

## Once We Were Slaves: The Extraordinary Journey of a Multi-Racial Jewish Family

**Laura Arnold Leibman**

Oxford University Press (Aug 9, 2021)

Hardcover \$27.95 (296pp)

978-0-19-753047-4

Discussions about, and popular understandings of, American Jews often belie the true diversity of the US's community, as is evinced in *Once We Were Slaves*. Laura Arnold Leibman's biography traces a preeminent American Jewish family to its roots, which are Sephardic, Black, and Caribbean.

Though they were born into slavery, with one parent on each side of the divide, Isaac and Sarah Brandon edged into Barbados society, were manumitted into freedom, traveled to Suriname, and converted in a Portuguese synagogue. Later, Sarah accompanied her father to London, remaking herself as a Jewish heiress and marrying into a merchant family. She arrived in New York as a respected member of the Jewish community.

For a while, Isaac remained in Barbados, working to eke out equality for Jews of color in its society. When these efforts failed, he, too, made his way north, where he partnered with his brother-in-law in business and became a full synagogue member. Still, he returned to the Barbados community that had rejected him in his youth later in his life.

These are the bones of their story; as Leibman's text shows, the particulars are more complex. Her accounts of racially motivated tiffs and restrictions within Caribbean, South American, and early US Jewish communities include bitter battles and pettiness aplenty, showing how many nuances the Brandons had to navigate to achieve acceptance among their peers. Traversing the line between slave and free also led to oddities of inheritance: at one point, the siblings were willed their still enslaved great-grandmother.

Though undeniably academic, *Once We Were Slaves* is an engaging work of historical scholarship that follows a family through its rises and collapses of fortune and, in the process, strips away damaging misconceptions about the homogeneity of America's Jewish community.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July / August 2021)

*Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The publisher of this book provided free copies of the book to have their book reviewed by a professional reviewer. No fee was paid by the publisher for this review. Foreword Reviews only recommends books that we love. Foreword Magazine, Inc. is disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255.*