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# A 'Haven of Benignity': Conflict and Cooperation Between Eighteenth-Century Savannah Jews

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A “Haven of Benignity”: Conflict and Cooperation Between Eighteenth-Century Savannah Jews

By Mark I. Greenberg

On July 11, 1733, forty-one Jews aboard the schooner William and Sarah landed in the fledgling Georgia colony.<sup>1</sup> Their harrowing five-month journey had included damage to their boat in the Thames River and a near shipwreck off the North Carolina coast. The weary travelers joined 275 Christian inhabitants already settled on the bluffs above the Savannah River. Only five months earlier James Oglethorpe had landed with a charter from King George II and the financial support of trustees to found a refuge for England's poor. The king hoped that by cultivating the desolate lands of America, the new settlers "might not only gain a comfortable subsistence, but also strengthen his Majesty's colonies and increase the trade, navigation, and wealth of his Majesty's realms."<sup>2</sup>

The early arrival of Jews to Savannah has appeared in published sources for nearly two hundred years.<sup>3</sup> Over the last three decades, several important books and many more excellent essays have significantly expanded an understanding of the topic. Relations between Savannah Jews and Christians and Jews' roles in Georgia's development have received attention as never before.<sup>4</sup> Less well documented are how Portuguese and German cultures, carried across the Atlantic with these first Jewish immigrants, shaped life in the New World. Exploring European Jewish history and culture *before* Jewish settlement in America's southern colonies helps explain periods of conflict and cooperation that characterized relations between Georgia's eighteenth-century Ashkenazic (Germanic) and Sephardic (Iberian) settlers and ties more closely together the history of European and early American Jewry.

The William and Sarah's journey stemmed from conditions in London's Jewish community. Faced with an influx of poor Jews from Portugal, and smaller numbers from Germany, three leaders of London's wealthy Spanish-Portuguese congregation, Bevis Marks, had received commissions from the Georgia Trustees in early 1732 to raise funds among their

coreligionists for the colonization effort. The trustees assumed that collections from London Jewry would support prospective Protestant settlers. London's Jewish elites had other ideas. They viewed the Georgia venture as an opportunity to manage their financial commitment to the poor and to alleviate the perceived threat that these newcomers posed to their social status among London Christians.<sup>5</sup>

The prospect of Jews in Georgia upset the Common Council of the Trustees, which never expected Jews might choose to make the colony their home. Motivated by centuries-old antipathy toward Jews and Judaism, in December 1732 the council voted to bar their entry.<sup>6</sup> In January 1733 it agreed "that no Jews should be sent, and the deputations given them to collect should be revoked. . . . Besides, the report of our sending Jews has prevented several from subscribing to us."<sup>7</sup> Oglethorpe was unaware of these decisions when the group landed at Savannah on July 11, 1733. Taken off guard by their arrival, he sought a legal opinion in Charleston on the subject of Jewish settlement in the colony. The Charleston lawyers held that since the Georgia charter guaranteed liberty of conscience and worship to all newcomers except "papists," Jews had to be admitted. The Georgia leader followed this advice.<sup>8</sup>

The arrival of Jews in Savannah and Oglethorpe's decision to admit them shocked the Common Council in London. The council secretary instructed Oglethorpe in an October letter to prevent the group from taking up permanent residence. "Use your best endeavours that the said Jews may be allowed no kind of settlement with any of the grantees, the Trustees being apprehensive they will be of prejudice to the Trade and Welfare of the Colony."<sup>9</sup> This correspondence crossed a letter from Oglethorpe, written in August, praising the Jews' good conduct, commending especially the skill of passenger Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribeiro, who had provided valuable medical attention to sick colonists during a yellow fever outbreak. Oglethorpe

informed the trustees on August 12 of a “doctor of physick [sic] who immediately undertook our people and refused to take any pay for it. He proceeded by cold baths, cooling drinks and other cooling applications.”<sup>10</sup> Although the epidemic had killed twenty, or 10 percent of the residents, Nunes “entirely put a stop to it, so that not one died afterwards.”<sup>11</sup> The Common Council met, debated, and fumed throughout much of the winter that Jews had arrived without its permission. In January 1734 it reiterated demands that London’s Jewish commissioners return their licenses and remove the Jewish settlers from the colony. It was too late. By December 1733 Oglethorpe had assigned plots of land to fourteen men, and the Jewish arrivals began their new lives.<sup>12</sup>

Despite sharing a common religion and appearing culturally similar to the Trustees, Oglethorpe, and most other Christians, Savannah’s early Jews hailed from different European countries, spoke different languages, had different historical experiences, and held dissimilar religious customs and practices. Thirty-four of those onboard the William and Sarah were from Portugal and thus of Sephardic background.<sup>13</sup> Dr. Nunes served as the group’s leader, and his personal story sheds light on Portuguese Jewish history and culture prior to Georgia’s colonization.

Dr. Diogo Nunes Ribeiro, as he was known in Portuguese records, belonged to a respected family in the north-central province of Beira. His father served as a procurator of the Customs House and several family members practiced medicine. Among the doctor’s prominent patients were Dominicans at the Lisbon monastery and, according to his daughter’s memoirs, the Portuguese Grand Inquisitor. Unbeknownst to the Christians around him, Nunes lived a secret life. He was a crypto-Jew, like his ancestors for generations before him. The Catholic Church called these people marranos, or pigs.<sup>14</sup>

Nunes's story is part of the complex but fascinating history of Jews on the Iberian Peninsula. In 1492 the Spanish crown completed a four-century-long reconquest of Spain from the Moors, which included forced conversions of its Jews, by compelling the remaining Jewish community to adopt Catholicism or leave the country.<sup>15</sup> Thousands of Jews converted publicly but practiced Judaism behind closed doors. Approximately half of the 100,000 people who chose exile instead of conversion fled to Portugal, but within five years Spain's intolerance had spread across its western border.<sup>16</sup>

