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PERSONALITY PROFILE

A Sephardic Physician in Williamsburg, Virginia

by

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The typical economic picture of Jewish immigrants during much of the nineteenth century is of individuals who arrived with scant financial resources. Using experience from Europe and credit from Jewish wholesalers, they traveled as peddlers with their pekls filled with merchandise, saved enough to purchase horse and buggy, which extended their routes and increased their goods for sale, settled in small towns to found clothing stores, and, after the Civil War, transformed these into department stores. With the massive influx of eastern European Jews beginning in 1881, many found jobs in the needle trades of northern industrial metropolises while others spread across the country replicating the earlier pattern. During both periods a minority brought craft skills and some capital and-or contacts that helped them establish businesses in towns and cities. Obviously this rosy picture ignores frequent moves, business failures, and other economic and social challenges. During both periods, the emergence of Jewish professionals tended to wait for the second or even third generations.

The colonial era offers a somewhat divergent narrative. Individual Jews in virtually every colony bought and sold goods, although not typically as peddlers. Gradually groups of Jews settled in port cities where they became merchants, established families, and created Jewish communal life. Yet a small number also came with professional credentials, including at least three who had been trained as physicians. The stories of two of these
have already been documented. This article sheds light on the life and career of the third, Dr. John de Sequeyra. A brief comparison and contrast of the three men explicate both their careers as physicians and the divergent ways in which they behaved as Jews in an overwhelmingly Christian environment. As these examples illustrate, the paucity of Jews and the fact that they filled important niches influenced both the willingness of society to allow them to make certain choices as well as the choices themselves.

The Sephardic Background

During the golden age under the Moors on the Iberian Peninsula, Jews obtained secular educations and rose in the ranks of business, government service, and the professions. As Muslim rule waned, Roman Catholic officialdom curtailed Jewish rights and opportunities culminating in the Spanish Inquisition when in 1492 Jews were forced to convert or flee. An alliance with Portugal resulted five years later in the spread of Spain’s policies against the Jews. The crypto-Jews of Spain and Portugal lived openly as Catholics and secretly as Jews. But many others fled to Holland, and eventually, Great Britain. Jewish communities emerged in both places during the mid 1600s. The Spanish and Portuguese congregations in Amsterdam and London served largely as sponsoring synagogues for those who ventured to the Dutch and English colonies in North and South America.

Religious practice and commitment varied among emigrating Jews. Some, for various reasons, chose not to return to Judaism. Others remained Jews but lacked knowledge or commitment after having spent years without Jewish education, institutions, or outward practice. Still others renewed their commitment to Judaism even going so far as to undergo circumcision as adults or to have marriages reconstituted under rabbinic auspices.

Economically, families typically arrived in London or Amsterdam with little capital but with skills and sometimes business contacts. Gradually some rose to become the backbone of their Sephardic communities. Others remained desperately poor. Some supported colonial ventures, according to their economic class, as business investments or to make a better life overseas than the one
they envisioned in Europe. Like their middle and upper class
Christian counterparts, they also used the colonies as a dumping
ground for their poor, especially if they feared that a backlash
against all Jews might be caused by the image of the Jewish poor
and criminal element.

The lives of physicians John de Sequeyra, Samuel Nunes
Ribiero, and Jacob Lumbrozo were deeply impacted by all of these
forces and trends.

De Sequeyra’s Family History and Early Life

Little is known about the de Sequeyra family. Possible rela-
tives with similar names made achievements in the medical and
scientific community, most notably Isaac de Sequeira Samuda in
England, the first Jewish member of the Royal Society. De Sequey-
ras were members of the Sephardic community in London. The
family name de Sequeyra “means the place without (or lack of)
water, dry.” It apparently derived from the province of Salaman-
ca, or Esquerra, situated in the Spanish province of La Coruna.
Like many surnames over generations, variations occurred. In
1279 the Esquerra family name appeared. In the fourteenth centu-
ry the name Ben Esquerra was recorded, with “Ben” referring to
the Hebrew usage for “son of.” During the eighteenth century, the
variants Sequerra and Sequeyra were used. In south Portugal the
Faro Jewish cemetery graves display Sequeira family names.

