In 1735, John Wesley left Oxford and sailed to the New World as a missionary to the Indians. Not long after he arrived in Georgia, on February 6, 1736, he was diverted from his original course. Rather than going to the Indians living in the hinterland, Wesley became minister to the white colonists residing in Savannah. Here he met and talked not only with the Gentile population, but also with the Jews who had settled in the town (approximately fifteen to twenty per cent of the population). This paper will describe Wesley’s connections with Dr. Samuel Nunez Ribeiro, a Jewish physician of Portuguese descent. It will argue, first, that Wesley showed some interest in converting the Jews of Savannah to the Christian religion and, second, that he and Nunez eventually established a personal relationship which transcended the religious differences between them.

At least some of the Georgia Trustees were interested in converting members of the Jewish faith to Christianity. This may be inferred from a request which the Trustees sent to the Rev. Samuel Quincy, Wesley’s predecessor as the Anglican minister of Savannah. They asked if any of the Jewish emigrants were disposed to change their religion. ¹ Quincy’s report was not encouraging. Perhaps the Trustees blamed him for not pressing the issue. At least, they grew restive. In order to mollify them, Colonel Oglethorpe, the Trustees’ representative in Georgia, reported that one Jew had been converted. ² The name of this person is not given, but he may have been Johann Gottfried Christ (Salomon Levi), a German convert residing in the village of Ebenezer, ³ twenty miles northwest of Savannah.

Quincy, Johann Boltzius (the Lutheran pastor at Ebenezer), and A. G. Spangenberg, a bishop of the Moravian Church, each had good things to say regarding the Jews of Savannah. The Jewish settlers were honest and law-abiding

persons, who took their civic responsibilities seriously (serving in the militia, for example). Individual Jews welcomed Christian immigrants with gifts of food. Dr. Nunez stopped an epidemic which was raging in Savannah at the time he arrived in the village. These actions surprised Christians who were conditioned to regard Jews with suspicion and distrust. They were also liable to misinterpretation. They could be construed to mean that the Jews of Savannah were disposed to hear the Gospel. Other occurrences reinforced this impression. "The Englishmen, nobility and common folks alike, treat the Jews as their equal," Boltzius observed. "They drink, gamble, and walk together with them; in fact, let them take part in all their fun." Spangenberg was invited to the Jewish "synagogue," presumably to convey the latest news from Europe. The majority of the Jews did not comply with all of the dietary laws. They were somewhat lax in their observance of the Sabbath. Furthermore, Jews attended Christian services of worship occasionally, either out of curiosity or as an expression of civic solidarity. They were also present at Christian weddings.

Wesley conversed at length with Quincy, Boltzius, and Spangenberg. In the course of these conversations, he probably heard them describe their contacts with the Jewish settlers. These descriptions may have influenced Wesley’s attitude toward the Jews of Savannah. Boltzius in particular was optimistic. Referring to Benjamin Sheftall, a Jewish emigrant from Germany, Boltzius wrote, "We have had several Discourses with him concerning Judaism, and given him some Passages out of the Holy Scripture to consider on, which seemed to make a strong Impression on him." Boltzius’ interest in the Jewish population can be traced back to his student days at the University of Halle, a center of the Protestant missionary movement. Among the organizations associated with the University, although not a formal part of it, was the Institutum Judaicum, founded in 1728 by Johann Heinrich Callenberg. This Institute gave young men training in the Hebrew Bible, Yiddish, and apologetics, and sent them out as itinerant missionaries, preaching to the Jewish inhabitants of Germany and Eastern Europe. Callenberg also published books and tracts for distribution to Jewish readers. Boltzius was acquainted with Callenberg’s work, since he wrote to

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2 Adelaide L. Fries, The Moravians in Georgia, 1735–40 (Raleigh: Edwards and Broughton, 1905), 82. The term "synagogue" is misleading. Boltzius described the building as "an old and miserable hut" (letter to J. M. Callenberg, February 21, 1738, quoted in Stern, 185).
3 An Extract of the Journals of Mr. Commissary Von Reck, ... And of the Reverend Mr. Bolzius [sic] (London: Printed by M. Downing, 1734), in Our First Visit to America: Early Reports from the Colony of Georgia, 1732–1740 (Savannah: Beehive Press, 1974), 68 (April 3, 1734).
Halle, asking for a supply of the Institute’s tracts. Benjamin Sheftall received one. 8

From April 1736 through January 1737 Wesley divided his time between Savannah and Frederica, Oglethorpe’s military headquarters to the south. Two of Wesley’s visits to Frederica bear upon the story which is being told here. Each of them is related to the international competition between Spain and Great Britain. Both the British and the Spanish claimed the territory which the British called “Georgia.” Oglethorpe was determined not only to make good his country’s claim but also to move forward the southern boundary of the colony. His actions provoked the Spaniards. British emissaries who had been dispatched to St. Augustine, the capital of Spanish Florida, were placed under house arrest. 9 War was a genuine possibility.

