

Jewish pirates of the Caribbean? It Is True ? You Better Believe it!

Researched by **George Plohn**, who always wanted to be a pirate, but somehow ended up here at the Esplanade instead...

Ships called the 'Queen Esther,' the 'Prophet Samuel' and the 'Shield of Abraham' roamed the high seas.



In 1645 there were 1,630 "Portuguese", a term then synonymous with Jews living in Recife, Brazil, according to Dutch historian Franz Leonard Schalkwijk. In 1654, 23 of them escaped religious persecution by ship and arrived at the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam – today New York City. Where did the other refugees flee to? Some returned to Amsterdam, others disembarked at the nearby Dutch Caribbean colony of Curaçao.

Less well-known is that some of the escaping Jews sought shelter in Jamaica, the luscious Caribbean island that was then the home to several hundred Jews and *Bnei Anusim* (descendants of Spanish and Portuguese Jews who converted to Roman Catholicism under compulsion). Jamaica at the time was an anomaly in the New World – a private fiefdom awarded in perpetuity to Christopher Columbus and his heirs in 1494 by Spain's Catholic Monarchs. Whether the explorer was himself a crypto-Jew (*crypto* means a person having a secret allegiance to a certain creed) is an unresolved historical issue. For over a century the Columbus kins kept their privately held domain free of the clutches of Spain's inquisitors. Jamaica was only one among the many remote and distant locales in the New World where Jews and apostates sought a haven far from the rapacious inquisitors of Spain and Portugal.

As early as 1501 the Spanish Crown published an edict that "Moors, Jews, heretics, reconciliados (repentants – those who returned to the Church), and New Christians are not allowed to go to the Indies." Yet in 1508, the bishop of Cuba reported,

“practically every ship arriving in Havana is filled with Hebrews and New Christians.” In 1655, one year after the Jewish refugees from Dutch Brazil arrived in Jamaica, the Columbuses’ poorly defended private island was seized by Britain. Leading the armada was Admiral William Penn, the father of William Penn Jr., who subsequently founded Pennsylvania. Under British rule, religious freedom flourished. By 1720, an estimated 20 percent of residents of the capital, Kingston, were descendants of Spanish-Portuguese Jews. As elsewhere in the New World, Jamaica’s Jews sought economic opportunities. Some built sugarcane plantations. Others traded various commodities, including African slaves. Apart from plantation owners, Jews were allowed only two slaves. The Jamaican community had strong commercial ties with Jewish businessmen in Europe including London, Bayonne and Bordeaux. Trade developed with the mainland British North American colonial ports, such as New York, Newport, Charleston and Savannah. But some Jamaican Jews turned to a more adventurous – and dangerous – life at sea. Captaining ships bearing names like the 'Queen Esther', the 'Prophet Samuel', and the 'Shield of Abraham', Jewish sailors began roaming the Caribbean in search of riches, sometimes obtained under questionable circumstances. These Jews most frequently attacked Spanish and Portuguese ships – payback for the property confiscations and torture of their brethren perpetrated by the Inquisition. While pirates and buccaneers were outcasts and lawbreakers who attacked ships, raided towns and robbed people of their money and sometimes their lives, privateers were a legal version of the same. Mercenaries armed with a 'letter of marque and reprisal' (*a government license authorizing a person known as a privateer to attack and capture enemy vessels and bring them before admiralty courts for condemnation and sale*) from their government permitting the attack of enemy ports and shipping during military conflict, they engaged in economic warfare – and turned over a portion of their booty to their king. In peacetime, they continued their plunder but flew the Jolly Roger pirate flag in lieu of the British Union Jack or the flag of free Holland.



Being either a criminal or a patriot depended on the latest developments in Europe's frequent wars of accession and territorial aggrandizement, and their concomitant battles on the colonial front and the high seas. The most famous of the Caribbean's Jewish pirates, or privateers, was **Moses Cohen Henriques**. His name is of Portuguese origin. Like many of his contemporary buccaneers, Henriques's life is shrouded in mystery. Together with Dutch folk hero Admiral Piet Pieterszoon Hein, Henriques captured a Spanish treasure fleet off Cuba's Bay of Matanzas in 1628. The booty of gold and silver bullion amounted to a staggering 11,509,524 guilders, worth around US\$1 billion in today's currency. It was the Dutch West Indies Company's greatest heist in the Caribbean. Another notable Jewish pirate was **Yaakov Koriel**, who commanded three pirate ships in the Caribbean. Similarly a pirate named **David Abrabanel**, evidently from the same family as the famous Spanish rabbinic dynasty (which included Don Isaac Abrabanel who fled Spain in 1492 after unsuccessfully trying to bribe Ferdinand and Isabella to rescind their catastrophic expulsion decree), joined British privateers after his family was butchered off the South American coast. He used the *nom de guerre* "Captain Davis" and commanded his own pirate vessel named 'Jerusalem' (what a chutzpah!). Henriques, Koriel and Abrabanel spoke Ladino, and knew the sting of the anti-Semitic slur *marrano*, meaning pig. The most infamous American Jewish freebooter spoke French, and knew the insult of *maudit juif* (damned



Jew). A US national park in Louisiana proudly bears the name of **Jean Lafitte** of New Orleans. Lafitte was a Sephardi Jew, as was his first wife, who was born in the Danish Virgin Islands. In his prime, Lafitte ran not just one pirate sloop but a whole fleet of them simultaneously. He even bought a blacksmith shop in New Orleans, which he used as a front for fencing pirate loot. And he was one of the few buccaneers who didn't die in battle, in prison or on the gallows. The British tried to recruit Lafitte to guide them through the swamps to ambush the Americans, but Lafitte instead showed Gen. "Old Hickory" Jackson Britain's battle plans to attack New Orleans. The rest is history.

