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Source: *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, No. 25 (1917), pp. 81-85

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43058052>

Accessed: 31-10-2021 00:09 UTC

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THE PHYLACTERIES FOUND AT PITTSFIELD, MASS.

BY LEE M. FRIEDMAN, A. B., LL. B.

Ever since the publication in 1650 of Thorowgood's "Jewes in America" claiming that the lost tribes of Israel had been found in the American Indians, this idea secured a deep and widespread hold on the Puritan imagination. Confirmation of this theory was found in texts of the Bible itself, and in the alleged similarity in appearance of the Indians and of the Jews; others found convincing proof in what they recognized as Hebrew words and sounds in the Indian language, while still others recognized Jewish traditions and religious customs reproduced in certain Indian legends and observances. As early as 1652, Sir Hamon l'Estrange published his answer to Thorowgood in "Americans No Jewes," denying and answering these claims. In the way of all religious controversies of that age, each side produced arguments which completely satisfied itself and only spurred the opposition to fresh efforts as unconvinced as ever. The following one hundred and fifty years saw a whole literature of this debate grow up around this subject which still finds its sporadic repetition even to-day.

Pittsfield, beautifully located in the heart of the Berkshires, was originally a sparsely settled Indian village of the Mohegans. In the early years of the eighteenth century, white settlers from Massachusetts cities and towns began to come to this region.

As early as 1753, the Great and General Court of Massachusetts incorporated the settlers as "The Proprietors of the Settling lots in the Township of Poonstoosuck." In 1761, the town of Pittsfield was incorporated, named after the great Commoner, William Pitt.

Captain Joseph Merrick settled in Pittsfield about 1800, having removed from Westfield, and became the innkeeper of its chief hostelry. He owned a farm and garden a little out of the center of the village at the south end of Onota Lake on which was "Indian Hill" more recently called "Fort Hill." On Indian Hill had been the old fort established in 1754, for the protection of the early settlers from the French and Indians.

While ploughing, in the summer of 1815, on Indian Hill, Captain Merrick turned up with his plough what proved to be a phylactery. Elkanah Watson, one of Pittsfield's distinguished pioneers, gives the following contemporary account of the discovery:¹

Pittsfield, November 10, 1815.

To Hugh Williamson.

Dear Sir:

In conformity with your request to ascertain all the facts in relation to the interesting discovery of a Jewish phylactery, in this village, in June last, I reply. It was ploughed up in the yard of Mr. Joseph Merrick, a respectable inhabitant who resides on the borders of the village, in the midst of rubbish, and lying some inches below the surface.

Immediately on hearing the rumor of the discovery, I repaired to the house of Mr. Merrick, where I found several clergymen, whose curiosity was greatly excited by the strange incident, and who believed with me that the article must have found its way into this recent wilderness, by the agency of some of the descendants of Israel.

Having previously read with intense interest on the subject and being impressed with the belief that the Indians of America were descended from the lost tribes of Israel; and that they had been directed by the same Almighty hand, which had brought them out of the land of Egypt, to continue their journeyings in a north-eastern course, probably for many ages, and finally to reach this continent at Behring's Strait; yet retaining some knowledge of the arts and sciences, and always adhering to the rites of the Jewish religion. After reaching this continent, and the lapse of

¹ "Men and Times of the Revolution, or Memoirs of Elkanah Watson," New York, 1856, p. 388.

many years, and probably ages, some portions inclined to rest in the northern region, but most pursued a southern course, spreading in all directions, even to the southern extremity of South America, and north to the polar regions; and thus peopling the whole surface of both Americas, more or less densely, according to the varied climates. Those in the extreme north and south, becoming the most savage, as in the milder regions they have been found the most civilized, and in possession of arts and sciences, especially in the City of Mexico and Peru.

