

# BENJAMIN SHEFTALL

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This year Mickve Israel features one of its primary founders who was among the original 41 Jewish colonists who landed in Savannah 284 years ago. Benjamin Sheftall was the patriarch of the Sheftall family, and some of his descendants remain active members of this congregation to this day.

Benjamin Sheftall was born in the town of Frankfurt-on-Oder, Prussia in 1692. The 1728 Prussian census lists Wolff Sheffel, as “head of household.” Wolff and Benjamin were variants of the same name, a custom that arose from the Bible, wherein Benjamin is described as Wolf. Benjamin would have been his name used in religious matters and Wolff in the gentile community. Various spellings of the name including “Scheffel” were found in the census. In Benjamin’s original Georgia land-grant from George II it is spelled “Schafstell.” The name morphed into “Sheftall.”

Benjamin likely emigrated to London during the reign of William I after harsh edicts were issued against Jews. 1730 is the most probable date of his emigration to London. Benjamin Sheftall and his wife Perla were among the largely Sephardic group of Jews sent by Bevis Marks Congregation in London to the newly established colony of Georgia. The Sheftall’s were one of only 2 Ashkenazic families arriving in Savannah, Georgia on July 11, 1733 aboard the *William and Sarah*. The voyage started from London in early January of 1733 but took almost seven months to reach the new colony of Georgia founded in February of 1733 by James Edward Oglethorpe.

There had been an epidemic in the new colony and Oglethorpe lost numerous colonists who had come to Georgia with him including the only doctor. One of the passengers on the *William and Sarah* was a physician, Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribeiro. Dr. Nunes managed to stop the epidemic and Oglethorpe was happy to have these new colonists to replace the ones he had lost.

Oglethorpe treated these new Jewish settlers exactly as he had the Christian colonists who had arrived with him, including deeding land to fourteen of the Jewish males. Thus, Benjamin became a landowner in the new colony. The fledgling colony of Georgia became the first place in the world since Biblical times where Jews enjoyed the same legal rights and responsibilities as their neighbors.

Oglethorpe’s inclinations were and would continue to be military. Most of the Jewish settlers were young and able-bodied men; in his eyes they were potential soldiers. Shortly after July of 1733, Oglethorpe appointed Benjamin Sheftall the first lieutenant of his militia.

Oglethorpe and a group of English Freemasons met in February of 1734 and formally organized a masonic lodge in Savannah in 1735. It was the second duly constituted Masonic Lodge in North America. Benjamin Sheftall was a Master Mason and his son, Mordecai became a Mason.

The Jewish settlers began Jewish worship immediately on the day of their arrival since their intent was to found a worshipping community. Two years later almost to the day (July 12, 1735), Benjamin Sheftall recorded a second stage in the development of the congregation. The Jews met and together agreed to open a synagogue, which was done immediately, named K.K. Mickva Israel. Mickva Israel (now Mickve Israel) is the third oldest Jewish congregation in the United States.

Benjamin Sheftall kept a chronicle in which entries were made as the occasion required. The Sheftall “diaries” cover the opening period (from 1733) to 1765 when Benjamin died. The diaries included a list of those passengers on the *William and Sarah*. His son Levi, carried on the journal until his death in 1809. Levi translated the manuscript that Benjamin wrote into English (probably from *Juelisch-Deutsch* which Levi described as Hebrew) and then rewrote it with minor changes. The manuscripts are now housed in the Keith Reid Collection at the University of Georgia. No other Jewish congregation in America has such a rich or original source to document its “birth” moment and early development.

On March 12, 1734 a ship of Salzburgers arrived in Savannah. They did not speak English and none of Oglethorpe’s original men spoke German. Benjamin Sheftall, speaking German fluently, took the Salzburgers in and treated them to a breakfast of good rice soup.

Benjamin and Perla’s first child, whom they named Sheftall Sheftall, was born on August 3, 1734. He died “very young by eating acorns given to him by his nurse.” Oglethorpe had gifted land for a cemetery for the Jews shortly after Mickva Israel was founded. Benjamin Sheftall was probably responsible for the cemetery land gift due to the death of first his child and then his wife. That first Jewish burial site was located in what is now the median of Oglethorpe Avenue near its intersection with Bull Street in Savannah. The original burial site was used until at least 1762.

Later Levi Sheftall gave land for a Sheftall family cemetery. When a visiting Jew to Savannah died and needed to be buried, the request was denied by Levi Sheftall for the burial in his family cemetery, Mordecai Sheftall gave

land for a cemetery where any Jew could be buried. The two Sheftall cemeteries are half a block apart.

Benjamin and Perla's other child was Mordecai, born on December 2, 1735. The hardships suffered by the early Georgia settlers proved too much for Perla's failing health. Mordecai was not quite a year old when Perla died in November of 1736 and being a single parent was extremely difficult for Benjamin. He began to look for a second wife. He found a Jewish woman in Philadelphia, Hannah Solomons, born in Amsterdam, Holland. Hannah arrived in Savannah on October 5, 1738 and on November 20 of the same year she married Benjamin Sheftall. Mordecai was almost three when Hannah took charge of his upbringing. Slightly more than a year later, Hannah gave birth to a son of her own, Levi. Mordecai and Levi remained close throughout most of their lives.

Like most of the first settlers, Benjamin Sheftall tried farming, then later branched out and became a merchant. He also tried his luck with shipping when he purchased one-third of a schooner that sailed between Savannah and New York. (Benjamin supplied the northbound cargo, consisting of rice, deer skins, and indigo or bills of exchange to the value of 200 pounds.) Although sufficiently successful to provide adequately for his growing family, Benjamin never acquired substantial wealth.

Benjamin Sheftall was a charter member of what became known as the Union Society, believed to be one of the oldest charitable organizations in America. Its purpose was to provide assistance for orphan children in the colony.

Benjamin Sheftall died on October 3, 1765 and was buried in the Levi Sheftall Family cemetery.

By Margie Levy from the following sources:

*Third to None* by Rabbi Saul Rubin

*Savannah's Old Jewish Community Cemeteries and Mordecai Sheftall Jewish Revolutionary Patriot*, both by B.H. Levy

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