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Nathan Simson and New York Colonial Jewry

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By Michael Ben-Jacob

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Background of the Jewish Community in Colonial New York

The original colony of New Amsterdam was by no means a large one. By 1652 it numbered a mere 750 souls but its reputation as a cosmopolitan center had already been well established. Settlers represented men of many nations and sects who, combined, spoke eighteen different languages. In the city there were French, Dutch, English, Anglicans and Huguenots who all integrated and intermarried. One group remained distinct and separate from the mass. This was a small body of Jews.¹

The origins of this Jewish community has been the subject of debate among historians for some time. Jacob Barsimson and Solomon Pieteron of Holland seem to have the distinction of being the first Jewish settlers in what is now New York. Barsimson was one of a larger group of emigrants sent by the Dutch West India Company to help populate its colony of New Amsterdam. The *Peartree* carrying Barsimson and possibly Pieteron arrived on 22 August 1654 close to a month before the more well known arrival of Jews from Recife, Brazil in early September 1654.²

A French ship, either the *St. Charles* or the *St. Catherine*, captained by Jacques de la Motthe, arrived carrying twenty three Jews who had fled from the newly established inquisition in Recife. Upon arrival they were met by Solomon

Pieterse and Jacob Barsimson. Despite their presence these refugees were unable to gather sufficient funds to pay for passage and, upon Captain de la Motthe filing suit, were forced to sell all their possessions to procure funds. Even this did not suffice and David Isaacs and Moses Ambrosius were imprisoned until funds were collected. Ironically, Jews then present in New Amsterdam either hadn't the means or desire to support these twenty three new arrivals and it fell upon the Dutch Reformed Church to feed and clothe them.³

Regardless of the original intent of these Jews who came in August and September of 1654, one can argue that within a year of their arrival they planned to make New Amsterdam a permanent home. There are a number of points that support this conclusion. First, Dominie Megapolensis, head of the Dutch Reformed Church, pointed out in early 1655 that the Jews "planned to build a synagogue." Furthermore, in March 1655 six families lead by Abraham de Lucena arrived from Amsterdam and brought with them a Torah scroll, which implies that they intended to stay permanently. Finally, in July 1655 Jews petitioned for the right to establish their own cemetery. The request was denied because, as the authorities pointed out, none of the Jews had died. Still, this episode is particularly telling. Why would the Jews request an unneeded cemetery unless they planned to stay and establish a permanent community? It was not until 1656 that a Jew did in fact die and the authorities were forced to designate a "little hook of

land" beyond the town wall to serve the purpose.⁴

There are those historians that suggest the evidence cited above is hardly conclusive. Although, as will be discussed later, religious services were held they never seriously attempted to build a synagogue. Also, the presence of a Torah scroll amongst the emigrants from Amsterdam does not lend itself to further conclusions. A Torah scroll would be considered personal property and therefore carried with its owner regardless of intent to form a community. The request for a cemetery despite the lack of need was not carried through as one would have expected had the Jews planned to form a permanent community. The same Jews, Abraham de Lucena, Salvador Dandrada, Jacob Cohen Henricques and Joseph d'Acosta, that refused to end their struggle for complete burgher rights which they ultimately obtained, accepted the decree that they could not have a cemetery or a house of public worship. Further, opponents of the view that Jews came with the intent to settle point out that until the turn of the century the Jewish settlement was transitory in nature with its underpinnings in the international wholesale trade. Even Saul Brown who acted as Rabbi and Moses Fonseca a hazzan were primarily merchants. The Jewish presence in New Amsterdam then could not constitute a community until the Jews had become part of the greater society by entering retail trade, becoming craftsmen, acquiring non-portable assets such as real estate and the formation of some kind of public worship. All

things that would not happen until the early 1700's.⁵

Whether they intended to settle in New Amsterdam or not they were still faced with the necessity of earning a living. As such they had to acquire certain rights within the colony and standing in their way was Peter Stuyvesant. The arrival of Jews in New Amsterdam was met with an immediate request by Stuyvesant to deny them entry into the colony. Much to Stuyvesant's chagrin seven of the one hundred and sixty seven stockholders in the Dutch West India Company were affluent Sapharedic Jews, so that the reply to Stuyvesant's request, which arrived 25 April 1655, cited Jewish "sacrifices in Brazil" and "investment in the Company" and ordered that Jews be admitted to the colony. After further protest from Stuyvesant a letter from the West Indies Company arrived 13 March 1656 saying that Jews of New Netherland were to be granted the same civil and political liberties as in Holland and were entitled "to carry on their religion in synagogues or gatherings." As a practical matter Jews were not only denied public worship, but also the right to perform military service, conduct retail business, they were excluded from the guard duty in lieu of which they had to pay a special tax, and could not traffic in furs or real estate.⁶

It became clear that economic success for Jews in New Amsterdam would be intertwined with their ability to gain rights that would put them on more equal footing with the other merchants of the colony. The winning of equal rights

was a process every stage of which involved a specific struggle. Despite orders from the Dutch West Indies Company, Stuyvesant repeatedly denied Jews their rights and, even upon the receipt of formal petitions from the community, stubbornly refused to carry out his instructions and more often than not denied the petitions. For example, Jacob Barsimson and Asser Levi petitioned on 5 November 1655 to be permitted to stand guard or be exempt from the special tax and later that same month on 29 November 1655 Abraham de Lucena, Salvador Dandrada and Jacob Cohen petitioned for the right to trade on the South (Delaware) River and at Fort Orange (now Albany). Both the November 5th and the November 29th petitions were denied. The issue of real estate ownership came to the fore in a petition by Salvador Dandrada on 17 December 1655 to keep a house bought at auction, then within several months, on 14 March 1656, a group led by Abraham de Lucena pointed out that since the Jewish community paid taxes they should be entitled to the same privileges as other burghers in regard to trade and real estate ownership. Again both petitions were denied.⁷ It is true, however, that by 5 November 1655 Asser Levi and Jacob Barsimson were permitted to stand guard. Furthermore, a request made by Salvador Dandrada, Jacob Cohen, Abraham de Lucena and Joseph D'Acosta 17 April 1657 resulted in the petitioners, as well as Asser Levi, acquiring burgher rights.⁸ Even being accepted as burghers did not give the Jews complete rights and liberties and the official atmosphere in New

Amsterdam was still one of hostility. It is not surprising that many of the original Jewish inhabitants who came in 1654 seized the opportunity to escape New Amsterdam for Holland or other Dutch possessions such as the West Indies or Guiana which offered considerably more liberty.⁹

In 1664 the Duke of York forced Stuyvesant to surrender the colony and New Amsterdam became New York. It is interesting to note that the only recorded Jewish presence, as per the list of those who swore loyalty to the crown, was Asser Levi.¹⁰ Of course this does not necessarily mean that Levi was the only Jew that remained, but it is suggestive of the fact that the Jewish community was smaller and less stable than one might have expected. Those Jews that remained now had to contend with the English authorities which had only allowed Jews to live openly in London for the past ten years. Fortunately the English opted for keeping the status quo in so far as they did not make things worse for the Jewish community. Still, the question of the status of Jews in the colonies came to the fore in a number of cases, the most famous of which was the Rabba Couty incident in November 1671. The case involved the seizure of Couty's ship *Trial* by the authorities in Jamacia on the ground that Couty, a Jew, was by definition a foreigner. He appealed the decision in England to the Council of Trade and Plantations and produced documents from Governor Lovelace of New York that attested to the fact that he had been a free burgher of New York for several years.

Based on this evidence and the fact that the ship and crew were English the Council overturned the sentence. The case ultimately established the right under English law of resident Jews to conduct business with England and its colonies.¹¹

With the passing of the Navigation Acts in 1660 and their later amendments, however, it became imperative for an alien in England or one of its colonies to become a citizen in order to conduct business as a merchant shipper. There were three ways by which one could become a citizen in the English colonies: denization, naturalization or freedom of the city. Denization was granted by the ruler or his local government and permitted the recipient to engage in business. Denization was a lesser form of naturalization in that it could be revoked. Naturalization on the other hand carried more privileges, was granted by an act of parliament and was of a permanent nature. Although naturalization was preferable to denization, it must be noted that naturalization did not confer political rights. Finally, freedom of the city was granted by a municipality and in New York carried with it the right to sell at retail and engage in a handicraft.¹²

One may point out that it was not until the Naturalization Act of 1740, passed under George II, that Jews were permitted to become naturalized. At the same time it should be noted that the acquisition of the rights of freemen and denization were independent of naturalization. As such many Jews such as Moses Levi in 1695, Joseph Isaacs in 1698,

