

## Eleazer Block—His Family and Career

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The Reverend Isaac Leiser, founder and editor of *The Occident* and perhaps the foremost Jewish religious leader of his day, wrote in 1847 that “there is no man among us, who possesses more general and classical knowledge” than Eleazer Block of Baltimore.<sup>1</sup> Yet Block has remained the subject only of bits and pieces of information (most notably the fact that he was the “first Hebrew lawyer” in St. Louis).<sup>2</sup> As one of the more interesting representatives of nineteenth-century American Jewry, Block is eminently worthy of characterization.

Eleazer Block was born March 26, 1797, in Williamsburg, Virginia, the son of Jacob Block, the latter a member of a large family of Bohemian Jews who migrated to America during the era of George Washington’s presidency. Jacob Block lived briefly in Baltimore and perhaps in other towns but, by the end of the first decade of the nineteenth century,<sup>3</sup> had permanently settled in Richmond, Virginia. While in Baltimore, Jacob Block had been a grocer; in Richmond he became a merchant. Before his death in 1835 he had served as president of Beth Shalome, Richmond’s only Jewish congregation.

<sup>1</sup> *The Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, V (Oct., 1847), 371.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Houck, *A History of Missouri*, III (Chicago, 1908), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> New Orleans Hebrew Cemetery Inscriptions (NOHCI) (card file), Louisiana State Museum Library; Herbert T. Ezekiel and Gaston Lichtenstein, *The History of the Jews of Richmond from 1769 to 1917* (Richmond, 1917), pp. 133, 242, 282; Ira Rosenwaike, “The Jews of Baltimore to 1810,” *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* (AJHQ), LXIV (1975), 310.

Eleazer Block was among that small group of Americans at the time—estimated at no more than one-tenth of one percent of the population—who had attained a higher education.<sup>4</sup> For this purpose he had returned to Williamsburg in order to study at the College of William and Mary. He received an A.B. from this institution in 1814.<sup>5</sup>

While Eleazer was attending William and Mary he was close to his kinsman Simon Block. An advertisement in the *Richmond Enquirer* of July 9, 1813, indicated that lottery tickets were “to be had of Simon Block, Williamsburg, and of Simon Block, Jr., Richmond.”<sup>6</sup> When Simon Block and Simon Block Jr. (not his son; the “junior” was to distinguish him from “old” Simon Block) moved to the Territory of Missouri, Eleazer Block followed. While Simon Block Jr. established himself in Cape Girardeau, Eleazer chose to settle, about 1817, in a Mississippi River port to the north, St. Louis.<sup>7</sup>

Block was not the first Jewish resident in this frontier town of less than four thousand inhabitants; the Philipson brothers, enterprising merchants from Philadelphia, had already preceded him.<sup>8</sup> There, in addition to practicing law, Eleazer joined with the other Blocks in a number of real estate transactions. In 1818 Eleazer and a partner (Richard Venables) paid five thousand dollars for a large lot on Main Street in St. Louis. Part of this was sold in 1819 for three thousand dollars to Simon Block Jr. and part in 1820 for twenty-five hundred dollars to Simon Block Sr., described as of the town of St. Genevieve. Still later in 1820 Eleazer also joined with the elder Simon Block, now referred to as from the town of St. Charles, in the sale of a lot on the bank of the Mississippi above the town of St. Louis.<sup>9</sup> In 1821, when the first directory of

<sup>4</sup> Edward Pessen, *Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War* (Lexington, Mass., 1973), p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> *The History of the College of William and Mary from its Foundation, 1693 to 1870* (Baltimore, 1870), p. 101.

<sup>6</sup> The specific relationship of Eleazer Block to the two Simon Blocks has not been established.

<sup>7</sup> Frederic L. Billon, *Annals of St. Louis in its Territorial Days* (St. Louis, 1888), p. 163; Isidor Bush, “The Jews in St. Louis,” *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society*, VIII (1951), 61.

<sup>8</sup> Marietta Jennings, *A Pioneer Merchant of St. Louis* (New York, 1939), p. 17.

