

## 23 Souls, Big and Little

As you read about the early Jewish arrivals in North America, begin thinking about the reasons this community deserves a monument. Underline text that helps answer the following questions.

- What type of treatment were early Jewish arrivals fleeing?
- What did early Jewish arrivals hope to find in North America?
- What did early Jewish arrivals accomplish in their new homeland of North America?



In 1654, two ships arrived at New Amsterdam, with North America's first permanent Jewish settlers.

The twenty-three Jewish men, women, and children were refugees fleeing Recife, Brazil. The Portuguese had recently conquered the former Dutch colony, giving Jews and Protestants three months to leave. These Jews and

planted the seeds for a new community.

New Amsterdam represented a small but thriving outpost in Europe's worldwide race for natural resources, profit, and power. The colony's inhabitants included Native Americans; Dutch, English, and Swedish settlers from various Protestant denominations; Jews; and African slaves. A center for trade with Europe, the Caribbean, and Africa, the city contained some 250 homes and commercial businesses. Merchants, including many of the first Jewish settlers, dealt in furs, lumber, and agricultural goods. Jews benefited from an economic system designed to create wealth for countries in Europe.

The arrival of Jewish settlers alarmed New Amsterdam's governor, Peter Stuyvesant, who considered them "hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ." But the Dutch West India Company, the colony's administrators, permitted them to stay but forbade Jews from worshiping publicly, owning real estate, serving in the militia, holding office, opening shops, or obtaining state relief.

European laws excluded Jews from most trades except finance and commerce, but the skills and connections they acquired as merchants served many of them well in the New World. The first Jews settled in port cities, where their international connections to Europe and the Caribbean and their commercial skills proved particularly valuable. Living in religiously and ethnically diverse communities reliant upon trade, Jewish settlers enjoyed freedoms denied to their families back in Europe. Nevertheless, Jews remained a tiny minority in North America, their numbers growing slowly from 250 to about 2,000 during the 1700s.

Most of New York's first Jews were Sephardim, whose rituals originated in Spain and Portugal. Jews met for worship in private homes until British authorities lifted the ban on public worship at the end of the seventeenth century. Community members established Congregation Shearith Israel (Remnant of Israel) and met in rented quarters until 1730, when they consecrated the Mill Street Synagogue.

Colonial America's most active seaport, Newport, Rhode Island, became home to a flourishing Jewish community of traders and merchants. Drawn by its reputation as a thriving port, a small group of Jews from Barbados settled in Newport around 1677. By Newport's golden age, during the mid-1700s, the Jewish population had grown to two hundred adults and children. The city's foremost Jewish merchant, Aaron Lopez, built a successful shipping enterprise, ferrying rum, sugar, oil dry goods, lumber, hardware, textiles, candles, flour, meat, and slaves between America, Africa, the Caribbean, and Europe.

### Three Early Jewish Profiles

As you read about three early Jewish individuals in North America, what do their stories make you think, feel, and wonder? Do you consider any of these people deserving of a monument? Why?



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Born in Vilna, Lithuania, Asser Levy arrived at New Amsterdam in 1654 and soon became one of the colony's most prominent citizens.

Asser Levy (?-1682) championed civil rights for New Amsterdam's Jews, including the right to serve in the militia, to be granted the status and privileges of a burgher (free citizen), and to trade outside the city limits. A successful merchant, property owner, and butcher—he was “excused from killing hogs, as his religious does not allow him to do it”—Levy remained in the colony after it surrendered to the British in 1664 and became New York.



New York attracted Jewish merchants like Luis Moses Gomez (?-1740) who arrived from England around 1703. Like many Jewish families, the Gomezes sustained a network of relationships throughout the Caribbean and Europe linked by trade, marriage, philanthropy, and travel. Luis Gomez and his sons also traded with Native Americans in upstate New York. In 1714, the Gomezes purchased 6,000 acres of land along the Hudson river. The trading post and mill they built there survives as the oldest Jewish dwelling in North America. Men from the Gomez family presided over Congregation Shearith Israel nineteen different times.



A descendant of Portuguese conversos—Jews forced to convert to Catholicism after Portugal expelled all no-Christians in 1497—Aaron Lopez (1731-1782) sailed from Lisbon in 1752 to join his brother Moses in Newport. In Portugal, Lopez had to live as a Catholic. After arriving in America, he publicly returned to Judaism, even undergoing circumcision as required by Jewish law. He became one of the wealthiest and best-known Jews in the colonies. Nevertheless, when he petitioned Rhode Island to become a naturalized citizen in 1762, the colony cited his religion when it denied his request. He soon arranged to be naturalized in neighboring Massachusetts.

## **Making a Monument**

Draft a sketch of a monument to the early Jewish arrivals to North America, reflecting what was agreed to by the class through deliberation. Below the sketch, write a description, sharing details about the monument's design, the story it tells, and the reasons why it is a relevant expression of social values in the United States today.
