The Life of Abigail Minis an Original Georgia Settler

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ABSTRACT

Abigail Minis was perhaps the most distinguished member of a distinguished Savannah family dating from colonial days. A woman in a male-dominated age and society, a mother of nine children, then a widow at the time of the Revolution, she overcame all odds to become a respected and successful businesswoman and landowner.
The Minis family enjoys a long, distinguished history in Savannah. The subject of this biography is Abigail Minis an original settler of the colony of Georgia. Abigail who lived a prosperous and full life, journeyed to Savannah from Europe as a young woman, gave birth to and raised eight children, started and operated her own business, and helped make her family affluent in a fledgling colony. Because Abigail left no personal diaries nor significant amount of correspondence, over two hundred years later it is hard to get a sense of her personality. Today one must look at her accomplishments to draw conclusions about her as an individual. During the time Abigail lived, the 1700’s, women were usually defined by the men they associated with. Abigail would become an exception to that rule.

These facts about Abigail Minis are clear. She possessed great business acumen, and her reputation around town was such that when you said “Mrs Minis” everybody knew who you were taking about. For the purpose of this biography, I have divided Abigail’s life into four phases. Her first years in Georgia as wife and mother, her life as a widow and
business woman, her life during the Revolution, and finally her life in Savannah as the matriarch of the Minis family.

Abigail’s childhood still remains a mystery. She came to Georgia thirty-two years old already a wife and mother. The story of her youth, including where and when she was married is beyond the scope of this biography. Both family and the Jewish Community tradition tell us the Minis family were Ashkenazi Jews originally from Germany. This information is taken from the male point of view however. It is possible that Abraham and Abigail met and married in England and that Abigail herself was from somewhere besides Germany.

The ship *William and Sarah* carrying the first Jewish settlers of Georgia arrived in Savannah on July 10, 1733. The passengers included Abigail, her husband Abraham, and their daughters Leah and Esther. The list of Georgia settlers believed to be taken from the Earl of Egmont’s notes records that Abraham Minis was awarded lot number ninety-four.³ have been unable to locate exactly where lot ninety-four could have been. This number must either be in error or represent the original numbering
system of Savannah which since has been lost or forgotten. It is almost assuredly one of the lots shown on the Peter Gordon engraving. (Figure 1)

Having traveled to a distant shore separated from whatever support systems she may have had in her homeland, Abigail’s life in Georgia those first few months must have been terribly difficult. Though the Minis family arrived in Savannah five months after the first settlers, I can
View of Savannah, 1734. "I took a view of the town of Savannah. It is about a mile and a quarter in circumference; it stands upon the foot of the hill, which is a hard, clear, sandy beach, a mile in length, and is behind a brick wall. The town is built of wood, all the houses of it are of a white color, and the streets are very clean. The town is surrounded by a brick wall, which is about a mile in circumference, and is two stories high. Heavy goods are brought up by a crane. You see the river which flows past the town in a pleasant manner. The river is about a mile in width, and is navigable for small vessels." Engraving after Peale.
imagine Georgia still being a rough and primitive place. Daily necessities one could buy in established colonial towns might be very hard to come by. Not to mention the lack of medical care, schools, and cultural activities. As a wife and mother, Abigail dealt with these realities on a daily basis.

Possessing a hearty constitution, Abigail survived the act of giving birth every two years over an eleven year time period. Then after four years, she gave birth to Sarah her last child in 1748. Abigail was forty-seven at the time of Sarah’s birth. During these years it is obvious Abigail was devoting most of her time to these young children. The Minis children numbered five daughters, Leah, Esther, Judith, Hannah, and Sarah, and four sons, Phillip, Minis, Joseph, and Samuel. The girls survived their mother, but the boys all passed away before their mother.4

In the meantime, Abraham had begun his life in Georgia as both a farmer (as was required by the Grant), and as a businessman. Though these enterprises might not have flourished (not much did in early Georgia), Mr. Minis had definitely made an impression. Colonel Oglethorpe knew him and used him as a supplier for the colony.5
Abraham died in 1757, stipulating Abigail as the executrix of his estate. No small vote of confidence for an eighteenth-century woman. The horses and mares went to his surviving sons, and his cattle to his daughters. All other possessions went to Abigail including their house, all the contents therein and the farm lot. Abraham’s thoughts regarding the distribution of his will are best stated by him, to enable her (Abigail) to maintain educate and bring up our children.

Without personal correspondence or recorded memories it is impossible to tell Abigail’s emotional state at the time of Abraham’s passing. In the years to come a second marriage might be expected, but Abigail apparently had not the interest or the opportunity to pursue a husband. Thus Abigail begins the second phase of her life, that of a widow. For a woman who lived during Abigail’s age, widowhood afforded opportunities and burdens that never came to married women.

