

264 LEVY, MARCUS

Publisher

Richmond

Publisher of Richmond's first Judaic imprint (1804) from the press of John Dixon Jr. (141).

Levy was an immigrant to America, arriving in the 1790s. Self-described as "from Poland" but reported in 1917 as coming from Germany, Levy evidently came from the Poznan area, a region annexed by Prussia in 1795 in the second of three eighteenth-century partitions of Polish territory that erased that nation from the European map. Once in Virginia, he settled into the retail trade at various locations on Richmond's Main Street, both east and west of the Shockoe Creek, and conducted that business until his death in 1823. Consequently, he was one of the few Jews accepted into membership in Richmond's Masonic Lodge No. 10.

Levy was clearly an advocate of religious liberty, perhaps the reason for his emigration from Europe. He became a leader among the city's small Jewish population; he was prosecuted in 1806 for breaking the Christian Sabbath by opening his Richmond store on a Sunday, even as he regularly observed his own faith's Saturday Sabbath. His solitary publishing venture reflects the centrality of Judaism in his life, as well as his ongoing attempts to encourage its toleration among his Protestant neighbors. In 1804, he contracted John Dixon Jr. to produce a new edition of a work that argued for faith and revelation over the empirical rationalism of philosophers like Voltaire and Hume: *Reason and Faith; or Philosophical Absurdities, and the Necessity of Revelation* by Rabbi Henricus, Esq. Henricus was a pseudonym adopted by Joshua Hezekiah De Cordova, a Sephardic Jew of Dutch origins, who was the *haham* (rabbi) at Curaçao (1748-55) and Kingston, Jamaica (1755-97); De Cordova first published *Reason and Faith* in Jamaica in 1788, with the first American edition issuing from Philadelphia in 1791, the year that his brother relocated there. Levy published this Richmond edition in the midst of the controversies unleashed by the anti-clerical arguments of Thomas Paine in his *Rights of Man* (1791), openly avowing in its preface that such ideas would "undermine all rational liberty, ... prostrate civil society, and eradicate from the hearts of man a reverence for the supreme being and for his distributive justice" – accepting De Cordova's premise that only laws crafted with divine guidance could guarantee the survival of any society, as evinced by Judaism's survival as a result of Talmudic law. His subsequent prosecution for "Sabbath breaking" suggests that his publication had little effect in the community, as does the short print-run indicated by the dearth of surviving copies.

Personal Data

Born: before 1771 Eastern Prussia/Western Poland

Died: July 1823 Richmond, Virginia

No record of wife and/or children yet discovered.

Sources: Imprint (S/S 6468); *History of Jews of Richmond*; Richmond City Directory, 1819; Schorsch, *Jews and Blacks in the Early Modern World*; notices in Richmond newspapers (1804-23).