

# Abigail Franks and Jewish Education in Early New York

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Abigail Levy Franks was born in London on 16 November 1696, and died in New York sixty years later on 15 May 1756. In between those two dates she led a full life, felt sorrow and happiness, pain and ease, married Jacob Franks in 1712 soon after both arrived in New York, raised a family of nine children and wrote a number of letters between 1733 and 1748 to her eldest son Naphtali, thirty-eight of which are extant.<sup>1</sup> It is this correspondence, among the surviving few written by any of her gender living in New York, which have given her a kind of immortality and have provided a rare opportunity to observe her abiding interest in education, learning and thought.

Abigail Franks moved in many worlds. She was a mother and a wife helping her husband raise children. She was a member of New York society; her best friends were Fanny (Frances) Moore, wife of noted merchant and politician, Col. John Moore, and Fanny Riggs, possibly a daughter of John Riggs, Commissioner of Indian Affairs. She dined with Governor and Mrs. William Cosby. Her daughter Phila married Oliver Delancey, a noted member of local aristocracy. Her son David, in an equally astounding event, married a member of the well-placed Evans family of Philadelphia. Though she was not active in the affairs of Congregation Shearith Israel, her husband was Parnas or President of the synagogue. Of all her worlds Abigail moved most comfortably in that of the Enlightenment. She was enthralled by reason and skepticism, admired clarity and simplicity and hated with passion ignorance, hypocrisy and anything she deemed as superstition, particularly organized dogmatic religion, which she exclaimed too often gave "sanction to wickedness."<sup>2</sup> In one of her letters to her son, dated 17 October 1739, she gave vent to her feelings specifically in regard to Judaism.

I can't help condemning the many superstitions we are clog'd with and heartily wish a Calvin or Luther would rise amongst us. I answer for myself, I would be the first of their followers for I don't think religion consist in idle ceremonies and words of supererogations which if they send people to heaven we and the papist have the greatest title to.<sup>3</sup>

Undoubtedly her children mirrored their mother's views, views which could account, at least in part, for the

out-of-faith marriages. Education began early in the Frank's household.

Her love of and regard for education were a central core of her life. It is a note she strikes often and deeply. This interest related to the day-to-day lives of her children, teachers they had, courses they studied and her own instructions to them. She was always ready with advice on the importance of learning. She was also involved with her own education, mindful of the books she had read or wished to read; evaluating criticism of contemporary authors, judging the value of thought. There was her overall expressed ardent love affair with reason and learning and a declared war against ignorance and stupidity.

Abigail liked nothing better than books. She was a bookworm, a collector—but in a positive sense. Books were to be read, not admired; used, not just stocked eternally on oak shelves. She tried so hard to instill this love into her children. She was surely their first, if not best, teacher. In one of her first letters to Naphtali, dated 16 October 1733, she wrote of her joy in receiving a number of books from her son in London. They "gave me the pleasure that good authors generally infuse in a mind inclined to books. I could with vast pleasure employ three hours of the 24 from my family affairs to be dipping in a good author and relinquish every other gaiety commonly called the pleasure of life."<sup>4</sup> At another occasion, 9 June 1734, something of the same feeling was expressed but this time it came in the form of an admonition.

I observe you give me an account how you expend your time. I find no fault in it but your not taking more time for your studying of books, for, if you don't do it now you will hardly follow it when you grow older and will have excuse that business is a hindrance. My advice should be that two mornings in a week should be entirely until dinner time dedicated to some useful book besides an hour every morning throughout the year to the same purpose. Pray let me know whether you have forgot versifying.<sup>5</sup>

One of the more interesting aspects of the Franks letters related to the kind of material she read or was desirous of reading. Though she was several thousands of miles removed from London or Paris and a voyage to



Fig. 40. Bilhah Abigail Levy Franks (1696-1756).

Oil on canvas, ca. 1740. Courtesy of American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, Massachusetts

Europe could easily take eight or more weeks, it is remarkable how quickly recently published works would be received by her. These were usually sent by her son. New York was intellectually not that far removed from distant cultural centers, at least not for Mrs. Franks.