<sup>9</sup> St. Louis Deed Records Book (City Hall), Book G, p. 207; Book H, p. 511; Book I, pp. 382, 506.

the residents of St. Louis appeared in print, "Block, Eleazer, attorney at law" was listed as living at "north Church, n.e. corner B."<sup>10</sup>

Sometime in the mid-1820's, Eleazer, perhaps tiring of his bachelor life, returned to the familiar surroundings of Richmond. Here he participated in his father's business and married Abigail DePass, scion of one of the leading Sephardic families in the Virginia city. Abigail's mother, Sarah, was the first-born of the eleven children of Hillel Judah and his wife, Abigail Seixas, a sister of Gershom Mendes Seixas, New York's Revolutionary War patriot rabbi. Sarah's parents had settled in Newport, Rhode Island, before the Revolution. In 1798, at the age of thirty-eight, Sarah married Ralph DePass, a widower who was close to sixty-five, and moved to Charleston, where Abigail was born in 1800. After her husband's death in 1812, Sarah evidently made Richmond her permanent home. Several of her brothers were prominent residents of this city.<sup>11</sup>

Following the death in Missouri of Simon Block Jr. the Hustings Court of Richmond on February 14, 1826, appointed Eleazer Block the guardian of the ten minor children of the Cape Girardeau merchant, adding new responsibilities to his activities. The children remained with their mother in Missouri and gradually were married off or reached legal age.<sup>12</sup>

While Eleazer, in all probability, desired to be close to his wards, he did not choose to return to St. Louis. Perhaps he felt that a town without a Jewish congregation was not an appropriate place to raise his own family.<sup>13</sup> In any case, Eleazer had established himself in Cincinnati, the city closest to St. Louis in which Jewish worship had been organized. There his family experienced steady

<sup>10</sup> *The St. Louis Directory and Register* (St. Louis, 1821).

<sup>11</sup> Malcolm H. Stern, *Americans of Jewish Descent* (Cincinnati, 1960), pp. 101, 102, 189. In his will David Judah refers to Abigail Block as his sister. (Baltimore County Will Book, vol. 33, p. 266). It must be inferred, since David was born in 1789 in Newport, that he was born out of wedlock before his mother's marriage to Ralph DePass. (Ezekiel and Lichtenstein, *op. cit.*, p. 72.) *The Occident*, XXIV (July, 1866).

<sup>12</sup> Ezekiel and Lichtenstein, *op. cit.*, p. 89; Cape Girardeau County (Mo.) Marriage Records.

<sup>13</sup> The Blocks' first child, Rosalie, was born in Virginia on November 20, 1828. (NOHCI).

growth. By this period Eleazer no longer practiced law, but as city directories reveal, was a full-time merchant.<sup>14</sup>

The patriarch of the Block family, Simon Block, now in his nineties, also was in Cincinnati, residing with Eleazer. In the 1829 directory both are listed as being located on Front Street, between Race and Elm; and in 1831, described as merchants, they are at Fifth street between Walnut and Main.<sup>15</sup> When Simon Block died in 1832 Cincinnati's Jewish congregation mourned "the loss of Simon Block, Esq., formerly of Richmond, Va. This venerable gentleman had filled the office of Parnass. . . . Being the oldest amongst us, we considered him as the father of this congregation."<sup>16</sup>

By the 1830's the old Sephardic community in Richmond was disintegrating, through out-marriage and out-migration. A number of the more prominent individuals settled in Baltimore, including David Judah, Eleazer Block's brother-in-law. Block came to join this group, entering into partnership (as commission merchant) with Judah.<sup>17</sup>

After more than a decade in the commercial world of Baltimore, Eleazer evidently became restless and was determined to move to New York, where he felt he could indulge in a dream of his: "opening a seminary of classical learning, combined with religious instruction." Rabbi Isaac Leeser, with whom Block corresponded, believed that New York "from the number and wealth of its Jewish inhabitants, is precisely the spot where Block's attempt can best be made with hopes of success."<sup>18</sup> There can be little doubt that Leeser, perhaps the most active organizer of Jewish communal life in his day, and Block were well acquainted. Leeser had resided in Richmond before accepting the post of rabbi of Phila-

<sup>14</sup> *The Cincinnati Directory, for 1829* (Cincinnati, 1829); *The Cincinnati Directory, for 1831* (Cincinnati, 1831).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* The 1829 directory incorrectly spelled their surname as 'Black'. *U.S. 1830 Census, Population Schedules, Cincinnati, Ohio.*

<sup>16</sup> Morris U. Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States 1654-1875* (New York, 1971) p. 229.

