

Some Notes on the Jews of Nevis

MALCOLM H. STERN

The British West Indian island of Nevis is located in the Leeward Islands, approximately one-third of the way along the necklace of Lesser Antilles that stretches from Puerto Rico to the South American mainland. From the Caribbean side, Nevis presents the aspect of a giant green circus tent, approximately eight miles from north to south, and six miles from east to west. Mount Nevis, a long-dormant volcano, 3,500 feet high, dominates the island, while two smaller peaks rise almost equidistant from this central point.

Discovered by Christopher Columbus in 1498, Nevis was colonized by the British in 1628. The Puritan Rebellion in England sent many exiled royalists to the West Indies, and Nevis acquired a generous share of such families as Washington and Hamilton, whose scions soon became prominent and wealthy as plantation owners. Due to the fortuitous presence of health-giving mineral springs which are still in existence, Nevis had become, by the eighteenth century, a center of West Indian social life, rivaling in pomp and circumstance Bath and even London itself.

Such an environment naturally proved attractive to the rapidly growing West Indian Jewish community of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The mid-nineteenth century brought a drop in the price of sugar that was to reduce the economic importance of the entire West Indies. The consequent depression led to a major exodus of once-prosperous families, among whom were many Jewish merchants and plantation owners. As for Nevis, the island went into a Rip Van Winkle slumber from which it has been roused by the current

Dr. Malcolm H. Stern, genealogist of the American Jewish Archives, serves as rabbi of Ohel Sholom Temple, Norfolk, Va. He visited Nevis on Sunday, February 3, 1957, while serving as Jewish Chaplain for the Virginia Jamestown 350th Anniversary Cruise, aboard the S.S. *Ryndam*. This was the first cruise ship ever to stop at Nevis, and the visit was commemorative of the fact that the 1607 Jamestown expedition had visited the island en route from England to Virginia. Dr. Stern, assisted by his wife, spent the major portion of their three hours ashore gathering the data for this article.

celebration of the bicentenary anniversary of the birth of Alexander Hamilton.

The present population of Nevis is estimated at 13,000, of whom barely twenty are white. None of the latter are indigenous to the island; they are mostly migrants from Britain in government or ecclesiastical service. The majority of the once-handsome plantation homes are now vine-devoured ruins.¹

No official record of the Jews of Nevis exists, but two monuments remain on the island, giving evidence of the size, the importance, and the dating of organized Jewish life there: the cemetery and the synagogue.

THE JEWISH CEMETERY

In the tiny capital town of Charlestown, barely three blocks from the wharf, is a large corner lot, reverently referred to by the natives as "the Jews' Cemetery." The lot, approximately 200 feet by 75 feet, is delineated by the remains of a wire fence.

Sixteen raised graves, covered with flat stone slabs, are clearly visible, one in each corner of the plot, the remainder clustered together near what must have been the main entrance to the cemetery. The epitaphs range in date from 1684 to 1768, and vary from perfect legibility to complete obliteration. Except for one fragment of a slab bearing a Hebrew inscription imbedded in the earth, no other graves are evident. The tropical growth is low and easily moved aside, and while it is possible that later upright tombstones might have been carried away by natural forces or human hands, it appears that the community purchased or set aside a far larger plot than it came to require. For the record of those buried in the cemetery, see Appendix I.

THE SYNAGOGUE

On the outer edge of Charlestown, on the main highway leading from the capital to the mineral springs and its hostelry, the Bath House, is a one-story stone ruin which the natives call "the Jews'

¹ Derived from literature issued by the Nevis Chamber of Commerce, which quotes, among other sources, two historical novels by Gertrude Atherton, *The Gorgeous Isle* and *The Conqueror*, the latter a fictional biography of Alexander Hamilton.