A significant event occurred just after Wesley returned from a trip to Frederica which he had started on May 19, 1736. He began to study the Spanish language. Oglethorpe and Wesley had left Frederica together on June 16; they arrived in Savannah on the 26th. Two days later, Wesley “began Spanish,” 10 as he put it. It may be inferred that Oglethorpe, in the course of the journey, had explained the political situation to Wesley and stated that he needed a Spanish language interpreter. Wesley was the man, but first he had to find a teacher. Wesley asked Dr. Nunez to give him lessons. His reason for asking, let it be noted, was basically secular, not religious. He intended to help Oglethorpe in his communications with the Spanish. Under these circumstances, one can understand why Nunez agreed to Wesley’s request. The first round of lessons ran from June 24 to November 29 (with certain interruptions, one of which will be mentioned below). After a lapse of four months, the lessons were resumed. By that time, Wesley’s motivation had changed.

An incident which occurred in late August 1736 illustrates the confidence which Oglethorpe placed in Wesley. On August 10, Wesley set out on another trip to Frederica. He brought with him dispatches from South Carolina addressed to Oglethorpe. For some reason (perhaps Oglethorpe needed a secretary), Wesley remained in Frederica until September 3. On August 26, Oglethorpe began a series of talks with Don Antonio de


11 Arredondo’s vessel reached St. Simon’s Island on August 25. I assume that the conference between Arredondo and Oglethorpe began the next day.
Arredondo, an envoy representing the Governor of Havana. Although Wesley
did not accompany Oglethorpe to the talks, he knew what was at stake, since
the Colonel discussed the issues with him at night.

Oglethorpe returned to Europe on November 23, 1736. After a final trip
to Frederica (December 29–January 31, 1737), Wesley settled down in
Savannah for the remainder of his stay in Georgia. He tried to focus his attention
upon his duties, as he understood them, as minister of the parish. In my judgment, these probably included conversing with the Jewish settlers regarding
the claims of Christianity, or at least preparing to do so. These pieces of
evidence support this conclusion.

(a) Wesley visited the households in Savannah on a systematic basis.
Both the Georgia Trustees and the organization which paid Wesley’s salary,
the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, expected their ministers to
make these visits. If householders were reluctant to receive the minister, he
could ask the civil magistrates for help in gaining admittance. These pastoral
visits were not simply social calls. The minister would ask about the material
needs of the household and try to relieve the necessities of the sick and
impoverished. But the primary purpose of his visit was spiritual in nature, to
exhort careless Anglicans to practice their faith more conscientiously, and to
convert to Anglican Christianity persons who belonged to other religious tra­
ditions. Wesley mentioned specifically his efforts to convert Catholics and
Quakers.

(b) While making his rounds, Wesley encountered Jewish settlers—his
“Jewish parishioners,” as he called them—who spoke little or no English. He
decided to resume his study of Spanish, in order to converse with them. His
first efforts to learn Spanish, in 1736, had been desultory and irregular.
Beginning in April 1736, however, he set his mind to the task. Once again his
teacher was Dr. Nunez.

(c) Wesley had at his disposal a collection of books provided by Dr.
Bray’s Associates and the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Among the books in this collection was a volume written by Richard Kidder
(1633–1703), the Bishop of Bath and Wells. The title of his book is The
Demonstration of the Messias. In Which the Truth of the Christian Religion is
defended, especially against the Jews. Wesley read Kidder’s work on April
15 and 16, 1737, that is, nine and ten days after he resumed his lessons in
Spanish. While this could be a coincidence, it appears as if Wesley was ready­
ning himself to present the claims of Christianity to Spanish-speaking Jews.


\[13\] Wesley, Journal and Diaries I, 178.

\[14\] In Wesley’s journal, as he published it, he says that he began his study of Spanish on April 4,
1737 (Journal and Diaries I, 178). The lessons actually began on June 28, 1736, as his manu­
script diary shows (Journals and Diaries I, 398).

