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The Jews of Newport

—BY—

LEON HÜHNER, A. M. LL. B.



Address delivered on the Occasion of
Unveiling the Memorial Tablet in
the Old Jewish Synagogue
at Newport, Rhode Island,
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Jewish Historical Society.*



MEMORIAL TABLET AT NEWPORT, R. I.

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THE dedication of a memorial tablet in this historic edifice, is full of interest both to Jew and Gentile and conjures up the memories of the past. To the world in general, this building is one of the colonial landmarks of Rhode Island, associated with the names of her merchant princes and connected with historic events of Revolutionary times. To the Jew, Newport has always been a cherished name, for here it was that civil and religious liberty were first firmly established by that illustrious champion of the brotherhood of man, Roger Williams.

True it is, that Maryland and Pennsylvania claim that honor also, but it must be remembered, that the one was founded primarily as a refuge for Roman Catholics, the other as a refuge for the persecuted Quaker, and in both the fundamental doctrine was toleration rather than religious liberty. Roger Williams on the other hand, founded his colony as a refuge for all mankind in those immortal words of his: "I desire not that liberty to myself, which I would not freely and impartially weigh out to all the consciences of the world beside."

Like the great temple in Rome, dedicated to all the gods, so Rhode Island became the Pantheon for all sects and all creeds, irrespective of race or nation.

Nor did the Jews abuse this liberality, for nowhere did they leave a prouder record of the past, than in this very city. While found as pioneers in each of the thirteen original colonies, it may fairly be said that nowhere did they exert a greater or a more beneficial influence than in Colonial Newport.

Jews settled here as early as 1658, exactly two hundred and fifty years ago, when fifteen Jewish families arrived from Holland bringing with them the first three degrees of Masonry. It has also been suggested that some settled even earlier coming from Curacoa and from New Amsterdam. Their numbers increased from time to time, several families settling here from the West Indies in 1694.

Early in the eighteenth century, a considerable tradesprang up between Newport, Portugal and the West Indies and in developing this, the Jewish settlers brought the town to the height of its commercial prosperity.

The magnificent harbor of Newport destined her to become a foremost port; situate between the New England colonies and the rest, she had every advantage for commercial enterprise. The Jewish settlers speaking various languages, particularly French, Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese, and having their kin scattered throughout the most distant parts of the globe, possessed advantages for commerce, possessed by no other nation; namely, reliable correspondents of their own race and blood; an advantage of immeasurable importance before the age of the railroad and the telegraph.

Between 1740 and 1760 there came to Newport a number of enterprising Jewish merchants, mostly refugees from the Portuguese Inquisition, and local historians have pointed out that only after their advent, did Newport become a great commercial centre, culminating in a period of prosperity when a man

“was thought a bold prophet who said that New York might one day equal Newport.”

Many of these men were indeed “Captains of Industry”. The names of Rivera, Lopez, Hart and Seixas are still cherished in this community. Jacob Rodriguez Rivera settled here about 1745 and introduced the manufacture of sperm oil, so that Newport soon had seventeen manufactories of oil and candles, enjoying a monopoly of the trade in America.

But it is unnecessary to recapitulate at this time the story of the careers of these Jewish merchants, the Levys, Pollocks and the rest. That has been told over and over again; and in an elaborate address delivered many years ago by Governor Cozzens of Rhode Island, is given in detail an account of their great influence in developing the trade and commerce of the colony. George William Curtis, Tuckerman, Mason, Dennison, Arnold and other writers, have likewise paid their tribute to the influence exercised for colonial prosperity by this class of settlers, and all alike have lauded their genius, character and integrity.

Perhaps I may be pardoned however, for mentioning one more name, intimately associated with this edifice, the President of this Congregation before the American Revolution, a name that stands pre-eminent among these great merchants of the past—Aaron Lopez. He settled here about 1750, and in the words of the late Judge Charles P. Daly “To him, in a larger degree than to anyone else, was due the rapid commercial development that followed, and which made Newport for a quarter of a century afterward, the most formidable rival of New York.” Owing to him more than forty Jewish families settled here, and fourteen years after his arrival the town had one hundred and fifty vessels engaged in the West Indian trade alone. At the beginning

of the American Revolution he was the owner of thirty vessels engaged in European and West Indian trade, his ships going to the Falkland Islands on the one hand and to Africa on the other. Ezra Stiles, the patriot President of Yale College states, that "for honor and extent of commerce he was probably surpassed by no merchant in America."

