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CELEBRATING THE 4TH OF JULY WITH JEFFERSON MONROE LEVY

Today is the 4th of July, America's 239th birthday. Where once this national holiday was filled with picnics, baseball doubleheaders, fireworks, the sounds of Sousa marches and the public reading of the Declaration of Independence, the 4th has morphed into a three-day weekend where fireworks compete with discounts and public figures issue press releases praising our Founding Fathers for having the wisdom to agree with them on issues ranging from abortion to unlimited access to guns. What seems to be missing is a genuine sense of patriotism; an ineffable, unpronounceable pride in the genius it took to birth this country not that many years ago. I for one miss the reading of the Declaration; the closest I get is Turner Classic Movie's annual presentation of Peter Stone's (no relation) cinematic tour-de- force "1776." For me, the film always bring a tear to eye, a hiccup in the sinus rhythm and a renewed sense of awe that such a relatively tiny populace could have contained such visionaries as Franklin, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Wilson and Hancock.

Jefferson Monroe Levy

This year, I have chosen to celebrate the 4th by presenting the story of the marvelously-named -- though largely unknown -- Jefferson Monroe Levy, (as well as the rest of the Levy clan) who all but single handedly resurrected

the legacy of Thomas Jefferson . . . the author of our Declaration. What follows is adapted from my 2010 work The Jews of Capitol Hill, (pp. 68-71). For those who wish to learn even more about J.M. Levy, please check out my friend and colleague Marc Leepson's marvelous 2001 work Saving Monticello.

Of the 204 Jewish men and women who have served in Congress throughout American history, no member of that august clan has a longer or more honorable American pedigree than the marvelously named Jefferson Monroe Levy. The first Levys landed on American shores in 1662. As with many early American families, both Jewish and non-Jewish, the Levy family tree has branches that intertwine with many other notable families. To wit: J. M. Levy's father, Jonas, was the son of Michael and Rachel Phillips Levy. Rachel was the daughter of Jonas Phillips (1736-1803), the progenitor of a prominent Philadelphia family. One of Jonas's sons, Zalegman, was the first Jew admitted to the Pennsylvania bar. His son, Henry M. Phillips, a prominent lawyer in his own right, served one term in Congress in the late 1850s. Henry was J. M. Levy's second cousin.

Commodore Uriah P. Levy

Among Jonas Phillips's many grandchildren were Mordecai Manuel Noah, the most prominent Jew in early-nineteenth-century America; the aforementioned Henry M. Phillips and Jonas Levy (1807-1883). Then there was Jonas's infinitely more famous (or infamous) older brother, Commodore Uriah P(hillips) Levy. The Levy brothers were both prominent naval officers. Jonas was Commander of the steamer *America,* which ferried troops to, and participated in, the battle for Veracruz during the Mexican War. When Veracruz was captured, General Winfield Scott appointed Levy an army captain. In 1850, the Mexican Congress granted him the exclusive privilege of building a road from New York to San Francisco that would pass through Mexico. For reasons unknown, nothing ever came of the plan. After the war, Jonas made a fortune in New York real estate and eventually moved to Washington, D.C., where he became a founding member of the Washington Hebrew Congregation. He was also one of the more vocal leaders in the fight to alter the U.S.-Swiss Treaty of 1850.

Jonas's brother (and J.M.'s uncle), the Philadelphia-bred Uriah P. Levy (1792-1862), ran away to sea at age ten, subsequently joined the U.S. Navy, and eventually rose to the rank of commodore, the Navy's highest rank in that era. Uriah would command the Mediterranean squadron for six months in the late 1850s. Brash, pugnacious, and a bit of a martinet, Commodore Levy felt the sting of anti-Semitism throughout his naval

career and was court-martialed no less than six times. Indeed, any aspiring biographer seeking to acquire an accurate portrait of the Commodore must of necessity read through the transcripts of those half-dozen trials. His troubles with the Navy kept him on shore from 1827 to 1857. He is best known for his successful one-man campaign to abolish flogging and other forms of corporal punishment in the U.S. Navy. Like his brother, he was a founding member of the Washington Hebrew Congregation.

