

The Diary of Asser Levy: First Jewish Citizen of New York

By Daniela Weil

Reviewed by Hank Bitten



In the teaching of world history or global studies, the concept of continuity and change over time is important for students in understanding the big picture of history. In learning about the American colonies, the migration of populations and the perspectives of ordinary people are important in understanding the diversity of the people living in the New World.

Teachers are able to understand the big picture of the 20th century and the rise of the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, Soviet Union, India, China, Israel, and the United States. Some teachers may also understand how the fall of Austria Hungary, Tsarist Russia, Ottoman Empire, Japan, and Germany changed the world. We teach about the permanent members of the UN Security Council but also recognize the power and influence of the media, investment firms, energy cartels, and technology firms. History is complicated.

The Diary of Asser Levy provides an opportunity to understand the big picture of European history in the context of Brazil, the western Caribbean, the Dutch colonies in America, and the Roman Catholic Church. The book is less than 100 pages and packed with a chronological memory over a period of twelve years. Students can easily read the accounts of a day in the life of Asser Levy, or a week or a month in a matter of a few minutes. The photographs and images are designed to connect students with the historical content and promote inquiry, literacy, and memory.

The book is written from the perspective of a teenager or young adult about age 16-18. He lived in Recife, Brazil in a prosperous Jewish community. In the 17th century, the Dutch were a powerful empire and one in competition with Portugal, Britain and the Holy Roman Empire. The entries of the diary take place only six years after the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia ending the Thirty Years War in Europe and marking the “Golden Age” of the Netherlands and the Dutch empire in Europe, East Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The Spanish Century of the 16th century was characterized by “God, gold, and glory” was now declining in influence as new states were rising.

The conflict between the Dutch and Portugal is an extension of the Thirty Years War in Europe and a victory for the Protestant beliefs a century after the Protestant Reformation. The ‘new economy’ in Europe was based on their global markets. For Portugal and Netherlands, it was the spice trade in East

Asia and sugar and sweets in the New World. Most teachers do not even mention the trade wars of the 17th century and the *Diary of Asser Levy* provides a point of inquiry for students to ask, “why do the Dutch want Salvador or Recife in Brazil?”

The military operations by the Dutch in Brazil took less than two weeks and 10,000 soldiers. Although the control of Salvador and Recife would be difficult to maintain over time, it changed the way of life for ordinary people who were citizens of the Dutch empire! Conflict is always unsettling because it separates families, postpones dreams, and presents challenges to the spiritual beliefs ordinary people value. This is the point of entry of Daniel Weil into your classroom and her influence on what your students will be thinking.

The Evacuation

“The Dutch have waged war against the crown of Portugal,” Barreto proclaimed, “yet we shall not retaliate. I will give all foreigners a period of three months to leave Brazil. You may take back any possessions you can carry. We shall provide additional ships needed to return you to your homeland.”
(January 26, 1654, page 16)

Although this appears a welcome gesture and is better than imprisonment or death, it uprooted the lives of more than 1,600 Jews living a prosperous life after a century of persecution in Europe under the Inquisition. Many Jews were forced to be baptized in Spain and Portugal and as a result many fled to Amsterdam. Under the protection of Dutch laws, the Jews in Recife were allowed to openly practice their religious beliefs and established, Kahal Zur Yisrael, the first synagogue in the New World. Isaac Aboab da Fancseca was the first rabbi in the New World. The Kahal Zur Israel congregation had an elementary and secondary school and supported charities in Recife. Many textbooks call attention to the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, which was built more than one hundred years later in 1763.



The Jewish population of Recife had to sell possessions, close their businesses, end the education of their children, and return to Amsterdam, a place they left more than twenty years ago. Middle school students familiar with the voyage of Columbus, Virginia Company, Pilgrims, and the Massachusetts Bay Company might speculate what the voyage back to Amsterdam in February, 1654. Use this situation to simulate the family discussions in the homes of Recife.

What were the sleeping accommodations like?

Was there adequate food on the ship?

Were the ships seaworthy in storms?

Did people experience sickness?

Was there danger from enemies or pirates?

Were families together or separated?

What dangers did young men and women experience?