School." This is unquestionably the synagogue, whose existence in 1688 was discovered in the Amsterdam Archives by Cardozo de Bethencourt.²

An apparently established fact of Hamilton's boyhood is that he received his elementary education in this building. Because he was the child of a common-law marriage, not recognized under British colonial law, Hamilton apparently was ineligible for the local church schools. He was, therefore, sent to a school "operated by a Jewess" (whose name has not been ascertained), where, by the age of ten, he had acquired his love of reading, his skill in mathematics, and the ability to recite the Decalogue in Hebrew.³

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A "List of the Inhabitants of Nevis, with the number of their Slaves," appears in the third volume of *Caribbeana*.⁴ Dated March 13, 1707, this census gives the following data about Jewish residents of the island:

² See *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (=PAJHS), XXIX, 37 f. Cardozo de Bethencourt, "Notes on the Spanish and Portuguese Jews in the United States, Guiana, and the Dutch and British West Indies." Translated from the French.

³ I first heard the tale of Hamilton's schooling in St. Thomas, where the story was apparently well-known, but was given the legendary addendum that the "rabbi" of Nevis, attracted to the precocious lad, took him when the church schools refused him admission, and gave him his elementary education.

I am deeply indebted to Mrs. Dorothe Bobbé, of New York, who is engaged in writing the definitive biography of Hamilton, and has painstakingly sorted out fact from fiction. In an article of scholarly content, "The Boyhood of Alexander Hamilton" (in *American Heritage*, June, 1955, pp. 4-9, 96-99), she writes (on page 7):

"Denied schooling, [his mother] sent him to the Jewish school, the only one. The Jews were respectable, and respected, in the islands. . . . His teacher liked to stand him on a table and make him recite the Decalogue in Hebrew. She fostered Alex's precious love of reading, and acquainted him with arithmetic. . . . In 1765, when Alexander was ten [the family moved] to St. Croix."

Gertrude Atherton's fictional biography of Hamilton, *The Conqueror*, originally published in 1902, colored the story a bit by having the lad recite the Decalogue at home, to his father's angry consternation, and this ended his schooling at the age of four.

Three recent biographies of Hamilton and the *Dictionary of American Biography* ignore the story of his schooling, and the family's migration from Nevis to St. Croix is put variously when Hamilton was age two or seven!

⁴ *Caribbeana*, a quarterly of British West Indian genealogy and antiquities, published by Dr. V. L. Oliver, at Antigua. Reissued in six bound volumes after 1919.

	<i>White Males</i>	<i>White Females</i>	<i>Blacks</i>
Isaac Lobatt.....		2	12
Isaac Pinheiro.....	2	4	9
Abraham Bueno de Mezqueto..		1	8
Ralph Abenduna.....			1
Solomon Israel.....	4	1	13

From this evidence, and from other sources (see the Appendix), the absence of the head of the household in the census is symptomatic of the peripatetic activity of West Indian Jewry. The islands were too small in size, population, and economic opportunities for many of the Jews to concentrate their energies on one island. Hence we find them busily engaged in several areas. This fact is further attested by the will of Haim Abinun de Lima, who lists himself, in 1765, as a Nevis shopkeeper, but states that his wife resides in Curaçao. In June of that year, he wrote a will in Nevis; in December, he wrote another in London, whither he had gone on business. He mentions family, friends, and business connections in London, St. Kitts, Barbados, St. Eustatius, and Curaçao. (See Appendix II.)

The 1707 Census shows that the Jews were all slaveowners, and the number of slaves is an indication of the owners' comparative prosperity. The paucity of Jews can be attributed, perhaps, to the depredations of the French about a year before.⁵ By 1723 the Nevis Jewish community had grown to about seventy-five persons, according to the rather derogatory report of the local Episcopal minister to the Bishop of London.⁶ Some civil rights were granted to the Jews, for Solomon Israel served as a jury foreman, and as a witness to wills for Christian friends. Intergroup relations are evident in his serving as executor for one estate.⁷

⁵ PAJHS, XXIII, 157 f. Will of Isaac Pinheiro.

⁶ PAJHS, XX, 160.

⁷ Nevis court records (noted by Mrs. Bobbé); *Caribbeana*, V, 306; VI, 11, 13-14.

APPENDIX I

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES ON JEWS WHO RESIDED AT NEVIS

ABENDUNA, RALPH. Unquestionably the same Ralph, or Raphael Abendana, who was endenized at Barbados on March 9, 1694,⁸ and was a resident of Boston in 1695.⁹ He appears as a slaveholder in the Nevis Census of 1707 (*supra*).

