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The Jews of Charleston...



A Review of the Article "Charleston" in
Vol. 3, of the Jewish Encyclopaedia.



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[Reprinted from The Charleston News and
Courier, December, 1902.]

I have been an enthusiast on the subject of the Jewish Encyclopaedia from its inception. It is an epoch-making work in the history of the Jews and of Judaism, and too much praise cannot be bestowed upon the genius who first promoted it and the publishers whose enterprise has rendered its publication possible. Ten years ago the possibility of carrying a work of such magnitude to successful completion would have been looked upon as a fantastic dream of a visionary. We all rejoice to-day in the fact that the Jewish Encyclopaedia is now a reality. The third volume has just come to hand and is a most welcome addition to its predecessors.

There is one article, however, that disfigures this otherwise excellent volume; an article that is without parallel in the number of errors that it contains, and of errors that could never have been made had the article been entrusted to one who

was in the slightest degree familiar with his subject, or to one, even, who knew enough to use the available materials of others who have pursued the same line of investigation before. I regret that the article happens to be "Charleston."

I would not have gone to the trouble of reviewing this article in detail but for the fact that we are fast approaching the time when the complete story of the Jews in America will have to be written. The Jewish Encyclopaedia is itself going to furnish much of the material for the future historian. When the time comes for this story to be written—and it cannot be delayed much longer—the Jews of Charleston will be found to occupy a far more prominent place in the picture than many now imagine, for Charleston has from the first been marked as a maker of history, and the Jews of Charleston have never been insignificant in the community to which they belonged.

I will now proceed to an examination of this remarkable article—for the article is, in truth, a most remarkable one. It is written by Mr L. Huhner, A. M., LL. B., of New York, contains about a thousand words and more mistakes in those thousand words than I have ever met with in any single volume in the whole course of my reading experience. Mr Huhner is a prominent member of the American Jewish Historical Society, who, I am told, has made a specialty of South Carolina Jewish history. In the bibliography at the end of his article he refers twice to himself—one reference being to an article that is not yet published. It is well that we have it, even if only from Mr Huhner himself, that he is an authority on the subject on which he writes; we certainly would never have suspected it from this specimen of his handiwork.

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The article begins, as an article on Charleston should begin, with the information that Charleston is in South Carolina, which is in the United States. But Mr Huhner cannot even tell that straight. He incidentally notes that it is the "capital of the county of the same name." Such a misuse of terms is surprising in one educated for the Bar. Charleston is the county seat, but not the capital of Charleston County. In America States have capitals and not counties.

Next follow references to the earliest mention of a Jew in Charleston and to Locke's Constitution. Both of these references are absolutely correct and are worthy of special mention on that account. There is little else of which the same can be said.

In the next item we are informed that "in 1702 Jews appeared in numbers and they seem to have influenced a general election." This is very vague, but I will not examine it too closely. Mr Huhner evidently does not understand the quotation from Rivers with reference to the bigoted Dissenters who protested in 1703 against the "Jews aliens" who had voted in the last election. The protest was against the legality of the election and had nothing to do with its result, for the Jewish vote had not affected it.

In the list of the earliest members of Beth Elohim Meshod Tobias appears as "Michael" Tobias; Mordecai Sheftall's name is spelt "Sheftail"—a clear misprint, and Levy Sheftall's name is omitted.

The next item of information is really funny. Moses Lindo is rightly quoted as the most conspicuous man among the Jews of South Carolina in provincial days. Mr Huhner refers to him as "Inspector General for South Carolina!" He evidently takes Lindo for a military man. Any-

one who has read the newspapers of the period knows that Lindo was "His Majesty's inspector general of Indico" (indigo) and later also of tobacco.

We now come to the interesting period of the Revolution. Here Mr Huhner is at his best as a manufacturer of history. At the outbreak of the war, Mr Huhner tells us, the most prominent Jew was Francis Salvador, "who resided near Charleston, and whose remains are interred in the old Charleston Cemetery." Salvador, he further informs us, "was a member of the Colonial Assembly as early as 1774, and of the Provincial Congress as well. He was one of the leading patriots of the South."