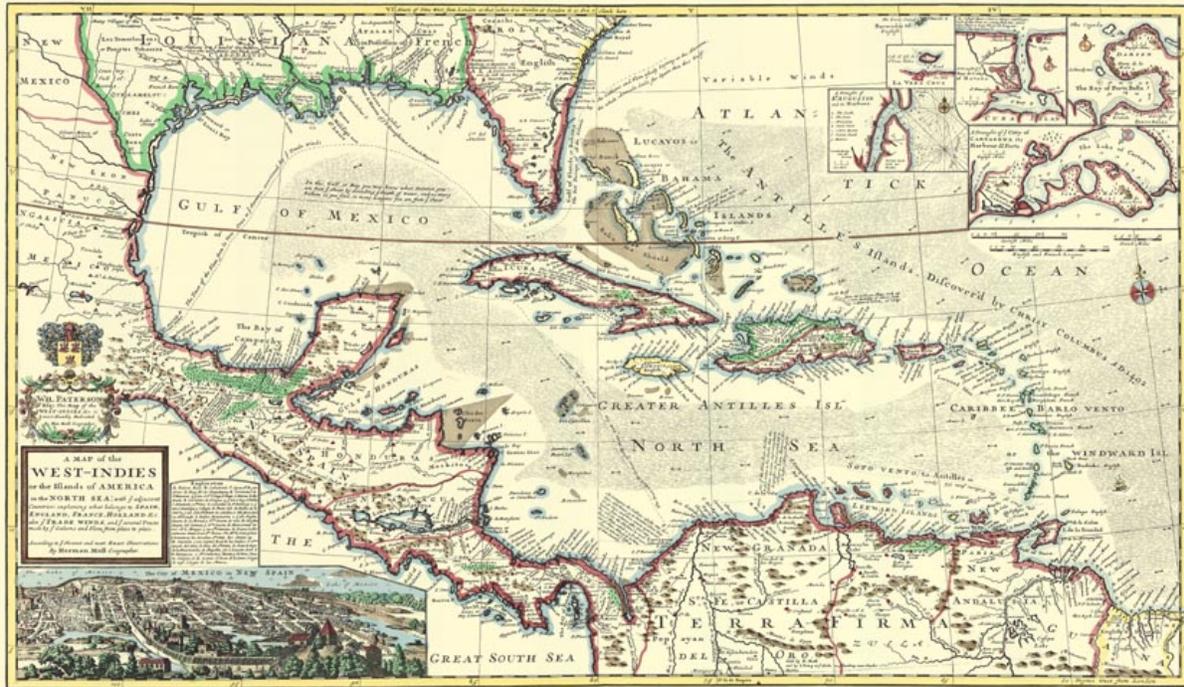
Stranded in the Caribbean

Asser Levy wrote in his diary on March 20, 1654, ***“This morning, the Falcon rocked harder than usual. I fumbled my way up to the deck to see what was going on. An ominous grey sky had replaced the blue, and strong winds howled. Ripples turned into waves, and waves into giant swells. The captain ordered all passengers to take cover below. Lightning exploded over the ship. The Falcon was being tossed around like a toy boat.”*** (Page 27)

What choices did passengers who are also refugees have at sea? Did they have any rights as Dutch citizens? Would their religious beliefs sentence them to prison, would able workers be kidnapped, could they be killed? Would they feel safe in a Spanish or Portuguese port in the Caribbean?

Five days later on March 25th, Asser Levy wrote with an exclamation, “Red flag!” Pirates! The most likely encounter middle and high school students have with pirates, is the Disney experience of ‘Pirates of the Caribbean.’ For Asser Levy and the other refugees fleeing Brazil, this was a death sentence, perhaps their greatest fear. They would lose their possessions, men might be kidnapped, women raped, and death or injury to anyone who dared challenge the pirates.

Use the two maps below for students to make a claim about the voyage from Recife, to the place of the storm, the boarding of the ship by pirates, and arriving in Jamaica. [On the first map, Jamaica is just south of the eastern end of Cuba and Recife is not visible. In the second map, Recife is on the most extreme end of the eastern coast of Brazil and Jamaica is south of Cuba.]



On April 1, about one week later, the *Falcon*, in need of repairs, drifted close to Jamaica. Understanding the geography of the Caribbean, especially the journey of approximately 40 days at sea from Recife to Jamaica should result in many questions and arguments that need evidence. Try to follow the diary and map the intended route of the *Falcon* with the actual route taking them to Jamaica.



Students studying colonial America are generally familiar with the religious exodus of people with Protestant faiths coming to Virginia, Massachusetts, New Sweden, and Connecticut. They likely understand the settlement of Maryland and the passing of the Toleration Act, 1648. Ask your students if people kept or lost their rights when their ship docked in a Spanish port. How did the Inquisition play out in real time when their ‘passports’ were checked? Asser Levy and the Jewish passengers on the Falcon were now under interrogation and the penalty of imprisonment or death for heresy.

