

Sarah Cohen (nee Torres)

Sarah Torres was born 8 March 1806 at London, England to Abraham and Esther Torres (nee Dias). Sarah was only 11 years old when her father died on 20 January 1818. We don't know the financial circumstances for Esther after Abraham's death, but with six children aged between 1 and 11 and no-one to support her, she was most likely desperate. However, the Sephardic Jewish community had a strong welfare system in operation to ensure the support of community members in financial difficulties long before the "state" provided such aid. From "*The Bevis Marks Synagogue*":¹

In the true tradition of Judaism the founders of the Synagogue were not content merely with building a House of God, it had to be a place where, through the service of God, help could be given to those in need, a place where the highest moral and philanthropic ideas were actually put into practice. This Synagogue looked after its less fortunate members at a time when needy people in England were too rarely given the basic dignities which are the right of every human being. The Synagogue had and still has many charitable trusts to look after its poorer members 'from the cradle to the grave'.

And so a special "Society" was formed to support girls when they came of marrying age.

² "In 1720 eight benevolent individuals formed a plan to establish a Society for granting Marriage Portions to Fatherless Girls of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation, but until the accession of some other liberal Gentlemen who united with them for this charitable purpose, their good intentions could not be carried into effect.

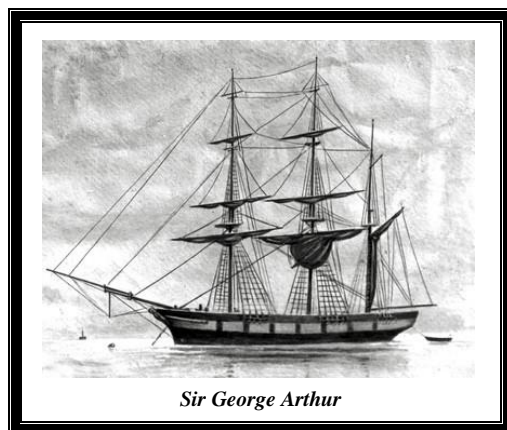
These "marriage portions" actually amount to a dowry. Sarah was the recipient of one of these grants when she married Benjamin Cohen on 31 August 1825. The couple received £120, a lot of money in 1825.

Benjamin and Sarah had a confectionary business at 8 Hackney Road and this is also where they lived. Benjamin and Sarah had five children between 1827 and 1834 – Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Judith and Jacob.

On 19 October 1835 Benjamin was arrested for receiving stolen goods, tried at the Old Bailey and sentenced to 14 years transportation to Van Diemen's Land. But that is another story.

With four sons to support, Sarah continued to run the confectionery business at 8 Hackney Road.

In 1839 Sarah decided to migrate to Australia to hopefully be reunited with husband Benjamin. On 4 December 1839 Sarah and the four boys departed London aboard the *Sir George Arthur* and arrived in Hobart Town on 10 May 1840. The *Sir George Arthur* was the largest ship built in Tasmania at the time and was built by shipwright C Johnston for businessman John Petchey. Petchey had taken the ship to England to demonstrate her ability to carry both passengers and cargo and was on the return trip to Tasmania.



Details of the arrival were printed in the newspapers, as were little descriptions of the voyage:

³ THE "SIR GEORGE ARTHUR." - We very heartily congratulate Mr. Petchey, on his safe return to the Colony, in his ship, Sir George Arthur, after a long and rather rough voyage. For twenty-two days they were beating about in that boisterous whirl-pool, the Bay of Biscay, but, fortunately, without sustaining any damage. They put in to Rio, where they remained a few days, and finally, reached the Derwent, after a voyage of five months. The ship excited considerable interest in London, being the largest, hitherto built in these Colonies: she has been entered A1, at Lloyd's, we hear, for fourteen years, - an occurrence not very common in the proceedings of that Institution, the members of which, likewise, presented the spirited owner with some appropriate marks of their approbation, but of what kind, we have not yet ascertained. The Sir George Arthur brought out twenty-six passengers for this Colony.

Sarah found that Benjamin had been sent to Woolnorth and set about trying to be reunited with him. Early correspondence between Sarah and the Superintendent of Convicts has not been located. However, she did write to the manager of the Van Diemen's Land Company, Edward Curr, on 21 August 1840, with a view to the family being reunited. The letter took almost two months to get to Curr, arriving on 19 October 1840 and Curr responded two days later on 21 October 1840.