Jefferson Monroe Levy (he pronounced the family name *leh-vee* rhyming with *bevy*) was born to Jonas and Fanny Mitchell Levy in New York City on April 16, 1852, at precisely the time his father was moving his base of operations to the nation's capital. Little is known of J.M.'s early family life. He had a younger sister, Amelia Levy von Mayhoff, who would be the prime beneficiary of his will. J.M. Levy was educated in the public and private schools of New York City, graduated from the New York University School of Law in 1873, and practiced law for more than twenty-five years.

Jefferson Monroe Levy

Levy was elected as a Gold Democrat to the Fifty-sixth Congress in 1898, representing the Thirteenth Congressional District. His forceful advocacy of hard money was anathema to most Democrats and nearly all Jews; but Levy, as the scion of one of America's oldest and most prosperous Jewish families, was largely out of step with the politics of his co-religionists. One of the few Jews holding membership in both the Sons of the Revolution and the Society of the War of 1812, Levy was, to say the least, a patrician. Fed up with the hurly-burly of congressional life, Levy quit Congress after his one term and returned to New York, where he resumed the practice of law.

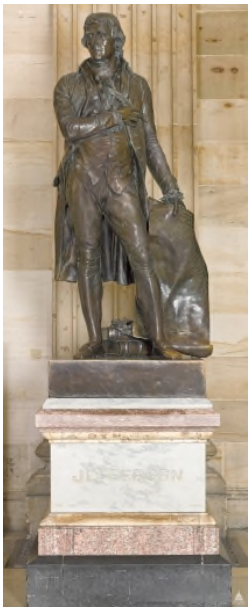
After being out of politics for nearly a decade, J. M. Levy was elected to the House of Representatives in 1910 and served in both the Sixty-second and Sixty-third Congress. While the general thrust of Levy's political energy and expertise continued to be in the economic realm, this time around he found a new cause to champion: the creation of a Federal Reserve Bank. Energized by the banking theories of his co-religionist, the German Paul M. Warburg (1868-1932), Representative Levy became a tireless worker on behalf of the Federal Reserve System. Created in the years immediately preceding World War I, the Federal Reserve would eventually come under attack as being the creation of a pernicious cadre of conspiring Jews. Indeed, Warburg, generally credited with being the Father of the Federal Reserve, was asked to leave its board of governors by President Wilson; the political pressure had become too much for the former Princeton professor to bear.

Neither politics nor the law, however, was Levy's prime passion. Throughout most of his life, the love, the obsession, the "mistress of his soul" was Monticello, the estate of America's third President, Thomas Jefferson.

For many decades, the history of the Levy family's ownership of Monticello was shrouded in mystery and misconception. Before historian Marc Leepson's seminal work *Saving Monticello* was published to great acclaim in 2001, there were only two incontrovertible facts: first, the Levy family owned Monticello for nearly ninety years (1836-1929); second, without the tireless stewardship of J. M. Levy, Monticello would likely be nothing more than a memory today.

J.M.'s uncle, Uriah P. Levy, purchased the mountaintop estate in May 1836, ten years after Jefferson's death. Hard as it is to imagine from the perspective of the early twentieth-first century, in 1836 Thomas Jefferson was not a particularly popular figure. His heroic star had been completely eclipsed by that of George Washington. Like his reputation, Jefferson's estate lay in ruins, the surrounding lands overgrown with weeds and the detritus of neglect. That the commodore revered Jefferson's legacy is abundantly clear: In a letter written in 1833, Uriah noted, *"I consider Thomas Jefferson to be one of the greatest men in history – author of the Declaration and an absolute democrat. He serves as an inspiration to millions of Americans. He did much to mold our Republic in a form in which a man's religion does not make him ineligible for political or governmental life."*

Monticello in Ruins



While in Paris in 1832, Commodore Levy privately commissioned the noted French sculptor Pierre-Jean David d'Angers (1788-1856) to create a heroic full-scale statue of his champion in bronze. In turn, d'Angers had been inspired by a portrait of Jefferson by American painter Thomas Sully, then owned by Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, better known as the "Marquis de la Fayette." When Levy borrowed the painting from Lafayette, the French hero of the American Revolution inquired about the fate of Monticello. Levy said he would find out when he returned to the United States.

Upon his return, the commodore asked Congress to accept the statue as a gift to the people of the United States. The statue still has a place of honor in Statuary Hall in the rotunda of the Capitol. Standing to

the right of the statue of George Washington, it is the only icon in that distinguished collection that was not paid for with federal or state governmental funds.

