

# **The Early Waves of Jewish Migration to Maryland**

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**Introduction:**

The state of Maryland is current home to over 235,000 self-identified Jewish residents, making up over 4% of the total state population (JDB, 159). Today, Jewish Marylanders live in an open, welcoming environment, but this was not always the case. When the first Jewish settlers landed in St. Mary's City, political equality was only a hope for the distant future. The first wave of Jewish migration to Maryland was marked by a trend of percolation rather than influx migration. Jews in the area practiced a quiet observance rather than an open profession of faith. After the Revolutionary War, urbanization increased and wave two of Jewish migration began. But it wasn't until 1826, the year the "Jew Bill" was passed, and the beginning of Wave 3 that Jews in Maryland could truly experience political equality.

**Migration Wave One:**

The first record of Jewish settlement in colonial Maryland appears as early as the 1630's. The individual who is credited as being the first Jewish colonist, a Portuguese itinerant salesman named Mathias de Souse, is recorded to have moved to the area in 1633 (Schwartz-Kenvin, 130). De Souse's arrival to the region marks the beginning of the first wave of Jewish migration. This wave begins in 1633 and ends a decade before the revolutionary war, in 1743. When comparing Jewish migration in the Chesapeake region to migration patterns in surrounding areas, the lack of movement to the area best defines this period. Large Jewish communities were forming in New York, Newport, Savannah, and Charleston, yet Maryland remained relatively free of Jewish settlement. On a local scale, Schaeferstown and Lancaster, both prominent Jewish communities in Pennsylvania, seemed to have little effect on any settlement found across the border in

Maryland. This suggests that there was either a deliberate avoidance of the area by Jews or there was a strong absence of public avowal of the Jewish religion.

One factor that kept Jews from moving to the area was that in the 1630's Maryland was still made up of small farming communities. Traditionally, Jews tend to live, both for religious and professional reasons, in urban areas. An observant Jewish male is required to attend daily prayer sessions with twelve other Jewish men. In addition, on Saturdays, all observant Jews must walk to synagogue to observe the Sabbath. This geographic constraint is one factor that has lead Jews to traditionally live in urban areas. These residential restraints have also lead to Jews traditionally working in secondary and/or tertiary industries. It was very difficult to find work in these sectors in Maryland in the late 1600's because the region focused mostly on primary sector jobs due to the low density settlement patterns.

There were many factors that shaped Jewish migration in the area that kept settlement levels to a minimum but one major limiting factor in the area was the strong Catholic local government. The behavior of the local legislator both hindered further migration and sought to penalize Jews that already lived in the area. During this period, citizenship was unofficially synonymous with church membership. Officially, the Maryland legislator did their best to back these informal feelings and practices. In 1649 the Act Concerning Religion made it a crime punishable by death to deny that Jesus was the son of God. Under Catholic rule, non-Christians could not legally vote, hold office, or conduct public worship services (Schwartz-Kenvin, 117). The same year, the Toleration Act was passed that helped to unify Catholics and Protestants and bring harmony to all Christians. Obviously, this Act did little to help the plight of the Jews in

the area and continued to discourage new Jews migration to the area. For example, in 1658 Jacob Lumbrozo, one of the first medical practitioners in Maryland and a recent Jewish immigrant from Portugal, was arrested after witnesses overheard him saying that Jesus was meagerly a man, and not the son of God. He was also overheard saying that all miracles attributed to Jesus were preformed by magic. Lumbrozo was quickly arrested and sent to jail. He remained in jail until he was freed many years latter in a general pardon (Stern, 292).

Even though suffrage was a right granted to all white males nationally, Jewish men in Maryland could not vote until the early 1800's. The same could be said for the right to hold state office. The Act of 1715 required that the oath of abjuration was added to the end of all oaths of state office. The words "upon the truth faith of a Christian" were administered to all people currently in state office or who were thereafter sworn into state office (Rabinove, 137). This officially excluded any Jewish person from holding a state position. Eight years latter, an act was passed to "punish blasphemers, swearers, drunkards, and Sabbath breakers" and in addition spell out the appropriate punishment "if any person shall hereafter within this province... deny our Savior Jesus Christ to be the Son of God, or shall deny the Holy Trinity" (AMO). Punishment for a first offence was a fine and a tongue boarding, while punishment for the second a fine and a B branded on the forehead. If a person was convicted a third time they were put to death. Because of acts like these, Jewish residents at the time tended to keep their religious affiliation on the backburner. Publicly observant Jews were few and far between.

As one of the original 13 colonies, this phase of church backed condemnation of non-Christian religions ended about 10 years before the Revolutionary War. In order to

officially become a state, the Maryland legislator had to ratify the new constitution which effectively allowed Jews to profess their faith without fear of legal repercussions. As the 7<sup>th</sup> State admitted to the newly formed United States, religious segregation and persecution was no longer officially sanctioned, but these practices and a generally intolerant mentality continued on unofficially for many years to come.

