

CHAPTER I

PRELUDE

The coast of Maine was carefully explored during the 16th Century and the early part of the 17th Century by Spanish, French and English adventurers. In 1614 John Smith prepared a map of the area and named the territory New England, but no English settlements were made in this region until the period between 1623 and 1629.

The first settlement on the site of present-day Portland was made in 1633 by two Englishmen, George Cleeve and Richard Tucker. The hill at the east end of the peninsula soon became the property of George Munjoy and the area on the west side that of George Bramhall. Shortly thereafter, the independence of the territory was threatened by encroachments of the powerful colony of Massachusetts, which succeeded in extending its jurisdiction over this part of Maine in 1658 and in later years gradually gobbled up other portions.

From 1658 the peninsula settlement, now known as Falmouth, developed rapidly until checked by the bloody Indian massacres in 1676. In 1690 French and Indian attackers destroyed the town, and it was not resettled until 1719. A few years later, with the addition of some neighboring territory and Cape Elizabeth, it was reconstituted as a new town called Falmouth.

During the War of Independence, Falmouth enthusiastically sided with the rebels and was repaid for its sentiment by a severe bombardment from British naval vessels. Several years after the war, in 1786, the peninsula portion of Falmouth was reorganized as a separate town named Portland.

When Maine was detached from Massachusetts and became an independent state in 1820, Portland became its first capital and remained such until 1831. Its development for thirty years was peaceful and orderly, only to be brought to a temporary standstill by another catastrophe reminiscent of the previous ones. As a result of a Fourth of July celebration in 1866, a fire destroyed an area of about two hundred acres, including the central part of the city. After a slow recovery from this disaster, Portland began to develop rapidly. Between 1890 and 1940 its population doubled

and its leadership in Maine's social, economic and cultural life has remained unchallenged.

The growth of the Jewish Community of Portland, which will be traced in detail in subsequent chapters, has been recorded inadequately by Jewish historians. The reason for this is twofold: Maine was considered as being beyond the periphery of the general history of American Jewry, and the source materials of early Jewish life were few and often hazy.

In order, therefore, to throw light on a hitherto obscure chapter of Jewish life in America, it is often necessary to reconstruct the history of the earliest periods from oral traditions, old directories, chance references in contemporary literature and a few scraps from authentic records.

It is generally conceded by Jewish historians that the settlement of Jews in Maine is comparatively recent. In fact, the *Jewish Encyclopedia* which was published early in the present century had no article on Maine Jewry. Furthermore, in its estimates of Jewish population, this standard reference work did not credit Portland with any Jews as late as 1905.¹ Even the newer *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* failed to penetrate the pre-1900 fog.²

Although the sources are fairly silent about Jewish life in Maine before the 19th Century, there are scattered references to Jews in the extant literature. Thus a modern historian of Maine writing on the earlier period says:

At an early period Jewish settlers appeared in Maine, the first of them in pre-Revolutionary days. Early in the 18th Century, Jews of Spanish, Portuguese and German origin appeared in Bangor, on the Cranberry Isles and at Islesboro. The families of Lowe, or Levi, were among the first. Their descendants of the Lowe and Lurvey families still live in Hancock County.³

During the colonial period and shortly thereafter, Jews experienced great difficulties in their efforts to settle in regions of New England beyond Rhode Island. As Jacob Marcus writes:

The original Puritans were interested in Hebrew and in ancient Hebrews . . . but not in their descendants as long as they remained Jews.⁴

Even Christians who did not conform with the established church as it existed in Maine and Massachusetts were persecuted.

As a case in point, consider the difficulties of William Scriven who sought to introduce the Baptist movement in Maine and was severely treated for his pains. In 1682 he was ordered not to speak in favor of Baptism or to hold private religious exercises. He was further directed to observe public worship in Kittery according to the established law. When he refused to conform, he was then ordered to leave the province.

When Roger Williams was driven from Massachusetts in 1635 by intolerant rulers of that colony, he fled to Rhode Island where he laid the foundation for a settlement that would be free of bigotry. It was thus to Rhode Island that Jews and other non-conformists were attracted, the Jews establishing their first community in Newport in 1658. Those who ventured farther north into Massachusetts, or the region of present-day Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont, were frequently harassed and made unwelcome. In time they either moved or converted. Thus, in late 17th Century and 18th Century documents, mention is made of the Moses and Abrams families in Maine or New Hampshire who were listed as "descendants of Jews."⁵ It also accounts for the fact that many leading Massachusetts families bear Jewish names.⁶

The conditions described account for the unevenness of Jewish settlement in New England until the middle of the 19th Century. Only Rhode Island stood out as a center of Jewish life. This was even noted by a seventeenth-century traveler who made no mention of Jews in his memoirs of New England until he came to Rhode Island. There, he observed, "most of the men are either Quakers or Jews."⁷