Lewis Gomez in 1705, Abraham de Lucena in 1708, Jacob Franks in 1710-11 and Rodrigo Pacheco in 1711-12 all received these rights and conducted business.¹³ Since the rights of freemen were granted by the local authorities and the Jews of colonial New York were so important to the local economy it was not unusual for such petitions to be granted. The result was that by 16 May 1699 freeholders, like Isaac Fernandes Dias and Benjamin Israel, were given the franchise which they exercised for the first time in 1700. On the whole the Jewish experience under English rule was far more comfortable than it had been under Stuyvesant. True, guild, craft and trade restrictions remained. Case in point, in 1685 Saul Brown was denied the right to open a shop at retail. Still, in the interest of expanding mercantilism, Jews were tolerated and allowed to make progress. So much so that by the year 1748 Peter Kalm the Swedish naturalist noted with surprise that the Jews had their own synagogue, great country estates and were allowed to keep shop in town. They were also permitted to own ships and trade with their own goods. In short they enjoyed "all the privileges common to other inhabitants of the town and province."¹⁴

Trade in Colonial New York and the Role of Jews

It must be remembered that the colony of New Amsterdam, as established by the Dutch West India Company in 1621, was a vehicle for Dutch mercantile capitalism to achieve supremacy over the feudalism of Spain and Portugal.¹⁵ The change to English control in 1664 was not accompanied by a change in the overall purpose of the colony as well, i.e. economic expansion remained the primary goal. The Naval Office lists probably provide the most accurate and detailed account of trade throughout the British colonial empire. A report made by the Board of Trade to the King in 1721 cited an average of 215 ships clearing New York ports, totaling 7464 tons and whose imports from Great Britain were valued at about 50,000 pounds per annum. This was at best a small community when viewed alongside the empire as a whole.¹⁶

Within the colony itself, however, socially, economically and politically small freeholders, tenant farmers, shopkeepers, artisans and laborers were overshadowed by a single elite ruling class comprised of landholders, lawyers and merchants. The aristocracy of New York was, even then, not one based on lineage but rather on wealth. Jews were for the most part members of the merchant class and therefore in a sense part of the New York elite. In order to attain a better understanding of the Jew in colonial New York it becomes imperative to acquire a basic understanding of the

life of a colonial merchant.¹⁷

Most merchants had a least 2000 pounds invested in their businesses and many had as much as 10,000 pounds. At a time when the monthly rental for a house was between six and nine pounds this was certainly a hefty investment. Beyond that a personal fortune of houses, land and bonds equaling 20,000 pounds was considered modest.¹⁸ Many aspects of trade often taken for granted by the modern businessman were absent from the colonial trade structure. Foremost amongst these were the lack of corporations. There were no large organizations based in the colonies like the East India Company or the Royal African Company. At most there were eight corporations formed in colonial times and even the Long Wharf of Boston, the most famous of them, only had local significance. Further, none of these organizations existed in New York. When a business organization proved necessary it most often took the form of partnerships. The great abundance of partnerships among colonial merchants produce an effect of discontinuity in business organizations. This is because partnerships were rarely of a permanent nature, some lasting as little as a few weeks and others for a number of years.

Another notable distinction between colonial merchants and modern businessmen was the dual role played by colonial merchants i.e. both principal and agent. The colonial merchant, in addition to carrying out his own business activities, had the added responsibility of acting as an agent

for his customers, suppliers and business associates. The role of agent carried with it a number of specific duties. He was required to keep his associates informed of market conditions so that they might adjust their shipments accordingly, he had to receive cargo and deal with customs officials, sell at the highest attainable price and credit profits to the principals account or use it in making up a return cargo. In short, the colonial agent was responsible for looking after the principals interests as if they were his own. If he failed to do so or if he failed to follow instructions he could be made to absorb any losses or forgo his commission. Commissions were generally between two and three percent for domestic shipments but could range as high as five percent for foreign shipments.

Finally, in colonial America there was little distinction between the wholesale and the retail trade and no specialization in any particular line of goods. Merchants generally dealt in any item of the moment that might turn a profit and would sell to any reliable customer, wholesale or retail. The largest specialization as such consisted of dried goods and even those few merchants who only had shops at retail opened, for the most part, "general" stores.¹⁹

Jews soon became "pioneers" of international trade. As chance would have it, however, they were particularly suited for that role. Most were fluent in several languages and harbored no national hatreds that might hinder trade. In the

American colonies they found themselves with another advantage as well. The colonies were pressed by a negative balance of trade, the difference of which had to be paid in coin. For the most part, coin was provided through West Indies trade whose principle trading ports were Curacao, Surinam, St. Thomas, Barbados, Madeira and Jamaica all of which contained Jewish communities.²⁰ In addition, Jewish merchants had by that time become well established in London as well as other British colonies, so that the colonial Jew had a relatively easy time developing associations and contacts with their brethren across the empire.

It has been pointed out that the Jewish community of colonial New York was a small one. This is attested to by the fact that it took nearly half a century, from 1682 until 1728, for the Jewish community to fill a small burial plot about fifty feet square. Despite this fact the Jews of colonial New York became an integral part of the colonial economic system, so much so that in a 1712 article published in the *Spectator*, Joseph Addison was prompted to write that Jews are "instruments by which most distant nations converse...like pegs in the frame of a building inconsequential in themselves but absolutely necessary." Addison's comment, although a bit overstated, is basically an accurate portrayal of the Jewish role in colonial trade. Some felt, however, that the Jewish influence in international trade spread so far that the Jews controlled an unreasonable portion of foreign trade. Upon the

accession of Charles II the London Corporation protested Jewish settlement in English dominions because they monopolized foreign trade.²¹ In regard to the colony of New York this statement is hardly supported by the evidence. At its peak in 1728 the Jewish community of New York numbered just thirty one families, about 2.3% of the population. For most of the colonial period the Jews numbered no more than 1% of the population. The customs records for the quarter of 25 March 1701 to 25 June 1701 show twenty-two entries involving Jewish merchants, representing 12.3% of the total entries at a time when the Jewish population was some 2% of the whole. This quarter represents the peak and by 1764 entries involving Jews had diminished to one-half of 1% of the total entries. So it is true that at some points, particularly in the earlier period, the Jewish portion of trade was several times more than their proportion in the population and, although many Jews prospered, this hardly constituted a monopoly of the foreign trade.²²

Nathan Simson: A Biographical Sketch

Between 1700 and 1750 a number of Jewish families gained economic prominence. The most famous among these were probably the Franks, Gomez, Levi and Pacheco families. Most of these Jewish families have been researched to some extent by historians and we have gained a better understanding of the Jewish community of the time through their papers, diaries and correspondence. The Simson family, however, has eluded in depth historical research. This is unusual because Nathan Simson was perhaps one of the most successful and prosperous Jewish merchants of the period. He was a merchant "magnet" whose dealings stretched across the British Empire and who had contacts with the most prominent Jewish families of the time. The fact that Nathan Simson has escaped concentrated historical analysis becomes even more curious when it is coupled with the fact that Nathan Simson was the uncle of Joseph Simson, who was in turn the grandfather of the famous Sampson Simson, founder of Mt. Sinai Hospital.²³

The major difficulty in researching Nathan Simson is the lack of primary sources that deal with anything other than his business activities. Some time after his death, Simson's papers were deposited in the Public Record Office in London where the originals can be found in category 258, C.104/13-14. Apparently even his commercial papers were only brought to the attention of the American Jewish Archives after 1950 where

they were examined by Jacob R. Marcus.²⁴ The Simson Papers consists of well over one thousand pages, over ninety percent of which deal directly with sales, purchases and other matters of strictly a business nature. To further complicate matters many of the papers are not organized in any recognizable manner, most contain no page numbers and those that do usually have two sets of page numbers. In addition the papers do not all relate directly to Simson i.e. many of the papers are the correspondence of the Levi brothers which probably came into Simson's possession due to his role as executor of Samuel Levi's will and there is at least one letter, written by Benjamin Sheftall to Benjamin Isaacs on 2 March 1748, almost twenty five years after Simson's death that has inadvertently become mixed up with Simson's papers.²⁵ As a result, most information about his personal life, religious observance, community activities and so forth must be gleaned from secondary sources. Many of these secondary sources, however, are contradictory or worse, don't cite the sources upon which their conclusions are based. Nonetheless, a somewhat reliable picture of Nathan Simson's life can be drawn from the Simson Papers.