\[15\] London: Printed by J. Heptinstall, 1684 (Part I), 1699 (Part II), 1700 (Part III).
Under these circumstances, Nunez's willingness to continue with the Spanish lessons is somewhat surprising. This is all the more the case, given his background. Nunez's parents were "New Christians," that is the descendants of Portuguese Jews who had converted to Roman Catholicism under pain of banishment. He received his medical training at the University of Alcala (or so tradition has it), and established a lucrative practice in Lisbon. The Grand Inquisitor of Portugal and members of the Dominican Order were counted among his patients. Behind the scenes, however, Nunez was playing a dangerous game. While conforming to Catholicism in public, he and his wife practiced Judaism in private. Not only that, but Nunez converted several "New Christians," so called, to their ancestral faith. Eventually the Inquisition caught up with him. He was arrested in 1703 and thrown in jail. Although Nunez was sentenced to life imprisonment, he was released the following year, probably at the insistence of his important patients. Nevertheless, Nunez remained under surveillance. He was confined to Lisbon and returned to prison at least once. Eventually the tension became too great. In 1726 Nunez and his family escaped to London aboard a British ship engaged in the Anglo-Portuguese trade. Shortly after their arrival, Nunez was circumcised and he and his wife were married according to Jewish rites.

Why then did a man who guided a series of "New Christians" back to Judaism continue to help Wesley with his Spanish? Wesley's original reason for learning Spanish provides an answer to this question. He had taken up the language in 1736 to assist Oglethorpe, if need be, in his conversations with the Spaniards living in Florida. Nunez was glad to help Wesley at this juncture; the Spanish lessons were a contribution, however small, to the defense of Georgia. By 1737, however, the situation had changed. The tension between the English and the Spanish had been reduced, at least temporarily. Oglethorpe had sailed for Europe. Wesley was no longer involved, even tangentially, in "high politics." He had left Frederica, Oglethorpe's military headquarters, and taken up residence in Savannah full-time. With this change, Wesley's motivation for learning Spanish changed. Now he was thinking in pastoral, not political, terms. It appears that Nunez did not recognize this shift, or at least did not become aware of it for some time. This misperception would account for Nunez's willingness to resume the lessons.

The village of Savannah was split into factions, which it could ill afford. Wesley came to be regarded by some as the creator and leader of a faction. Once this had happened, his critics, especially Thomas Causton, set out to humiliate him and put him in his place. Finding himself in an untenable position, Wesley left Georgia towards the end of 1737. This series of events, and

John Wesley and His "Jewish Parishioners"

its effect upon Wesley's relationship with Nunez, will be described in the final section of this paper.

The way in which Wesley conceived his duty as a pastor was one issue at stake. Some persons approved the way in which Wesley conducted his ministry. However, other people were disturbed because the daily and Sunday services, as arranged by Wesley, diverged from the patterns to which they were accustomed. Still others were offended by Wesley's surveillance of their behavior, as they saw it, and his repeated exhortations to repent and reform.

The relationship between parson and magistrate was another point at issue. Wesley stood up for persons who had been treated in an unjust manner. He rebuked the magistrates in open court, when he disagreed with the procedures they followed and the decisions they made. Some individuals applauded Wesley's actions. Others rebuked him for interfering in situations which were not his concern. They argued that Wesley was eroding respect for the law and encouraging people to ignore the magistrates' commands (a significant accusation, since the magistrates had so little force at their disposal).

Matters came to a head when Wesley gravely offended Thomas Causton, the most powerful man in Savannah. Causton was the chief magistrate (First Bailiff) of the settlement, charged by the Trustees with enforcing the law. As such, he had felt the sting of Wesley's criticisms. Causton was also the storekeeper, who managed the stock of food and supplies which the Trustees had provided. These goods were for the use of persons who had yet to earn enough to support themselves. Wesley accused Causton of cheating the recipients of the stores. Although each man made an effort to work with the other, Wesley's words and actions must have irritated Causton. The storm broke in August, when Wesley refused to give Communion to Causton's niece, Mrs. Sophia Hopkey Williamson. Wesley relied on the provisions of the Prayer Book, which direct the priest to repel persons who have treated their neighbors wrongfully. Causton believed that Wesley acted out of spite and malice. Oglethorpe, Causton and Mrs. Causton had encouraged Wesley to marry Sophy. Apparently the young lady was willing, but Wesley vacillated, month after month. Having decided that Wesley intended not to marry, Sophy then accepted Williamson's proposal.

