

*Gender and the Canadian Jewish Fur Trader Experience:
Expansion and Colonialism in British North America – 1759 to 1812*

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Reflecting on the early history of Jews in Manitoba with both wonder and praise, Rabbi Arthur A. Chiel declared, “Jews have penetrated into many lands of the globe... it is little wonder, then, that when the seemingly boundless regions of the New World became known to European man, Jews too made their way across the Atlantic to try their fortunes.”¹ Chiel was right that in the mid-eighteenth century young Jewish men were among the European opportunists who came to North America with the dream of expanding economic profit. As historians Sheldon and Judy Godfrey have written about eighteenth-century Jewish migrants, these Jewish settler men were enticed to travel to North America due to the restrictions placed on their civil and political liberties in England.² Simply put, migrant Jewish men were motivated to seek out places which would afford them equal opportunities as self-identified Jews, establish Jewish communities, and expand their economic prospects.

In the case of the early Canadian Jewish experience, this desire to achieve economic prosperity was principally achieved through the fur trade. In the mid-seventeenth century, notes historian Ira Robinson, the fur trade was the most lucrative economic activity in New France, due to the large availability of fur-bearing animals, making the lands extremely desirable for colonists like the British.³ As a result, the climate that Jewish men entered into in North America during the 1760's was one of intense struggle and tension between the British and French over the colony, resulting in the Seven Year's War (1756–1763), which ended with British triumph and the collapse of New France.⁴ Early Jewish settlement to this area directly commenced following Britain's acquisition of British North America in 1763 upon the signing of the Treaty

¹ Rabbi Arthur A. Chiel, “Manitoba Jewish History” from *Manitoba Historical Society* (MHS Transactions, Series 3, Number 10, 1953-54).

² Sheldon J. Godfrey. *Search out the Land: The Jews and the growth of equality in British colonial America, 1740-1867* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1995), xviii.

³ Ira Robinson, “Jews and New France,” in *Canada's Jews: in Time, Space and Spirit* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2014), 13.

⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

of Paris.⁵ These wars were fought chiefly to gain access to the expanding fur trade network; male Jewish migrants were among those who stood to gain from Britain's possession of New France.

Jewish settlers influenced the expansion of pre-confederation Canada and played a role as agents of colonialism working to subjugate Indigenous peoples, between 1759–1812. By examining their role in the fur trade, this paper will argue that in the eighteenth century, Jewish male settlers who lived in Montreal, Michilmackinac, Sandwich, and Windsor, motivated by economic freedoms and fortunes in the New World, became prominent figures in the expansion of pre-confederation Canada, as well as colonizers of Indigenous peoples through their military support and economic savvy. The Jewish experience in the fur trade was also gendered—an entirely masculine enterprise. Indeed, gender and family intersected with economics to create new social conditions for Jews in the New World and consequently demonstrated what being a young Jewish businessman, landowner, father, and immigrant meant in the late eighteenth century—the opportunity to accrue respectability, prestige, and wealth.

This paper aims to fill a gap in the scholarly field of Canadian Jewish history by considering four gendered dimensions of Jewish fur trader activity. First, it will consider the role of Jewish involvement in military and state relations. Second, race relations with Indigenous people. Third, it will consider what being a young Jewish businessman and immigrant meant in the mid-late eighteenth century in relation to their economic dealings, land ownership, fur trading partnerships and debts. Finally, it will consider issues of masculinity and the role of the Jewish father in family dynamics. The cultural forces and circumstances that conditioned the Jewish involvement in the fur trade and the factors which led them to pursue this type of business mattered in the making of male Jewish settler life, as land ownership and individualism

⁵ Ibid.

played particularly important roles for male Jewish fur traders in the eighteenth century, as a way to access resources for the trade and as an approval of their wealth.

Masculinity, Jews, & Settlement in the eighteenth-century Fur Trade

Historically, the fur trade was the economic foundation of Canada until Confederation in 1867 and provided the justification for much of the imperialism that took place in North America. As historian Arthur J. Ray described, the fur trade defined the economy, geography, environment, and social relationships of European settlement in North America for over two centuries.⁶ The trade, he argued, was critical in the formation of the country's economic history and development.⁷ Historian Ken McGoogan further defined the fur trade as a confluence of forces beyond the merely local or the merely economic, arguing that it was "not only influenced by geography, but also by aboriginal goals and strategies, mercantilist economic thought, European imperial struggles on a global scale, the changing economic and industrial fortunes of England and France, and Canadian entrepreneurship."⁸ Historian Keith R. Widder characterized the fur trade in more intimate terms, understanding the fur trade in terms of "relationships within this distinctive North American community [that] were formed through intermarriage, gift giving, diplomacy, military alliances and war."⁹

The context in which early male Jewish settlers were arriving in the 1760's was a complex web of interrelated factors as highlighted by McGoogan but one with enormous opportunity for a rugged individual to make "his" mark. Faced with outward discrimination and inequity in Old World countries like England, where non-Protestants were prevented from

⁶ Arthur J. Ray, "Introduction" in Harold A. Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* by Harold A. Innis. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), vi.

⁷ Ibid, vi.

⁸ Ken McGoogan, foreword to *A Journey to the Northern Ocean: The Adventures of Samuel Hearne*, (Washington: Touch Wood Editions, 2007), vi.