In 1497 King Manoel I, seeking to marry Ferdinand's and Isabella's daughter, prohibited Jewish emigration and began forced conversions in Portugal. Promising not to investigate the personal lives of these "New Christians" too closely, Manoel inadvertently fostered development of a large crypto-Jewish community. Crypto-Jews dropped most overt Jewish symbols in order to maintain secrecy. Circumcision, prayer books and shawls (tallisim), Torah scrolls, mezuzahs, several public festivals, and the ritual slaughter of animals could not be maintained under close scrutiny. For centuries, Portugal's secret Jews remained cut off from European Jewish life and thus developed religious practices based upon increasingly diluted traditions and curious Jewish-Catholic hybrids passed orally from one generation to the next.<sup>17</sup>

Loose oversight of Portugal's New Christians lasted barely forty years. In 1536 the Inquisition spread to Portugal. For the next three centuries, it sought to root out people who had lapsed back to Judaism or, worse, those who actively encouraged others to return to their ancient faith (judaisers). In 1702 a New Christian arrested and tortured by the Inquisition denounced Nunes as a fellow judaiser. According to the man's secret testimony, Nunes "had persuaded him to declare his faith in the Law of Moses, in which they would save their souls." An August 1703 warrant for his arrest and the seizure of his property opened a floodgate of new accusations from

other New Christians in the Inquisition's custody. One person claimed that Nunes had disclosed his faith to her and had "spoken of the Great Fast (Kipur) and its dispensatory value." Another stated that he had told him about the "Passover of the Hebrews which ought to be kept for 2 or 3 days beforehand." Someone else declared that the doctor came to her house on a medical call "whereat certain practices took place and they declared their faith in the Law of Moses, by keeping sabbaths, not eating pork or shell-fish."<sup>18</sup>

In October 1703 Inquisition officials formally charged Nunes with judaising. According to Inquisitional records, he had separated himself from the Catholic faith, rejected the Trinity and Christ as the true Messiah, and observed various Jewish practices. Nunes denied the charges and attempted to mount a defense against his many secret accusers. Working blindly to reconstruct a list of those who might have enmity toward him, he correctly identified informants with whom he previously had quarreled and attempted to explain the petty motivations for their charges.<sup>19</sup>

Nunes finally succumbed to mounting pressure in July 1704, confessed to twenty acts of judaising, and repented. He admitted that approximately fifteen years earlier another judaiser had convinced him to believe in the Law of Moses and, though he could not practice Jewish ceremonies faithfully, to separate himself from the Catholic faith. He also reported that his own father had urged him to return to the family's ancient faith. A month later, Nunes suffered torture on the rack because he had failed to implicate his wife as an accomplice and others with whom he had clandestinely worshiped. In a September 1704 final judgment, the Inquisitional court upheld its charges against him but offered leniency in punishment. In the presence of Portugal's Inquisitor-General, Nunes publicly renounced his heresies. He swore to keep the events of his arrest, incarceration, and trial secret, and he received the holy sacrament. On

November 6, 1704, fifteen months after his original arrest, he was conditionally released from prison but confined indefinitely to Lisbon. The Inquisition had treated Nunes mercifully.<sup>20</sup>

In the days following his ordeal, officials forced the doctor to give testimony against his wife, her parents, and various other relatives. The scope of new denunciations troubled the Lisbon Inquisition. At the September 1705 auto da fe in which his family was punished, one victim was burned at the stake and sixty-five given lesser sentences.<sup>21</sup> During the eighteenth century's first two decades, the Inquisition punished some 2,126 people in Portugal for practicing Judaism. Most received penances and imprisonment, but thirty-seven were burned.<sup>22</sup>

Faced with ever increasing oppression, at least 1,500 impoverished Portuguese Jews contracted with British and Dutch sea captains for secret passage to England between 1700 and 1735. London's Bevis Marks Synagogue paid the way for most refugees and supported them after their arrival. Nunes helped as well. His nephew and countless others fled thanks to his generosity. Finally, sometime in late spring 1726, Nunes and seventeen family members boarded a British brigantine anchored in the Tagus River and joined a growing flood escaping persecution in Portugal for religious freedom in England. For a short time he practiced medicine among Bevis Marks's poor. Five years later, he and his extended family comprised one-third of the William and Sarah's passengers. Other once-secret Portuguese Jews accounted for all but eight of the remaining forty-one settlers to Georgia in July 1733.<sup>23</sup>

Far less is known of the specific European origins or experiences of the non-Sephardic Jews that arrived with Nunes.<sup>24</sup> Abraham Minis and family, Benjamin Sheftall and his wife Perla, and bachelor Jacob Yowel were Ashkenazim -- members of the branch of European Jews, historically Yiddish-speaking, who settled in northwest Europe, initially on the banks of the Rhine.<sup>25</sup> Minis probably was born in England, though his family likely had migrated westward



from a German state, and Benjamin Sheftall came from Frankfurt an der Oder in Prussia to London about 1730.<sup>26</sup>

No records detail the Sheftalls, Minises, or Yowels in Central Europe, but broad strokes can paint the environment in which they and their families lived before migrating to England sometime prior to 1732. Within the German states, Jews were spread unevenly, living in clusters of several dozen to several hundred people. Ninety percent of these Jews concentrated in small towns or villages where noblemen granted the community rights of residence and physical protection in return for high taxes.<sup>27</sup>

For their economic survival Jews depended almost entirely on trade, yet the ability to earn a living in this sphere was subject to severe limitations. Most crafts were closed to Jews, with the exception of those associated with the Jewish community's basic needs: kosher slaughtering, baking, and making articles for worship. Because officials also prohibited Jews from owning land, earning a living in agriculture was seriously curtailed. Jews clustered in irregular or distressed trades such as second-hand clothing, pawn brokering, peddling, and money lending. Since laws ordinarily prevented Jews from keeping shops, they had to seek out customers or trade illegally from their homes.<sup>28</sup> In rural areas they served as dealers in agricultural products and manufactured goods by exporting produce and livestock to market, importing finished wares required by farmers, and providing needed credit. In poorer regions, city merchants were not likely to grant small-scale and risky loans to unknown debtors or to accept produce in place of cash; therefore, many smallholders depended on Jewish middlemen for the movement of crops and credit between rural and urban areas.<sup>29</sup>

