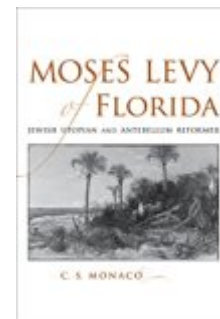


**C. S. Monaco.** *Moses Levy of Florida: Jewish Utopian and Antebellum Reformer.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005. xi + 240 pp. \$44.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-3095-7.



**Reviewed by** James M. Denham

**Published on** H-Florida (March, 2006)

Throughout its history, Florida has served as a place of refuge, renewal, and rebirth—a launching pad for unconventional ideas and schemes—a proving ground for utopian experiments. Ponce de Leon was the first European to discover Florida's exotic potential. Bartram came later. During the Second Spanish Period, the eccentric Zephaniah Kingsley founded prosperous plantations in North Florida, from which he wrote tracts defending slavery and miscegenation at the same time. In an excellent, probing study of Moses Elias Levy, Chris Monaco sheds light on another unconventional migrant who influenced his world. Understudied and misunderstood Jewish pioneer Moses Levy was the founder of Pilgrimage Plantation, near present-day Micanopy, Florida—which, according to Monaco, was the first Jewish communitarian settlement in the United States.

Knowledge of Moses E. Levy's activities in Florida, the Caribbean, and in Europe—especially his planting and utopian enterprises in the Alachua County region—has always been sketchy. The author argues persuasively that for a number of reasons—including an estranged son, and a re-

luctance on the part of the subject himself to be identified personally in many of his own writings and initiatives—Moses Elisa Levy's life has been misunderstood and shrouded in mystery.

Monaco's fine biography presents Levy as a man of the "Atlantic World." Born in Morocco, the son of an affluent Sephardic Jewish merchant and advisor to the sultan, Levy also lived in Gibraltar, the Danish West Indies, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and England before and after coming to the United States. As a successful West Indies shipper-merchant, Levy acquired sizable acreage in Florida from his Spanish business associates. Once Spanish Florida became American territory, Levy transferred his center of activities from Havana to the Territory of Florida with the goal of creating "an asylum ... for our fellow creatures" (p. 39). In this work Levy collaborated with other leading Jewish business leaders and intellectuals in the United States and Europe, including Frederick Warburg, Moses Myers, and Mordecai Noah.

Levy labored long and hard to achieve his goal. But the project foundered because of financial panics, protracted legal battles over land ti-

bles, ill-suited participants, and Indian raids occasioned by the Second Seminole War. With his dream of establishing this utopian community ruined, Levy, broken in health and finances, moved to St. Augustine. But near the end of his life he was able to recover his fortune, in part. During these years in St. Augustine in the 1830s and 1840s Levy's estrangement from his son became complete. Monaco recreates and helps us understand this estrangement. He pieces together the public and private feud between father and son in the context of David Levy (Yulee's) rising political power and influence.

In an excellent discussion of the emerging political dynamics of East Florida and the father and son's place in them, Monaco argues that Levy's opposition to the onward march of individualism, a hallmark of Jacksonian Democracy created added friction between the father and son. Though Levy never cared much for politics, and seldom voted, he was more in line with the Whigs who denounced Democrat's "cult of the common man." Thus Levy gravitated naturally to cultivated planters, business and banking men who were his son's Whig opponents like Peter Sken Smith, Joseph Hernandez, and George Fairbanks.

As Monaco explains, the father and son "occupied opposing ends of the philosophical spectrum. Levy was a proto-Zionist, a social activist, and utopian theorist who questioned and rebelled against orthodoxy and the political status quo. His progressive ideas, especially in regard to slavery, were anathema in the South. In comparison, David Yulee disassociated himself from Judaism and yearned not only for acceptance by the southern elite but to become one of their stalwart leaders and defenders. While his father was attracted to the egalitarian theories of the Enlightenment, Yulee promoted the ideals of the Industrial Revolution and Manifest Destiny. On some level Moses Levy's liberal views seemed to generate opposing beliefs in his strong-willed son and certainly contributed to the unbending character of the ante-

bellum states' rights champion known as the 'Florida Fire Eater'" (pp. 3-4).