Nathan Simson was an Ashkenazic Jew whose origins and early life are open to conjecture. Some claim his roots are tied to Polish Jewry but it is more likely that his family originated from Holland and Frankfort. The family name was in all likelihood Sampson but was later anglicized to Simson. It

is unclear at what point Simson's family left Germany or whether Nathan Simson himself ever actually lived in Holland. He probably found himself in England not before early adulthood. This is alluded to by the fact that Yiddish and not English was apparently Simson's mother tongue. Simson's clerks kept his books in Yiddish and Simson himself often started accounts in English and later lapsed into Yiddish.²⁶ According to the genealogical record as presented by Malcolm H. Stern, Nathan Simson was one of five siblings including four girls Grace, Rose, Hannah and Sarah. Grace later married Samuel Plont of Bonn, Rose was married to Miero Kiser of Amsterdam, Hannah wed Joseph Levy and Sarah's husband, who was the father of Joseph Simson, is unknown.²⁷ There are four major points of interest one can derive from this family tree of Nathan Simson as presented by Stern. First, no birth dates or year deceased, other than Nathan Simson's death in 1725, are listed. Therefore, it is impossible to know how old Nathan Simson was at any particular juncture. Second, Joseph Simson was only related to the Simson family maternally and took the name Simson for reasons unknown. Also, Stern claims that Nathan Simson was married twice, the first wife's name is not listed and only the second wife, Dyfie Simson, is mentioned in any of the Simson papers. Finally, Stern makes no mention of a Daniel Simson who lived in London and is believed to be a brother of Nathan Simson and even did business with his brother Nathan in 1712.²⁸

Due to the nature of international trade it was important that a merchant have reliable agents in ports abroad. During this period of time many Jews emigrated to New York to help further business interests of their family. Jacob Franks and Rodrigo Benjamin Mendes Pecheco are often cited as examples of this. It is believed that Moses and Samuel Levy as well as Nathan Simson were sent to America to help further the interest of Joseph Levy, his brother in-law through his sister Hannah, who was then a well established merchant in London.²⁹ The year of Nathan Simson's arrival in colonial New York is open to question. Secondary sources are replete with contradictions and most mention dates without any accompanying citations. Marcus mentions that Nathan Simson and Moses Levy did business with Stephen DeLancey as early as 1701.³⁰ There is no reference of this transaction in the Simson papers but there is evidence that points to a business relationship between DeLancey and Simson in the form of a receipt written to Simson from Delancey on 15 July 1703 for nine pounds five shillings in fulfillment of a bond. This receipt along with one other made out to Simson for the sale of rum on 24 September 1703 provide the earliest evidence of Simson's presence in colonial New York.³¹ These two receipts do not provide conclusive evidence that Simson had settled in New York by late 1703, it is possible that these activities were carried on through the use of agents. Perhaps that is why Marcus, in his work *Critical Studies in American Jewish*

History, states openly that Simson arrived from London in 1706. Problems arise, however, for in *Studies in American Jewish History: Studies and Addresses* Marcus states that Simson was in New York by 1703. Then again, Marcus points out in *The Colonial American Jew* that a small number of Jews made their debuts on the colonial scene as shopkeepers and "there is evidence" that Nathan Simson began his career as a shopkeeper in the Long Island hamlet of Brookhaven in 1705.³² Beside the obvious contradiction pertaining to Nathan Simson's arrival in New York this also leads one to question the conclusion that Nathan Simson was sent to New York to further Joseph Levy's business interests. One could hardly expect to be of much help to an international merchant such as Joseph Levy from a small Long Island hamlet.

There are a number of other secondary sources that choose dates for Simson's arrival anywhere between 1704 and 1706.³³ Those that point to the 1706 date, although no source is cited, probably refer to the Manhattan Tax Assessment Lists of 6 December 1706 that list Nathan Simson as being assessed for just over five pounds.³⁴ But there are primary sources that can confirm his arrival as early as 1704. The first is mentioned by Elvira N. Solis in a 1903 article published by the *American Jewish Historical Society Publications* as well as Pool's *Portraits Etched in Stone*. Apparently, Lewis Gomez and Nathan Simson were called to court on three occasions, 9, 17 and 18 of October 1704, to clear up

a matter regarding Joseph Nunes. A small cargo had arrived after Nunes' death and remained unclaimed upon the ship *New York*. Gomez and Simson attested to the fact that Nunes had told them that he was expecting this cargo and the goods were added to the Nunes estate. The problem with both Solis and Pool is that neither mention the primary source or location in which one might find this case.³⁵ The more definitive source, then, for the 1704 date of arrival appears in the export ledgers for the port of New York. According to the lists, Nathan Simson exported almost four pounds worth of dried goods on 17 November 1704.³⁶ Based on the evidence provided by primary sources it is safe to assume that Simson arrived sometime between the middle of 1703 and the middle of 1704.

It is difficult to ascertain precisely what Simson's activities were upon his arrival in New York. It is possible that Simson did not immediately enter the business world but rather took a position as a clerk. Even if this is so, however, it was certainly for a very limited period of time and he soon established his own business.³⁷ His own papers, with perhaps a half dozen exceptions, only begin in August of 1713 so even his business activities for this period are not well documented. In addition, his name does not appear in any of the places where one might expect to find it. For example, on 19 February 1705 a petition was signed by sixty six of New York's "most prominent" merchants, requesting a fair standard

of values for foreign coins. A number of Jews, including Joseph Bueno, Abraham de Lucena and Samuel Levy, signed the petition but Nathan Simson's signature is absent. True one could argue that Simson was not by 1705 a "prominent" merchant, still it would be informative had the signature appeared. This rebuttle does not hold true when one examines the lists of those who received freemanship rights between 1695 and 1712. This list includes many Jews of equal economic standing as Nathan Simson, such as Jacob Franks and Joseph Isaacs, but again Nathan Simson does not appear on these lists.³⁸ In all likelihood Simson did not even apply for freemanship rights in the colony, for why would he be refused while so many others were accepted? It could be that being granted such rights afforded no practical difference in day to day business activities. But again the Simson Papers contains a copy of an order issued by Bolingbroke in the court of Kessington, Jamaica on 15 June 1713. The order states that Nathan Simson and Samuel Levi of London, Moses Levy, Moses Michaels, Moses Hart and Mordecai Nathan of New York were to be considered free denizens of the Kingdom of Great Britain with all rights privileges and immunities.³⁹ This document leaves us with several questions. Why would Simson apply for rights through the courts in Jamaica and why was he described as a merchant in London when he had resided in New York for ten years? Finally, the New York Mayor's Court Minute Books provides an incomplete list of aliens who were made "natural

born subjects" from 12 July 1715 to 3 April 1716. Again Jews like Simon Moses and Abraham Pinto are among those listed but Nathan Simson is not.⁴⁰ The merchants listed on this petition would not be recorded as freemen in New York until 1728, three years after Simson's death.⁴¹ Since the petition granted to Simson was effective throughout the British Empire there was no need for Simson to formally request freemanship rights in New York. It should be noted that there is no documentation that suggests that Simson ever attempted to attain full naturalization, even though this was possible after 1715.

A general question historians of Jewish history often ask is how religiously observant were the colonial New York Jews. Marcus makes the blanket statement that nearly all Jews in colonial America were observant. Certainly, Simson seems to bear out this conclusion. No later than 1709 Simson shared rooms with Jacob Franks in a kosher boarding house run by Moses Hart. Marcus concludes that it was Simson's strict adherence to dietary laws that prompted this arrangement.⁴² It is also true that the letters between Moses and Samuel Levi that are included in the Simson Papers use Hebrew dates and describe family events, upcoming weddings and so forth, in terms of their relationship to Jewish holidays.⁴³ But one can easily question the definition of "observant" even in comparison to the standards of the time. For example, the Simson Papers contain an inventory of Samuel Levy's household

goods. Nathan Simson probably obtained this list in his capacity of executor of Samuel Levy's will. Of all the items listed there are none which can be construed as religious articles. Simson's level of observance can also be called into question. His will contains no mention of religious articles to be left to his descendants, and only his permanent seat in the Great Synagogue of the High German Jews in Amsterdam left to his brother-in-law Miere Kieser, attests to the fact that this is the will of a Jew.⁴⁴ Another interesting point in regard to Simson's religious observance can be drawn from the fact that Simson was elected Constable of the South Ward, along with Samuel Levy as Constable of the North Ward, in 1718. It was not until 15 November 1727 that Jews were exempt from uttering the words "upon the true faith of Christians" when taking an oath in court or for holding public office.⁴⁵ Since Simson was involved in a number of court cases as a result of his business ventures and held public office as well, it is likely that he had to include this phrase in his oath, clearly not the practice of observant Jews even in that period. So what of Simson residing in a kosher boarding house? A variety of possibilities might serve as an explanation. Perhaps the rates were reasonable or Simson simply felt more comfortable among Jews. These two possibilities are as likely as any other, including the claim that Simson adhered strictly to dietary laws.

