

Jacob Rader Marcus and the Revival of Early American History, 1930–1960

Jon Butler

Jacob Rader Marcus remained for a half century the single most important figure in early American Jewish history. Marcus earned this recognition for his remarkable series of books that included, among his American topics, *Jews in American Life* (New York, 1940); his multi-volume *Early American Jewry* (Philadelphia, 1951–53); his collection of documents, *American Jewry: Documents: Eighteenth Century: Primarily Hitherto Unpublished Manuscripts* (Cincinnati, 1959); his publication of the Rudolph lectures in Judaic studies at Syracuse University, *The American Colonial Jew: A Study in Acculturation* (Syracuse, 1967); and his three-volume work *The Colonial American Jew, 1492–1776* (Detroit, 1970). No figure—perhaps no group of figures—equaled Marcus's learning in the history of early American Judaism in his lifetime and certainly not before him. Although Marcus would continue his study of American Jewish history for more than two decades, and write on the full expanse of the American Jewish experience, it is his work on the colonial period that will be examined here.

Marcus did not work alone in studying the earliest years of the Jewish experience in America. Leo Hershkowitz, for example, published many important pieces on early American Judaism, most notably his edition of the letters of the Franks family of eighteenth-century New York, as well as important materials unraveling the history of New York's first synagogue, a subject mired in myths, misunderstanding, and poor documentation. Yet the sweep of Marcus's work, however much criticized for its antiquarianism, still marks it as a major achievement and its author as a unique figure who will be long revered not only among historians of Judaism but among early Americanists as well.¹

How did Marcus's work figure in the revival of early American history? It probably was not accidental that Marcus began researching, then publishing, in the very decades that early American history came into its own. Much like the history both of Judaism and of American immigration, early American history was only dimly understood in America in the 1930s. Virginia and Maryland were commonly thought to have been peopled by "Cavaliers," royalist escapees from the English civil

wars. Puritans were people to be reviled, the sponsors of Prohibition perhaps. As H. L. Mencken described them, they busily spread "the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."²

In fact, early American history was thoroughly revolutionized between 1930 and 1960, the years in which Marcus did much of his original work. Perhaps ironically, this change was largely a consequence of renewed attention to American Puritanism. Led first by historians like Clifford K. Shipton and Samuel Eliot Morison, then by Perry Miller, who almost single-handedly made the Puritans respectable by turning them into "intellectuals" when previously they had been only bigots, this powerful group of historians made seventeenth-century New England the center of early American history, intellectual and social alike. One need only think of the work on New England in the 1950s and 1960s from Edmund S. Morgan and Bernard Bailyn to understand the point.³

The renewal of early American history between 1930 and 1960 bore several characteristics that were extraordinarily congenial to Marcus's own scholarship. The new colonial history was a text-based history. Shipton, Miller, and then figures like Thomas Perkins Abernethy, who reinvigorated Virginia history, insisted on studying original materials both in print and in manuscript in order to comprehend seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonial development. Like Marcus, they published original materials, Morison publishing the seventeenth-century records of the Suffolk County Court, Shipton continuing the work of J. L. Sibley in his series on Harvard College graduates of the colonial period, and Miller and Thomas H. Johnson publishing a major two-volume collection of documents on the Puritans, source materials unmatched by those published for any other region and in part responsible for the dominance of New England in the written history of the colonial era.⁴

The emphasis on original texts produced a second effort to recover previously unknown materials in early American history. This effort could be seen in early American literature in the discovery in the Yale archives by Thomas Johnson of the poetry of Edward Taylor, published by Johnson in 1939 as *The Poetical Works of Edward Taylor*, and in the publication of the several volumes of the diary of the Virginia planter, William Byrd. Ultimately, that emphasis was responsible for the origination of the great and now seemingly endless publications of the papers of the Founding Fathers—Franklin, Washington, and

Jefferson—together with many new series of colonial documents and personal papers, one of the most recent being the edition of John Winthrop's journal edited by Richard Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yaendle.⁵

It also led to renewed attention to religion as a topic of real intellectual interest and as a legitimate expression of a people's identity. Puritan studies became, as they still remain, the principal beneficiary of that interest, first in Perry Miller's *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* (1933), and later in the outpouring of studies that created the New England dominance in American religious history for several decades.