Jewish businessmen's intermediary role in the age of mercantilism made them an indispensable element throughout the German states. Unlike Catholic religious leaders, rabbinic

scholars did not denigrate commerce and the profit motive, and thus historically Jews had engaged in commercial pursuits. The weakness of an indigenous capitalist and entrepreneurial class in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germanic states prompted princes and government officials to encourage limited Jewish settlement in their territories and to elevate a few Jewish businessmen to positions of economic power within their courts. Here, Jews drew upon an expansive network of coreligionists across central Europe to provide horses, cattle, and other goods during times of war and to serve as sources for diamonds and precious metals to fund the lavish lifestyles and political machinations of their absolutist monarchs. Horse-trading was an exclusive and prestigious position for a Jewish trader, as every prince wanted a good stable of horses for both civilian and military use.<sup>30</sup>

Virulent antisemitism and Jews' commercial and credit dealings contributed to constant friction in their relationship with the Christian population, especially the peasantry. Smallholders' seasonal needs often required that they seek loans, yet the uncertainties of a good harvest called into question their ability to repay. The association of Jewish creditors with economic ruin lay just below the surface in peasant consciousness and easily erupted into violence during times of crisis.<sup>31</sup> Economic, social, and political dislocations caused by military conflict also threatened Jews. During the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) soldiers looted homes and synagogues and killed thousands of Jews across Central Europe. Bloodthirsty Cossacks swept through Eastern Europe in 1648 wreaking havoc in Jewish areas. Jews flooded westward, only to kindle resentment and anger in their new German homes.<sup>32</sup>

In a world of religious antipathies, economic inequalities, and personal uncertainties, seventeenth-century German Jews found solace in their synagogues and other communal institutions. Unlike Portugal, where Jews practiced secretly, Jewish activities in Central Europe

occurred openly. The synagogue served as the center of communal life, offering a focal point for worship, study, and celebration. Weddings and other joyous occasions took place in the courtyard, and dress and residential clustering in the Judengassen (Jews' Alleys) made Jews highly visible to their Christian neighbors. The nobility supported Jewish life by sanctioning Landjudenschaften, corporate self-governing bodies set up to administer Jewish affairs autonomously in each region. Led by a lay board, the communal organization regulated Jews' religious, social, and economic lives. Torah study and strict adherence to ancient Jewish customs, including dietary restrictions and Sabbath and holiday observance, were the norm. Frankfurt an der Oder, Benjamin Sheftall's home, contained a prestigious center of rabbinic learning and a publisher of Jewish texts.<sup>33</sup>

Two distinct Jewish cultures collided in early eighteenth-century London. Minis, Sheftall, and Yowel felt at home at the German-speaking, orthodox Great Synagogue, located in the heart of the Jewish quarter for Ashkenazim, Duke's Place.<sup>34</sup> Nunes and four other Sephardic families that later sailed to Savannah affiliated with the city's Bevis Marks congregation, founded by fellow crypto-Jews in the early seventeenth century. Here fathers and sons underwent ritual circumcision, and husbands and wives remarried according to Jewish law.<sup>35</sup> These actions reveal their desire to put secrecy behind them and to sanctify their reunion with Judaism, but they could not erase centuries of isolation. Many crypto-Jews found it hard to adapt to the Orthodox Judaism practiced in London. Life in the colonies offered a chance to start again.

In the first years following settlement in Georgia, cultural differences between the Ashkenazim and Sephardim threatened to tear Savannah Jewry asunder. Some of the dissimilarities were linguistic. Minis, Sheftall, and Yowel felt most comfortable in German or a

German-Hebrew hybrid.<sup>36</sup> The Portuguese knew neither. The arrival of seventy-eight Lutheran refugees from Salzburg in March 1734 reveals that the Ashkenazim had more in common with their fellow Germans than fellow Jews. The Salzburger received a welcome from Benjamin Sheftall, and either Minis or Yowell.<sup>37</sup> The Reverend John Martin Boltzius, leader of the Salzburger, noted in his journal the warm reception given to his flock by the two Jews and his future plans for them: “These Jews show a great love for us, and have promised to see us at our settlement, we hope we will preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ to them with good success. They are both born in Germany and speak good German.”<sup>38</sup>

John Wesley shared Boltzius’s goal for Savannah Jews’ conversion, and he recognized Jews’ linguistic differences. As an emissary of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, Wesley was expected to convert to Anglican Christianity people belonging to other faiths. To this end, he familiarized himself with Richard Kidder’s The Demonstration of the Messias. In Which the Truth of the Christian Religion is defended, especially against the Jews and “began learning Spanish in order to converse with my Jewish parishioners; some of whom seem nearer the mind that was in Christ than many of those who called him Lord.”<sup>39</sup> It is unclear whether Wesley meant that Jews already attended Anglican services or simply that he sought to bring them within the fold. Either way, speaking English to the Sephardim would not suffice. Nunes served as his Spanish teacher, friend, and confidante throughout his short time in Savannah, though no evidence exists that Wesley had any success with his missionary efforts among the group.<sup>40</sup>

Other Christian leaders encountered early Savannah Jews and commented on their internal divisions. In July 1735 Reverend S. Quincy reported from Savannah to his Church of England mission headquarters in London on the Sephardim’s and Ashkenazim’s differing levels

of religiosity. The Portuguese, he believed, had professed Christianity in Portugal or the Caribbean for some time and had dispensed with many Jewish practices. In fact, two young men sometimes came to his church, and thus some people thought them Christians. Quincy could not find out their true religious beliefs, “only that their education in these Countries where they were oblig’d to appear as Christians makes them less rigid and stiff in their way.” He believed that the German Jews were much stricter in their religious practices and observance of Jewish law and unlikely to convert. “Their kindness shew’d to Mr. Boltzius and the Saltzburgers [sic], was owing to the Good temper and humanity of the people, and not to any inclination to Change their religion,” he opined.<sup>41</sup>

The Reverend Boltzius noted that some Jews referred to themselves as Spanish and Portuguese while others called themselves German Jews. The latter spoke “High German” and differed from the former in their religious services and in “other matters as well.” In particular, the Spanish did not adhere closely to Jewish dietary laws and religious ceremonies.<sup>42</sup> In another letter Boltzius wrote that the German Jews wanted to be on good terms with their fellow countrymen and had done them small favors time and again. But as far as religion was concerned, they were unwilling to abandon Judaism, the Salzburgers’ efforts to proselytize notwithstanding.<sup>43</sup>

