

The Jews in the United States—1848*

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From the smallness of the numbers of our people, compared with the rest of mankind, it will be readily understood that, comparatively speaking, but few Jews will be found in America. Still, despite of this fact, they are found in every portion of the Union, with the exception almost (for there are a few even there) in the northern range of states. Probably the first settlement of Jews took place in New Amsterdam, when it was under the Dutch government, about 1660. They no doubt were Spaniards and Portuguese who, like their brethren who were settled in Holland, fled from the bloody Inquisition to seek refuge under the equitable protection of the laws of the Batavian Republic. The writer of this has learnt that a correspondence is yet in existence which took place between the Israelites and the Dutch authorities in New Amsterdam; but he has never seen it, wherefore he is unable to say anything with precision farther than he has stated above. This much, however, he believes certain: that the number of our people did not increase rapidly, since we are not friendly to making proselytes, and owing to the great difficulties emigrants of our persuasion must be exposed to in new communities on account of the duties of our religion. Be this as it may, but one synagogue was needed in New York till about 1827, when a second one was established in the central part of the city. Since that period four other congregations have been organized, and all the places of worship, though so rapidly multiplied, are frequently over-full, so as to require temporary meeting places. The number of Jews in the city of New York is said to be about 10,000, and is rapidly increasing by emigration from Europe, owing to the oppressive laws enforced against us in many countries There are two congregations in Albany, and one or more in the country, of which, however, I have too vague information to say anything with certainty.

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A few years before the American Revolution a congregation assembled in Newport, Rhode Island; but with the falling off of the business of that place after the conclusion of the peace of 1783, the Jewish population left it by degrees, some going to New York, some to Richmond, and others to different other towns. There are a synagogue and burying ground, both said to be in good order, a legacy having been left by [Judah Touro] the son of the former minister, [Isaac] Touro, to keep them from falling into decay.

In Pennsylvania, Israelites were settled long before the Revolution in various places. But I believe that no regular congregation was organized till about 1780, when the occupation of New York by the British induced many from that place to come hither with their minister, Gershom Mendes Seixas, and a synagogue was erected upon the site of the present building, and consecrated about the fall of 1781 [1782]. There are now three congregations in Philadelphia, numbering about from 1,500 to 1,800 souls. One congregation is at Easton, one in Hanover, and considerable settlements in Franklin County, Bucks [County], and elsewhere, which will no doubt be organized as congregations before long.

In Maryland, the Jews were until lately excluded from a participation of equal rights, but soon after the repeal of their disabilities many Europeans joined the former few settlers, and there is now a considerable congregation of about 1,500 souls in Baltimore, where there is a synagogue. There are also a few families in Frederick, Hagerstown, etc.

In Virginia, the Jews settled about 1780, or even earlier, but their number is small in that state, and there are but two congregations in the whole state, and both at Richmond. Others dwell at Petersburg, Norfolk, Lynchburg, Wheeling, but they amount in the whole state to scarcely more than 600.

In North Carolina, where the constitution excludes us from the rights of citizens, there are but a few families. But in South Carolina, we are much more numerous, and Israelites are found in all parts of the state. Still, there is but one regular congregation, at Charleston, where there is a handsome synagogue; the congregation was organized in 1750.

In Georgia, there is a synagogue in Savannah. The first Jews came over soon after General [James] Oglethorpe, in 1733; but they have never been very numerous, though it appears from present indications that many European emigrants, and persons

from the north, will, it is likely, soon seek a home in that state.

In the southern and western states the arrival of Israelites is but recent. Still, there is a congregation at Mobile; another, numbering about 125 families, in New Orleans; another at Louisville; two at Cincinnati; one or two in Cleveland, and one at St. Louis. There are probably others, but they have not become generally known. A small congregation also has recently been formed at New Haven, in Connecticut, probably the only one in the New England States, unless Boston be an exception.

We have no ecclesiastical authorities in America, other than the congregations themselves. Each congregation makes its own rules for its government, and elects its own minister, who is appointed without any ordination, induction in office being made through his election, which is made for a term of years or during good behavior, as it may meet the wish of the majority. As yet we have no colleges or public schools of any kind, with the exception of one in New York, under the direction of the Rev. Samuel M. Isaacs, one in Baltimore, and another in Cincinnati, and Sunday schools for religious instruction in New York, Philadelphia, Richmond, Charleston, Columbia, S. C., Savannah, and Cincinnati. There can be no doubt that something will be done for education as soon as we have become more numerous. The American Jews have but one religious periodical, and this is printed in Philadelphia; it is called *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, and appears monthly.

In all our congregations where the necessity demands it, there are ample provisions made for the support of the poor, and we endeavor to prevent, if possible, any Israelite from being sent to the poorhouse, or to sink into crime for want of the means of subsistence.

Upon the whole, we have increased in every respect within the last five years, and we invoke the blessing of Heaven that He may prosper our undertakings and give us the means to grow in grace and piety, that we may be able to show the world the true effects of the law of God upon the life of a sincere Israelite, which must render him acceptable to his neighbors of every creed, and a worthy servant in the mansion of his Heavenly Father.