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# Crypto-Jews Disappear in the American Colonies

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*The historic Coming Street Cemetery in Charleston, South Carolina*

**O**n a recent tour of the historic Coming Street Cemetery in Charleston, South Carolina, the second oldest Jewish graveyard in the United States, I walked through a veritable who's who of Colonial Sephardic Jews.

The families buried at Coming Street Cemetery share a fantastic history. They were forced to convert in 15th-century Spain and Portugal, lived there as Catholics for a century or more, left the Iberian Peninsula, and fully reclaimed their Jewish identity in London, Amsterdam and the New World. The surnames found at this cemetery can be found in the Sephardic cemeteries in Barbados, Jamaica, Savannah, New York, and Newport. Names like Cardozo, Carvalho, D'Costa, De la Motta, De Leon, and more.

Lee Kamman, the docent giving us the tour of the cemetery, had something very intriguing to say. He has given tours to families who had only recently discovered that their Colonial American ancestors were Jews and came to see their graves. This got me thinking. How many Americans with Jewish roots in the early colonies are unaware of their Jewish ancestry?

The phenomena of crypto-Jews disappearing in Central America, Mexico or the Colorado valleys has gotten a lot of attention. The crypto-Jews who disappeared in the 13 American colonies have not received as much interest. I decided to investigate. It turns out, quite a few crypto-Jews did come to the colonies and

did disappear in the colonial world. My research revealed at least two distinct waves of crypto-Jews made their way to the English colonies and disappeared.

## The First Wave: The Seriously Secret Jews

In theory, between 1290 and 1656 Jews were not permitted to reside in England. I recently created a database of all "Registered Aliens" who lived in England between 1350-1656. I analyzed my list of 102,000 names, where they lived, where they went to "church," or didn't go to church, what they did for work, who they married, and where they were buried. Through this analysis, I concluded London was home to several crypto-Jewish communities throughout the 366-year

ban on their existence. They were, by necessity, seriously secret Jews.

My research reveals Jewish “Italians,” “Spaniards” and “Portingales” came to London in waves that lined up with troubles befalling Iberian Jewry. Not surprisingly, during periods of persecution more Iberian Jews appear in London. When times were good, fewer Iberian Jews made their way there.

When Spanish and Portuguese Jews arrived in London, they registered themselves as members of the French Church, the Italian Church, the Dutch Church, or of “No Church.” They displayed little allegiance to any of these churches and flipped between them. They baptized some children and did not baptize others. They worked as musicians, goldsmiths, precious gem cutters, physicians, and merchants. No matter what their main profession, they tended to trade with the greater *converso* world. They lived in the East End of London, most usually in the Tower Hamlets Ward, in Stepney, Bethnal Green, and Shoreditch. They married amongst themselves and were buried together.

## The London Italian Church?

Though these secret Jews joined a variety of churches, or were of “no church,” by far the most popular church amongst them was the London-Italian Church. It was the spiritual home of many a 16th-century secret Jew. And what an odd church it was! In 1568, only 25% of its members were Italian. Its first pastor was the converted Jew Michaelangelo Florio. A later pastor, Antonio del Corro (1527-1593) came from Seville, had a Spanish Jewish surname, and preached in Spanish. A *converso* preacher preaching in Spanish to an audience of *conversos*?



Emilia Bassano (1569-1645)



Peter Rycault, Sephardic Jew and member of the London Italian Church (more at Schar's website).

## The “Italian” Court Musicians

Some of the Tudor secret Jews arrived as musicians. In preparation for his fourth marriage, Henry VIII (1509-1547) told his ambassadors to seek out the best musicians in Europe for his court. The desire to find good musicians was so great, origins were often overlooked. The first musicians recruited were the Jewish Bassano brothers. Others would soon follow.

Many of these musicians were Spanish Jews whose families had made their way to Italy and once there, re-invented themselves as “Italian” musicians and traveled to England where they made, played and traded musical instruments in London. The musicians stayed after Henry’s death and continued to provide music for Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1602), and James IV (1602-1626).