⁹ Keith R. Widder. "After the Conquest: Michilimackinac, a Borderland in Transition, 1760-1763," in *Michigan Historical Review*, (Central Michigan University, 2008), 48.

benefiting from the economy and politics, Jews were motivated by the prospect of migration to lands where they could retain their Jewishness, participate freely in society, and gain a degree of acceptance.¹⁰ A seemingly tall order to fill, however, British North America seemed a likely region for Jews to search out, as Godfrey claims. Jews were viewed by Britain as suitable migrants for their new colony from a purely economic standpoint and were recruited for their connections to international contacts, access to funds, and ambition.¹¹ British Member of Parliament Nicholas Hardinge emphasized this point on May 7, 1753 in the House of Commons when he stated:

No people can be supposed more capable, or more ready than the Jews, to make new experiments [in commerce] because of their great propensity to trade, and because of the curse that attends them. By being dispersed through all nations, and by being the chief traders in every nation where they sojourn... Jews are more likely to improve and extend our foreign trade than any other set of people whatsoever.¹²

Certainly, British politicians supported the idea of a Jewish migration to North America because they recognized they would help the colony prosper economically.

In Britain, Jews were offered few and limited political rights or freedoms due to their refusal to take state oaths under Christian laws and because of medieval restrictions which gave them alien status. As a result, Jews were prohibited from many careers and were unable to own or lease a house or business, which effectively prohibited them from social, economic, or political advancement.¹³ Historian of Canadian Jewish life Allan Levine acknowledged that while although Britain itself was not willing to extend civil and political liberties to Jews in the motherland, they were prepared to extend the rights of Jews in British colonies, especially after

¹⁰ Godfrey, 31, & Robinson, *Canada's Jews: In Time, Space and Spirit*, 22.

¹¹ Godfrey, xxii. & Robinson, 22.

¹² Godfrey, 52.

¹³ *Ibid*, 25-26.

they realized the economic value Jewish mercantile proficiency might have for the colony.¹⁴ The *Plantation Act* of 1740 thereby naturalized Jews and other non-Protestants living in British colonies while also extending them civil and political rights as members of the frontier economy.¹⁵ This measure of equality encouraged Jews to settle and then to even *remain* in British North America. Godfrey went so far as to describe the *Plantation Act* as the “magna carta” of the Jews in British North America, clearly highlighting its profound importance.¹⁶ Thus, the British desire to enhance its fur trade in mid-eighteenth century paved the way for a long-term Jewish homeland in Canada. According to historian David Koffman, “Jews gained the foothold for permanent settlement in what would become Canada through Indigenous access to fur.”¹⁷

Thus, in the 1760’s, Jewish settlers like Ferdinand Jacobs, Ezekiel Solomons, Moses David, Gershon Levy, Chapman Abrahams, Benjamin Lyons, Aaron Hart, Samuel Jacobs, and others were already participating successfully in the British fur trade on the Great Lakes. Handwritten letters, land titles, land claims, gazetteers, newspapers, mortgages, and scraps of ephemera attest to a complex history of Jews in pre-confederation Canada, in which key themes from the period, including military, race, economics, gender, social, political and familial relations, support that Jews were influential figures in Canadian expansion. Documents relating to military revealed how Jewish traders participated in various imperial military forces in order to better their chances economically and politically after said conflicts.

Warfare and State relations – a gendered activity

¹⁴ Allan Levine, *Seeking the Fabled City: The Canadian Jewish Experience*, (Penguin Random House McClelland & Stewart, 2018), 18.

¹⁵ Robinson, 22. & Godfrey, 78.

¹⁶ Godfrey, 60.

¹⁷ David S. Koffman, “The Unsettling of Canadian Jewish History: Towards a Tangled History of Jewish-Indigenous Encounters,” in *No Better Home?: Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 83.

Young male Jewish migrants were eager and willing to support Britain as an imperial power, because they believed that would give them the best chances to own land, establish businesses, practice their faith, and ultimately make a living. Warfare was both connected to economics and was a gendered experience for Jewish fur traders. Jewish traders provided the crown with military support as a way to be awarded land ownership; they did not have legal rights to own land, thus they had to appeal to the goodwill of the crown by acting as loyal citizens. Their involvement in the military speaks to their role as colonists and their active involvement as imperialists. To illustrate this, Jewish consortium Gershon Levy & Company was a successful fur-trading commercial enterprise established in 1760, comprised of Gershon Levy, Ezekiel Solomons, Levy Solomons, Chapman Abraham, and Benjamin Lyon.¹⁸

These Jewish men were key suppliers, sutlers, and provision merchants of the British army during their battle with France over dominance of North America in the Seven Years War and played a role in the British victory, thus shaping what became Canada using their capital funds.¹⁹ Historian Gerald Tulchinsky claimed that “given their orientation to trade, it is not surprising that some Jews were among the suppliers who accompanied or supplied the British army that captured Quebec city in 1759 and Montreal in 1760.”²⁰ Samuel Jacobs, who operated in New Brunswick, had also been supplying the British with goods during the war with France and particularly in 1759 leading up to the Battle of the Plains of Abraham.²¹ As a result of his loyalty to Britain, Jacobs became a successful landowner in Saint Denis, Montreal and owned land esteemed at £2,700.²² Jewish businessman Aaron Hart and his associate Isaac Levy were

¹⁸ Godfrey, 88.

¹⁹ Mark K. Bauman, “Jews and the Fur Trade along the Southern British Colonial Borderlands,” *American Jewish History* 102, no. 2 (2018): 200

²⁰ Gerald Tulchinsky. *Canada's Jews: A People's Journey*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 17.

²¹ Levine, 20.

²² Ibid.

also involved as purveyors to the British army during the war and likewise settled in Montreal in 1761 based on the goodwill of Britain. Hart became a successful store owner, fur trader, and landowner in Trois-Rivières.²³ Historians Ira Robinson and Denis Vangeois both claim that Hart held the position of commissary officer of the British army during the Seven Years War in 1760.²⁴ Jewish traders knew that by supporting the British they would be elevating their chances of success in North America by gaining a foothold in land ownership, which would grant them access to resources and wealth—hence giving them prestige. This experience was gendered, as it was understood that only men could own land and participate in military efforts.

