

American Jewish History

Handout - Lesson # 1 - Early American Jewish History and Colonization

1. Introduction
2. Fitting In
3. Savannah, Georgia
4. Back North – In the Community

Hayim Gans – Reading #1

Standard works on Jewish history often foster the impression that the first Jews to arrive in North America were refugees from Recife, a short-lived Dutch colony in Brazil subsequently recaptured by the intolerant Portuguese. Although their arrival is said to have marked the beginning of Jewish settlement and communal life in the United States, they were not the first Jews in North America. That distinction must be credited to Joachim (Hayyim) Gans, a mining engineer and metallurgist from Prague, whose revolutionary techniques earned him an invitation to England in 1581. Evidence has been found of his role in a scientific expedition to “Virginia,” backed by Sir Walter Raleigh, which made him the first professing Jew to set foot in North America.

Gans became an expert in metallurgy, the technique of extracting various metals from their ores. His knowledge of advanced smelting techniques brought him to the notice of powerful men in England. For both economic and political reasons, the English authorities were anxious to develop their mining industry so as to make the country independent of foreign supplies. George Nedham, the clerk of the Society of Mine’s Royal and one of its shareholders, suspected that the mines were not operating as efficiently and profitably as they might and, having heard of Joachim Gan’s revolutionary techniques, sought to bring Gans on board. Nedham was presumably unaware that Gans was a Jew.

Once he arrived in England, Gans took up a managerial post, studying the mines, urging various improvements and then increasing their output. At Keswick, the headquarters of the Society of Mine’s Royal, Gans determined that the current mining operations were hopelessly outdated and inefficient. After making a thorough chemical analysis of the ores and their composition, he introduced a new, far quicker and cheaper method of smelting them to separate the copper from arsenic, iron, antimony, and other metals. Nedham and associates were delighted with Gans, because they understood the military importance of larger and cheaper copper supplies.

Sir Walter Raleigh now enters the picture. In 1584, a scouting expedition he had sent across the Atlantic reported that some of the Native Americans encountered there wore copper ornaments as badges of rank. This aroused hopes of finding gold and silver as well as copper in North America. Over 100 prospective settlers and those accompanying them set sail for North America in the early summer of 1585, among which was Gans. Their arrival was the first English settlement in the New World, established 35 years before the Pilgrim fathers disembarked from the Mayflower in Massachusetts. Gans thus became the first Jew to reach and explore the coastal region of North America.

Gans delivered samples of metal bearing ores to the Queen and reported that the land had great economic value. The next major English expedition found a permanent settlement, at Jamestown in 1607. Had Gans presented a negative report, there might have been no Jamestown and no English presents south of New England.

Adapted from “\The Adventures of Joachim Gans” by Gabriel A. Sivan,
“Jewish Affairs, Pesach 2015)

Reading #2

The Jews who have arrived would nearly all like to remain here, but learning that they (with their customary usury and deceitful trading with the Christians) were very repugnant to the inferior magistrates, as also to the people having the most affection for you; the Deaconry [which takes care of the poor] also fearing that owing to their present indigence [due to the fact that they had been captured and robbed by privateers or pirates] they might become a charge in the coming winter, we have, for the benefit of this weak and newly developing place and the land in general, deemed it useful to require them in a friendly way to depart; praying also most seriously in this connection, for ourselves as also for the general community of your worships, that the deceitful race – such hateful enemies and blasphemers of the name of Christ, - not be allowed further to infect and trouble this new colony, to the detraction of your worships and the dissatisfaction of your worships’ most affectionate subjects.

Reading #3

It is well known to your Honors that the Jewish nation in Brazil have at all times been faithful and have striven to guard and maintain that place, risking for that purpose their possessions and their blood.

Yonder land is extensive and spacious. The more of loyal people that go to live there, the better it is in regard to the population of the country.

Your Honors should also please consider that many of the Jewish nation are principal shareholders of the Company.

Reading #4

These people may travel and trade to and in New Netherland and live and remain there, provided the poor among them shall not become a burden to the Company or to the community, but be supported by their own nation. You will govern yourself accordingly.

Reading #5 - Rhode Island Code of Laws (1647)

“These are the laws that concern all men...and otherwise than...what is herein forbidden, all men may walk as their consciences persuade them, everyone in the name of his God.”