Abigail became the sole owner of number four Hucks Tything/Percival Ward in 1757. As stated before, I have been unable to reconcile whether this lot and the original lot ninety-four are one
in the same. In the following years, Abigail makes numerous real estate transactions in and around Savannah, so many that they become confused. Beginning with her next-door neighbors property, Abigail acquires lot number 5 Hucks Tything/Percival Ward in 1760 and in 1761 lot number 3 Hucks Tything/Percival Ward (Figure 2). The garden lots to these town lots were included in the purchases.

This major expansion seems to be connected with the beginning of the Minis tavern. In 1764, for the first time, Abigail's name appears in the Georgia Gazette under those petitioning “To keep taverns in Savannah.” As a widow needing to support her family, Abigail is allowed to start a business under her name. This newly acquired property would enable the tavern to accommodate guest and their horses more easily. It is worth mentioning that her name does not appear under those petitioning as “Retailer,” so any connection with her husband's old business is no longer in existence. Her name appears again in the years 1765 and 1767 requesting the same license. The tavern business became a typical enterprise for widows to take on because it allowed them to use skills they already had running a household, yet allowed them time to take care of their family at the same time. It is very likely that Abigail's
daughters assisted her in the operation of this tavern.

An advertisement for a Frederick Hoizendorif, saddler, appears in the Georgia Gazette in 1763. Mr. Holzendorif gives the location of his shop as being “opposite from Mrs. Minis’s in Savannah”13, indicating Abigail’s name and location are well known to the readers of the Gazette. Interestingly, Abigail herself never advertises in the newspaper.

Because of her widow status, Abigail is allowed to petition for and receives a King’s Grant of five hundred fifty acres in the Parish of St. Mary’s. The grant of this land, called both “pine land” and “swamp land,” is dated the sixth of September 1760.14 In 1767, Abigail petitions and receives a different grant this time for property in St. Matthews Parish. The justification for the request reads, “…because she had eight children and nineteen Negroes..,” Mrs. Minis requests another nine hundred acres to add to the one thousand acres currently in her possession.16 In 1768, Abigail acquires additional land next to the previously mentioned property in St. Mary’s Parish.16

The reason for the acquisition of these tracts of land I believe to be for investment purposes only. Abigail does not appear ever to make use of
the property. Perhaps counsel advised her that even more than her business, real estate holdings would provide security for herself and her family.

Meanwhile the years prior to the Revolution prove to be golden ones for the Minis Tavern. The committee of dignitaries responsible for building the new Tybee lighthouse chose Mrs. Minis to provide the “provisions & liquors” celebrating the completion of the same. This suggests a catering business flourishing as part of the tavern.¹ ⁷

As the American Revolution came to Savannah, Abigail began the third phase of her life. I found this the most interesting, yet difficult part of her life to research. Perhaps because she was a woman, Abigail’s personal political opinions did not matter to the society she lived in. The contributions of Savannah Jewry during the Revolution have been researched fairly extensively by various Jewish scholars. Abigail is typically presented as having been a Whig by these researchers. Her son phillip and her friend Mordecai Sheftall definitely took the Patriots’ side during the conflict.¹⁸ However unlike these men, Abigail left no conclusive
evidence that she supported one side or the other.

Evidently she did loan money or agreed to loan money to the continental Army. Such a loan would involve considerable risk. However in the letter she wrote to Mordecai Sheftall about the loan, her tone is of a businesswomen not a Patriot. Other accounts indicating Abigail’s favoring the side of the Patriots all seem to originate from family and community lore rather than documentable facts.

It is my opinion that Abigail may not have supported the British, but once they retook Savannah in 1778 she decided to ride the fence between them and the Patriots. Like the good business women she was, Abigail chose not to burn any bridges behind her. Indeed both British officials and Savannah citizens seemed to be wary of this crusty seventy-seven year old woman.

In December of 1778, Mordecai Sheftall writes of an incident after he has been imprisoned by the British. For whatever reason, Abigail seems to have influence with the British. She is allowed to visit Mr.
Sheftall, a known Patriot, in prison and bring him some food.20 In 1779, Abigail decided it would be best for her and her daughters to leave Savannah. Evidently she was feeling uncomfortable, unsafe or both in Savannah. Depending on whose account you read, Abigail felt pressure from the local Tories or she felt pressure from the local Whigs.

