

Jewish Marriage and Inter-marriage in the Federal Period (1776-1840)

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The Jewish population of North America prior to the Revolution could be counted by hundreds. In 1790, according to a careful reckoning of the — to be sure, far from complete — Federal Census for that date, there were 1,500 identifiable Jews.¹ By 1840, the number had increased to an estimated 15,000, the majority of them concentrated in the cities of the Eastern seaboard.² Even here the number of marriageable women in proportion to the men was low, and for those venturesome single Jews who sought their fortunes away from the urban centers, the prospects of a Jewish marriage were slim indeed. As a consequence, it is not surprising to note that, out of the 699 marriages involving Jews which my researches have unearthed for the period, 201 — 28.7 percent — were marriages between Jews and non-Jews.³

In twelve of the 201 mixed marriages, there is evidence that the non-Jewish mate was converted to Judaism. As might be expected, these conversions took place usually when the couple was residing in a Jewish community large enough to support a formal congregation. More conversions might have occurred, had the three rabbis required by Orthodox law been available to perform them. Prior to 1840, however, there were no ordained rabbis residing in North America. The congregational lay leadership attempted to interpret very stringently such Jewish laws as they could follow.⁴ In general,

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¹ Ira Rosenswaike, "An Estimate and Analysis of the Jewish Population in the United States in 1790," in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, L (1960), 23 ff.

² *American Jewish Year Book: 5660* (Philadelphia, 1899), p. 283.

³ Malcolm H. Stern, *Americans of Jewish Descent* (Cincinnati, 1960), *passim*.

⁴ Hyman B. Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community of New York, 1654-1860* (Philadelphia, 1947), pp. 81-99, 543 (note 14).

they opposed conversion, but in several instances, under pressure from the families involved, it was sanctioned. While the circumstances surrounding most of the twelve conversions are unknown, the above-mentioned factors were probable in every case.⁵ Of the mixed marriages, by the way, six were cases of "miscegenation" — three with mulattoes, two with Indians, and one with a Negro.⁶

⁵ Stern, "The Function of Genealogy in American Jewish History," in *Essays in American Jewish History* (Cincinnati, 1958), Appendix II: Converts to Judaism Through Marriage Before 1840, pp. 89 ff.

⁶ Irving I. Katz, *The Beth El Story* (Detroit, 1955), pp. 45-46; Bertram W. Korn, *The Jews and Negro Slavery* (Elkins Park, 1961), pp. 49-50.

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