

# ST. THOMAS, VIRGIN ISLANDS

CAMILLE PISSARRO, JEWISH IDENTITY



Port, Charlotte Amalie, St. Thomas, V.I.

**THIS IS THE DAY WHICH THE LORD HATH MADE;  
WE WILL REJOICE AND BE GLAD IN IT.**

PSALM 118:24

**LIFE IS NOT ALWAYS BLACK OR WHITE.  
SOMETIMES WE BLINK.**

WILLIAM RABINOWITZ

*In 1493, Columbus sailed the ocean blue...* actually the correct words to the rhyming couplet are "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." They are generally attributed to a 17 year old girl, Winifred Sackville Stoner Jr. Winifred penned them in 1919.

The Virgin Islands were named by Christopher Columbus on his second voyage to the New World in 1493. Columbus was so taken by the natural beauty of the Islands. He named them after the virgin St. Ursula and her reputed beauty. She was martyred by the Huns along with 11,000 martyred Christian virgins who joined her on her pilgrimage to Rome in 384 A.D.

Columbus never set foot on St. Thomas. He kept searching for the fabled water passage to India and treasure.

**St. Thomas, given its hilly topography and thin soil, was not the first choice of the European powers and settlers seeking to establish colonies that could return great wealth in White Gold – Sugar.**

**One hundred and sixty four years after Columbus sailed by, (1657), leaving St. Thomas untouched and in the possession of the indigenous Carib Indians, the Dutch West Indies Company planted a small outpost on the isolated, unimportant Island. Nine years later, the Danish “conquered” St. Thomas.**

**The Island was of so little potential to the Dutch, they ceded control quickly. Denmark retained control of St. Thomas for the next two hundred and fifty one years, 1666-1917.**

**Control of land is one thing. Development requires governorship. Denmark, represented by the Danish West India Company, sent Governor Iverson to St. Thomas as their first Governor. Iverson proved incompetent. He was quickly replaced by Governor Nicholas Esmit. Nicholas Esmit, in short order, was deposed by his brother Adolph, who usurped the Governorship.**

**Which of the brothers was more corrupt and more focused on self-interest is debatable. Adolph opened St. Thomas as a haven to Caribbean Pirates. They had money. They needed safe harborage. They needed a place to refit their ships and a place to spend their money. St. Thomas became a Pirate Port. The principle town was called Taphus.<sup>1</sup> In Danish it translated to Tap Hus – Rum Shop, for obvious reasons.**

**March 10, 1684, the Danish West India Company sent a new Governor to St. Thomas to clean up the corrupt mess that it had become. The new Governor, Gabriel Milan, was a man not afraid to fight.**

**Milan began his adult life as a soldier of fortune. He served as a Colonel of Spanish Cavalry in Flanders (1654-1655). He fought in the Thirty Years War on the Spanish side against France and with distinction at the Battle of Dunkerque.**

**Milan was no ordinary soldier. He was believed descended from Spanish Marranos, Spanish Jews who were forced to convert to Catholicism. Marranos maintained their Jewish identity secretly hiding it from the Inquisition. By the time Milan served in the Armies of Spain, his family had openly come out as Jews again. His worth was such that the Inquisition was held at bay.**

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<sup>1</sup> Taphus needed a more respectable name by 1691. The town was renamed Charlotte-Amalie after King Christian V's consort. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlotte\\_Amalie,\\_United\\_States\\_Virgin\\_Islands](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlotte_Amalie,_United_States_Virgin_Islands)

Milan's first wife was the daughter of Benjamin Musaphia. Musaphia was a Jewish scholar, author, with scientific interest ranging from archeology, to philology to alchemy. Her family had its own coat of arms and was related to the very wealthy Portuguese-Jewish da-Costa family.

Milan's career changed direction in 1667. He became a substantial merchant in Amsterdam providing financing to Prince George of Denmark. A year later he was made Danish Factor. By 1670, Milan was appointed Factor-General in Amsterdam giving him high level access to the Danish court.

Intelligent, aggressive and recognizing opportunity, Milan developed remarkable language skills. He mastered Spanish, French, Portuguese, German, Dutch and Danish. Milan, multilingual, a recognized military leader, a man with considerable economic ability and whose trading connections through important Jewish financial networks were to become very valuable to the Danes.

Tragically, Milan's wife died in 1675. He was left with two small children. Not one to pass up an opportunity, Milan married a widow, Juliane Regina von Breitenbach. The new marriage further insinuated him into the Danish court.

January 18, 1682, Milan presented a certificate to the Danish Court that he had been persuaded by the truth of the Augsburg Confession. Milan partook of the Holy Communion and was baptized a Lutheran. Milan was 53 years old.

Slightly more than two years later, October, 1684, the ship the *Fortuna*, arrived in St. Thomas. On board was the newly appointed Governor of St. Thomas, Gabriel Milan. He arrived in style with his wife, children, luxuries, gold, men and power. Quickly, he took power from Adolph Esmitt, imprisoning the former Governor.

The treasury of St. Thomas was empty when Milan arrived. Esmitt denied any wrongdoing but was believed to have emptied it. Revenue and military protection was needed by St. Thomas.