Over the course of his eighteen year stay in colonial

New York Simson became part and parcel of the Jewish community. By 1708 he had become well enough established that he was one of four individuals who witnessed the will of Ester Brown, along with Joseph Bueno, Abraham de Lucena and Mordecai Gomez. As Simson attained more economic affluence he was looked upon to help those in need in the Jewish community. His papers are littered with notes from the likes of a Mrs. Parker, a Mr. Raisor and others thanking Simson for loans.⁴⁶

As mentioned earlier Simson became sufficiently well known to be elected as constable for the South Ward in 1718. It is unknown whether Simson sought the office or it was thrust upon him. The position of constable and assessors were practically the only public positions that Jews held in the colonies. It has been suggested that the Jews were chosen because they would more carefully oversee Christian behavior. In essence these were possibly non desirable positions forced upon the Jewish community and would explain why Moses Levi and Jacob Franks refused to serve in 1720 despite a twenty pound fine.⁴⁷ Simson's political influence stretched beyond the immediate borders of the colony, and even went so far as the English parliament. Shortly after Simson's return to England in 1722 he received two letters from Francis Harison who still lived in New York. One dated 5 November 1722 and the other 11 November 1722. Harison was attempting to attain the office of comptroller of the port of Boston. In the first letter he beseeches both Nathan Simson and Moses Levy to speak on his

behalf to members of Parliament and, in tones which were nothing short of pleading, signed off "pray leave no stone unturned." In the second letter he also asks Nathan Simson and Moses Levy to speak specifically to Lord Westmoreland and perhaps Lord Cantenet in hopes that they might procure the appointment for him. He then begs Simson and Levy to try every avenue available and even outlines a number of other possible routes that might lead to success in this matter.⁴⁸ Whether or not Simson and Levy actually executed these requests is unknown. But the fact that Harison felt that it was within their means to approach members of parliament and request a favor shows that Simson must have wielded considerable influence in political circles.

Despite his rise to affluence in the New York community, Simson still kept ties to his family. It is true that Simson had a ten year feud with Moses Levy, apparently over some business dealings, but feuding with Moses Levy was not an unusual occurrence. Even Moses' brother Samuel Levy had bitter feelings towards Moses which lead to charges of fraud and deceit. Nonetheless, Simson kept in contact with his family in London, so much so that in 1718 he agreed to bring over his twenty two year old nephew Joseph Simson and start him off in trade. Further, in spite of his feud with Moses Levy he stayed close enough to Samuel Levy to be named executor of his will along with Isaac Levy and Jacob Franks. Interestingly, Samuel Levy's will as reproduced by the

Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society in 1915 states that Mathew Simson was to be executor of the will. Oppenheim points out that the name Mathew Simson does in fact appear on the original will, but that this was an error in transcription and the reference was in fact to Nathan Simson.⁴⁹

After eighteen years in New York Simson decided to return to London. Although Simson's age is not known it can be said with some confidence that Simson was now an elderly gentleman and wished to spend his final years with his family in London. The letters sent to him during this period i.e. after 1722 almost all contain inquiries as per Simson's health and warnings that he must take good care of himself. These inquiries and warnings had not appeared in his correspondence before 1722.⁵⁰ Obviously Simson had entered his declining years. Leaving his nephew Joseph to run the business in New York, Simson returned to London with a fortune valued at approximately 60,000 pounds sterling. Simson's correspondence show that by 21 August 1722 he was already conducting business from London.⁵¹ Even though Simson had left New York he still remained active in trade until shortly before his death. His papers show that he was still attempting to collect a debt from Robert Robinson of New York as late as 12 May 1725 and he still received his usual business correspondence dated 26 May 1725 from his agents in Jamaica.⁵² All this less than six months before his death.

The date of Simson's death can be narrowed down to a three month period between 3 August 1725, the date of his will, and 24 October 1725, the date the will was probated in London. Simson left a substantial estate and upon his death his stocks alone took in 1150 pounds per annum. Even Jews were subject to that fact that at those times community records were most often kept by the local church, for the will begins "In the name of G-d...I Nathan Simson, of the parish of Saint Dunstan's in East London...." In his will Simson divided his assets in the following manner: fifty pounds were set aside for a tombstone, to his eldest sister, Grace Plont widow of Samuel Plont who was then a resident of the Elector of Cologne near the Rhine in Germany, he left a ten pound annuity. To his wife Dyfie Simson he left all interest earned from his stock in the South Sea Stock Company of Britain, but the stock was to be managed by the executors of the will. Upon her death the interest was to be divided in half and given to "any poor relation...in the way of marriage and putting him or her in the world" on an annual basis. Part was to be given to one such individual from his side of the family and the remainder to one from his wife's. The arrangement was to continue indefinitely and, should no relations exist, the interest would be divided among any two poor orphans per year. To Rose Kiser, his sister in Amsterdam, he left a ten pound annuity which would be given to his wife's poorest relation upon her death. He left his seat in the Great Synagogue of

the High German Jews in Amsterdam to his brother-in-law Miere Kiser. Upon Miere Kiser's death the seat was to be sold yearly with the proceeds going to the poor. Dyfie Simson, Benjamin Isaacs, Isaac Levy and Henry Isaac were listed as executors and Jay Stevens, Manuel Cortino and Thomas Huett witnessed the will.⁵³

This will leads to several general observations and a number of questions. Beginning with the former we see that Simson kept to the Jewish tradition of being charitable. Second, names like Jay Stevens and Thomas Huett as witness to the will support the contention that the relationship between Jews and non Jews was an amiable one. But the questions far out number these observations. Neither his sisters Hannah or Sarah nor his nephew Joseph Simson are mentioned in the will. It is possible that Hannah and Sarah had already passed on, but it is known that Joseph Simson was alive and had even married Rebecca Isaacs in 1722. Being relatively newly wed one would expect some provision for him. Could it be that they had a falling out, or did Simson simply decided that he had given Joseph enough help? The will also raises a number of questions in regard to Daniel Simson. There are but two notations involving Daniel Simson in the Simson Papers. The first is an invoice of an account for the estate of Daniel Simson dated 2 June 1712 which lists a few trunks of textiles valued at 121 pounds and 9 shillings. The second entry is a ledger entry under the heading "The Estate of Daniel Simson"

and the entry reads "to the balance of his account transported from ledger A" for 53 pounds, and a second line which reads "to cash paid Joseph Levy" for just over 246 pounds.⁵⁴ Marcus does not cite his source for the conclusion that Daniel Simson was Nathan Simson's brother. Although it is a likely enough surmise it is equally possible that Daniel Simson was a cousin or some other distant relative. This latter conclusion is bolstered by the fact that the relations of Daniel Simson are not mentioned in the will as one might expect had he been a brother. The question holds true of Stern's contention that Simson had an earlier marriage. One might expect some mention of her or her family. Of course, none of this is conclusive evidence that there was no first wife, or that Daniel was not a brother, but it is suggestive.

It is unknown how long Dyfie Simson survived after her husband's death but she did take an active role in continuing her late husband's business enterprises, as can be seen from several correspondence contained in the Simson Papers. Dyfie Simson was quite well suited to continue her husband's activities, she was fluent in at least three languages, English, Yiddish and German and apparently well educated.⁵⁵ As a final note in regard to Dyfie Simson: She received a letter from New York dated 2 June 1726 which is worth examining. The letter was from Mary Verplanck the wife of a former business associate of Nathan Simson. In addition to thanking Mrs. Simson for her gifts of silk and a blouse, she

expressed her condolences to Mrs. Simson upon the passing of her husband in strong religious terms. She states her wishes that "God give you [Dyfie Simson] strength and comfort you in your great grief...the best of our days are nothing but trouble and sorrow...therefore...consider how happy they are that depart of this world...God shall not forsake you."⁵⁶ This letter confirms that Jews and non Jews not only had cordial business relationships, but that they were personally friendly as well.

Nathan Simson apparently chose his executors well. A full two years after Simson's death, on 17 October 1727, two cases were heard in America, *Nathan Simson v. Peter Soumans* and *Isaac Levy and Nathan Simson v. Peter Soumans* which involved issues relevant to the Simson estate. But issues involving the Simson estate extended far beyond 1727. The will provided the background for a landmark English court case which was heard on 23 February 1754. The case was *Isaac v. Defriez* and revolved around the provision in the will that called for annuities to be given to Simson's "poorest relations" upon the death of Grace Plont and Rose Kiser. What then constitutes "poorest relations"? The courts ruled that nephews and nieces were the only ones who could claim benefits from these annuities as they were the only direct relations. The case set the precedent for the definition of "relations" as understood by the courts of England and Ireland. This definition is still valid today and, by the

way, is contrary to New York State law that deems such provisions to be too ambiguous to execute. Interestingly, the *Jewish Chronicle* of 27 September 1907 carried an advertisement by the Board of Guardians for the Relief of Jewish Poor stating that any relatives of Nathan Simson or his wife Dyfie who wish to benefit from the annuities should contact their offices. It is unclear how the organization became the executor of these funds, but it is fascinating to note that the trust existed for almost two hundred years.⁵⁷

Nathan Simson: A Jewish Merchant

Nathan Simson arrived in New York during the early years of Queen Anne's War (1702-1713). The war provided precious business opportunities for many businessmen, a number of them Jews. For example, Abraham de Lucena and his gentile partner Justus Bloch provided supplies to the British army. The Nathan Simson Papers gives historians a good outline of Simson's business activities between the years 1712 and 1725. The period between 1704 and 1712, however, is not contained in the papers that have survived and it is difficult to know exactly what his activities were during this period. It seems that Simson was unable to take advantage of the opportunities that the war provided, at least on the international scale. The import/export records for New York during the period 1703-1709 show that Simson only exported one small cargo in 1704. Despite this Simson was able to expand his business activities to enormous proportions within ten years of his arrival. The papers show that by 1714/15 Simson was trading with Charleston, Albany, Middlesex County and Philadelphia. Internationally his business connected to the ports of Jamaica, Barbados, Curacao, London, Amsterdam and many others.⁵⁸