What can be proven is that Abigail petitioned Crown officials to be allowed to settle with her daughters in Charleston for the duration of the conflict, and for the ship they hire to carry them to Charleston to fly a flag of truce.21 Expressing concern for her property in Georgia, she requests she be allowed to hire someone to manage her Savannah goods and chattels in her absence. The Royal Governor granted Abigail’s request in an expedient fashion stipulating “…that they may appoint any persons, who have taken the Oaths,”22 to manage the said property. It is highly unlikely that Abigail approached the British with the attitude that she would be returning to Georgia as soon as the British lost the War. Whether or not she openly supported the British I cannot say, but she obviously commanded their respect.
The next record of Mrs. Minis appears in the South Carolina newspaper, “Yesterday a flag arrived from Savannah with Mrs. Minis and family.” This brings up the question whether Abigail was already known in South Carolina. For the next few years she and her daughters lived in Charleston apparently in rented accommodations. It has been suggested that she practiced trade while there, but never is the kind of trade specified.

It is unknown exactly when Abigail relocated back to Savannah. She apparently had not offended her fellow Savannahians to any great extent if at all during the Revolution, for just as she had planned Abigail regains all of her property, again suggesting that she made no outright support for either side during the struggle. Abigail did return to Savannah and would remain there for the rest of her life. By this time no one could deny that Mrs. Minis, as she was always referred to, was one of Savannah’s great matriarchs.

In 1787, Abigail began another intense series of real estate transactions. She purchased from John and Robina Penman lot number
two Tyrconnell Tything/Darby Ward, “....fronting North on Johnstons Square...”25 (Figure 2) Then in 1789 she makes a huge transaction purchasing number ten Moore Tything/Percival Ward, number four Second Tything/Anson Ward, numbers three & four Third Tything/Anson Ward, number ten Hucks Tything/Percival Ward, and a farm lot of ninety acres."26(Figure 2)

By this time, Abigail, well advanced in age, might have been acting as a money source for her less fortunate neighbors. She had the cash to buy their property, and they seemed more than willing to sell to her. Before Abigail died she had owned property in three different Georgia counties and all over Savannah.

County Records indicate that in 1790 Abigail sold two bonds. The buyers are listed as her daughter Leah and a John Habersham. Both bonds are priced over one hundred pounds plus interest. Was this simply another business transaction or is it possible that Abigail, realizing she would not go on for ever, began to pass on some of her assets to her heirs?2ZThis record brought up more questions than it answered.
On the eleventh of October 1794 Abigail passed away at the age of ninety-three. She was survived by her five unmarried daughters, and her grandchildren Abigail, Frances, Abraham, Isaac, Esther, and Phillippa. Counted among her friends and family were some of the most influential and respected citizens of Savannah. The Sheftall family records indicate Abigail was buried in “Mordecai Sheftall Cemetery” in Savannah. Unfortunately evidences of the grave are no longer visible.28

In December of 1794, Leah who had been named executrix of Abigail’s estate, placed an advertisement in the “Savannah Gazette” asking those with claims against Abigail to bring those claims to her for retribution.29 Abigail’s will specified that after all of her debts had been paid, her five daughters or their survivors were to receive all her goods and chattels. If they did not survive her, then the grandchildren were to receive the estate. Abigail signed her will both in Hebrew and English.30

Since Abigail Minis and her family ran businesses, they did not have the luxury of keeping vast diaries and writing volumes of letters. One can judge their success not by what they said, but what they accomplished
during their lives. Fortunately complete inventories for both Abraham and Abigail Minis are available for evaluation.

Abigail and Abraham arrived in Georgia in 1733 with nothing, and Abigail died in 1794 with a fairly sizable estate including a town home and a plantation. Abraham left Abigail a modest house with a shop and farm lot. At the time of her death Abigail’s town holdings included a sizable home, many furnishings, and nine slaves. At her plantation where she also maintained a home, Abigail owned thirty-six head of sheep, eighteen head of cattle and another six slaves. Many of her other holdings had been sold or distributed to her family by 1794.

Abigail had survived the first years in a fledgling colony, a revolution and a war, and through it all managed to hold on to her possessions and her dignity. I found no evidence that Abigail ever asked for or received help from anyone. The evidence shows that Abigail Minis was ahead of her time in her ability to maintain herself and to succeed in a man’s world.

My inquiries at Mickve Israel Temple lead me to Abram Minis Jr., the
only living descendent of the Minis family who is still associated with the Mickve Israel congregation in Savannah. He is the owner of several of the original documents referenced in this paper, and he initiated the writing of the recently published work, “The Minis Family of Georgia 1733-1992,” written by Kaye Kole. It would appear fruitful inquiries might be made of members of the Sheftall family who still reside in Savannah but no longer bear the Sheftall name particularly Alan Gaynor. Further research should be conducted at the Bevis Marks Jewish Congregation’s Archives in London, the British Public Records Office also in London, and the American Jewish Archives located at Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati.


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