

Asser Levy—A New Look at Our Jewish Founding Father

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As most students of American Jewish history are aware, the first Jew of record to live out a career in North America was Asser Levy. Although his story has been researched and recorded in many places, the details and specifics deserve a new look under the microscope of contemporary scholarship. My researches have unearthed at least fifty-two mentions of him in the court records of his day. These court records, in Dutch and in English, should be reexamined, put together, and the full story of this remarkable pioneer put into proper and careful record.

Appended here is a chronological outline of what we know about him.

After his sudden death on February 1, 1682, his estate came up for litigation. Two administrations were ordered of his effects. A list of his personal possessions and those of his wife, Miriam (also called Maria), is also appended.

Asser's successes attracted from Amsterdam his brother-in-law, Valentine van der Wilden, alias Valentine Valck (his daughter's tombstone refers to him in Hebrew as "Rabbi Jerachmeel Falk"). Valentine's son-in-law, Asher Michaels or Michaelson, and son, Simon Valentine, had also arrived in the colony of New York by 1680, and all three appear in the inventory of Asser Levy's debtors (published by Harriet Stryker-Rodda in *The New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, July and October, 1971). It is evident from the record that Simon Valentine, as Asser's nephew, considered himself the heir of his uncle's estate along with his uncle's widow.

On December 24, 1684, Miriam or Maria Levy, Asser's widow, was licensed to marry Ansell Samuel Levy. (The court clerk wrote his name as "Asser Levy," giving rise to the theory that this might

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be a *son* of Asser Levy, but court records clearly show that Asser Levy left no direct heir.) Miriam and Ansell were married on January 1, 1685. A prenuptial agreement allocated the partnership in the slaughterhouse to Ansell Samuel Levy, while the rest of Asser's estate was held in trust for the benefit of the creditors.

Simon Valentine evidently made claims against the slaughterhouse. On March 31, 1685, an arbitration was held, and Ansell evidently signed a bond for £1,000 to Simon "to end a difference betwixt the old woman, your orator's wife [i.e., Miriam], and the said Simon."

By September 14, Ansell was in trouble, for he and his partner were arrested by Christopher Dinne and made to pay £12 damages. A week later, Simon Valentine had Ansell arrested and jailed for failure to pay up his bond plus £200 damages. On October 28, Ansell appealed to the court for a release from jail on the grounds that he misunderstood the bond and did not read or write English. A month later he was still languishing in debtors' prison and evidently remained there. On January 1, 1686, Miriam Levy sold off £140 of the goods in the estate inventory "to support herself and pay creditors of the estate," but she promised to reimburse the estate. A record of March 25, 1691, alluding to Asser [*sic!*] Levy's bail, seems to show that Ansell was still imprisoned. Judgment was finally pronounced in the suit in October, 1697, but its nature is unclear.

The attached genealogy sketches the only Jewish descendants still living who can trace their lineage back to Asser Levy's sister, Rachel Valentine. Among Rachel's colonial descendants were the well-known Levy and Franks families, from whom can be traced—among many others—the Protestant Duchess of Norfolk, wife of the leading Catholic peer of England!

CHRONOLOGY OF ASSER LEVY

pre-1654: Not mentioned in Brazil. Arnold Wiznitzer (*PAJHS*, XLIV, 92f.) suggests that he may have been the son of Benjamin Levy, the Ashkenazic shochet of Recife. This would mean that Asser was just launching his career when he arrived in New Amsterdam.

1654

- About Sept. 6: *Ste. Catherine* arrives with twenty-three Jews, including Levy.
- Sept. 7: Capt. de la Motthe sues for the boat fare *in solidum* (the entire group responsible).
- Sept. 14: *First mention of Asser Levy*: He sues Ricke Nunes for a loan she made in Jamaica. She claimed to have paid his fare. Court ruled in her favor.
- Oct. 5: He still owed 106 fl. [florins] on fare; argued that he is not bound to pay more inasmuch as payment for his freight was offered before the [auction] sale [of the Jews' possessions] on condition that his goods not be sold. The court decreed that the prisoners [David Israel and Moses Lumbroso], who were taken as principals, be held responsible for the remainder of the payment.
- Oct. 12: goods sold at auction did not meet the fare.
- Oct. 26: de la Motthe's sailors agreed to await payment until ships could come from Holland.

