

# The New York Jew

In 1784, Arthur Lee, the diplomat and congressman, and one of the Virginia Lees, met the New York Jew Joseph Simson [Simpson]. The latter was born in Germany but had migrated to America, about the year 1718. In New York Simson had a varied career and enjoyed the distinction of being president of Congregation Shearith Israel, where he had once served as beadle. He was known for his knowledge of Hebrew and was occasionally consulted by Christian Hebraists.

The story of the meeting of the two men, reprinted below, is taken from Joseph Dennie's *Port Folio*, VI (1818), 121-22, a copy of which is found in the library of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.

## THE NEW YORK JEW FROM THE DIARY OF THE HON. ARTHUR LEE

New York, 1784. I went to visit a Jew called Simpson, though his true name is Sampson. He was born at Frankfort-on-the Maine, has lived in this city seventy years, and is aged ninety-nine. He married a wife on Long Island, with whom he lived sixty years . . . .

[He did not wear a wig], he wore his hair and beard, both white, but not yet of the silver whiteness of old age. He had some of his teeth remaining, and his eyesight good. His eyes were blue, his complexion fair and florid, both which are uncommon among Jews. He walked well, ate well, slept well, and talked well. His voice was strong; he talked much, but was not prolix, is a very warm Whig, and as such quitted the city when the British took it.

He told us, when he first came hither the whole [of New York City] consisted of one street, and there were orchards where the town is now. He said there was then an Indian king on Long Island, who was very proud and thought there was no one in the world greater than himself, but having heard much of the great King of England, he sent his son to see whether he was bigger, as he phrased it, than himself.

Simpson was present when the son returned. The old king was eating a mess of mush. He immediately inquired of his son whether he had seen the king on the other side of the water and whether he was bigger than himself. The son answered: "A great deal bigger," and gave such a stupendous account of the British King that the old man remained for some time in a sullen reverie. At length he asked his son if the King of England ever died, to which the latter replied in the affirmative. Upon this the chief recovered his cheerfulness and eat his mush with alacrity.

He [Simpson] said he believed General Washington was the greatest warrior in the world and ought to be called Joshua, that the King of France had made him one of his mareschals, and he was sure would never rest till he got him into his service.

On someone's mentioning that the Jews of Amsterdam were about to purchase a large tract of land on the back part of Georgia for the purpose of establishing a colony of Jews exclusively, he observed that it would not do, for that the Jews prospered most when intermixed with other nations.

He delivered his sentiments with conciseness and perspicuity. His only failing consisted in being somewhat deaf. He said in all his life he had not kept his bed two days from sickness, that he had never observed any particular regimen, had used spectacles for forty years, till of late he could see without them. He was easy and cheerful and benevolent of his blessings on us.

## A Poem by Joseph Lyons

Joseph Lyons was born in South Carolina, probably in Columbia, in 1813. He received an excellent education in Charleston and, at the age of twenty-two, passed the bar examination at Savannah, Georgia. The following poem is found in his diary under the date of May 23, 1834. Lyons died of consumption the following year in Paris, France.

May 23, Friday. A fool told me today she was sorry for me, and I thought what I here write:

<i>You</i> are sorry for me!!!	Crawling, weak, despicable reptile?
Eternal God! am I then that <i>thing</i>	If I am, <i>then</i> be <i>sorry</i> for me.
As to excite pity!	But whilst I feel in my capacious
Give me deep scorn, without disguise,	soul
Most rancorous hate, abhorrence,	A comprehensive power to enfold
Anything but pity!	Passions that in their expansion
By heaven, 'tis what you feel	Would shatter your pigmy soul
For the unresisting worm you've	Into indiscernible atoms,
carelessly crushed,	Dare not to reduce me
And you pity it for its impotence	To your petty pitiful size
To escape or to retaliate.	And be sorry for me, as
Am I so gifted—Am <i>I</i> a poor,	You would for your fellows.