ABUDIENTE, ABRAHAM, alias ABRAHAM GIDEON. His tombstone in the Nevis cemetery, giving the date of his death as "6 de Tisri do A° 5450" (September 27, 1689), confirms the existence in Barbados of two individuals bearing the same name. The other Abraham Abudiente died in Barbados on 4 Tamuz, 5457, July 3, 1697, at the age of eighty-four. The Nevis Abraham Gideon-Abudiente left Barbados in the ketch *Phoenix*, along with Rowland Gideon, on November 25, 1679, bound for Nevis' neighboring isle of Antigua.¹⁰

ABUDIENTE, BATHSHEBA, wife of REHIEL (alias ROWLAND GIDEON). Her tombstone, in Hebrew and English, is by far the handsomest in the Nevis cemetery. Her death date is given only in Hebrew as "Tuesday, the 28th of Ab, 5444" (August 20, 1684). Her husband's prosperity is evident in the elaborate decoration of the stone: crossed palms upon

⁸ *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* (= *TJHSE*), XIII, 96.

⁹ David de Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone* (= Pool, *Portraits*), p. 442.

¹⁰ *TJHSE*, XIII, 36-37, 64, 68, 94, 96, 103. The discovery of this second Abraham Gideon-Abudiente explains why the Barbados sugar levy on the Jews for the years 1679-80 lists:

Abraham Abudiente 230 lbs.
Abraham Obediente 1,044 lbs.

The wealthier of the two is probably the migratory Abraham who left shortly thereafter for Antigua, since in 1680 an Abraham de Abudiente is one of the levy assessors and his tax is given as 236 lbs. It is entirely probable that the sugar levy itself led the more prosperous Abraham to leave Barbados for an island where such discriminatory taxes were not levied. Which of the two Abrahams was endenized at Barbados along with Rowland and Samson "Gideon" on August 19, 1688, it would be difficult to say. Lucien Wolf (in one of the *Miscellanies* of *TJHSE*) pointed to two Rowland Gideons on the West Indian scene at this time, but more research will be needed to ascertain which Rowland was in Boston in 1674-75, and which was endenized in Barbados on July 30, 1679, and again in 1688, as mentioned. Which Rowland accompanied Abraham to Antigua (and probably to Nevis: *vide infra*), and which returned to England to become the father of the financial magnate, Samson Gideon?

a wreath at the top; lotus blossoms in the middle; and the winged hourglass with a sprouting lotus at the bottom.¹¹

ALVAREZ, JACOB. Enderized at Nevis, where he listed himself as "trader," on April 14, 1725, he may be presumed to be identical with the Jacob Alvarez who was in Jamaica some years before. On October 25, 1712, he pleaded, along with other leaders of the Jamaican Jewish colony, that they were unable to meet their taxes because of poverty due to losses. In 1722, he signed a similar petition, attributing losses to a hurricane.¹²

ARROBAS, HANANIAH OF ANANIAH. His name appears on a Nevis court record for 1714,¹³ and his Nevis tombstone states that he died on January 25, 1729/30.

COHEN, DANIEL. His elaborate Portuguese and English epitaph tells only that he died on January 29, 1703/4.

C-?, DANIEL MENDES. We are unable to track down the surname of this individual, buried at Nevis, who died on 28 Tamuz, 5444 (1684).

DE LIMA, HAIM ABINUN. Nevis shopkeeper, 1765. (See his will in Appendix II.)

DELSON [probably DE LEON]. Mentioned as a Nevis Jew in 1755.¹⁴ Perhaps the David de Lion of St. Kitts, mentioned in De Lima's will.

DE MEZQUETO (MESQUITA), ABRAHAM BUENO. Probably a son of Benjamin Bueno de Mesquita, who with two sons was banished from Jamaica on August 16, 1665. Abraham owned a plantation at Barbados in 1692, and was enderized there, on February 2, 1695. He was absent from Nevis when his wife and slaves were recorded in the census of 1707.

