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The Seixas-Kursheedts and the Rise of Early American Jewry

Kenneth Libo, Abigail Kursheedt Hoffman

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The Seixas-Kursheedt family is remarkable in the annals of American Jewish History for having provided American Jewry with spiritual guidance and enrichment from the Revolutionary War well into the nineteenth century. As a tightly knit family, the Seixas-Kursheedts played a crucial role in integrating Jews into the fabric of America. The family patriarch Gershom Mendes Seixas was a Revolutionary War patriot, hazzan of New York's oldest congregation, Shearith Israel, and American Jewry's official ambassador to the Gentile community. Gershom was one of thirteen ministers invited to George Washington's first inauguration. His son-in-law, Israel Baer Kursheedt, had more Jewish learning than any Jew who came before him to these shores. For decades, Israel Baer functioned as New York's unofficial chakam (sage) on matters pertaining to Jewish law. Israel Baer's son Gershom wa in many ways the fulfillment of the family's dream of carrying on its traditions. As leading architect of New Orleans' Jewish community, Gershom Kursheedt persuaded Judah Touro to become America's first major Jewish philanthropist. Rounding out the picture of a truly remarkable family is Gershom Mendes Seixas son David, a pioneer educator of the deaf in this country and a victim of anti-Semitism.

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