For the period that the papers do cover i.e. 1712-1725

one can form a good description of the methods and activities of large scale Jewish merchants. Further, the papers show that Jewish merchants of this period conducted themselves in the same manner as their non Jewish competitors. In keeping with the custom of the times Simson rarely entered into partnerships of any kind, and when he did they were usually only for the duration of a specific venture. Over the course of his career Simson found himself in partnership with Jews like Jacob Franks and Moses Levi as well as non Jews like William Walton and Richard Jenway. None of these business relations, however, were permanent or established for lengthy periods of time. A prominent example of this tendency for partnerships to be transient is found in a partnership formed by Joseph Isaacs, Moses Michaels and Simson for the express purpose of exporting a one time shipment of one hundred and fifty barrels of kosher beef to the Caribbean. Another excellent example is found in a contract between Nathan Simson and Isaac Levi dated 6 December 1722 in which they agreed to ship seventy and one half barrels of flour to Jamaica with two thirds of the proceeds going to Nathan Simson and the remainder to Levi.⁵⁹

Although partnerships were generally temporary, the use of agents abroad was extensive and once a relationship was established, most agents were used permanently. The Simson papers are replete with correspondence from Diego and Abraham Gonzales, Simson's agents in Jamaica, as well as letters from

Richard Jenway and William Walton his agents in London. The merchants relationship with his agents was, as mentioned earlier, a complex one whereby the merchant acted as both supplier to foreign ports and an agent in his own. Merchants would often pay one client at the request of another, lend money to a clients friend and act as both salesman and purchaser. There are numerous examples of this type of activity in the Simson books. Andrew Teller who was, along with Peter Rutger, an agent of Simsons in New York after his return to England in 1722, mailed Simson a letter dated 23 November 1723. In it he confirmed that he had received the bill of loading and an invoice for goods that Simson was to credit to his (Teller's) account, as well as one trunk and one bundle of merchandise to be added to the account of Mr. Van Schelluyne a merchant in Albany. Hence Simson acted as an agent in London for his agents in New York.⁶⁰

Despite efforts in good faith by agents and merchants to look after each others interests they faced a number of formidable obstacles. Foremost among these was the difficulty in anticipating market fluctuations and communicating these changes to agents overseas. In order to keep abreast of market conditions Simson often requested that Richard Jenway supply him with English newspapers and copies of French, Dutch and English treaties. In a letter from Andrew Teller to Nathan Simson, then residing in London, dated 21 June 1723 Teller requested that Simson send him a copy of the "gazette"

so that he could follow the news. Despite these precautions merchants often had to absorb losses which resulted from the difficulties in communication. At one point Simson found himself in possession of one thousand barrels of onions in Port Royal, Jamaica with no buyers because someone else's shipment had arrived first. At times merchants were forced to make decisions based purely on speculation. Rodrigo Pacheco bought mourning goods upon the death of Queen Caroline in November of 1737. He suspected that an official period of mourning would be declared and would extend to the colonies. Pacheco hoped to ship his goods to James Alexander so that they might have a monopoly in the market when the mourning period was declared. A period of mourning was declared in March of 1738, unfortunately Pacheco's ship was not the first to arrive with the news of the Queen's death and, although Pacheco most likely profited from the venture, he did not have the monopoly he had hoped for.⁶¹

In addition to communicating changes in the market merchants faced a variety of other problems. The colonial Jewish merchant was constantly affected by changes in the political climate and very often would resort to petitions to request redress for their grievances. Abraham de Lucena and his non Jewish partner had been granted permission to ship goods to Jamaica in 1713. No sooner did they load their cargo than an embargo was declared as a result of Queen Anne's War. They immediately petitioned to allow the goods to be sent. It

is unclear as to whether or not the petition was granted but the case serves as a prime example of how political affairs affected the international merchant. Simson was also affected by international affairs. His agent had used a base in South Carolina to conduct business with the Bahamas but it was a "disastrous venture" due to a Spanish attack in 1721. Again in April of 1724 Simson could not collect a debt from Samuel Daffy of Amsterdam because Spanish ships were attacking Dutch ships and the cargo was lost. Similarly, merchants constantly faced heavy losses that resulted from damage to, or spoilage of, goods while enroute to their destination. Many of the Simson business correspondence contains examples of this very point. To cite but one example, a letter from Diego Gonzales dated 3 December 1722 mentions that much of the cargo sent via Captain Williams' ship was damaged but he remained hopeful a profit could still be made. In order to reduce their losses merchants would often try to get the duties on damaged goods reduced or eliminated. Such was the content of petitions made by Lewis Gomez in 1711 and a petition by Abraham de Lucena in March 1716.⁶²

Jewish merchants also had the added difficulty of contending with taxes levied by the towns in which they resided and which were incumbent upon the Jewish community as a whole. Two petitions were brought by the Jewish community of Jamaica one in 1715 and the other in 1721. Both cited a disparity between the amount of trade conducted by the

community and the amount of the tax. It is interesting to note that the former petition was brought by, among others, Diego Lewis Gonzales who was Simson's agent in Jamaica. In addition to dealing with special taxes Jewish merchants, and merchants in general, were constantly threatened by natural disasters. A petition of 28 August 1712, again brought by the Jewish community of Jamaica, requested a reduction of the yearly tribute due to loss of business that resulted from a recent earthquake and hurricane. In this instance the authorities agreed to a two hundred and fifty pound reduction bringing the total to seven hundred and fifty pounds.⁶³

Finally, merchants had to be wary of the threat of pirates or the illegal seizure of their ships. On 21 July 1720 Mordecai Gomez and Rodrigo Pacheco petitioned to prosecute Captain John Hickford for illegally seizing their ship. Simson ran afoul of pirates on a number of occasions as well. Most notably, as described by his agents in Jamaica in a letter dated 26 July 1722, the sloop *Mary and Martha* had been taken by pirates. Simson lost his entire shipment of one hundred and ten barrels of flour. The agent pointed out to Simson by way of consolation that another who had lost eighty barrels of flour was completely ruined. This incident also gives us an insight into the extent of Simson's business activities. He could absorb the loss of one hundred and ten barrels of flour, a sizeable shipment, while others were ruined by the loss of eighty.⁶⁴

Despite these formidable obstacles many Jewish merchants, Simson among them, gained wealth and affluence through international trade. On the whole Simson relied on the circular mode of trade i.e. West Indian staples and specie to London, textiles and assorted goods to New Amsterdam and whatever the market called for back to the West Indies. An examination of Simson's papers will show that, like most merchants of the period, Simson did not deal exclusively in any one product. His records are filled with the accounts of sale of everything from Jews Harps and whale bones to snuff and hairpins. Certain goods, it seems, were in demand during the entire period that the papers cover. For example, records of sale for flour, indigo and meat (both kosher and non-kosher) appear at regular intervals. Other commodities, such as silver, appear prominently during the period between 1721 and 1723 in shipments from Jamaica to London as large as 660 ounces. But entries for silver are almost non-existent for the period immediately prior to and after that time. Besides the obvious remark that Simson supplied goods as they were needed in the market it would be an impossible task to attempt to categorize the merchandise in which he traded. Many of the invoices list more than forty separate items sent via any one shipment. This coupled with the fact that over the course of his career Simson was engaged in many hundreds, of transactions, places any attempt at systematically organizing Simson's sales and purchases beyond the scope of this

paper.⁶⁵

Aside from the specific commodities in which Simson traded a few general statements can be made in regard to the way in which Simson conducted his business dealings. One will immediately notice that Simson kept meticulous and accurate records. As can be expected he paid the going rate, five percent, to his agents and very often carried insurance on his cargo. Furthermore, Simson conducted an honest trade, paid his import and export duties and did not deal in contraband. Marcus points out that there is one account that in 1719 Simson smuggled to London three pieces of embroidered silk hidden in a barrel of cocoa, the silk was valued at twenty one pounds. Given the accuracy of Simson's record keeping it seems that this was a one time occurrence and in light of the overall volume of trade Simson conducted it was a minor infraction at best.⁶⁶

As one might expect, Simson's business ventures lead him to turn towards the courts on a number of occasions. Interestingly enough, however, Simson was involved in only ten cases during his career while others, Abraham de Lucena in particular, were involved in three to four times that many.⁶⁷ It is also worth noting that Simson was called as a defendant in just three cases, that of *Moses Michael v. Nathan Simson* in 1713, *Peter Louis v. Nathan Simson* in 1718 and *Moses Levy v. Isaac Levy, Nathan Simson and Jacob Franks* in 1722.⁶⁸ Finally, of the ten cases in which Simson is cited three of

them, *Nathan Simson and Jacob Franks v. Anne Jackson* in 1720, *Moses Levi v. Isaac Levi, Nathan Simson and Jacob Franks* in 1722 and a case heard in Middlesex County New Jersey in 1725 dealt with issues that arose out of Simson's position as one of the executors of Samuel Levi's will.⁶⁹ In total then Simson found it necessary to turn to the courts for the collection of debts or the redress of grievances just six times during his career.