The London musical families include Antonia (alias Moyses), Bassano, Comy (alias Comes, Combe, Combre, Coimbra), Daman (alias De Man, De Ammano, Amman, Man, Della Man), Lupo (alias Abimelech, Lux), Maiohn (alias Majon), Maria (alias Cossin, Cuson, Cusin, Cassin, Albert), Segar, Tedesco, and Vicenza (alias Kellim, Kenner, Kenneth, Hithcoke). These musicians lived with each other, married amongst themselves, acted as witnesses for each other wills, and collectively tended to the communities’ widows and orphans. Most of them belonged to the Italian-London Church.

## The Tale of Six Violinists: The Bassanos

One cannot discuss the music producing crypto-Jews of 16th-century London without mentioning the “Italian” Bassano family. The Bassanos were Jewish. The question is: Italian Jews or Spanish Jews living in Italy? Nineteen Bassanos appear in the old Jewish cemetery in Venice (San Nicolo on the Lido). At the same time, Bassan was a Jewish name in Spain and Bassano a confirmed Sephardic name in Tunisia, Greece, Egypt, Syria, Turkey.

The first Bassanos in London were the sons of Jeronimo Bassano, a Venetian Jewish physician, teacher, author-heretic, and musician. The heretic part may be the reason the sons, Gasparo (Jaspar. 1508-1577), Alvise (1510-1554), Anthony (1511-1574), Zuane (1512-1579), Giacomo (1518-1566), and Giambaptista (Baptista, 1511-1576) moved from Venice to London in 1539. Once there, they became the most prominent musical family in the Tudor period and married into other secretly Jewish musical families. The other crypto-Jewish musicians playing of the Tudor court are an interesting bunch. Here are a few.

## The Tale of Two Violinists — and 15 Names!

Frances of Vicenza came to London in 1543 to replace the crypto-Jewish violinist Romano of Milan who lost his life after being accused of being a practicing Jew. Frances changed his name frequently; his aliases included Frances Kellim, Kellem, Kener, Kennyt, Kenneth, Francis Francisco, and finally Francis Hithcoke. *Kinnor* is the Hebrew word for stringed instrument. *Kelem*, the Hebrew word for instruments in general.

Ambrose Lupo, another violin playing London crypto-Jew also had quite a list of aliases. He began as Ambrose of Milan but by 1559 he became Ambrose Lupo. Between 1567 and 1576, he went by Ambrose Luck, Lucki, Lux, and Lucksor. A will revealed his real name, Almaliach, a version of Elmaleh, the name of a well-known Spanish Jewish family found around the Mediterranean after the 1492 Expulsion.

## From Court Musicians to Colonists

The secret Jews of London's move to the colonies begins when the court musician Ludovico Bassano (1542-1593) married Elizabeth Damano (1572). Elizabeth was the daughter of the crypto-Jewish court musician William Daman (alias Guigielfmo Damano). The union produced Elizabeth Bassano (1593-1630) who married Albiano Lupo (1574-1626). Albiano Lupo was the grandson of Ambrose Lupo, Elizabeth Bassano was his great granddaughter. They were uncle and niece. The pair traded their life in the English court for the Virginia colony in the early 1600s.

Records indicate Albiano arrived in Virginia on a ship called the *Swann* in 1610. Elizabeth followed him six years later. Albiano was granted 350 acres by the crown and Elizabeth was granted 50 acres. The crown gave immigrants 50 acres for every indentured person they brought and Albiano brought five servants, all from the Alien Registry.



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Albiano died in 1626. The widow Lupo married John Chandler (1599-1658) in 1627. Elizabeth bore Chandler at least three children, Robert William Chandler II, John Chandler II, and Mary Chandler. Elizabeth Bassano Lupo was buried at St. Johns Church Cemetery in Hampton, Virginia in 1635.

Her son, Robert William Chandler II (1627-1669) married Elizabeth Davis (1629-1661). Davis is another English crypto-Jewish surname. The couple had upwards of eight children who populated the Virginia colony with Christian Chandlers.

