

http://www.dailyprogress.com/news/local/honoring-religious-liberty-s-roots-at-monticello/article_c6104712-3381-11e7-bf7c-cb31dd2d92a9.html

Honoring religious liberty's roots at Monticello

BY MICHAEL BRAGG 15 hrs ago



ANDREW SHURTLEFF/THE DAILY PROGRESS

[Buy Now](#)

Congregation Shearith Israel Rabbi Meir Soloveichik performs a private service Sunday at the gravesite of Rachel Phillips Levy to commemorate the Levy family's contributions to Monticello's preservation.

Members of a historic Jewish congregation visited Monticello on Sunday for a speech on religious freedom, followed by a service to honor the Jewish family that helped preserve Thomas Jefferson's estate.

Meir Soloveichik, rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City, and Jon Meacham, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and vice chairman of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, participated in the conversation on religious freedom in the theater at Monticello's visitor center.

The two discussed Jefferson and other Founding Fathers' views on religion and religious freedom, and their significance today.

Soloveichik said two of Jefferson's achievements etched into his gravestone — author of the Declaration of Independence and author of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom — go together to create what America is today.

"On the one hand, religious liberty is the right to have religious difference, to be fully part of the society, no matter what faith you profess, and the right to hold boldly and strongly and steadfastly to that faith while being fully involved in the American politic," he said.

"And the legacy of the Declaration is what I call America's covenantal document, that it's what articulates the ideas, especially, 'We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal,' which unites all Americans," he said. "So it allows us to both be different and be united as Americans."

Members of Congregation Shearith Israel, the oldest Jewish congregation in the country, and students from Yeshiva University, also located in New York City, attended Sunday's events at Monticello.

After the speech between Meacham and Soloveichik, a private service was held at the gravesite of Rachel Phillips Levy, the mother of Uriah Phillips Levy, a Jewish commodore in the U.S. Navy who was the third owner of Monticello.

"He was an ardent advocate of religious freedom, and he bought and preserved Monticello in 1834 to preserve this home, preserve Jefferson's legacy for the future," said Susan Stein, vice president for museum programs at Monticello. "And that's what he was committed to before the American Preservation Movement really started. Uriah Philips Levy was prescient in what he did here by preserving Monticello."

Soloveichik recited prayers at Rachel Philips Levy's grave, located not too far from the house at Monticello, as several members of the congregation stood by.

"The story that it tells, this grave, is the story of a family that saved Monticello," he said. "And if Monticello is here today as a legacy for the entire American people, it's because of this Jewish family."

Soloveichik said the service and prayers were done "in memory of all the extraordinary individuals in her family, and in celebration and commemoration of the Jewish patriots who helped found and build the American Republic."

Several members of the Levy family made contributions to restoring and preserving Monticello, Stein said.

"Monticello's survival and preservation is really due to this family's commitment," she said.

Uriah Philips Levy's nephew, Jefferson Monroe Levy, came into ownership of Monticello in 1879, several years after Uriah's death.

Jefferson Monroe Levy owned the estate for more than 40 years until it was purchased by what was then called the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation in 1923, according to Monticello's website. He died the following year.

Michael Bragg is a reporter for The Daily Progress. Contact him at (434) 978-7265, mbragg@dailyprogress.com or @braggmichaelc on Twitter.



+16

GALLERIES

Monticello - Levy family - gallery

17 hrs ago