This brief notice of Salvador is extraordinary, coming, as it does, from one who has written a special monograph on him for the Jewish Historical Society. Francis Salvador was certainly his name, and Francis Salvador was as certainly a patriot. But Francis Salvador did not live near Charleston, but at Ninety Six, which is in the northwest of the State, almost as far from Charleston as one could get without leaving South Carolina. Nor was Salvador "a member of the Colonial Assembly as early as 1774." There never was such a body in South Carolina as "the Colonial Assembly." There was a "Commons House of Assembly of the Province of South Carolina," but no House was elected after Salvador came to America. Salvador came to South Carolina during the latter part of 1773, and the last election for the Commons House of Assembly ever held in South Carolina took place in 1772. Nor are Salvador's remains interred in the old Charleston Cemetery. Salvador met his tragic end at Essenecca, some fifty miles from where he lived. (See Huhner's "Francis Salvador" in publications of American Jewish Historical Society,

Vol 9, p. 120.) He may have been buried where he fell or he may have been carried to his own plantation. We have no information on the subject. It is Joseph Salvador who is buried here—the uncle and father-in-law of the patriot—and he is buried, not in the old burial ground here, (Coming street,) but in the Da Costa ground. (Hanover street.)

“During the struggle for independence,” we are next informed, “the Jews of Charleston distinguished themselves by their patriotism. Not a single case of Toryism was to be found among them.”

This would indeed be a remarkable fact were it true and a notable exception to traditional Jewish loyalty to the sovereign Power. The veriest tyro, however, who knows anything at all of the history of South Carolina during the Revolution, could not be guilty of writing such nonsense. There were numbers of Jewish Tories in Charleston at the outbreak of the Revolution, and we have no reason to be ashamed of it. There was as much of patriotism in the Tory as there was in the most ardent Revolutionist and we meet with the very best in South Carolina as loyal subjects of the Crown. I need not mention names, McCrady has enough on the subject for anyone who desires the information. There is no excuse for such ignorance in a man who pretends to have looked into the original sources for his facts—and no man can write history without doing this—else he is liable to be in hot water all the time.

In the well known “Petition to Sir Henry Clinton,” signed by 166 citizens of Charles Town, there are the names of seven well known Jews, (including some of Mr Huhner’s “patriots.”) This petition sets forth that the petitioners “were very desirous to shew every mark of allegiance and at-

tachment in their power to his Majesty's person and Government, to which they were most sincerely affected, and, therefore, humbly prayed that they might have an opportunity to evince the sincerity of their professions."

In the Proclamation dated September 19, 1780, we are informed that "The said Memorials and Petitions had been referred to gentlemen of known loyalty and integrity, as well as knowledge of the persons and characters of the inhabitants, in order to report the manner in which the Memorialists had heretofore conducted themselves; and that they having made their report in favor of the persons undermentioned (166 names, including the aforesaid 7 well-known Jews,) Notice is hereby given that if they will apply at the State House * * * and there * * * subscribe a declaration of their allegiance, they will receive a certificate, which will entitle them to use the free exercise of their trades or professions, and the privileges enjoyed by the other loyal inhabitants of Charles-town."

(The Royal South Carolina Gazette, Thursday, September 21, 1780.)

In the list of those whose estates after the Revolution were "amerced in a fine of 12 per cent ad valorem," there is likewise a well-known Jewish name. (See "Statutes of South Carolina, Vol VI, p. 633.

But we are not yet through with Mr Huhner's story of the Revolution.

Mr Huhner next refers to the traditional "Corps of volunteer infantry"—which in the next line is magnified into a regiment (!) "composed almost exclusively of Israelites," and "which was organized in 1779." "This regiment," Mr Huhner continues, "subsequently fought at the Battle of Beaufort."