Yet Miller was not alone. The fascination for religion was likewise exhibited in the publication in 1948 of Frederick Tolles's *Meeting House and Counting House*, still one of the finest studies of early American religion and society ever published. Tolles, like Miller and Marcus, sought to recover crucial aspects of early American religious culture. As a testament to its power, *Meeting House and Counting House* remains one of the two or three best-selling books ever published by the Institute of Early American History and Culture, which was itself formed in the early 1940s to publish both the *William and Mary Quarterly* and its outstanding series of books that together made early American history the most intellectually formidable American history of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s.⁶

What then happened to Marcus's work? Did Marcus emerge as a leading figure in early American history? Did Judaism emerge as a leading topic in early American history? The answer to both questions is no. In fact, the reaction to Marcus's work was muted, at least among early American historians. In part, this reaction may have stemmed from the nature of the work. Marcus's scholarship was, indeed, "fact-oriented," as Marcus put it himself. Thus it did not necessarily attract interpretive attention, particularly in a world where an increasing premium derived from claims to uncover the origins and character of American values, claims implicit and often explicit in Puritan studies in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s.

Instead, Marcus's work satisfied what might be called the "Mount Everest" criterion in history. Marcus studied it because it was there, even if the importance of earliest Jews in colonial America was not always made clear. Put simply, Marcus's work did not immediately stimulate the interest of early American historians in Jewish history, or in Jews in early America, that might have been imagined, certainly

given the bulk of Marcus's first effort in 1951 and even the expanded three volumes of 1970.

A keyword survey (using the internet's J-STOR system) of the *William and Mary Quarterly* between 1944 and 1980 reveals the relative lack of interest in Jews and Judaism in these early years of our "modern" history of early America. The *Quarterly* mentioned Jews only in passing, and between 1944 and 1980 it published no articles on Jews. The *Quarterly* did, however, regularly review books on Jews, including Marcus's books, and he garnered mixed reviews. He won general praise from Doris Elizabeth King and Louis B. Wright for his edited volumes—*Memoirs of American Jews, 1775–1865* (1955), and *American Jewry: Documents: Eighteenth Century* (1959). But Stow Persons and Moses Rischin both criticized Marcus for essentially the same problem: antiquarianism. Persons lamented Marcus's decision in *Early American Jewry* (1951–53) "not to provide a critical discussion of several important topics suggested in the text," and Rischin reproved Marcus's *The Colonial American Jew* (1970) for its "unrelenting and indiscriminating encyclopedism" that produced "not a much-needed new synthesis but a treasure trove and compendium of Judaica Americana."⁷

Marcus's own work aside, why did the study of Jews and Judaism in colonial America increase so slowly among early American historians before 1980? One plausible answer—possible anti-semitism within the history profession generally and among early Americanists specifically—is all but impossible to discuss because it would require research into the personal papers of countless retired and deceased early American historians that is not yet possible or feasible to conduct. Still, the difficulty faced by Jews in the American historical profession between 1930 and the 1960s is well known. The author's own university, together with other Ivy League universities, was well known for its quota system not only in undergraduate admissions but in faculty hiring well into the 1950s—that is, when it was willing to hire Jews at all.⁸

One well-known early Americanist, Carl Bridenbaugh, closed his career with a presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1962 that was widely taken to be anti-Semitic in its references to younger historians. Lamenting the decline of "insider" history and its resonance with tradition and the agrarian past, Bridenbaugh complained that "many of the younger practitioners of our craft, and those who are still apprentices, are products of lower middle-class or foreign origins, and their emotions not infrequently

get in the way of historical reconstructions."They were, Bridenbaugh said, "in a very real sense outsiders on our past and feel themselves shut out," a condition he believed would produce bad, not good, history. Granted that Bridenbaugh's alternately bitter and curmudgeonly address constitutes fair warning to historians determined to bemoan the present in public, it might be noted that Bridenbaugh's main complaint often centered on class, not specifically on religion, though it certainly could be doubted that he feared any poor immigrating Episcopalians who might then have been invading the history profession.⁹

