than 40 years! Before this time they could only pray in private homes. Despite this initially cold reception, the Jews of New Amsterdam/New York, gained most of the same rights as other settlers by the end of the seventeenth century including the right to trade, travel, construct religious buildings, and own property.

The first synagogue, a Jewish house of worship, in America was built by this community in 1730. Between the time they had gained the right to public worship and the construction of this synagogue, the community had rented space where they worshiped together. The congregation was named Shearith Israel, which means remnant of Israel. This name alludes to the community's sense of vulnerability as well as its connection with its heritage.

Like the Jewish settlers in New York, most early Jewish immigrants to America were Sephardi Jews, Jews who traced their ancestry to Spain, Portugal, or North Africa. They primarily emigrated from South America, the Caribbean, and Western Europe.

Jewish legal status and treatment varied greatly between the different colonies. But, in general, the colonies were tolerant of Jews and there were few overt anti-Jewish acts or instances of violence as was common in Europe. However, like other religious minorities, Jews often lacked full equality. Notably, after the Revolutionary War, they lacked the right to hold government office in almost every state. They could also lack other rights. For example, Jews did not gain the right to public worship in Connecticut until 1843.

Despite the lack of equality, Jews in colonial and post-revolutionary America were usually accepted as members of the larger society. Jews adopted the customs and fashions of their neighbors, went into business with them, and made friendships with those outside their religious community. One of the most significant differences between the Jewish experience in America and the Jewish experience in Europe is that in America Jews could be judged on their individual merit. In Europe, the primary factors affecting a Jewish individual's ability to prosper were the restrictions on and attitudes toward the community as a whole. In the colonies, and later in the United States, an individual's abilities and personality were greater factors and there were more opportunities for Jewish individuals to advance economically and socially. In fact, in 1774 Francis Salvador, a Jew, was even elected to the General Assembly of South Carolina. He also served in the South Carolina's revolutionary Provisional Congress. He was killed in battle fighting for the Patriot cause during the Revolutionary War. Sadly, like most states after the war,

South Carolina placed religious qualifications on who could hold office that barred other Jews from being elected.

The lack of political equality for Jews in America should not obscure America's remarkable tolerance and acceptance of religious minorities. This general acceptance in colonial society contrasted sharply with the Jewish experience throughout most of the rest of the world where Jews were treated as outsiders. However, this acceptance presented a new challenge to the Jewish community: balancing a desire to integrate into mainstream culture with a desire to maintain a unique heritage. This is a challenge that Jews, like other minority groups, continue to wrestle with to this day.

During the colonial period, most Jews addressed this challenge by expressing their Judaism privately and trying to minimize their Jewish identity in public. This is symbolized by Touro synagogue, the oldest synagogue still standing in America. It was built in Newport, Rhode Island in 1763. The outside looks like any other building of the period with nothing that identifies it as a Jewish structure. Inside, however, it is full of Jewish objects and symbols. Likewise, colonial Jewish families typically downplayed their Jewish identity with their neighbors while maintaining their ancient customs and traditions with each other.

Jewish perspectives on, and participation in, the American Revolution paralleled the general population. The Continental Congress sent a request to pray for a peaceful resolution to the conflict with the Crown on July 20, 1775, to both churches and synagogues. There were Jewish merchant blockade runners, Jewish soldiers in the Continental Army, and Jewish officers. Of the many Jews who helped fight for American freedom, two of the most famous are Jonas Philips and Haym Solomon.

Jonas Philips was a blockade runner who wrote his supply list in Yiddish, the language of Eastern European Jews, hoping that this would help him avoid trouble if the ship was boarded by the British. Ironically, his plan backfired. When the British boarded the ship, they assumed the Yiddish was a code, seized the ship, and sent the note to England to be decoded. It is significant that Philips was fined in 1793 for refusing to testify in a Philadelphia court on the Jewish Sabbath because of his religious obligations. This illustrates that though there was a general acceptance of Jews, there was also a lack of sensitivity towards minority religions' religious observances at this time.

Haym Solomon was a Jewish immigrant who joined the New York branch of the Sons of Liberty. He was captured by the British and sentenced to death. Fortunately, he was able to escape and flee to Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, Solomon began working with the Continental Congress. In 1975, the United States Postal Service issued a stamp identifying him as a "Financial Hero" who was responsible for "raising most of the money needed to finance the American Revolution and later to save the new nation from collapse."

From its first years after winning independence from Great Britain, the American government articulated support for religious toleration. The first piece of federal legislation that created provisions for religious tolerance was the Northwest Ordinance. This act was passed by Congress in 1787 under the articles of confederation and was reaffirmed by congress under the U.S. Constitution in 1789. It is most famous for creating the first organized territory in the United States, but it also guaranteed freedom of religion in federal territories and future states.

The Constitution itself represents a major step forward for religious equality in America. It was adopted by Congress on September 17, 1787, two months after the Northwest Ordinance was

first passed. Article VI prohibits religious qualifications for holding office at the federal level. This is particularly significant because many state constitutions contained these eligibility restrictions. The slow repeal of these and other discriminatory laws between the late seventeenth and late eighteenth centuries is one of the earliest examples of social progress towards greater equality in this country.

In 1790, President George Washington clearly communicated the federal government's support of religious equality to the Jewish community. In his response to a letter from a member of the Jewish community in Newport, he wrote, "All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens." In other words, Washington assured the Jewish community that they had the right to practice their religion without losing other rights given to American citizens.

The following year, the states ratified the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The first freedom of the First Amendment prohibits the federal government from creating an officially endorsed or supported religion and guarantees religious freedom. It reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." These protections only affected the federal government because of the separation of power between the federal government and state governments. However, it is important to note that even when they lived in areas with an established church, when they lacked the right to public worship, and when they could not hold political office, Jews in America had remarkable acceptance and economic opportunity compared to Jews elsewhere.

Over time, states increasingly removed laws that favored specific religious denominations or discriminated on the basis of religion. But this was a slow process. Thomas Jefferson wrote a bill to guarantee religious equality in his home state of Virginia in 1779. It took seven years for the bill to pass and become law. This law, the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, is one of only three accomplishments that Jefferson listed on his tombstone.

Jews did not gain full legal equality in every state until 1877, more than 100 years after America declared independence. The experience of Jews and other religious minorities in the eighteenth century shows that the progress towards greater equality has been part of the American experience since the beginning of the country.