The great earthquake at Lisbon brought additional Jewish settlers, and by the outbreak of the American Revolution, Tuckerman claims that there were eleven hundred and seventy-five Jews at Newport, and that more than three hundred worshipped in this very synagogue. What is now the north side of the Mall was once covered with Jewish residences.

Some Jewish houses are still standing, among others, the Rivera house, next to that of Ezra Stiles, and the Seixas house which later became the home of Commodore Perry.

It has frequently been said that civil and religious liberty makes good citizens, and certainly the various writers of the history of Newport agree that the Jews were such. "From a close examination of the records of our courts of justice," says Mr. Hunter in an address delivered more than half a century ago, "I find against no one of the Hebrew faith an indictment, nor in any tradition, an accusation or reproach." Jews were numbered among the founders of the Redwood Library in the middle of the eighteenth century, and gave liberally toward its support. They numbered among their friends some of the most cultured families in this community.

But these great merchants did not forget their ancestral faith in the days of their prosperity. A congregation seems to have been established as early as 1658, though worship took place in private houses. The Rev. Isaac Touro to whom this tablet is dedicated in part, became its rabbi about 1760, and here he remained until the outbreak of the Revolutionary War.

This building was erected by Peter Harrison, the associate of Van Brugh in constructing the famous palace at Woodstock. It was commenced in 1762 and finished the following year, and was made possible by the generosity of these very Spanish and Portuguese merchants, Lopez and Rivera and the rest. At its dedication the prominent citizens of the town attended, and a most charming description of the ceremony has come down to us from the pen of one of those present, the famous scholar, Ezra Stiles, subsequently President of Yale.

And this building is indeed rich in historic associations. From this very pulpit preached Isaac Touro, here worshipped Rivera and Lopez. Hither too, came many prominent visitors, recorded by Dr. Stiles. In that pew yonder sat illustrious colonial personages. Governor Wanton, Judge Oliver, Judge Auchmuty and others who visited here on festival days.

Here was cemented that firm friendship between Touro, Lopez and Dr. Stiles, the last of whom received instruction in Hebrew from its minister. Within these very walls also, met the General Assembly of Rhode Island for the first time after the evacuation of Newport by the British in September 1780, and here also, tradition has it, visited our illustrious George Washington in 1790.

Nowhere in colonial times came so many rabbis from the most out of the way portions of the globe, as to Newport. Dr. Stiles mentions meeting here a Rabbi Malki from Palestine, a Rabbi Moses from Poland in 1772, his friend Rabbi Karigal from Hebron in the Holy Land, who preached in this very building in Spanish; Rabbi Tobiah from Poland who preached in Dutch, Rabbi Bosquila from Smyrna and Rabbi Cohen from Jeru-alem.

When the Revolution broke out, these great merchants were patriotic Americans; they closed this building rather than

continue under the British, they relinquished much of their wealth, several joined the army and the rest scattered to American strongholds, a large group settling at Leicester in Massachusetts. This included the Rivera, Lopez and Seixas families.

They lived at Leicester till the close of the Revolution and their character is appreciatively summed up by the historian of Leicester, the eminent Judge Emory Washburn, in the following words:

“Though differing from their neighbors in matters of religious faith, they won the confidence and esteem of all by their upright and honorable dealing, the kindness and courtesy of their intercourse and the liberality and public spirit which they evinced as citizens.”

“Though without a place of assembly for worship here, they rigidly observed the rites and requirements of their own laws, keeping Saturday as holy time, but out of regard to the sentiments of the people among whom they were settled, carefully kept their stores closed from Friday until Monday morning of each week.”