In 1678 Abraham Israel de Sequeira, a Portuguese Jew, died
in London and was buried in the Jewish cemetery. A son born in
1665 and also named Abraham survived him and became a physi-
cian. Employment as a physician was far from unusual. Many
Sephardim had attained high levels of learning and had risen in
the professions, including medicine, in pre-Inquisition Spain and
Portugal, and they and their descendants continued in such lines
of work.

Dr. Abraham de Sequeira married Sarah Henriches, and they
had at least two sons and two daughters, John, Joseph Henriches,
Esther, and Deborah, and possibly another son, David. Esther,
Deborah, and David have disappeared into history without any
as-yet-uncovered trace. Joseph became a physician, married Cath-
erine de Roza, also known as Leah Henriques, had two daughters, Esther and Rebecca, and traveled to Goa, a major Portuguese outpost on the Indian subcontinent, where he practiced medicine. His brother John indicated Joseph’s posting in his thesis, “De Peripneumonia Vera,” with the author identified as “Sequira (Sigueijra) Joannes de. Anglo-Britannus, Sept. 11, 1736 at 24-Med. M.D. Leyden, Feb. 3, 1739” and “Dedicated to his brother Joseph Henry de Siqueyra, M.D. of Goa, East Indies.”

Born in London in 1712, John de Sequeyra was thirteen or fourteen in 1726 when a group of refugees from the Portuguese Inquisition arrived in the city. Sponsored by the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation, Bevis Marks, London, they settled into that community. One member of the group, Isaac Nunes Henriques, who may have been related to Leah Henriques, married Abigail Sequeira, who was possibly related to John de Sequeyra. In 1733, the original group plus (at least) Abigail, now forty-two in number, immigrated to Savannah, Georgia. Among them was a physician, Dr. Diogo (Samuel) Nunes Ribiero. His medical prowess greatly facilitated their acceptance in the fledgling colony.

Whether or not Abigail Sequeira was related to de Sequeyra, news of Nunes’s medical success surely reached Bevis Marks since members of that congregation were deeply involved with negotiations with the Georgia trustees. De Sequeyra likely learned of Nunes’s work before he left London to attend medical school in Leyden, Holland, under the tutelage of the renowned Dutch physician and botanist Hermann Boerhaave, or by the time he graduated from medical school on February 3, 1739.

In Holland the young student would have found a welcoming Jewish community, especially within the Spanish and Portuguese congregation in Amsterdam. Between 1739 and 1745 almost nothing is known of the recent graduate’s whereabouts. He may have married a woman named de la Cour in London, or he may have taken the grand tour of European cities, a not uncommon extended vacation for elite young English gentlemen. What is obvious is that his family was much better off financially than those who were sent to Savannah partly so that they would not
Portrait of Dr. John de Sequeyra by William Dering, 1745–1749. The artist lived in Williamsburg at the time this portrait was painted. (Courtesy of Winterthur Museum, bequest of Henry Francis du Pont.)
become wards of Bevis Marks. Nonetheless de Sequeyra chose to emigrate for unknown reasons.\textsuperscript{10}

\textit{Life and Career in Williamsburg, Virginia}

The War of the Austrian Succession raged from 1739 to 1748. French ships pirated British vessels from colonial bases in the Lesser Antilles or sought shelter at the French Canadian fortress of Louisbourg. The ship on which de Sequeyra came to Williamsburg in 1745 fell prey to a French corsair, and his medical diploma, among other possessions, was stolen. He subsequently wrote to the University at Leyden to obtain a new diploma.\textsuperscript{11}

