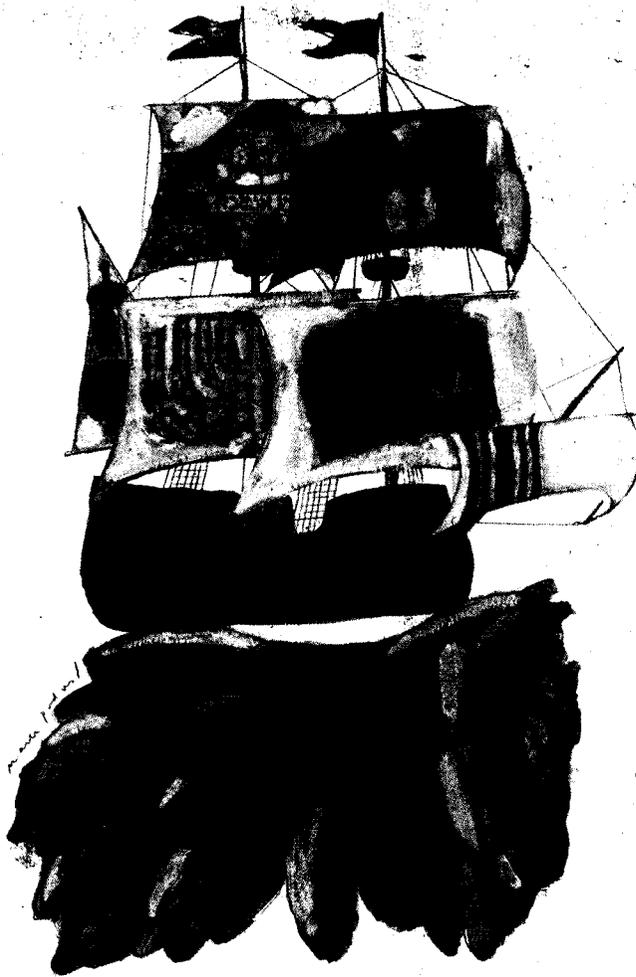


Beth Ahabah
MUSEUM ARCHIVES

Generations

Volume 11 Number 1 Commemorative Issue May 2005



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Jacob I. Cohen and the 350th Anniversary of American Jewish Life

Professor Jonathan D. Sarna
Brandeis University

This year marks the 350th anniversary of the Jewish communal life in North
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This commemorative edition of *Generations*, the journal of the Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives, examines the origins of the American Jewish experience 350 years ago. Contributors include the nation's pre-eminent American-Jewish historian, Jonathan D. Sarna of Brandeis University, and Rabbi Martin Beifield Jr., of Congregation Beth Ahabah. Rounding out this edition are articles by representatives from four other of the nation's earliest Jewish congregations: in Newport, R.I., New York, Philadelphia and Charleston, S.C.

Dr. Sarna provides an account of Jews' earliest days in America. He explains how 23 refugees from Brazil established a beachhead for the Jewish people that would shape them and an emerging nation for generations to come. Dr. Sarna also highlights the ties of Richmond's Jewish community to several of the other early congregations.

Rabbi Beifield and his counterparts from the other synagogues focus on the events, issues and personalities that shaped the births of their congregations.

This special edition of *Generations* is made possible through the support of the Saul Viener Fund for the Study of the American Jewish Experience.

FROM THE COVER

America. Many myths cloud the story of what happened in 1654. For example, the Jews who arrived in that year were not the “first” on American soil. That distinction, for now, belongs to Joachim Gaunse who, in 1585, served for a year as the metallurgist and mining engineer for the ill-fated English colony on Roanoke Island, in what is now North Carolina.[1] Nor were the 1654 Jews all Sephardi Jews, descendants of those who were expelled from Spain in 1492. Asser Levy, perhaps the best-known of the group and the only one who stayed on until his death in New York in 1682, was an Ashkenazi Jew from Vilna.[2]

Because the Jews and the Lutherans, and the Papists [Catholics] did eventually receive liberty, New York became what it is today: a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual community – and so eventually did the nation as a whole.

