

***May is Jewish American Heritage Month. To participate, Mickve Israel's History and Heritage Committee is offering brief articles about Mickve Israel and Jewish American history.***

## **Frances Hart Sheftall – A Valiant Woman**

by Marie Dodson



Boldly courageous; brave; stout-hearted. All of these words which define “valiant” apply to Frances Hart Sheftall who lived in Savannah during the Colonial era and who is closely associated with Congregation Mickve Israel.

Little is known of her life before she moved to the New World. She was born in 1740 in The Hague, the Netherlands to Moses and Esther Hart. Her brother, Joshua, came to America and settled in Charleston, where he became a successful merchant. Frances herself did not come directly to America but stopped in Antigua, West Indies. Marriage led her to settle in Savannah. Her brother, Joshua, was very good friends with Mordecai Sheftall who needed a wife. Joshua arranged the marriage and Frances agreed to the match even though she had never met nor even seen her betrothed. Talk about courageous! To marry a stranger upon the recommendation of one’s brother is exceedingly brave. The marriage took place in October, 1761 in Charleston. Her silk wedding dress is currently located at the Georgia Historical Society in Savannah after having been entrusted to the care of family members for over 200 years.

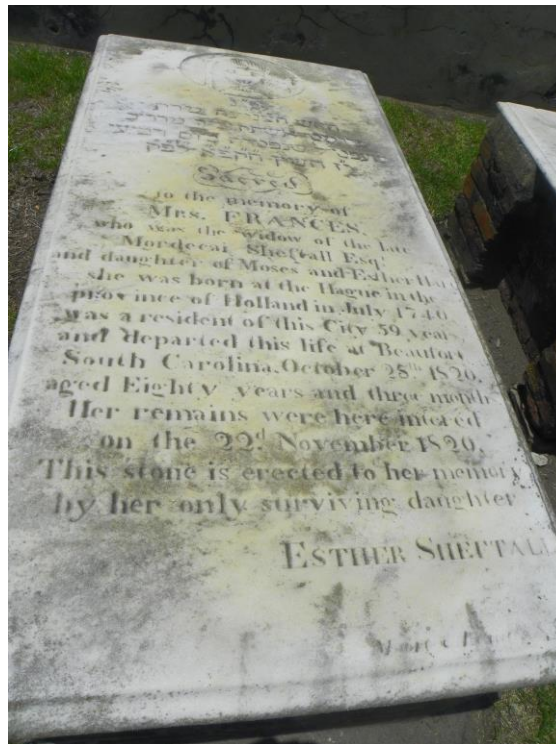
By 1774, Frances and Mordecai were at the center of Savannah Jewry and regularly held services in their home. Mordecai had become a successful businessman with an international shipping interest. He and Frances owned 2,000 acres of land and thousands of heads of cattle.

During the Revolutionary War period Frances found herself dealing with many difficulties. The most horrific obstacle to overcome was the incarceration of her husband, Mordecai, and her eldest son, Sheftall, in December, 1778. The British occupied Savannah and confiscated all of Mordecai’s wealth. Frances fled to South Carolina with her other children, Esther, Moses, Benjamin, and

Perla. She had no access to any of the family's funds and yet she had to provide a living for her family. Not one to shirk her responsibilities, Frances took in sewing and became a laundress for a while.

Frances was not content to sit idly by while her husband and son were imprisoned; she began a letter writing campaign to petition the British for their release. Mordecai and Sheftall were released from their prison ship in Antigua in April, 1781. Frances and her other children left South Carolina and met the men in Philadelphia. The family returned to Savannah at the end of the war.

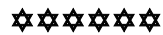
Mordecai Sheftall had pledged his own private funds to the American forces during the Revolution. He petitioned the American government for repayment of the loan but was unsuccessful in this endeavor. After Mordecai's death in 1792, Frances also petitioned the American government on behalf of her children. She was not successful. She actually wrote to the Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, but the monies she sought for the redress of the financial loss suffered by her family were not awarded.



When I interviewed Mrs. Marion Levy Mendel about her ancestor, Frances Hart Sheftall, she described Frances as "valiant". No word describes her better. No matter what hardships life dealt her, she overcame them. She survived yellow fever, a smallpox epidemic, and the bombardment of Charleston by the British navy. She survived alone during the American Revolution. She publicly petitioned the British for the release of her husband and son from prison and petitioned the American government for monies for her children. She wrote letters to her husband and son during their incarceration to boost their spirits.

Frances died in Beaufort, SC in 1820 at age 80. She had left Savannah to escape a pestilential fever, probably yellow fever.

Frances was an educated woman, rare for her time. In a time when few men and even fewer women were educated, Frances could write and felt no reprisal for doing so. How did she find the courage and commitment to write letters seeking fairness and justice for herself and her family? She was born during the Age of Enlightenment. Perhaps when you are exposed to the ideals of liberty and justice, you have no choice but to act valiantly.



In honor of the upcoming Sisterhood Shabbat as well as the recent Mother's Day holiday, Mickve Israel's History and Heritage Committee reminds congregants that, although women have not always held official positions of leadership in American Jewish congregations as they do today, women have always been leaders in our congregation and in Savannah Jewish history.



***Celebrate Jewish American Heritage Month by exploring the Gutstein Museum, our sanctuary, and our Slany Torah exhibit to learn more about our congregation's story as well as Savannah and American history.***