The Danish court negotiated and approved an agreement with the Elector of Brandenburg in 1685 that would do both. Slaves acquired by the Germans in Guiana were to be sold in St. Thomas beginning the slave trading industry. The Germans would help provide military protection. They had a second demand, "by the recommendation of the elector of Brandenburg Calvinists and Lutherans were to have free exercise of religion; Catholics and Jews were 'to be tolerated and allowed to hold private services, provided they permitted no scandals.'" <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The Jewish Nation of the Caribbean, Mordechai Arbelle, Geffen Press, 2005, Jerusalem pg. 270

Aggressively and heavy handedly, Milan established order. He built a sugar plantation for himself, worked by African slaves. He attacked Spanish interests from nearby Islands. Milan managed to alienate almost everyone on St. Thomas. He trusted no one. Trusting no one, he appointed his own son, by his first marriage, his Lt. Governor on St. Thomas.

Sixteen months after he arrived, Milan was ordered back to Copenhagen to stand trial for corruption. The principle witness against Milan was Captain Jorgen Meyer. He was the Danish ship captain who first brought Milan to St. Thomas. "Milan described him as a fuming anti-Semite who was mistreating 'an unfortunate Jew.'"<sup>3</sup>

The first "Jewish" Governor of St. Thomas was found guilty. He was beheaded as the dawn broke over Nytorv Square in Copenhagen, March, 16, 1689.

Adolph Esmet was tried for corruption and the usurpation of his brother Benjamin's governorship. Adolph was found not guilty. A final irony followed. Adolph Esmet was appointed Governor of St. Thomas. Upon returning to the Island, he established a personally very profitable sugar mill on land that had once belonged to Milan. Piracy, with St. Thomas as center, flourished again.

Except for isolated Jews on St. Thomas, or Jewish merchants trading with or through St. Thomas, significant Jewish permanent settlement would have to wait another hundred years. Jewish settlement began in earnest because Jews were expelled from somewhere else, a tiny island only 7 square miles in size, 130 miles to the south-east, St. Eustatius.



Admiral Rodney

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<sup>3</sup> Arbel Page 270

February 7, 1781, fifteen British Ships of the Line, over 1,000 guns, followed by support ships, five frigates and smaller craft transporting 3,000 ground troops, sailed into St. Eustatius' harbor. The entire Dutch garrison of Ft. Oranje, 61 men, surrendered. The British under the command of Admiral Sir George Rodney captured the Island. He captured almost 200 ships in the port, the stores along the water front and the population.

The British destroyed St. Eustatius in 1781. Rodney's mission was to destroy the vast military supplies being sold to the Americas that were stored on the Island. Jewish merchants were very significantly involved in selling the Americans war material and supplies. Rodney destroyed Statia not just for the military supplies and gold he found, but also because who was on the Island.

Rodney found a large Jewish community on St. Eustatius. Jews constituted nearly 25% of the Island's merchants. He singled them out for "special treatment". Rodney wrote about the Jews of St. Eustatius, "They (the Jews of St. Eustatius) cannot too soon be taken care of - *they are notorious in the cause of America and France.*"

Rodney immediately arrested 101 adult Jewish males on the Island, brutally locking them up in a warehouse without food and water for days. He deported the heads of over thirty Jewish families to neighboring Islands. He destroyed the synagogue and burned what he could not carry from their warehouses. The homes, the property, even the clothing on the backs of the Jews were searched for treasure. He had Jewish graves dug up when the Jews tried hiding some of their personal wealth and possessions in the Jewish cemetery.

Rodney violated his orders and stayed on St. Eustatius far too long, robbing, plundering and lining his own pockets. While Rodney stayed and robbed in the Caribbean, the French Fleet moved up the Atlantic combining with other French Naval forces in the northern American waters. For this short period of time, just four months, the French Fleet was the most powerful in the Americas.

Rodney finally realized the danger and responded too late to make a difference. Rodney had weakened his battle fleet to escort the loot he was shipping to England. He sent a portion of his remaining fleet to meet the French Naval threat off the coast of Virginia. The British fleet was defeated. The defeat of the British fleet sealed the doom of the desperate, trapped British army under Cornwallis at Yorktown, Virginia.

The French Fleet was at Cornwallis' back. He had no hope of sea rescue or reinforcements. George Washington's Continental Army, along with a French army, hemmed him in from the land. Cornwallis was finished. He humiliatingly surrendered. The United States of America was born, thanks in part to a tiny rock of an Island in the Caribbean from where Jews once again had been expelled to wander.

St. Eustatius was recaptured by the French within a year after Rodney left. The Jews attempted to rebuild their former lives on the Island but failed. They began drifting away to new places, new opportunities. They were merchants and artisans. The nearest port open to them to begin anew was St. Thomas. A significant portion of the Jewish community relocated and set up life in St. Thomas.

The tiny community on St. Thomas grew. A small Jewish cemetery had existed on St. Thomas before the Jews began arriving after the expulsion from St. Eustatius. It served the simple needs of Jewish merchants traveling to St. Thomas or the few Jews who were resident on the Island. With the arrival of a significant Jewish migration from St. Eustatius, Curacao, Dominica and smatterings from other areas, all attracted by the rising open port economy of St. Thomas, the needs of the Jewish residents changed.

