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## To Bigotry No Sanction, To Persecution No Assistance: Jews in the American Revolutionary Period

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## To Bigotry No Sanction, To Persecution No Assistance: Jews in the American Revolutionary Period

### Abstract

While Jews were a small minority in the American colonies, they nonetheless participated in the American Revolution on both sides. This paper aims to evaluate the role of Jewish people in the conflict, contextualizing the experiences of this small minority within the larger narrative of the American Revolution and establishing their importance in the development of religious freedom in the United States. Through the examination of these topics, this paper aims to explore the Revolutionary period from the perspective of the Jewish-American, discussing their often-overlooked experiences in this watershed period within U.S. history.

### Keywords

Jews, American Revolution, Revolutionary America

# **To Bigotry No Sanction, To Persecution No Assistance: Jews in the American Revolutionary Period**

*Ziv R. Carmi* | Gettysburg College '23

By 1776, there was a fairly small but active Jewish community within the American colonies. While Jews consisted of about 0.1% of the total population, they nevertheless were well integrated into colonial economies and societies, attaining a level of tolerance unseen in the Old World, where antisemitism remained strong. As the crisis in the American colonies exacerbated, Jews, despite their small numbers, played a significant role in the Revolutionary conflict. Indeed, the Jewish story of the Revolutionary period largely mirrored the experiences of their Gentile counterparts, with Jewish colonists trying to navigate a world turned upside-down. Jews participated on both sides of the conflict, firmly establishing this small minority within the larger narrative of the American Revolution, particularly their importance in the development of religious freedom in the United States.

There are two main historiographical arguments about the role of Jewish citizens in the American Revolution. First, the question of why Jews primarily supported the Patriots, and second, the discrimination Jews faced at the state levels after the war,

despite the enlightened equality promised by the founding of America.

Many historians argued that most Jews sided with the colonists in support of the Enlightenment ideologies that the Revolution was based upon. Samuel Reznick wrote that the promise of political and intellectual equality of republicanism gave Jews a hope of integrating into American society. Compared to European society, where Jews remained politically and legally alienated, Reznick argued, the potential of being included within a society that emphasized equality under the law appealed to the Jewish citizens who supported the Patriots.<sup>1</sup> However, Jonathan Sarna challenged this claim in 1981, arguing that most colonies gave Jews the right to work and worship, making their conditions much better than other regions of the Jewish diaspora. As such, Sarna argued that the treatment of Jews was not the major factor determining their loyalties, but rather, individual pragmatism.<sup>2</sup> Hasia Diner's 2004 history of American Jews concurred with Sarna's argument, suggesting that economic motivations were behind the choice of which side to join for many Jews, whether Patriot or Loyalist.<sup>3</sup> It appears that, like the general historiography

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<sup>1</sup> Samuel Reznick, *Unrecognized Patriots: The Jews in the American Revolution* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), 5-6.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Impact of the American Revolution on American Jews," *Modern Judaism* 1, no. 2 (1981): 149, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1396058>.

<sup>3</sup> Hasia R. Diner, *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 44-45.

of the American Revolutionary period, the examination of Jewish motivations can fall in two separate schools: the Whiggish interpretation, focusing on the ideologies of the Revolutionary period, which Rezneck seemed to take in his argument, and the Progressive interpretation that examines economic interests, which can be seen in Sarna and Diner's arguments.

Additionally most secondary sources about Jews in the Revolutionary period also focused on is whether Jewish citizens received increased rights and equality following the war. Rezneck called the Revolution an "emancipating event," writing that the Jews were beneficiaries of the equal rights bestowed upon Americans following independence.<sup>4</sup> However, he noted that these rights were mostly restricted to the federal level, discussing the struggles and antisemitism faced by Jews across the states. Sarna concurred with this argument, noting the paradoxical nature of these legal restrictions which allowed Jews to hold federal office but not anything lower in the states.<sup>5</sup> Diner, on the other hand, questioned the nature of this codified antisemitism, pointing out that most states did not even have any open Jews residing in them, let alone an active Jewish community. She asserted that the establishment of religious oaths prior to taking office could have been more of a response to Enlightenment-inspired secularism than

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<sup>4</sup> Rezneck, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Sarna, "The Impact," 154.

motivated by antisemitism.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Howard Sachar argued that, by the 1820s and 1830s, politicians in state legislatures had become openly antisemitic in their support for legislation requiring religious oaths, suggesting that, indeed, these policies were intended to block Jews from holding office.<sup>7</sup> Unlike the historiographical debates about why Jews fought, all historians agree that the ideals of equality espoused by the Revolution were not fully extended to the Jews in the Early Republic Period, although the extent of which does seem to be the subject of debate.