¹¹ *Bevis Marks Records* I, 40, and Lee M. Friedman's *Jewish Pioneers and Patriots*, pp. 285 f., assume that Bathsheba was Rowland's first wife; and Esther do Porto, whom he married in London, on December 26, 1693 (*vide Bevis Marks Records* II, Ketubah Abstract #23), his second. As suggested in the preceding note, there were two Rowland Gideons, and Bathsheba may have been the wife of one; while Esther became the wife of the other. Quoting *PAJHS*, XVIII, 190, Lee M. Friedman, p. 400, points to the marriage in Surinam of Rohiel Obidiente to Rahel da Fonseca. He failed to note that this Rohiel, or Rehiel, was the son of Simson (Samson) Obidiente (*PAJHS*, XVIII, 201), and that the marriage took place in 5489 (1729). This Rohiel was undoubtedly a nephew of one of the two older Rowlands heretofore mentioned.

¹² *PAJHS*, XXIX, 38; XVIII, 153 f.

¹³ Mrs. Bobbé.

¹⁴ Found by Mrs. Bobbé in *Diary of John Baker* (London, 1931). Baker was the British Solicitor-General in the islands in 1755.



Foto Fischer, Curaçao

One of the Other "Precious Stones"
in the Curaçao Cemetery
(see p. 161)



Foto Fischer, Curaçao

Tombstone of Abigail Aboab Cardozo
in the Curaçao Cemetery
Where She Was Buried in June, 1747
(see p. 161)

The following year, on the death of his brother, Joseph, in New York, Abraham received a *Sefer Torah* (a Scroll of the Law). He died at Nevis in 1715, intestate, leaving several children.¹⁵

GARCIA, REBECCA. Mentioned in Nevis court records in 1713.¹⁶

GOMES, ABRAHAM ISQUIAO DAVID. Buried at Nevis, in February — ? Perhaps his name can be read Abraham de Isaac de David Gomes. Isaac and Abraham Gomes were endenized in Barbados, on December 14, 1694; and Isaac appears in the Barbados census of 1715 as head of a household, consisting of two males, ages fifty and thirty. It could be that the younger of these was Abraham, the son of Isaac, who died subsequently at Nevis.¹⁷

ISRAEL, SOLOMON. He is mentioned as a resident of Nevis in the will of his kinsman, David Israel, of Barbados, in 1689. His was the largest Jewish household of family and slaves in the 1707 census. As mentioned above, he assisted in several legal functions between 1712 and 1720.¹⁸

LOBATTO, ABRAHAM COHEN. Endenized in the colonies by Charles II of England in 1661, he was buried at Nevis in 1689/90.¹⁹

LOBATTO, ISAAC. He was perhaps the son of the preceding. The Nevis census of 1707 finds him absent from his household of two white females and twelve blacks. Nevis court records of 1713 mention him as a planter.²⁰

LOBATTO, RACHELL CAHANET. This maiden lady was buried at Nevis, on September 28, 1701. Note the feminine form of the Hebrew word *Cohen* (priest).

MANICHE, —TER. Buried at Nevis, on February 20, 1679.

MELHADO. Mentioned at Nevis in 1755.²¹

¹⁵ Pool, *Portraits*, pp. 187 ff., 453; *TJHSE*, XIII, 14.

¹⁶ Mrs. Bobbé.

¹⁷ *TJHSE*, XIII, 96; "A Census of the island of Barbados . . . taken in the months of October and November Anno Domini 1715" (a typescript extract of the Jewish listings, made by E. M. Shilstone, of Bridgetown, Barbados).

¹⁸ *TJHSE*, XIII, 21, 76; *vide* Note 7, *supra*.

¹⁹ *PAJHS*, XX, 110.

²⁰ Mrs. Bobbé.

²¹ *Vide* Note 14, *supra*.

MEN[DES?], —UAS. Buried at Nevis, in November, 1768 (the last date recorded for Nevis Jewry).