<sup>17</sup> Ira Rosenwaik, "The Jews of Baltimore, 1820 to 1830," *AJHQ*, LXVII (1978), pp. 246-59; *Matchett's Baltimore Directory, corrected up to September, 1835* (Baltimore, 1835); *Matchett's Baltimore Directory, for 1840-1* (Baltimore, 1840).

<sup>18</sup> *The Occident*, V (Oct., 1847), 371.

delphia's Mikve Israel congregation in 1829. While in Richmond he had lived with and worked for his uncle, Zalma Rehiné, whose wife also happened to be the aunt of Block's wife, Abigail. Furthermore, the Rehinés had moved to Baltimore before the Blocks and very likely housed the newcomers in their own home while they were getting established.<sup>19</sup> Thus, when Leaser printed a report of Eleazer Block's plans to open a school in New York in his national monthly *The Occident* in October 1847, he had more than a journalistic interest in the endeavor.

After two years in New York, Block sorrowfully reported his disappointment with his career in education to Leaser:

I am grieved and mortified to have to state that my endeavors to establish a classical school for the Jews of N York have completely failed—whether because of my want of capacity or moral unfitness or simply from the want of proper patronage & support. That portion of the Jewish public who feel any interest in the matter will judge and of course for the greater part unfavorably to me, the unfortunate are always in fault.<sup>20</sup>

Block lamented that during the first six months of its establishment his school "had as many classes nearly as pupils" and that he personally taught "all the various branches of instruction" except Hebrew and German. Academically the school was better off during its last year when it "was supplied with capable teachers in Hebrew in German in Music, in Latin, French, Algebra and Geometry and the English branches. . . ."<sup>21</sup> But a chronic shortage of students and difficulty in the collection of tuition payments from the parents of some of those who did attend made the end of the venture in education inevitable. Block felt he had no choice but to resume his former occupation as a commission merchant. "I do not flatter myself," he told Leaser, "with hopes of immediate sweep and expect to encounter many difficulties."<sup>22</sup>

There was at least one consolation for the Blocks in New York. They were able for the first time since moving from Richmond to

<sup>19</sup> Ezekiel and Lichtenstein, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-40; Stern, *op. cit.*, pp. 102, 109. Both Eleazer Block and Zalma Rehiné are listed as residing at Holliday street near Pleasant in the Baltimore city directory for 1835.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to Isaac Leaser from E. Block, dated New York, Sept. 5, 1849, Leaser Collection (microfilm, American Jewish Archives).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

attend Sephardic services and one *Shabbat* in 1854 they had the joy of seeing their youngest son, Herman, *Bar Mitzvah* at Congregation Shearith Israel.<sup>23</sup> Guests were frequent; one of these was a young Yale student, Henry J. Labatt, who visited during school holidays and charmed the ladies of the household.<sup>24</sup> After attaining his bachelor's degree in 1852 Henry married Block's daughter Eleanor and with his wife moved to San Francisco to practice law. Henry was one of the sixteen children of Abraham Cohen Labatt, a Charlestonian who had moved to New Orleans in 1831 and who migrated once again in 1849, taking the old Santa Fe trail to the California gold fields.<sup>25</sup>

Eleanor was an exception among the Block women; her three sisters all married men named Jonas. It seems to have become a tradition among Blocks to marry members of the Jonas family, or at least those of the twenty-two children and untold number of grandchildren of Benjamin Jonas and Annie Ezekiel of Exeter, England, who had migrated to the American hinterland. Block's oldest daughter, Rosalie, married George Jonas, who had settled in New Orleans, and his second daughter, Sarah, married George's nephew Charles, a son of the Quincy, Illinois, lawyer, Abraham Jonas, who has been described as a long-term friend of Abraham Lincoln. Charles and most of his brothers settled permanently in New Orleans; one of these, Benjamin Franklin Jonas, married Block's daughter, Josephine.<sup>26</sup>

Not only did Eleazer Block's daughters gradually make their way to New Orleans, but his eldest son, Rehine David, also chose to settle in the Louisiana metropolis and was by 1853 listed in the New Orleans city directory.<sup>27</sup> With most of their grown children

<sup>23</sup> Congregation Shearith Israel (New York) Register, Births, Deaths, Marriages, vol. II, p. 329 (microfilm, American Jewish Archives).