### **Jews in the Colonial Period**

Jews had been a part of colonial society beginning in the mid-seventeenth century. In 1654, Jews of both Sephardi (Iberian) and Ashkenazi (Central and Eastern Europe) origin began immigrating to the New World. Like many who came to America, religious freedom motivated them. While many European settlers adopted rural, agricultural careers, most Jews stayed in urban areas and adopted trades. Overwhelmingly, Jewish colonists were merchants and retailers, using their cultural connections to establish a trading network with other colonial and European Jews. This network extended beyond economic practice into the trade of religious connections, ensuring that Judaism in the New World

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<sup>6</sup> Diner, *The Jews*, 49-50.

<sup>7</sup> Howard M Sachar, *A History of the Jews in America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 26-27.

could thrive. For example, Jews would often trade kosher meat across the American and Caribbean colonies to ensure that their dietary laws would remain unbroken. There have even been records that Torah scrolls were sent around the colonies, from Savannah to New York, who lent it to the newly built synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island (another large Jewish community in the mid-seventeenth century), showing the strength of the connections between Jews across America.<sup>8</sup>

Because of the relative tolerance in the colonies, the Jewish community continued to grow through the mid-eighteenth century, despite remaining a small minority. By 1770, about 1,500-2,500 Jews lived in America, about 0.1% of the total colonial population.<sup>9</sup> Most of these Jews lived in five cities typically considered to be the center of colonial Jewish life: New York City, Philadelphia, Newport, Savannah, and Charles Town (later Charleston). While there were Jews in other urban areas across the colonies, including Lancaster, Providence, and New Haven, about 60% of all Jews lived in these five cities.<sup>10</sup> These five areas likely became Jewish centers due to the economic opportunities they afforded and the more liberal laws of the colonies to which they belonged. By the outbreak of the Revolution, these large Jewish communities had become quite prosperous participating in the

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<sup>8</sup> Diner, *The Jews*, 13, 21-22.

<sup>9</sup> Rezneck, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Sachar, *A History*, 21.

local economies. In Newport, the New England port town, Jews served not only as merchants or shippers but also as a large part of the whaling industry, whereas in Charleston, the second-most populous Jewish community, Jews participated in the slave trade and plantation system.<sup>11</sup> In other words, like Protestant colonists, Jews were equally active in the local economies, showing a level of equality that separated colonial society from that of Europe.

Despite increased equality in the colonies, Jews still faced discrimination. For example, in 1761, several Jews of Rhode Island, by far one of the most religiously liberal colonies, petitioned the legislature and Superior Court for citizenship under the provisions of Britain's Naturalization Act of 1740 and were rejected by both institutions despite having met the conditions established by Parliament (New York and Massachusetts ultimately granted these Jews citizenship despite ostensibly being less religiously tolerant than Roger Williams' colony).<sup>12</sup> By the mid-eighteenth century, Jews were barred from voting or holding public office in most areas, establishing them as a clearly separate group from the Christian colonists. The one exception to this was in New York City, where fifty-seven Jews were able to vote for the colony's legislature between 1688 and 1770, although they were banned from voting in elections for colony-wide office after 1737

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<sup>11</sup> Sachar, *A History*, 21-22.

<sup>12</sup> Diner, *The Jews*, 23.



(they continued voting in municipal elections afterwards, however).<sup>13</sup>

In the broader image of colonial society, though, Jews were not targeted by antisemitic legislation. While there were restrictions directed specifically against Catholics, no laws were passed to exclude the Jewish population explicitly. Perhaps this lack of explicit discrimination against Jews was due to the small population of Jewish colonists, and thus, a smaller perception of them as a "threat" to Protestant Christianity. No matter the reason, it is clear that, in the hierarchy of colonial society, Jewish people were considered higher than other groups (namely Catholics and Africans), likely due to their participation in colonial economic activities. Most historians concur that, during this period, American Jews faced the best conditions and most tolerance of anywhere in the Western world, with some, including Sachar, even claiming that, by 1776, colonial Jews "unquestionably were the freest Jews on earth".<sup>14</sup> While Sachar's claims might be contested within the larger historiography of eighteenth century Jews, it is clear that, nevertheless, on the eve of the Revolution, American Jews were mostly integrated into colonial society and treated far better than their European counterparts.

