The Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina

Southern Jews and the Atlantic World

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Looking for Lushington: The Lost Quaker Commander of Charleston's Revolutionary Jewish Militia
by George H. McDaniel, South Carolina Battleground Preservation Trust

"Died Last Monday, after an illness of only three days, the
honorable Richard Lushington Esq. Col. of the regiment
of militia for Charleston district," June 24, 1790.1

Thus, the life of an important figure in Charleston and southern Jewish history prematurely ended at the age of 39. Today, the name Richard Lushington draws little, if any, attention among the general public’s awareness of Charleston history. When carriage tours travel along King Street, his name is not among those spoken at the corner of King and Queen, now occupied by a Charleston County parking garage. In fact, it is likely that many of the men who served under his command and lived and worked along that same stretch of King Street garner no mention— an omission the South Carolina Battleground Preservation Trust (SCBPT) works hard to correct. Our goal is to reimagine preservation in a way that allows the story of “ordinary” people to be told and their world to be understood, beneath the extant buildings of today.

Richard Lushington was born in Charles Town (as it was known before the Revolution) in 1751 and spent his entire life in the Carolina colony, and is buried at the historic St. Philip’s Church. In his last will and testament, the matter of Quaker burial rites. In his last will and testament, Lushington’s unit became known as “The Jews’ Company” or “The Company of Free Citizens,” but while it did include a significant number of Jewish men, they were not a majority nor was Lushington’s unit the only one with this demographic profile. James Bentham, another prominent merchant, also commanded a unit with a significant Jewish presence. The difference between Lushington and Bentham illustrates the tensions within the social hierarchy and how those shaped the historical narrative and the challenges presented in telling the story of Lushington and his men.

Bentham was Anglican, the dominant religion of the Carolina colony, and is buried at the historic St. Philip’s Cemetery on Church Street. Twiced marginalized, Lushington’s story provides a stark contrast. He was a member of a small minority in Charles Town, given his Quaker faith, and isolated even further within that faith by taking up arms. This double marginalization, along with many of his men being Jewish, another minority in the colony, lends this unit its unique and complex character.

Further, links between Quakers and Jews date to the early days of Quakerism when George Fox and Margaret Fell, founders of the Religious Society of Friends, played an important role in the return of Jews to England in the 1650s. While evidence is still needed to definitively support such a theory, it is possible Lushington felt a kinship with the Jewish men under his command. As historian Sally Bruyneel writes, “Friends embraced no creed save humility before that God of the individual conscience. This was something, including Jews, possessed. Thus, for Quakers, Jews are equal as human beings subject to the same sins and the same potential for divine indwelling of the Light.” While motivations are difficult to infer, the idea of equality being a factor not only within the dynamics of this unit but also in the call to service under the Patriot cause for Lushington and Jewish men certainly resonates.

Unfortunately, the era of the historic quarantine at the critical location where the Quaker Meeting House and cemetery stood presents its own challenges. Once situated at the corner of King and Queen streets, a tremendous fire in 1837 necessitated the razing of the meeting house, although it had long before fallen into a state of disrepair as the Quaker Meeting of Charleston greatly weakened in the early 19th century. While the cemetery survived, it too disappeared from the landscape in 1869 when the remains were relocated behind the Charleston County Courthouse to make room for a parking garage. Such erasure means that while the Jewish presence became entrenched in both the physical landscape and historical memory of Charleston, Lushington and other Quakers vanished.

Further complicating the quest to locate Lushington is the matter of Quaker burial rites. In his last will and testament, Richard Lushington specified, “after my Decease, in a proper time, my Executrix hereafter named, do cause me to be buried without any Ceremony.” That last instruction, “without any Ceremony” helps explain why he receded from American history memory for so long. While the location of Lushington’s burial remains a mystery, circumstantial evidence suggests that he was laid to rest in the Quaker cemetery.

SCBPT faces these challenges by seizing upon them as opportunities for creative new forms of interpretation. At the forefront is the development of The Charleston Liberty Trail. This partnership between SCBPT and the American Battlefield Trust guides visitors to a network of battlefields and important sites across the state of South Carolina. A key component of this partnership is the development of The Charleston Liberty Trail app. Undergirded by historical research and enhanced by the latest technology—such as augmented reality—visitors will be able to learn about Lushington and his men saw it. Research is underway to identify where the shops of these Jewish men were located and provide interpretation at those specific sites.

Creating such a network of sites in Charleston takes visitors beyond all the battelfields and into the daily lives of these historical figures through deep research keyed to identifiable locations. The Liberty Trail allows us to rethink and reinterpret preservation in an ever-changing and constantly developing landscape, such as 21st-century Charleston. In doing so, SCBPT is stepping outside of the traditional box and forging new partnerships with retailers and others who occupy spaces once frequented by people like Lushington and the militia men who served under his command. Site-specific interpretation enriches the historical narrative by bringing to the fore minority groups, such as Quakers and Jews, and introducing outsiders’ perspectives to the mainstream point of view.

Notes
1. State Gazette of South Carolina, June 24, 1790.
2. A full discussion of Charleston Quakers and their complex views on slavery beyond the purview of this piece. For an insightful look at these views of Quakers and Lushington, see Claire Bellerjeau and Tiffany Vecke Brooks, Espionage and Endurance in the Revolution (Guilford: Lyons Press, 2021).
9. The evidence consists of Lushington having spent his entire life in Charleston and the fact that his brother-in-law, Daniel Latham, who was married to Charity Lushington’s sister, was buried there. Latham’s tombstone is the only one preserved and currently marks the location of the remains.