

# **EARLY AMERICAN JEWS AND THE SLAVE TRADE**

*by*

***Richard Bevan, Ph.D.***

Reprinted from  
THE NEW PATRIOT  
March 1966

# EARLY AMERICAN JEWS AND THE SLAVE TRADE

*by Richard Bevan, Ph.D.*

The modern history of the North American continent begins with the English settlements organized under Charter from the English crown, by Sir Humphrey Gilbert and Sir Walter Raleigh. Shortly before his death, Raleigh said "I shall yet see North America an English nation." He was fearful, of course, of competition from Spanish America, since until the defeat of the Armada in the British Channel, it had seemed certain that the Spaniards would extend their settlements in Central America into the northern part of the continent.

A few decades after the successful establishment of English settlements in Virginia, more Englishmen, this time the Pilgrim Fathers, landed further north in Massachusetts, and constructed their own colony quite independently of those in Virginia. The only non-English settlements on the North American Atlantic Coast were those of the Spanish in Florida, the French in what is now Canada, the Swedes in Delaware, and the Dutch in New Netherlands, with their capital at New Amsterdam (New York). All were destined to be engulfed by the rising tide of British immigration.

No Jews were therefore to be found on the American continent in those early days. The first Jew to place foot on the soil of North America was one Franco Solomons, who arrived in Boston in 1639, where he was promptly arrested by the colonists, who wanted no Jews, and sent homewards on the next ship. The early settlers knew a great deal of the history of the Jews, who represented a part of the European scene they had no wish to import into America.

Fifteen years later, however, on 22nd August 1654, to be precise, another Jew by the name of Jacob Barsimson arrived in New Amsterdam on the "Peartree" from Holland. New Amsterdam was still controlled by the Dutch West

Indies Company, and Holland was a stronghold of the Jews, as it had been since Spanish Jews settled there in large numbers. Barsimson's father was a substantial stockholder in the Dutch East Indies Company, and within two days of his arrival in New Amsterdam, we find him writing to his friends in Holland to invite more Jews to join him. Two months later, the French ship, the "St. Charles", docked in New Amsterdam from South America (where Jews already resided in the Spanish colonies) bringing twenty-seven Jews, none of whom admitted to having any money, so that the Captain of the ship had to seize their clothing and baggage in part payment, two being put in gaol for non-payment for the voyage. These have been called "The Jewish Pilgrim Fathers."

It would seem that the Dutch colonists liked this invasion no more than the English colonists had liked the arrival of Franco Solomons, and Peter Stuyvesant, the famous Dutch governor of New Amsterdam, received many protests from the settlers. He also viewed the Jewish immigrants with disfavour, and wrote several letters to the Dutch West Indies Company in Holland saying that while he would agree to keep those Jews who had already arrived, no more ought to be permitted to enter the colony. He justified the exclusion of Jews on the grounds that they were lazy and troublesome, and that their presence would only injure the colony's future prospects. At the same time, and unknown to him, certain of the newly arrived Jews wrote to counter his protests, claiming that they were friends of Barsimson whose uncle was an important shareholder. Matters deteriorated, and Stuyvesant ordered all Jews who had arrived in New Amsterdam to leave the colony, but the Jews delayed their departure while he was away in South America. He returned to find them still residing in the colony, and to find also a letter awaiting him from the Head Office of the West Indies Company in Holland, stating that his radical beliefs would not be countenanced and that the Jews were to stay. Jewish influence in Holland had won, and the Jews were in North America to

stay, notwithstanding the apprehensions of Peter Stuyvesant and his fellow settlers.

Unlike the present day, the Christian church was in those times generally wary of Jewry, and a letter by Pastor John Megapolensis reveals that this churchman was hotly opposed to the Jews whom he regarded as Mammon-seeking and slothful. They would not work for the good of the colony. But although this letter, dated 18th March 1665, was addressed to one of the shareholders of the Company who was friendly with Stuyvesant, the influence of the Jews in Holland was too strong, and it had no effect.

Being obliged to tolerate the Jews, Peter Stuyvesant ordered them to live apart from the remainder of the colonists, and they were required to build a wall with their own labor, and to live behind it. They could own no land, do no trade with the colonists, could not vote nor stand for election, nor even hold any religious service. This wall was the origin of the street now known as Wall Street — still a center and stronghold of Jewry.