Crypto-Jews have the habit of marrying other crypto-Jews. This was as true in the American colonies as it was elsewhere. Robert Chandler II (1700-1764) married Sarah Billeboe (1700-1766). Sarah was the daughter of a crypto-Jewish "Huguenot" Jean-Jacques Billbeau (1675-1735) alias Billeboe, Billbeau, Bilibo and Bilboa. This marriage produced seven Anglican children, Joseph, Nancy Ann, John, William, Joel, James, and Elisha.

There is more. Philip Lupo (1582-1668), the goldsmith brother of Albiano, arrived in Virginia in 1621 aboard the *George*. However, he came alone. He left behind his wife, Mary Comes, and his children. The Comes family (Commes, Combre, Coombe) were crypto-Jewish court musicians founded by Coimbra born George and Innocent. Phillip did not stay, returning to London in 1624.



However Phillip Lupo II (1605-1670) did return to Virginia and established a family. His daughter, Marie Lupo (1625-1689) married Thomas Royal (1611-1709). Thomas' parents were Thomas Ryall (de Real, 1595-1645) and Eleanor Falcon (1606) — both Sephardic surnames from the London Alien list. Through their sons (Phillip III, James, and Albiano) the Lupo family would live in Virginia through present day.

## The Violets

Sarah Damano (1570), another daughter of William Damano, married the Antwerp-born musician Pierre Vyolet (1570) in 1594. Once married, they moved to crypto-Jewish friendly St. Katherine Cree, a neighborhood favored by London crypto-Jews and the eventual home of the first legal synagogue in London.

A surprising fact: Their son, Thomas Violet (1609-1662), a goldsmith, criminal, and all-around bad guy, would become one of London's most vocal anti-Semites. As if this was not bad enough, he devised numerous schemes to entrap members of the crypto Jewish community, take their money, and see them deported. An acquaintance said this of him, "Thomas Violet has a name too sweet for so foul a carcass."

Sarah Damano and Pierre Vyolet had another son, Peter/Pierre Viollet II (1620) who was less vile. Their grandson Peter Villet III (1652-1739) immigrated to the Maryland colony as an indentured servant. There he married another London alien, Cecelia Barber. This marriage produced many children including Peter Villett IV (1697-1748). The name eventually morphed to Willett, a well-known name throughout the southern colonies.

The first wave of London crypto-Jews had a good reason to make their way to the English colonies. At a minimum, in London they faced discrimination as aliens and were taxed at a high rate. At a maximum, they risked their lives if their ancestry was discovered. America, with its offer of free land and end of alien status, was a good option. Once in America, it appears all their descendants disappeared into the colonial Christian world.

## The Second Wave: The Legal Jewish Immigrants

The second wave of Sephardic Jewish immigration to the colonies occurred after Jews were re-admitted to England in 1656. Once it was legal for Jews to reside in England, many *conversos* became practicing Jews in London. They set up businesses, opened a synagogue (Bevis Marks), and then sent family members to the other English colonies, Barbados first, followed by Jamaica, and then the 13 American colonies.

This wave was different from the first. These crypto-Jews arrived at the colonies as practicing Jews. Their time of hiding was over!

## The Hays-Touro Family

Two of the most famous Sephardic families in the English colonies would be the Touro and Hays families. Indeed the first synagogue in America, the Touro Synagogue, was named after its first rabbi, Isaac Touro (1738-1783). An Amsterdam-born Sephardic Jew, Isaac married Reyna (Malka) Hays (1743-1787) in 1773. The couple married

in an elaborate Jewish ceremony at the Newport synagogue officiated by Rabbi Isaac Karigal, the first rabbi to visit the American colonies. So in a sense, their marriage might have been the first legitimate Jewish marriage in America. This colonial family had four children, Abraham, Rebecca, Judah and Nathan.



