

Jewish Patriots in the American Revolution

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Immigration and Settlement

The story of Jewish settlement in the American colonies begins in 1654, when twenty-three refugees arrived in New Amsterdam after fleeing Recife, Brazil. Portugal had reconquered the former Dutch colony, forcing this small community to seek safety elsewhere. Their Atlantic crossing was one chapter in the much larger Sephardic Jewish diaspora set in motion by the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492.

Over the following decades, the character of Jewish life in the colonies broadened. Ashkenazi immigrants from Central and Eastern Europe began arriving in the late seventeenth century, and their numbers increased throughout the eighteenth. By the eve of the American Revolution, Sephardic and Ashkenazi Jews had built communities in a growing network of colonial ports:

- Newport, Rhode Island
- New Amsterdam (now New York)
- Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
- Charleston, South Carolina
- Savannah, Georgia

These communities brought together Jews of varied geographic and cultural backgrounds. Even so, their colonial synagogues generally followed Sephardic traditions, creating a measure of continuity across otherwise diverse congregations.

On the eve of independence, approximately 2,500 Jews lived in the colonies—about 0.1 percent of the total population. Their numbers were small, but their communities were firmly rooted in the commercial, civic, and religious life of several important ports.

Settlement, however, did not automatically bring full legal belonging. The English Plantation Act of 1740 offered certain non-British residents—including Jews, Quakers, and other Protestant dissenters—a path to becoming natural-born subjects of the Crown. That opportunity came with specific conditions and limits:

- Applicants had to reside in an American colony for seven consecutive years, with no absence longer than two months.
- Required to swear allegiance to the king and take the Protestant sacrament in open court.
- Jewish applicants were permitted to omit the “upon the true faith of a Christian” from the oath.
- Naturalization granted important rights, but it did not permit an individual to:
 - Sit on the Privy Council
 - Enter Parliament
 - Hold civil or military offices of trust
 - Receive Crown land grants in Great Britain or Ireland

Jewish Response to the American Revolution

In the years after the French and Indian War, many Jewish merchants moved into western Pennsylvania, supplying frontier communities with goods in exchange for furs. That expanding trade was abruptly constrained by the Proclamation of 1763, which barred colonial settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains and limited the opportunities these merchants had begun to build.

Such restrictions formed part of a broader pattern of British policies that increasingly frustrated colonists. As resentment over taxation spread, many Jewish residents moved from private discontent to collective economic protest: they signed non-importation agreements, boycotted British products, and promoted American-made goods as “equal in price and superior in goodness to British goods.”

Economic resistance did not, however, lead immediately to a united call for independence. Even after fighting erupted at Lexington and Concord, hopes for reconciliation endured. At New York’s Mill Street Synagogue, congregants prayed that King George would turn his wrath away from North America and choose peace instead.

By 1776, however, the conflict had moved beyond reconciliation, and the colonies declared independence. The Declaration’s adoption coincided with the Seventeenth of Tammuz, a Jewish fast commemorating events that led to the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem. For Jewish Patriots, that convergence offered a striking historical contrast: the birth of a new nation on an anniversary associated with the loss of their ancestral homeland.

The Battlefield

Approximately 100 Jewish men served in the Continental Army across the various theaters of the Revolutionary War, enlisting both as privates and as officers; others served in state militias. In Charleston, many Jewish men joined Captain Richard Lushington’s company, which became known as the “Jew Company.” Despite the nickname, the company was not deliberately segregated, and Jewish soldiers did not constitute a majority of its ranks. Jewish men from Charleston also served in other units, including a regiment commanded by local merchant James Bentham.

The Homefront

Besides military service, Jewish men and women demonstrated their loyalty to the Patriot cause in other ways. This included loaning money and paying for food, ammunition, and other supplies. Many merchants crafted supplies for the troops as well.

Military Records

Compiled Military Service Records – contains abstracted details from the original muster rolls, pay rolls, etc. Contents include the following:

- Name
- Unit
- Period of Service
- Muster rolls
- Pay rolls
- Hospitalization and prisoner of war rolls (if applicable)
- Index available at <https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1849623>
- Images available on Fold3.com

TIP: The volume and page # on the muster roll index cards can be used to help you find the original muster rolls.

Muster Rolls - A list or return of all troops, including officers and soldiers, present or accounted for on muster day. Soldiers would respond at rollcall when their names were read aloud. Muster rolls often contain the date when a soldier joined or left a military unit (including if a soldier deserted).