One of the first books mentioned by Abigail in her letters as being in the process of being read was Paul Rapin's very popular "History of England." The contemporary *Gentlemen's Magazine*, a widely-read literary journal to which Abigail subscribed, remarked that Rapin's work furnished "the best materials against the two worst evils, superstition and tyranny; and it's a pleasure to see such vast numbers of them sold every week."<sup>6</sup> What better history than this for Abigail to read.

Besides the *Magazine*, she was also sent at least two newspapers from London, a weekly paper possibly the literary *Grub Street Journal*, and the *Daily Advertiser*. On learning that the weekly would no longer be sent, Abigail in her direct, no-nonsense way, remarked that the *Advertiser* contained "nothing almost but robbery and advertisements," while the weekly was much better "since it contained something of the learned as well as

political world."<sup>7</sup> It is not known if the subscription to the weekly was continued.

Among the volumes Abigail received and read were Henry Fielding's *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews*. This was first published in London in 1742 and she wrote about the book in December of that year, "As you observe Joseph and Parson Adams are very Amusing. That Author makes Parson Adams speak smart things with great truth and simplicity."<sup>8</sup> Tobias Smollett's *Adventures of Roderick Random*, published in 1748, was finished by Abigail by October of that year and Abigail commented, "Roderick Random pleased me much though I think Jo[seph] Andrews exceeds him."<sup>9</sup> In the same letter she wrote of reading *The Hermit*, an anonymously written Crusoe-type story, published in London in 1746. She was "delighted" with the *Foundling*, probably a 1748 London comedy by Edward Moses. Though she already owned George Littleton's *To the Memory of a Lady*, published in London in 1748, when another was sent her, she commented that Littleton's story of the death of his wife "says too much, I should have believed his grief more sincere had he said less." Then Abigail added to her review of books of 1748, "I

committed to flames the Lady of the Gold Watch . . . I hate such impudent trash."<sup>10</sup> Abigail evidently was not one to hide her feelings, especially in regard to books.

A list of reading matter that Abigail wanted to be sent her is also informative. In her letter of 16 October 1733, she told Naphtali that she would like to see the *Tryal of the Widow De Costa with a Jewish Love Letter* "especially written by a Portuguese. If you can procure it pray do."<sup>11</sup> This affair related to a breach of marriage contract. The plaintiff lost. On 17 October 1739, she asked for James Arbuckle's *Hibernicus Letters*, published in London 1734, and James Forrester's *Polite Philosopher: An essay On that Art Which Makes You Happy in Himself and Agreeable to Others*. George Gordon's *Annals of Europe, 1739-1740* was requested by Abigail in her letter of 3 June 1742. She wanted only the first volume which basically contained public papers. On 14 March 1742, Abigail asked for two years of Rider's *British Merlin*, an almanac first published in 1733.<sup>12</sup>

Abigail's greatest literary admiration was for Alexander Pope's writing. It was by all odds her favorite. On 12 December 1735, she informed Naphtali that she had read Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* and "I think 'em prittily done." She went on, "Popes Letters is charming reading, if any more are published pray let me have them me thinks it very odd that in spite of his teeth they will pilfer & publish his works." This reference is to Pope's long-time involvement with various plagiarism suits. Abigail wrote on 20 November 1738:

I have received the pamphlets they are very interesting especially Mr. Pope who is impossible to be otherwise. In short if I may so express myself I read him with the same sort of adoration which is like wealth a very unequal distribution and often bestowed on the most unworthy. However, our author is not in that class.<sup>13</sup>

Abigail's reading lists are a rare description of what might be available to those New Yorkers having similar cultural pursuits. They add considerably to what is known of literary New York under the Georges.

While engaged in her own education she was, of course, deeply involved in seeing that her children's needs were attended to. Abigail's letters provide some new and valuable insights into the colonial educational process.