Levy also kept his promise to Lafayette that he would check into the status of Monticello. What he learned was terribly depressing: Jefferson's family had sold Monticello only the year before. "(They) had simply inherited a white elephant," the historian William Howard Adams noted. At the time of his death in 1826, Jefferson owed his creditors $107,273.66 – roughly $2.5 million in 2015 dollars. Jefferson's heirs, headed by Jefferson's daughter, Martha Randolph, and grandson Thomas Jefferson Randolph, had originally hoped to sell Monticello through a lottery. They eventually sold the estate's 130 slaves, household furnishings, supplies, grain, and farm equipment at public auction in January 1827.

The family donated Jefferson's library to the University of Virginia and kept only a few pieces of furniture. His large art collection was shipped to Boston for sale. The heirs left the mansion in the summer of 1828 and put it, too, up for sale. There were no takers until James T. Barclay, an eccentric Charlottesville druggist, bought the house and 552 acres for $7,000 (roughly $116,000 in today's money) on November 1, 1831.

Barclay had his own vision for the property: he decided to turn it into a silkworm farm. Toward that end, he cut down Jefferson's carefully cultivated groves of poplar, linden, and beech trees and dug up his manicured lawns and flower gardens, replacing them with a massive planting of mulberry bushes. Barclay's silk business, like so many ventures Jefferson himself had conceived at Monticello, never materialized. Also like Jefferson, Barclay's debts mounted. He could not afford to make even minimal repairs to Monticello, and in 1833, put it on the market. Enter Uriah P. Levy.

Levy had grown rich investing in New York real estate. Indeed, in Moses Beach's 1855 work, *The Wealth and Biography of Wealthy Citizens of New York,* Uriah's net worth was estimated at $500,000 – approximately $12.3 million in today's money. He and German-born industrialist August Belmont (1816-1890) were the only two Jews on Beach's list.

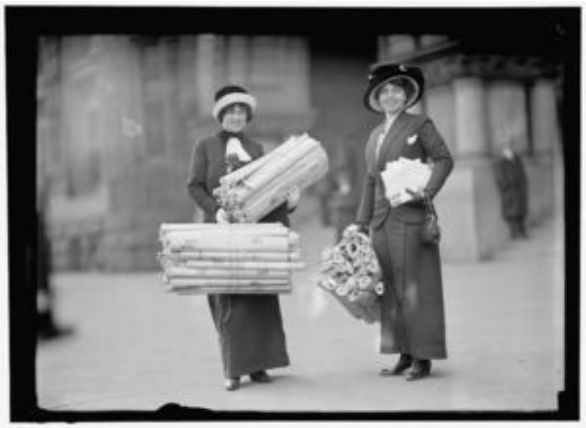
Commodore Levy purchased Jefferson's rundown property for $2,600. Levy then proceeded to restore and refurnish the estate at his own expense. Leepson notes that "(Uriah Levy) did not live there, (but) opened Monticello to visitors who showed up to pay homage to Jefferson's memory."

When the Commodore died in March 1862, he left a "strange convoluted will" that would be wrangled over in the courts for the next 17 years. Part of the problem was that the instrument transferred title of Monticello to the "People of the United States," to be used "as an Agricultural School for the purpose of educating as practical farmers children of the warrant office of the United States Navy whose Fathers are dead." Not

surprisingly, the will was contested by childless Levy's many cousins, nieces, and nephews.

After 17 years, the estate wound up in the hands of the 27-year old Jefferson Levy. Quietly and without notice, J.M., like a modern-day arbitrageur, began buying shares from his many cousins, aunts, and uncles. By 1879, he had acquired enough "stock" to be able to purchase Monticello outright. This he did for the sum of $10,500, to be paid in three annual installments. Jefferson Levy's purchase of the estate was finalized on March 20, 1879. By this time, Monticello was once again in ruins.

Over the next decade and a half, J. M. Levy committed nearly $500,000 of his own money for the restoration of Monticello. He returned the estate to its original pristine condition, and played host there to one president (Theodore Roosevelt) as well as "countless members of Congress, ambassadors, and other officials and dignitaries." Toward the end of the nineteenth century, William Jennings Bryan began making inquiries about purchasing Monticello and turning it into a national monument. When asked what price might suit him, J. M. Levy reportedly replied, "All the money in the Treasury could not pay for the mansion." This was just the beginning of a brouhaha that would last another quarter century.