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<sup>13</sup>Eli Faber, "America's Earliest Jewish Settlers, 1654-1820," in *The Columbia History of Jews and Judaism in America*, ed. Marc Lee Raphael (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 36.

<sup>14</sup> Sachar, *A History*, 23.

## **Jews on the Eve of Revolution (1754-1775)**

During the Seven Years War, American Jews aided the British war effort against France. For example, Sampson Simpson, Jacob Franks, Judah Hayes, and Hayman Levy, four New York Jews, purchased several ships and lent them to the Royal Navy to use as privateers against the French.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, Moses Franks, one of the most prominent of the New York Jews at the time, entered in a contract with the Crown where he financed £32,169 and sixteen shillings for supplies.<sup>16</sup> After the war, Jews capitalized on the newly conquered territories, settling in western Pennsylvania and establishing businesses in the trade of goods to the frontiers in exchange for furs.<sup>17</sup> However, this desire to profit in the West was stifled by the Proclamation of 1763, planting the first seeds of resentment in many colonists, including the Jews who wished to settle and trade there.

This resentment grew with the imperial crisis of the 1760s and 70s, as Jews participated in the expression of their discontent with British legislation. Jewish merchants played a role in the boycotts against British goods to protest taxation. Among the 375

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<sup>15</sup> Sachar, *A History*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> "King George's Warrant," in *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States*, ed. Moris U. Schappes (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 34.

<sup>17</sup> Jacob R Marcus, *The American Jew, 1585-1990*, (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing Inc, 1995), 22-23.

signatories of the Non-Importation Agreement of Philadelphia of October 1765, nine Jews signed the document.<sup>18</sup> As the crisis continued, Jewish merchants continued to participate in these boycotts and protests of British policy. In both Philadelphia and New York, there is record of Jewish merchants protesting the Townshend Acts. Jewish merchants such as Isaac Adolphus of New York eagerly advertised American made goods, touting them as “equal in price and superior in goodness to British goods,” calling for the “patriotic American” to purchase them in large quantities, for example.<sup>19</sup> While this did, of course, further the ideological principles of Patriots by assisting their boycott, it also showed how some Jewish merchants took advantage of the political circumstances to profit. Perhaps no source, however, encapsulates the resentment of Jewish merchants better than a January 1770 letter from Barnard Gratz, a prominent Philadelphia merchant visiting London to his brother Michael back home in Pennsylvania. In this letter, Gratz, a Silesian-born Jew who had signed the Non-Importation Resolution, wrote that King George’s speech to Parliament about the imperial crisis was such “*narishkeit*” (Yiddish for “foolishness”) that it was not worth paying the postage to enclose a transcript.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “The Non-Importation Agreement of Philadelphia, October 25, 1765,” in Schappes, *A Documentary History*, 38-40.

<sup>19</sup> Jacob R Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew, 1492-1776*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 1264.

<sup>20</sup> Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1262-63.

Despite the resentment to acts such as the Stamp Act and Townshend Duties, by early 1770, there seemed to be a shift in attitudes amongst Jewish merchants. Even though they still sympathized with the Whiggish colonists in their frustration towards British taxation, several prominent Jewish merchants decided to place their profits over their politics. The correspondence of various Jewish merchants show that they had grown tired of the nonimportation resolutions, which deeply affected their business even if they had initially capitalized from selling American-made goods. Indeed, even before the repeal of the Townshend Duties in the early spring of 1770, Jewish merchants had landed in Boston with English goods and sent several of their ships to England to trade.<sup>21</sup> This exhaustion with boycotts, however, was not unique to Jewish merchants; records show that Christian merchants felt that profits superseded their ideological principles, and, across the colonies, many traders felt frustration at the length of these boycotts.

### **Military Experiences of Jews in the Revolutionary War (1775-1783)**

Despite the backlash to the boycotts, as the imperial crisis escalated, most Jews remained loyal to the colonial cause. However, as seen by the resistance to boycotts in the early 1770s,

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<sup>21</sup> Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1263.