Thus, by supporting the British in the Seven Years war, Jewish migrants and traders benefited and doors to new economic opportunities were opened for them. Similar to Jacobs and Hart, Gershon Levy & Co found success in British North America following the Seven Years War. In 1762, their Jewish consortium, originally established in New York, had been relocated to the Great Lakes region, replacing the trade previously controlled by the French.²⁵ A letter from Henry Nellis, an officer in the British Indian Department in the Seven Years War, suggests that either Levy Solomons or Gershon Levy,²⁶ members of Gershon Levy & Co, were sutlers for the British during the war, providing Nellis with two pipe Tomohawks. ²⁷ Nellis mentioned that he had “borow’d of Levi the Sutler.”²⁸ These Jewish men’s business dealings and alliances suggest that their loyalty to the British during the Seven Years War earned them influence with the

²³ Michael Hoberman, “More Disgrace than honor: the diminishment of paternal authority in the letters of Aaron Hart,” in *American Jewish History*, vol. 98. (2014): 212. & Godfrey, 97.

²⁴ Robinson, 26. & Denis Vangeois, *The First Jews in North America: The Extraordinary Story of the Hart Family, 1760-1860*. (Montreal: Baraka Books, 2012), 3.

²⁵ Godfrey, 88.

²⁶ It is unclear which “Levi” Mr. Nellis is referring to in this correspondence, however considering the letter was located in Levy Solomons file it is more likely that it is Levy Solomons who is the sutler in this passage. Regardless, they are from the same consortium.

²⁷ Correspondence from Henry Nellis to Sir William Johnson, Niagara 8 May 1760, Levy Solomons 2003-060-001(20), Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

²⁸ Ibid.

crown, which they then parlayed to their advantage once the British colony was established in 1763 in the territories of the St. Lawrence River. Support for the winning imperial power proved fruitful for this cadre of merchant Jews. As historian Mark Bauman noted, “The social and economic status of Jews rose and fell with the vicissitudes of the trade, war and diplomacy.”²⁹ These Jewish entrepreneurs hoped that their loyalty to the crown would win them praise, which would, in turn, translate into equality in the new colony—a luxury they were not afforded in Britain.

Jewish traders and businessmen were indeed tenacious in their drive to use military means to leverage their status in British North America, not just during the Seven Years’ War, but also during the American Revolutionary War twelve years later. With the American invasion of Montreal in 1776, there was increasing anxiety that Lower Canada would fall under the sphere of American authority.³⁰ In 1775, Jewish fur trader Chapman Abraham demonstrated his loyalty to the crown and became a scout with the Canadian militia forces against the Americans.³¹ But, not all Jewish settlers were willing to support Britain during the American Revolution. David Salisbury Franks outwardly supported an American victory and, in his own words, “did everything to promote their success,” becoming an American paymaster in Benedict Arnold’s army in June 1776.³²

Franks was not the only Jewish man in British North America to have sympathies for the American cause. Levy Solomons has also been documented as a supporter to the Americans during the war. A four-page handwritten letter from Levy Solomons to the United States of America in Congress authenticates this claim and is complete with fascinating details into his

²⁹ Bauman, 197.

³⁰ Godfrey, 108.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

³² *Ibid.* 107

unique case in Montreal in 1776. The importance of Solomons' letter shows clearly that Jewish men in the eighteenth century were loyal to whichever imperial power offered assurances for stability in North America. Solomons referred to himself throughout the letter as a "memorialist" and further asserted that, "General Montgomery on his arrival at Montreal in 1775 sent for your memorialist and desired him to act as purveyor to the American hospitals in Canada for which service General Montgomery promised him two guineas per day for himself."³³

Solomons' letter was effectively a list of grievances for which he sought resolutions. He claimed that upon following General Montgomery's exact orders and having spent all his own funds on the hospitals he was still expected to pay for the maintenance of said hospitals, despite his, "own credit [being] ruined."³⁴ In order to continue to pay for the expense, he was forced to sell 4,000 gallons of rum and "sustained a loss of nearly 7,000 livres."³⁵ Furthermore, Solomons' inventory of goods and ammunition used for his fur trade were "appropriated," and he was never compensated for the loss.³⁶ This illustrates how economics and warfare were interrelated activities, which involved Jewish male fur traders supporting an imperial power at their own financial expense in order to safeguard their position in North America.

The majority of Montreal Jewish men remained loyal to British at the time and refused to associate with Solomons for his betrayal of the crown. According to Godfrey, the majority of Jews in Upper Canada were content with their life in the colony and had no desire to join the

³³ Correspondence from Levy Solomons to the United States of America in congress assembled, Montreal 15 November 1784, Solomons, Levy (d. 1792, Montreal). Solomons Levy or Solomon Levy (1730-1792) was one of the five members of the Great Lakes fur trade syndicate that was disrupted by Pontiac's uprising in June 1763. The Solomons/Levy Family, 2003-060-007 (10), Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid. Solomons faced a great deal of criticism from his peers in Montreal for his involvement with the Americans as he states he was, "exposed to insult and injury from people of every denomination in the province." His connection to the American cause ostracised him in the town, resulting in his eviction from his friends home, as he claimed "it was dangerous to harbor a notorious rebel."

United States.³⁷ Clearly, Jews were not willing to openly take a stance with the Americans; however, some were happy to profit from the conflict like Aaron Hart and Samuel Jacobs who discreetly supplied the American army during the revolution.³⁸ Though it appears that Solomons had few alternatives other than to follow the orders of General Montgomery, it had not been a friendly request, but rather a demand from the invading regime. Nevertheless, it does appear from Solomons' writing that he did foster some sympathy towards the American cause,³⁹ though it is possible that his writing was influenced by his desire to exact compensation from the newly formed American government for his troubles. Thus, the Jewish involvement in the military was not due to a particular loyalty to the crown, but rather for economic security, access to resources, wealth and the potential to own land—a predominantly male experience.