This special corps of King street Jewish merchants is, I am satisfied, one of the myths of history. Mr Huhner evidently

refers to Capt Richard Lushington's Company of the Charles-Town Regiment of Militia. This contained several Jews, the names of whom have come down to us, but they are not those mentioned by Mr Huhner. This regiment was not organized in 1779, but had been in existence since 1733 and had merely entered the service of the Revolutionary Government of the State. Nor did this regiment serve at the Battle of Beaufort, but only a detachment of it.

I will not here discuss the names referred to by Mr Huhner as having served on the field. He mentions only nine men. He informs us that Mordecai Sheftall was commissary general for South Carolina and Georgia. It is strange that Mr Heitman does not put him down as a Continental officer if he occupied such a position. He certainly did not hold this office for the State of South Carolina. The statement, too, that most of the Jews served as officers, is not a fact, as I shall elsewhere show.

Major Nones belongs to Philadelphia, and Mordecai Myers to Georgetown and not to Charleston.

Among the Jews who held high offices in the State during the early portion of the nineteenth century are mentioned Myer Moses, a member of the Legislature in 1810, and Franklin J. Moses, Chief Justice of South Carolina. Franklin J. Moses was not Chief Justice until after the Confederate war.

Amongst "other" prominent Charleston Jews during the early part of the nineteenth century we find Myer Moses, one of the first "Commissioners of Education." Mr Huhner evidently thinks that he is dealing with two people. There were two distinguished men who bore the name of Myer Moses. The above references, however, are both to Myer Moses, Jr. Nor was he "one of the first "Commissioners

of Education." There was no such office in existence at that time. Myer Moses, Jr, was one of the "Commlsioners of Free Schools"—a purely local office, which had been in existence for upwards of a hundred years before Myer Moses, Jr, was elected to it.

The first Jewish Reform movement began in Charleston in 1824 and not in 1825, as stated by Mr Huhner.

Isaac Harby was a prominent member of that movement, but he never was editor of the City Gazette. John Geddes, Jr, was editor in Harby's day.

The second split in Congregation Beth Elohim, in consequence of the introduction of the organ, took place in 1840 and not in 1843, as Mr Huhner states.

And lastly, the item with reference to the part played by the Jews of Charleston in the Confederate war, can only be read with feelings of contempt and disgust. Here it is:

"At the outbreak of the civil war the Jews of Charleston joined their Gentile brethren in the Confederate cause. One of the prominent soldiers of the Confederacy was Dr Marx E. Cohen." (!) No one questions the gallantry of this young soldier, who was shot at Bentonville, but why select him alone of the hundreds who rendered equally signal service to their State? I dismiss the paragraph without further comment. One might wonder, however, whether such notices are inserted at advertising rates.

I could have said much more, but forbear. Mr Huhner has covered himself with glory. He has erected to himself a monument more lasting than bronze. If anyone can point out the like of his work in the literature of ignorance, I would like to know it. I think that he has accomplished a unique feat—and all in a thou-

sand words! We may well congratulate ourselves. What would have happened if he had written two thousand? The thought is appalling.

In conclusion, I would not have my readers carry away the impression that the article, "Charleston," in the Jewish Encyclopaedia, by L. Huhner, A. M., LL. B., is a fair sample of that magnificent work. It is merely an illustration of the methods of department editors, who for reasons best known to themselves, entrust special work to those utterly incompetent to accomplish it. "Vaulting ambition doth sometimes o'erleap itself." Perhaps some department editors are not quite as familiar with their fields as their admiring friends or a generous public have led them to believe.

The Charleston Jewish community may not be as large to-day as it was in former years, but from a thorough knowledge of its past I do not hesitate to declare that its influence to-day in commerce, in civil affairs, and in the professions generally—taking it as a whole—is as great as it ever was. It is an ancient community and during the two centuries of its history its record has been a glorious one. It was worthy of a better fate than to be thus mercilessly butchered at the hands of a raw, amateur, would-be-historian.

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