Jews at large were not extraordinarily radical in their ideologies and thus were more nuanced in their loyalty to the Patriot cause. The motives of Jews in supporting the Patriots are equally complex. Some historians believe that many were indeed enamored with the ideas of republicanism and equality. Others argued that they supported the American cause for profit and pragmatic purposes, while another historiographic argument claimed that the support for the Patriots occurred more out of loyalty to their local governments over the Crown. While ideological motivations were likely the reasons for some colonists, it is unlikely that this was the driving reason for most Jews, given that their economic and social circumstances were far better than that in the Old World. It is possible that these republican ideals did encourage some to support the Patriot cause, but it is equally likely that these ideals were too high-minded for some of the less educated, working-class Jewish citizens. Economic purposes were likely a stronger motivator, given the large number of Jewish merchants who had lost a significant amount of money as a result of the British taxation, and the number of Jews who wanted to expand their businesses to the West.<sup>22</sup> It is also possible that Jews supported the Patriot cause out of a simultaneous loyalty to their local, continental governments and a lack thereof to the Crown. This theory is supported by the fact that most these Jews were

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<sup>22</sup> Diner, *The Jews*, 44-45.

either born natively in the colonies to a family that had been in America for multiple generations or immigrated from a non-English country (often from one of the German states or Poland), and thus, had more loyalty to America than they did a distant country they had never been to.<sup>23</sup>

Some reactions to the outbreak of war, despite sympathies with the Patriot cause, also remained mixed. Even after the first shots of Lexington and Concord, some Jews wished to avoid an outright war. In accordance with the day of prayer occurring on May 17, 1776, an event prescribed by the Continental Congress, the Jews of New York's Mill Street Synagogue prayed for their "Sovereign Lord, George III... to turn away their fierce wrath from against North America," repeating several biblical phrases wishing for peace, including Isaiah 2:4 ("and they shall beat their swords into plow-shares"). With the prayers of the Mill Street Jews for peace and reconciliation with the Crown in mind, it is worth noting that no Jews held any political influence within state legislatures or the Continental Congress, and thus, had no role in supporting or opposing the severance of ties with Great Britain. However, other Jews, like Philadelphian Jonas Phillips, who took a holiday to celebrate from July 3<sup>rd</sup> to July 7<sup>th</sup>, rejoiced after the vote for independence. In 1776, the Fourth of July happened to coincide with the Seventeenth of Tammuz, a fast day commemorating the

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<sup>23</sup> Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1258.

breach of Jerusalem's walls by Babylonian (587 BCE) and Roman (69 CE) forces, precipitating the destruction of the Holy Temples and the Jewish diasporas three weeks later. Many Jews, including Philips, went to services for this sad and holy day, reflecting on how this commemoration of the loss of their ancestral homeland fell on the same day as the foundation of a new nation that they could call home.<sup>24</sup>

While reactions to the Declaration of Independence and war were mixed, as the Revolutionary War escalated, about a hundred Jews served with the Continental Army across all theatres of battle. Francis Salvador of South Carolina is one notable case; a former member of the First and Second Provincial Congresses of South Carolina and General Assembly (the first open Jew to sit in a legislative body in America), Salvador, serving with the South Carolina Militia, was shot and scalped by Cherokee warriors allied with Britain the morning of August 1, 1776, becoming the first Jew to die for the newly independent United States.<sup>25</sup> Due to his role in the legislature, Salvador was the only Jew to have made any policy decisions, with what little influence he had, setting him apart from other American Jews of both Patriot and Loyalist leanings but could not express them in a political body.

While Salvador served as a militiaman, other Jews enlisted in the Continental Army, both as privates and as officers. Many of

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<sup>24</sup> Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1266, 1279.

<sup>25</sup> Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1307-08.

Charleston's Jews deemed able to serve enlisted in Captain Richard Lushington's company, aptly nicknamed the "Jew Company."<sup>26</sup> Years after the Treaty of Paris, one of these Jews, proud of his service, wrote in a local newspaper that "the conduct of the Hebrews [during the war]... their steady adherence to the American cause... are substantial proofs of their patriotism and attachment."<sup>27</sup> This company was not purposely segregated, but rather consisted of Jewish citizens due to Charleston's geography. Since militias were mustered by district, it just happened that many of the Jews lived and worked in Lushington's, which extended through the business district. Jews were not even a majority within this group, despite its nickname. James Bentham, another Charleston merchant, also commanded a regiment containing Jews, suggesting that integrated military units were not unusual during the war.<sup>28</sup> Charleston was not an isolated case; plenty of Pennsylvania and New York Jews also enlisted.

There are numerous stories of Jewish bravery during the war. One of the more dramatic experiences was that of Lieutenant Colonel Solomon Bush, the deputy adjutant general of the Pennsylvania militia, who was wounded and captured by the

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<sup>26</sup>Young adult males of fighting fitness; Sachar, *A History*, 24.

<sup>27</sup> Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1306-07.