Two decades following the American Revolution, Britain found itself yet again immersed in another war, the Anglo-Spanish War of 1796 (1796–1802). Once more, there is evidence of a Canadian Jew showing military support to Britain, in the hopes of gaining clout as Jew in the colony. Moses David, born in Quebec in 1767, was a merchant in the town of Sandwich, later known as Windsor, and became a member of the Canadian militia in 1794.⁴⁰ In 1796, he served as a volunteer under General Simcoe during the Anglo-Spanish War and later became a Lieutenant in the War of 1812 (1812–1815).⁴¹ In Montreal, on March 18, 1799, David petitioned Robert Prescott, the governor of Upper and Lower Canada for a land grant in Montreal, to remind

³⁷ Godfrey, 112.

³⁸ Robinson, 27.

³⁹ Solomons claimed in his own words he had “always uniformly adhered to the American side.”

⁴⁰ Typescript of the David's Family history, 2003-060-003(10) David, Moses, fur trader, b. Montreal 1768, d. Sandwich U.C. 1814. Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁴¹ Ibid. & Typescript of the Essex North East Battalion of the War of 1812, Moses David Lieutenant, 2003-060-003(10) Moses Fur trader, b. Montreal 1768. Sandwich U.C 1814, Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

his government of his loyalty and service to the British, which consequently in his eyes made him eligible for land and stated,

At Detroit in the year 1790 your memorialist offered himself with many other gentlemen as a volunteer to Sir John Johnson to go against the Spaniards on the breaking out of the war between Great Britain and Spain. That afterwards in the year 1796 your memorialist being again at Detroit offered himself to Lieutenant General Simcoe as a volunteer to do duty with the troops.⁴²

David positioned his military service as a “memorialist” as the prime evidence to support his justification for land ownership in the colony. Both David and Solomons’ claimed to be a memorialist, displaying their desire to be seen as men who made the ultimate sacrifice for their country and who, as a result, were deserving of award or compensation. Land holding was a sign of success, stability and prosperity—an activity reserved for men only. Upon receipt of his petition, the government granted him the 2,000 acres of land which he requested.⁴³ Despite the fact that there were no “written declaration of rights” for Jews at this time, their rights were, in Godfrey’s words “being established by precedent,” as piecemeal legal gains for Jews as Britain recognized that minorities had to be accepted if their colony was to succeed.⁴⁴

David’s letter concerned not matters of legal rights and entitlement but included a request based on the goodwill and benevolence of the crown to recognize his military duty and *award* him with land. He wished to show the crown he was deserving of land on the grounds of his respectability and loyalty shown through his service. To illustrate this, David stated,

Your memorialist being desirous of settling some of the waste lands of his majesty in hoping that in consideration of the promises that your excellency will be induced to extend to him his majesty’s bounty he humbly prays that your excellency will grant to

⁴² Handwritten correspondence of Moses David merchant of Montreal to Robert Prescott Governor of the province of Upper and Lower Canada, 18 March 1799 Sandwich, 2003-060-003(10) David Moses Fur trader, b. Montreal 1768. Sandwich U.C 1814, Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Godfrey, 101.

him 2000 acres of waste land or such other quantity as your excellency shall think your memorialist entitled to.⁴⁵

Within this above excerpt, it is evident that David used the language of the colonizer as he referred to “waste land,” indicating his role in the subjugation of Indigenous people in Canada. Upon the passing of the Royal Proclamation in 1763, the British Crown established a system to govern the land surrender process and prevent settler encroachment. Thirty years later, David appeals to the crown to request “waste lands,” and he used his military service and loyalty to Britain as a way to prove his worthiness of receiving land, as the crown was the only one with the power to purchase and alienate Indigenous land. The myth that Canada was void of people and empty prior to European contact advanced a program of land appropriation and an economic justification for it. This language, so prevalent among merchants and political leaders in the colonies, reveals something essential about race relations characteristic of the late eighteenth century and the European mentality of land ownership being associated with private property and improvement, at least from the perspective of the colonists, Jews among them.⁴⁶ These concepts were, of course, foreign to Indigenous people.⁴⁷ David clearly had adopted the settler-colonial rhetoric of this time in order to gain resources, land and power, thus showing how early Jewish settlers were willing agents in the expansion of the Canadian nation. As Koffman importantly notes, “Capitalism colluded with colonialism in the making of Canada and Jews were willy-nilly active agents,”⁴⁸ as perfectly exemplified here by David’s land request.

Race relations in British North America: the Jewish-Indigenous relationship of the eighteenth century – Pontiac’s War, Intermarriage, & Colonialism

⁴⁵ Handwritten correspondence of Moses David, merchant of Montreal to Robert Prescott Governor of the province of Upper and Lower Canada, 18 March 1799, Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection.

⁴⁶ Irene Spry, “The Great Transformation: The disappearance of the commons in western Canada,” In *Canadian Plains Studies 6: Man and Nature on the Prairies*, edited by Richard Allen, (Regina, Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1976): 23.

⁴⁷ Spry, 21.

⁴⁸ Koffman, 87.

The fur trade existed within several broader economic ambits in which Jews experienced both economic success and failure. Examining Jews' role in this sphere, argued Bauman, forces us to confront "issues of nebulous and changing concepts of race and ethnicity, the complexity of trans-colonial and transatlantic commerce, [and] Jewish interaction with other ethnic groups."⁴⁹ Indeed, as Bauman suggested, the fur trade was surely a powerful market, which set Jewish fur traders on a clashing trajectory with Indigenous peoples, leading to a complex history of interactions and encounters. As Koffman also acknowledged, framing Canadian minority histories using an Indigenous-settler lens disrupts and critically questions the traditional narrative that is perpetuated about the founding of the nation.⁵⁰ It is important to recognise that due to the thin basis of archival records written from the perspective of Indigenous peoples about their relations with Jewish settlers, historians can only paint half the picture.