Nathan Simson and the Slave Trade

One of the more interesting facets of Simson's trade activities revolves around his involvement in the slave trade. Generally speaking Jews of the early colonial period had a very limited role in the slave trade.⁷⁰ Jacob Franks is said to have imported twelve slaves during the twenty six year period between 1717 and 1743. Similar small lots were brought in by Pacheco, Gomez and Levi. For the most part slaves in colonial New York were not a moveable commodity because there was little need for them in comparison to Rhode Island and South Carolina. In total, between 1715 and 1743, the Jews of colonial New York imported less than eighty slaves. These figures do not include the activities of one notable exception, Nathan Simson. In discussing the role of Simson in the slave trade Marcus makes two contradictory statements. In his work *Early American Jewry*, Marcus states that Simson and his partners, conducted two voyages to Africa, one in 1717 with the ship the *Crown Galley* and the other in 1721 with the ship the *New York Postillion*, these combined voyages lead to the importation of two hundred and seventeen slaves. This would be the largest slave cargo brought into New York in the first half of the eighteenth century. In another work

entitled *The Colonial American Jew*, published almost twenty years later, Marcus states that Simson imported a one time shipment of approximately one hundred and fifteen slaves.⁷¹ Neither the contradiction nor the reason for the later change are mentioned by Marcus but given the difficulties inherent in dealing with the Simson Papers it is not surprising that there is some confusion.

In the over one thousand pages contained in the papers there are only twenty-two pages that have any connection to the topic of slavery. Almost two thirds of these are bulked together but the remainder are scattered randomly throughout the papers and are easily overlooked. Once all the references to slavery have been compiled, however, it is possible to formulate a reasonably clear picture of Simson's involvement in the slave trade. Of all the records kept of Simson's business transactions there is only one transaction involving slavery before 1720. On 27 October 1709 Simson, in partnership with Jacob Franks, sold one negro boy for the sum of forty pounds to Rukard Bunke.⁷² Given the manner in which Simson kept his records it would be unreasonable to conclude that he did not record other transactions concerning slaves. It is safe to say then, that although Simson was obviously not opposed to selling slaves he did not enter the slave trade in any real way until the end of his career. Furthermore, when he finally did try his hand at the slave trade it was not a lone venture. He had three partners - one Jew, Isaac Levy,

and two non-Jews, Richard Janeway and William Walton. In truth these three individuals were also partners with Simson in ownership of the vessel the *Crown Galley* which was used for the 1720 slave voyage.⁷³ It is possible that Simson only took partners in the venture because they were partial owners in the ship to be used for the voyage. This seems unlikely, however, given that there is no evidence that all the cargo shipped aboard a vessel held in partnership had to be owned by all the partners of that vessel. It is more probable that Simson was nervous about undertaking such a risky and costly venture alone and desired to reduce his risk by entering into partnership. There is an interesting piece of evidence that supports the conclusion that Simson and his partners were extremely uneasy about the voyage.

Some time before the 1720 departure Captain Dennis Downing of the *Crown Galley* was given a detailed list of instructions for the trip. In all eighteen points were enumerated. The document is extremely telling in light of the fact that it is the only such document that appears in all of the papers. Besides the usual instructions i.e. procure funds from certain individuals, deliver cargo to others and so forth, Downing was specifically instructed not to stop or speak "to any commanders of ships or vessels, but only to make the best of your way as speedy as possible you can." He was told specifically at which ports he may or may not stop to obtain supplies and was forbidden to stop at the Cape of Good

Hope. Finally, Downing was to purchase as many young slaves as possible with preference to boys from thirteen to twenty years of age for fear that slaves above that age "would not sell very well."⁷⁴ In addition to the wording of the document which shows their apprehensiveness its mere existence implies that they considered this an extremely risky venture.

The *Galley* arrived in Madagascar probably sometime in 1720. There they sold their cargo for cash and purchased two hundred and forty slaves. Unfortunately the vessel met rough seas and cold weather which resulted in the death of between two and three slaves per day.⁷⁵ For reasons that are unclear the *Crown Galley* first went to Brazil where they arrived by 17 February 1721. In Brazil Downing sold three slaves, one man and two girls for a total of eighty one pounds, and then sailed on to Barbados where they arrived by 17 April 1721.⁷⁶ Upon landing in Barbados only between one hundred and thirty to one hundred and forty slaves remained and due to their "deplorable condition" the voyage came to a halt for just over a week so the slaves could rejuvenate.⁷⁷ From Barbados Downing returned to London probably to report back to Isaac Levy and Richard Janeway. Downing arrived in London by 25 May 1721, a mere 27 days after he departed Barbados, and complained that had weather conditions been more agreeable he could have brought fifty to sixty more slaves than the one hundred and seventeen he did bring.⁷⁸ It is unknown exactly when the *Galley* arrived in New York but an undated receipt

specifies that one hundred and fifteen slaves were delivered to Simson, two more had apparently died after Downing left for London, and it is safe to assume that the ship arrived in New York either in late 1721 or early 1722.⁷⁹

In all the entire venture took a little over one year, employed twenty crew members one of whom, Chaim Harrison, may have been Jewish, at a cost of over six hundred and ninety-eight pounds in wages. In addition, Downing received just over two hundred pounds for his services, half the cargo was lost and the expense of upkeeping the remainder neared two hundred pounds.⁸⁰ By 31 May 1722 the entire cargo had been sold. Eight slaves were sold outside New York, the largest single purchase consisting of eleven slaves was made by Joseph Read and the rest were sold one or two at a time. The account of sale lists the sale of one hundred and fourteen slaves for between forty and fifty pounds each. This does not include one slave that Simson himself bought for forty-four pounds bringing the total to one hundred and fifteen slaves. The total revenues were 4577 pounds.⁸¹ So we see that the slave trade was risky and contained many pitfalls which is probably why this was the only major shipment of slaves that Simson was involved in. It is clear from Simson's purchase that he was not against owning a slave himself which he most likely used as a household servant. His wife also had some minor dealings with slaves in that she sold a slave boy named Crown in June of 1726.⁸²

It should be noted that this slave voyage was made by the *Crown Galley* and not the *New York Postillion* as Marcus stated. One reason for this error might be that the *Galley* and *Postillion* were the same vessel. In fact the vessel was first called the *Sloop Anne*, was renamed the *New York Postillion* by 1716 and by 18 October 1720 in a contract between William Walton, Nathan Simson and Francis Sherman the ship is cited as the "*Crown Galley* formerly called the *Postillion*."⁸³ But the more important issue is was there a voyage to Africa by the *Postillion* in 1717 as Marcus claimed? There is no mention of such a trip in the Simson Papers but there is an allusion to one. In a letter from Richard Janeway to Nathan Simson dated 30 June 1719, Jenway mentions that he is aware of the charges brought against Simson by Peter Louis as a result of the Guina trip and promises to testify that Simson is in the right on this issue.⁸⁴ There is no mention of the reason for the voyage to Africa or Simsons involvement in it but the case of *Peter Louis v. Nathan Simson* was brought to the New York Mayor's Court on 28 October 1718 and can shed light on the subject.

After numerous delays a lengthy deposition was recorded on 4 March 1719 and outlined the following facts: On 2 June 1719 Nathan Simson, part owner of the *New York Postillion* bound for London, Guina in Africa and then to return to New York, agreed to hire Peter Louis as foromastman. Upon the ships arrival in London Louis was to become second mate and be

paid three pounds and four shillings per month until the ship returned to New York. In addition to these wages Louis would have the privilege of bringing four negro slaves to New York for his own use and benefit. Upon arriving in Guina Louis was not permitted by Captain Downing to place the slaves on board. Louis sued Simson for the profit he might have made as well as the cargo he had brought to barter for the slaves which was valued at one hundred and fifty pounds. Simson stated simply that he never denied Louis the right to transport his slaves aboard the *Postillion*. Simson was found guilty, Louis was awarded fifty pounds in damages and Simson was responsible for all court fees which amounted to fourteen pounds and thirteen shillings.⁸⁵ It is highly unlikely that Simson sent the *Postillion* to Africa to trade in something other than slaves. How many, if any, slaves were brought into New York and other details of the trip remain a mystery.

