

## Notes on an Early Virginia Physician

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London-born Dr. John de Sequeyra (1712–1795), who arrived in Virginia around 1745, was no ordinary newcomer to America. His distinguished family of Portuguese Jewish origin produced several noted physicians during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<sup>1</sup> A descendant of the de Sequeyras who possesses and has access to extensive family records has provided some genealogical data.<sup>2</sup> The first name in the record is Abraham Israel de Sequeira, who died in 1679 and is described in an undated clipping from the *Jewish Chronicle* as “one of the oldest and most respected member of the community. . . .” According to the *Chronicle*, Abraham’s name “appears on the purchase deed of the [Bevis Marks Congregation’s] burial ground.”

A Dr. Abraham de Sequeira (1665–1747), who is also mentioned in the synagogue records and is believed to have been Abraham Israel’s grandson, is listed as having had three sons. One of them, Joseph Henrique, married a woman named Leah; John is the subject of this article; and another, his name unrecorded, married into the de la Cour family of medical fame. The descendants of Joseph and his anonymous brother converted to Christianity during the nineteenth century.

According to the records of the Spanish and Portuguese (Bevis Marks) Synagogue in London, a Dr. Abraham de Sequeyra was a member of the congregation in the 1730’s, and a Dr. Isaac de Se-

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Sewall, *Lecture delivered at the opening of the Medical Department of the Columbian College, Washington, March 30, 1825*, p. 61, says that John de Sequeyra “was, it is believed, a Portuguese Jew.” James Thacher, *American Medical Biography* (New York, 1828), I, 74, similarly refers to him.

<sup>2</sup> P. J. L. Sequeira, Wilmslow, Cheshire, England, to the author, April 9, 1970.



*Courtesy, The Henry Francis du Font  
Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Del.*

Dr. John de Sequeyra  
1712-1795



queyra Semuda died there in 1730. Another John de Sequeyra, also a physician, was a licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians in 1771, attended the Portuguese Ambassador, and died at London in 1816.<sup>3</sup>

The first John de Sequeyra left England for Holland in September, 1736, to matriculate in the medical school of the University of Leiden. His admission was recorded in the University *Inscriptiones*: "11 September 1736. Johannes de Sigueyra, Anglo-Britannus, 24 (annorum), M(edicinae)."<sup>4</sup> According to the *Recensiones* (the record of examinations), a student known as Iohannes Disiqueyra boarded with Martin Muller in February, 1737, and later, from February, 1738, through February, 1739, with Dr. Jacob de Knyff. He received his doctor's degree in medicine on February 3, 1739, and the University record listed his dissertation: "3 February 1739. Iohannes de Sigueyra, Portugalensis, de Peripneumonia vera, in Sen. Med." The dissertation was dedicated (in Latin) "with the greatest esteem to that most gifted and learned man, my brother Joseph Henry de Siqueyra, M.D., head doctor of the Portuguese in East India and Chief Physician of the Vice-Regent of Goa."

John de Sequeyra apparently remained in Holland for at least another year, since the *Recensiones* report him boarding with Walter Clark in February, 1740. We can only speculate as to the reasons which impelled him to sail for Virginia some five years later. Perhaps, like many other English physicians of his day, he was motivated by a spirit of adventure and the belief that the growing British colonies in North America offered attractive opportunities for professional advancement. A university-trained physician was likely to enjoy far greater prestige in any of the American colonies than in England.

In all probability, only a handful of Jews lived in Virginia during the last half of the eighteenth century. So long as they did not worship as a community or openly engage in theological disputations

<sup>3</sup> Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, London, to the author, Dec. 9, 1969, and Jan. 8, 1970. The *Jewish Encyclopedia* lists a Dr. Isaac H. Sequira, born at Lisbon in 1738, who died at London in 1816 (XI, 201).

<sup>4</sup> P. C. Boeren, Archivist, Leiden State University Archives, Leiden, Netherlands, to the author, Nov. 18, 1969.

and denials of the Trinity, they seem to have been tolerated. Dr. de Sequeyra, it is evident, was known as a Jew to some of his contemporaries, but since he was not a practicing Jew and never got into conflict with the establishment on any religious issue, his social and economic status in the colony apparently suffered no impairment. He paid his tithe and property tax which supported both the local government and the established Anglican Church. There is no record that Dr. de Sequeyra or any other Virginia Jew ever took advantage of the Act of Parliament which in 1740 offered naturalization to Jews and non-Anglican Protestants settling in the British North American colonies. Nor do we know of any Jew who was granted denization by the House of Burgesses.