<sup>28</sup>George H. McDaniel, "Looking for Lushington: the Lost Quaker Commander of Charleston's Revolutionary Jewish Militia," *The Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina* 27, No. 2 (Fall 2022): 6, [https://irp.cdn-website.com/bb67d73b/files/uploaded/JHSSC\\_fall\\_2022\\_magazine\\_cover%26p%26p6-7.pdf](https://irp.cdn-website.com/bb67d73b/files/uploaded/JHSSC_fall_2022_magazine_cover%26p%26p6-7.pdf)



British. During his imprisonment, he learned of a spy infiltrating Washington's headquarters, escaped with this knowledge, and successfully informed the Continental Army. Bush was not the only Jew to be captured and held as a prisoner of war. Isaac Franks, also of Philadelphia, served as Washington's aide-de-camp on Long Island and was captured on the retreat from New York City before escaping captivity in the Hudson River during winter in a leaky boat with only one paddle. Franks' cousin David served as the aide-de-camp of Benedict Arnold and was investigated and acquitted of collusion in Arnold's treasonous scheme.<sup>29</sup> While these men are all significant in their bravery and the actions taken during their service, there were other Jews whose stories were never recorded, and it is worth noting their sacrifice for the United States as well.

Jews serving the American cause also faced antisemitism at the hands of the British. For example, Mordecai Sheftall, a wealthy Jew in Savannah, received blatant antisemitic treatment from the British while being a POW. Sheftall had organized a Patriot group before the Revolution and assisted in the smuggling of gunpowder to Boston in 1776, provoking the ire of Britain.<sup>30</sup> Sheftall was later appointed as the Commissary General for the Continental Army in

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<sup>29</sup>Later, near the end of the war, David Franks would serve as a diplomat to Europe, helping deliver the approved Treaty of Paris to the American negotiators in France; Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1311-1312.

<sup>30</sup> Rezneck, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 41.

Georgia, a position he held until his capture during the December 1778 fall of Savannah.<sup>31</sup> In the account of his capture, Sheftall wrote that, upon the first night of his imprisonment on the prison hulk *Nancy*, he and his son, Sheftall Sheftall, along with the other POWs, were fed a half-gill of rice and about seven ounces of boiled beef for dinner; however, these conditions would quickly change.<sup>32</sup> One of his fellow prisoners, Reverend Moses Allen, wrote that after Mordecai and Sheftall Sheftall refused to eat the pork they were served due to their adherence to the Jewish dietary laws of *kashrut*, the British guards ordered their knives and forks greased with pork fat. As Professor Jonathan Sarna noted, the adherence to *kashrut* was a hallmark of the Jewish identity, simultaneously showing the strength of the faith of Mordecai and Sheftall Sheftall and the explicit antisemitism of British guards aboard the *Nancy*.<sup>33</sup> Mordecai and Sheftall would later escape the prison hulk, get captured again and be sent to the Caribbean until their parole in 1780, after which they spent the remainder of the war in the North.<sup>34</sup> While there are not any other extant accounts of

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<sup>31</sup> Rezneck, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 41.

<sup>32</sup> "Capture of Mordecai Sheftall, Deputy Commissary-General of issues to the Continental Troops for the state of Georgia, viz., 1778, December 29th," in Schappes, *A Documentary History*, 55.

<sup>33</sup>Rafael Hoffman, "Uncovered Documents Show the Spiritual Heroism of a Jewish Patriot in the American Revolution," May 25, 2020, <https://www.raabcollection.com/blog/uncovered-documents-show-the-spiritual-heroism-of-a-jewish-patriot-in-the-american-revolution>

<sup>34</sup> Mordecai Sheftall papers, P-12, collection of the American Jewish Historical Society, New York, NY, <https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/3/resources/1659>

antisemitism directed at Jews serving in the Revolution, it is possible that the Sheftalls' experience was not unique, and that other Jewish men were singled out for their faith.

### **Jews at Home: Economic Support, Relocation, and Loyalism**

Jewish support for the war extended beyond military service to the home front. Many wealthy Jewish citizens sympathetic to the Patriots opted to financially support the cause of the United States. As early as 1776, men such as the Gratz brothers and Hayman Levy of New York served as de facto bankers to the Continental Army and militias, loaning money and paying for rations and then collecting certificates from Congress for their reimbursement.<sup>35</sup> While these early gestures of support were fairly minor in the general financing of the war, they demonstrated a clear support of Jewish merchants and bankers towards the newly independent country and a confidence in the credit worthiness of the fledgling government.

