

Bridging Daughters of the American Revolution and Jewish Genealogists

by Ellen Shindelman Kowitz

In partnership with the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution (NSDAR), an ambitious project to index early American Jewish records and to create a comprehensive list of Jewish patriots has begun. The hopeful expectation is that descendants will apply for DAR membership in an ancestor's honor.

DAR is a non-profit and non-political women's service organization; its members provide millions of community service hours annually supporting veterans and active military families, and award scholarships and financial aid. Coming from a variety of backgrounds and interests, all share a common bond of having an ancestor who helped contribute to securing the independence of the United States of America, and any woman 18 years or older—regardless of race, religion, or ethnic background—who can prove lineal descent from a patriot of the American Revolution, is eligible for membership.¹ These efforts may come through military, civil, or patriotic service, and must have occurred during the period between April 19, 1775 and November 26, 1783.

DAR has never maintained a list of Jewish patriots. In fact, since being established in 1890, no religious affiliation of any kind has been required on an application or tracked in their extensive databases. This was not a policy to limit the membership of minority faiths, but originated because of religious quarrels among Protestant denominations; dissenters to the established Church of England were predominantly those of Presbyterian or Congregationalist persuasion.²

Other Christian denominations including Catholics and Quakers were already established in the colonies by the 1770s, as were Jews, the earliest of whom date back to 1654 when 23 Dutch Sephardic Jews arrived via Brazil and settled in New Amsterdam.³ By the outbreak of the Revolution, Jewish communities totaling approximately 2,500 individuals existed in Charleston, Newport, New York, Philadelphia, and Savannah.⁴

Twenty-five hundred may not seem like many people; Jews represented only one-tenth of one percent of an estimated 2.5 million population in 1776.⁵ Arguably, this number may seem insignificant, but the number of descendants alive today is considerably larger. Consider, for example, that while only 51 passengers on the Mayflower are known to have parented children, their descendants are estimated to be 35 million.⁶ Moreover, we might predict that future U.S. descendants will be interested in the entirety of the history of Jews in America and will need easier access to the records to do so.

Jewish Studies academics have published information about major Jewish patriots such as financier Haym Solomon, Chazan Gershon Mendes Seixas, Colonel Isaac Franks, Jonas Phillips, and Mordecai Sheftall, but other less-known



Rebecca GRATZ (1781–1869) was daughter of Revolutionary War Patriot Michael GRATZ (DAR Ancestor #A047169) born 1740 in Austria and died 1811 in Philadelphia, and who was a signer of the Non-Importation Resolutions. She is considered as the model for the character “Rebecca” in Sir Walter Scott’s novel Ivanhoe. Image courtesy of the Loeb Jewish Portrait Database.

Jewish men served alongside George Washington, as did Jewish doctors, women who supplied materials, taxpayers, and signators who took an oath of allegiance. In South Carolina, a militia headed by Richard Lushington was called The Jew Company, about two-thirds of whom were Jewish soldiers. Scholars estimate that 75 percent of colonial Jews supported the Revolution, and among the Tories were also Jewish Hessians.⁷

Qualifying ancestor service is not limited to those who fought in battle, or even only to men. A comprehensive list is available at www.dar.org/national-society/accepted-revolutionary-war-service, but generally, DAR defines a patriot in four ways during the period of April 19, 1775, and November 26, 1783:

- Signers of the Declaration of Independence
- Military service in the Army and Navy of the Continental Establishment, State Navy, State and Local Militia, Privateers, or Military or Naval Service performed by French nationals in the American theater of war.

• Civil Service under authority of provisional or new state governments including state, county and town officials such as Town Clerk, Selectman, Juror, Town Treasurer, Judge, Sheriff, Constable, Jailor, Surveyor of Highways, and Justice of the Peace.

• Patriotic Service, which includes membership in committees made necessary by the war such as Committees of Correspondence, Inspection, and Safety, or committees to care for soldiers' families; doctors and nurses; clergy who gave patriotic sermons; prisoners of war or refugees from occupying forces; those who rendered material aid and furnished supplies, with or without remuneration, loaning money and/or providing munitions. Some states enacted special tax laws to raise money for supplies. Payment of these "supply" taxes is considered patriotic service.

Located in Washington, DC, DAR has an extensive library open to the public; its catalogue is available online at <https://librarycatalog.dar.org/library2/>. In recent years, a significant amount of genealogical material has been placed on the DAR website where it may be searched. Presented as the Genealogical Research System (GRS), it offers public access to free databases with information on Revolutionary patriot ancestors and descendants of patriots. See www.dar.org/national-society/genealogy/using-genealogical-research-system-grs.

Not all patriots are registered with the DAR and might not appear. In order for a patriot to be included on the DAR ancestor list, a female descendant must submit an application that not only provides evidence connecting every generation back to a presumed patriot, but also proof of that patriot's residence and service. When accepted, this application officially registers the individual with the DAR. The process for how applications are formatted and submitted is quite specific. Each is initiated through one of 3,000 chapters across the United States and overseas. See the list at www.dar.org/national-society/become-member/chapter-locations.

Unlike the case in earlier times, DAR now encourages membership applications from a broad cross-section of American women. In the current and progressive three-year administration of President General Denise Doring VanBuren of New York, titled, *Rise and Shine for America*, an ambitious goal to increase membership from 185,000 to 250,000 over ten years relies largely on the inclusion of African-American and Native American women, populations that historically were excluded from membership. DAR's "Continuing Commitment to Quality" statement explicitly states that:

Our National Society encourages and celebrates a diverse membership, and we embrace the opportunity to support our members of color. DAR reaffirms to the membership and the public alike that our organization condemns racism. Bias, prejudice and intolerance have no place in the DAR or America.

To reinforce the inclusion of applicants from all backgrounds, and specifically those historically absent from

membership outreach efforts, specialty research task forces have been created by the volunteer-led DAR Lineage Committee to assist women documenting African-American, Spanish, and French ancestry and/or patriots. In 2020, for the first time in its history, DAR added a Jewish Task Force with the following objectives:

- Open new avenues for DAR membership
- Serve as a resource to members and prospective members with Jewish ancestry
- Locate documentation relating to Jewish contributions to the American Revolution
- Compile a bibliography of source material relating to Jews and the American Revolution
- Assemble and maintain a list of Jewish Revolutionary War patriots.

Readers with questions about a possible Jewish patriot or who want to know more about the DAR application process, should post on the *Jewish Task Force—Daughters of the American Revolution* Facebook group page at <https://tinyurl.com/y3ftf92v> where DAR Jewish Task Force members and Jewish genealogists will assist them or contact ekowitt@jewishgen.org.

Notes

1. <https://www.dar.org/national-society/about-dar/who-we-are/who-we-are>
2. <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel03.html>
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Jews_in_Colonial_America
4. <https://tinyurl.com/yxmp4aya>
5. <https://www.themayflowersociety.org/>
6. <https://tinyurl.com/yxmp4aya>

Ellen Shindelman Kowitt is a veteran Jewish genealogist, and has served on the IAJGS board, and has been president of both JGS Greater Washington and JGS Colorado. She contributed articles to AVOTAYNU and Family Tree Magazine. This year, she was appointed director of JewishGen's U.S. Research Division and National vice chair of the DAR Lineage Committee Jewish Task Force. Kowitt lives in Erie, Colorado.

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