Jews needed a religious center, a synagogue, for two reasons.

The Jewish immigrants were primarily of Spanish/Portuguese backgrounds. Most were descendants of Marranos. They were painfully aware of the historical uncertainty of the long term durability of Jewish welcome in Christian and Muslim lands. They all carried real personal awareness of expulsion and homelessness. Jews were citizens of nowhere. The Jews were tolerated, more or less, where they wandered. They were tolerated as long as they were useful and did not cause problems for the host countries. They called themselves the "Nation", members of the Jewish "Nation" in exile.

The Jews needed a synagogue because "The Danish government recognized its population by religious blocks. The religious communities registered births, deaths, and marriages, kept records and coordinated them with the colonial authorities. Every free inhabitant had to belong to a religious community; therefore every Jew belonged to the island's synagogue."

The central government on the Island was small. Governing through small, self-administering semi-autonomous communities was the most effective and efficient means to control the Islands disparate populations.

If Jews wished to live on St. Thomas they had to have an organized community. Jews living on St. Thomas, who were not affiliated with their religious community, lived even more tenuously.

The Jews needed a synagogue for their spiritual needs and even more they needed a synagogue to give them legal reason to remain on St. Thomas.

The Jewish community on St. Thomas came together and founded the first synagogue on the Island, July 26, 1796. It was named Bracha v'Shalom, v'Gemilut Hassadim. The Holy Community, (Congregation) of Blessing and Peace and Loving Deeds

To become a functioning religious body with its community responsibilities and obligations to each other and the government of St. Thomas, they needed to create governing documents; A body of operating principles, articles of association. The documents had to be accepted by the Danish Governor.

Governor van Scholten accepted the governing documents for the St. Thomas synagogue in 1801.

The documents were organizationally detailed and with a special emphasis on the financial obligations of the Jewish community to itself. They were fluid, being amended numerous times over the years as the community needs evolved.

A number of salient points of the Synagogue's organization:

*Article 1 The Mahamade, or standing council, shall be composed of a President and Treasurer and the Adjuntos, Wardens, shall consist of at least five members, which in the whole form a Council of seven.*

*Article 2 Every new year a new election must be conducted.*

*Article 3 No familial relationships were permitted between council members.*

*Article 5 "Fourteen days before New Year, the election of the President and Treasurer shall be proclaimed in the Synagogue, and should the persons elected refuse accepting, they shall each be condemned in five and twenty pieces of eight penalty and two others shall be elected, who shall be proclaimed eight days before New Year and if they also refuse, they shall be subject to alike penalty in which case the Mahamade and Adjuntos shall draw lots among themselves and those on whom the lots fall shall be obliged to serve."*

*Article 10 Requirements of charity and communal charitable needs outlined.*

*Article 12 During the Synagogue service, "their shall be all decency and decorum observed by the congregation, that due respect shall be paid to the orders of the Acting Presidents and the Mahamade in conjunction, and no person to contradict his or their orders under penalty of four dollars, and such offender or offenders shall be ordered immediately to quit the synagogue for the better preservation of the peace and tranquility amongst the congregation."*

***Article 18 "Every person called up to the five Books of Moses shall be compelled at least to offer one half royal for the President and congregation. Nor shall nay person refuse a mitsva or function given them by the President when in Synagogue under Penalty...to quit the Synagogue."***

The formal Jewish community of St. Thomas consisted of 9 families in 1801.

The Jewish community of St. Thomas grew rapidly with the Island's burgeoning economy over the next five decades. The number of Jews on St. Thomas swelled to 24 families in 1803. By 1824, the numbers had grown again to 64. The Jewish community was estimated at 400 in 1837. It doubled to 800 by 1850. The permanent synagogue building remained physically small and completely incapable of handling the numbers of Jews on the Island. The obvious answer was that for most Jews on St. Thomas, the practical necessity of synagogue membership trumped spiritual needs. The governing documents of the Synagogue had to be amended numerous times.

Just two years after the Synagogue's documents were approved they had to be significantly amended.

Incorporated within the new documents were unique exclusivity clauses. No Synagogue community, other than Bracha v'Shalom, will be tolerated on the Island. Jewish decorum and behavior within the Synagogue, even in public, was to be regulated.

Of particular importance was that the dirty linen of the community was to be kept within the community. The world outside of the Synagogue must never know of internal Jewish dissension, religious conflict or immorality.

Article 21 reflected a harsh Jewish universal reality with echoes heard many times in Jewish experience elsewhere as on St. Thomas. Jews were tolerated by sufferance, not by right. Conflicts with other religious communities on the Island would not be tolerated as it risked the safety and security of all Jews. The Jews of the Spanish/Portuguese "Nation", particularly those of Marrano background, were sensitive to their insecure minority status.

Christians with internal religious conflicts or community dissension had choices of somewhere to go. Jews did not.