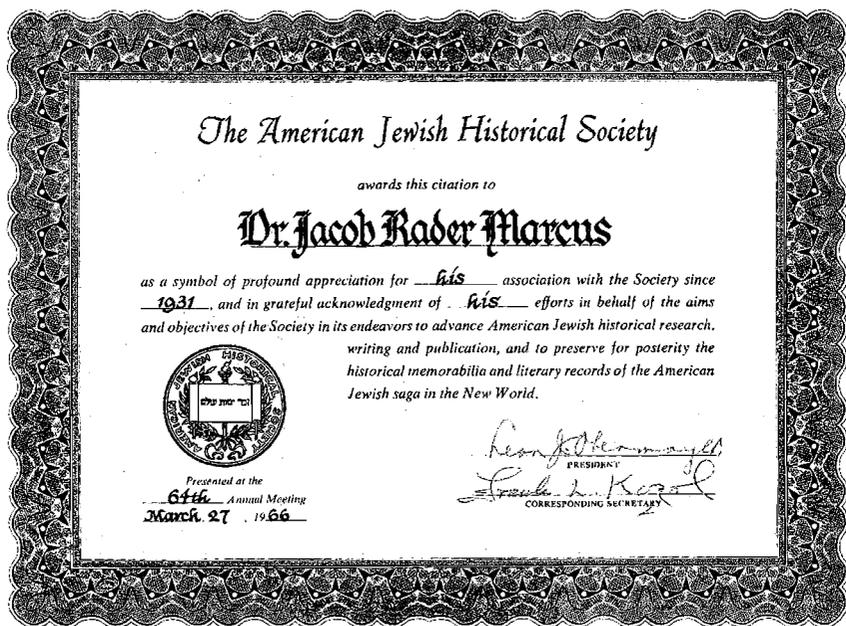
In fact, several other causes lodged in the nature of early American history as practiced between 1940 and 1960 explain a good deal about the lack of attention to Jews and Judaism in early American history. First, it could be observed that until the late 1960s even this reinvigorated early American history often remained the history of New England writ large. This is an exaggeration, of course. The history of Virginia, for example, also became important and produced considerable study for both the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Yet before 1970 both bulk and prestige in early American history went to Puritan studies. The history of the middle colonies and most of the southern colonies languished. Indeed, Tolles's *Meeting House and Counting House* became the proverbial exception that proved the rule that the important colonial history was done on Puritan thought and society. Other histories, including the histories of early American Jews, might be interesting, but they did not speak to the larger contours of colonial history or to American history generally.¹⁰

Of course, this stress on Puritanism might have augured well for the history of Judaism in early America. The Puritans took exceptional interest in the Old Testament, and their clerical leaders commonly knew Hebrew, often well. But explanations in theory are not explanations in practice. The Puritans' interest in Hebrew and the Hebrew Bible did not stimulate historians' interests in Judaism or Jews. Few Jews lived in Massachusetts and Connecticut, and most Jews who lived in New England resided in Rhode Island, specifically in Newport, a colony and town that did not fit the general narrative of Puritan history once the dissident Roger Williams arrived there. In fact, the history of Puritanism remained just that, a history sometimes not even true to its own constitution and character.¹¹

Second, the renewal of early American history in the 1940s, 1950s,

and 1960s also concentrated largely on the seventeenth century, especially the period from 1607 to the late 1680s. Some important exceptions aside, historians tended to jump from the 1680s to the 1760s and the Revolution. This meant that the very decades that witnessed the rise of the Jews in colonial America lost out to the two bookends of colonial American history—the early and mid-seventeenth-century Puritans and the late eighteenth-century Revolution. The Jews who first arrived in substantial numbers in the 1690s in any of the British mainland colonies were among many colonists who won little interest from most early American historians before 1970.