Nevertheless the basic facts of the 1654 story are well known: the arrival of 23 Jews “big as well as little” in New Amsterdam; the fact that most if not all of them were refugees from Recife, Brazil, which Portugal had just recaptured from Holland; the petition of Jews for the right to “navigate and trade near and in New Netherland, and to live and reside there”; the battle with Gov. Peter Stuyvesant who wanted the Jews expelled; and finally, the sweet victory: permission from the Dutch West India Company for Jews to “travel,” “trade,” “live” and “remain” provided that “the poor among them shall not become a burden to the company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation.”[3]

Far less well-known are the larger themes underlying this story that should continue to concern us. From the very beginning, for example, the fate of Jews in America was tied in with that of other religious dissenters. “Giving them [Jews] liberty,” Stuyvesant wrote, “we cannot refuse the Lutherans and the Papists.”[4] The decision about admitting Jews to New Amsterdam was, at the very deepest level, a decision about the social and religious character of New Amsterdam. Because the Jews, and the Lutherans, and the Papists [meaning the Catholics] did eventually receive liberty, New York became what it is

today: a multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual community – and so eventually did the nation as a whole. Small as they were in number, Jews played a significant part in that early story and have remained part of the story of pluralism and tolerance in America ever since.

No less important a theme from 1654 is the fact that the Dutch authorities, forced to choose between their economic interests and their religious sensibilities, voted with their pocketbooks in allowing Jews to remain – a significant sign of modernity. The “usefulness” of Jews, the fact that they might help to enrich the colonies, proved far more important to the Dutch than the fact that they were not Christians. The Dutch West India Company was worried that a heavy-handed and restrictive colonial policy would diminish the population, discourage immigration, and scare off investors. Its advice to Stuyvesant demonstrates that a whole new attitude toward religious dissenters was emerging, one that would affect not only Jews, but in time all religious minorities. “Shut your eyes, at least [do] not force people’s consciences,” they wrote, “but allow every one to have his own belief, as long as he behaves quietly and legally, gives no offense to his neighbor and does not oppose the government.”[5]



New Amsterdam Harbor - 1650

The Jewish community of Richmond emerged more than a century after the events of 1654, but the 350th anniversary of American Jewish life provides a welcome opportunity to re-examine its origins as well. Indeed, the ambitious goal of the 350th anniversary is to “celebrate, commemorate and investigate all aspects of American Jewish life: heroes and villains, time-tested themes and neglected ones.” [6] To this end, I want to look anew at

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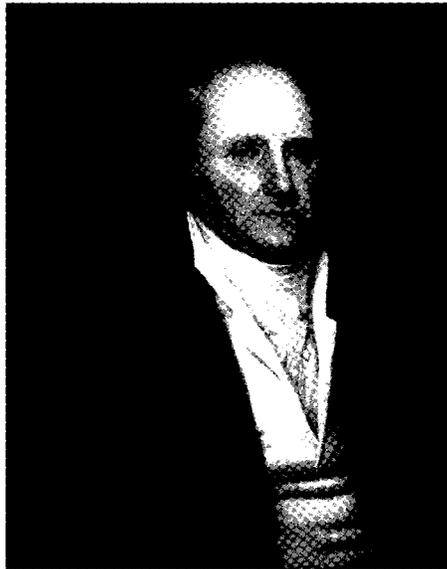
one of Richmond's first and most distinguished Jewish citizens, Jacob I. Cohen. I recently wrote the entry about him for a forthcoming volume of the *Dictionary of Virginia Biography*, and was impressed that in his case, as in the case of New Amsterdam's original Jews, myths cloud the story. Though basic facts are known, their larger significance remains elusive.

Jacob I. Cohen (Jan. 2, 1744[7] – Oct. 9, 1823) arrived in America, from Bavaria, in 1773. Like most Jewish immigrants of that time, he was an Ashkenazi rather than a Sephardi Jew. He settled in Lancaster, Pa., where he received a license to trade with the Indians, and then moved on to the much larger Jewish community of Charleston.

By 1781, Jacob I. Cohen formed a partnership with Isaiah Isaacs. They hired Daniel Boone to survey some 10,000 acres on their behalf.