April 25, 1803

***Article 1 "That there shall exist but one Congregation in the island which shall be called Blessing and Peace, nor shall ten persons of the Jewish Religion be permitted to assemble together so as to form a separate Minham (Minyan) or Congregation, except in house of mourners, and that only in weekly days and not on Sabbaths or Festivals, which must be with***



*the consent of the Parnas Presidente, nor shall there exist any religious society under any description whatsoever without being subject to and under the immediate direction of the Mahamade and Adjuntos of the Synagogue as is customary in all congregations... “*

Article 5 Talking during services was subject to a fine - \$2

Article 21 *“No person or persons shall be allowed to hold any argument or dispute with any of the predominant religions on the Island on religious subjects, that we may not therefore become hateful to our protectors and that the freedom which we enjoy may not be infringed. Offenders in the Article will be severely prosecuted.”*

Article 24 *“Finally we crave in behalf of our Nation that they shall enjoy the same rights and privileges as the Jewish Nation in the mother country fully enjoys and that our Mahamade and Adjuntos shall have the same power and authority invested in them as the Mahamade and Adjuntos in Copenhagen.”*

A small wooden synagogue building was constructed. It burned in 1804 during one of the frequent fires that ravaged Charlotte Amalie. During the ten hour conflagration, 1200 buildings were destroyed. The Synagogue was rebuilt in 1812. Two more times the wooden synagogue buildings were destroyed by fire. The last fire was in 1831.



**Bracha v'Shalom v' Gemilut Hassadim**

Finally in 1833, a permanent, “fire proof” building was constructed of stone and brick on Krystal Gade, half way up a hill. The hill became known as Synagogue Hill. It is still known as Synagogue Hill today.

The Jewish community celebrated the new “fire proof” synagogue. A special song had been dedicated and sung for the occasion based upon the 24<sup>th</sup> verse of Psalm 118.

*This is the day which the LORD hath made;  
We will rejoice and be glad in it.*

Contributions towards the new building came from the Caribbean, Europe and the United States. Non-Jews contributed to the rebuilding of Bracha v'Shalom, Gov. General Peter van Scholten, Admin Rosemorn, the Captain of the Port, the chief judge and counsellors.

The Jewish community of St. Thomas, reflected the broader white community. In a sense they were heterogeneous in that Jews came to St. Thomas from all over the Caribbean. They came from Europe, some from the United States at times contentiously conforming their Ashkenazic minhags (traditions) to the dominant Sephardic orthodox religious practices. A few came from as far as Morocco. Whatever background they came from they were just Jews to the broader world.

In common with the white community, it was not unusual for Jews to have sexual relations with the free Blacks and slaves on the Island. Because St. Thomas was not naturally conducive to an agricultural economy, a mercantile economy was dominant. A mercantile economy did not have the same massive labor needs as did the Caribbean Islands dependent upon sugar production.

Slaves introduced to the mercantile world to assist their owners needed to be educated. Very quickly, slaves and slavery in the mercantile world, with the exception of house slaves, could earn their freedom. Free Blacks became a significant part of the St. Thomas community.

Racial intermixing became common. White males on St. Thomas could be married, if they married at all, and still have several “relationships” with Island Blacks. The relationships and children of those relationships were far more accepted than in the United States. Jews were not exempt from racial mixing.

Nathan Levy was born in Baltimore, Maryland. He moved to St. Thomas. As a longtime resident, the United States Government appointed Levy the American Consul to the Island in 1818. He tumultuously promoted American mercantile interests on St. Thomas. At the same time, he pushed his observant Jewish identity by refusing to do business on the Sabbath. His business reputation was considered marginal and he frequently came into conflict with merchants.

Levy particularly irritated one merchant, Joseph O' Reilly, who complained to President John Quincy Adams. He focused on Levy's *immoral* lifestyle.

**"This N. Levy is a Jew and lives with a Black Woman and frequently Walks the Streets with her arm in arm to the mortification of all the Americans who are under the painful necessity of witnessing the Same for the correctness of this statement. I beg leave to refer your Excellency to the following most Respectable Houses on the Island.. and in fact to anyone who knows him."** <sup>4</sup>

The American government ignored O'Reilly's complaint. Levy was too valuable to them. He was left alone and resigned on his own terms in 1832. The St. Thomas Synagogue community never commented. As far as they were concerned, Levy's relationship with his Black "wife" was a non-marriage.

Inter-racial unions and inter-racial children, be they Black, Carib, or Creole as they became known, were not unusual. The stigmatization that blemished American society was never reflected in St. Thomas society to the same degree.



Charlotte Amalie's Emancipation Park in the main city center, where the millions of tourists being discharged from the cruise ships congregate, has a beautiful band stand. The bandstand has a dedicatory plaque to David E. Monsanto. Monsanto is an old Jewish family name. Jewish Synagogue communities throughout the Islands and in Suriname have many

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<sup>4</sup> Through the Sands of Time, A History of the Jewish Community of St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, Judah M. Cohen, Brandeis University Press, 2004, pg. 33-34.