Historians also remained uninterested in other aspects of pre-revolutionary America that might have stimulated further interest in the earliest Jewish colonists. The study of immigration to the colonies, beyond the study of the earliest Puritans to New England, advanced only slowly. Economic history, including the history of the transatlantic trade, concentrated on applying economic theory in historical settings, not on the careers of merchants, traders, and farmers. Historians interested in theology generally worked within denominational boundaries and slowly abandoned larger topics that crossed



(American Jewish Archives)

those boundaries, including even the study of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Amid these reigning patterns, the history of Jews in early America continued to languish.¹²

Third, the kind of social history that began to be practiced in the 1960s did not benefit groups like early American Jews. Ironically, much of it continued to focus on New England, with a second variety concentrating on the history of the Chesapeake. With some exceptions—Kenneth Lockridge's study of Dedham, Massachusetts, and Philip Greven's study of Andover, Massachusetts, for example—most New England town studies still focused on the seventeenth century and missed the major decades of Jewish immigration to early America. Moreover, much of this "new social history" also continued to bypass the middle colonies of New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and Pennsylvania and thereby left New York's relatively large Jewish community poorly studied. Moreover, little of this new history concentrated on mobile populations or on populations with strong transatlantic connections. "Persisters" attracted the attention of social historians after 1960, in good part because they tended to leave the best historical records. As a result, the history of early American Judaism missed both of the post-World War II revivals of early America history—the initial renaissance that brought early American history to the forefront in the 1940s and 1950s as well as the rise of social history in the 1960s and 1970s.¹³

What are the prospects now after Marcus's death? Modestly good. Certainly the recent publication of the five-volume Johns Hopkins University Press history, *The Jewish People in America*, with its individual volumes by Eli Faber, Hasia Diner, Gerald Sorin, Henry Feingold, and Edward Shapiro, plus the republication of Jonathan Sarna's *The American Jewish Experience: A Reader*, suggest that if no one else can write a three-volume history by himself or herself, Jacob Marcus was more than prescient when a half century ago he believed that the history of Jews in America was indeed a multivolume affair. Furthermore, the flowering of nineteenth- and twentieth-century American Jewish history in books such as Jenna Weissman Joselit's *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture 1880–1950* (New York, 1994), Deborah Dash Moore's *To the Golden Cities: Pursuing the American Jewish Dream in Miami and L.A.* (New York, 1994), and Beth S. Wenger's *New York Jews and the Great Depression* (New Haven, 1996) demonstrates the extraordinary vitality of the broader field. These new studies demonstrate

how, in the engagement with the history of American consumerism, internal migration, and economics, ethnic and religious histories can intersect powerful themes in American history and need not constitute their own intellectual ghetto.

This modern literature carries important implications for new approaches to the earliest period in American Jewish history. For example, two books published in 1995 stress the fruit of international comparisons: Paula Hyman's *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women* (Seattle, 1995) and Matthew Frye Jacobson's *Special Sorrows: The Diasporic Imagination of Irish, Polish, and Jewish Immigrants in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995). As these comparative histories stretch far across national boundaries, they broach fascinating implications for managing the broad transatlantic focus implicitly and explicitly necessary to any study of the first Jews in America.

Other studies in religion and material culture also suggest fascinating possibilities for advancing the history of colonial American Judaism. Several recent books, ranging from Joselit's *Wonders of America* to Colleen McDannell's *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840–1900* (Bloomington, 1986), and *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, 1996), plus David Morgan's *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman* (New Haven, 1996) and Morgan's edited book, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley, 1998), all point toward rich interpretive possibilities inherent in the study of religion's physical artifacts. This is important for understanding lay religious life, where theology and spiritual inclinations customarily bear little written expression. It is especially important in studying men and women carrying on religious lives away from traditional religious leadership, as was the case among so many colonial Jews when even hazans were not a regular feature of liturgical life and for whom ordained rabbis were not possible until the 1840s.¹⁴

The current literature does not prescribe every appropriate way to broaden early American Jewish history, however. A renewed emphasis on community as a mobile phenomenon, not as one bounded exclusively by land deeds, is needed to unlock the history of groups with strong transatlantic connections and mobile populations. Too much of our written history of American religion still focuses on settled communities, from the earliest study of New England's Puritans to the

present. Furthermore, the general decline of intellectual history, especially in its international dimensions, restricts our understanding of both theological beliefs and social practices that transcended national and physical borders. The eclectic reading tastes known to be imbibed by many eighteenth-century colonists, from the Mathers to New York's wonderful Abigail Franks, suggest that men and women from many religious backgrounds, including Jews, were far more intellectually adventurous than historians have allowed them to appear. What should we make of the religious sentiment Abigail Franks expressed to her son Naphtali in May 1733? She took satisfaction, she wrote, in "the faire Character Our Familys has in [New York] by Jews and Christians." This good opinion was, she opined, "the greatest happyness a Person Can Injoy Next to the having a good Conscience for As Addison Says A good Conscience is to the Soul wath health is to the body." One suspects that Franks, like many colonists, constructed an intriguing spiritual world from many sources, and the integration and tensions of those sources ought to be a major fascination for historians.¹⁵

