

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

JEFFERSON AND THE JEWS -- PART II

by Rabbi Saul J. Rubin



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Mordecai Manuel Noah (From a painting in the possession of L. Napoleon Levy)

In Part I it was mentioned that Jefferson wrote letters to two congregations... ours and Shearith Israel in New York (in 1818, two years before the letter to Mickve Israel). The New York document was addressed to Mordecai Manuel Noah who delivered the dedicatory sermon. M. M. Noah had strong connections to Savannah Jewry. His great-grandfather was Dr. Samuel Ribero Nunez, savior of the Georgia Colony. In my opinion the Jefferson letter to Noah lacks the beauty and power of the Savannah document. Here are some quotes:

"Your sect has furnished remarkable proof of the universal spirit of religious intolerance, inherent in every sect, disclaimed while feeble and practiced by all in power. Our laws have provided the antidote to this, protecting our religious, as they do our civil rights by putting all on equal footing."

"But more is to be done. Nothing would be so likely as to effect this as your sect in particular paying more careful attention to education and placing its members on the *benches of science as preparatory to their doing the same*

at the board of government".

The words in italics are almost identical to those in the Savannah letter:

"(He) hopes they will be seen taking their seats on the *benches of science as preparatory to doing the same at the board of government.*"

M. M. Noah was, without question, the most respected Jew of the period, the first American-born Jew to attain national prominence. He was editor of three major New York newspapers, a successful playwright, the first influential Jewish-American writer. President James Monroe appointed him ambassador to Tunis. No Jew before him held such a prestigious post. As leader of a benign Tammany Hall (so it was at the beginning), he wielded profound political power. Noah is considered to be *the* pioneer American Zionist, founder of Ararat near Buffalo, N.Y., a refuge for oppressed European Jews. The experiment received considerable support from the Christian community, though no persecuted Jew took advantage of the "haven".

Jefferson's letter to Savannah was addressed to Dr. Jacob De La Motta, renowned for his oratory. When Rabbi Gershom Mendes Seixas, the most prominent American rabbi of Revolutionary times, passed away, De La Motta was invited to deliver one of the eulogies. He was trained as a physician by Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia, Jefferson's close friend and confidant.

Where I read it, I know not, but I believe the information is accurate. Within the last half-century, the letter from Jefferson to Mordecai Manuel Noah was put up for auction. It fetched many thousands. Had the Savannah letter survived, no question it would have been valued at a greater sum considering its superior content. CMI would have hit the jackpot! Who knows what other treasures lurk in our archival material!

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.