<sup>24</sup> Block to Leeser, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> *Catalogue of the Officers and Graduates of Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut 1701-1915* (New Haven, 1916), p. 136; Norton B. Stern and William M. Kramer, "The Historical Recovery of the Pioneer Sephardic Jews of California," *Western States Jewish Historical Quarterly*, VIII (1975), 10-12; Richmond Chancery Court, Deed Book 96A, p. 314; *Galveston Daily News*, Aug. 17, 1899.

<sup>26</sup> Bertram W. Korn, *The Early Jews of New Orleans* (Waltham, Mass., 1969), pp. 162, 326; Stern, *op. cit.*, p. 98; Bertram W. Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War* (New York, 1970), pp. 189-94.

<sup>27</sup> *Cohen's New Orleans Directory for 1853* (New Orleans, 1852).

resident in the Crescent City it was only a matter of time before Eleazer and Abigail too decided to relocate in the city that would be their home for the remainder of their lives.

The Jonas brothers all seemed destined for successful careers but none matched that of Benjamin F. Jonas (1834–1911). After deciding on his father's profession, he entered the law school of the University of Louisiana, where he graduated in 1855. Like his father, who had served in the state legislatures of both Kentucky and Illinois, he was captivated by politics. In 1860 Jonas was an unsuccessful candidate for delegate to the state convention called to consider the question of secession. When war finally came Jonas entered the Confederate service. His achievements in the ensuing years were numerous; as one writer has observed, "to write the life of Jonas after the war is to write the history of Louisiana for that period." Jonas served various terms in the state legislature, was a delegate to the Democratic convention of 1872, and was for two terms city attorney of New Orleans prior to his election as United States Senator from Louisiana for a term running from 1879 to 1885.<sup>28</sup>

Although some of Eleazer Block's children remained permanently in New Orleans others settled in diverse areas. The place of residence of five of his seven sons and daughters living in 1871 is mentioned in a deed transferring property in Richmond that they had received from their mother (who in turn had inherited it from her uncle Isaac H. Judah). Sarah DePass Jonas (wife of Charles) was then living in Mississippi; Eleanor Elizabeth Labatt in Galveston, Texas; David Judah Block and his wife Sally in Decatur, Illinois; Herman Mendelsohn Block and his wife Jennie Sampson in Fort Clarke, Texas; and Josephine (Mrs. Benjamin F.) Jonas in New Orleans.<sup>29</sup>

Rehine David Block, the oldest son of Eleazer and Abigail, arrived in New Orleans as a youth and remained in the Louisiana city until his death more than fifty years later. Rosalie (Mrs. George Jonas), the first-born daughter, who lived until 1911, resided in New Orleans even longer.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Louisiana*, vol. 1 (Chicago, 1892), pp. 495–98; U.S. Congress, *Biographical Directory of the American Congress 1774–1971* (Washington, 1971), p. 1201.

<sup>29</sup> Richmond Chancery Court, *op. cit.*

<sup>30</sup> *New Orleans Times-Democrat*, Feb. 2, 1903; Nov. 22, 1911.

When Benjamin F. Jonas moved to Washington to serve his term in the Senate he apparently paid for the care in New Orleans of his elderly father-in-law and mother-in-law. Eleazer Block wrote to his son-in-law in 1881 expressing his "desire that all accounts expended by you on our account for board and lodging be repaid to you out of the proceeds of the estate I leave. . . ." In Block's will he appointed Benjamin F. Jonas his executor, remarking that he held "the most implicit confidence in his integrity and ability and in his friendship and regard."<sup>31</sup>

Eleazer Block died in New Orleans on February 2, 1886, at the age of eighty-eight. His widow Abigail survived him, and died November 16, 1893, at the age of ninety-three.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Eleazer Block will, dated Oct. 15, 1877, with codicil of July 5, 1881, New Orleans Probate Court Records, Civil District Court.

<sup>32</sup> NOHCl.