¹ Richard D. Barnett and Abraham Levy – *The Bevis Marks Synagogue*, 1970.

² Bevis Marks Records – "A Short Account of the Society" and "List of Orphans".

³ Colonial Times 12 May 1840.

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21st October 1840

M^{rs} Cohen (Mr Curr writes to Mrs Sarah Cohen)

I received your letter of 21st August on the 19th Inst. I sent it to the Principal Superintendent of Convicts, stating upon that I have no objection whatever that your husband Benjamin Cohen should be allowed to join his wife, but that I will not have his wife and family.

21st October 1840

Principal Superintendent of Convicts

I have no objection whatever that Benjamin Cohen should be allowed to join his wife but I will not have the wife & family here.

(Signed) Edward Curr.

Curr arranged for Benjamin to be sent to Launceston where he would be closer to his family. In May 1841 Benjamin was placed on board the Van Diemen's Land Company's ship, the *Edward*, for the trip to Launceston and upon arrival was placed in the Launceston Gaol. Unfortunately, by this time, Benjamin had gone completely insane and early the next morning, 8 May 1841, he threw himself down the well at the gaol and was killed.

Sarah and the boys are now in Hobart Town by themselves, so what was Sarah to do? Quite simply, she set up a confectioner's shop in Argyle Street and continued the trade she practiced in London. The business may not have earned enough to support the family as the following indicates.

The minutes of the Hobart Synagogue

Committee meeting 7/9/1845

It was unanimously resolved that Mrs Cohen's appointment at the sum of 6 pounds yearly to attend in the Ladies Gallery be confirmed.

By 1847 Sarah had established herself at 26 Liverpool Street where she was surrounded by shopkeepers from the Jewish community and had a special friend in Mrs Abrahams who ran the drapery shop next door.

⁴ The south side, (of Liverpool St) Murray St. end of the main shopping block, was the stronghold of a prosperous Jewish community. The wholesale premises of Nathan and Saul (Samuel) Moses at (later known as) Miller's corner, were surrounded by tailors' and pawnbrokers' shops, clustered close, their small paned-windows cluttered with goods and samples for view. Behind lay the warehouses and workshops controlled by Leo Susman and Abraham Rueben, and here one could discern a living geared to urban pursuits, with little reference to forests, the sheep plains and farming life of the lonely island spaces.

But another synagogue committee meeting could throw further light on Sarah's financial plight:

Committee meeting 28/4/1848

Rev. Maurice Cohen complained that a member of the congregation had publicly and willfully violated the precepts of our holy religion.....Rev Mr Cohen personally stated that the person alluded to in his letter was Mrs Widow Cohen who kept open shop on the last holy days..... It was resolved that notice on the part on the committee to be sent to every Hebrew householder that any person or persons willfully violating the mosaic ordinances by keeping open shop on the Sabbath or holy days shall have no claim to be entitled to any benefit or privileges of the congregation and that Mrs Cohen particularly receive notice to that effect.

In late 1850, Sarah promoted her business in the press: ⁵

Sarah Cohen ... Returns thanks to his (sic) friends and to the public for the liberal support afforded her during the past eleven years, and trusts by continued efforts to meet with an increased patronage, by importing the very best articles, and at the lowest prices. S.C. has just received, per *Calcutta*, a very choice and large assignment of Goods, including the most approved Cough Lozenges, in the greatest demand in London; vis., Bath, Pipe, Jujubes, Candied Orange and Lemon Chips, with every other article in the Trade, too numerous to name.

N.B. – S.C.'s own manufactured Goods are so well known that they require no comment.

On 21 January 1854 there was a huge fire in Hobart Town. A report in the Courier on 21 January 1854 describes the situation, the desperation, the panic and primitive means of defending property from a fire which ravaged through Sarah's neighbourhood and includes:

..... we should also mention that the shops of Mr. Lazarus, Mrs. Galway, Mrs. Abrahams, and Mrs. Cohen have not only received great damage from their contiguity to the fire, but also from the necessity which existed of pulling down some portions to aid in arresting the progress of the flames.

Around a month after the fire and after a prolonged drought, Hobart was hit by a vicious storm, washing buildings and bridges away and causing severe flooding.