Frustrated in New Amsterdam

This morning, September 5, 1654, ***“the St. Catherine turned and entered a large bay. The ship slipped through a narrow passage between two forested hills. We drifted into calm, sheltered waters, leaving the agitated open ocean behind, In the distance, the top of an island covered in mist slowly became visible. All the passengers came up on deck to witness the sight.”*** (Page 41)

When studying the past, we do not have all the answers. In fact, asking the right questions is necessary to the historical context when documents and artifacts are not available or never existed. Ask your students to draw a picture of Asser Levy who departed Cuba on August 15 and now, 21 days later, has arrived in New Amsterdam.



Draw a line from the place in the image of Asser Levy to answer the following questions:

What does he see with his eyes?

What is he thinking in his head?

What sounds does he hear with his ears?

What sentences will he write with his hand and pen?

What does he smell with his nose?

What does he feel in his heart?

When he arrives on shore, where will his feet take him?

What are his fears?

Why is he holding a weapon?

What are his hopes?

The traditional opportunities to learn about diversity in the American colonies focus on Roman Catholics in Maryland and the banishment of Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams from Massachusetts Bay, it is 1654, so the Charter of Liberties has not been adopted in Philadelphia, and a safe haven for debtors in Georgia is still 80 years in the future. The evidence in Asser Levy's diary provides inquiry into the lives of Jews who were Dutch citizens.

There are also clues in this book about self-government in the colonies. Most students learn about the representative government in Virginia's House of Burgesses, the Mayflower Compact, the town meetings in New England, the power of the purse in determining local taxes, and the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut. ***The Diary of Asser Levy*** provides a unique look into the authority of judges and the colonial court system. It also provides a prompt for discussions about civic engagement to correct what Asser Levy believes to be arbitrary or unfair decisions.

September 9, 1654: ***"Two days have passed since our trial. Today, we had to return to court with Mr. Petersen and face La Motthe again.***

The captain made his case. He had not been paid the remaining guilders. Mr. Pietersen begged for a little more time.

"The Jews have not paid their legal debt to Captain La Motthe," Stuyvesant declared. "However, they have sufficient property on the St. Catherine. I will allow the captain to sell all of the Jews' belongings at public auction within four days." (Page 51)

For high school students, consider comparing the court system in New Amsterdam with the experiences of four enslaved persons in the courts of Virginia around 1650. ([Source](#)). The arrival of the 23 Jewish refugees from Brazil corresponds directly with the arrival of 300 enslaved individuals from Brazil in New Amsterdam. The double arrival presented problems for this colony of 1,000 residents regarding diversity, language barriers, housing, and work. By 1660, New Amsterdam was considered the most significant slave port in North America. ([Source](#)) These ‘threads,’ or themes, that are part of the historical tapestry of the colonial experience are available to your students through supplementary texts, *The Diary of Asser Levy*, and digital resources.

The information in *The Diary of Asser Levy* is a rich resource for student inquiry, especially for teachers who want to involve their students with guided research, interdisciplinary connections, understanding the diversity of the American experience, and evaluating decisions. The illustrations in the book from colonial New York, with specific street addresses, also provides information for teaching how communities have changed over time. For example, the history behind Pearl Street, Mill Lane, Maiden Lane, William Street, Water Street, and Wall Street are part of the local historical narrative.

Resilience and Restoration

The subtitle of *The Diary of Asser Levy* is, “First Jewish Citizen of New York.” Brainstorm with your students if it should be changed to, “First Jewish Dutch citizen of New York,” “First Citizen Advocate,” “First Jewish Homeowner in America,” “First Refugee in New York,” “First Jewish Banker,” etc. According to the author, Daniela Weil, Asser Levy was the 38th wealthiest person in America. History comes to life for our students when they make connections with the relevance of today. The websites in the Works Cited section provide digital resources for further exploration and investigation. Of particular note are www.newmasterdamhistorycenter.org, www.ung.org, and www.archives.nyc/newamsterdam.

It is the resilience and civic engagement of Asser Levy as a young man under age 20 who spoke for justice, pursued equality, advocated for the right to employment, homeownership, freedom of religious expression, and made the colony of New Amsterdam, and after 1664 the colony of New York, a safer and better place. This is not a book or lesson about any one person or group of people. Instead, it is a starting point for a deeper discussion about the ordinary people who are the ‘soul’ of America more than a century before the Declaration of independence and the birth of a United States of America.

In this context, students might reflect on the legacy of Asser Levy and how history and New York remember him, when his memory was first discovered, if communities outside of New York have places named in his honor, and how he will most likely be remembered in the future of this century and specifically on August 22, 2054, the 400th anniversary of his arrival in New Amsterdam!



Asser Levy Park, Brooklyn, NY (near Coney Island)

Weil, Daniela, *The Diary of Asser Levy*, Pelican Publishing, New Orleans, 2020.