Judah Touro (1775-1854)

Meanwhile in New York, Moses Michael Hays (1739-1805), Reyna's brother, married Rachel Myers (1738-1810) and had six children, Judah, Judith, Sarah (Sally), Rebecca, Catherine, and Slowey. And this is



Moses Michael Hays (1739-1805)

where things get complicated. Judith Hays (1767-1844) married her first cousin, Samuel Myers (1755-1836). At the same time, Judith's sister, Sarah Hays (1772-1832) married Samuel's brother, Moses Mears Myers (1771-1860). So two sisters married two brothers. All cousins.

Four of the New York Hays-Myers children, Judith, Sarah, Catherine, and Slowey moved from New York to Richmond, Virginia. The unmarried sisters (Catherine and Slowey) and the two married sisters (Judith and Sarah), all maintained homes close to one another other.

Gustavus Adolphus Meyers (1801-1869), son of Judith Hays and Samuel Myers, met a free woman of color working in the house of his aunt, Sarah Hays named Nellie Forrester (1800-1873). The two had a romantic liaison and on February 1, 1823, their son, Richard Gustavus Forrester was born. The extended Sephardic family raised Richard as their own. Eventually, Gustavus sent Nellie and Richard to Canada so his son might receive the education denied mixed race children in the slave south.



*The first synagogue in America, the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, was named after its first rabbi, Isaac Touro (1738-1783).*

In the meantime, Catherine Hays maintained a close friendship with her cousin Judah Touro (1775-1854). Judah had moved from Newport to New Orleans to expand the families import/export business. Judah had a common-law marriage with a free woman of color, Ellen Wilson (1800-?). The union produced a daughter, Narcissa (1822-1883). In 1830, Judah sent Narcissa to be raised by his good friend and maiden cousin Catherine in Richmond. Judah wanted Narcissa to be closer to a larger Jewish community than what existed in New Orleans.

In 1836, Nellie and Richard Gustavus Forrester returned from Canada and lived with his great aunts, Slowey and Catherine Hays. In 1840, a marriage was arranged between the cousins Richard Gustavus Forrester (Hays) and Narcissa Wilson (Touro).

This clan of Sephardic Jews did not condone slavery and gamed the system in every manner known to keep Richard and Narcissa and their children safe. A double house was built by Samuel Myers, Richard's grandfather, to accommodate the spinsters and the Forrester family. The house was located on the very fashionable Broad Street, one block away from Monument Avenue. And what a family it was — Narcissa and Richard Forrester were parents to 23 children!

Richard and Narcissa had a house to live in and, when their elderly aunts, Catherine and Slowey died, they left their fortunes to them. What became of these 23 mixed race Sephardic children? Based on available records, children Lucretia, Richard Henry, Richard Gil, William Manning Taylor, Katherine, and Arthur Gratton, lived as people of color, were classified as mulatto, married persons of color, and became members of the African-American Christian community.

As for the remaining 16 children? Unknown. After the Civil War, Richmond became a difficult place for people of color to live and many left. While some of Richard and Narcissa's children chose to live in the African-American world, some may have chosen to live in the white Christian world, or the Jewish world. There are documented cases of mixed-race Sephardic children ending up in in the elite Sephardic community in New York.

The second wave of colonial crypto-Jews ended up in all manner of colonial families. Some married white Christians and entered the white Christian world. Some married African-Americans and entered into the African-American Christian world. Some married Jews and remained Jewish. Some married white and African-American Christians and their descendants lived in the Jewish colonial world.

## Full Circle

I end where I began. Today, many people, white and black, with roots in the 13 American colonies, descend from crypto-Jews. Some of these ancestors arrived at the Colonies as secret Jews. Some arrived as practicing Jews. But as the centuries passed these crypto-Jews disappeared into the general population. Many people do not know their ancestors were early American Colonial crypto-Jews.

To quote Aviva Ben-Ur, in *Sephardic Jews in America, A Diasporic History*, "Malcolm Stern's thorough genealogical research of the 1950s revealed so many Christian branches grafted onto the trunks of Colonial Jewish family trees (some 40,000 individuals) that it made sense to title the first edition of his book *Americans of Jewish Descent*." 🌐