In 1749, Dr. de Sequeyra submitted a request to the University of Leiden for a duplicate diploma. The original had been lost when the French captured the English vessel on which he was traveling and confiscated his belongings. The ship, it is clear, was a victim of the War of the Austrian Succession, an eight-year struggle in which England, Austria, and Holland were opposed by France, Spain, and Prussia. A number of land and sea engagements were fought until the peace of Aix-la-Chapelle was signed in 1748.

According to Leiden's Acta Senatus Academica of August 29, 1749,

The Rector Magnificus explained in the [academic] Senate that John Sequeyra, a Portuguese, had sent a letter from Virginia . . . in which he had made known that in traveling to Virginia in the recent war, the ship [on which he found himself] was captured and that together with his belongings he also lost his graduation diploma; therefore he, in a very special way, requested that the Senate deign to grant him a new one. The Senate was of the opinion that such a reasonable request was not to be denied and that consequently arrangements should be made that a new diploma be issued with the same contents as the former one, with the addition, however, of the following:

"This diploma, to which the Rector, the Professors of Medicine, and the Secretary of the Academic Senate have affixed their signatures in accordance with law and custom, has been granted to John Sequeyra. Since the latter informed the Rector and the Senate by letter that his previous diploma had been lost together with his personal effects on a

captured ship headed for America, and requested that a new one be sent to him, we have seen to it that the present one be issued in place of the one that was lost.”<sup>5</sup>

From Dr. de Sequeyra's arrival in the colony, says one authority, he “kept an annual record of the most prevalent diseases and outlined the treatment he found most successful.”<sup>6</sup> An early record has been found on the back of a portrait of Dr. de Sequeyra now in the possession of the Winterthur Museum. The painting was done probably between 1750 and 1770. The inscription by E. Randolph Braxton on the back of its stretcher reads: “Dr. Secarri—an Italian. He was the family physician to my grandfather, Philip Ludwell Grymes [a student at William and Mary College in 1759]. He first introduced into Williamsburg the custom of eating tomatoes, until then considered more of a flower than a vegetable.”

Another early reference to Dr. de Sequeyra is found in the records of Middlesex County, where an entry reads: “Ordered that Dr. John de Sequeyra be added to the General List of Tithables, taken by Philip Gryme[s], Esq.”<sup>7</sup>

What was the correct spelling of the doctor's name, and what was his status? One writer has put it this way:

“Allowing for the informal methods of spelling proper names in that day, it seems almost certain that the Dr. Seccari of the portrait was also the Dr. de Sequeyra—his name also appears as Sequeyra, de Siqueyra, Sequeyea, de Sequera—of the Lunatic Hospital; and was, besides, the Dr. Siccary who is listed in James Thacher's *American Medical Biography* (1828) as one of Virginia's most eminent physicians, and who is mentioned by Jefferson as having first introduced the tomato.

“Williamsburg was a cosmopolitan town. Besides English and Scotch physicians there were other nationalities represented in the

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* (original in Latin).

<sup>6</sup> Jan. 6, 1970. Dr. Edward M. Riley, Williamsburg, Va.

<sup>7</sup> Miss K. A. Grubbs, Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, Del., to the author, Dec. 4, 1969; Middlesex County Order Book, 1745-1752, p. 361.

profession. Dr. John de Sequeyra is reputed to have been one of the educated Italians who came to this country with Philip Mazzei, but since Mazzei did not come until 1773 and Sequeyra's name appears in the *Journals* of the House of Burgesses of 1767 this connection seems doubtful. In this earliest reference to him the House orders 'Dr. John de Sequeyra, a physician, and Mr. William Pasteur, a surgeon, to go immediately to York' and 'enquire into the state of . . . [one Mr.] Pride's health and make a report of the same to the house.' The physicians found Mr. Pride, who had been declared by Dr. Matthew Pope of York too sick to attend a hearing, in pretty good health except that 'he was much troubled with nervous Disorders,' and the House forthwith ordered its sergeant-at-arms to bring him to Williamsburg. For their services the physician and surgeon received L3-4s-6d. and L2, respectively. In 1773 Dr. Sequeyra became the first visiting physician to the hospital for the insane, and from 1774 until his death in 1796 [*sic*] he was on the Board of Directors of the institution."<sup>8</sup>

One of the earliest official records of Dr. de Sequeyra's services in the insane asylum is found among the James City County *Petitions*:

#### PETITION OF DR. JOHN SEQUEYRA

To the honorable the Speaker and Gentlemen of the House of Delegates  
The Petition of Doctor John de Sequary humbly sheweth, that your  
Petitioner hath for one Year attended as a Physician the Hospital for  
the Maintenance of Lunatics, Idiots and Persons of insane Mind, for  
which he hath had no compensation made him. He therefore prays  
that you will take his Case unto consideration, and grant him such Al-  
lowance for his Services as you shall think proper, and he as in duty  
bound will ever pray.