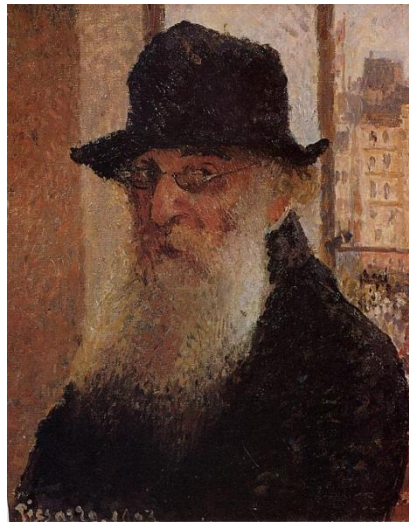
members who are racially mixed and accepted by their communities as Jews



**Two Women – St. Thomas**



**Boulevard Montmartre - Paris**



**Pissarro – Self Portrait**

Jacob Abraham “Camille Pissarro, world renowned painter and (one of the) “father(s) of French Impressionism” was born July 10, 1830, in St. Thomas to Abraham Gabriel (Frederic) and Rachel Manzano Pomier Petit Pizarro. Camille was an offspring of a “cause celebre”. His mother had been widowed in 1824. Husband Isaac Petit died leaving her pregnant. His child was delivered in 1825. The baby was no more than six months old when Rachel (Esther) Manzano Pomier Petit married Abraham Gabriel Pizarro, her dead husband’s nephew.”<sup>5</sup>

Frederic Pissarro was the descendent of Portuguese Marranos. Frederic’s grandfather, Pierre Rodrigues Alvares Pissarro, had fled his native Braganza in 1769 as the reach of the Inquisition came too close. He moved his family to Bordeaux. Frederic was born in 1802. His

<sup>5</sup> A Short History of The Hebrew Congregation of St. Thomas, with a Preface by Herman Wouk, edited by Rabbi Stanley T. Relkin and Monty R. Abrams. Pub. Hebrew Cong. of St. Thomas, 1983, pg. 25

father, Joseph Gabriel Jean Pissarro had married the daughter of a Bordeaux Jewish family, Anne-Felicite Petit. They were originally from Avignon.

Frederic's maternal Uncle, Isaac Petit, moved to St. Thomas and married Rachael Manzana-Pomier (Pomie). Her family had fled present day Haiti when the slave revolt took place. Isaac was considerably older than Rachael. She bore him three children and was pregnant with a fourth when he suddenly died.

It was a family catastrophe not just for the widow and the children but for the larger family. Without a man in the house, the widow, and by extension the family, might not be able to retain control of the considerable assets of Isaac Petit. Frederic was sent by his father to St. Thomas to oversee the family affairs and protect the assets. Frederic arrived in 1824. He immediately assumed control of the business and eased the emotional burdens that the young widow was enduring.

Rachael and Frederic entered a relationship much deeper than either anticipated. She became pregnant with Frederic's child in 1825.

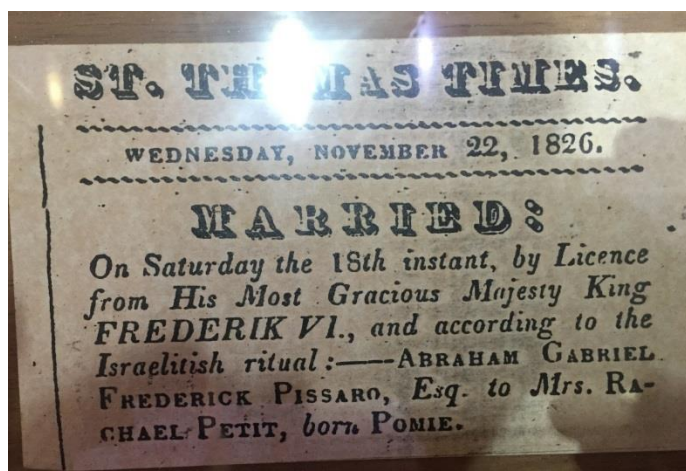
The young couple announced their intention to marry to the St. Thomas Synagogue Mahamade. Their request was summarily rejected. It did not matter what they wanted. It did not matter if they were in love or if they needed the union to preserve the family property. The marriage request was out of the question to the Synagogue council. Frederic and Rachael were not blood related. The marriage of a nephew to an aunt just the same was a forbidden union. It was illegal and immoral. Any children born of such a union would be considered Bastards, Mamzarim, forbidden to the Jewish community.

Frederic and Rachael desperately tried to persuade the Mahamade. The Mahamade would not bend. The dirty linen, the immoral union of a nephew to an aunt was kept quiet in the Jewish community. The Christian world of St. Thomas knew nothing about what was happening. The Jews did not want the Christian community of St. Thomas to know that a basic value of traditional Mosaic Judaism had been transgressed and was being vigorously challenged. It was a shanda – a disgrace.

During February, 1826, a son, Felix, was born to the couple. The boy was circumcised by Abraham Hoheb, a member of the Synagogue community. Felix's name was entered in the rolls of the Synagogue records but without a father's name.

Frederic and Rachael did not remain quiet. They did not keep their alleged dirty linen hidden. Their union was not dirty in their eyes.

