

Our colonial roots

Solomon Levey arrived in Sydney as a convict in 1815, sentenced to seven years for stealing 90 lbs (41 kg) of tea and a wooden chest. He served only four years of his sentence, after which he began a meteoric career as a mercantile dealer, trading with the South Pacific. His triumphant and prosperous return to London in 1826 triggered Australia's first wave of free settlers, including most of his own family.

Altogether, six members of the Levey family migrated to Australia (three of them as convicts), along with fourteen of their children, six nieces and nephews, four spouses and a brother-in-law (who was also a convict). Solomon's elder brother, Samuel, and his younger brother, Barnett, arrived on separate ships in December 1821. Barnett arrived as a free settler on board a ship full of female convicts. Samuel, who arrived as a convict, was 'considered by his brothers and the public generally as a madman'. Official papers attested that; 'it appears that the unfortunate man is in a state of insanity'. Samuel was financially supported by his younger brothers, Solomon and Barnett, who were enormously influential figures in Sydney. Both Solomon and Barnett died at the age of 39. But, their impact on the colony was substantial.

Their brother, **Isaac**, and his wife, **Dinah**, arrived as free settlers with their children and Isaac's nephew, Jacob Marks, in 1835. **Isaac Levey** became president of the Sydney Hebrew Congregation. Jacob's parents, **Frances (Levey) and Lyon Barnett Marks**, remained in London. But, five of his siblings and one nephew followed him to Australia, as did another uncle, Philip Levey, who arrived with his family, as free settlers, in 1843. One way or another, they had each escaped the squalid conditions of 'Dickensian' London, to start a new life in Australia. The following is a brief account of their exploits.

Initially, Solomon Levey sold lollipops in the streets of Sydney. But, soon after his release, he married Ann Roberts, the daughter of William Roberts, a wealthy land owner. The marriage only lasted a few years, after which Solomon returned the dowry. But, with his business partner, Daniel Cooper, Solomon Levey became immensely successful, owning large tracts of land surrounding Sydney (Waterloo, Alexandria, Redfern, Randwick, Neutral Bay, Point Piper, Woollahra, Vaucluse and Rose Bay) and numerous flour mills, one of which was the colony's first to be powered by steam.

Point Piper was previously owned by Captain John Piper, a naval officer responsible for collecting harbour dues, customs and excise duties. Captain Piper was known as 'the Prince of New South Wales', on account of his extravagant lifestyle. But, he got into difficulties, when he failed to account for more than £12,000 in revenue. To raise the money, he sold

the Piper Estate to Cooper & Levey for £10,000, when it was worth seven times that amount.

A month after buying Point Piper, Cooper & Levey were involved in another rescue, when the entire colony started to run out of money. In an attempt to remedy the situation, Cooper & Levey issued their own bank notes. This upset the Bank of New South Wales and the newly established Bank of Australia, who claimed they alone had that privilege. But, Cooper & Levey had more capital than both the banks combined and they subsequently recalled £30,000 that was owed to them. In 1827, the banks agreed to accept Cooper-Levey bank notes as colonial currency and, adding insult to injury, Daniel Cooper was subsequently elected to the board of directors of the Bank of New South Wales, a position previously held by Captain Piper.

Barnett Levey opened the colony's first theatre, Levey's Theatre Royal, with seating capacity for 1200. It was Sydney's first skyscraper, a five-storey building that served as a warehouse, flour mill, public house and theatre. Barnett often performed solo in the theatre, which was connected to the Royal Hotel by a saloon 60 feet long. The flour mill was powered by a windmill perched on top of the building. The 90 foot high building, which was never approved by the government, was called a 'stupendous structure'. Unfortunately, the mill didn't work and very little flour was produced; at enormous expense, since Barnett had contracted to buy 15,000 bushels of wheat well in advance of the season. According to *The Sydney Times*: 'the theatre and the windmill were in one respect alike; they were both useless.' He also built Waverley House, named after the novel by Sir Walter Scott, and opened the first book lending library. Apparently, he was obsessed with setting the cultural foundations for the colony.