During the American Revolution, Cohen opposed the British, and was one of a group of Jews, among them his subsequent partner in Richmond, Isaiah Isaacs, who fought, in 1779, under Capt. Richard Lushington as part of the Charleston Regiment of Militia ("Free Citizens"). The company was known during the Revolution as the "Jew Company," although only a minority of its members were actually Jewish. Cohen himself fought in the Battle of Beaufort under Gen. William Moultrie and, according to Lushington, "in every respect conducted himself as a good soldier and a man of courage." [8]

Numerous books report that Cohen was captured by the British during the war and was imprisoned on the ship *Torbay*. Herbert Ezekiel and Gaston Lichtenstein, who first made this claim in their *History of the Jews of Richmond* (1917) wrote that "he was *probably* taken prisoner (italics added)." By the time Samuel Reznick



Jacob I. Cohen

wrote his *Unrecognized Patriots: The Jews in the American Revolution* (1975) the "probably" had been forgotten and the claim was presented as an accepted "fact."

In re-examining the evidence, I noticed that Cohen himself, in a brief memoir of his Revolutionary War exploits preserved at the American Jewish Historical Society, made no mention of being captured and imprisoned – hardly the kind of experience that he would have been likely to forget! Nor did Aaron Baroway, who wrote a history of the Cohen family in 1923 based on interviews with descendants, mention anything about capture and imprisonment during the Revolution. Moreover, the "Jacob Cohen" known to have been imprisoned on the *Torbay* was never described as "Jacob I. Cohen."

The initial is important since, according to family tradition, the "I" did not stand for anything, but rather served to distinguish Cohen from the other Jacob Cohens with whom he was frequently confused. [9] Since there were at least three people named Jacob Cohen in Charleston at the time of the Revolution, it seems most likely that the Jacob Cohen on the *Torbay* was a different one. Indeed, Barnett Elzas, in his *The Jews of South Carolina* (1905) specifically identifies Jacob Cohen of the *Torbay* as the son of Moses Cohen, a different family altogether. By the time that Jacob Cohen was released from the *Torbay*, Jacob I. Cohen was already in Richmond.

By 1781, Jacob I. Cohen had formed a partnership with his fellow militia veteran, Isaiah Isaacs. Together the two men, Richmond's earliest known Jewish residents, engaged in a wide range of commercial activities, sometimes taking land warrants in lieu of currency. Daniel Boone surveyed some 10,000 acres on their behalf. [10]

Spring of 1782 found Cohen in Philadelphia, acquiring goods. He was wealthy enough to be able to advance fifty pounds to his fellow Virginian, James Madison, who was short on funds. [11] Cohen applied to join Philadelphia's Mikveh Israel synagogue and also fell

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in love with the recently widowed and impoverished Esther Mordecai (nee Elizabeth Whitlock, 1744-1804), a convert to Judaism. Jewish law, however, forbade Cohen, as a descendant of priests, from marrying a convert. Following a stormy internal debate, Mikveh Israel prohibited its minister (*hazan*) from conducting the marriage or even from mentioning the couple's name within the synagogue's portals.[12]

Here is where the story takes on special significance. Cohen, doubtless imbued with the spirit of the American Revolution, proved defiant. Why should he be denied the right to marry a convert to Judaism, he apparently wondered, just because his ancestors had been descendants of Aaron, the high priest? The dictates of the synagogue and of Jewish law ran counter to his sense of liberty and freedom. Nor was he alone. Some of his patriotic friends in Philadelphia, doubtless also affected by the plight of the young widow whom he sought to marry, apparently agreed with him. So, in an unprecedented move, the congregation's leading member, the financier Haym Salomon, along with the Revolutionary hero Mordecai Sheftall, and the well-respected old-time Philadelphian, Israel Jacobs, privately conducted and witnessed the wedding of Jacob and Esther. A copy of the hand-written traditional Jewish marriage certificate (*ketubbah*) prepared for the occasion is found in the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati. Notwithstanding the opposition of Congregation Mikveh Israel, the couple, therefore, was legally married—a signal to the community that the synagogue's power to regulate Jewish life was waning.