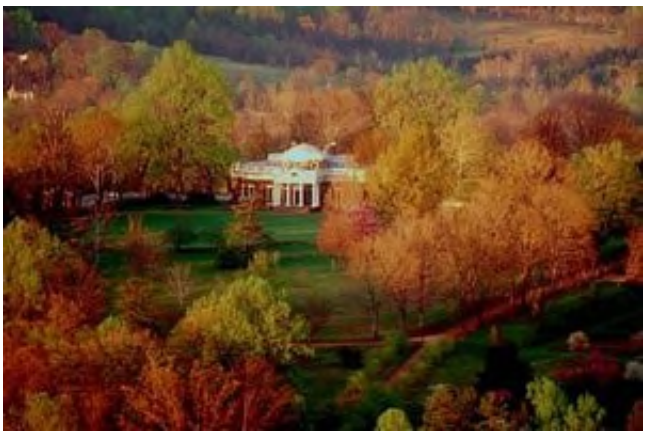
J. M. Levy's desire to maintain Monticello as a private residence was viewed with disdain by many. Although largely unstated, one gets the impression that many Sons and Daughters of the American Revolution were repulsed by the idea of a New York Jew owning the Jefferson estate. Chief among these bluebloods was Mrs. Martin Wiley Littleton, wife of one of Levy's congressional colleagues from New York. Mrs. Littleton (pictured at left along with her secretary holding a batch of petitions) spared no time, effort, expense, or invective in her attempt to make Monticello the property of the American people. She took her case to Congress, where the issue was turned over to the House Rules Committee. Chary of manhandling a colleague, the Rules Committee issued a nebulous finding that "perhaps" the House might consider authorizing the purchase of Monticello on behalf of the American people. The House voted 141 to 101 against the committee's resolution.

Levy was then offered $100,000 (four times Monticello's assessed valuation) by Virginia's Governor, Thomas Fortune Ryan. Again, Levy demurred. He was quoted by the *New York Times* as saying: *"I will sell Monticello under no circumstances. I have repeatedly refused $1,500,000 for the property. My answer to any proposition seeking the property of Monticello is: When the White House is for sale, then will I consider an offer for the*

sale of Monticello, and not before." Truth to tell, Levy rarely ever lived at Monticello. He did journey there each Fourth of July, when he would take Jefferson's old music stand outside the mansion and, using it as a lectern, would read the Declaration of Independence to his neighbors.

Shortly after World War I, Levy let it be known that he might be interested in selling the property to a private foundation – if the price was right. What led to his change of heart? The answer is simple: J. M. Levy had exhausted most of his funds in restoring and maintaining Monticello. Once word got out that Levy would sell, groups in Washington, Richmond, and Charlottesville, Virginia, attempted to establish foundations with the aim of acquiring sufficient capital for the purchase of Monticello. They all failed. It was left to a New York City-based group, the "Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation," to succeed. Funded largely by Felix M. Warburg, Oscar Straus, and Herbert Henry Lehman, the Memorial Foundation pledged $1,000,000 – half for the outright purchase of Monticello, and half in the form of an endowment for its upkeep.

By the time the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation completed its fundraising, J. M. Levy had died. Title to the estate passed on to his sister Amelia von Mayhoff, who had acted as her brother's hostess at Monticello. Following her late brother's wishes, she accepted $500,000 for Monticello, which was then turned into the national monument that millions have visited over the past eighty years.



When one visits Monticello today, tour guides will generally not mention the name Jefferson Monroe Levy unless they are prodded. They seem almost willfully ignorant of the seminal role this patriotic Jewish man played in salvaging, restoring, and preserving Thomas Jefferson's magnificent home.

The keen-eyed tourist will, nonetheless, find a tiny reminder of the Levy family's legacy. Just up the road from the gift shop, one comes across the vine-covered enclosure that is the Jefferson family graveyard. Buried there are the family's cousins, servants, and retainers. If one cranes one's neck just a bit, he or she will spot a tiny, moss-encrusted headstone marking the final resting place of Jefferson Monroe Levy's beloved great aunt (and Uncle Uriah's mother), Rachel Phillips Levy. Small though it is, the Levy family's legacy lives on at Monticello.

I wish for one and all, a happy, healthy and meaningful 4th of July