[Endorsed:]

Petition of Doctor Sequqryra. October 26, 1779, ref<sup>d</sup> to trade reason-  
able, allowed £250 for the year past, reported.<sup>9</sup>

Four letters and reports are found in the Virginia State Papers for the years 1781-1787. The first reads:

<sup>8</sup> W. B. Blanton, *Medicine in Virginia in the Eighteenth Century* (Richmond, 1931), pp. 320-21.

<sup>9</sup> *Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine*, No. 2 (1921), p. 185.

July 1781

John Blair, Nath'l Burwell, John de Siqueyra, J. Madison and J. Prentis, to Govr Nelson.

Sir,

We think it a Duty incumbent upon us, to lay before you ye present state of ye Hospital for Lunatics—It is destitute of every necessary for its support—The unhappy objects which are now here, have been without cloathes for some time past—they are now also without Provisions—The Keeper, previous to ye Arrival of ye British Army at this Place, obtained Provisions from ye Commissaries by means of an order from Gov'r [Thomas] Jefferson for that Purpose—But at present there is no such office here, and therefore that Resource is at an end—We submit this state to your Excellency, because we doubt not, if it be possible, that you will make such Provision for ye unhappy sufferers as is absolutely requisite, by supplying them with proper cloathing and by enabling ye Keeper to draw Provisions from such Commissaries as may be appointed at this Place, or at any Place convenient to it.

We have enclosed a List of ye Persons now in ye Hospital and have added the Counties from whence they were sent, in Hopes that your Excellency will order ye means of returning them to their respective Counties provided no method can be adopted for their support.

The second is addressed by John "De Sigueyra" to Governor Benjamin Harrison:

Sir:

My age & infirmities prevent me from waiting on your Excellency & your Lady, which would afford me the greatest Satisfaction. I must acquaint you, that from the October Session of Assembly in 1769 to Nov: 1781, the Hospital for Lunaticks being then broke up, I have not received my salary of fifty pounds a Year as Physician to the said Hospital, & a hundred pounds is due to me as it will appear by the Auditor's Books. As the Assembly passed an Act & resolution that the Arrears of the Said Hospital should be paid out of the money appropriated for the Civil List, your Excellency will be so good to give a warrant to the Treasurer for the payment of the Sd: Sum. . . .

Another letter to Governor Harrison came from Dudley Digges, President of the Hospital's Board of Directors:

Enclosing the proceedings of "Court of Directors of the Public Hospital for Lunatics," present, Dudley Digg[e]s, James Madison, Thos: Nelson, John Blair, John de Sequera, Nathl: Burwell and J. Pretis

Esquires, authorizing him to call upon the Executive for an order on the Auditor of Public Accounts, for Three hundred pounds, in favor of James Galt, the late keeper: and for the "further sum of fifty pounds for the immediate relief of such lunatics as are now in town." These amounts to be credited to the late appropriations made by the General Assembly.

Digges subsequently wrote to Governor Edmund Randolph and enclosed in his letter the following paper:

At a meeting of the Court of Directors, held at the Hospital, the 8th day of January, 1787—

Present: Dudley Digges (President), John Blair, James Madison, John D. Sequeyca, Robert Andrews, Henry Tazewell, and Joseph Hornsby, Esq.—

The court took into consideration the case of John Torner, brought to the Hospital from the county of Princess Anne, by virtue of a warrant under the hands and seals of John Hancock, Charles Williams, and William White, gentlemen, justices for the said county. And it appearing from the Depositions of Thomas Torner and Mary Torner, taken and returned by the said Justices, that the said John Torner is a person of insane and disordered mind, it is the opinion of the court that the said John Torner is insane and of disordered mind, and, therefore, a fit object to be received into the said Hospital. But the finances of the said Hospital being, at present, in such a situation as not to enable the Keeper to support any such objects, it is ordered that the said John Torner be returned to the county of Princess Anne.<sup>10</sup>

According to the late Wyndham Bolling Blanton, "some of the earliest contributions to the care of the insane were made in Virginia. The first insane asylum in the country was built in Williamsburg in 1773." Among "the earliest physicians attached to this institution" was John de Sequeyra. "From the beginning," Dr. Blanton wrote, "the professional care of patients was in the hands of a visiting physician. Dr. John de Sequeyra was the first to hold this position. When he resigned in 1795, after twenty years of service, two visiting physicians were appointed."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> W. T. Palmer *et al.*, eds., *Calendar of Virginia State Papers* (Richmond, 1881), II, 279; III, 555, 558; IV, 224.

