

A Note on the Genealogy of an Eighteenth-Century Family of Jewish Origin: The Nunez Family of Lewes, Delaware

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The Jews in colonial America, prior to the Revolution, were comparatively few, barely 2,500 of them, as is noted by Jacob R. Marcus, their distinguished historian. Other writers, particularly Malcolm H. Stern and Joseph R. Rosenbloom, have attempted to record as many of them as they could possibly trace in the diverse and often tenuous sources available. Some have undoubtedly escaped these historians, perhaps because they were relatively obscure and unheralded. Jews on occasion migrated from the few Jewish communities then in existence into the countryside, and their travels often brought them to remote and obscure places where they were ultimately lost to Judaism. It is impossible to estimate the scope and magnitude of such drainage from the Jewish community in America, but it may have been not inconsiderable.

One such case, involving a substantial number of individuals, all bearing the name of Nunez, was recently discovered by the writer during a visit to Lewes, on the coast of Delaware, at the entrance to Delaware Bay. Here, in the churchyard of an old Episcopal church named St. Peter's, he came upon a group of gravestones, whose inscriptions permit the reconstruction of an entire family to the third generation. Nunez is known and even noted as a family name of Sephardic origin in eighteenth-century America. The best-known was undoubtedly Dr. Samuel Nunez (Ribiera), who

was one of the founding settlers, not only in the Jewish but also in the general community of Savannah, Georgia, in 1733. His descendants remained in Savannah, where they played a noteworthy role during and after the Revolution. Among them was a son, named Daniel Nunez.¹

The Daniel Nunez whose grave is in Lewes, Delaware, was, however, a contemporary of and not related to Dr. Samuel Nunez, since he died in 1769, in his seventy-fourth year, which would indicate his year of birth as 1695. Where he came from and how he got to Lewes is unknown. Marcus refers to a Daniel Nunez who in 1722 settled in Piscataway Township in New Jersey. In another place, he names a Daniel Nunez as living in Lewes in Delaware in the 1730's. He suggests that these may have been identical. Both were probably the same as Daniel Nunez (da Costa), who was a member of the New York Congregation, Shearith Israel, in 1720, as listed in the oldest existing record of that synagogue.²

Of the Daniel Nunez in New Jersey, Marcus writes that he married a Christian woman in 1722 and that he was town clerk and tax collector in Piscataway, as well as a justice in Middlesex County. He was perhaps the first Jew to hold public office in North America. Nevertheless, also according to Marcus, Daniel Nunez had to flee from New Jersey in the 1720's in order to escape imprisonment for debt, and thus possibly got to Lewes. Finally, Marcus cites Malcolm H. Stern to the effect that a Daniel Nunez Sr., and his son, Daniel Nunez Jr., were buried in Georgetown, Delaware.³

The last fact given, on the authority of Stern, is obviously incorrect, since the clear evidence of the gravestones indicates that both Nunez men, father and son, are buried in the churchyard of St.

¹ Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew* (Detroit, 1970), I, p. 471; Malcolm H. Stern, *Americans of Jewish Descent* (Cincinnati, 1960), p. 169; Joseph R. Rosenbloom, *A Biographical Dictionary of Early American Jews* (Lexington, Kentucky, 1960), p. 136.

² Marcus, *op. cit.*, I, pp. 332, 334; Cf. also Marcus, *In The Time of Harvest: Essays in Honor of A. H. Silver* (New York, 1963), p. 232.

³ Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, I, pp. 442, 446-47; II, p. 785; III, p. 1438, n. 24.

Interestingly, Stern gives 1733 as the year the Nunez family was first known to be in America, obviously referring to the Nunez family of Savannah, Georgia, but those of Lewes were there well before that date (*Selected Essays in American Jewish History*, Cincinnati, 1958, p. 88.)

Peter's in Lewes, where they lived, married, and functioned in the community. The information available in the inscriptions on the gravestones permits a reconstruction of the genealogy of the Nunez family. Other incidental material supplies some additional information on their life there, but nothing has been uncovered to suggest where the family came from and how they got to Lewes.

