
 HISTORICAL NOTES

**Some Early American Jews:
From a British Consul's Unpublished Diary**

BETH-ZION ABRAHAMS

James Finn (1806-1872), Her Britannic Majesty's consul at Jerusalem from 1846 to 1863, was a man of wide literary and religious interests. During the course of his consulship he kept a diary, a daily journal of considerable interest which has never been published. Apart from its British and Palestinian interest, it contains unique entries of Jewish concern. James Finn had before the days of his consulship made a study of Jews and Judaism and had published two works—*Sephardim* (1841) and *The Jews in China* (1843). Also, as an earnest evangelical Christian he was interested in the conversion of Jews to Christianity. He was the son-in-law of Dr. Alexander McCaul, an active missionary to the Jews, and a man noted in the first half of the nineteenth century for his zealous polemical and anti-Talmud campaign, which culminated in his notorious *The Old Paths* (1837). When McCaul was offered the bishopric of Jerusalem, so it is said, he refused it, declaring that the see should be filled by one of the seed of Abraham, a Jew converted to Christianity. He indicated the apostate Michael Samuel Alexander, who did indeed fill the see, thus becoming in 1841 the first Anglican bishop of Jerusalem.

Among James Finn's diary entries of Jewish interest there are some concerning American Jews whom he met when they were in the Middle East on official business. The first was when he was in Beirut in September 1859 as guest of Mr. Consul Jackson, the American consul, with whom he spent three weeks "in the hospitable house of the American consulate." The occasion of this visit was the marriage of his niece to the vice-consul, Dr. Robert Barclay, son of the missionary Barclay of Beirut. Father and son were Americans.

On Friday, September 16, 1859, the first morning of his stay, Finn records that before they had finished breakfast, a lieutenant of the ship *Macedonian* called to announce the ship's arrival, having come ashore by tender. Finn writes,

In the afternoon, we had a long visit from the Captain and his secretary. This Captain Levi I had long wished to see, being the only example I had ever heard, of a Jew

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commanding a ship-of-war. (The *Macedonian* is a sloop, cut down after capture from the English in 1812, originally French.) He is a fine looking rosy old fellow aged 69 [Ed. note: Levy was actually 67 years of age], with strong Jewish features which looked curious with cocked hat, epaulettes and eagle buttons—with abundance of jewellery. His nephew the Secretary, is a more gentlemanly pale-faced person. They dined with us.

The Captain told us that on leaving America, he went to the Boston repository for Bibles and tracts, and bought a good many, which he has since distributed about these countries (in English). When asked in Boston, why he as a Jew should wish to make use of such publications, he answered that he knew the religion of Christ had civilized the world, and therefore he wished to recommend it everywhere. Judge Noah and he were cousins, their mothers being sisters.

All this was to me exceedingly interesting—but I find that the other officers dislike him. They represent him as a coddled old woman.*

The Barclay family, too, it seems, had reservations about Captain Levi. "They have," writes Finn, "other reasons to dislike him—namely that he bought from them many years ago the great mansion named Montecello [*sic*], near Philadelphia, and which had been that of President Madison [Ed note: actually, Thomas Jefferson], and he had never paid for it wholly."

The following year, when back in the Jerusalem British consulate, on Thursday afternoon, June 7, Finn notes that "there came a Major D. Camden de Leon of the U. S. Army, bringing a letter of recommendation from this brother the U. S. Consul General in Egypt. Very strong Jewish features." Communing on this, he added, "Thus I have seen in my time an officer of the Army, Navy and Civil Service of the United States from the Jewish people. The navy officer was Post Captain Levi of the *Macedonian* whom we met in Beyroot last autumn. All of them egregiously fond of displaying jewellery."

James Finn's on-the-spot accounts throw an unusual and all-too-brief light on those few native-born American Jews whose official positions had brought them to the Near East in pursuit of their duty in the service of their country.

*[*Editor's note*] "Captain Levi" was, of course, Commodore Uriah P. Levy (1792-1862). On his assumption of the *Macedonian*, see Samuel Rezneck, *The Saga of an American Jewish Family Since the Revolution: A History of the Family of Jonas Phillips* (Washington, D.C., 1980), pp. 102 ff. On Levy and Monticello, see Rezneck, pp. 93 ff.

Bayport river, when she tacked about from her direct course, to hold off for the night.

16th Sept (Friday) Before breakfast was quite finished, there came to table, a Lieut. of the Macedonian - who after ~~his~~ breakfast, took of Mr. Johnson (in his uniform) to the ship.

Before noon the ship was in, and fired her salute which was promptly returned - In the afternoon we had a long visit from the Captain & his Secretary - This Capt. Levi I had long wished to see, being the only example I had ever heard of, of a Jew commanding a Ship of war. (The Macedonian is a sloop, cut down after capture from the English in 1812, originally French.) - he is a fine looking ^{young} old fellow aged 69, with strong Jewish features which looked curious, with cocked hat, epaulettes & cape buttons. ^{with the splendour of justice} His Secretary, is a more gentlemanly pale faced - his nephew, the Secretary, is a more gentlemanly pale faced person. They dined with us - The Captain told us that on leaving America, he went to the Boston repository for Bibles and Tracts and bought a good many, which he has since distributed about these countries (in English) - when asked in Boston, why he as a Jew should wish to make use of such publications, he answered that he knew the religion of Christ had civilized the world, and therefore he wished to recommend it every where - Judge Noah and he were cousins, their mothers being sisters - All this was to me exceedingly interesting.

A page from the diary of James Finn discussing Uriah P. Levy. The diary is in the possession of the author.

Courtesy of Beth-Zion Abrahams