- United States Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775–1783
<https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/2068326>
- Also available on Fold3.com

Pension Records

- There are three types of pension files:
 - Survivor Pensions (Veterans)
 - Widow Pensions (Spouse of Veteran)
 - Rejected Pensions
- United States, Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Applications, 1800–1900
<https://www.familysearch.org/en/search/collection/1417475>
- Also available through National Archives catalog - Case Files of Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Applications Based on Revolutionary War Service, ca. 1800–ca. 1912 -
<https://catalog.archives.gov/id/300022>
- Pension Roll of 1835 - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/60514/>
- Pension Census of 1840 - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7678/>
- U.S., Revolutionary War Pensioners, 1801–1815, 1818–1872
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/1116/>

Bounty Land - To entice soldiers to fight, the Continental Congress in 1776 promised land in exchange for service. After the war, states had to cede land to the federal government, sometimes resulting in competing land claims among states. Not all states awarded bounty land. The following did NOT:

- New Hampshire
- Rhode Island
- New Jersey
- Delaware
- Connecticut
- Republic of Vermont

There were several bounty land acts passed to award land for military service in: 1788, 1803, 1806, 1850, and 1855. In 1788, soldiers were allowed to sell/assign their award to someone else. These assignees are often seen through the Bureau of Land Management web site on the patents showing the original recipient and the person who holds the final patent. Information about land received under these acts is often combined in Revolutionary War pension file.

- Eligibility:
 - Unit: Continental line
 - Rank: Soldier or non-commissioned officer
 - Duration: Minimum three years of service
 - Assignment Allowed: No (changed in 1788)
 - State Application Allowed: Yes
- Steps:
 - Application
 - Survey
 - Possession
 - Warrant
 - Patent
- Bureau of Land Management – <https://glorerecords.blm.gov>
- Revolutionary War Bounty Land Grants - <https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/49315/>

The DAR Genealogical Research System (GRS) can be searched for people that have been approved as patriots (including those who have been flagged for future applicants). The GRS includes information on their service (whether patriotic, civil or military), and information on spouses and children with applications for purchase. You can search the GRS database at www.dar.org/grs

Tips for Identifying Origins

- Military Records – look for pension affidavits from the soldier
- Court records – testimony given in their place of residence may note their birthplace. Many records are held at the county level on FamilySearch.
- FAN Club – research the extended family, associates, and neighbors
- Many brothers served in the military together
- DNA testing – identify living male descendants to take a Y-DNA test. Many family history associations around specific surnames have projects where you can upload results to.

Manuscripts

Haym Salomon Collection – Center for Jewish History (New York) -

<https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/3/resources/15440>

Mordecai Sheftall Papers – Center for Jewish History

<https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/3/resources/1659>

Aaron Lopez Papers –

- Newport Historical Society – <https://newporthistory.org/>
- Rhode Island Historical Society - <https://www.rihs.org/mssinv/Mss541.htm>
- Center for Jewish History <https://archives.cjh.org/repositories/3/resources/196>

Published Sources

Hertzberg, Arthur. *The Jews in America: Four Centuries of an Uneasy Encounter: A History*. Simon and Schuster, 1989.

Jortner, Adam. *A Promised Land: Jewish Patriots, the American Revolution, and the Birth of Religious Freedom*. Oxford University Press, 2024.

Reznek, Samuel. *Unrecognized Patriots: The Jews in the American Revolution*. Greenwood Press, 1975.
Available to borrow online at <https://archive.org/details/unrecognizedpatr00rezn>.

Sarna, Jonathan D. “The Impact of the American Revolution on American Jews.” *Modern Judaism* 1, no. 2 (September 1981): 149–160. Available on JSTOR at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1396058>.

Sharlip, Leon. *Jewish Patriots of the American Revolution*. Kesselman Foundation, 1996.

Archived American Ancestors Education Programs

Applying to Colonial Lineage Societies - <https://www.americanancestors.org/video-library/applying-colonial-lineage-societies>

Clues of Service: Determining the Military Service of Your Ancestors by David Allen Lambert - <https://www.americanancestors.org/video-library/clues-service-determining-military-service-your-ancestors>

Imagining Early American Jews - <https://www.americanancestors.org/video-library/imagining-early-american-jews>