

The Jew of St. Denis: An Introduction

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Résumé

D'aucuns ont entendu parler de Samuel Jacobs. Non pas de Samuel W. Jacobs avocat brillant et membre du Parlement mais bien de Samuel Jacobs qui est peut être le premier Juif à être venu s'établir au Québec. Son histoire complète n'a pu être encore écrite car on présume que de nombreux documents existants sont encore dispersés. Les Archives Publiques du Canada ont des lettres et des documents ayant trait à la vie d'homme d'affaire de Samuel Jacobs, à partir de ceux-ci, il est possible de retracer sa vie d'environ 1750 à 1786.

Toutefois, il est à espérer que l'histoire complète de sa vie pourra nous donner une idée des errances d'un Juif dont les 40 premières années demeurent un mystère. Les documents que l'auteur a analysés donnent un tableau très net du mode de vie au Québec entre les années 1760 et 1786 mettant tout particulièrement l'accent sur le milieu des affaires de cette époque.

Ceci n'est qu'un préliminaire à la vie de Samuel Jacobs et à l'époque qu'il vécut.

Lorsque ses papiers seront catalogués et analysés il nous sera possible d'en savoir plus long à l'égard d'un être qui ne renia pas sa religion et qui par bien des côtés nous apparaît comme étant fascinant.

Some of you have heard of Samuel Jacobs. No, not Samuel W. Jacobs, well-known lawyer and Member of Parliament who died in 1938, but rather the Jacobs who may have been the first Jew to legitimately settle in Quebec. David Rome has written several vignettes about this Jacobs in the *Canadian Jewish News*¹ and Marcus mentions him in *Early American Jewry*.² By the same token, Vaugeois speaks about him in *Les Juifs et la Nouvelle-France*³ and is his

biographer in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.⁴ Nevertheless, the complete story of Samuel (Schmuel) Jacobs has not, as yet, been written. The reason for that is probably that the vast amount of material about Jacobs that has survived, has never been adequately catalogued and analyzed, a process that is just now taking place.

When Jacobs died in Quebec in 1786 at the age of 76, his estate was handled by Michael Cornud and Edward William Gray, and his will probated in Montreal. One of the Ermatingers was the executor for Gray's estate, and so the Jacobs' papers came to form a substantial part of the Ermatinger Estate Papers. Approximately forty volumes out of two hundred and forty-six of the Ermatinger-Jacobs Estate Papers (MG19, A2, Series 3) at the Public Archives of Canada consist of letters, business documents and other paper pertaining almost exclusively to Jacobs. From these documents it is possible to trace his life, in broad details, from about 1750 to 1786, with only a few uncertain gaps. The first 40 years of his life, though, are still shrouded in mystery. Eventually, however, it is hoped that the complete story of Jacobs' life will give us some idea of one Jew's wanderings. The material presently available will, nevertheless, provide us with a clear picture of the way of life in Quebec from 1760 to 1786 with particular emphasis on the business environment, as well as some inkling of the type of accounting records and methods used at that time.

Jacobs first comes to our attention as a shopkeeper and trader in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Most of the references come from actions taken by and/or against Jacobs for various sums connected with his buying or selling activities. Of particular interest is a writ⁵ taken out by Israel Abrahams on February 21, 1752 against Jacobs for £5.16.3. The statement of account attached to the writ shows £1.16.3 for merchandise purchased during March and April, 1751 and "to 6 months board, Sabbaths & holy days" for £4.0.0. This last entry indicates that Jacobs was practicing his faith at this time and also dates his definitive appearance in Halifax as late as 1750. Since no writs appear in the records of the Inferior Court of Common Pleas (a kind of small claims court), Halifax County after 1752, it seems that he did not stay in Halifax too long. Nevertheless, on March 20 1752 he does buy a half lot with buildings at the southeast corner of what is now Sackville and Granville Streets in downtown Halifax.⁶