The financial support of the American cause only increased as the war continued. Many merchants shifted their attention to creating supplies for the military. For example, the Gratz brothers utilized local manpower to make uniforms for soldiers, while Joseph Simon of Lancaster manufactured rifles.<sup>36</sup> Most significantly, however, was the lease of ships to be used as

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<sup>35</sup> Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1315.

<sup>36</sup> Sachar, *A History*, 24.

privateer vessels. Isaac Moses, a prominent New York merchant who fled to Philadelphia after the British capture of the city, requested two or three hundred "weight of powder" from Congress, telling them that he had outfitted a "schooner under a letter of marque with every necessary (but gunpowder) in a warlike manner."<sup>37</sup> Throughout the war, Moses entered eight privateering ventures, operated ships that ran British blockades, and frequently offered his credit to Congress, working closely with Robert Morris, who became Congress's Superintendent of Finance in 1781, throughout the war.<sup>38</sup>

Of the financiers of the Revolution, however, Haym Salomon remains undoubtedly the best-known. An immigrant from Poland, Salomon immigrated to New York in 1775 and built his wealth brokering international trade.<sup>39</sup> After the outbreak of war, Salomon served as a sutler to Continental troops and a spy in British-occupied New York before a death sentence was placed on his head for his espionage-related activities.<sup>40</sup> Salomon fled for his life to Philadelphia, leaving his family behind and losing a significant amount of his wealth as he did.<sup>41</sup> In the American

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<sup>37</sup> Reznick, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 70.

<sup>38</sup> Reznick, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 70-71.

<sup>39</sup> James A. Percoco, "Haym Salomon: Revolutionary Financier," *American Battlefield Trust*, accessed November 7, 2022, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/haym-salomon>.

<sup>40</sup> Reznick, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 82-83.

<sup>41</sup> "Haym Salomon's Memorial to the Continental Congress, Philadelphia, August 25, 1778," in Schappes, *A Documentary History*, 52-53.

capital, Salomon's financial services to the United States became significant; Salomon's name appeared frequently in Morris' official records as Superintendent of Finance, demonstrating his significant contributions to the American war effort.<sup>42</sup> Throughout the war, Salomon negotiated the sale of Continental bills of exchange for hard French and Dutch currency at almost no personal profit (he asked for 0.25% for himself), receiving the title of "Broker to the Office of Finance of the United States" from Congress and "Treasurer of the French Army in America" from the French consulate.<sup>43</sup> Morris' diary described Salomon's role not only in the sale of bills of exchange and finance of the war, but as an advisor and negotiator in American financial dealings, demonstrating how, unlike many other Jews, Salomon had a fairly broad role in the affairs of the government.<sup>44</sup>

Salomon's most famous contribution occurred during the Yorktown campaign as funds remained scarce. In response to Morris' letter that there was no money to finance the campaign, Washington wrote that he should "Send for Haym Salomon," where, indeed, the financier was able to obtain the requested \$20,000 and assist in bringing about the American victory.<sup>45</sup> The American Battlefield Trust estimates that Salomon personally

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<sup>42</sup> Reznick, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 84.

<sup>43</sup> Sachar, *A History*, 25.

<sup>44</sup> Reznick, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 85.

<sup>45</sup> Percoco, "Haym Salomon."

loaned about \$650,000, showing his own incredible sacrifice; the new American government never repaid their debt, leaving him destitute when he died in 1785.<sup>46</sup>

Salomon was not the only Jew to leave his home due to the British capture and occupation of cities. After the capture of New York, many Patriot sympathizers left the city for Philadelphia, returning after the conclusion of the war.<sup>47</sup> Upon their return to the city in 1783, Congregation Shearith Israel resolved to write a letter to Governor Clinton, describing themselves as "lately returned from Exile," and "look[ing] forward, with Pleasure to the happy days we expect to enjoy under a Constitution, Wisely framed to preserve the inestimable Blessings of Civil and Religious Liberty."<sup>48</sup> Similarly, after the fall of Savannah, most of the Jewish community fled to Charleston, and later, moved further north through the Southern states to establish new Jewish communities.<sup>49</sup> While some Jews stayed in these communities, including Baltimore and Richmond, the Jewish communities in Savannah and especially Charleston remained very large and active. In fact, Charleston became the largest and most active Jewish community

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<sup>46</sup> Percoco, "Haym Salomon."

<sup>47</sup> Rezneck, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 14-15.