Cohen and his new wife soon returned to Richmond and prospered. The firm of "Cohen and Isaacs" operated a highly successful store in Richmond, known as "the Jews' Store," which included Gov. Edmund Randolph among its customers.[13] It owned the Bird in Hand, reputedly the city's first inn and tavern, which, for a time

was overseen by Cohen's stepson, Jacob Mordecai. It also successfully speculated in land and possessed several African slaves.[14] A sign of the firm's prominence is the fact that it numbered among the four largest contributors to the campaign to erect public buildings on Shockoe Hill in 1785.[15] Cohen and Isaacs amicably dissolved their partnership in 1792, and Cohen continued in business on his own, being particularly involved in property and insurance.[16]

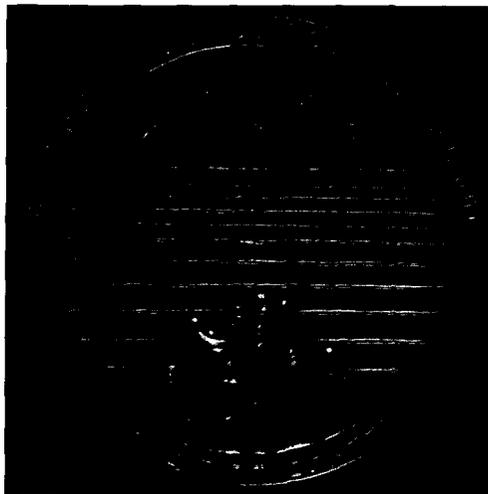
Cohen played an active role in Richmond civic life. He served as a grand jurymen in 1793, won election to the city's common hall (city council) in 1795, and was appointed an Inspector of the Penitentiary in 1801.[17] He also participated in Masonry, serving as Master of his lodge.[18] At the same time, he remained active in Jewish life. He was a founder of Virginia's first synagogue, Beth Shalome of Richmond. He composed a special prayer for the country recited at Beth Shalome in 1789 on the national day of thanksgiving proclaimed by George Washington. And he also made liberal donations to his synagogue, including valuable ritual objects. By example, he demonstrated that leadership in Jewish life and civic life went hand in hand.[19]

Esther Cohen died in 1804 and within two years the now-widowed Cohen returned to Philadelphia where, on Nov. 3, 1807, he married the widow,

Rachel Jacobs (Polack) (1754/60-1821), a descendant of the first Jews in Savannah, Ga.[20] Remaining active in Jewish life, he served as president (*parnas*) of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia – the very synagogue that once tried to prevent his marriage to a convert – and he later presided over its Hebrew Society for the Visitation of the Sick and Mutual Assistance.[21]

Cohen had no children of his own, but was close to his nephews and nieces in Baltimore, the children of his only brother, Israel Cohen (1750/51-1803), who had immigrated to Richmond and predeceased him.[22] In

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350th Anniversary Commemorative Medal

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his generous will, he bequeathed much of his estate to his Baltimore relatives, as well as considerable sums to Jewish charities. He also freed his slaves, granting each one \$25.[23]

What makes this tale worth recalling in the 350th anniversary of Jewish life is its continuing relevance. Just as the story of 1654 pointed toward themes that would define American and American Jewish life forever after, so too the career of Jacob I. Cohen. At a time when most of the world's Jews were severely restricted in their rights, barred in Cohen's native Bavaria from specific occupations and habitations and confined in Russia to a carefully delineated "Pale of Settlement," his career pointed to the promise of American freedom. Indeed, his was not only a prototypical "rags to riches story," but also the story of a man who insisted that he could be a devoted American and a devoted Jew at the same time. Yet his life also betrayed tensions between American and Jewish values, particularly when he married in defiance of his synagogue and of Jewish law.

In a sense, therefore, Jacob Cohen was a modern Jew, a man ahead of his time. He grappled, as American Jews still do, with the challenges and complexities of a dual identity. By studying his life in this anniversary year, we learn more about our own.

NOTES

[1] Lewis S. Feuer, *Jews in the Origins of Modern Science and Bacon's Scientific Utopia: The Life and Work of Joachim Gaunse, Mining Technologist and First Recorded Jew in English-Speaking North America*. Brochure Series of the American Jewish Archives VI (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1987).