The next few years are blurred. There is some unconfirmed evidence that a Jacobs, maybe ours, supplied Gage's troops out of Albany. It is known that Jacobs dealt with the troops at Staten Island, New York,⁷ but there is definite evidence that he was back in Nova Scotia in 1759. This time, he appears as a partner in a brewhouse at Louisbourg with William Buttar and Alexander Mackenzie.⁸ This venture was not too successful as, on settlement at Quebec on

March 10, 1761, each of the partners has a loss of over £100. It is also known that Jacobs lived at Fort Cumberland⁹ during 1758, but arrived at Quebec, most likely aboard his schooner “Betsey”, late in 1759. Although there is no evidence that he ever went back to Nova Scotia, he did have some property at Fort Cumberland in 1772, under the care of William Allen.¹⁰ Nevertheless, in November, 1761 his moveable effects at Fort Cumberland were sold at Public Vendue, raising almost £200 in the process.¹¹

Settled in Quebec City, Jacobs became very active in trade and commerce. By late 1761 he was involved in the building of a distillery in partnership with Benjamin Price and John Hay.¹² Rum was being produced three years later in 1764. This distillery, located near the Intendant’s Palace, also served as a tobacco manufacturing plant and as a base for buying and selling wheat. During this time Jacobs also shipped over £3,200 of merchandise to an employee, Charles Ferdinand Curtius, who was running a general store for him at St. Denis sur Richelieu.¹³ Before too long, Curtius decided to go into business on his own; he was not too successful and lost his home in Quebec City to Jacobs for non-payment of debts.¹⁴ Within several years Jacobs transferred his headquarters to St. Denis. The reason for this move is not quite definite. Jacobs was getting on in years and as he complained to one friend had “too many irons in the fire”.¹⁵ He was also having cashflow problems, particularly with Brook Watson, Olive and Rashleigh, a London firm to which he owed a considerable debt. Conversely, he wrote that he now had “A place in the country, well established a pleasant situation and flourishing regard to trade”.¹⁶ Whatever the reason, there is no doubt that Jacobs appreciated the strategic significance of St. Denis for trade between Montreal and Quebec in the north to Albany, New York and Philadelphia in the south. The location of St. Denis on the Richelieu River, which runs into the St. Lawrence River but has its roots in Lake Champlain, put it on a natural highway to the south, since the Hudson River runs out of this lake and eventually to the Atlantic Ocean at New York City.

As the quintessential entrepreneur, Jacobs did not rest at St. Denis. He operated a chain of general stores at St. Charles, St. Ours, Sorel and also sold merchandise at Crown Point on Lake Champlain. He was constantly acquiring real estate and owned houses in Quebec City, Montreal and Sorel, as well as considerable property around St. Denis. He seems to have always been involved with the military, either selling to individual soldiers and officers or as assistant commissary to the Prince Frederick’s Regiment, the Prince Louis Dragoon Regiment and many others stationed on the Yamaske River and around St. Denis from 1776 to 1783. His considerable success as a businessman can be attributed to his dedication in that direction. As he,

himself, put it in a letter written to a friend in 1785, “Your esteemed letter of the 12th ins. I was favoured with this day which gave me much pleasure as the Topic was business which I prefer to politics.”¹⁷

Insofar as his personal life was concerned, Jacobs is known to have fathered nine children with only two predeceasing him. At least six of these children were born in St. Denis to his common-law wife Marie Josephte Audet dite Lapointe. He did marry Marie Josephte in 1784 with no less a dignitary than His Excellency Frederick Haldiman, Governor in Chief of the Province of Quebec, etc. etc. and Protestant Minister, officiating at the wedding, which would tend to indicate his standing in the community.¹⁸ Despite his involvement in business, he seems to have had enough time to at least be concerned with his brood. His eldest child and son, also called Samuel, caused him quite a bit of pain and was disowned for a time, but they reconciled before too long. (This Samuel died July 19, 1824 and is buried in the Protestant Cemetery at Chambly, Quebec.) He wrote to his two eldest daughters who were being boarded at the Ursuline Convent in Quebec City to be good girls, but he disowned his oldest daughter and wrote her out of his will when she persisted in marrying someone not to his liking. Nevertheless, he did hire a dancing teacher and a French teacher for his children at St. Denis and ordered books and atlases for their use and education.