<sup>48</sup> "Address of Israelites to Governor Clinton, signed and presented by Hayman Levy, Myer Myers, and Isaac Moses, in January 1784, pursuant to a Resolution of Congregation Shearith Israel, December 9, 1783," in Schappes, *A Documentary History*, 66-67.

<sup>49</sup> Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1300.

in the generation following the Revolution, showing how, despite the relocation of many of its citizens during the war, the city was able to recover both economically and demographically from the effects of the war on its population.<sup>50</sup>

While Charleston's Jewish community remained mostly intact despite the relocation of Jews during the war, Newport was not as fortunate. After its capture by the British, approximately half of all Jewish property owners fled the city, permanently affecting the Jewish community in the town.<sup>51</sup> Many Jews, including Aaron Lopez, one of the wealthiest businessmen in the community, lost much of their fortune because of their flight and the subsequent confiscation of their ships and other properties by the British.<sup>52</sup> By the early nineteenth century, as a result of the economic losses and especially, the dispersion of Jewish residents, the Newport Synagogue closed for regular services. It did not reopen for regular practice until the influx of Jewish immigrants in the 1880s.<sup>53</sup>

While many of the Patriot sympathizers of Newport left, several Loyalists remained. Most notable of these Newport Tories was Rabbi Isaac Touro, who followed the British Army to New York when they left Rhode Island and later went to Jamaica in

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<sup>50</sup> Rezneck, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 18.

<sup>51</sup> Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1290.

<sup>52</sup> Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1289-90.

<sup>53</sup> Touro Synagogue, "History of Touro Synagogue," accessed November 10, 2022, <https://toursynagogue.org/history>.

1782 after it became evident that Britain would withdraw from the American colonies.<sup>54</sup> Similarly to Touro, Myer Pollock and Isaac Hart left Newport for Long Island, building and defending Fort St. George, where Hart ultimately died in 1780. Historian Samuel Rezneck suggests that this Loyalism was economically motivated, noting that the Hart family of Newport had financially supported the British government during the Seven Years War.<sup>55</sup> These economic motivations contrasted with other Jewish merchants like Hayman Levy, who had eagerly supported the British cause during the Seven Years War but grew disillusioned with the Crown during the imperial crisis of the 1760s, showing the variance in political ideology amongst the Jewish-American community.

As illustrated by the case of the Newport Jews, New York became a center for Jewish Loyalists just as it did Gentiles. In October 1776, shortly after the capture of New York, nearly 950 men, including seventeen Jews signed an oath of loyalty addressed to General Howe.<sup>56</sup> While some of these could have been genuine sentiments of loyalty to Britain, in the case of these Jews as was with all Loyalists, there were likely some who were not completely loyal to the Crown. Indeed, there were men aligned with the

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<sup>54</sup> Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1290.

<sup>55</sup> Rezneck, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 138.

<sup>56</sup> "Address of Loyalty to the Conquerors, Admiral Richard Howe and General William Howe, New York, October 16, 1776," in Schappes, *A Documentary History*, 50-51.



British whose loyalties changed, such as the Hessian soldier Alexander Zunz, who became highly respected and integrated within the Jewish community, and, after the war, remained a citizen in the United States.<sup>57</sup> The case of Zunz, who stayed in America due to the connections he had forged with other Jews while living in New York, and other Jewish citizens whose loyalties to Britain were relatively weak, demonstrated a spectrum within Jewish Loyalists akin to those of Gentile Tories.

### **The Aftermath of War: Jews in the Early Republican Period**

The sentiment of the Jews of New York in their letter to Clinton reflected the expectations and hopes of Jews across the victorious United States. As early as 1781, Jews began to advocate for equal rights. Gershom Seixas, a Philadelphia Rabbi, compiled a list of discriminatory clauses within state constitutions, the first sign of the movement for equality that would grow throughout the 1780s.<sup>58</sup> As the Constitutional Convention got underway, Jonas Phillips wrote them a letter, asking the Framers to instate a policy ensuring religious equality on the federal level (since the Constitutional Convention had met in secret, Phillips was unaware that the delegates had already passed Article VI, Clause 3, which

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<sup>57</sup> Reznick, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 141.