Yet, we know that the fur trade was a significant economic incentive for Jewish men, as for other colonists, so much so that even after the British conquest of New France in 1763 the English and French rivalry continued in the region. British, French, and Indigenous peoples all grappled with negotiating economic and political boundaries long after France's defeat.⁵¹ Indigenous people rightfully believed that although the French had been defeated by the British, *they* had not been. In 1763, this tension led to Pontiac's War, which consequently engulfed many Jewish fur traders in our story.⁵² Gershon Levy & Co were especially ruined by the violence brought by the conflict, and he and his partners nearly faced death on more than one instance.⁵³ Just two years prior to being captured, on September 28, 1761, Ezekiel Solomons and thirty other

⁴⁹ Bauman, 220.

⁵⁰ Koffman, 82.

⁵¹ Widder, "After the conquest: Michilimackinac, a Borderland in Transition, 1760-1763," 43.

⁵² *Ibid*, 44.

⁵³ Correspondence (in French) of Gershon Levy & Co's imprisonment during Pontiac's uprising, Gershon Levy pt. 2, Tues 23 August 1763, Canadian Jewish Congress Fonds 0001, Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives, Montreal, Quebec, Canada. [hereafter referred to as Gershon Levy & Co Imprisonment CJC 0001, ADCJA]

voyageurs were attacked by Ottawa Nation warriors; however, the massacre was avoided when British troops arrived to neutralize the situation.⁵⁴ Solomons once again fell victim to Chippewa warriors on June 30, 1763, when a war call was initiated by Chief Madjeckewiss, and he was taken as prisoner.⁵⁵ Fur trader Alexander Henry included an excerpt from Solomons in his diary which supports the former's claim that "I, Ezekiel Solomons, resident in the Fort of Michilimackinac at the time it was surprised by the savages... on the 2nd day of June [1763]."⁵⁶ Solomons' life was spared and he was ransomed, however, not without losing all his goods and becoming economically ruined.⁵⁷ Days later, Gershon Levy, Levy Solomons⁵⁸, and Chapman Abraham were all taken prisoner by Waindote warriors; however, the men escaped. While Chapman Abraham was tied to a stake, he was given his final meal; however, upon receiving scalding hot soup, he became enraged and threw the soup in the face of his Indigenous captor.⁵⁹ Godfrey suggested that Abraham's Indigenous warriors interpreted his efforts to fight his captive as evidence of his insanity, and they released him.⁶⁰ As a result of the conflict, the Gershon Levy fur trade consortium was ruined and was forced to break apart due to the significant quantity of goods that were stolen.⁶¹ Godfrey reports that the company lost £85,916 in goods, an insurmountable amount.⁶² Such economic devastation can be interpreted through a gendered lens because as historian Scott Sandage investigated, nineteenth-century popular culture espoused

⁵⁴ Godfrey, 83.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 84.

⁵⁶ Alexander Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories between the years 1760 and 1766*, (University of Toronto, 1809), 150-154.

⁵⁷ Typescript of Ezekiel Solomons, 2003-060-007(5), Solomons, Ezekiel, (d.c 1804, probably at New York), Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁵⁸ Typescript, 2003-060-007(10) Solomons, Levy. (d. 1792, Montreal). Solomons Levy or Solomon Levy (1730-1792) was one of the five members of the Great Lakes fur trade syndicate that was disrupted by Pontiac's uprising in June 1763. The Solomons/Levy Family, 2003-060-007 (10), Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. [hereafter referred to as Solomons Levy, 2003-060-007(10)].

⁵⁹ Godfrey, 86.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid, 83.

⁶² Ibid, 277.

that financial ruin represented individual failure and that “ruined men caused their own downfalls.”⁶³

Race relations involved a fluctuation of power or control over the land and its resources between Jews and Indigenous peoples. Gershon Levy was forced to pay a debt well in advance of its due because he was forced to sign a promissory note for £1,200 under duress when he was prisoner of his Indigenous captors.⁶⁴ Relations between settlers and Indigenous peoples were interconnected with economics and business dealings. While in captivity by the Indigenous warriors, the Jewish traders feared being massacred and were thus under their control.⁶⁵ Using this control, the Indigenous warriors exacted economic leverage over the traders, coercing them into signing a billet that was favorable to them and their French allies.⁶⁶ This captivity can also be connected to masculinity, as they showed that economic disputes were expressed through physical confrontation and military means displaying power imbalances among men.

Jewish traders adopted the language and rhetoric of the period, which viewed Indigenous people as inferior. On January 17, 1763, four months before Pontiac’s War began, Levy Solomons wrote a correspondence in Niagara to an unknown recipient in which he noted, “The Indians are kept sober and I hope well not be troublesome at this point.”⁶⁷ Solomons’ patronizing language reflected his attitude towards Indigenous peoples. Perhaps Solomons was writing to a British officer updating him on the status of the Indigenous people. Being that this letter was

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⁶⁴ Ibid, 85.

⁶⁵ Gershon Levy & Co Imprisonment CJC 0001, ADCJA.

⁶⁶ Two months after the event, Gershon Levy petitioned the British and requested that the promissory note he signed under threat be null and void. Levy acknowledged that the billet was indeed a, “sign of the hand of Mr. Levy” but that “he was forced to sign him being a prisoner of the savages,” and demanded the crown to resolve the issue.

⁶⁷ Correspondence of Levy Solomons, Niagara 17 January 1763, 2003-060-007(10) Solomons, Levy. (d. 1792, Montreal). Solomons Levy or Solomon Levy (1730-1792) was one of the five members of the Great Lakes fur trade syndicate that was disrupted by Pontiac’s uprising in June 1763. The Solomons/Levy Family, 2003-060-007 (10), Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

written four months prior to Pontiac's War, there must have already been signs and signals of unrest, so it is possible that Solomons, acting as an informant for the British, was updating on the position of Pontiac's forces. Moreover, the issue of drunkenness could have posed a problem for Solomons, who viewed it as an obstruction to smooth business with Indigenous traders, hence why he was interested in reporting this, as it would potentially threaten his own trade if his Indigenous partner was not sober. Thus, early Jewish settlers can be regarded as agents of European colonialism.