Public Prayer and the Simson Ledger

With the arrival of the first group of Jews in 1654 the issue of Jewish public worship needed to be addressed. According to the Charter of Freedoms and Exemptions granted by the Dutch West Indies Company in 1640 only the Dutch Reformed Church could practice publicly. It was the Dutch Lutherans that first made an issue of public worship and even gained some concessions. The Quakers followed suite but fared less well, some were arrested and one was tortured for refusing to serve his sentence of two years of hard labor. All of this coupled with Stuyvesant's general dislike of Jews resulted in the Jewish petition for public worship being denied. Still, the first services were probably held in 1654 and certainly by 1655.⁸⁶

The Jews petitioned Governor Dongan in 1685 to be allowed public worship but they were again denied. In 1692 the Frenchman Monsieur Lamothe-Cadillac wrote in his description of New York that "each sect has its church and freedom of religion." This would imply that the Jews had established a formal congregation by that time. But the statement is drawn into question by the fact that the Catholics, who are known have been in New York by that time,

did not have a church until 1786. What then can be said as per the accuracy of his statement regarding the Jews? In 1695 Reverend John Miller sailed to London with maps of New York that he had drawn. Enroute his ship was captured by the French and Miller threw all his papers overboard. He later reconstructed his maps from memory and listed a Jewish synagogue on Beaver street with a congregation of twenty families and lead by Saul Brown.⁸⁷ Between 1697 and 1700 the congregation moved to Mill Street into a house originally owned by John Harpendigh and later, by 1728, owned by David Provost. In 1728 the congregation purchased a house about one hundred feet west of Harpending's owned by Cornelius Cooper and established Shearith Israel.⁸⁸ Some historians like Abraham Karp claim that Shearith Israel might be correct in dating its conception to 1654 but there is no evidence to support this contention. In fact, a congregational constitution was written in 1706 at which point the congregation was most likely called Shearith Jacob, the name Shearith Israel would not be used until 1728.⁸⁹ Neither the minutes of the congregation nor the constitution of 1706 have survived so, although he probably had some hand in its formation, Simson's exact role is unknown.

Nathan Simson was president of the congregation from September 1720 to September 1721. Fortunately, Simson kept the records for the period of his tenure in office and this sixteen page ledger has found its way into the Simson

Papers.⁹⁰ Simson kept a financial record of every member of the congregation and much of the ledger is written in Portuguese. Although Simson was Ashkenazi in his religious life he was an assimilated Sephardi. Even though by 1720 of the thirty-seven paying members of the congregation only fifteen were Sephardi the Sephardic ritual was still practiced by the congregation. It should be noted that paying members were generally heads of households so that the congregation in fact numbered between 175 and 200 individuals. They had three paid officials, the hazzan Moses Lopez de Fonseca, the shoet and teacher Benjamin Wolf and the sexton Vallentine Compenall. The congregational expenditures show that by 1721 they rented both the house of John Harpendigh and that of Mr. Cooper which was either used as a school or turned over to one of the congregational employees. All these expenses had to be met by the congregation and since there were no dues they relied entirely upon donations to meet their fixed budget of eighty two pounds per year. There is only woman, Rachel Levy the widow of Samuel Levy, listed as having made a contribution. When one takes into account other expenditures such as oil for the lamps, servants to clean the synagogue and so forth the total cost of upkeeping the synagogue reached 128 pounds. Simson's record shows that the Levy-Franks-Simson group of Ashkenazim along with the Pecheco-Gonzales group of Sephardim, six members in total, formed the economic backbone of the congregation. Finally, it can be judged from their

contributions that aside from these six wealthy members the remaining thirty-one were in the middle or lower middle class. There were only three members on the charity list, the Silvas and one of the Campanall family. It is possible, however, that these were retired congregational servants living off their pensions.

In short there is no real difference in the activities of the community between 1720 and 1728. But the Simson ledger allows us to make the statement with some surety as well as push back our documentation another eight years.⁹¹

Conclusion

The Nathan Simson Papers provide a wealth of information for those who study the history of colonial America in general and colonial Jewry in particular. Despite the efforts put into this paper much work still needs to be done. The majority of the letters written in Yiddish, German, Dutch, Portuguese and Hebrew have not been fully translated nor organized in any manner. Who knows what insights we might obtain from them about daily life, trade practices and religious observance? No study of the life of Samuel Levi or, for that matter, the Levi family in general would be complete without the correspondence between Samuel and Moses Levi contained in the papers. A statistical study of the business ledgers and day book that takes into account factors like the type of merchandise traded, which ports were dealt with most often, the size and quantity of shipments and other factors would be particularly revealing. Much could be learned in regard to Jewish activity in commerce and such a study might tell us something about the economic condition of the British colonial empire as a whole. Each of the topics mentioned constitutes a project of enormous proportions given the volume and lack of organization of the papers. Hopefully this small

contribution might prompt other historians to complete the analysis of the Nathan Simson Papers.

Endnotes

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2. Tina Levitan, *The Firsts of American Jewish History* (New York, 1957), 27. Abram V. Goodman, *American Overture: Jewish Rights in Colonial Times* (Philadelphia, 1947) 75 states that the group that came in the summer came for the purpose of trade, not settlement.
3. Martin A. Cohen and Abraham J. Peck ed., *Sephardim in the Americas Studies in Culture and History* (Tuscaloosa, 1993) 156. Levitan, *Firsts*, 29.
4. Goodman, *Overture*, 79. Cohen, *Sephardim*, 157. Levitan, *Firsts*, 34.
5. Schappes, *Documentary History*, 12-13. Leo Hershkowitz "Migration and Settlement: Some Aspects of the New York Jewish Merchant in Colonial Trade," *The Jewish Historical Society of England* (1971): 102-105. Leo Hershkowitz "Judaism: Establishing a Presence in New Amsterdam," *Encyclopedia of North American Colonies*, volume three (New York, 1993) 637.
6. Cohen, *Sephardim*, 156. Goodman, *Overture*, 81-85 & 96.
7. Schappes, *Documentary History*, 6-11.
8. Jacob R. Marcus, *Early American Jewry: The Jews of New York, New England and Canada 1649-1749*, volume one (New York, 1951) 30-31. Schappes, *Documentary History*, 13.
9. For an excellent discussion of the struggle for Jewish rights under the Dutch in New Amsterdam see Goodman, *Overture*, 86-96.

10. Cohen, *Sephardim*, 157.
11. Hershkowitz, "Judaism: Establishing a Presence in New Amsterdam," *Encyclopedia of North American Colonies* (1993): 636. Hershkowitz, "Migration and Settlement," *The Jewish Historical Society of London* (1971) : 105.
12. Marcus, *Early American Jewry*, 38-39.
13. W. Rosendale "An Act Allowing Naturalization of Jews in the Colonies" *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume one (1892): 93. Max J. Kohler "Civil Status of Jews in Colonial New York" *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume five (1898): 101.
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16. Virginia, *New York Merchant*, 202.
17. Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Colonial Merchants and the American Revolution 1763-1776* (New York, 1957) 27.
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20. Miriam K. Freund, *Jewish Merchants in Colonial America: Their Achievements and Their Contributions to the Development of America* (New York, 1939) 30-31.
21. David De Sola Pool, "New York's Oldest Existing Jewish Cemetery," *The Saint Charles: Devoted to the History and Genealogy of the Ancestors, Founders and Descendants of Those Jewish Families Which Settled in America Prior to 1789*, volume one (January 1935): 54. Max J. Kohler, "Jewish Activity in American Colonial Commerce," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume ten (1902): 47 & 57.
22. Hershkowitz, "Migration and Settlement," *The Jewish Historical Society of London* (1971): 101, 112-114.
23. Stephen Alexander Fortune, *Merchants and Jews: The Struggle for British West Indian Commerce 1650-1750*, Latin American Monographs, second series (Gainesville, 1984) 137 & 207 n.19. "From the editor's notebooks," *The Saint Charles* (1935): 81. Samuel Oppenheim, "Will of Nathan Simson, a Jewish Merchant

Before 1722 and a Genealogical Note Concerning Him and Joseph Simson," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume twenty-five (1917): 87.

24. Marcus, *Studies*, 46.
25. Simson Papers CL6 frames 1-50. Simson Papers CL8 frame 114. Note: The originals can be found in the Public Record Office in London category 248, C.104/13-14. For the purposes of this paper all citations refer to the microfilm version as produced by the Recordak Corporation and are presently in the possession of Dr. Leo Hershkowitz of Queens College. The microfilm consists of four reels numbered CL5 through CL8. Due to the fact that, for the most part, neither the film nor the originals contain page numbers and where they do there is often more than one page number the citations here are referred to by frame. A frame is defined as any document(s) that fit on one microfilm screen unless it is an oversized page which may have taken as much as three screens but was counted as one frame.
26. Freund, *Jewish Merchants*, 41. Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, volume two (Detroit, 1970) 520 and volume three 1184. Marcus, *Studies*, 45. Marcus, *Early American Jewry*, 163.
27. Malcolm H. Stern, *First American Jewish Families: 600 Genealogies 1654-1988*, third edition (Baltimore, 1991) 272.
28. Another major problem with Stern is that, for the Simson entry, he relies completely on secondary sources. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, volume two, 587. This would have to be early 1712. For a further discussion of Daniel Simson see pages 27 & 28 of this work.
29. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, volume one, 279.
30. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, volume three, 1430 n.23. Marcus mentions in this same note, citing Leo Hershkowitz, that Jacob Franks probably arrived in 1708. The Early Tax Assessment Lists of Manhattan volume two, 6 December 1706, New York County Clerks Office, 31 Chambers Street, New York City, list a Jacob Franks living in the North Ward as being assessed for just over five pounds. This would push back his date of arrival at least two years.
31. Simson Papers CL8 frames 85 & 90.
32. Jacob R. Marcus, *Critical Studies in American Jewish History: Selected Articles from the American Jewish Archives* (New York, 1971) 26. Marcus, *Studies*, 45n.6. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, volume two, 559.