Following Wesley's insult to his family, as Causton saw it, he exercised his power in order to punish the offender. Causton convened a Grand Jury which agreed to a ten point indictment against Wesley. Wesley claimed that

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Causton had stacked the jury and that the Savannah magistrate had no authority to try him. There matters stood until November the first, when William Stephens, the newly-appointed Secretary of Georgia, arrived in Savannah. Having heard petitions and complaints from many quarters, he sided with Causton. Stephens was especially disturbed by Wesley’s criticisms of the magistrates. He believed that Wesley had damaged their prestige and undermined their effectiveness. In Stephens’ judgment, the clergy should tend to spiritual matters, and leave politics and government alone. Feeling the weight of authority bearing down upon him, Wesley decided to leave Georgia, in defiance of the orders issued by Causton. Wesley’s supporters helped him to escape; he arrived in Charleston, South Carolina on December 13, 1737.

What is the relationship between the divisions within the Savannah community and Wesley’s association with Dr. Nunez? Well before Causton took action against him, Wesley was deeply affected by the hostility which he had aroused, or so it would appear. For example, he began to refer more frequently to the persecution which faithful Christians must expect. Whatever the attitude of others, Nunez kept his door open. He provided a haven to which Wesley could retire, at least temporarily. During June, July and the first half of August, Wesley visited Nunez much more frequently than he had in the past. The purpose of the visits changed as well as the frequency. Visiting the Spanish-speaking Jews was no longer on Wesley’s agenda. The Spanish lessons came to a stop; after June 17 he refers to them only once. Now the goal is relaxed conversation on non-controversial topics. On one occasion Wesley inadvertently brought up the Messiahship of Jesus, but regretted it almost immediately. Nunez and Wesley were both university graduates; this could have given them something to talk about.

Wesley’s diary for 1737 ends with a cryptic utterance. Unhappily for the historian, the diary, as it has been transmitted to us, stops on August 31. Another diary begins on April 1, 1738. The entry for August 31 reads, “3:35 Nunez. Spanish. 4 Dispute! 4.40.” What does this mean? Consider first the

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21 Stephens, Journal in Colonial Records, 4:19–20; For Stephens’s efforts to effect a reconciliation between Wesley and Causton, see Stephens to the Trustees, December 20, 1737 (Colonial Records, 22/1:38).
22 John Wesley to James Hutton, June 16, 1737 (Letters I, 510); Charles Wesley’s response (January 2, 1738) to a letter by John Wesley which has not survived (Letters I, 524). John’s experiences also reminded him of the sufferings which the ancient martyrs had endured (John Wesley to David Humphreys, July 22, 1737 [Letters I, 514]).
23 18 visits in June, 10 visits in July, 6 visits between August 4 and August 12.
24 Wesley, Journals and Diaries I, 525 (July 7, 1737).
25 W. R. Ward has described Nunez as Wesley’s “chief mentor and religious colleague” from April 1737 onwards (editor’s note, Wesley, Journals and Diaries I, 178). This characterization contains an element of truth. Wesley would show respect to a man who was twice his age. Nunez did tutor Wesley in Spanish. However, to describe him as Wesley’s “chief mentor” is an overstatement. Wesley learned more from books than he did from Nunez. Furthermore, the phrase “religious colleague” implies a degree of theological agreement which did not exist.
26 Wesley, Journals and Diaries I, 558.
reference to "Spanish." Perhaps Wesley asked to continue the Spanish lessons. Perhaps Nunez was provoked by the use to which Wesley had put them in the past. Neither of these possibilities strikes me as being very likely. Each man, in all probability, had other things on his mind. The Grand Jury considering the charges against Wesley had been meeting for the previous nine days; it would return its indictments on September 1. Nunez had to consider his own position, as an associate of Wesley, and the threat to the Jewish settlers posed by factionalism. In my judgment, the connotations of Wesley's term, "Spanish," remain a mystery. The reason for the dispute between Nunez and Wesley may be easier to explain. Nunez wanted to remain on good terms with Causton as well as Wesley. Causton represented law and order, upon which the safety and prosperity of the settlers depended. On a personal level, Nunez and Causton were both members of the Masonic lodge. Perhaps Wesley offended Nunez when he appeared to spurn an accommodation with Causton. Wesley seemed to be encouraging dissension, which in turn weakened the hand of the magistrate. This interpretation is speculative, however. The grounds for the dispute cannot be known with certainty.

27Wesley, Journal and Diaries I, 538-40.