Differences in language and religiosity may have hindered close relations, but they did not prevent Portuguese and German factions from uniting to preserve Judaism in Savannah. Ironically, the various proselytizing efforts underfoot may have pushed the two groups together.<sup>44</sup> In July 1735, following nearly two years of informal worship services held in people’s homes, Savannah’s Ashkenazic and Sephardic settlers formally gathered to establish Congregation Mickve Israel (Hope of Israel). Continuing in temporary quarters for several more

years, Reverend Boltzius reported that services moved to “an old miserable hut” on Market Square (now Ellis Square), where “men and women [sat] separated” and “a boy speaking several languages and especially good in Hebrew is their reader and is paid for his services.”<sup>45</sup> The young congregation received a second Torah, a Hanukkah menorah, and books from London’s Sephardic community. Benjamin Sheftall purchased land for a Jewish cemetery to bury his infant son according to religious custom, and Savannah’s third Jewish institution, a mikvah (ritual bath) was opened for the congregation’s use on April 2, 1738.<sup>46</sup>

Establishing a congregation, cemetery, and ritual bath proved relatively easy compared with efforts to erect a synagogue. Reverend Boltzius recorded the years of strife in his correspondence. The Jews “want to build a Synagogue, but the Spanish and German Jews cannot come to terms. I do not know the special reason for this,” he wrote in February 1738. The next year he elaborated. “They have no Synagogue, which is their own fault; the one element hindering the other in this regard. The German Jews believed themselves entitled to build a Synagogue and are willing to allow the Spanish Jews to use it with them in common; the latter, however, reject any such arrangement and demand preference for themselves.”<sup>47</sup>

Precise reasons for the strife cannot be known for certain, but cultural differences likely dominated.<sup>48</sup> More permanent and thus more significant than informal gatherings in people’s homes, the design and operation of a synagogue generated heated debate and intractable divisions. Ashkenazim and Sephardim follow the same basic tenets of Judaism (both view the Babylonian Talmud as their ultimate authority), but significant variations exist in matters of detail and outlook. During worship services, the Torah scrolls are raised at different times in the service, the sanctuary’s seating and ark placement have different arrangements, the prayers and their melodies vary in detail, even the Hebrew is not pronounced the same.<sup>49</sup> Given these and

other significant cultural distinctions, heated arguments and deadlock on the look and function of a synagogue erupted between factions.

Ironically, a synagogue in Savannah mattered little to the divided factions just a few years later. Despite the addition of thirty-nine Sephardic immigrants from London and the birth of some twenty Jewish children in Georgia between 1733 and 1740, Savannah's Jewish population disintegrated in 1741.<sup>50</sup> Threat of a Spanish invasion of Georgia during the War of Jenkins' Ear (1739-1742) haunted the Portuguese Jews and precipitated the community's collapse. Reminded of their ancestors' experiences, the Sephardim worried that should Spain conquer the colony, religious persecution would spread to Georgia. Nunes, now seventy-two years old, along with his son and daughter left for Charleston in August 1740. Others soon followed or went to New York. Only the German Sheftall and Minis families remained.<sup>51</sup> Not until 1774 would Savannah Jewry again meet for religious services.

In the decades preceding the American Revolution, Benjamin Sheftall and Abraham Minis prospered. Although both men began in Georgia as farmers, within a short time they had become merchants. In Minis's case, frequent flooding of his land made a life in agriculture unprofitable. In 1736 he began buying beef, pork, and butter from New York to sell to Thomas Causton, the colony's keeper of public stores. During the conflict between Spain and England in 1742, he traveled to New York City to purchase supplies, which he transported to Oglethorpe's forces at Fort Frederica on St. Simons Island.<sup>52</sup> As early as 1752, Sheftall referred to himself as a "storekeeper," and after 1760 legal documents consistently termed him a merchant.

Benjamin's son Mordecai achieved considerable success as a merchant and large landowner. By the early 1760s he engaged in timbering, saw milling, shipping, and selling manufactured goods

from the Sheftall family's store. Mordecai's half-brother Levi developed a successful tannery near the city in the 1770s.<sup>53</sup>

In 1750 Benjamin Sheftall joined four other men to found the St. George's (or Union) Society to further the education of orphan children. The name "Union" was adopted after the first few years to emphasize that its founders subscribed to varying religions yet were united around the brotherhood of man.<sup>54</sup> The organization's rules commanded members to contribute two pence weekly for the support of an orphan house, to hold regular meetings, and to celebrate the group's anniversary on April 23.<sup>55</sup>

With the outbreak of the Revolution, the city's small Jewish population was well situated economically and socially to hold positions of leadership. Mordecai Sheftall allied himself with Savannah Whigs and served as chairman of the Savannah Parochial Committee (similar to a county Committee of Safety) from 1775 to 1778. Levi Sheftall and Philip Minis (Abraham's son) assisted in the same body. In 1777 Mordecai received a commission as deputy commissary general of the Continental troops in Georgia and South Carolina, as well as commissary general of the Georgia troops, positions that made him a member of the Georgia General Staff. The following year, Maj. Gen. Robert Howe promoted Sheftall, removing the deputy status. Providing troops with food and supplies proved especially difficult because of a lack of public funds throughout the war. In some instances Mordecai purchased goods with his own money and extended credit to the state and federal governments. Philip Minis lent almost \$11,000 to the Revolutionary forces, funds that paid salaries and provisions for troops from North Carolina and Virginia.<sup>56</sup>

A sermon by Presbyterian minister John J. Zubly before the Georgia Provincial Congress in July 1775 suggests reasons why Jews actively participated in the colony's struggle for



independence and why Georgia conferred important leadership positions on some of them.