PAZ, ELIAS and SOLOMON. Mentioned in Nevis court records in 1734.²²

PINHEIRA (PINHEIRO), ISAAC, ESTHER, and JACOB. Isaac and Esther Pinheiro's 1707 census record reads: 2 Wh. M.; 4 Wh. F.; 9 Bl. From his will, written in the following year, we can identify the members of the family as Isaac and his youngest son, Moses; Esther, and their three daughters, Sarah, Rebekah, and Judith. Two older sons, Jacob and Abraham, seem to have been elsewhere. Isaac's will mentions his father, Abraham, of Amsterdam, and two sisters, Sarah, wife of Isaac Dagama, of Curaçao, and Rachel Pinheiro, of Amsterdam. Isaac served as the New York agent of Abraham Bueno de Mesquita (*supra*). He was made a freeman in New York, on February 2, 1695, and died there on February 17, 1710. His desire to be buried in Nevis evidently could not be fulfilled, for he lies buried in the Chatham Square cemetery of New York's Congregation Shearith Israel. His wife, Esther, had purchased a slave woman in New York on February 13, 1707, but returned to Nevis in time for the census, and was in the island at the time of her husband's death. She and her son, Jacob, appear in Nevis court records in 1712.²³

REZYA, RIBCA LEVY and RACHEL LEVY. Rachel was buried at Nevis, on 6 Shebat, 5444 (1684); Ribca died four years later. They were members of a family (spelled also as Levi Rezio) known in Brazil, Barbados, and England.²⁴

RODRIGUES, BENVENIDA COHEN and —? COHEN. Miss Benvenida Cohen Rodrigues' epitaph, in Portuguese, English, and a remnant of Hebrew, yields the information that she died on 5 Tishri, 5445, December (*sic!*) 3, 1684, aged nineteen years. The other Cohen Rodrigues may possibly be deciphered as Abraham, but no data survive.

SENIOR, —? This may be Jacob Senior, who left Barbados for Nevis on October 29, 1679, aboard the barque *Dove*. He may be the same individual who was in Brazil before 1654, and four years later sought to

²² Mrs. Bobbé.

²³ Pool, *Portraits*, pp. 453 f.; *PAJHS*, XXIII, 157 f.; Mrs. Bobbé.

²⁴ *PAJHS*, XLII, 395; *TJHSE*, XIII, *vide* Index; *Bevis Marks Records* II, *vide* Index.

migrate from Hamburg, Germany, to Essequibo, Surinam. On March 7, 1694/95, Jacob and Esther, his wife, sold two women slaves in Barbados. The *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* reports his death at Nevis, on February 9, 1710, but the epitaph seems to read "18 de [Fe]brauro, 1709."²⁵

APPENDIX II

ABSTRACT OF THE WILLS OF HAIM ABINUN DE LIMA²⁶

Written at Nevis, 27 June, 1765.

Haim de Lima, alias Haim Abiniern [Abinun] de Lima, of Nevis, shop-keeper. "My soul to Almighty God of Israel. To be buried after the rites of the people called Jews." Mentions:

Niece: Sarah de Elias Burgos, Barbados.

Kinsmen: Jacob, son of Uncle David de Piza; Haim, son of kinsman Mordechay Abinun de Lima.

Wife: Rebecca Abinun de Lima, of Curaçao.

Kinswomen: Leah, wife of Mordechay de Lima; Sarah, daughter of Haim Abinun de Lima; daughters of Mordechay Abinun de Lima, of Curaçao, viz.: Rachel, Clara, Judith.

Others: Isaac Pardo, merchant of Curaçao, to pay his debts to the wardens of the synagogue; Jacob, son of Uncle Jacob de Piza; David de Lion, of St. Christopher, merchant; Abraham, son of Uncle David de Piza, of Barbados.

Probated in London 12 December, 1766, by Moses Nunes, Sr., and Isaac Israel Nunes, of London, attorneys for the estate.

Written at London, 2 December, 1765, at Mrs. Judith Dias' house. In case of death, Abraham Dias, Jr., of London, is to handle the estate.

Executors: David de Lion, St. Kitts; Abraham de David de Piza, Barbados.

Bequests: "Little Sepher [Torah] for St. Eustacia, Kodes for the Kaal"; "the great Sepher for my cousin, David de Abraham Piza, Sr."

²⁵ *TJHSE*, XIII, 33; *PAJHS*, XVI, 106; XVII, 200; XLII, 395.

²⁶ "Abstract of Nevis Wills in P. C. C." (in *Caribbeana*, VI, 158 f.).