In Turner's *Some Records of Sussex County*, Daniel Nunez is reported as having been elected coroner for the county in 1735. In the same year, he became a member of the vestry of St. Peter's Episcopal Church, an office occupied by himself and his son, Daniel Jr., until the latter's death in 1775. Moreover, in the following year, 1736, he and his wife, Mary, sponsored a girl, Catharine Clewes, who was christened in St. Peter's Church. In 1742, Mary Nunez again appeared as a sponsor at the christening of Lidia Clewes. In 1764, Daniel Nunez appears as a signatory of a letter, with five others, promising to raise £75 for a missionary to be sent by the church. In his will, registered in the same year, Daniel Nunez' occupation is recorded as an "innholder." Here is clear indication of Daniel Nunez' involvement in the religious, economic, and political life of the community at least from 1735, and possibly earlier.⁴

More informative is the record of the graves in St. Peter's churchyard. The first dated death was in 1744, when Moses, the son of Daniel and Mary Nunez, passed away in his twenty-third year. He was thus born in 1721, although there is no proof that this birth occurred in Lewes, or that Daniel might have been in Lewes as early as that date. The wife, Mary, died in 1746, aged fifty-three, and must thus have been born in 1693. Probably she was not a native and was already married to Daniel when he came to Lewes.

Daniel Nunez must have married again soon thereafter; a daughter named Esther, born to Daniel and Diana, is recorded as having died in 1763, in her sixteenth year. Early deaths were unusually common in the Nunez family, as is indicated in the record of the gravestones. Daniel Nunez Sr. himself, however, died at

⁴ C. H. B. Turner, *Some Records of Sussex County, Delaware* (Philadelphia, 1909), pp. 47, 345; N. W. Rightmeyer, *The Anglican Church in Delaware* (Philadelphia, 1947), p. 85; Lewes Episcopal Church Record, and Register of Wills (both in the Delaware Archives, Dover, Del.).

seventy-four, in 1769. Another son, whose name is somewhat blurred on the stone, died in 1753 at twenty-one. Sara, a daughter, who was married to Reese Wolfe, died in 1771 at the age of thirty-three. Her son, named Daniel Nunez Wolfe, fought in the War of 1812, while his father, Reese Wolfe, had participated in the Revolution. Both were substantial farmers in the area.⁵

Finally, the most long-lived of the Nunez children, Daniel Nunez Jr., died in 1775, at forty-five. He lived long enough to play a quite important role in the community and in the state during the years just preceding the Revolution. He was elected sheriff of Sussex county for several years between 1763 and 1770. He was chosen a member of a Committee of Thirteen in 1774, whose function it was to rally the people of the county to the support of Boston against Britain's Intolerable Acts, adopted following the Boston Tea Party. Marcus also notes that Daniel Nunez Jr. was a member of the Delaware House of Representatives and sat on committees with such prominent leaders of the colony as Caesar Rodney and George Read.⁶ Interestingly, Nunez' early political activity thus paralleled, as it were, the career of another Sephardic Jew on the South Carolina frontier, Francis Salvador, who was killed by Indians in 1776.

Thus does this brief note fill out the record of an eighteenth-century family of Jewish origin, bearing the important name of Nunez. It had ceased to be Jewish and had become a prominent and active part of a small but historic community in Delaware. Significantly, it is listed first in the modern "Guide to the Churchyard" of St. Peter's, among noteworthy graves there, with the sad but dubious distinction: "Row of old slate stones of the Nunez family, dating between 1746 and 1775." No other reason is offered for their inclusion with those of governors, judges, and other notables of Lewes, unless it was the unusual character of the family name.⁷

⁵ (No author or editor) *A Biographical and Genealogical History of the State of Delaware* (Chambersburg, Pa., 1899), I, p. 401; II, p. 1011; Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

⁶ Anna T. Lincoln, *Wilmington, Delaware* (Rutland, Vt., 1937), p. 82; J. T. Scharf, *History of Delaware* (Philadelphia, 1888), I, p. 143; H. C. Conrad, *History of the State of Delaware* (Wilmington, 1908), II, p. 691; Marcus, *op. cit.*, I, 446.

⁷ "A Supplementary Guide To The Churchyard," published by Saint Peter's Church of Lewes, Delaware.