By April 1854 much had been done to rebuild the parts of Hobart affected by the fire and storm. ⁶

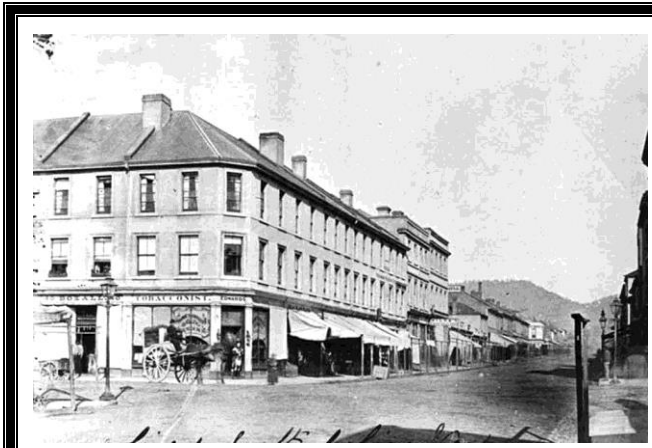
CITY IMPROVEMENTS - The drapery establishment of Mrs. Abrahams, and the juvenile rendezvous where **Mrs. Cohen** deals in delectable home-baked of every description of sweet meats, have been neatly renovated.

⁴ A Few From Afar, Jewish Lives in Tasmania from 1804" page 85.

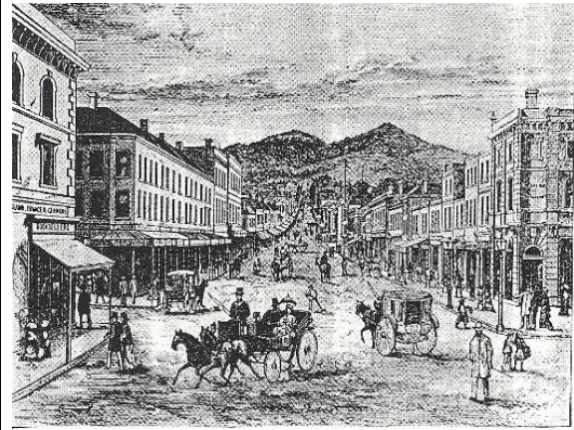
⁵ Colonial Times 26 November 1850.

⁶ The Courier 27 April 1854.

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Liverpool Street before the fire and flood. Sarah's shop was under the large canvas awning on the left side of the street.



Liverpool St, Hobart – after reconstruction c.1880

From the inventory of stock published after Sarah's death, we know her shop was stocked with confectionery in endless variety, displayed in glass. We can confidently conclude that Sarah created and maintained a successful confectionery business, bringing the latest confectionery lines from London into Hobart Town.

Sarah and the boys were members of the Jewish community in Hobart. Peter and Ann Elias's book, *A Few From Afar*, shows a list from the congregation's ledger containing names of those who were seat holders and in the list we find Sarah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In the evening of 11 July 1857, Sarah was using an iron shutter-bar to close her shop, when she had a sudden pain in her head. She asked a passer-by to hold the shutter-bar and went back inside. Sarah had had a stroke and died shortly after.⁷

⁸ Sudden Death – Mrs Cohen, the well-known pastry cook in Liverpool St, died suddenly on Saturday. According to the rights of her people, her remains were interred in the Jewish cemetery yesterday.

Sarah was buried in the Jewish cemetery in Harrington Street.

In 2002 the remains of all bodies in the Harrington Street Jewish Cemetery, including Sarah, were reinterred at the Cornelian Bay Cemetery. They were placed within a small walled area in the Jewish section of the cemetery. The wall was designed by Laurence Herst and David Clark and made by a stonemason. The wall was made out of every tombstone fragment that had been found at the Harrington Street Cemetery. Each person buried in this special area has a Star of David attached to the wall showing their name, age at death and the year in which they died.



Sarah Cohen's grave in Harrington Street Cemetery Memorial Garden at Cornelian Bay Cemetery.

Written by Lorraine and Geoff Court.

Lorraine is Sarah's 3x great granddaughter.

⁷ The Cornwall Chronicle (Launceston) 18 July 1857 and Colonial Times 14 July 1857.

⁸ Colonial Times 14 July 1857.