Jacob Marcus understood well that unraveling the past depends upon our ability to see it. He provided historians with an unparalleled range of sources for the history of early American Jews. If his work was indeed sometimes regrettably antiquarian, the history of Jews in early America suffered more in his own times from the narrow concern of early American historians for only a few regions and decades in the colonial experience. Only slowly did historians turn their attention toward the broader spectrum of peoples and societies that made the developing British colonies so significant, so much the "new order of the ages." Marcus's goal of rescuing the history of early American Judaism will be achieved only as historians of early America and of early American Judaism continue uncovering new sources and developing new and innovative ways to investigate a past of undying fascinating complexities.

Jon Butler is William Robertson Coe Professor of American Studies and History and Professor of Religious Studies at Yale University.

NOTES

1. Leo Hershkowitz, "The Mill Street Synagogue Reconsidered," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 53 (1964): 404–10; idem, ed., *Wills of Early New York Jews, 1704–1799* (New York, 1967); Hershkowitz and Isidor S. Meyer, eds., *Letters of the Franks Family, 1733–1748* (Waltham, Mass., 1968).

2. H. L. Mencken quoted in Bruce Daniels, *Puritans at Play: Leisure and Recreation in Colonial New England* (New York, 1995), 3.

3. Clifford K. Shipton, "Immigration to New England, 1680–1740," *Journal of Political Economy* 44 (1936): 225–39; idem, *Roger Conant: A Founder of Massachusetts* (Cambridge, Mass., 1944); Samuel Eliot Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony* (Boston, 1930); idem, *The Founding of Harvard College* (Cambridge, Mass., 1935); idem, *The Puritan Pronaos: Studies in the Intellectual Life of New England in the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1936); idem, *Three Centuries of Harvard, 1636–1936* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936); Edmund Sears Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (Boston, 1944); Bernard Bailyn, *The New England Merchants in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 1955); idem, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967).

4. Samuel Eliot Morison, ed., *Sources and Documents Illustrating the American Revolution, 1764–1788, and the Formation of the Federal Constitution* (Oxford, 1923); idem, ed., *Records of the Suffolk County Court, 1671–1680*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1933); Bernard Bailyn, "The Apologia of Robert Keayne," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 7 (1950): 568–87.

5. Edward Taylor, *The Poetical Works of Edward Taylor*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (New York, 1939); William Byrd, *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709–1712*, ed. Marion Tinling (Richmond, 1941); idem, *Another Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1739–1741, with Letters and Literary Exercises, 1696–1726*, ed. Marion Tinling (Richmond, 1942); John Winthrop, *Journal of the Transactions and Occurrences in the Settlement of Massachusetts and the Other New England Colonies: The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649*, ed. Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yaendle (Cambridge, Mass., 1996).

6. Frederick Barnes Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House: The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Philadelphia, 1682–1763* (Chapel Hill, 1948).

7. The famous third series of the *William and Mary Quarterly* began publication in 1944; the first two series specialized in the history of Virginia. As of March 1999 the internet address for the J-STOR system, which contains full files of articles and book reviews published in a wide variety of historical and other scholarly journals including the *William and Mary Quarterly*, was <http://www.jstor.org/>. The survey, first done in the fall of 1996 and reconfirmed in March 1999, found the following results: the term *Jews* occurred in eight articles published between 1944 and 1950, nine articles published between 1951 and 1960, eleven articles published between 1961 and 1970, and twelve articles published between 1971 and 1980; in all, forty articles between 1944 and 1980 contained the word *Jews*. All of these citations were incidental, and none of the articles concentrated on Jews in the colonies. In addition, the word *Jew* occurred in twenty-one articles between 1944 and 1980 and the word *Jewish* was found in thirty-three articles between 1944 and 1980. Book reviews published in the same period contained the word *Jews* in forty-two reviews, the word *Jew* in seventeen reviews, and the word *Jewish* in thirty-nine reviews. (Incidents of these different words overlap strongly in both articles and book reviews.) The quotations from the reviews by Stow Persons and Moses Rischin are from the *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 9 (1952): 447, and 30 (1973): 353.