### **Migration Wave Two:**

The second wave of Jewish migration in Maryland begins roughly around Maryland's ratification of the Constitution and ends with passing of the "Jew Bill" in 1826. This period was marked by the large movement of Jews from bigger cities on the east coast that had traditionally strong Jewish communities, to Baltimore and the resulting build up of a local observant Jewish community. Although legally citizenship, and the privileges associated with it, could not be linked to church membership, Jews and non-practicing Christians in the area were penalized socially and politically for their beliefs during this wave. This period of history is when Jews in Maryland first began legally challenging the state establishment and this behavior embodies the mindset of the period.

The newly formed state of Maryland was quickly developing into a radically different place that Jewish populations found much more appealing. Baltimore was rapidly expanding into one of the nations leading port cities. Because of this, the surrounding areas began to develop and focus on a wide variety of economic activities. These new economic opportunities brought many new immigrants, a number of whom were Jewish, to the area. These higher density living situations were much more accommodating to an observant Jewish lifestyle.

The impressive political changes taking place in Maryland during this period of time acted as a very strong pull factor for many Jewish migrants. In 1797 Solomon Etting, with the help of Jacob I. Cohen, began petitioning the legislature to remove the discriminatory provisions barring Jews from holding state office. On December 13<sup>th</sup>, a petition was presented to the State General Assembly that stated “that they are a sect of people called Jews, and thereby deprived of many of the valuable rights of citizenship, and pray to be placed upon the same footing with other good citizens.” (AMO) After many rejections, Etting’s eventually gained support for his “Jew Bill” from a number of non-Jewish local politicians, most notably Thomas Kennedy. In a speech to his constituents, Kennedy once said “during the late war [1812], when Maryland was invaded, they were found in the ranks by the side of their Christian brethren fighting for those who have hitherto denied them the rights and privileges enjoyed by the veriest wretches.” (Sarna, 152).

After years of debate on the “Jew Bill”, Kennedy suffered harsh political repercussions for his strong public support for Ettings petition. The bill was even dubbed “Kennedy’s Jew Baby” by other local politicians. When Kennedy ran for reelection, opponents nicknamed him the “Jew ticket” and Kennedy lost the election (Rabinove, 121). For its entirety, the campaign had an underscore of irony, because at the same time Solomon was petitioning the state legislature, his brother, Reuben, had been appointed by Thomas Jefferson to the post of US Marshal. In 1826 after close to 30 years of debate, the bill passed officially allowing Jews to hold state office without taking a Christina oath. In the election cycle immediately following the decision, Solomon Etting was elected to the Baltimore city council.

With the granting of equal political rights to Maryland Jews, wave two officially came to an end. This period can be characterized by increasing levels of public religious observance and a start of Maryland urban living. People like Etting and Kennedy paved the way for all levels of observant Jews and Non-Jews alike to move to Maryland and take their chance in the quickly expanding economic market.

### **Migration Wave Three:**

In the immediate years following the passing of the “Jew Bill” Maryland’s Jewish population underwent massive changes. This period can best be characterized as the first time Maryland’s Jewish community acted as a cohesive Jewish Community.

Congregational development and community development go hand and hand during this migration wave to together acted as strong pull factors for Jews living in other regions of the United States and, on a larger scale, draw new Jewish immigrants, looking for a new accommodating home, to the Baltimore region.

In 1839 the first official synagogue was established in the city of Baltimore. East Baltimore soon became the heart of the Maryland Jewish community. This neighborhood soon became a haven for poorer German-speaking Jewish immigrants looking to gain from Baltimore’s booming diverse economy. After quickly getting their foot in the door in the retail market, word got back to Europe of the success these new immigrants were finding in Baltimore. Soon, a number of Eastern European and Russian Jewish immigrants began to arrive in the port city. Quickly, a Jewish aide infrastructure was organized. Charities and social services sprung up all over the city to help the new arrivals acclimate to their new surrounds. While the German and Russian Jews were not

completely desegregated, a strong distinct Baltimore Jewish community had begun to develop.

**Conclusion:**

Today, Maryland's Jewish population, still centered in Baltimore, remains a strong and cohesive cultural group. The first wave of Jewish migration arrived in St. Mary's city quietly practicing their faith and attempting to assimilate into local culture. As Maryland urbanized after the Revolutionary War, a second, more observant wave of religious Jews began to move to the area. With the passing of the "Jew Bill" in 1826, the last wave of early Jewish migration began in Maryland. After 200 years of state sponsored political inequality, Jews of Maryland could finally hold office and participate fully in state democracy. Acting as a strong pull factor for new immigrants and Jews already living in the US, this last wave of migration was marked by strong community development and an increase in public religious observance.

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