<sup>11</sup> Blanton, p. 166.

Dr. de Sequeyra was one of five physicians in the Williamsburg area during the late eighteenth century. The others, described as "men of ability and fine character," were Dr. George Riddell, who lived in Yorktown, Dr. Peter Hay, Dr. John M. Galt, and Dr. William Pasteur.

While de Sequeyra devoted considerable time to the treatment of the mentally ill, he was also a general practitioner of medicine. His extensive description of the diseases prevalent in Virginia is found in the archives of Colonial Williamsburg, among the papers of his prominent Williamsburg colleague John Galt, who served as Surgeon-General of the 15th Virginia Regiment during the American Revolution. Galt and de Sequeyra apparently were closely associated. Before Galt left Virginia to study medicine in England, de Sequeyra presented him with a copy of *Physical Essays on the Parts of the Human Body and Animal Oeconomy* (London, 1734). Later, Dr. Pasteur wrote Thomas Welling in London that de Sequeyra wished to be remembered to Galt, who was still in England.<sup>12</sup>

During the fatal illness of Virginia's colonial governor, the Baron de Botetourt, Dr. de Sequeyra was called in to treat him. The account of his treatment is contained in a letter from Robert Carter to the Duke of Beaufort, dated October 9, 1770:

My Lord Duke:

On Sunday, the 23d of last month, your uncle Lord Botetourt was at my house here, who complained of being a little indisposed. The next morning his Lordship took a dose of salts and went to the college chapel immediately after it, but did not stay the service out. Tuesday, the third day, John de Sequayra, physician, and Pestore [Pasteur], surgeon and apothecary, attended him. They say that his Lordship's complaint is two-fold, a bilious fever and Anthony's fire, that the first is not dangerous, and that the medicines given for the latter have had no visible operation, which is a circumstance very alarming to them. I shall write to your Grace from time to time, stating the condition of my noble, worthy, and near neighbor who has effectually obtained the love and affection of every person residing in his government, all of

<sup>12</sup> *William and Mary Quarterly*, 1st Ser., XVI (1907-1908), 37; Letters 1768-1777, Slater and Hanrott vs. Burdwell, 1798: U.S. Circuit Court, Virginia District (Virginia State Library).

whom are now praying to the Almighty for his recovery. I am, with great respect, my Lord Duke, Your Grace's most obedient and most humble servant,

R. CARTER.<sup>13</sup>

In 1769, during Martha Park Custis' long siege of epilepsy, Colonel George Washington frequently called in the noted Williamsburg physician to treat his stepdaughter "Patsy," as she was familiarly known. Family records show that Dr. de Sequeyra was first called in on May 9, 1769, on which date he "Received of Col. Washington a Pistole [a gold coin worth about \$4.00] for prescribing for Miss Custis." Again on November 14, the doctor's visits and fees are recorded: "Visited and prescribed for Miss Custis £3-4-6; and again November 24, 25, 26 and 28; December 1, 12 and 14, do. £7-10-6." The last entry reads: "Received on 16th Dec'r. 1769 of Col. George Washington the above sum [£10-5-0]. . . . John de Sequeyra."<sup>14</sup>

It is of interest to note the laws governing the practice of medicine and in effect during Dr. de Sequeyra's time. A law enacted in 1736, and unchanged for almost 150 years, provided "that no surgeon or apothecary, who had served an apprenticeship to those trades," should charge more than "Five shillings for any visit in town or within five miles, and one shilling more for every additional mile over five and under ten; for every ten miles, ten shillings and six pence additional for every mile above ten; provided, that those who had taken a degree in a university were permitted to double the aforesaid charges." Physicians were forbidden to administer any remedy without at the same time handing to the patient an itemized statement of the ingredients and the prices thereof. For simple fractures, the fee allowed was £2; for compound fractures, £4.<sup>15</sup>

Dr. de Sequeyra's interests extended into the field of horticulture, as Thomas Sewall pointed out, quoting a letter from J. A. Smith, President of William and Mary College (1825):

<sup>13</sup> Robert Carter Letter Book, Jan. 31–Nov. 12, 1770, pp. 24–25 (Virginia Historical Society).

