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OPINION | COMMENTARY | HOUSES OF WORSHIP

The Jews Who Saved Monticello

Thomas Jefferson's home lay in ruin until Uriah Phillips Levy stepped in to help.

By *Meir Soloveichik*

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Thomas Jefferson is buried at Monticello, his estate in Charlottesville, Va. The exact spot is marked by an obelisk bearing the date of his death: July 4, 1826—50 years to the day after the Second Continental Congress declared independence. Also close to the home lies a grave belonging to Rachel Phillips Levy. According to the inscription, she died on the 7 of Iyar, 5591, following a calendar used by traditional Jews.

How did a Jewish grave end up in Monticello? The answer lies in the history of a family whose own story is every bit as American as that of Jefferson himself.

In 1776 a Jewish patriot named Jonas Phillips fled to Philadelphia from New York with the arrival of the British fleet. A decade later, he was well-regarded in his new city, and his daughter Rachel was set to marry a Jewish gentleman named Levy.

— ADVERTISEMENT —



Benjamin Rush—a famous physician, signatory of the Declaration of Independence, and friend to Jefferson—attended the wedding. That Phillips had invited a prominent gentile to a Jewish ceremony, an act unthinkable almost anywhere else at the time, is a sign of the extraordinary freedom Jews had found in this new land. Rush, for his part, was entranced by the ceremony. He later wrote, “I was carried back to the ancient world and was led to contemplate the Passovers, the sacrifices, the jubilees, and other ceremonies of the Jewish Church.”

Rachel gave birth to a boy named Uriah Phillips Levy. Running away to sea as a child, Uriah returned home to mark his bar mitzvah, before soon setting sail again. Most of his life was devoted to the American Navy, in which he served with distinction and led an ultimately successful campaign against flogging. Though he faced anti-Semitism and assaults on his reputation throughout his career, Uriah's legacy is honored today: The Jewish Chapel at the Naval Academy in Annapolis bears his name.



Uriah Phillips Levy. PHOTO: UNITED STATES NAVAL MUSEUM

Uriah's hero was Thomas Jefferson. His reverence for the Founding Father lay in the latter's dedication to molding "our Republic in a form in which a man's religion does not make him ineligible for political or governmental life." In 1834 Uriah united his own legacy with that of the man he admired by purchasing Monticello. Jefferson died deep in debt, and his home had fallen into ruin. Uriah devoted himself to Monticello's rehabilitation, restoring the house and purchasing land that had once been part of the estate.

Uriah also made Monticello the permanent home of his mother, Rachel. When she died in the spring of 1839—or 7 of Iyar, 5591—Uriah buried her on the property. Thus did the young Jewish woman whose wedding was attended by a man who signed the Declaration of Independence come to rest eternally at the estate of the man who had written it.

Uriah died in 1862, amid the chaos of the Civil War. Monticello fell into Confederate hands for a time but ultimately was returned to Jefferson Levy, Uriah's heir and eventually a congressman from New York. He restored Monticello once again, and ultimately arranged for the estate to be transferred to the American people. Monticello became a pilgrimage point for individuals all over America. Yet as Marc Leepson notes in his book "Saving Monticello," for decades the Levys' role in preserving Jefferson's home wasn't celebrated.

That has changed. Today the Thomas Jefferson Foundation, which oversees Monticello, honors the role this Jewish family played. But few American Jews know the tale of the Phillips Levy family. In speaking to Jewish audiences, I often ask how many have visited Monticello. Many hands go up, but few remain raised when I ask who has visited Monticello's Jewish grave.

On May 7 I will lead a Jewish delegation to Monticello. Our group will comprise members of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York—the community where Jonas Phillips, Uriah Levy and Jefferson Levy were once members—and Yeshiva University students. We will lead a service at the grave of Rachel Phillips Levy, concluding with the traditional Jewish memorial prayer for the dead. It will mark one of the very few times the prayer has been recited at Monticello since her burial almost two centuries ago.

It's well-known that Jefferson demanded that no mention of his presidency appear on his grave: "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson / Author of the Declaration of American Independence / of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom / and Father of the University of Virginia." Jefferson saw his fight for

religious liberty, and the Declaration's assertion that "all men are created equal," as more important to his legacy than the power he had wielded in his life. Monticello's Jewish grave, as much as Jefferson's own, gives eternal testimony to the equality and freedom that diverse faiths found in the country Jefferson helped fashion. And on May 7 we will honor the extraordinary history of the Jewish people—and of America.

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