There is, in fact, very little known of Jewish education in the 17th century. There simply are no records of this. There is mention of a synagogue in 1695, but little more

is known about it. Though there seems to be a congregation organized by the late 17th or early 18th century, a permanent one was not formed until 1728-30, that of the still existing Shearith Israel. There is nothing in the records prior to 1728 on schooling. Possibly there was some religious teaching, surely some young men received religious instruction enough to become Bar-Mitzvah. But the community was so small, so transient, any comment would be a guess. Records again are almost non-existent. Cultural evidence is slight. The voluminous Assur Levy inventory of 1682 contains no listing of books, though there is listed a Sabbath Lamb (lamp) and nine pictures. There are no other 17th century Jewish inventories. Information is a little better for the early 18th century.<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting to note here that beginning in the 18th century books begin to appear in Jewish inventories. Judah Samauel (1702) had a Hebrew bible and five prayer books; Joseph Bueno (1708) had an old Hebrew bible and five Books of Moses with silver bells (*rimonim*). These were sold by executors to Isaac Pinheiro for £25.6. The inventory of Pinheiro (1710) lists "29 books of several sorts." The Books of Moses were now valued at £150. David Elias' inventory (1723) had the *Posthumous Works of Mr. Jo. Locke*, valued at 3s.<sup>15</sup> What would an inventory of Abigail Franks' library contain? Seemingly her literary interests were shared by her co-religionists, but her secularism seems rooted in different soil.

Education was for Jewish and non-Jewish children rather disorganized and haphazard; often it was dependent upon a traveling tutor or willing church or synagogue school. Jewish education was at best very limited and it "barely limped along."<sup>16</sup> The first school established by the New York Jewish community was in 1731. It was formally called *Yeshibat Mishat Areb* (School of the Evening Sacrifice). It was basically a Hebrew school with half-day classes, morning or afternoon. It is possible that secular subjects, especially foreign language instruction, as well as Hebrew, were offered. Hebrew and language teaching was left to a Hazan (cantor) or rabbi.<sup>17</sup> In 1737, the Hazan Machado was contracted to teach Hebrew, "either the whole morning or afternoon, as he shall think proper."<sup>18</sup> By the mid-1750s the school also taught the three R's and Spanish. The Hazan was to teach mornings from nine to twelve and afternoons from two to five. In the winter he taught only to four. The poor were given free instruction.

None of the Franks children attended school after 1750 and all went to secular school to study mathematics and the arts. Naphtali and his brothers surely attended the *Yeshibat* after 1731 and learned Hebrew, and maybe French and Spanish. Abigail, however, says little of their congregational schooling. She says a good deal of secular schools as they applied to her children.

Whatever the spur, Naphtali early developed a keen interest in botany. In the letters are mentioned a constant flow of horticultural specimens sent by Abigail to her son. As an example, on 4 January 1747, she wrote, "I have sent you some locust trees and some tulip trees some pepper, peaches and cranberrys—watermelon and cabbage seed I sent by some ship last fall." Then on 30 October 1748, Abigail informs her son, "I have sent you some cedar cones . . . locust, red cedar and tulip trees [though] . . . I am neither gardner nor botanist." Again, where Naphtali developed his botanical interest is not known, though Abigail surely contributed to it. On 3 May 1764, Naphtali Franks was made a member of the Royal Society.<sup>19</sup>

The first mention in regard to the education of Moses occurs on 7 October 1733, when Abigail wrote that Moses was learning mathematics at "Mr. Mallcoms" [Malcolm] "who tells me he will go thro it with abundance of ease and be perfect in a very little time." Moses was now 14 years old. Alexander Malcolm, born in Aberdeen, Scotland, advertised himself as a "Master of the Grammar School in the City of New York" where he taught "Latin, Mathematics, Geometry, Algebra, Geography, Navigation and Merchant Book-keeping after the most perfect manner." In 1732 the Assembly appointed him head of the New York Public School at £40 per year—about a year's wages for a workman or laborer. It left him "short of comfortable support for him[self] or his family."<sup>20</sup> It is not clear as to how long Moses stayed with Malcolm but very soon he showed a marked preference for music and painting, and for these subjects Moses could have been sent to others, including George Brownell, also a Scotch-born teacher then living and working in New York. In June 1735, Abigail noted that Moses expressed a desire to learn the harpsichord, probably with Charles Theodore Pachelbel (1690–1750), a German musician who performed frequently in New York, usually giving concerts at Todd's Tavern. Pachelbel died in Charleston, South Carolina. However, this desire of Moses' was frustrated since as Abigail wrote, "the charge is too much." There was another way. Abigail advised:

Your Sister Richa has begun to learn on the harpsichord and plays three very good tunes in a months teaching. Her master is one Mr. Pachebel. He is allowed to understand music. Mr. Malcolm says he is excellent in his kind.<sup>21</sup>

As Richa learned so did Moses, for by December 1735 he had "stole some parts of tunes by seeing her [Richa] taught. "I wish," sighed Abigail, "it was not so chargeable they should all learn everything they had a mind to."<sup>22</sup> Moses, the part-time harpsichordist, next went to the flute. By 3 December 1736, Abigail said he was in want of a German [modern] flute since one he had borrowed in Philadelphia had to be "returned to its owner." Could Naphtali ask Uncle Aaron [Franks] if he could send Moses one of his flutes, since Aaron played the instrument? Abigail pleaded:

If Moses does not get a German flute we shall be at a stand in our own concern, viz, Richa, Moses and David. Though Moses has had no master he is best and first hand, also he acts in two capacities for he is chief singer.<sup>23</sup>

Moses, obviously, had remarkable talent and, obviously, the musical education of the children was an important consideration in the Franks household since it provided much of the evening entertainment. Another example of the value of education.



Fig. 41. David (1720-93) & Phila (1722-1811) Franks; Courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society Waltham, Massachusetts

Moses had other artistic interests, particularly a talent for painting and drawing. In this he became a student of William Burgis, famed for his view of New York harbor done about 1718. Burgis was still active in the city as of 1735 and on June 15 of that year Abigail would write that Moses "profits very much in his drawing and has begun to learn to paint upon glass which he does very well. He has done half dozen pictures for Miss Fanny Moore." Then on 15 December 1735:

Moses intends to send Farinelli back again done upon glass which way of painting he does very well as he also does in Indian ink. Several gentlemen that understand drawing say he will do mighty well in time. His master Mr. Burgis, says he never met with any one that took out lines of any so true and in so little time as he will.<sup>24</sup>

How far Moses took his talents is not known but they must have served him in later life perhaps taking away some of the drudgery of an intensive business career. A painting by Moses Franks of Farinelli, a famous castrato, much the rage in Europe and New York would be worth viewing. Unfortunately nothing of Moses' artistic endeavors seems to have survived.

Phila who was eleven in 1733 was also sent to school. "I shall," said Abigail on 7 May 1733, "put her next week at Mrs. Brownalls [George Brownell]." This well-known master had taught in Boston in 1713 where he gave

instruction in dancing, treble violin, flute . . . English quilting, etc. He was remembered by Benjamin Franklin as a "skillful master" who succeeded by employing "gentle means only." In 1731 in New York he taught "Reading, Writing, Cyphering Merchant accounts, Latin, Greek, etc. also dancing, plain-work, flourishing embroidery and various sorts of work. Any person may be taught as they please."<sup>25</sup> Brownell was helped by his wife. Abigail in her letter of 7 October 1733 provided a specific account of Phila's schooling which was to learn French, Spanish, Hebrew and writing in the morning (at Shearith Israel?). In the afternoon she was at Mrs. Brownell's assumedly to be taught embroidery or dancing. Hazan Moses Lopes de Fonseca was surprised at Phila's progress in Spanish.<sup>26</sup> Thus, education in the Franks household was well attended to, but if Abigail could have had her way there would have been even more for the children.

The effect of Abigail's insistence on learning merits considerable attention, more than can be given here. Moses, Naphtali and David pursued successful business careers in England and in the colonies. They became commission agents to the Royal Navy as well as well-to-do English merchants. All died in England. But there was another effect of Abigail's "enlightened world." Her children to a great extent seemed to follow her views and



Fig. 42. Phila Franks (Mrs. Oliver Delancey; 1722-1811). Oil on canvas, ca. 1740. Courtesy of the American Jewish Historical Society, Waltham, Massachusetts.