It is quite obvious that once Jacobs settled in Quebec City, he was no longer an observant practitioner of his religion. As indicated previously, contrary to usage, his eldest son bore his name and his daughters were brought up as Catholics. It can be postulated that one of the reasons that Jacobs is not as well known as his confrere Aaron Hart, with whom he corresponded and traded, is that Jacobs is the last of his line in his religion. Although not emphasized, there are several references throughout his papers that refer to this religion. He apologized to Samuel Judah in Montreal when his man disturbed the Sabbath and mentioned the Talmud. He further indicated to Judah that he wanted to be on good terms with him more than anyone other of the “tribe”.¹⁹ In one case, he felt that he was being discriminated against because of his Jewishness but didn’t seem to let it bother him to any great extent. All in all, however, it is certain that Jacobs never forgot that he had been born a Jew. One of the volumes belonging to the estate has several pages written in Hebrew script, almost certainly by Jacobs. These pages are written in some kind of code and have not as yet been deciphered, but give some indication that they pertain to the invasion of Quebec from the south. More to the point, throughout his life Jacobs signed his name with several ostentatious flourishes and in one of these flourishes there invariably appears the word “Schmuel” in Hebrew script.²⁰ It almost seems that

he was sending out a message to anyone “in the know”. His signature very strongly signaled his origins.

This has been a short introduction to the life and times of Samuel Jacobs, but it is only a beginning. Once his papers have been catalogued and analyzed a great deal more will be learned about this enterprising and fascinating man.

NOTES

1. For example, see “Rice, Juice, Skates-and Slaves Made Samuel Jacobs Healthy,” (28 Oct. 1977) and “Early Canadian Jew Married Catholic Girl”, (18 Nov. 1977).
2. Jacob Rader Marcus, *Early American Jewry* (The Jewish Publication Society of America, Philadelphia, 1961), p. 203, et seq.
3. Denis Vaugeois, *Les Juifs et La Nouvelle-France* (Boréal Express, Trois Rivières, Québec, 1968).
4. Denis Vaugeois, *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, V. IV (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1960), pp. 384-6.
5. *Inferior Court of Common Pleas*, Halifax County, No. A, 1749-53, RG37, Actions, March 1752 #39.
6. *Deeds Registry*, Halifax County, Vol. 2, p. 90.
7. *Public Archives of Canada* (MG 19, A2, Series 3) Vol. 2, pp. 95-6.
8. *Public Archives of Canada* (MG 19, A2, Series 3) Vol. 61, p. 63.
9. *Public Archives of Canada* (MG 19, A2, Series 3) Vol. 61, p. 62.
10. *Public Archives of Canada* (MG 19, A2, Series 3) Vol. 2, p. 3.
11. *Public Archives of Canada* (MG 19, A2, Series 3) Vol. 61, pp. 116-7.
12. *Public Archives of Canada* (MG 19, A2, Series 3) Vol. 62, p. 155.
13. *Public Archives of Canada* (MG 19, A2, Series 3) Vol. 62, p. 149.
14. *Quebec Gazette*, 27th August, 1767.
15. *Public Archives of Canada* (MG 19, A2, Series 3) Vol. 2, p. 7.
16. *Public Archives of Canada* (MG 19, A2, Series 3) Vol. 2, pp. 2-4.
17. *Public Archives of Canada* (MG 19, A2, Series 3) Vol. 4, p. 158.
18. *Public Archives of Canada* (MG 19, A2, Series 3) Vol. 22, pp. 308A & B.
19. *Public Archives of Canada* (MG 19, A2, Series 3) Vol. 3, pp. 148-150.
20. This signature can be seen throughout the many volumes of this series, but readers can see this phenomena quite easily on Jacobs' Will (Vol. 5, p. 72).