Not only did the fur trade bring Jewish and Indigenous people together economically and militarily, but they became connected socially and sexually through intermarriage.⁶⁸ For instance, Jewish fur traders in Halifax often took Indigenous wives, had children with them, and learned their languages.⁶⁹ Ferdinand Jacobs is one such example of these men. Although we do not know if he spoke Indigenous languages, it is confirmed that he had an Indigenous wife with whom he had children. They had a daughter named Thu'Cotch.⁷⁰ Moreover, Ezekiel Solomons in Michilimackinac had many children with a Chippewa woman, and, similarly, Abraham Jacob Frank took a Huron wife.⁷¹ This practice occurred occasionally amongst fur traders, not only Jewish ones, as it enhanced their prestige in the trade and provided them access to quality information and furs. As historian Koffman notes, these men married for external factors and still remained highly connected to their Jewish faith.⁷²

In addition to intermarriage, Jewish fur traders formed bonds of trust and friendship with diverse Indigenous people in Canada and came to rely on one another. This can be seen with the

⁶⁸ Koffman, 83.

⁶⁹ Bauman, 207. & Robinson, 23. & Widder, 49.

⁷⁰ Samuel Hearne, *A Journey from Prince of Wales's Fort in Hudson Bay to the Northern Ocean, in the years 1769, 1770, 1771, and 1772*, (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1911): 160.

⁷¹ Koffman, 83.

⁷² Ibid.

example of Jewish trader Ferdinand Jacobs, chief of York Fort, who was employed by the Hudson Bay Company (HBC) and who in 1755 was reprimanded for trading privately with Indigenous people.⁷³ Jacobs claimed he was given the furs as a “bond of friendship,” one formed with the Indigenous traders, displaying that he had created a strong relationship with them. It could also be the case that Jacobs was purchasing furs off the record directly from Indigenous trappers and re-selling them back in London, which would display keen business savvy on his part.

Economic & Business relations: the profits behind the fur trade, debts & land ownership

Economic prowess and opportunities were certainly the prime focus for Jewish fur traders in the eighteenth century. The fur trade was clearly a critical economic underpinning in pre-confederation Canada, generating £200,000 per year between the years 1780–1790 alone.⁷⁴ Even if Godfrey was exaggerating when he said that Gershon Levy and Co were “responsible for almost one-half of the British fur trade on the Great Lakes from 1761 until Pontiac’s uprising,” they were no doubt a significant player.⁷⁵ In 1767, Gershon Levy sent £3,910 of beaver pelts, which was classified as one of the largest deliveries of peltries and furs from Michilimackinac⁷⁶—a striking claim that speaks to the extent to which Jewish fur traders influenced Canadian expansion through their economic involvement beyond what their small numbers in the colony would have suggested. Levy demonstrated strong financial aptitude, especially because only years before he had been financially ruined.⁷⁷ It is estimated that Gershon Levy & Co’s total loss from Pontiac’s War was £18,000 and despite a fur sale being held for their creditors to recoup

⁷³ Manitoba Jewish History, Arthur A. Chiel, 2003-060-003(25).

⁷⁴ Typescript of the State of the fur trade in Canada, fur trade general, 2003-060-007(2-4), Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁷⁵ Godfrey, xvi.

⁷⁶ Typescript of Gershon Levy beaver shipment, Gershon Levy file, Canadian Jewish Congress Fonds 0001, Alex Dworkin Canadian Jewish Archives, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

⁷⁷ Godfrey, 91.

their investments, they still remained in debt.⁷⁸ Although they tried to declare bankruptcy, a British law prevented them from doing so and so they remained responsible for their debt.⁷⁹

The fur trade involved many interrelated activities, some of which have been described, such as military suppliers and purveyors.⁸⁰ Land ownership was one of these activities that Jewish fur traders engaged in quite frequently to expand their access to the trade, resources, and wealth. As previously mentioned, David Moses applied and was given a land grant in 1799 for 2,000 acres, and in 1801 and 1803 he requested additional grants in the town of Sandwich, where he lived.⁸¹ Within his letter, David again reminded council that he offered his loyal service and that he recognized that his Jewish identity “precludes him from the grant;” however, similar to his first land grant, he was given the land he requested the following month on April 19, 1803.⁸² He received a certificate from the Church of Sandwich authenticating his purchase.⁸³ David was the only Jewish trader to have settled in the region of Sandwich in Upper Canada.⁸⁴

In regards to land ownership, Levy Solomons applied for a mortgage for his lands on May 24, 1784 and was granted a £1,000 mortgage on his property by Robert Ellice and Co,⁸⁵ a successful company that supplied military posts, sold furs and brokered mortgages.⁸⁶ Solomons

⁷⁸ Solomons Levy, 2003-060-007(10).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Bauman, 195.