1655

- Aug. 28: Denied the right to join the train bands [to fight against the Swedes] and must pay tax instead.
- Nov. 5: With Jacob Barsimson, he asked to stand guard and not pay tax. Plea denied and "consent is hereby given them to depart whenever and whither it please them."

1657

- Apr. 11: petitioned for burgher right.
- Apr. 20: burgher right granted when he flourished one from Amsterdam.

1658

- Apr. 12: Dercke Hermans, wife of Jan Mettens of Ft. Orange [Albany], owes him 177 guilders in beavers.
- July 23: at Albany, he acts as attorney for Joseph d'Acosta in pressing a debt from Recife.



Courtesy, Harry Levine, Leominster, Mass.

Arrival of the first Jews in North America
at New Amsterdam, 1654

Aug. 22: made deposition at Albany.

Aug. 26: owes a debt there.

1659

Jan. 27: Plavier family, leaving Amsterdam, bring 1,625 guilders from Abraham Coen for beavers, consigned to Asser Levy [shows that his financial reputation was known in Amsterdam].

July 1: owes debt at Albany.

1660

May 24: In Amsterdam, an Asser Levy, alias Aster Wilde, about to depart for Germany, makes a power of attorney for his debt to Alexander Polack of 126 rix dollars. [Is this Asser Levy, of New York?]

July 28: mortgagee of a house and lot in Beverwyck [near Albany], where he signs himself "van Swellem"—the only time [does this mean, "from Schwelm," Westphalia?].

Oct. 15: He and Moses Lucena named sworn butchers and excused from slaughtering hogs.

1661

Apr. 1: purchased a boatload of goods consigned from Holland to Albany.

July 15: sold a house and lot at Albany at auction.

1662

Mar. 2: owed 260 guilders and asked court to have someone else pay, but court ordered him to.

May 2: Anke Jans signed a note for him for 412 fl.

June 5: another debt.

June 8: purchased the house of Jan. Nagle on Hoogh Straat (Stone St.), becoming the first Jewish landowner in North America.

Sept. 4: Notary LeClair wrote four letters to Holland for him.

Nov. 17: granted the right to increase his charges for slaughtering cattle.

1663

June 1: bought the Jan Evertsen House on Hoogh Straat/Stone St.

1664

Feb. 24: contributed 100 guilders toward strengthening the fortifications.

Oct. 21–26: the only Jew on the list of those swearing allegiance to Britain [he seems to have been the only Jew on record in New Amsterdam/New York between 1660 and 1680].

1665

Apr. 19: prefers to pay 2 fl. rather than quarter British soldiers.

1670–71

Five lawsuits in Flatbush.

1671

Jan. 29: suit against Pieters over the Pluvier house bought by the Lutheran Church. Church had borrowed money from Levy.

n.d. Paid with Jacob Kip 500 wampum for serving as administrator of the estate of Jan Steelman.

May: secured abatement of Jacob Lucena's fine in Hartford, Conn.

1672

July: with Kip, curator of the estate of Jan Copal.

1673

May 26: sold house on N. side of Hoogh St. (probably his original one).

Sept. 17: sued City Weigher, Dietloffson, for "affronts" [probably anti-Semitic remarks]. Court decided in Levy's favor.

Sept. 28: sued Edward Smith for 125 fl. Goods at Smith's awarded to Levy.

Oct.: appointed one of the trustees of Capt. John Manning's property.

1674

Feb. 1: accused of receiving a letter from New England [during the Dutch revolt against the British in N. Y.]. Claimed that his wife received it. Case dismissed.

Feb. 9: Tax list of properties worth over 1,000 guilders, his shown in three estimates: 1,500 fl., 2,500 fl., 2,500 fl. [= \$10].

Mar. 17: he was thirty-eighth wealthiest on the tax list.

Sept. 18: attorney for Charles Huysman vs. Adrian Vincent.

