

Moses Levy of Florida: Jewish Utopian and Antebellum Reformer

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Recommended Citation

Taylor, Robert A. (2006) "Moses Levy of Florida: Jewish Utopian and Antebellum Reformer," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 8 : Iss. 3 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol8/iss3/17>

Review

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Fall 2006

Monaco, C.S. *Moses Levy of Florida: Jewish Utopian and Antebellum Reformer*. Louisiana State University Press, \$44.95 ISBN 807130958

Activist, Reformer, Visionary

An Early Proponent of Abolition

Moses Elias Levy (1782-1854) is far from being a familiar figure to students of the nineteenth century. Those with an interest in Florida might remember him as the father of David Levy Yulee, a pioneer Florida political leader and the first Jew ever elected to the U.S. Senate. But Levy senior remains in the shadows, without any known likeness of him in existence or even definite information on his final resting place. Historian C.S. Monaco takes on the daunting task of rescuing Levy from obscurity by writing a modern biography, and he succeeds in his efforts. This is a detailed account of one of antebellum America's most influential Jewish citizens and a well-known figure in the greater Atlantic community.

Part of the challenge faced by any Levy biographer is the fact that for much of his life he was a man on the move. His father was a courtier to the sultan of Morocco, where Moses was born in 1782. He went to live and have business interests in Gibraltar, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Curacao, England, and finally the United States. Levy prospered in a variety of enterprises as diverse as arms dealer and sugar planter. Although a material success with international connections, Levy never forgot his religious and cultural heritage. He would spend his entire adult life as a social activist, religious reformer, and utopian visionary.

By the 1820s Levy was in the young United States with dreams of creating a Jewish colony somewhere on the American frontier. He used his connections in the Spanish world to secure thousands of acres of land in what would soon be the new American territory of Florida. In time he developed several agricultural

operations, including his dream utopian community, the Pilgrimage, in the central section of the Florida peninsula. Legal problems over the validity of Spanish land grants and the fiery destruction wrought by the Second Seminole War crippled his Florida empire and any plans for the Pilgrimage to prosper. However, the attempts at colonizing were certainly bold and groundbreaking. Levy believed that there were many kinds of victory, and his creation of the Florida Association of New York was indeed the first development corporation in Florida history.

In 1824 the harried Levy sailed for Europe in hopes of securing more backing for his Florida communitarian settlement. Soon a well-known speaker and reform advocate in London, he composed an audacious initiative. His 1828 Plan for the Abolition of Slavery caught the attention of British abolitionists and put him in the forefront of their growing movement. Levy was taken quite seriously in those circles, as he was one of the rare few among the anti-slavery forces who had first hand knowledge of the peculiar institution from his experiences as a slave owner and Caribbean planter. His was a gradual emancipation scheme, with a focus on children rather than adult slaves. One controversial aspect of the plan was a call for miscegenation through the shipping of British convicts not to Australia but the sugar islands. A hard look at the Plan for the Abolition of Slavery finds it to be less than practical, but its sentiments were well received at the time.

The 1830s found Moses Levy back in Florida and trying to deal with an array of financial troubles. His son David's political rise only brought some cheer, as father and son would remained estranged for years due to differences over religion and the younger Levy's desire to assimilate into greater gentile society. Eventually advanced age caught up with the elder Levy, and he died peacefully at a Virginia health resort in 1854. He was quietly buried in an unmarked grave and soon slipped into historical anonymity.

Moses Levy of Florida opens a window on an extraordinary man and the evolution of the New World Hebrew community in the early 1800s. He was indeed one of antebellum America's most underrated figures and long overdue for a scholarly study such as this. Author Monaco presents a well-written and exhaustively researched account of a unique person who lived, though at times contradictory, a remarkable life.

Robert A. Taylor is Associate Professor of History at the Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne, and the author of Florida: An Illustrated History (Hippocrene Books, ISBN 0781810523, \$14.95 softcover).