Years before the Battle of New Orleans, Louisiana Governor William C.C. Claiborne placed a reward of \$500 on Lafitte's head. Lafitte retaliated by putting a \$5,000 bounty on the head of the governor. Neither collected, however... Lafitte later commanded his own "kingdom" named Campeche on the island of Galveston, Texas – then nominally under the rule of the colony of Nueva España or Mexico. Some of Lafitte's trading activities were conducted by **Jao de la Porta**, a Portuguese Jew from

Spanish Texas. Among their clients was Jim Bowie, made famous at the Alamo and also for his eponymous knife.

In 1630 **Henriques** took his loot and led a Jewish contingent to settle in newly captured Brazil. There he established his own treasure island as a pirate base. But in 1654, he too had to flee South America. Ending up in Jamaica, he served as an adviser to the notorious pirate Henry Morgan. In 1674, England's King Charles II knighted Morgan in appreciation for the colorful sea captain's bravery, and the economic havoc he wreaked on the Spanish empire in the NewWorld. To understand Henriques, Koriel, Abrabanel and Lafitte and the Caribbean's unknown Jewish pirates, it is helpful to examine Morgan's legacy. Alexandre Esquemeling joined Morgan's band of privateers as a ship's doctor in the late 1660s. Much of what is known about Morgan's exploits comes from Esquemeling's account "De Americaensche Zee-Roovers" ("Buccaneers of America") published in Amsterdam in 1678. The book became a bestseller across much of Europe and the Americas, and was translated into several languages. Six years later, in 1684, it was followed by Philip Ayres's equally evocative "The Voyages and Adventures" of Captain Barth, Sharp and Others in the South Sea. Then came Charles Johnson's "A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pirates", first published in 1724, and reprinted due to popularity in 1725 and 1726. Many scholars now believe that Johnson was in fact a pseudonym of the English writer Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), best known for his novel Robinson Crusoe.

Even as Europe and its colonies were waking up to the danger of piracy and beginning to prohibit it, the fanciful books established Caribbean pirates as a cultural phenomenon. Thus 200 years later, in 1881, a baseball team in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the new sport of baseball sweeping the United States, would take the name Pirates.

BUT WHAT does all this have to do with Jamaica's Jewish pirates? In January 2009 the International Survey of Jewish Monuments, which for several years had been documenting Jamaica's historic Jewish cemeteries, issued a report about Kingston's Hunt's Bay and Orange Street Jewish cemeteries.

The document was released in Kingston during a five-day conference on Jewish Caribbean history that drew 200 academics, genealogists and history buffs from Oregon to Israel. The Hunt's Bay cemetery, Jamaica's oldest graveyard, was the burial ground for the Jews of Port Royal. The deceased, who had lived across the harbor where the high water table of the peninsula prevented burial, were rowed to their final resting place. The earliest of the remaining 360 tombstones there dates to 1672 and its latest is from the mid 19th century. Many markers were destroyed or looted for construction over time.



The newer Orange Street cemetery, located near the historic Shaare Shalom Synagogue, contains grave markers from the early 19th century. By the end of that century, Jamaica had six synagogues and around 2,000 Jews. The cemetery is still in use by Jamaica's contemporary Jewish community, whose numbers have shrunk due to assimilation, intermarriage and emigration to around 200. The cemetery is located in Kingston's newer, northern end of the city. Previous to the establishment of the Orange Street Cemetery, Kingston's Sephardim buried their dead in the no-longer-extant Old Kingston Jewish Cemetery downtown. The 18th-century gravestones from the Old Kingston Jewish Cemetery were transferred to the Orange Street cemetery when the former was closed likely due to the growing city's new sanitation laws. The inventory of the Hunt's Bay Cemetery's bluestone, limestone and marble grave markers with their Portuguese, Hebrew and English epitaphs includes some **50 with skulls and crossbones**. Of course, the Jamaican Tourism Ministry realized the potential bonanza of Jewish tourists.

Conceding that Jamaica's Jewish history has "been a well-kept secret," tourism director John Lynch launched a tourism package that included visits to the historic Jewish cemeteries, prayers at the island's remaining synagogue – built in 1911 by the United Congregation of Israelites – with its distinctive sand floor, and a kiddush with Jewish families. Since most of the island's Jewish sites are near Kingston, the strategy of developing the city as a Jewish heritage cultural destination fit the government's desire to boost tourism in the scruffy, crime- and ganja-ridden capital which most vacationers give a wide berth. Piracy was finally prohibited in Jamaica in 1687 and in the Bahamas in 1717. But what is the Jewish world to make of figures like Henriques,

Koriel, Abrabanel and Lafitte? Were they heroes or villains? The Jewish pirates of the Caribbean is a subject that deserves ongoing research. The academic study of these little-known figures has only just begun.