Sept. 28: executor for an estate.

Oct. 2: held 268.10 fl. in an attachment case.

Oct. 16: ordered to pay out the fund from the attachment case.

1676

Active in Brooklyn:

June 21: sued Jan van Kirk for debt; Minne Johannes for trespassing. Witnessed a deed.

1677

July 19: sued Minne Johannes in Brooklyn for debt.

1678

Jan. 8: secured permission to build a slaughterhouse outside the wall [i.e. Wall St.] at East River.

May 25: In Amsterdam the estate of Balthasar de Haert has a claim against him.

July 11: purchased property from Jacob Young [Pearl and Wall Sts.].

Oct. 5: slaughterhouse completed. Entered partnership with Garrett Jansen Rose.

1680

July 23: In Amsterdam, Rachel Valentine, spouse of Valentine Valck, resident in N. Y., assisted by her son-in-law and trustee, Asher Michaelson, gives power of attorney to Elias Salomons of Amsterdam to handle all items sent by her husband and brother, "Assur" Levy.

Dec. 16: witnessed bill of exchange for Joshua Serfatty.

1681-82

protracted case vs. Jan Hermiense.

1682

Jan. 16: Asher Michaelson and Valentijn van der Wilde obtain burgher right.

Feb. 1: Levy dies [suddenly, since his business affairs are so widely scattered].

Inventories show that over 400 people were indebted to him for sums ranging from 1 fl. to 6,678.17 fl., but he was indebted for some large sums also. Inventories also show that he was planning some kind of structure (tar, planks, bricks, etc.).

THE SECOND INVENTORY OF ASSHER LEVY'S ESTATE

sheet no. 1: In Re Assher Levy

sheet no. 2: Account of ye appraisem^t of ye Estate of Assher Levy deceased made ye 9th of February 1682/3. Inventory. Assher Levy.

sheet no. 3: City of New Yorke

The Court of Record of the City afores^d holden att ye City Hall within ye s^d City on Monday the 9th of May 1682 before Mr. W^m. Beekeman, Deputy Mayor . . .

This Inventory of the Estate of Asser Levy Deceased being presented in Court by Maria Levy his Widdow & Admi^{strix} who declared upon Oath y^t the same was a true & to fact inventory of all & Singular ye goods Chattels & Credits of the s^d deceased that she knows off or is come to her hands the same was allowed of & ordered to be recorded now is accordingly done.

John Westcott (?)

sheet no. 4: In Consonance of two orders of Court of May^r and Aldermen di-

rected to us underwritten ye 9th day of May and of 19th day of September last, we here upon ye 9th day of February 1682/3 being first sworne as ye law directs valued and appraised ye Estate of Assher Levy deceased presented to us by ye widow and administratrix of siad Estate, as following viz.

The lott of ground and buildings there upon left by Assher Levy at his decease and at present in ye possession of ye administratrix sittuate within ye City of New York at ye Water gate..... £328.-

The Slaughter house and penn with out ye gate in Comp[an]e with Gerret

Janse Roos with all ye Priviledges according to patent for one

Moyety	18.-
One coper kettle	1.10.-
One Spot and Dreeping Cann	0.10.-
three brass Scales with ballances	0.12.-
one brass barber bason	0.2.-
two brass candle sticks	0.4.-
two trim Challanders	0.3.-
two brass platels	0.5.6
twelf pewter platels	2.0.0
two pewter basons	0.7.0'
one pewter butter kegg	0.3.0.
one ditto platel	0.2.0
Six ditto porrengars	0.6.0
one halfe pint pott	0.1.6
2 halfe mintsies (?), one mustard pott one salt seller, one small butter cab	0.6.0
three pewter flesshes	1.2.0
one greate pewter can & 1 quart	0.6.0
two tinn dripping panns	0.5.0
one yron pot hanger and 2 andjrons	0.9.0
one butter tryer, two yron firehanges one yron spoon, two brass skimmers	0.8.0
two small spitts two pott coverts	0.5.0
eighteen threners [trenchers?]	0.18.0
one brass lamp	0.2.0
one brass pann 2 pewter springs	0.11.0
two porringers & 1 bottle	0.3.0
	<hr/>
	£347.2.0