Though Levy's vision of founding an agricultural refuge for persecuted Jews throughout the world was never realized, Monaco argues persuasively that Levy's life represents an important yet unknown part of Hebrew intellectual life in the Atlantic world. His contributions and connections to major Hebrew intellectual trends in the circum-Caribbean, European, and American worlds are clearly and distinctly drawn.

The author ably places Levy in the context of his time and place; and in doing so retraces Levy's steps throughout the Atlantic world. Monaco combed European archives in Seville, London, Paris, Hamburg, and Vienna. Monaco also exploited repositories in St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, Williamsburg, Norfolk, and Cincinnati--as well as familiar holdings in St. Augustine, Tallahassee, and Gainesville. The result of this research is to reveal new and surprising revelations that will question previous assumptions and shed new light on Levy and his better-known son. Monaco argues that much of what we know about the life of Moses Elias Levy is either incorrect or unknown. Monaco scrapes away the myths and half-truths that have shrouded his subject's life. This was not an easy task because his subject himself eschewed publicity, and strove to remain in the shadows. Levy's estranged son also contributed to the confusion. Monaco persuasively argues that the politician, businessman, and aspiring politician purposefully obfuscated his father's past and many accomplishments in order not to embarrass him, and later to break his father's will that disinherited him.

While many historians have suspected for years that Levy's son carefully manipulated facts about his father's life to ensure his own economic and political success, this is the strongest attempt yet to expose this manipulation. At best, one could say in summarizing the relationship of Moses Levy to his wife, sons, and daughters, as the late

Samuel Proctor once explained to this writer, that, in the modern sense, the Levy family represented the nineteenth-century version of the "dysfunctional family." Monaco adeptly explores the complicated dynamics of his subject's family, using available primary and forgotten secondary sources and makes careful plausible conclusions about his subject's behavior. The exploration of the father and son's relationship, the confirmation of the father's authorship of the anonymous anti-slavery tract in London, "Plan for the Abolition of Slavery" (1828), and Monaco's uncovering of Levy's "eccentric views"--so out of accord with the prevailing political, economic, and social views of the antebellum South--make it all the more plausible for the aspiring son to obfuscate or recast his father's past to suit his own purposes. Monaco's research is exhaustive and his conclusions are sound.

Despite the obfuscation of the record, Monaco points out Levy's lasting accomplishments and contributions to territorial Florida. "[W]hile Levy's small Jewish colony survived just thirteen years," notes Monaco, "his impact in the Florida territory was substantial. Highly regarded by prominent officials, Levy reintroduced sugarcane as a viable crop; organized the first Florida development corporation; was instrumental in establishing the territory's earliest free public school; helped found the village Micanopy, the first distinct United States town in Florida; and served for many years as East Florida's most vocal and influential Jewish resident. In addition, his colonization venture brought much needed settlers into the sparsely populated interior, and his great expenditures in sugar mill technology inspired similar investments throughout the territory--a veritable 'sugar boom' that lasted until the Second Seminole War" (p. 9).

Monaco has accomplished some impressive detective work here. But I hasten to say that this is only one contribution of this work. Monaco has also uncovered and adeptly laid out the unfolding

of an unknown and pioneering attempt to create a utopian community with a strong Hebrew component in an area on the outer fringes of the American frontier. Finally, Monaco's work on Levy marks a major contribution to our understanding of Hebrew intellectual thought in the Atlantic world.

Monaco's writing is clear, concise, and lacks jargon. Terms are explained well and concisely. His eloquent narrative style tells an interesting story while providing context for Levy's life and times. Monaco has presented a finely crafted full-scale biography of an important figure. In doing so he has made a substantial contribution to our knowledge of the man and his pursuits in the context in which they were achieved.

This is not an arcane academic tome we have here but a living, breathing biography that makes many interesting and original statements about a person, time, and place of which we know very little. For far too long Moses E. Levy has been the shadowy, ambivalent figure behind his famous son's image. Chris Monaco's fine book casts a bright light on this misunderstood and often maligned figure. This book will be of great interest to scholars of American, Circum-Caribbean, Southern and Florida history. It will also attract the attention of scholars of Hebraic traditions in the Atlantic world. "Pathbreaking" is perhaps an overused word, but I think this book fits the bill.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-florida>

**Citation:** James M. Denham. Review of Monaco, C. S. *Moses Levy of Florida: Jewish Utopian and Antebellum Reformer*. H-Florida, H-Net Reviews. March, 2006.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11530>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.