⁸¹ Correspondence of Moses David to the British Crown, The Petition of Moses David of Sandwich merchants, Sandwich 9 March 1803, 2003-060-003(10) David Moses Fur trader, b. Montreal 1768. Sandwich U.C, Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Typescript of land book entered by William Allan Esquire of Moses David land certificate in the town of Sandwich, 19 April, 1803, 2003-060-003(10) David Moses Fur trader, b. Montreal 1768. Sandwich U.C, Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁸⁴ Typescript of secondary information on Moses David & family, 2003-060-003(10), David Moses Fur trader, b. Montreal 1768. Sandwich U.C, Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁸⁵ Deed of mortgage from Levy Solomons to Robert Ellice and Co, Montreal 24 May 1784, 2003-060-007(10) Levy Solomons, Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

also mortgaged his share of the Montreal Distillery at this time as well.⁸⁷ The reasons for these mortgages are because he was in debt, a result of Pontiac's War, as well as his involvement in the American Revolution. Since he presumably needed cash, he mortgaged these properties, which were his assets. In regards to assets, Ezekiel Solomons also sold his assets around the same time period, which included a full list of peltries that he owned in order to cover his debts on August 3, 1780.⁸⁸

These young Jewish fur traders invented clever strategies to secure profits. In an undated correspondence regarding profit strategy to an unknown recipient, fur trader Moses David described on such strategy, instructing: "This is the way you act, you pick all the good skins out to send to Canada and the bad ones you keep to pay your debts here."⁸⁹ Since key information about who wrote the letter, to whom and on what date, is missing, it can only be speculated that the writer is referring to an economic system in which quality preservation is forefront. Using this strategy, the writer encouraged the trader to only sell the best furs, ostensibly to hold up their reputation of giving prized goods, showing business savvy and mercantilist expertise. Regarding economic savvy, Ferdinand Jacobs was also greatly influential for the HBC, as he predicted and encouraged the use of inland posts to increase company profits. His strategy was eventually adopted through the use of York boats.⁹⁰ He came up with this idea because he recognized

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Account of peltries seized from the estate of Ezekiel Solomons, 2003-060-001(19) Ezekiel Solomons, Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁸⁹ Correspondence regarding profits strategy undated and anonymous, 2003-060-003(10) David, Moses, fur trader, b. Montreal 1768, d. Sandwich U.C. 1814, Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁹⁰ Typescript of Secondary literature, Manitoba Jewish History – Early Times by Arthur A. Chiel, Jacobs, Ferdinande, (1713-1783), chief factor of Hudson's Bay Company Post at Fort York c. 1750. No record of his [Jewish] religion has been traced in the HBC Archives" according to his biographer Shirlee Anne Smith [D.C.B. vol. pp. 384-4]. Captain John Rogers diary referred to his daughter as offspring of "Jacob (a Jew)." 2003-060-003(25), Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. [(hereafter referred to as Manitoba Jewish History, Arthur A. Chiel, 2003-060-003(25)].

Montreal pedlars were trading directly with Indigenous people and Canadian traders, whereas the HBC was simply waiting around for the Indigenous trappers to come to them, which was much less cost effective.⁹¹

Early Jewish settlers were not only fur traders but were involved in a diverse variety of commercial undertakings in order to financially protect themselves from ruin.⁹² On March 4, 1790, two years before Levy Solomons death, he and his eldest son by the same name advertised in the Quebec *Gazette* the sale of their products of starch and hair-powder in a barter exchange for the goods of wheat, barley, peas, oats, flax-seed, and bark.⁹³ Upon Solomons' death, his son, Levy Solomons Jr, continued their business legacy selling snuff, carrot, plug-tail spencer twist tobacco, starch, and hair powder, "which he will sell on the most reasonable terms."⁹⁴ This demonstrated their willingness to diversify their business and trade in order to stay economically stable especially during precarious times. Levy Solomons and his son exhibited business savvy and ambition. Moreover, Ezekiel Solomons was involved in a similar enterprise, as he was one of the members of the establishment of a general store in Michilimackinac on July 1st, 1779.⁹⁵ Solomons and his associates collected their merchandise for trade with the Indigenous people at this store, in hopes of increasing their profits. Importantly as historian Godfrey acknowledges,

None of these five men became rich, but their legacy was enormous. The consortium was the first large scale organized fur trade enterprise after the British gained sovereignty over the western posts. Almost all forgotten today as Canadian patriots, the five members of the consortium risked their lives in an attempt to found a British North American fur trade that could give Canada an economic justification as a country.⁹⁶

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Robinson, 24.

⁹³ Levy Solomons' Advertisement in the Quebec *Gazette* Typescript, 2003-060-007(10), Solomons, Levy (d. 1792. Montreal). Solomons, Levy or Solomon Levy (1730-1792) was one of the five members of the Great Lakes fur trade syndicate that was disrupted by Pontiac's uprising in June 1763. The Solomons Levy Family. 2003-060-007(10). Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Typescript of Ezekiel Solomons general store in Michilimackinac, 2003-060-007(2) Fur trade general, Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁹⁶ Godfrey, 91.

With this said, it is clear that Jewish fur traders were absolutely essential in the expansion of the Canadian nation, particularly through the avenue of finances, however also militarily and through colonialism and their actions in these realms were gendered, impacting their family life.

The socio-familial realm of the fur trade - The intersection of Gender, Fatherhood & Economics

The Jewish involvement in the fur trade is viewed as an “atypical commercial endeavour” by Bauman, relatively due to their small numbers, however those who did participate were influential community organizers. Jewish fur traders like Levy Solomons were also involved in the social realm of their communities. Solomons is credited as the builder of the Ginseng Hall on December 12, 1782.⁹⁷ From this, it is clear that the fur trade was not only supposed to be seen as a way to explore economic fortunes of the New World but also as a way to connect to that society of fur trading young men in a formal and social setting. Solomons created the Beaver Club, which was founded in 1785 and was an invitation to fur traders for a monthly dinner.⁹⁸ The invitation to the dinner read, “the honor of your company is requested at a ball, to be given by the Bachelors Club at Mr. Levy’s room on Tuesday 6th January, Montreal 20th Dec, 1788,”⁹⁹ and was known as the Bachelors Club ticket. Not only does this represent that being a fur trader held prestige, but this also displays that what it meant to be a Jewish man in the late eighteenth century included respectability, community and keen business sense. Concepts of rugged individualism are certainly present here, shown by their motto which was, “fortitude in distress,” signifying that they demonstrated strength in the face of hardships on the frontier.¹⁰⁰ These

⁹⁷ Typescript of Levy Solomons and the Bachelors Club Ticket, 2003-060-007(10), Solomons, Levy (d. 1792. Montreal), Solomons, Levy or Solomon Levy (1730-1792) was one of the five members of the Great Lakes fur trade syndicate that was disrupted by Pontiac’s uprising in June 1763. The Solomons Levy Family. 2003-060-007(10). Sheldon and Judy Godfrey Collection, Clara Thomas Archives, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

dinners were significant, because they were not a one-time ordeal but rather were monthly gatherings lasting until 1827. Topics of conversation at these dinners could have included fur trading prospects, economic opportunities or perhaps the interactions with Indigenous people. The dinners were a way for the Jewish traders to connect with other traders, establish a reputation and develop their self-identities as newcomers and frontiersmen in the New World.