[2] Malcolm H. Stern, "Asser Levy--A New Look at Our Jewish Founding Father," *American Jewish Archives* (=AJA) 26 (April 1974), 66-77; Leo Hershkowitz, "Asser Levy and the Inventories of Early New York Jews," *American Jewish History* (=AJH) 80 (Autumn 1990), 21-55.

[3] Arnold Wiznitzer, "The Exodus from Brazil and Arrival in New Amsterdam of the Jewish Pilgrim Fathers, 1654," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (=PAJHS) 44 (1954), 80-98; cf. Leo Hershkowitz, "New Amsterdam's Twenty-Three Jews--Myth or Reality?" In *Hebrew and the Bible in America*, edited by Shalom Goldman. Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993.

[4] Samuel Oppenheim, "The Early History of the Jews in New York, 1654-1664: Some New Matter on the Subject," *PAJHS* 18 (1909), 20.

[5] E.T. Corwin (ed.) *Ecclesiastical Records of the State of New York* (Albany: NY: 1901), 1:530.

[6] *Proceedings of the Inaugural National Planning Conference Celebrate 350 Jewish Life in America 1654-2004* (New York: 2003), 24.

[7] The precise birth date is provided, according to family tradition, by Aaron Baroway, "The Cohens of Maryland," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 18 (1923), 359. Cohen's death

was noticed in various contemporary newspapers as having taken place on 9 December 1823 "in the 80th year of his age," which seems to confirm the 1744 birth date. The 1782 Richmond census, however, listed Cohen as being 35 in that year, indicating a 1747 birth date [see Myron Berman, *Richmond's Jewry 1769-1976* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 2], which some writers accept.

[8] Jacob I. Cohen Papers, American Jewish Historical Society, NY; Leon Huhner, "Some Addition Notes on the History of the Jews of South Carolina," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 19 (1910), 151-156.

[9] Baroway, "The Cohens of Maryland," 359.

[10] Jacob R. Marcus, *American Jewry- Documents-Eighteenth Century* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1959), 441.

[11] Edwin Wolf II and Maxwell Whiteman, *The History of the Jews of Philadelphia from Colonial Times to the Age of Jackson* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1975), 96; Herbert T. Ezekiel and Gaston Lichtenstein, *The History of the Jews of Richmond from 1769 to 1917* (Richmond: Ezekiel, 1917), 18-19.

[12] Marcus, *American Jewry- Documents*, 121-124.

[13] See Randolph to Cohen & Isaacs, May 8, 1787, *American Jewish Archives*, Cincinnati, OH.

[14] Berman, *Richmond's Jewry*, 7-8; Melvin I. Urofsky, *Commonwealth and Community: The Jewish Experience in Virginia* (Richmond: Virginia Historical Society, 1997), 11.

[15] William P. Palmer (ed.), *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts from January 1, 1785 to July 2, 1789* (Richmond, 1884), 64.

[16] Ezekiel and Lichtenstein, *History of the Jews of Richmond*, 15-16; numerous Mutual Assurance Society Declarations bearing his signature are found in the Library of Virginia.

[17] Baroway, "The Cohens of Maryland," 361; Berman, *Richmond's Jewry*, 10 and n.22; *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts from May 16, 1795 to December 31 1798* (Richmond 1890), 305; James Monroe to Jacob I. Cohen, April 16, 1801, AJHS; *Calendar of Virginia State Papers and Other Manuscripts from January 1 1799 to December 31, 1807*, p.328.

[18] Ezekiel and Lichtenstein, *History of the Jews of Richmond*, 19; Samuel Oppenheim, "The Jews and Masonry in the United States Before 1810," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 19 (1910), 61.

[19] Marcus, *American Jewry- Documents*, 147-48; Berman, *Richmond's Jewry*, 10.

[20] Malcolm Stern, *First American Jewish Families: 600 Genealogies 1654-1988* (Baltimore: Ottenheimer, 1991), 32, 234.

[21] Jacob R. Marcus, *United States Jewry 1776-1985* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 1, 321.

[22] Berman, *Richmond's Jewry*, 10-11; see also Emily Bingham, *Mordecai: An Early American Family* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2003), 11-17.

[23] The will is reprinted in Ezekiel and Lichtenstein, *History of the Jews of Richmond*, 330-335.