November 22, 1826, an advertisement appeared in the St. Thomas Times:



*St. Thomas Times*

*Wednesday Nov. 22, 1826*

*Married*

*On Saturday the 18th instant by Licence from His Most Gracious Majesty King FREDERICK VI., and according to the Israelitish ritual: ---Abraham Gabriel Frederick Pissaro, Esq. to Mrs. Rachael Petit, born Pomie.*

The Synagogue community was shocked, embarrassed and frightened.

Reacting quickly, the Mahamade placed an ad in the same paper for the next day:

*The Marriage of Mr. A.G.F. Pissaro with Mrs. Rachael Petit announced in the Paper of 2 d Instand, was without the knowledge of the Rulers and Wardens of the Synagogue, nor was the Ceremony performed according to the usual customs.*

*St. Thomas, 23d Nov. 1826*

*By order of the Rulers & Wardens,*

*M. Pretto Hz.*

*Treasurer and Secretary*

The Synagogue emphatically declared that the “marriage” of Frederic and Rachael was not legal. They had no knowledge of it and it was not a Jewish wedding. They wanted the Christian community of St. Thomas to know, this marriage was not Jewish.

War had been declared between the Pissarro family and the St. Thomas Mahamade. A direct challenge to the authority of the Mahamade and the laws and regulations that permitted the

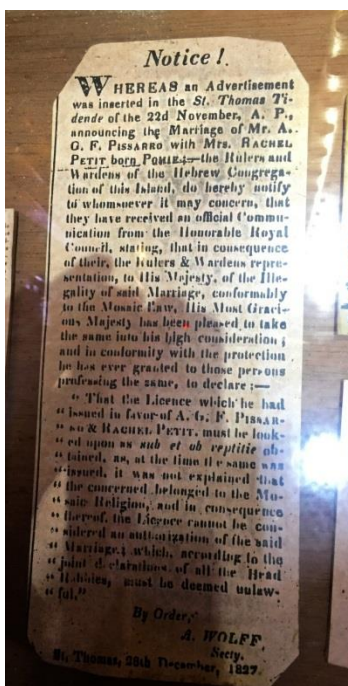
Jews to live on St. Thomas was at issue not to mention the violation and definition of traditional Jewish marriage practices.

The dirty linen was out to the dismay of the Jews and the condemnation of the Christian community, if they cared much at all. St. Thomas, for all its mercantile finery, was still a rough frontier community. Marriage was a luxury for many. The Jewish internal squabble did not mean much to them. It meant much to the Jews.

It is quite common for small Jewish communities faced with religious questions to write to Rabbinic centers for rulings. The Mahamade did exactly that. The contentious marriage of the Pissarros was so important, the Mahamade wrote to both the Chief Rabbi of Amsterdam and the Chief Rabbi of Copenhagen. They wrote to the King of Denmark.

The Rabbis answered. The Pissarro marriage contravened Jewish law and practice. It did not matter if Frederic was related to Rachael Petit by blood or marriage. Their marriage was illegal and immoral.

The King of Denmark issued his judgement. The Mahamade published the King's decision in the St. Thomas Times, December 28, 1827.



“Notice!

*Whereas an Advertisement was inserted in the St. Thomas Tidende (Times) of the 22<sup>nd</sup> November, A.P., announcing the Marriage of Mr. A.G.F. Pissarro with Mrs. Rachel Petit born Pomie; - the Rulers and Wardens of the Hebrew Congregation of this Island, do hereby notify*

*to whomsoever it may concern, that they have received an official Communication from the Honorable Royal Council, stating, that in consequence of their, the Rulers & Wardens representation, to His Majesty, of the Illegality of said Marriage, conformably to the Mosaic Law, His Most Gracious Majesty has been pleased to take the same into his high consideration, and in conformity with the protection he has ever granted to those persons professing the same, to declare: -*

*“That the Licence which he had issued in favor of A.G.F. Pissarro and Rachael Petit, must be looked upon as sub et ob reptitie obtained, as, at the time the same was issued, it was not explained that the concerned belonged to the Mosaic Religion, and in consequence thereof, the Licence cannot be considered authorization of the said Marriage which, according in the joint declarations of the Head Rabbis, must be deemed unlawful.”*

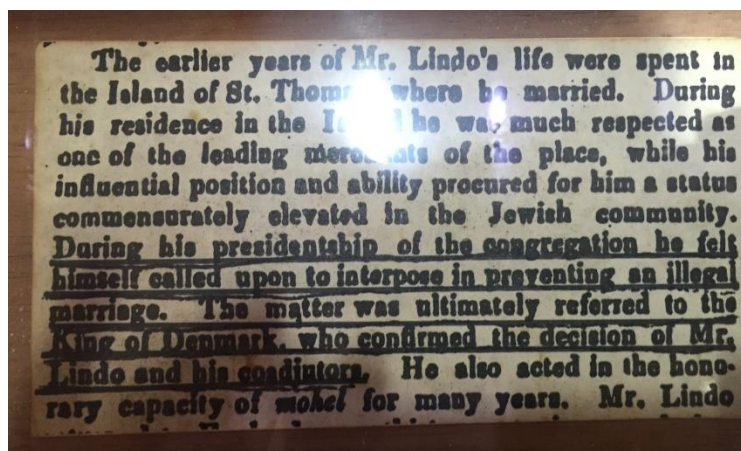
*By Order,*

- A. Wolff*
- B. Secty.*

*St. Thomas, 28<sup>th</sup> December, 1827*

The marriage of Frederic Pissarro to his aunt, Rachael Petit was declared illegal. The couple stayed together just the same. Nothing was done. They had more children. Each child was circumcised and entered into the records of the Synagogue.