33. Freund, *Jewish Merchants*, 36. Erna Drucker, *Jewish Settlers in New Amsterdam and Early New York 1654-1825: A Selected Annotated Guide to Source Material*, masters research paper (New York, 1984) 50.
34. Early Tax Assessment Lists of Manhattan volume two entry for the Dock Ward of 6 December 1706. This entry also attests to Simsons modest beginnings. He assesment of just over five pounds is one of the lowest in the ward and several assesments were well over one hundred pounds.
35. Having carefully inspected every entry in the Mayor's Court Minute Books between 1695 and 1725 I can state with confidence that this case did not appear before the Mayor's Court although it is possible that it did appear before one of the other New York courts.
36. Elvira N. Solis, "Note on Isaac Gomez and Lewis Moses Gomez, From an Old Family Record," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume two (1903): 142. David De Sola Pool, *Portraits Etched in Stone: Early Jewish Settlement 1682-1831* (New York, 1952) 190. Julius M. Bloch and Leo Hershkowitz ed., *An Account of Her Majesty's Revenue in the Province of New York 1701-1709* (Ridgewood, 1966) 141.
37. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, volume one, 308.
38. Simson Papers CL5 frame 34. *Documents Relating to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, volume four, 1133-1135. Max J. Kohler, "Civil Status of Jews in Colonial New York," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume five (1898): 101.
39. Simson Papers CL8 frame 113.
40. Mayor's Court Minute Books volume 24 May 1715 - 29 April 1718, New York County Clerks Office, 31 Chambers Street, New York City pages 360-363.
41. Hershkowitz, "Migration and Settlement," *The Jewish Historical Society of London* (1971): 105.
42. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, volume two 936 & 997.
43. Simson Papers CL6 frames 1-50.
44. Simson Papers CL5 frame 226. Oppenheim, "Will of Nathan Simson," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications* (1917): 89.

45. Pool, *Faith*, 315-316. Simon W. Rosendale "An Act Allowing Naturalization of Jews in the Colonies," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume one (1892): 93.
46. Leo Hershkowitz, *Wills of Early New York Jews 1704-1799*, Studies in American Jewish History number four (Philadelphia, 1967), 12. Simson Papers CL5 frames 59 & 86.
47. Hershkowitz, "Migration and Settlement" *The Jewish Historical Society of London* (1971): 103 note 4.
48. Simson Papers CL5 frames 190-191 and 235-239.
49. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, volume two, 780. Hershkowitz, *Wills*, 27. Marcus, *Early American Jewry*, 163. Lee M. Friedman, "Wills of Early Jewish Settlers in New York," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, volume twenty-three (1915): 150. Oppenheim, "Will of Nathan Simson," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications* (1917): 87 note 1. Interestingly, a photocopy of the will probated in New York appears in Hershkowitz, *Wills*, 32 and clearly names Nathan Simson as executor. It is unclear whether Oppenheim is referring to a will probated in London or New York although given the evidence it is most likely the former. Leo Hershkowitz has suggested that perhaps there was another Samuel Levi unrelated to Moses Levi residing in London and that this might be the will of that individual. This seems highly doubtful, however, given that both wills also name Jacob Franks, a resident of New York, as co-executor.
50. For a prime example see Simson Papers CL5 frame 27, 50-52 and 154.
51. Marcus, *Early American Jewry*, 163. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, volume two, 824.
52. Simson Papers CL5 frames 331-341 and frames 50-52.
53. Dr. Leo Hershkowitz, as a result of the research he conducted for his work *Wills of Early New York Jews 1704-1799*, attests to the fact that Simson's will was never probated in New York. Interestingly, in a letter to Mrs. Simson dated 19 May 1726 Diego and Abraham Gonzales request that a copy of the will be sent to them in Kingston, Jamaica. It is unknown whether or not the will was sent or whether it was ever probated in Jamaican courts. See Simson Papers CL8 frame 93. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, volume two, 1529 n.29. Oppenheim, "Will of Nathan Simson," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications* (1917): 87-91.
54. Simson Papers CL8 frame 131 and CL7 section C frame 25.

55. For examples of these correspondence see Simson Papers CL6 frames 60-66 and CL8 frames 28, 93, 100, 104 and 110.
56. Simson Papers CL6 frame 56 & CL8 frame 1.
57. George Julius Miller, "James Alexander and the Jews, Especially Israel Emanuel," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume thirty-five (1939): 182. Albert M. Friedenberg, "The Simson Trust," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume twenty-eight (1922): 246-248.
58. Jacob R. Marcus, *American Jewry Documents: Eighteenth Century Primarily Hitherto Unpublished Manuscripts* (Cincinnati, 1959), 311. Bloch, *Her Majesty's Revenue*, 141. Simson Papers CL7 second book frames 1-100.
59. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, volume two, 591 & 594. Simson Papers CL5 frame 43.
60. Simson Papers CL8 frame 3.
61. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, 1519 n.14. Simson Papers CL8 frame 10. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, 774-775. Hershkowitz, "Migration and Settlement," *The Jewish Historical Society of London* (1971): 109-110.
62. Simson Papers CL5 frame 55. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, 625. Simson Papers CL5 frame 37. Marcus, *Documents*, 311-313.
63. George Fortunatas Judah, "Jewish Tribute in Jamaica," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume eighteen (1909): 153.
64. Max J. Kohler, "Phases of Jewish Life before 1800," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume two (1894): 81. Simson Papers CL5 frame 77.
65. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, 637. For an example of silver purchases see Simson Papers CL5 frames 44-46. For an example of the invoices see Simson Papers CL5 frame 9.
66. Simson Papers CL5 frame 160. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, 790.
67. Mayor's Court Minute Books volume April 23, 1695-Aug. 17, 1723.
68. Mayor's Court Minute Books volume Nov. 28, 1710- May 17, 1715 page 343 and vol. May 8, 1718-June 14, 1720 page 54. Hershkowitz, *Wills*, 27 note 1.

69. Mayor's Court Minute Books vol. June 21, 1720- Aug. 13, 1723 page 56. George J. Miller, "Early Jews in Middlesex County New Jersey," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume thirty-three: 253.
70. For an excellent study of the role of Jews in the international colonial slave trade see the soon to be published book by Eli Faber.
71. Marcus, *Early American Jewry*, 64. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, 674.
72. Simson Papers CL8 frame 81.
73. Simson Papers CL5 frames 20-21 and 184.
74. Simson Papers CL5 frame 246.
75. Simson Papers CL5 frames 22 & 18.
76. Simson Papers CL5 frames 16 & 9.
77. Simson Papers frames CL5 22 & 7.
78. Simson Papers CL5 frame 18.
79. Simson Papers CL5 frames 13 & 17.
80. Simson Papers CL5 frames 13 & 14. Frame 14 of this reel contains an account of wages paid to the crew of the *Crown Galley*. In the name Chaim Harrison it is possible to call into question the presence of the "i" in the first name "Chaim". Since this work was done without the advantage of examining the original sheets it is impossible to be conclusive about this point.
81. Simson Papers CL7 frame 249 and CL8 frames 70-72.
82. Simson Papers CL8 frame 107.
83. Simson Papers CL8 frames 35-69 and CL5 frame 184.
84. Simson Papers CL6 frame 94.
85. Mayor's Court Minute Books volume May 8, 1718 to June 14, 1720 see page 54 for the first mention of the case and pages 138-140 for the deposition.
86. Goodman, *Overture*, 70-73. Marcus, *Studies*, 44.
87. Goodman, *Overture*, 102-103.

88. David De Sola Pool, *The Mill Street Synagogue 1730-1817 of the Congregation Shearith Israel* (New York, 1930) 15-17. For an excellent discussion of the exact date the congregation was founded and its location see Albion Morris Dyer, "Points in the First Chapter of New York Jewish History," *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume three (1895): 41-60, the introduction to the "Shearith Israel Minute Books from 1728 onward" printed in the *American Jewish Historical Society Publications*, volume twenty-one (1913) and Leo Hershkowitz, "The Mill Street Synagogue Reconsidered," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly*, volume fifty-three, (June, 1964).
89. Jack Wertheimer ed., *The American Synagogue Transformed* (Cambridge, 1987), 1. Marcus, *Studies*, 44.
90. Marcus, *Colonial American Jewry*, 868. Marcus, *Studies*, 47.
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