Jacob Marks followed his uncle, **Isaac Levey**, to the Yass district, where they had a store at Curryong Creek. The store was held up by bush rangers and Jacob received gunshot wounds to the head and body. In 1835, he inherited a large sum of money from his uncle Solomon Levey, who had died while on business in London. Jacob's mother, **Frances Marks** (who had remained in London) was Solomon's favourite sister.

Jacob moved to Melbourne in 1840 and went into partnership with his brother-in-law, **Samuel Henry Harris**, who was an ex-convict and one of the original members of the Melbourne Hebrew congregation. He arrived in Australia in 1833, sentenced to seven years for stealing over £100 from his employers, Elias & Isaac Moses. They opened two drapery stores in Melbourne; the London Mart in Queen Street and the Liverpool Mart at Collins and Elizabeth Streets. According to an advertisement, their stock was 'selected by their friends in London'. The business was so successful, they built a two-storey store. But, economic depression forced the dissolution of the partnership and a 'sacrificial sale' of their 'rich and

extensive stock'. Their 'friends in London' may well have been Jacob's brother, Mark Marks, and **Samuel's** sister, Hannah Harris, who subsequently arrived in Australia with their four children in 1845.

Jacob bought property in Warrnambool, Geelong and North Melbourne. In 1840, he was involved in a 'scam' with his brother-in-law, Philip Phillips, who attempted to save part of his stock in bankruptcy proceedings by holding a fake auction at Colac. Ten years later, Philip Phillips accidentally drowned in Mustons Creek, near Warrnambool. His was the first Jewish burial in Geelong. Suddenly widowed, Jacob's sister, Susan, gave her daughter, Caroline, to their brother, Morris Lyon Marks, who had arrived with another brother, Solomon Lyon Marks, in 1846. Morris and Solomon owned and operated a shop in South Australia. Solomon became a successful merchant in Cooktown, Queensland, where he donated a large portion of the costs of the town's first public hall.

By 1850, Jacob had moved to Sydney, where he bought land costing more than £3,000. In February 1860, the Sydney City Council leased from Jacob Marks a building at 6 Carrington Street to serve as the Town Hall. It had previously been the home of the Union Club. The council remained there as his tenant for eight years, after which the building became the Imperial Hotel and finally the site of Australia House.

It was common for Jews to marry within the family. But, with so few Jews in Australia - less than a thousand in 1850 - the Leveys had little choice. Jacob Marks married his cousin, Susannah Levey, daughter of **Isaac & Dinah Levey**. Susannah's brother, Montague, married his cousin, Catherine, daughter of Philip & Leah (Mordecai) Levey. Their younger sister, Isabella Dinah Levey, married her cousin, Maurice Alexander, son of Susan (Levey) & Isaac Alexander.

Jacob's nephew, **Montague Maurice Marks**, married Susannah's niece, **Deborah Harris**, daughter of **Elizabeth and Samuel Henry Harris**. As second cousins, both were descended from **Deborah & Moses Lyon Levy**, whose 7 children and 20 grandchildren migrated to Australia. Not one of their own children married within the Jewish Faith. Although this was not unusual, their father expressed his disappointment by wearing a black arm band.

Maurice Alexander represented Goulburn in the Legislative Assembly and was a successful businessman, part-owning the Australian Store, based in Goulburn, with numerous branches throughout southern New South Wales. He was highly respected in the business community, becoming a trustee of the Savings Bank of New South Wales, a director of numerous public companies including City Bank, Australian Gaslight Company and United Insurance Company and treasurer for the Benevolent Asylum. When he died in 1874, his wife, Isabella Dinah, honoured his memory by funding the colony's first scholarship, at Sydney University. Five years

later, she established a further endowment to honour the memory of her late parents, **Isaac & Dinah Levey**.

By 1838, 400 Jewish convicts and fifty free settler Jews had arrived in Australia. Over the next two decades, the number of Jewish convicts more than doubled, while the number of free settler Jews surged nearly ten fold. Jews were among the first to contribute toward the development of frontier communities and their numerous ventures helped set the foundations for Australia's middle class.

References

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