It is not my purpose to write a treatise on this important subject, but merely to skim the surface, in the view of accounting in some measure for this very interesting discovery. I think it must have originated from these sources. It is well known, even from Sacred Writ, that the Jews held their phylacteries, with the precious scroll enclosed, in religious reverence. This discovery forms another link in the evidence by which our Indians are identified with the ancient Jews, who were scattered upon the face of the globe, and to this day remain a living monument, to verify and establish the eternal truths of Scripture.

On comparing this phylactery with those described in the Old Testament, I found an exact conformity. I will explain it in my own way. They are described in Scripture as composed of five folds of raw hide or leather, sewed compactly together by the entrails of animals. In order to understand the appearance of this discovery, imagine five pieces of leather or raw hide, or some composition similar to India rubber, and capable of resisting the ravages of time and exposure, cut into squares of two inches, sewed together with entrails. Suppose, also a hole in the center, half an inch in diameter made to admit a tube two and a half inches long with eyelet holes at the corners to receive strings—and you will have an idea of the article.

This tube, as described by Mr. Merrick, was of such a hard, spongy substance that it was with great difficulty he could gain an opening at one of the sloping ends, and seemed absolutely impervious to moisture, for although the surface was incrustated in a manner to evince its having been probably exposed for many ages, yet I drew out from the tube three or four scrolls of parchment, which it contained when found, and inscribed with texts of Scripture, written in Hebrew in an elegant manner, and the ink of a beautiful jet black. The parchment, writing, ink, were all perfectly fresh.

Very respectfully,

E. WATSON.

Contemporary local tradition reported that these were the relics of early Jewish settlers in Pittsfield. It was said that a Jew from Germany was known to have resided in Pittsfield and probably lost them.²

Rev. Ethan Smith, pastor of the Congregational Church of Poultney, Vermont, in 1823 published his "View of the Hebrews" supporting the contention that the Indians were the Ten Lost Tribes. On the publication of this volume President Griffin of Williams College called his attention to this discovery of the phylacteries in Pittsfield, and the Rev. gentleman immediately undertook an investigation to use this find as further evidence to support his contention. He made a journey to Pittsfield. He interviewed "different aged people" and convinced himself that "no Jew was ever known in Pittsfield." He got an account of the discovery from Captain Merrick himself. He tried to see the phylacteries and found that they had been deposited with the American Antiquarian Society at Worcester,³ but they had been misplaced as they could not be located. Thereupon being convinced that they were Indian in their origin, he found that these phylacteries were a convincing proof of the Hebraic origin of the Indian and inserted the story of their discovery as an unanswerable argument to support his views in the second edition of his "View of the Hebrews."

I have made a diligent search to see if we could identify any of the early settlers of Pittsfield as Jews.

² Ethan Smith, "View of the Hebrews," 2d ed., 1825, p. 213 *et seq.*

³ Isaiah Thomas, the founder of the society and its president, reported to Rev. Ethan Smith that "among the many boxes of articles he knew not where to look for it." The present librarian writes, "I rather think that we have the phylactery in question, at least we have a sheet of old vellum upon which are written two columns of Hebrew script, surrounded by an ornamental design and border colored by hand. The sheet of vellum is about 10 x 7, and in its present state is closely rolled."

Situated on the Mohawk trail, the main colonial thoroughfare of western Massachusetts, not over two days' travel from Albany, and a trading center of a prosperous growing agricultural district, it would not be surprising to find enterprising Jewish traders visiting or settled there at an early date. We fail, however, to substantiate the traditions from the early records.

The name of Isaac Isaacs appears on the Pittsfield military rolls as in service in 1780-1781, and it has been suggested that he may have been a Jew. There is nothing to substantiate this, and I am more inclined to believe that he belonged to the well-known Connecticut family of that name which was early settled in Greenwich, Stamford, and Norwalk.

But whether lost by an early settler or dropped by some pioneer traveller, the finding of the phylacteries at Pittsfield affords only another indication of the ubiquity of the Jew in early colonial America.