Zubly admonished the spirit of submission that other religious leaders had preached: “As to the Jewish religion it cannot be charged with favoring despotism. The whole system of that religion is so replete with laws against injustice and oppression; and by one of its rites it proclaimed liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof.”<sup>57</sup>

The Sheftalls’ and Minises’ unfailing commitment to the Revolution caused them considerable hardship during the war. Most Jews, including Philip Minis, his wife and three children, and Levi Sheftall and family fled to safety shortly before British troops captured Savannah in December 1778. In doing so, they left homes and businesses to an uncertain fate. Mordecai Sheftall and his fifteen-year-old son Sheftall Sheftall remained behind to fight the British, and Mordecai continued his responsibilities as commissary. They were soon captured and imprisoned on board the British prison ship Nancy anchored in the river, in the British-held town of Sunbury, Georgia, and later on the island of St. Johns in Antigua. Upon their release two years later, they moved to the American-held city of Philadelphia where they established ties with local Jews. In autumn 1779 Levi Sheftall and Philip Minis agreed to serve as guides for Commander Charles-Hector (Count d’) Estaing and the French fleet during his ill-fated attempt to recapture Savannah. With the fall of Charleston in May 1780 Levi was again on the move-- this time to Petersburg, Virginia. Distraught over separation from his family, he accepted a British offer of amnesty, returned to Charleston, and swore loyalty to the king. Savannah’s Jews endured the rest of the war scattered in Georgia, Charleston, and Philadelphia.<sup>58</sup>

The departure of British troops from Savannah in December 1782 enabled residents who had fled to return. Mordecai Sheftall and family came back after two years in Philadelphia. While in Pennsylvania, he had purchased the schooner Hetty with several associates, had her

outfitted as a privateer, and captured one British ship as a prize.<sup>59</sup> Back in Georgia, he resumed his Savannah mercantile business and began a campaign to clear Levi of charges that he was a Tory. In August 1785 Levi regained his citizenship and recommenced business activities. Rather than return to tanning and butchering, he used slave labor to develop farmland and timberland. Both Mordecai and Levi were elected to governmental positions following independence: Levi to alderman and fire master; Mordecai to city magistrate, warden, and state legislator.<sup>60</sup>

By 1785 the Minis and Sheftall families were no longer alone. Sephardim settled Savannah again and reconstituted a community moribund for over four decades. Dr. Nunes's sons Moses and Daniel were among the returnees, but most were newcomers. In 1786 the community reestablished Congregation Mickve Israel under shared leadership, and a synagogue opened in a rented house in Broughton Street Lane. Philip Minis and Levi Sheftall served as the congregation's president and trustee, respectively. David Nunes Cardozo held the treasurer's position, and Emanuel De la Motta officiated during prayers. After learning of the incorporation of both an Episcopal and Congregational church by the Georgia General Assembly in late 1789, Mordecai Sheftall recommended in August 1790 that the Jews take advantage of Georgia's religious tolerance and apply for a charter for Mickve Israel. The congregation's adjunta (governing board) authorized Sheftall to appeal to Governor Edward Telfair, who in November 1790 granted the request.<sup>61</sup>

The rules and regulations governing Mickve Israel, written immediately following incorporation, suggest that the Ashkenazim and Sephardim had learned the art of accommodation. First and foremost, Mickve Israel followed examples set in colonial New York, Newport, and Charleston by adopting the Sephardic mode of worship. On the matter of religious

observance inside and outside the synagogue, traditional Judaism prevailed. Men and women sat in separate sections of the sanctuary during services. Those who did not keep the Sabbath were subject to denial of synagogue honors. Engaging in business on the Sabbath or holidays was forbidden. The congregation prohibited its members from marrying outside the faith, and the offspring of mixed marriages were denied a Jewish burial. Finally, the board expected seat holders to eat kosher meat exclusively. The constitution gave the adjunta power to punish transgressors. In March 1792 the synagogue president and board members summoned Isaac Pollock, a Savannah merchant, to appear before them and explain why he had opened his store on the Sabbath.<sup>62</sup> Three years later, in 1895, the adjunta voted to deny two men the right to interment in the Jewish cemetery until they made “such concessions as the parnass [president] and adjunta shall think proper.”<sup>63</sup>

What factors facilitated cooperation between Savannah’s German and Portuguese Jews in 1790 where dissension had been predominant in the 1730s? Definitive answers are elusive, but it is likely that the composition of the Sephardim in the latter period played a role. Although the Sheftall and Minis families still comprised the bulk of the city’s German Jews, the Portuguese-Jewish population was almost entirely different in the post-Revolutionary period. Most of the original Sephardic settlers, described by the Reverends Boltzius and S. Quincy as nonreligious and confrontational, do not appear on the roster of Mickve Israel’s charter members. The dozen or so Sephardic households that purchased pews after incorporation were mostly South Carolina natives and apparently held more conciliatory views and traditional Jewish beliefs than the founding generation.

The influences of time, space, and shared experiences in America also seem to have dampened differences. Portuguese and German Jews lived far from their native lands. Neither

Germany's Landjudenschaften nor Portugal's Inquisitional courts guided Jewish practice in America. Instead, a half-century of face-to-face interaction, a revolution against the British, and the reality of religious freedom fostered a new American national identity.<sup>64</sup> Mickve Israel's membership reveals the continuity of interaction. Of the twenty Jewish household heads located in the 1830 federal census, fourteen were congregants or the children of members in 1793.<sup>65</sup>

Intermarriage between the two groups also played a role in lessening differences and building understanding. With relatively few Ashkenazic Jews in America in the eighteenth century, the Minis and Sheftall families married Sephardim.<sup>66</sup> Levi Sheftall married Sarah De la Motta, daughter of Emanuel, in 1768; Mordecai Sheftall and Frances Hart married in Charleston; and Philip Minis wed Judith Pollock of Newport, Rhode Island, in 1774.<sup>67</sup> As distinctions between the groups broke down and cultures fused, compromise and cooperation increased. It was possible by 1800 to regard the city's Jews as a small, relatively cohesive ethnic community.

At the turn of the nineteenth century Temple Mickve Israel had a dozen families, though numbers increased to eighty persons thirty years later. This growth paralleled Savannah's own development. The city's population increased 50 percent, from 5,166 in 1800 to 7,776 in 1830.<sup>68</sup> The community's expanding size, cooperation among its members, and their increasing financial resources permitted synagogue leaders to begin planning construction of a place of worship. In March 1820 a building committee, comprising Abraham DeLyon, David Leion, Moses and Sheftall Sheftall, and Jacob De la Motta received a grant of land from the city--a lot at the corner of Whitaker Street and Perry Lane--and within four months Savannah's first synagogue was completed.<sup>69</sup> On June 23, 1820, acting cantor Jacob De la Motta led a processional into the new building.