In 1664 English warships bombarded New Amsterdam, Britain then being at war with Holland, seized the colony, and hoisted the Union flag. Under the new name of New York, the old anti-Jewish laws continued for a time, but again repercussions of events in Europe had their effect. As long ago as 1290, King Edward I had expelled the Jews from England, in response to popular demand, and the country had remained virtually free of Jews for nearly four centuries, during which time it had grown and prospered. But with the Civil War, Cromwell found himself a dictator in Britain, and a lonely one at that, as he was obliged to abolish even the Parliament which he had supported against the Crown. Without a Parliament to assist him, he had difficulty in raising taxes, and so he turned to the Jews for finance. Meanwhile, King Charles II, in exile on the continent, was also in need of money, having no income from his Kingdom which was in the hands of Cromwell, and he too borrowed from the Jews. On his return to power in

the import trade, in which they likewise soon achieved pre-eminence. It naturally followed that they should start to buy and own ships, Newport being their main shipping center.

Based on Newport, the Jews rapidly gained ownership of a large merchant and fishing fleet, and one Portuguese Jew by the name of Aaron Lopez, who owned thirty ships, and seventeen factories, brought a further forty Jewish families from Portugal to assist him in supervising his interests. His fleet was not confined to fishing and legitimate trading activities, however, for he was also deeply involved in the slave trade.

But perhaps the largest Jewish profits were made from two virtually illicit trades, which truly earned for them the animosity of the colonists. The first of these was the manufacture of alcohol.

Since the early immigrants were puritan in outlook and generally abstemious, the manufacture of alcohol was frowned upon by them. But the Indians who dwelt close by in the forests knew nothing for or against alcohol, and cheap rum, known to them as "fire-water," soon became an important trading commodity, for those who chose to handle it and who were prepared to introduce these Stone Age people to the evils of excessively crude and harsh liquor.

Thus it was that the Indians became a target for the Jewish merchants from an early date. Stuyvesant had in the early days of the Dutch East India Company endeavored to protect not only the colonists but also the Indians from Jewish exploitation. But with the advent of British rule, the Jew was able to trade cheap gewgaws and crude rum for valuable pelts.

These pelts they exported to Europe, where the European Jews became the main dealers in pelts and furs, which they remain to this day. While John Astor, a colonist, paid the Indians \$1 per day for trapping pelts, Hyman Levy, the first Jew known to have traded with the Indians, aided by his compatriot Nicholas Low, gave rum. As we have said, colonists in those days were virtually a hundred per cent

abstainers, and the liquor trade, centered on Boston, was exclusively Jewish run. Soon the Indians began to clamour madly for fire-water, becoming addicts to the poisonous and cheap brew which they were supplied by the Jewish traders. Drunken braves became a menace to the colonists, especially when short of rum, until Benjamin Franklin felt obliged to complain against the trading of rum to the Indians, but without avail. Other Jews such as Joseph Simon joined the trade, and eventually the Indians began to run wild, burning houses and killing pointlessly, trading their land and every possession for more firewater. So was lost all hope of any peaceful reconciliation with the indigeneous Indians of the North American continent. The uneasy truce which had been established by the early colonists was completely destroyed by the "firewater" trade.

## III

The other line of business which earned disrepute for the Jews of the New World was the slave trade. Now it is untrue that this was exclusively Jewish-operated, but at the same time there is ample evidence that a great number of the ships plying between America and the West African coast were owned by the Jews of Newport. Again rum came in useful, for shipped in large quantities to the slave coast of Africa, it could be bartered for slaves, and the more martial African tribes soon developed a liking for rum which they knew could only be acquired by extending their slave raiding operations against neighbouring tribes to supply slaves in exchange for the "White" man's drink.

As the colonies expanded, labor became scarce. Europe was not then so overpopulated as now, and many of those who might have come over had not the money. England sent convicts and prisoners of war to work on the plantations, but these were relatively few in number. The answer seemed to be in the slave trade. The first Negroes came to Virginia as early as 1610, though not as slaves. But soon ships found it profitable to make a triangular voyage, bringing molasses

from the West Indies to Newport, where these were distilled into rum. The rum was shipped to West Africa, and from West Africa the same ships brought back Negroes for sale in the West Indies and in the southern colonies.