her actions. Naphtali had to be cautioned by his mother not to be outspoken on the subject of religion while in England. Though Naphtali and Moses married their first cousins, children of these marriages became or married Christians. For example, Isabella, the only child of Moses Franks, married the Reverend Sir William Cooper, when they were both minors. Many years later Isabella's husband became Chaplain-in-Ordinary to George III. The children of Naphtali Franks, who had several times been Warden of the Great Synagogue, Duke's Place, established by his wife's grandfather, and who was active in the Jewish community, also went along alien paths. Naphtali's daughter, Abigail, who bore the name of her grandmother, left all her money to the cause of converting Jews to Christianity though her father, Naphtali, had contributed much to Jewish causes. A son, Jacob Henry Franks, married a Miss Roper and they had five children, who were not Jews. Surely, concluded one author:

It is rather a shame that what could have been an important Jewish family should have been quenched so completely. And most unfortunate also, these happenings were not unique either in this family or others at that time.<sup>27</sup>

David and Phila Franks married out of their faith (a daughter, Rebecca, apparently did not marry). Though obviously very hurt by the secret marriage of her daughter, there was some compensation. Phila had "disobeyed" not "dishonored" the family. Abigail felt that

Oliver Delancey was after all a man of "worth and character." As for her husband, Jacob, he felt it was a marriage into the "best family," and a marriage it would be well not to contest for fear of possible reprisals. He found Oliver a "careful young man," not a spendthrift. Jacob was determined, nevertheless, that his eldest daughter Richa would be sent to London where such an affair was less likely to occur.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the Franks as Jews had all but disappeared. They would follow the path of conversion, the road taken by many German Jews at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century as a result of the Enlightenment and the pre-Emancipation and Emancipation age. This failure to remain within their faith may have been due in part to Abigail's attitude and actions. Other factors also have to be considered including disputes between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, disputes ridiculed by Abigail. There were few members of the Jewish community. Intra-family rather than inter-family marriages, exemplified by the large number of first cousin marriages, were typical of the social scene. Yet, surely, the role played by education is pivotal in understanding and creating attitudes. This is not better seen than in the education of the Franks family of New York.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*The Lee Max Friedman Collection of American Jewish Colonial Correspondence: Letters of the Franks Family, 1733–1748*, Studies in American Jewish History, No. 5, ed. by Leo Hershkowitz and Isidore S. Meyer (Waltham, Mass.: American Jewish Historical Society, 1968), hereafter cited as *Franks' Letters*. Two letters from David Franks and one from Jacob Franks are included in the collection.

<sup>2</sup>*Franks' Letters*, 79. Mrs. Franks paid little attention to spelling or punctuation, in common with many of her time. For purposes of this paper quotations have been edited to conform to modern usage. Original syntax has been similarly edited.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 27. It is interesting to see how often Mrs. Franks saw educational processes as being active and creative.

<sup>6</sup>*Gentlemen's Magazine*, II (1732), 1023. *Franks' Letters*, 20.

<sup>7</sup>*Franks' Letters*, 50.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 69, 103, 113.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 49, 50, 62.

<sup>14</sup>John Miller, *New York Considered and Improved, 1695* (Cleveland: Burrows, 1903), see map, explanations, 49. For a discussion of early synagogues see David

and Tamar De Sola Pool, *An Old Faith in the New World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955), 39–41.

<sup>15</sup>See these individual inventories in Historical Documents Collection, Paul Klapper Library, Queens College, City University of New York, Flushing, New York.

<sup>16</sup>Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew, 1492–1776* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), II, 1067.

<sup>17</sup>The *Franks' Letters*, especially that of 7 October 1733, p. 13, indicate that the *Yeshibat* might provide language instruction in addition to Hebrew. The Marcus volume cited in Endnote #16 above states on p. 1064 the *Yeshibat* was a “Hebrew school only . . .”

<sup>18</sup>Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew*, 1064.

<sup>19</sup>*Franks' Letters*, 135, 140, 140 note.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 12, 13 note. There were other private tutors available in New York including William Thurston, who also taught the three “R’s” and “Arithmetick.”

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 41, 41 note.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 48, 49.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 41, 48.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 3, 3 note.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 12–13.

<sup>27</sup>Rachel Daiches-Rubin, “Eighteenth Century Anglo-Jewry in and around Richmond Surrey,” *Jewish Historical Society of England Transactions*, XVIII, 151. For a general discussion of Franks descendants, see Introduction to *Franks' Letters*.