The War for Independence destroyed Newport's commercial supremacy. Her great merchants had suffered severe losses and most of the Jews went to New York and elsewhere after the war. Some returned to Newport, opened their synagogue and in 1790 addressed President Washington, the original of whose reply is still extant. This edifice was closed in 1791, and so remained for about sixty years. During that period but few Jews resided here; yet so fond were the memories clustering about the place, that many of the former residents and their descendants made it their dying request, to be interred in the little cemetery near here, the Old Jewish Cemetery purchased in 1677.

There they sleep, those worthies of a past age, Seixas, Levy, Hays, and Rivera. There too, is the Lopez gravestone with its eloquent inscription, the tribute of the great President of Yale College. There also lie the Touro brothers whose memory we honor to-day.

Abraham and Judah Touro were noble representatives of these colonial citizens. Born in Newport, but living far away, throughout their career, both remembered their native city both during their lives and after. Both led spotless lives, universally respected. It was Abraham Touro who bequeathed a sum for perpetually keeping this historic structure in repair. It was Judah Touro who replaced the old cemetery wall by the present gateway, and left a fund for its preservation, as well as for the payment of a minister's salary for this community.

Born here in 1775 Judah Touro repeatedly favored the place of his birth. Though living in New Orleans, it was he who saved from demolition, the old Round Tower or old Stone Mill as it is frequently called, purchasing it with the surrounding ground, and presenting it to your community, a gift you have perpetuated in the name of Touro Park. It is not too much to say that he was perhaps the first great American philanthropist, knowing neither distinction of race or creed in his bounty, restoring a church building to a poor Universalist congregation,—he, the founder of the New Orleans Alms House, the benefactor of the Massachusetts Female Hospital, the Female Asylum, the Boys Asylum of Boston, your own Redwood Library and many other worthy institutions. His will, in 1854 created a sensation throughout the world, by giving a princely fortune enormous for that day, entirely to charity both to the North and to the South.

His funeral was attended by the Municipal authorities of Newport and the cortege is stated not to have been equalled since the interment of Commodore Perry in 1826. During the progress of the procession the bell of old Trinity and those of the other churches were tolled, and all places of business were closed. In the old cemetery yonder he sleeps; as his tombstone tells us: "The last of his name, he inscribed it in the book of philanthropy, to be remembered forever."

Judah Touro was as public spirited as he was charitable. He almost gave his life for his country, being severely wounded while fighting under Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans; and he it was who, with Amos Lawrence, supplied the funds for completing Bunker Hill Monument.

At Fanueil Hall, Boston, these two men were eulogized in the following verse:

"Amos and Touro, venerated names,
Patriarch and Prophet press their equal claims,
Christian and Jew, they carry out one plan,
For though of different faith, each is in heart, a man."

John Quincy Adams, Daniel Webster, Joseph Story and Edward Everett were the illustrious committee appointed to prepare an inscription for a tablet to be placed in the monument, to record the liberality of Lawrence and Touro.

What wonder then, that Newport has always cherished the memory of citizens like these Jews of the past; nor is it surprising that a visitor in later years, when Jews no longer resided here,—I refer to Longfellow,—sang of them:

"Gone are the living, but the dead remain,
And not neglected; for a hand unseen,
Scattering its bounty, like a summer rain,
Still keeps their graves and their remembrance green."

There is still another name on the tablet you dedicate to-day, that of the Rev. Abraham Pereira Mendes, who becoming pastor of a new congregation in a later age, when this old synagogue was opened again, was thoroughly imbued with the lofty traditions of the past, and strove to realize the ideals of those departed worthies.

But after all, this marble tablet is for the living rather than for the dead. The name of Touro will forever be enshrined in the grateful remembrance of the citizens of Newport, both Jew and Gentile. This tablet may serve as a reminder to the living, of the virtues of the departed and the esteem in which they were held, and inspire the Jews of the present day to live up to those high standards of manhood and citizenship, so that the hope expressed by the "Father of his Country", in his letter to the Jewish citizens of Newport, may be repeated anew in the same spirit, by the entire community, in every generation. To use Washington's own words:

"May the children of the stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid."



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