De la Motta's address to the congregation that day demonstrates the existence of a Jewish community with an increasingly shared history and identity in America: "Assembled as we are, to re-establish by commemoration, the Congregation of this remnant, or small portion of the house of Israel; your expectation of a brief sketch of our History, and particularly as connected with a primeval residence in this City, and for many year past . . . shall be realized; and may I trust, it will not be uninteresting, as it will include the well known fact, that many Jews struggled, and sacrificed their dearest interest, for the independence of this county." <sup>70</sup>

The Jews' long history, De la Motta insisted, had much in common with the experience of all Americans: "The dawn of the Revolution, opened to their view, new scenes; and they revolved in their minds, the condition of their forefathers, who toiled and suffered under the yoke of servitude, during the reign of Pharaoh. . . . Resolving to separate from the standard of Tyranny, they united with freemen for the general good; [and] contended for the independence of the states." <sup>71</sup> The successful overthrow of British rule and passage of a Constitution codified religious tolerance and protected Savannah Jews' right to practice their religion: "It is here, that we are reasonably to expect the enjoyment of those rewards for our constancy and sufferings, as promised by the word of God, when he declared he would not forsake us." To merit the continuation of God's favor and ensure a completion of His promise, De la Motta called for a "rigid adherence to his commandments, and an undeviating pursuit of that path, which by his protection, leads to that external and exalted kingdom, the haven of benignity." <sup>72</sup>

Rhetoric aside, De la Motta's sermon conveyed an important message. Jews had found freedom from religious persecution in America, but with that liberty came considerable change. Nearly one hundred years in Savannah had transformed its Jewish population. From two factions with different national and linguistic backgrounds and religious practices, a relatively

cohesive community had taken shape. If in the 1730s Savannah's German Jews appeared more in common with the Salzburgers than their Portuguese coreligionists, by the 1820s economic growth, kinship ties, and the Revolution increasingly had brought Jews together for worship and fellowship. Many of these Jews and their descendants would remain in Savannah throughout the antebellum period, to be joined by increasing numbers of arrivals from South Carolina, Germany, and then Eastern Europe.<sup>73</sup> Savannah Jewry would again face considerable internal tension. Eighteenth-century conflict between the Portuguese and Germans would seem insignificant compared with the social and religious battles raging between Eastern European and German Jewry in 1900 Savannah.

## Notes

1. According to Malcolm H. Stern's definitive essay, "New Light on the Jewish Settlement of Savannah," American Jewish Historical Quarterly 52 (March 1963): 176, forty-two Jews left London aboard one ship; however, Isaac Nunes Henriques's child died at sea. For citations to earlier, erroneous sources, see Jones, "Sephardim and Ashkenazim Jewish Settlers in Colonial Georgia," 519-22.
2. Lee and Agnew, Historical Record of the City of Savannah, 2-3.
3. Early writings by state and local historians include Capt. Hugh M'Call, The History of Georgia, (1811-1816; rpt. Atlanta, 1969), 34; William Bacon Stevens, A History of Georgia, 2 vols. (1847; rpt. Savannah, 1972), 1:101-104; Charles C. Jones, Jr., The History of Georgia, 2 vols. (Boston, 1883), 1:151-55; William Harden, A History of Savannah and South Georgia, 2 vols. (1913; rpt. Atlanta, 1969), 1:44-52; and F. D. Lee and J. L. Agnew, Historical Record of the City of Savannah (Savannah, 1869), 2-9.  
  
American Jewish historians have also written on the topic. See Leon Hühner, "The Jews of Georgia in Colonial Times," Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society 10 (1902): 65-95; Hühner, "The Jews of Georgia from the Outbreak of the American Revolution to the Close of the 18th Century," Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society 17 (1909): 89-108; Edmund H. Abrahams, "Some Notes on the Early History of the Sheftalls of Georgia," Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society 17 (1909): 167-86; Abram Vossen Goodman, American Overture: Jewish Rights in Colonial Times (Philadelphia, 1947), 168-200; W. Guenther Plaut, "Two Notes on the History of the Jews in America," Hebrew Union College Annual 14 (1939): 575-82.

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4. See David T. Morgan, "Judaism in Eighteenth-Century Georgia," The Georgia Historical Quarterly 58 (Spring 1974): 41-54; John McKay Sheftall, "The Sheftalls of Savannah: Colonial Leaders and Founding Fathers of Georgia Judaism," in Jews of the South: Selected Essays from the Southern Jewish Historical Society, ed. Samuel Proctor and Louis Schmier with Malcolm Stern (Macon, Ga., 1984), 65-78; B. H. Levy, "The Early History of Georgia's Jews," in Forty Years of Diversity: Essays on Colonial Georgia, ed. Harvey H. Jackson and Phinizy Spalding (Athens, 1984), 163-78; Kaye Kole, The Minis Family of Georgia, 1733-1992 (Savannah, 1992); John C. English, "John Wesley and His 'Jewish Parishioners': Jewish-Christian Relationships in Savannah, Georgia, 1736-1737," Methodist History 36 (July 1998): 220-27; and B. H. Levy, Mordecai Sheftall: Jewish Revolutionary Patriot (Savannah, 1999).
  5. Marcus, Colonial American Jew, 1: 351-52; Levy, "Early History of Georgia's Jews," 164.
  6. On the enormous literature exploring the depth and breadth of European antisemitism, see Susan Sarah Cohen, ed., Antisemitism: An Annotated Bibliography (New York, 1987); Bernard Glassman, Anti-Semitic Stereotypes without Jews: Images of Jews in England, 1290-1700 (Detroit, 1975); Gavin I. Langmuir, History, Religion, and Antisemitism (Berkeley, 1990); Lionel B. Steiman, Paths to Genocide: Antisemitism in Western History (New York, 1998).
  7. John Earl Perceval, Manuscripts of the Earl of Egmont, 3 vols. (London, 1920-23), 1:309, 313.
  8. Robert G. McPherson, ed., The Journal of the Earl of Egmont (Athens, 1962), 12;