The first United States Census, for the year 1790, reported forty-four persons in Maine presumed to be Jewish. Although this estimate has been challenged as excessive, it cannot be denied that Jews were settled in Maine. The only Jew of whom anything definite is known was Susman Abrams, a native of Hamburg, Germany, who came to Maine during the post-Revolutionary period. Abrams lived for a time in Waldoborough and Thomaston before settling in Union where he operated a tannery until his death in 1830, at the age of eighty-seven. Although he married a Christian in 1810 and attended public worship in Union, Abrams professed faith in Judaism alone and abstained from hard labor on Saturdays, working often secretly on Sundays.⁸

It is true, nevertheless, as Leon Huehner has pointed out, that prior to 1800 Maine did not have any Jewish community, although Jews lived there.⁹ For, Jewishly speaking, a community is said to

exist only when at least ten adult males are available for a *minyán*, or quorum for public prayer.

During the early part of the 19th Century efforts were made by Jews to settle in Maine in considerable numbers. Thus we learn of the formation of a community in Bangor in 1829. In 1834 there came into being a "Bangor Hebrew Center" and there is also reference to the organization of a "Congregation Ahawas Achim" in Bangor in 1849 with the purchase of a burial ground in the same year. Furthermore, a Jewish cemetery is known to have existed in Waterville as far back as 1830.¹⁰

As for Portland, local sources do not mention the presence of a Jewish community in that early period. In 1817 a Female Society of Portland was organized to collect money for the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews. And in 1823 a Portland branch of this society was formed. In the original constitution and other papers published that year, no mention is made of Jews in Portland and the principal activity of the Society was fund raising for other branches. The only information found therein on Jews in America is the general statement:

In the United States are 3000 Jews. They are found principally in New York, Philadelphia, Richmond, Charleston and Savannah.¹¹

If any Jews were living in or near Portland, they were not organized so as to come to the attention of the society.

During the next few decades Jewish peddlers operating out of New York or Montreal worked their way through Maine. They even advertised in the newspapers of Bangor¹² but can in no way be regarded as constituting part of a Jewish population in Maine.

City directories of Portland from 1843 to 1860 list some persons with Jewish-sounding names but there is no other ground for assuming that they were Jews. It was still current practice for New Englanders to have Hebrew given names, even surnames, and the occasional mention of names such as Jacobs, Straus or Levi, is no sure indication that these persons were Jews.

According to the "oral tradition" of the Jewish settlers who came to Portland in the 1860's and 1870's, there were some Jews in Portland when they arrived but these were already assimilated. They had no interest in Jewish affairs and ceased to call themselves Jews. It is quite possible that the presence of these earlier arrivals accounts in part for the apparently German or Jewish names found in the city records.¹³

In general, we may say that until 1860 there is little in the records to indicate the existence in Portland of a stable Jewish population. From this point onward the real history of Jewish life in Portland takes root.

REFERENCES IN CHAPTER I

- ¹The Jewish Encyclopedia, New York, 1906, Vol. XII, p. 372.
- ²Universal Jewish Encyclopedia, New York, 1939-41, Vol. VIII, p. 604.
- ³Modern Maine, Richard Hebert, New York, 1951, Vol. I, p. 418.
- ⁴Early American Jewry, Jacob R. Marcus, Phil., 1951, Vol. I, p. 103.
- ⁵The Jewish Encyclopedia, New York, 1905, Vol. IX, p. 241.
- ⁶Ibid., Vol. VIII, p. 372.
- ⁷"Memoirs of M. DeLa Mothe Cadillac, Concerning Acadia and New England, 1692," in Collections of the Maine Historical Society, 2nd Series, Vol. VI, p. 288.
- ⁸History of the Town of Union, etc., J. L. Sibley, Boston, 1851, p. 110.
- ⁹Publications of American Jewish Historical Society, Vol. XI, "The Jews of New England Prior to 1800." Huehner also notes (p. 95): "In connection with Portland, Maine, mention is made in 1804 in a letter of Commodore Preble, of a Lt. Joseph Israel who fell before the walls of Tripoli, but there is nothing to show whether he was a Jew."
- ¹⁰Maine: Resources, Attractions and its People, 5 Vol., edited by Harrie B. Coe, New York, 1928, Vol. II, p. 267; also Hebert, op. cit., Vol. I, pp. 418-19.
- ¹¹"The Constitution of the Portland Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, etc.," Portland, 1823, p. 14, in the library of the Maine Historical Society.
- ¹²Dr. Lee M. Friedman, in a letter to the author, dated February 3, 1953.
- ¹³According to Simon Wolf, only one known Jewish soldier from Maine fought in the Civil War. Publication of American Jewish Historical Society, Vol. 3, p. 38. He has been identified as Captain A. Goldman of Maine's 17th Infantry Regiment.