

Forgotten Women: Abigail Minis

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Savannah is a place that's famously full of history. But many of the people who shaped that history, particularly women, are relatively unknown. So GPB has created a series called "Forgotten Women" looking at some of the untold stories in the region.

Our first featured woman is a Georgia colonist. Arriving in 1733 just months after the first settlers she and approximately 40 others became the first Jews to touch Savannah ground. Abigail Minis was 32 years old when she left Europe with her husband Abraham and two daughters. When Abraham died some years later he left her with his ranch, store and the task of caring for their now 8 children. Still, she managed to not only maintain his businesses but to double the earnings.

Florence Minis Slatinsky is a direct descendent of Abigail and Abraham Minis. "I have an image of her as a very strong woman who once her husband died probably was able to apply herself in ways she couldn't when he was alive because it would of undermined him and he wasn't nearly as successful as she was," she said.

And during a time when women were often defined by their spouses, Minis chose not to remarry. It is unknown if the decision was due to age, lack of Jewish candidates or desire to be unwed but Slatinsky says the decision left lasting impact on her 5 daughters. None of the girls married, ever. Except one of them who I think was married for about one month and I think it sort of unraveled. So she knowingly or not she passed on this legacy of being a strong matriarch who really wasn't particularly interested in finding a man.

Minis bought land constantly. She owned several garden lots in town, at least 7 farm plots outside the city and 5 hundred acres of pine land on Sapelo Island. And in less than ten years after her husband's death she opened the Minis Tavern. It flourished and became a place for Georgia and Britain's distinguished elite- with a guest list including George Washington.

She was also a founding member of what is now the Congregation Mickve Israel. Phoebe Kerness works at the synagogue's museum. She describes the original Torah scrolls that were aboard the ship that brought the Minis family to America. "They look like panels of leather but they're deerskin." She points at the glass that holds the scrolls. "They are stitched together with cow gut. They are written with a quill and it's amazing that they have survived."

Kerness wrote an article on Minis, whom she playfully calls Abby. "I entitled my article 'Thoroughly Modern Abby' She was a modern woman. She was a single mother, she raised children, she ran businesses and she got involved politically."

As a woman Minis would not have been allowed to vote, but she expressed her political views in other ways. "She was giving money, ammunition and uniforms to the continental Army," Kerness explains. When Savannah fell to the British, Minis was charged as a supporter of the rebellion. But despite her charges against the crown, she was able to convince the Royal Governor to provide her with safe passage and protection to South Carolina. She stayed there the remainder of the war.

Before her trip she brought her friend and fellow patriot Mordicai Shefthall food in prison after the British captured him. The following is a letter she wrote Shefthall about her loans to the continental army.

"Dear Sir:

Enclosed I have sent you a copy of Certificates given me for sundry Articles provisions - delivered the Allied Army when the lines of Savannah in September 1779- immediately after the Surrender of the Town to the British."

The Jewish population in Savannah is small. But Slatinsky says Minis's legacy of leadership and civic involvement has lived on. She herself serves on several boards throughout the community. They didn't just live in Savannah they really were part of the fabric of Savannah," said Slatinsky. "Every generation they were in Rotary and in the Hibernian Society. They were serving in the army, they were really involved in the city, they were really invested from the very beginning. So that's been a really important role model for me and I try to do a lot in the community."

Minis died in October of 1794 at 93 years old.