(cont.)

five pound Spinning Yarne	0.7.6
eighteen skiple (?) of wheate (a skipple = $\frac{3}{4}$ bushel)	2.14.0
two Pistols and holsters	0.15.0
six cotton wigg	0.12.0
one barrell Flower	2.10.0
seven brass kettles & one pann	2.10.0

Seven yron potts	1.8.0	
three yron canns	0.6.0	
Some wooden & earthenware & Some necessaries in ye house	1.10.0	
tenn pewter threnzers	0.6.0	
two pewter basons	0.4.0	
four ditto plates	0.7.0	
three ditto chamber potts	0.10.0	
two chopping knives one mortar	0.14.0	
two looking glasses	0.8.0	
three wooden cases	1.2.0	
three pewter canns	0.4.0	
nine pictures	0.12.0	
one Sabbath lamb [<i>sic!</i>]	0.10.0	
one hatt	0.10.0	
one chest	0.10.0	
one sword silver hilted	0.6.0	
one box wampum of An[netkin] Litsoe's vendue	0.15.0	
one black velvet jacket	2.0.0	
one black grosgraine breeches & coat	}	
one grand ^e (?) & coat, one dark broad		6.0.0
cloth coate & stuffe briches		
two linen briches	0.5.0	
one p ^e table & napkin cloth	1.7.0	
one drest Leather Skinns 1 p ^r Stockins	0.12.0	
four cloathes on Spreades	1.10.0	
one sword with a belt	0.9.0	
two pair shoes & 1 pair pantofles [= slippers]	0.10.0	
two caps 2 ^e Six Curtans & Valons 15 ^e	0.17.0	
two bedds	5.10.0	
twelf cushions greate & small	3.00.0	
two pellow bares 1 ditto	1.5.0	
four blanketts 1 rugg	1.10.0	
one chest	0.10.6	
one close stool	0.8.0	
	verse £392.5.0	

(cont.)

a Case with bottles	0.5.6
one deske	0.6.0
two leather Chairs, tenn chairs, more	0.17.6
four cours hatts	0.16.0
two hung mackers	0.15.0
clean earthen dishes	0.2.0
four earthen flower potts	0.2.0
two table cloths	0.7.0
one Callico Cloath for a bedd	0.6.0
one greate long table cloth	1.0.0

eleaven table cloaths	2.10.0
one ditto with Lace	0.8.0
twelfe new Sheets 12 woven ditto	6.0.0
Six linen drawers	0.15.0
Sixteen woman Smoks	
two petticoats, one woman Suite with a redd petticoat	
one bleu petticoate, one paire bodice	
one colored cassock	
one scarlet petticoate, one silke d ^o	
one velvet cassock	
one hood, one muff, one black silk apron	
three pair redd woman stockings	
two paire silke Stockins	0.7.0
3 ells green -Say [a coarse wool]	0.9.0
two mustard disches	0.1.0
12 pairs pellow bears great & small	2.10.0
Six white aprons	
twenty four napkins	1.4.0
two Cloaths with bone lace	1.15.0
Six towels	0.6.0
Six & fourteen neck cloths unclosed & w th out	1.0.0
Six hand ketchers	0.4.6
One silver ear wearing	
one p ^{re} Silver buttons 1 silver knife	0.12.0
twenty five oncertons	9.7.6
one ditto with a ring	0.7.6
Fourteen Rixdallers	4.7.6
one gilded pies [gilded piece]	0.6.0
	verse £429.12.0

(cont.)