In the year of his arrival, Williamsburg, Virginia, was a colonial city that had no physician, although there were apothecaries operated by individuals called doctors where medicines were sold and many community medical needs were served. One of these medical functionaries was John Galt. De Sequeyra befriended the younger Galt and eventually they became colleagues.\textsuperscript{12}

From all outward signs a bachelor, de Sequeyra lived in at least two different lodgings in town. Until October 1771 he rented from William Carter, and from 1772 to 1790 he leased the eastern part of what is now Shields Tavern from William Goodson. He paid rent to Goodson’s estate in 1786 and to his widow, Mary Goodson, in April 1790.\textsuperscript{13}

Little is known concerning de Sequeyra’s religious practices or beliefs from papers left behind, most of which deal with medical issues.\textsuperscript{14} According to Emma Powers, author of a brief article on de Sequeyra, “Certainly there was no temple or synagogue in town—the closest sizable Jewish populations were in Richmond and Norfolk, and they came into being only after the Revolution.”\textsuperscript{15} At best only an isolated Jew held temporary residence in Williamsburg. Yet neither Richmond nor Norfolk was a great distance away and some contact was possible. Under Virginia colonial law the Church of England was the established church and, as the head of a household, de Sequeyra would have paid a required annual tax to the Bruton parish vestry. All free persons twenty-one years old and older were also required to attend the local Anglican parish church at least once a month but the law
was enforced only intermittently. When petitioned by dissenters, the Virginia General Assembly suspended payment of taxes to the Anglican Church during the American Revolution. The Church of England was officially disestablished as of January 1786 under the provisions of the landmark Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom. Notwithstanding, de Sequeyra never denounced his Judaism, a religion with which he was identified.

Soon after de Sequeyra’s arrival in Virginia, he began writing “Notes on Diseases in Virginia,” a project he continued through 1781. Another document attributed to de Sequeyra by historian Harold B. Gill, Jr., at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation (CWF), is the so-called “Smallpox List” covering about eighty-five households in Williamsburg, which de Sequeyra recorded during a smallpox epidemic that began in February 1747 and lasted into 1748. Modern historians at CWF find the list useful for information about the epidemic and as an informal census of the City of Williamsburg in the mid-eighteenth century, since it contains names of household heads and the number of people in each household that the doctor visited. His records were more detailed than those of his medical colleagues and both “Notes on Diseases” and the “Smallpox List” reflect his systematic and scientific study as well as his knowledge of medicine. De Sequeyra was venturing beyond just treating individual patients to developing statistics of diseases and treatment that might aid him to meet future medical crises.

On December 14 and 16, 1769, de Sequeyra attended epileptic Martha Parke “Patsy” Custis, daughter of Martha Washington, who ultimately was lost to an epileptic fit at the age of seventeen, in 1773. George Washington had grown to love this girl he called his “sweet innocent” stepdaughter. His account books for the last years of her life are poignant in their record of expenditures for medicines interspersed with those for the clothing and the types of toys and accessories that a father enjoys buying for a daughter. Among those expenditures are records of payment to Dr. John de Sequeyra. In 1770, de Sequeyra was “called to attend Lord Botetourt,” governor of the colony from 1768 to 1770, “during his fatal illness of bilious fever and St. Anthony’s fire (erysipelas).”
Care of the governor and Washington’s step-daughter imply the high regard in which de Sequeyra was held by prominent individuals.

From 1773 until his death in 1795, de Sequeyra served as the first visiting physician to the Public Hospital for the Insane (as described in hospital account records: “the hospital for idiots, lunatics, & persons of unsound mind”) and, from 1774 also until his death, as a member of the hospital’s board of directors. De Sequeyra was obliged to petition for payment for his services at the hospital. Besides his appointment to the public hospital, there is no record of him serving in any other public or official capacity.

