

This Month in American Jewish History

Gomez Mill House, Home of Luis Moses Gomez The Oldest Standing Jewish Dwelling in North America

On March 28, 1709, Luis Gomez was one of several fellow merchants who purchased the estate property after the death of Jewish merchant Jacob Bueno De Mesquita. Bueno was an interesting character, who may have been born a Basque, perhaps moved to Amsterdam, might have joined the Portuguese Jewish community and turned up in New York around 1680. Soon after, he purchased 2600 square feet of land for a cemetery that may have become the first section of the historic Sherith Israel Cemetery in lower Manhattan.

Luis Moses Gomez's home, just north of Newburgh, is the oldest standing Jewish dwelling in North America. Born in 1654 in Spain, his grandfather, Gomez de Salazar, was Comptroller of the Treasury for King Philip IV, and his father also advised the Spanish crown. The family was so essential to Philip that he protected them from the raging Inquisition for many years. Luis' father and the King understood that it couldn't last forever, because the Grand Inquisitor knew about and opposed the arrangement. They set up a code phrase that the King would speak when he could no longer assure the safety of the Gomez family. When Philip said to Luis' father, "The onions are beginning to smell," he immediately fled Spain with his family. They went first to France, eventually ending up in London. In England, Luis' father rebuilt his merchant business and became an essential financial advisor to Queen Anne of England. Son Luis worked for his father and expanded the business to the trans-Atlantic trade in sugar, cocoa and spices. He eventually moved to Barbados and Jamaica to run the operation and was successful and wealthy by the time he showed up in New York in the late 1690s.

The close connection between the Gomez family and the English Crown paid off when Queen Anne granted Luis Gomez an Act of Denization in 1705. Acts of Denization were similar to naturalization today, except that they were rare and reserved for persons who could not otherwise become full citizens of England, such as Jews. With the denization, Gomez could conduct business in the English colonies and own real property, without swearing allegiance to the Crown in the name of the Church of England, but could not vote, hold office, nor participate in certain other activities.

In New York, Gomez grew wealthy as a trader, merchant, speculator and ship-owner. In the second decade of the 18th century, he set his sights on the wild lands in and around what is now Orange County, NY. Most traders sailed past these dark forests on their way up the Hudson River to Fort Orange (today's Albany). They were afraid to venture from their river boats, because just north of today's Newburgh, from the river, a large natural feature on the shore appeared to be a threatening Indian vision. It was made even more fearful by the fires and wild dances of the Indians at the shore. Gomez, see-

ing an opportunity and not frightened by ghost stories, went ashore and began to trade with the Algonquin Delaware Indians for furs and lumber, making a fortune. By 1714, he had purchased some 6000 acres of land, and within a few years owned most of what is now Orange and Ulster Counties, including the City of Newburgh. He was a true pioneer in that wild frontier. It was a dangerous place, and he built a combination home and trading post on "Jews Creek," near Marlboro, between the Hudson River and the trail that led north to Fort Orange (today's Route 9W). From there he and his son Daniel conducted a very successful trading business between the Indians, local settlers and river boats for 30 years. He had a home in New York inside the Wall, and

the Gomez family is mentioned in many NYC records, including as major donors to Trinity Church for their first steeple. He was the largest financial backer for the construction of America's first synagogue – the Mill Street Synagogue.

The Gomez Mill House was first a thick-walled, one story, fieldstone blockhouse, designed and built by Luis and Daniel to protect themselves and their workers from marauding Indians, river pirates and settler thugs. Later, Dutch-American owner Wolfert Acker added a second floor and made it his home. He lived there while he was an officer in the New Marlborough Company of Minute Men, who protected George Washington when he was camped in the area. Subsequent owners wisely preserved the home and the nearby mill. In the 20th century, many descendants of Luis Moses Gomez pooled their collective heirlooms, including the original Act of Denization signed by Queen Anne, and many other fabulous household items and early American Judaica. They created the Gomez Foundation for the Mill House and purchased the site. The current Foundation Board includes many direct descendants of Luis. Today, it is open to the public as an incredible window into American and Jewish American history, and it will capture your imagination and heart. The museum serves as the centerpiece of a wonderful education program for local and distant schools, and class visits are part of the curriculum of Newburgh public schools and many nearby districts. This very special gem is easily accessible from Long Island. It's located about 5 miles north of Newburgh, on a little old road off Route 9W. Driving north, as you pass the Mill Creek Golf course, pay attention to the right side of the road, and don't blink. There is a familiar blue and white marker sign where you must turn. Proceed slowly down the hill, into the thick forest, and you will soon arrive in the world of early 18th century NY. The entire experience is immersive and uplifting. The site is closed during the winter and reopens in April. The best time to visit is, of course, when there are no tour groups or during other slow times. When we stumbled on the place by accident, there was no one else there, and we had a private tour and lecture. Make sure to view the film that is shown.