seaven halfe Crowns	1.1.0
Four heavy beavers	2.9.0
twenty two Silver spoons, one silver Forke, three silver gobletts, one ditto tankert, one ditto mustard pott, one ditto cup with 2 eares, five silver small cupps, one ditto, one goblett, two ditto salt sellars, one ditto cup, two ditto Sawsers, one ditto cup, one ditto spice box, a Cornelia tree [cherry or dogwood] cup with silver, two ditto dishes	
With in all told	48.0.0
a silver girdle with hanging keyes	
one ditto with 3 chaines with hookes	
one gold bodkin, 2 silver ditto	
Silver for my booke with a Chaine	
Silver to a belt for a Sword	1.4.0
one Silver hatt band	0.13.6
One silver tumbler, one silver bell	0.10.0

one ditto watch	1.0.0
two paire ditto buckles	0.8.0
1 d ⁿ white linen hoods, 1 d ⁿ ditto Santeen,	
2 parle cords, 3 hals cloaths	
8 ditto & 8 ditto of another sort	
three mans caps with lace	0.6.0
twelf womans with lace, Somethings to my wearing of small conse-	
quence, two paire gold pendants foreteen gold ring 13 valued	10.7.6
Fifty Skipples of Salt or thereabouts	2.10.0
Two barrels of Tarr	1.4.0
Timber to build a house and plankes	12.0.0
in Sundry pieses of gold to ye value of	13.10.0
one negro boy	20.0.0
one belt and hatt	0.15.0
one gray & black hatt	0.12.0
5,000 brix	4.10.0
a parcell of old books	0.10.0

verse £551.9.

(cont.)

two andirons, three pewter basons, 1 funnell, 1 porringer, 3 pottletts,	
1 p ^{re} tables, 2 Spinnin wheels, one warming pann, & several trifles	2.0.0
in ye house & necessarys for a butcher	0.6.0
one gunn	
	<hr/>
	£553.15.0

Cowⁿ Steenwyth
John Lawrence
N. Bayard
Ths. Codrington

(cont.)

Severall accounts concerning Cornelis Spyker as by Ledgers & Jour-	
nals not compleated.	
A booke of ye Concernings of Samuella Blagge with severall accounts	
not stated.	
A booke of accounts Concerning ye Estate of Anna Ltsco with some	
acctts. & peapers.	
Severall Peapers belonging to Capt ⁿ John Manning.	
A booke of Envoces of goods sent for Barbados &c.	
Sundry bookes for butchers account of small value.	
The Governor's grant and patent for ye slaughter house in Comp ^e	
with Gerrett Johnse Roos.....	18.0.0
(the rest of the page repeats end of the inventory) mentions items in hands of	
Simon Valentyn	

signed by all four
N. Bayard—others crossed out

List of creditors and debtors

Includes 5 Jews: (all after 1680)

David Abendana	f 131.10
Asshur [Asser Michaels] my cosen [nephew-in-law]	352.16 ½
Abraham Frankfort	585.6
Simon [Valentijn] my cosen [nephew]	129.0
Valentijn van der Wilde [brother-in-law]	2631.4

CONTEMPORARY DESCENDANTS OF AMERICA'S FIRST
JEWISH FAMILY

1	1		
ASSER LEVY VAN SCHWELM	RACHEL LEVY m/JERACHMEEL VALCK		
(-1681)	1 (VALENTIJN)		
ASHER MICHAELS DE PAUL	m. REBECCA VALENTIJN		
	1 (1653-1740)		
1	1		
SAMUEL LEVY (1)	m. RACHEL ASHER	m. (2)	SAMUEL MYERS-COHEN
(1666/7-1719)	(1690-1732)	1	(c. 1708-1743)
		1	
MATHIAS BUSH	m. REBECCA MYERS-COHEN		
(1722-1790)	1		
	1		
Dr. MOSES SHEFTALL	m. NELLY BUSH		
(1769-1835)	1 (1772-1830)		
	1		
LIZER SOLOMONS	m. PERLA SHEFTALL		
	1		
	1... (adopted)... .		
	1		
EDMOND H. ABRAHAMS	m. CECILIA BUSH		
(1839-1890)	1 (1848-)		
	1		
MILDRED LEE GUCKENHEIMER	m. EDMOND H. ABRAHAMS (Jr.)		
(1890-)	1 (1881-1945)		
	1		
BENJAMIN HIRSCH LEVY	m. MARION ABRAHAMS		
	1 (1917-)		
	1		
1	1		
JOAN LEVY	B. H. LEVY, Jr.		
(1942-)	(1948-)		