<sup>14</sup> Custis Papers 1765–1769 (Virginia Historical Society).

<sup>15</sup> *William and Mary Quarterly*, 1st Ser., XIX (1910–1911), 154–55.



*Courtesy, Colonial Williamsburg Photography,  
Williamsburg, Va.*

Residence and office of Dr. John de Sequeyra



It is said by Mr. [Thomas] Jefferson that we are indebted to him (Dr. Siccary) for the introduction of the admirable vegetable the tomato. He was of the opinion that a person who should eat a sufficient abundance of these apples would never die. Whether he followed his own prescription is not known, but he certainly attained a very old age, and particularly for the climate in which he lived.<sup>16</sup>

The doctor was also one of eighty-four prominent Virginians who subscribed annually, for a term of eight years, in the amount of one pound or more, to a prize for the production of the best wine in the colony. The act "Proposals for the encouragement of useful undertakings," passed on October 30, 1760, had the following provisions:

1. That the sum of five hundred pounds be given as a premium to the person who shall in any one year, within eight years from this date, make the best wine, in quantity not less than ten hogsheads.
2. That one hundred pounds be given to the second candidate.
3. That this money be raised by the annual subscription of such public-spirited gentlemen as are willing to encourage the undertaking.
4. That the first payment of the subscription be made on the thirtieth of October one thousand seven hundred and sixty-one, and on the same day every year after.
5. That as soon as the subscription shall be sufficient to pay the first premium, there be a meeting of the subscribers, in order to choose a collector or treasurer.
6. That a select committee be chosen at the same time, who shall direct in what manner the said premiums shall be obtained, and to whom it may be recommended to enquire into the best methods of cultivation, &c. and publish them for the information of the publick.
7. That if there be any overplus, it be given for the encouragement of such other articles as shall appear to the committee most advantageous to the colony.

Dr. de Sequeyra subscribed £ 1-1-6 for each of eight years.<sup>17</sup>

We have only a fleeting picture of Dr. de Sequeyra's social and economic status in Colonial Williamsburg as shown by property records and letters which have survived almost two centuries. From 1783 (the date of the earliest records extant) until 1790, he was

<sup>16</sup> Sewall, p. 61.

<sup>17</sup> W. W. Henig, ed., *The Statutes at Large . . . Laws of Virginia* (Richmond, 1820), VII, 566-67.

taxed on the basis of two adult slaves, two horses, and a 4-wheel post chaise, which he had disposed of by 1793, perhaps due to the infirmities of age. Little is known of his place of residence until 1772, when he signed a lease for the rental of quarters. The seven-year lease, signed on June 18, by him and by William Goodson, a prominent Williamsburg merchant, provided for an annual payment of thirty pounds (Virginia currency), and under it the doctor was granted occupancy of "three rooms at the east end of a large dwelling house." He was also given possession of the rooms and passages above them to the eastward, the adjoining yard, and "all houses, kitchens and buildings" (except Thomas Craig's tailor shop), "together with one-half of the garden on the said lot and free use of the well thereon." These quarters were occupied by Dr. de Sequeyra and his two slaves. Later known as "Marot's" or "The English Coffee House," the large building was fully restored by Colonial Williamsburg and can be seen on the south side of Duke of Gloucester Street near Botetourt Street.<sup>18</sup>

That de Sequeyra was an avid reader is reflected in his purchases of books through the office of the *Virginia Gazette*. During the years 1764–1766, the following items were recorded:

"The World"—4 volumes 1–4–0 March 28, 1764

Cash, sundry accounts 2–13–1–1/2 May 1764

"The Adventures" 4 volumes 1–5–0 January 4, 1765

Cash, sundry accounts, 2–9–9 April 30, 1765<sup>19</sup>

Dr. de Sequeyra died in 1795 in the city to which he had devoted a half century of service. His brief death notice read as follows: "On the 30th ult. [sic] in Williamsburg, Doct. John de Sequira, in the 83rd year of his age, 50 of which he lived in the above place. He was born in London, and studied physic at Leyden, under the great [Hermann] Boerhaave, and was reputed to be an eminent famous physician."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Williamsburg Personal Property Records, 1783–1861 (Virginia State Library); York County Records, Deeds, VIII, 236–38.

<sup>19</sup> *Virginia Gazette Day Book*, 1764–1766, p. 28, Colonial Williamsburg, Microfilm Collections, M–1136.

<sup>20</sup> *Virginia Gazette and General Advertiser*, March 18, 1795.