<sup>58</sup> Reznick, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 158.

barred religious tests as a requirement for holding office).<sup>59</sup> In Philadelphia's 1788 Independence Day celebration, which also commemorated the ratification of the Constitution, Jewish rabbis walked arm in arm with Christian reverends, and, more significantly, ate separately at a special kosher table made to accommodate their dietary restrictions.<sup>60</sup> On a federal level, religious equality had become the policy of the land; this can be best illustrated by President Washington's famous letter to the Newport Jews (see appendix), where he wrote that the United States government "happily [gave] bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."<sup>61</sup>

On the state level, however, Jews faced significant opposition in the form of codified discrimination. While New York's 1777 constitution eliminated all religious limitations to being incorporated into society, other states took longer to grant Jews equal rights.<sup>62</sup> Sarna recognized how absurd this paradigm was; it was legal for a Jew to be elected President but illegal for him to be the mayor of the smallest town in Maryland.<sup>63</sup> Until

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<sup>59</sup> "Letter from Jonas Phillips to the Federal Constitutional Convention, September 7, 1787," in Schappes, *A Documentary History*, 68-69.

<sup>60</sup> Jonathan D. Sarna, "The Revolution in American Judaism," in *American Judaism: A History, Second Edition*, (Yale University Press, 2019.), 38, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvhrczf4.7>.

<sup>61</sup>"Correspondence Between the Jews and Washington," in Schappes, *A Documentary History*, 80.

<sup>62</sup> Diner, *The Jews*, 48.

<sup>63</sup> Sarna, "The Impact," 153.

1790, the oath that all officeholders in Pennsylvania required them to swear that the "Scriptures of the old and new Testament" were "divine inspiration," essentially gatekeeping public office to only Christians.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, it took until the Fourteenth Amendment and Reconstruction for North Carolina (1868) and New Hampshire (1876) to remove religious language from their constitutions, showing the difficulties in attaining true religious equality across the United States.<sup>65</sup>

Maryland's legislation, however, remained the most controversial and difficult in the generation following the Revolution. As Baltimore's Jewish community grew, so did the attempts of Jewish citizens to integrate into civil society. In 1797, Solomon Etting, a Baltimore merchant, tried to remove the bar on Jews holding office, but failed. The issue was raised again in 1818 by banker Jacob Cohen, where antisemites openly admitted that they feared a "Jew bill" allowing Jewish men to hold office would "dilute the strength of Christianity" in the state.<sup>66</sup> Thomas Kennedy, the man who wrote and argued for the passage of this bill, was called a "Judas," and an "enemy of Christianity," ultimately losing his seat in the legislature for his attempts to grant Jews equality.<sup>67</sup> With all

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<sup>64</sup> Diner, *The Jews*, 48.

<sup>65</sup> Rufus Lears, *The Jews in America: A History* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1954), 49.

<sup>66</sup> Diner, *The Jews*, 49.

<sup>67</sup> Sachar, *A History*, 27.

the controversy and backlash to the legislation, it was not until 1826 that the "Jew bill" finally passed in Maryland, allowing Jewish citizens to hold office.<sup>68</sup> It is worth noting that, almost immediately after the repeal of religious tests in Maryland, both Etting and Cohen were elected to the Baltimore City Council, and each presided over the Council for several years.<sup>69</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Jewish experience in the American Colonies can be seen as one of emancipation from the intolerance and oppression of Europe. Even before the Revolution, Jewish people were met with a significant amount of tolerance within the American Colonies, establishing an environment for Jewish communities to grow and freely practice by the late colonial period.

As the Revolution began, despite the small size of their demographic, Jewish citizens participated in nearly all aspects of the war on both sides. From Mordecai Sheftall, the quartermaster, to Haym Salomon, the financier, to Isaac Touro, the Tory, it is clear that, while they were few, Jews played a role in the narrative of American Independence.

Enticed by the ideals of republicanism, the many Jews who supported the Patriots saw hope in the new country, a government that finally granted them the religious equality that Jewish people

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<sup>68</sup> Diner, *The Jews*, 49.

<sup>69</sup> Reznick, *Unrecognized Patriots*, 161.

had not had for centuries. While, at first, this ideal was not realized, Jews continued to fight for their rights into the Early Republic period, showing that, for them, the Revolution was not yet over.

In the larger picture of the American Revolutionary era and afterwards, Jewish people remained an overwhelming minority of the population. However, through their struggle to gain equality well into the nineteenth century, it is clear that they were significant in the establishment of a government that recognized religious freedom as a natural right and, even though it took decades if not a century, one that did indeed “[give] to bigotry no sanction.”

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## Appendix

Letter from George Washington to the Hebrew Congregation in  
Newport, 18 August 1790

Gentlemen:

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your Address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you, that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, to become a great and a happy people.

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. 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 giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my Administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy