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THE SETTLEMENT
OF THE
JEWS IN GEORGIA.

BY
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Augusta, Georgia.

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THE SETTLEMENT OF THE JEWS IN GEORGIA.

BY CHAS. C. JONES, JR., LL. D., *Augusta, Georgia.*

In and by the charter granted by George II to the Trustees for establishing the colony of Georgia in America, liberty of conscience in the worship of Almighty God was fully guaranteed. To all sects, save Papists, was accorded a free exercise of religion, provided its ministrations and enjoyment were peaceable and caused no offense or scandal to the government, which, as we well know, favored the Established Church of England. Acting in this spirit of toleration, Mr. Oglethorpe, in the language of Francis Moore,* ‘shew’d no Discountenance to any for being of different Persuasions in Religion.’

It has been idly charged that in the beginning, Georgia colonists were impecunious, depraved, lawless, and abandoned, that the settlement at Savannah was a sort of Botany Bay, and that Yamacraw Bluff was peopled by runagates from justice. The suggestion is utterly without foundation. The truth is, no applicant was admitted to the privilege of enrolment as an emigrant until he had been subjected to a preliminary examination, and had furnished satisfactory testimony that he was fairly entitled to the benefits of the charity. Other American colonics were founded and augmented by individuals coming at will, without question, for personal gain, and bringing no certificate of present or past good conduct. Georgia, on the contrary, exhibits the spectacle, at once unique and admirable, of permitting no one to enter her borders who was not by competent authority adjudged worthy the rights of citizenship.

*A Voyage to Georgia, etc., p. 15. London, 1744.

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The primal introduction of Jews into the colony of Georgia was irregular, and contravened the instructions of the Trustees. It came about in this wise. Oglethorpe had scarcely concluded his labors in laying out the town of Savannah and designating its streets, squares, and wards, when a vessel arrived from England having on board forty Hebrew colonists. They came to Savannah without the sanction of the Trustees, although the expenses incident to their transportation had been defrayed with moneys collected under commissions granted by the Common Council. It appears from the journal of the Trustees that among the commissions empowering the holders to solicit and receipt for contributions in aid of the colonization were three in favor of Alvaro Lopez Suasso, Francis Salvador, Jr., and Anthony Da Costa.

It was understood that all moneys which they might collect were to be transmitted to the Trustees, to be by them applied in furtherance of the objects specified in the charter. Acting under their commissions, Messrs. Suasso, Salvador, and Da Costa did secure benefactions to a considerable amount. Instead, however, of paying these funds over to the Trustees, or lodging them in the Bank of England to the credit of the Trust, as they should have done, they busied themselves with collecting Hebrew colonists to the number of forty, and, without the permission of the Common Council, appropriated the moneys which they had collected to chartering a vessel and defraying the expenses requisite for the conveyance of these Israelites to Savannah.

Receiving an intimation that Messrs. Suasso, Salvador, and Da Costa were exceeding their authority and violating the instructions which accompanied the delivery of the commissions, and apprehending that the purposes of these individuals, if consummated, would prove prejudicial to and subversive of the good order and best interests both of the Trust and the Colony, the Trustees as early as the 31st of January, 1733, instructed their secretary, Mr. Martyn, to wait

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upon them and demand a surrender of the commissions which they held. With this demand Messrs. Suasso, Salvador, and Da Costa refused prompt compliance, and persisted in appropriating the funds they had collected in the manner indicated.

Mr. Oglethorpe had not been advised of the coming of these colonists, and was somewhat at a loss to determine what disposition should be made of them. As the charter guaranteed freedom of religious opinion and observance to all, save Papists, he wisely concluded to receive them, and in due course notified the Trustees of their arrival and of his action in the premises. Those gentlemen did not hesitate to avow their disapproval of the whole affair. They declared that such irregular and unauthorized conduct on the part of Messrs. Suasso, Salvador, and Da Costa was prejudicial to the good order and scheme of the colonization, and that the sending over of these people had turned aside many intended benefactions. A committee was appointed to prepare for publication a statement of the matter, and to assure the public that the Trustees did not propose "to make a Jew's colony of Georgia." To Mr. Oglethorpe they wrote that they had heard with grave apprehension of the arrival of these Israelites in Georgia, and that they hoped "they would meet with no sort of encouragement." They counseled him to "use his best endeavors that they be allowed no kind of settlement with any of the grantees," and expressed the fear that their presence in Savannah would prove injurious to the trade and welfare of the colony.

Ignoring the narrow-minded and illiberal suggestions of the Trustees, Mr. Oglethorpe furnished ample accommodation and encouragement for these Hebrew colonists, who by their peaceable behavior, orderly conduct, and industry commended themselves to his favorable consideration. In communicating with the Trustees he took occasion to express the opinion that this accession had not proved a detriment to the colony. He specially invites the attention of his asso-

ciates to the good offices of Dr. Nunis. In acknowledging the latter's kindness, the Trustees request Mr. Oglethorpe to offer him a gratuity for his medical services, but insist that all grants of land within the confines of the province should be withheld from these Israelites. With these instructions, however, the founder of the colony of Georgia did not comply. In the general conveyance of town lots, gardens, and farms, executed on the 21st of December, 1733, several of these Hebrews are mentioned as grantees. Among them appear Abraham Minis, Isaac Nunez Henriquez, Moses le Desma, Samuel Nunez Ribiero, Benjamin Sheftall, and Abraham Nunez Monte Sano.

That the Trustees were justified in condemning and rebuking the irregularity, disobedience, and contumacy of Messrs. Suasso, Salvador, and Da Costa, cannot be questioned. That it was entirely prudent and proper in them to claim and exercise the right of selecting colonists for the plantation, is equally certain. That they alone possessed the power of determining who should seek homes in Georgia, and of binding applicants in advance to a due observance of prescribed rules, was a privilege conferred by the terms of the charter. That they were justified in recalling the commissions sealed in favor of Messrs. Suasso, Salvador, and Da Costa, all will admit. And yet Mr. Oglethorpe was right in disregarding the illiberal instructions of the Trustees, and in receiving these people and according them homes in Savannah. Some of them removed to South Carolina, but others remained in Savannah, and their descendants may this day be found in that city occupying positions of trust, respectability, and influence.

Upon the arrival in Savannah of the Salzburgers* under

*The Salzburgers, to whom reference is here made, numbering in all seventy-eight souls and coming from the town of Berchtoldsgaden, had been transported free of charge to Dover, England; whence, on the 28th of December, 1733, they sailed in the ship *Purisburg* for Savannah. To them a settlement was accorded by Mr. Oglethorpe, at a locality about four miles below the present

the conduct of the Baron Von Reck and the Rev. Mr. Bolzius, a Jew invited the weary voyagers to a breakfast of rice soup, and showed them many kindnesses. In this little commercial metropolis of the colony there were then twelve resident Hebrew families.

Of a Jew and his wife that clergyman records this anecdote in his diary: "They are so very willing to serve us and the Salzburger's that it surprises us; and are so honest and faithful that the like is hardly to be found, as appears by the following example. The Jew's wife had, by mistake and in the dark, taken of a Salzburger's wife a crown piece for a half-crown piece, because the Salzburger's wife had given her it for no more. When, the next day, the Jew saw the money and his wife told him she had taken it for half the value, he went to the Salzburger's tent and asked for the woman and paid her the other half-crown with these words: 'God forbid I should have any goods in my house that are not my own, for it will have no blessing.'" "This," adds

town of Springfield, in Effingham County, Georgia. Depending upon the charity of the Trustees for establishing the Colony of Georgia in America for supplies of all sorts, patient of toil, observant of the rules of honesty, sobriety, and morality for which their sect had been long distinguished, and rejoicing in their freedom, these industrious and frugal immigrants labored earnestly in building a village in the depths of a sterile and monotonous pine forest.

Early in 1735 this settlement was materially strengthened and encouraged by the arrival of fifty-seven new-comers, of like lineage and persuasion, under the conduct of Mr. Vatt; and, about a year afterwards, the population was further increased by the arrival of some eighty Germans from the city of Ratisbon, under the guidance of Baron Von Reck and Captain Hermsdorf, and twenty-seven Moravians, under the care of the Rev. David Nitschman.

In 1736 these Salzburger's abandoned their homes, and, with Mr. Oglethorpe's consent, located themselves on a high ridge near the Savannah river, to which they gave the name of New Ebenezer. Here they multiplied and prospered. In silk culture they excelled. To the present day their descendants may be found in this vicinity, and the large brick house of worship, known as Jerusalem Church, still attests the industry and the religious zeal of these peoples.

Mr. Bolzius, "made a great impression on the Salz-burgers."*

Referring in another place to the generous treatment experienced by the Salzburgers, Mr. Bolzius states: "These Jews shew a great love for us, and have promised to see us at our settlement."

Surely,

"In Faith and Hope the world will disagree,
But all mankind's concern is Charity."

Be it remembered in praise of these Hebrew colonists that they were never numbered among the malcontents, many of whom gave Mr. Oglethorpe no little trouble and annoyance. They seem to have pursued quiet, industrious lives, and to have been observant not only of prescribed regulations, but also of the rights of their neighbors, refraining as far as possible from being a continuing charge upon the Trust.

Mindful of their religion, at an early day they opened a small synagogue in Savannah which they named Mikva Israel. Unable to employ a minister, services were gratuitously conducted in turn by members of the congregation.

Among the early and successful merchants of Savannah, Abraham Minis will not be forgotten.

It will be remembered that the Trustees entertained great expectations of profit not only from silk-culture but also from the fruit of the vine. Among the Hebrew colonists was Abraham de Lyon. He had been for years prior to his removal to Georgia a *vineron* in Portugal. In his garden he cultivated several kinds of grapes. Among them, the Porto and Malaga "grew in great perfection." He proposed to the Trustees that if they would lend him, upon such security as he offered, £200 sterling for three years without interest, he would "employ this sum with a further stock of his own in sending to Portugal and bringing over vines and vinerons." He also

* Extract of the Journals of Mr. Commissary Von Reck, etc., pp. 46, 47. London, 1734.

obligated himself to repay the loan at the specified time, and to have growing within the province forty thousand vines, with which he would supply the freeholders at moderate rates.* The scarcity of money, however, and other pressing demands upon the purse of the Trust prevented the acceptance of the proposition.

To Colonel William Stephens, the venerable and faithful agent of the Trustees, we are indebted for the following glimpse of the first vineyard planted within the limits of Georgia :

“1737, December 6. After dinner, walked out to see what Improvements of Vines were made by one Mr. Lyon, a Portugese Jew, which I had heard some Talk of; and indeed nothing had given me so much Pleasure since my Arrival as what I found here; though it was yet (if I may say it properly) only in Miniature, for he had cultivated only for two or three Years past about half a Score of them which he received from Portugal for an Experiment; and by his Skill and Management in pruning, &c., they all bore this year very plentifully a most beautiful, large Grape, as big as a Man’s Thumb, almost pellucid, and Bunches exceeding big; all which was attested by Persons of unquestionable Credit, (whom I had it from), but the Season now would allow me only to see the Vines they were gathered from, which were so flourishing and strong that I saw one Shoot of this last Year only, which he allowed to grow from the Root of a bearing Vine, as big as my Walking-Cane, and run over a few Poles laid to receive it at least twelve or fourteen Foot as near as I could judge. From these he has raised more than a Hundred which he has planted all in his little Garden behind his House at about four Foot Distanee, each in the Manner and Form of a Vineyard: They have taken Root and are about one Foot and a Half high; the next Year he

*A true and historical narrative of the Colony of Georgia in America, etc., by Tailfer, Anderson, and Douglas, p. 37. Charlestown. South Carolina, MDCCXLI.

says he does not doubt raising a Thousand more, and the Year following at least five Thousand. I could not believe (considering the high situation of the Town upon a Pine-Barren, and the little Appearance of such Productions in these little Spots of Ground, annexed to the House), that he had found some proper Manure wherewith to improve the sandy Soil; but he assured me it was nothing but the natural Soil, without any other Art than his Planting and Pruning, which he seemed to set some Value on from his Experience in being bred among the Vineyards in Portugal; and to convince the World that he intends to pursue it from the Encouragement of the Soil proving so proper for it he has at this time hired four Men to clear and prepare as much Land as they possibly can upon his forty five Acre Lot, intending to convert every Foot of the whole that is fit for it into a Vineyard; though he complains of his present Inability to be at such an Expence as to employ Servants for Hire.”*

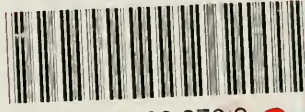
The manufacture of silk and the cultivation of the vine did not engage, except to a limited degree, the attention of the colonists. They found other products such as indigo, rice, and corn more profitable. At a later period tobacco and cotton engrossed the labors of the planters.

While these memoranda touching the connection of the Jews with the early settlement of Georgia are not as full as we could desire, they nevertheless afford some insight into the temper and the conduct of the Hebrew colonists. As a general rule they preferred commerce to agriculture,—town to country. In the record there are no stains. To the present day the Jews of Georgia have been industrious, thrifty, law-abiding, and substantial citizens. While chiefly busied with trade, among them will be found not a few who acted well their parts in law, in medicine, and in positions of trust, honor, and emolument.

*A Journal of the Proceedings in Georgia, etc., pp. 48-50, Vol. I. London, MDCCXLII. See also *An Impartial Enquiry into the State and Utility of the Province of Georgia*, pp. 21, 22. London, MDCCXLI.

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