Nonetheless it is clear that for half a century de Sequeyra was a major physician in Williamsburg, the capital of Virginia for most of that time. Records indicate that he persevered in the middle of at least one epidemic, that he cared for members of Virginia’s elite, and that he played a major role in the formative years of a pioneering hospital. His expertise ran from general practice to epidemiology to pre-modern psychology. He maintained copious records, which indicate he viewed his role as a researcher attempting to discern patterns. Moreover, de Sequeyra was credited by Thomas Jefferson with introducing the tomato as an edible food to the colonists.

De Sequeyra owned at least two slaves, a man named Cain and a woman named Sally, also known as Sally Green. At his death, he bequeathed Green her freedom and awarded her Cain, and Green, in turn, freed Cain on the same day de Sequeyra’s will was recorded in York County, Virginia. Why de Sequeyra may have done this is an unanswerable question, but it may have been because he wanted Green to receive some financial benefit from the ownership of Cain. Cain paid Sally for his freedom. The provisions of his will imply that the doctor had granted Green her freedom, that he intended the same for Cain, and possibly even that Green and Cain may have had a personal relationship. In post-Revolutionary urban Virginia, for someone of his class, de Sequeyra’s ownership of a few household slaves and his bequests were far from unique. During the 1790s slaveholding was
being brought into question in the upper South and his posthumous actions would have been viewed as reasonable and benevolent.

A Richmond newspaper announced the death of Williamsburg’s “eminent famous physician” in early 1795. No other information was in the brief obituary. De Sequeyra’s burial site is unknown. Although he was obligated by law for a time to pay taxes to the Church of England, nonetheless he was known as a Jew by some Williamsburg residents and never formally converted. During his half-century in Williamsburg, de Sequeyra lived an acculturated life that was not totally different from crypto-Jews in Portugal. However, unlike them he was an
accepted and even notable member of the Williamsburg community who did not suffer the overt antisemitism to which they were subjected. John de Sequeyra’s story reminds us that not all Jews came to colonial America as peddlers, traders, or craftsmen, and that not all single Jewish men in isolated situations wandered from place to place.

Contrast, Comparison, and Conclusions

From a comparative perspective, de Sequeyra’s experiences illustrate variations on several themes. Diogo Nunes Ribiero, noted above, had actually served the grand inquisitor of Nunes’s native Portugal while living as a Crypto-Jew. According to historian Mark I. Greenberg, when in 1703 Nunes was accused of being a Judaizer, someone who sought to return people to the faith, he confessed and repented. Undergoing torture, he implicated his wife and other family members. He finally departed for London with numerous family members where he openly espoused Judaism. For five years he practiced medicine among the Sephardic poor. In 1733 he and his family departed for Georgia with the first group of Jews to arrive in the new colony. These Jews had been sent by members of the Spanish and Portuguese congregation because the synagogue was becoming overwhelmed with aid to indigent Jews and did not want gentile society to look down on Jews as poor wards and criminals. In London, Georgia’s ruling trustees did not want Jews. Yet, as the ship William and Sara arrived in port, a yellow fever epidemic devastated the small group of colonists; among the fatally stricken was the colony’s physician. Nunes treated the colonists and refused compensation. Partly because of Nunes’s services and skills and partly because the Jews would take care of their own people, James Oglethorpe, the trustee in direct charge in Savannah, came to their defense and the London trustees relented. Nunes’s travels did not end. In 1740, while the Spanish fought the British in the War of Jenkins’s Ear (known in Europe as the War of Spanish Secession), Nunes, his wife, and children fled to Charleston for fear that a Spanish victory in Georgia would bring the Inquisition with it. In Charleston
the Nunes family participated in a flourishing Jewish community.26

Jacob Lumbrozo worked as a physician and commercial trader in seventeenth century Baltimore. Born in Lisbon, Portugal, Lumbrozo moved temporarily to Amsterdam, then to England. He arrived in Baltimore around 1658, the year Cecil Calvert, Lord Baltimore, the proprietor in charge of Maryland, issued the Act Concerning Religion, which granted rights to all those who believed in Jesus Christ and seemingly denied them to others. The act was designed to protect Catholics against the power of Anglicans (members of the Church of England) in the colony and in Britain’s Parliament.