In the back of the modern St. Thomas Synagogue is a modified museum. A few pictures, a number of display cases with artifacts and photo-copies of newspaper reports. President Lindo was the head of the Mahamade, when the Pissarro marriage struggle was going. Lindo’s reasons for fighting the marriage of Frederic and Rachael, aggressively underscored in bold dark enlarged text, is prominently displayed in the Pissarro exhibit.





***“During his presidentship of the congregation he felt himself called upon to interpose in preventing an illegal marriage. The matter was ultimately referred to the King of Denmark, who confirmed the decision of Mr. Lindo and his coadjutors.”***

**After nearly 8 years of divisive internal contention within the Jewish community, the issue of the legality of the marriage was quietly dropped. As the expression goes, *let sleeping dogs lie.***

**July 10, 1830 Camille Pissarro was born. He was circumcised by Abraham Hoheb. His name was entered into the records of the Synagogue.**



**Moravian School**

**After the fire of 1831, Frederic Pissarro contributed to the rebuilding of the Synagogue. His children attended the Moravian Protestant Church School in St. Thomas. Some have argued that was because the Pissarro children were not welcome in the Jewish school. There was no Jewish school. The Pissarro children attended school with the children of Free Blacks.**

**Camille Pissarro remained on St. Thomas until he was eleven years old. His parents sent him to France for his formal education. It was common for wealthy Island families to send their children for their education to Europe.**

**Pissarro spent seven years studying French culture, literature, science, mathematics and art. Art is what attracted him beyond anything else. He had a natural ability that was slowly emerging.**

**Pissarro returned to St. Thomas and an unhappy life as a merchant in his parents business. His interest remained art. For four years, he sketched whenever he could. A fortuitous meeting with Fritz Melbye, a young French artist, slightly older than Camille, who was visiting St. Thomas, changed his life.**

Camille and his father never got on well. The father's direction for his life was not his. Melbye suggested to Camille, come with him to Venezuela. They would open a studio and paint. Camille jumped at the opportunity.

The two young artists went to Venezuela. Fortune did not wait on Pissarro there. His mother, as she did well into Pissarro's middle age, continued to send him money. No doubt his father knew of what was happening, quietly disapproving, but not stopping the financial support.

Pissarro returned to St. Thomas briefly once his father relented and agreed that he should go to France and pursue his dream of becoming an artist. He left St. Thomas and his life there, never to return.

Pissarro returned to France and stayed with his grandparents. In their small home, he met his grandparent's kitchen maid, an uneducated, Christian girl. He fell for her. They lived together for years, having children, suffering the life of the starving artist, still partially supported by a loving mother in faraway St. Thomas. Pissarro could not make a living as an artist. They were compelled to marry years later in England in a civil ceremony, probably much like his parents had done in St. Thomas.

The years passed, Pissarro developed his unique artistic vision of Impressionism. He formed artistic alliances with other developing French Impressionists, such as Monet, Renoir, Degas and Gauguin. Together they created one of the great artistic movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Pissarro painted from his memories of St. Thomas. He painted from the real world of France that he saw. He never painted anything that was even remotely Jewish. There was absolutely nothing traditionally Jewish about his lifestyle. He was a radical, a believer in anarchism and societal reform against the bourgeoisie capitalists. He was not a Jew until his being a Jew was thrust upon him.

The sensational espionage trial of Captain Alfred Dreyfus split France along pro and anti-Dreyfus lines. Pissarro at first had no strong opinion. In the beginning Pissarro, like Theodor Herzl, believed that Dreyfus might have been guilty. Reading Emil Zola's, *J'Accuse*, Pissarro became convinced that Dreyfus was a pawn, a victim of the old aristocratic right wing establishment. They used the Jewish officer as a sacrificial lamb to cover their own incompetence. Pissarro became a Dreyfussard.

The artistic world was no different from the general public in France. They could be pro or anti Dreyfus. Pissarro naively wanted to believe the pure world of the artist was above that. He was wrong, very wrong. Becoming a supporter of Dreyfus, he immediately became

enemies with Renoir and Degas. Great artists such as Renoir, and in particular Degas, became vicious anti-Semites – and anti-Dreyfusards . Life time friendships, mutual aid, admiration, comradery in creativity evaporated in the base hatred of Renoir and Degas for the *Old Jew* – Pissarro. Pissarro, even if he did want to, had become a Jew again. He had turned his back on the Synagogue in spite of his father’s pleas to remember his heritage. Turn his back as he would, in the end he was a Jew.

Pissarro was a Jew but he never returned to Judaism. He never denied his heritage but he never became one with it in the end. He paid a price for being a Jew when he was born in St. Thomas. He paid a price for being a Jew when he was an old man with his health failing. Pissarro died in 1903. He was buried with his family in Paris’ Pere LaChaise cemetery.