Slave handling was forbidden in the northern colonies, which retained something of the Puritan outlook of the Pilgrim Fathers. Certain Philadelphia Jews endeavored to have the laws altered, to permit the handling of slaves in that city also, but they were unsuccessful. Their names were Lay, Woolman and Benezet.

While Rabbi M. A. Guttstein, in his book "Jews of Newport" has attempted to absolve Jews of the African slave trade, other Jewish sources have admitted that some 600 ships based on Newport were Jewish-owned, and it has been estimated that about half of these were engaged in the slave trade. It is reported that the first year in which slave trading was undertaken from Newport was 1723, when 'some businessmen' suggested shipping rum to Africa in return for slaves. Within a few years, 1,000 hogsheads of rum were being shipped to Africa annually. Slaves brought about \$2,000 dollars each, and the profits on a single run, even on small ships carrying only about 100 to 200 slaves, could be \$40,000. Numerous Jewish ship-owners are mentioned.

Abraham Mendes was perhaps one of the largest Jew slave dealers, as also was Jacob Rivera, father-in-law to slave dealer Aaron Lopez. Letters from Captains Cruger, Mill, White, Dolbeare and Moore to Aaron Lopez all show evidence of the huge size of Lopez's activities in the slave trade. Moore tells Lopez about his trip in the "Ann", in a letter dated 27th November 1774, informing him that he had 112 slaves on board; while Abraham Mendes writes to the Jewish Captain Abraham All to complain that the latter had paid too high a price for the slaves he had brought back — after all Mendes had only All's word for the exact figures, as it was not possible to check with the savage chieftans who had supplied the goods in Africa!

In May 1752 the "Abigail" sailed from Africa with 9,000

gallons  
slaves.  
100 g  
he w  
and v  
the y  
to N

Sout  
no l  
600  
owr

180  
as  
the  
mc  
its  
by  
du  
ce

tl  
1  
e

gallons of rum which was given in exchange for Negro slaves. One Negro slave was generally to be obtained for 100 gallons of rum, but Jewish Captain Freeman writes that he was diligent in carrying out the Owners' instructions, and watered down all rum before making the exchange. In the year 1756, no less than 4,697 Negro slaves were brought to Newport in this way.

It was no accident that the biggest slave owner in the South was a Jew, Samuel Haiston of Virginia, who owned no less than 3,000 slaves. His brothers owned 1,000, 700 and 600 respectively, while another Jew, by the name of Pollack, owned 1,500 slaves in North Carolina.

When the import of slaves was finally prohibited in 1808, a new "black market" in slaves, almost as profitable as the import trade, sprang into being. It is reported that the Jewish slave dealers each year shipped some 6,000 or more slaves from Virginia to other states, this trade reaching its peak in 1820 by which time stud farms had been set up by the dealers to breed slaves, most of the slaves thus produced being mulattoes with, we may assume, a large percentage of Jewish blood.

The size of the slave trade and the profits to be made therefrom may be understood when it is realised that by 1860 the market value of slaves in North America was assessed at \$4,000,000,000.

Thus the role of the Jew in early American history was not one which may be widely publicized by the Jewish people themselves with impunity. Certain it is that their contacts with Jewish mercantile communities throughout Europe facilitated the import and export trade, but it is not to be assumed that a lively international trade would not have developed in the absence of the Jews. The colonists who opened up America were themselves not fools, but mainly honest, intelligent men, and trade would surely have followed a reasonable and level course if it had been left entirely in their hands. The history of the "firewater" trade, and the resultant debauchment of the North American Indian is a shameful one, and the entire business of the



slave trade is one which has the murkiest of backgrounds. What is perhaps the worst aspect of the popular historical version of slavery is the manner in which the entire blame for this has been wrongly placed on the heads of the colonists, whereas the opposite is perhaps the truth. The colonists were generally, it is demonstrable, of a kindly and humane disposition towards their slaves, and it was the treatment of the dealers which was only equalled by the inhumanity of the ships' Captains who worked for the Jewish dealers and shipowners, some of which Captains, but possibly only a minority, were Jews. One truth is obvious, the entire history of the North American continent would have been different if the colonists had been permitted to send back Jacob Barsimson and the other Jews, and the development had been left in the hands of Christians alone.

---

*"How many Jews are in the United States? No Gentile knows. The figures are the exclusive property of the Jewish authorities. . . Immigration into the United States became a business. . . a strictly Jewish business."*

Henry Ford

*The International Jew Vol. II*