Unlike de Sequeyra and Nunes, Lumbrozo was a controversial figure in and out of court cases and questionable personal relationships with gentile women. When Lord Baltimore passed the Act Concerning Religion, Lumbrozo made an issue of his Jewish identity and openly challenged the divinity of Christ. Historian Eric L. Goldstein argues that Jews were accepted in practice in the colony so long as they did not openly make such attacks. But, even in Lumbrozo’s instance, the case did not hold him back unduly. He escaped punishment when a new British ruler came to power and a general amnesty was granted in his honor. Lumbrozo remained in Baltimore practicing medicine, participating in trade, marrying a Christian, and frequently going to court.27

The study of colonial physicians adds insight into how Jews adjusted to, as well as why they were accepted in, the colonies. Living in relative isolation from other Jews, Lumbrozo chose to emphasize his religious differences with those in power although the demographic reality resulted in his intermarriage. De Sequeyra probably remained unmarried and left behind no evidence of participating in Jewish activities while living in Williamsburg, although he did not convert to Christianity, and he was known to be a Jew. Nunes, directly impacted by the Inquisition and residing with his family in larger Jewish communities, openly practiced Judaism and used his talent to overcome prejudice without, however, fomenting conflict.
Comparing and contrasting the behaviors of these three Sephardic physicians indicates that Jews with important skills could largely acculturate, maintain their religious identity circumspectly, or go out of their way to express their differences with the majority. That they performed needed services filling important niches facilitated their ability to do so in colonies where the letter of the law bent to practical circumstances.

NOTES

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7. R. W. Innes Smith, *English-Speaking Students of Medicine at the University of Leyden* (London, 1932), 208. In the *Acta* (University of Leyden official record) he is described as “Iohannes de Sigouyra, Portugalensis.”


12. “Brief History of Eastern State Hospital and the Treatment of Mental Illness in America,” http://www.esh.dmhmrgsas.virginia.gov/crossroads/history.htm (accessed October 1, 2007). According to Linda Rowe, “There were at least two university trained physicians in early Williamsburg, well before Dr. de Sequeyra’s arrival: Dr. William Cocke (1672–1720) received the M.B. (Bachelor of Medicine) in 1693 from Cambridge and was elected to a fellowship of that college in 1694 and Dr. Archibald Blair (ca. 1665–1733) who graduated from the University of Edinburgh in 1685 (he may have received his medical training post-graduation),” Linda Rowe, notes, November 30, 2007, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Williamsburg, VA.


15. Powers, “Biographical Sketch,” 1; Melvin I. Urofsky, *Commonwealth and Community: The Jewish Experience in Virginia* (Richmond, 1997), 4. Urofsky notes that a Dr. Isaac Levy practiced medicine and entered into business in western Virginia but it is unclear whether he arrived before the American Revolution.


23 The provisions of Cain’s emancipation by Green reads as follows: “Know all men by these Presents that I Sally Green of the City of Williamsburg for divers good causes me thereto moving, but more especially for and in Consideration of the sum of ten shillings by Cain to me in hand paid the receipt whereof I do hereby acknowledge and thereof acquit and discharge the said Cain. I the said Sally Green doth by these Presents emancipate and set free the said Cain who was formerly the property of the late John DeSequary and by him to me given by his last Will and Testament. In Witness whereof I have hereunto set my Hand and affixed my Seal this 29th Day of April 1795.

Sally (X) Green

Witnesses: Benjamin C. Waller, J: M: Galt

Recorded in York County Court 20 July 1795”

York County Records, Deeds 7, p. 150, the College of William and Mary; Nicolson, “A List of Taxable Articles in the City of Williamsburg.”


25 Shosteck, unpublished notes.


27 Eric L. Goldstein, Traders and Transports: The Jews of Colonial Maryland (Baltimore, 1993), passim.