The new economic realities of their career choice as fur traders forced changes in the traditional family dynamic for Jewish fur trading fathers. Ferdinand Jacobs was elevated to the high esteem of an exceptional father in the journal of Samuel Hearne. Hearne comments that, unlike other European fathers who abandoned their children and only had sexual relations with Indigenous women for pleasure, that Jacobs genuinely cared for his Indigenous wife and children.¹⁰¹ Hearne stated of Jacobs, “No man could possibly be fonder of his children, yet as there were some that he could not bring to England, he had them brought up entirely among the natives; so that when he left the country, they scarcely ever felt the loss, though they regretted the absence of a fond and indulgent parent.”¹⁰² For Hearne to praise Jacobs in this way speaks to the importance they attached to being a good father, as well as the ideals of specifically *Jewish* masculinity among fur traders, which was being praised here as an alternative to a rougher version of masculinity among traders in the eighteenth century.¹⁰³

The role of the Jewish father was clearly changing in the eighteenth century as Jewish men migrated to North America and took up an entirely new career as fur traders. As historian Doris Groshen Daniels argued, the generation of Jewish men in the late eighteenth century witnessed a loss of patriarchal control over their families, and over their sons in particular, as the

¹⁰¹ Hearne, 160,

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

“young people became more geographically mobile and moved to new lands.” Aaron Hart’s relationships with his four sons certainly followed this pattern. In his private letters to his sons, Hart frequently articulated his worry and disappointment.¹⁰⁴ Yet it was the fur trader father, Aaron Hart, who voluntarily chose to live in rural Montreal, as close as possible to the fur trade routes, given the value and financial gain these inland backcountry positions had.¹⁰⁵ Although his inland position gave Hart advantages in his access to fur, it shows that he valued his profits more than his establishment of his family unit. This sheds insight into the priorities of the Jewish businessmen father figure at the late eighteenth century in the New World surrounded by economic opportunities—hence sacrificing the proximity of family, in order to establish his economic legacy. Familial relations were redesigned during this time period to accommodate for the context of “fast growing individualism.”¹⁰⁶ The legacy that Hart wanted to build for his sons was never realized, because they were disinterested in following in his footsteps, and this greatly influenced his letter writing to his sons. He expressed worry, disappointment, and regret that his sons would not continue his legacy that he had worked tirelessly over.¹⁰⁷ Hart voluntarily alienated himself from his sons in the name of economic profit and because of the nature of his profession; however, because he still wanted them to receive a Jewish education, they were separated from him and from his control over their decisions.¹⁰⁸ Harts’ letters provided an interesting insight into what Jewish fur trading fathers expected from their sons during this period. His writing reveals the gendered experience of fur trading, as Hart believed that his sons had a duty as Jewish men to further the family business.

¹⁰⁴ Michael Hoberman, “More Disgrace than Honor: The Diminishment of Paternal Authority in the Letters of Aaron Hart,” *American Jewish History* 98, no. 4 (2014): 214.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 214.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

The Jewish minority played a significant role in the country's economic and geopolitical expansion. Although there were only a small number of Jews in pre-confederation Canada, they made significant contributions to the new British colony through their gendered activity of military involvement, economic affairs, and race relations. Fur trading discourses privilege the successes of the Hudson Bay Company and the Northwest Company; however, often there is little to no mention of the Jewish traders involved in those companies. Moreover, scant attention is paid in the scholarly field to Gershon Levy & Co and their significant economic contributions in the development of British North America. As Godfrey suggests, "Why was [Ezekiel] Solomons [and others] forgotten by his country of choice?"¹⁰⁹ And why are Jewish fur traders and early settlers' contributions left out of the dominant narratives in Canada's beginnings?

Jewish settlers came to British North America to escape the restrictions of the Old World and lay their foundations in the New. These young, mostly unmarried Jewish men searched for a place to find economic prosperity, political freedom, and a degree of equality and acceptance while preserving their Jewishness. Jewish traders were actively involved in the colonization of Indigenous peoples through their economic, military, social, and sexual interactions. As Koffman notes, by framing history through an Indigenous-settler lens these "encounters offer an important dimension to the home-making saga, to the story of particular minorities making a new home where others had been displaced from their homes."¹¹⁰ Hence, Jewish fur traders were colonialists, prominent figures in the expansion of the Canadian nation, and were influential in the staple trade which the pre-confederation economy was built on. Thus, "further research into

¹⁰⁹ Godfrey, xvi.

¹¹⁰ Koffman, 82.

the country's roots will give Jews and others their place among those who began the building of the Canadian nation."¹¹¹

Biography

Emily Belmonte lives in Woodbridge, Ontario and is a fifth-year undergraduate student at York University pursuing her specialized honours BA in History and her bachelor of education with plans to graduate in 2022 as an Ontario Certified Teacher. She is passionate about studying history and Indigenous studies and was honoured to create a paper showing the early relations between Jewish fur traders and Indigenous peoples in Canada using a gendered lens. She strives to be a teacher who decolonizes history and encourages her students to reach their fullest potential.

¹¹¹ Godfrey, xvii