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- Marcus, Colonial American Jew, 1:356.
9. Amos Aschbach Ettinger, James Edward Oglethorpe (Oxford, 1936), 137.
  10. Oglethorpe to Trustees, August 12, 1733, in Mills Lane, ed, General Oglethorpe's Georgia: Colonial Letters, 1733-1743, 2 vols. (Savannah, 1975), 1:19-23.
  11. Lee and Agnew, Historical Record of the City of Savannah, 8-9; R. D. Barnett, "Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribeiro and The Settlement of Georgia," in Migration and Settlement: Papers on Anglo-American Jewish History (London, 1971): 63-97; Manuscripts of the Earl of Egmont, I:440.
  12. Ettinger, James Edward Oglethorpe, 137; Allen D. Candler, The Colonial Records of the State of Georgia, 26 vols. (Atlanta, 1904-1916), 1:75; E. Merton Coulter and Albert B. Saye, eds. A List of the Early Settlers of Georgia (Athens, Ga., 1949). It appears that the fourteen Jews who received land from Oglethorpe had purchased it. On this point, see Levy, "Early History of Georgia's Jews," 168.
  13. The word "Sephardic" originates from "Sepharad," the usual Hebrew designation for the Iberian Peninsula. Sephardic Jews descend from those who lived in Spain or Portugal before the expulsion of 1492.
  14. Richard D. Barnett, "Zipra Nunes's Story," in A Bicentennial Festschrift for Jacob Rader Marcus, ed. Bertram Wallace Korn (New York, 1976), 49.
  15. An enormous literature exists on the Jews of Spain. See Robert Singerman, comp., Spanish and Portuguese Jewry: A Classified Bibliography (Westport, Conn., 1993). The best recent overview is Jane S. Gerber, The Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience (New York, 1992).

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16. David M. Gitlitz, Secrecy and Deceit: The Religion of the Crypto-Jews (Philadelphia, 1996), 74.
  17. The most comprehensive treatment of crypto-Jewish religious practices appears in Gitlitz, Secrecy and Deceit. Other good sources include Norman Roth, Conversos, Inquisition, and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain (Madison, Wis., 1995); B. Netanyahu, 3rd ed., The Marranos of Spain from the Late 14th to the Early 16th Century (Ithaca, N.Y., 1999); and Michael Alpert, Crypto-Judaism and the Spanish Inquisition (New York, 2001).
  18. Barnett, "Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribeiro," 66-68.
  19. Ibid., 69-71.
  20. Ibid., 71-72.
  21. An auto da fe (Act of Faith) was a public ceremony intended to show the Church's majesty and the convicted heretic's debasement. On an announced day, people gathered in a city's principal plaza to watch accused prisoners in penitential garments hear their offenses and receive their penance. See Gitlitz, Secrecy and Deceit, 21.
  22. Barnett, "Zipra Nunes's Story," 47-50.
  23. Barnett, "Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribeiro," 77-79, 84; Richard Barnett, "Dr. Jacob de Castro Sarmiento and Sephardim in Medical Practice in 18th-Century London," in Jewish Historical Society of England. Transactions, 36 vols. (London, 1982): XXVII: 90, 110-11; Stern, "New Light on the Jewish Settlement of Savannah," 176-77.
  24. Malcolm H. Stern, "The Sheftall Diaries: Vital Records of Savannah Jewry (1733-1808)," American Jewish Historical Quarterly 54 (March 1965): 246-47, offers no details on the family's life prior to arrival.

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25. Encyclopaedia Judaica, 16 vols. (Jerusalem, 1971), 3:719.
  26. Sheftall, "The Sheftalls of Savannah: Colonial Leaders and Founding Fathers of Georgia Judaism," 66; Kaye Kole, The Minis Family of Georgia, 1733-1992 (Savannah, 1992), 3; B. H. Levy, Mordecai Sheftall: Jewish Revolutionary Patriot (Savannah, 1999), 1, 3.
  27. Mordecai Breuer and Michael Graetz, German-Jewish History in Modern Times, ed. Michael A. Meyer, 4 vols. (New York, 1996), 1:82, 191.
  28. David S. Landes, "The Jewish Merchant: Typology and Stereotypology in Germany," Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook 19 (1974): 11-13; Breuer and Graetz, German-Jewish History in Modern Times, 1:27-43.
  29. Monika Richarz, "Emancipation and Continuity: German Jews in the Rural Economy," in Revolution and Evolution: 1848 in German-Jewish History, ed. Werner E. Mosse, Arnold Pauker, and Reinhard Rürup (Tübingen, Germany, 1981), 95-96; Werner J. Cahnman, "Village and Small-Town Jews in Germany: A Typological Study," Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook 19 (1974): 111.
  30. Werner E. Mosse, Jews in the German Economy: The German-Jewish Elite, 1820-1935 (Oxford, 1987), 24-29; Richarz, "Emancipation and Continuity," 99; Hasia R. Diner, A Time for Gathering: The Second Generation, 1820-1880 (Baltimore, 1992), 11. For a discussion of court Jews' roles in the German economy, see Breuer and Graetz, German-Jewish History in Modern Times, 1:104-26.
  31. William Zvi Tannenbaum, "From Community to Citizenship: The Jews of Rural Franconia, 1801-1862" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1989), 224.
  32. Breuer and Graetz, German-Jewish History in Modern Times, 1:97-98.

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33. Ibid., I:166-224.
34. Vivian D. Lipman, Three Centuries of Anglo-Jewish History (Cambridge, 1961), 54; Todd M. Endelman, The Jews of Georgian England, 1714-1830 (Philadelphia, 1979), 47; Cecil Roth, The Great Synagogue, London, 1690-1940 (London, 1950), 144. Meticulous records kept by London's Sephardic congregation contain no references to Sheftall, Minis, or Yowell, suggesting that if they belonged to a synagogue, it was Ashkenazic.
35. "R. D. Barnett, ed., "The Circumcision Register of Isaac and Abraham de Paiba (1715-1775)" in Bevis Marks Records, 6 vols. (Oxford, 1940-97), 4:61, 62, 71; Barnett, "Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribeiro," 79, 81-82; Stern, "New Light on the Jewish Settlement of Savannah," 175-76; Richard D. Barnett and Abraham Levy, The Bevis Marks Synagogue (Oxford, 1970), 10. A sixth Sephardic couple on the William and Sarah remarried in Amsterdam.
36. Benjamin Sheftall (1691-1765) and his son Levi (1739-1809) kept a diary in Juedisch-Deutsch (Yiddish) from 1733 to 1808. The original did not survive, but two English translations may be found in the Keith Reid Collection at the University of Georgia library. For an annotated version of the two diaries, see Stern, "Sheftall Diaries: Vital Records of Savannah Jewry," 243-77.
37. Stern, "New Light on the Jewish Settlement of Savannah," 184.
38. Boltzius journal entries of March 14, 20, 1734, quoted in Hühner, "Jews of Georgia in Colonial Times," 75-76.
39. John Wesley, The Journal of John Wesley, ed. Percy Livingstone Parker (Chicago, 1952), 43.