8. On Jews at Yale see Dan A. Oren, *Joining the Club: A History of Jews and Yale* (New Haven, 1985).

9. Carl Bridenbaugh, "The Great Mutation," *American Historical Review* 68 (1963): 315–31, quotation from 322–23. For reaction to Bridenbaugh's speech see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical*

Profession (New York, 1988), 339–40, 470, 478.

10. Thomas Perkins Abernethy, *Western Lands and the American Revolution* (New York, 1937); idem, *Three Virginia Frontiers* (University, La., 1940); Robert Beverley, *The History and Present State of Virginia*, ed. Louis B. Wright (Chapel Hill, 1947); Perry Miller, "Religion and Society in the Early Literature: The Religious Impulse in the Founding of Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 6 (1949): 24–41; Carl Bridenbaugh, *Myths and Realities: Societies of the Colonial South* (Baton Rouge, 1952); Byrd, *Secret Diary, 1709–1712*; Robert Carter, *The Letters of Robert Carter, 1720–1727*, ed. Louis B. Wright (Chapel Hill, 1940); David J. Mays, *Edmund Pendleton, 1721–1803*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1952); Louis Morton, *Robert Carter of Nomini Hall: A Virginia Tobacco Planter of the Eighteenth Century* (Williamsburg, Va., 1941); Charles Sydnor, *Gentlemen Freeholders: Political Practices in Washington's Virginia* (Chapel Hill, 1952); Louis B. Wright, ed., *Letters of Robert Carter, 1720–1727: The Commercial Interests of a Virginia Gentleman* (San Marino, Calif., 1940).

11. For beginning references to the role of Jews in the relationship between America and the Christian Bible, see Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll, eds., *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York, 1982), 3–18. The focus on New England has been criticized in Jack P. Greene, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Social Development of Early Modern British Colonies and the Formation of American Culture* (Chapel Hill, 1988), and in Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990).

12. See the relatively small number of books listed under "Ethnicity" in David L. Ammerman and Philip D. Morgan, eds., *Books about Early America: 2001 Titles* (Williamsburg, Va., 1989), 71. An example of both the promise and the problem in economic history is found in John J. McCusker and Menard R. Russell, *The Economy of British America, 1607–1789* (Chapel Hill, 1985); for the seventeenth century these developments assumed a more human face in Lois Green Carr, Russell R. Menard, and Lorena S. Walsh, *Robert Cole's World: Agriculture and Society in Early Maryland* (Chapel Hill, 1991), and Gloria L. Main, *Tobacco Colony: Life in Early Maryland, 1650–1720* (Princeton, 1982). Two of the few general books on the eighteenth-century Enlightenment in America are Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976), and Henry Steele Commager, *The Empire of Reason: How Europe Imagined and America Realized the Enlightenment* (Garden City, N.Y., 1977), both, of course, a quarter century old.

13. Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town: The First Hundred Years* (New York, 1970); Philip J. Greven, Jr., *Four Generations: Population, Land, and Family in Colonial Andover, Massachusetts* (Ithaca, 1970).

14. Eli Faber, *A Time for Planting: The First Migration, 1654–1820* (Baltimore, 1992), 59, 118–20.

15. Two excellent examples of internationally conscious early modern intellectual history that intersect religion can be found in Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680–1750* (New Haven, 1995), and Gerald Cerny, *Theology, Politics and Letters at the Crossroads of European Civilization: Jacques Basnage and the Bavlean Huguenot Refugees in the Dutch Republic* (The Hague, 1987). The quotations from Abigail Franks are in Hershkowitz and Meyer, *Letters of the Franks Family*, 4–5. Hershkowitz and Meyer index Abigail Franks's reading interests under the listing "literature."