Was Pissarro really Jewish? Jews rush to claim the great artist was one. The question is open to who is writing about him. Some historians emphatically declare he was. His mother, they say, was the daughter of a Dominca Marrano family. Others say she was a Creole, the child of a native Islander and a Jewish father. Matrilineally, Pissarro would not have been Jewish.

The family of the Petits living on St. Thomas today, by family oral tradition and extensive research, along with the St. Thomas Historical Trust, believe Pissarro’s mother was a Creole. It grates some Jews and is shrugged off by others.

If a person of Jewish heritage is famous enough, important enough or can bring Nachas (pride- honor) to being Jewish, Jews blink. Pissarro was not the first time Jews have blinked about who is a Jew.

On the other hand, if his mother was Jewish, and his father respected the Mahamade’s decision, Camille Pissarro never would have been born.

Jews blink (point) with pride to Jews from the Virgin Islands.

St. Thomas was the birthplace of Senator David Yulee, the first Jew elected to the United States Senate, D- Fl. and a Southern Pro-Slavery “Fire Eater.” He converted to Presbyterianism. St. Croix was the birthplace of Judah P. Benjamin, United States Senator from Louisiana and later Secretary of State of the Confederacy. Benjamin converted to Catholicism on his deathbed. St. Thomas was the birthplace of the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century Philadelphia physician Dr. Mendes de Costsa. His son married the daughter of his friend, the renowned Philadelphian, Dr. John Hill Brinton.



Edward W. Blyden

Edward Wilmot Blyden, author, Liberian political leader, educator and diplomat was the father of Pan-Africanism. He was born to a Free Black family in Charlotte-Amalie, August 3, 1832. Blyden grew up playing with Jewish friends on Synagogue Hill. Rabbi David Cardozo taught the inquisitive youngster Hebrew, which he quickly mastered. Blyden never forgot the warm welcoming relationships with Jews he had on St. Thomas. Years later, he grew to respect, admire, write about and emulate a remarkable historic movement for Jewish national liberation, Zionism. Blyden called his movement, Ethiopianism.

A lesser known work of Blyden's about Zionism was titled *The Jewish Question*. He clearly understood the parallels between Zionism and Black liberation.

*<sup>6</sup>(My) "deepest possible interest in the current history of the Jews – especially in that marvelous movement called Zionism. The question, in some respects, is similar to that which at this moment agitates thousands of descendants of Africa in America, anxious to return to the land of their fathers...And as to the history of the African race- their enslavement, persecution, proscription, and sufferings – closely resembles that of the Jews, I have been led..by a fellow feeling to study the great question now uppermost in the minds of thousands, if not millions, of Jews."<sup>7</sup>*

The United States had been considering the purchase of St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. John for many years. The sale was agreed to in 1917. For \$25,000,000 the Danish government sold the islands to the U.S. It was a bargain price. The economy of St. Thomas had collapsed. Ships no longer came to St. Thomas for repair or for trading reasons after the Panama Canal was

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<sup>7</sup>Blyden, *Black Spokesman: Selected Published Writings of Edward Wilmot Blyden*, ed. Hollis R. Lynch (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1971), pp. 210-11

opened. Oil became the principle fuel of long distance naval transportation. St. Thomas, as a coaling station, was no longer needed.

The Jewish community faded away looking for better economic prospects. When the American purchase of the Islands took place in 1917 there were only forty Jews on St. Thomas. They had no Rabbi. The community was looked after by a twenty three year old *Haham* – a learned lay leader.

All the organized religious communities on St. Thomas had withdrawn their professional clergy. The Danish and American governments wanted to bless the transfer. The only person on St. Thomas capable of blessing the transfer was Moses D. Sasso, Bracha V'Shalom's Haham.

Moses Sasso remained on St. Thomas nurturing and overseeing the rebirth of the Jewish community and the Island's economy. He was ordained a Rabbi by the Union of American Reform Congregations, in 1949. He retired in 1965 after 51 years of service to the Jews and people of St. Thomas.

Rabbi Sasso assumed the mantel of leadership in 1914. By the time he retired, the Jewish community had grown significantly. President Harry Truman had appointed the first Jewish governor of St. Thomas, since Gabriel Milan almost 230 years earlier, Gov. Morris Fidanque De Castro, 1950. President Kennedy appointed another Jew Governor, Ralph M. Paiewonsky Governor of the American Virgin Islands in 1961. Paiewonsky had the distinction of being the first American to be both a Jew and a Governor of a Black Legislature.



**Bracha v' Shalom**

**St. Thomas has more than one Synagogue today. There is a Chabad congregation on the Island. Bracha v' Shalom is recognized as a site of historic significance to the American experience. It is on the National Registry of Historic Places. 15,000+ tourists visit annually, to sit in the pews, scrape their feet over the iconic white sand floors and learn about the Jews of St. Thomas. Numerous destination wedding and simchas are celebrated there. The community is hundreds of members strong once again.**

**Jerry Klinger is President of the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation,**

[www.JASHP.org](http://www.JASHP.org)

[Jashp1@msn.com](mailto:Jashp1@msn.com)

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