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40. English, "John Wesley and His 'Jewish Parishioners,'" 222-23.
  41. Quoted in Stern, "New Light on the Jewish Settlement of Savannah," 184.
  42. Letter from Boltzius dated July 3, 1939, in Hühner, "Jews of Georgia in Colonial Times," 76-77.
  43. Stern, "New Light on the Jewish Settlement of Savannah," 186.
  44. Ibid., 185; Morgan, "Judaism in Eighteenth-Century Georgia," 43.
  45. Quote in Levy, "Early History of Georgia's Jews," 169.
  46. Saul Jacob Rubin, Third to None: The Saga of Savannah Jewry, 1733-1983 (Savannah, 1983), 5; Sheftall, "Sheftalls of Savannah," 68.
  47. Quoted in Levy, "Early History of Georgia's Jews," 170; Stern, "New Light on the Jewish Settlement of Savannah," 185.
  48. Several scholars have cited the social and economic elitism in London's Sephardic community c. 1700 and later Sephardic exclusivity in America to explain early Savannah tensions. As Savannah's Portuguese and German Jews arrived in similar economic conditions and without much exposure to Europe's Sephardic community or its prejudices, this reasoning seems unconvincing. See Jones, "Sephardim and Ashkenazim Jewish Settlers in Colonial Georgia," 531, 536; and Morgan, "Judaism in Eighteenth-Century Georgia," 44.
  49. Encyclopaedia Judaica, 14:1168-70.
  50. Stern, "New Light on the Jewish Settlement of Savannah," 181-82. At least ten ships brought Jews from London to Savannah between 1733 and 1738, including arrivals on November 12 and December 30, 1733. Philip Minis, born July 11, 1734, is considered

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- the first white male child conceived and born in Georgia. See Kole, Minis Family of Georgia, 24.
51. Ibid., 193; Barnett, Dr. Samuel Nunes Ribeiro and the Settlement of Georgia,” 87-88. Jacob Yowell had died in September 1736.
52. Kole, Minis Family of Georgia, 3-4; Stern, “New Light on the Jewish Settlement of Savannah,” 188-89.
53. Sheftall, “Sheftalls of Georgia,” 69, 71-72. Mordecai Sheftall’s life is told in considerable detail in the Georgia Historical Society publication Mordecai Sheftall: Jewish Revolutionary Patriot.
54. Hühner, “Jews of Georgia from the Outbreak of the American Revolution to the Close of the 18th Century,” 90.
55. Lee and Agnew, Historical Record of the City of Savannah, 19, 25, 183-85.
56. Sheftall, “Sheftalls of Georgia,” 73; Kole, Minis Family of Georgia, 25; Levy, Mordecai Sheftall, 65.
57. Hühner, “Jews of Georgia from the Outbreak of the American Revolution to the Close of the 18th Century,” 89.
58. Ibid., 94, 99-103; Sheftall, “Sheftalls of Georgia,” 74-75; Kole, Minis Family of Georgia, 28.
59. For more on these activities, see Levy, Mordecai Sheftall, 85-88.
60. Ibid., 96-97; Sheftall, “Sheftalls of Georgia,” 76-77.
61. Rubin, Third to None, 39; Morgan, “Judaism in Eighteenth-Century Georgia,” 48; Minutes of Congregation Mickve Israel, August 29, 1790, Savannah Jewish Archives,

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- Georgia Historical Society, Savannah.
62. Morgan, "Judaism in Eighteenth-Century Georgia," 50.
  63. Rubin, Third to None, 47, 50, 52, 55; Jacob Rader Marcus, American Jewry Documents Eighteenth Century (Cincinnati, 1959), 179; Minutes of Congregation Mickve Israel, October 4, 1791, September 17, 1793, September 20, 1795.
  64. Samuel Rezneck, Unrecognized Patriots: The Jews in the American Revolution (Westport, Conn., 1975), 48, 60, 203-04, 221.
  65. Rubin, Third to None, 52; Ira Rosenwaike, On the Edge of Greatness: A Portrait of American Jewry in the Early National Period (Cincinnati, 1985), 156.
  66. Ira Rosenwaike estimates that as late as 1830 approximately 10 percent of Jewish households in America were German. See Rosenwaike On the Edge of Greatness, 39.
  67. Malcolm H. Stern, comp., First American Jewish Families: 600 Genealogies, 1654-1988, 3rd ed. (Baltimore, 1991), 267; Kole, Minis Family of Georgia, 24.
  68. Jacob Rader Marcus, To Count a People: American Jewish Population Data, 1585-1984 (Lanham, Md., 1990), 52-53; Rosenwaike, On the Edge of Greatness, 31; Department of the Interior, Census Office, Report on the Social Statistics of Cities, pt. 2 (Washington, 1887), 173.
  69. Rubin, Third to None, 63-64; Minutes of Congregation Mickve Israel, April 25, 1820.
  70. Morris Schappes, A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States, 1654-1875 (New York, 1950), 151.
  71. Ibid., 153-54.
  72. Ibid., 155.

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73. On nineteenth-century Savannah Jewry, see Mark I. Greenberg, *Creating Ethnic, Class, and Southern Identity in Nineteenth-Century America: The Jews Of Savannah, Georgia, 1830-1880* (Ph.D. diss., University of Florida, 1997); Greenberg, "Becoming Southern: The Jews of Savannah, Georgia, 1830-1870." American Jewish History 86 (March 1998): 55-75; and Greenberg, "Savannah's Jewish Women and the Shaping of Ethnic and Gender Identity, 1830-1900." The Georgia Historical Quarterly 82 (Winter 1998): 751-74.