



## Genealogy Breakthrough: In Search of Judah

By Jennifer Willis

7 April 2009

*Jennifer Willis had heard that she had a Jewish ancestor named Judah, but no one in her family knew anything more. With that single clue and some good luck, Jennifer was eventually able to track her elusive down.*

For years, I had heard about a long-lost Jewish ancestor on my mother's mother's side. I had little to go on: a single name—Judah, with no indication whether this was a first or a surname—and a possible connection to a U.S. president.

Each time I searched for Judah, I was rewarded with a wealth of records spanning centuries and the globe. But in terms of tracking down my long-lost relative, I came up empty.

Until May 2007.

At the time, I was considering converting to Judaism and was determined to track down this ancestor. But I wanted more of a foundation for my religious quest. If Judaism had been the faith of even one of my forebears, I needed to know.

Online family history records had expanded exponentially since I'd last searched, which, I thought, made it more likely that I'd find this elusive ancestor. One promising candidate was Judah P. Benjamin, a Louisiana senator and later attorney general of the Confederate States of America. He certainly fit the profile from the family lore: a Jew named Judah who had served a president.

I got excited and e-mailed family members about my find—only to discover that Benjamin had died in self-exile in France, and his family line had no connection to mine.

I decided to work backward through my maternal grandmother's line instead. I knew she'd been told repeatedly in her youth, "Olive, your mother's mother was English, and your mother's father was Irish, and she never let him forget it." Since a Jewish connection seemed unlikely there, I moved into her dad's line.

That's when spelling got in the way.

Sharott. Sharitt. Shoratt. Sharette. And so on. Her surname was supposed to be spelled Sharrett. I admittedly took this a bit personally. Sharrett is my middle name, and I struggled as a child to learn how to spell it correctly. You'd think other people could have done the same.

I researched each variation for my grandmother's father, Horatio Sharrett. Other than his name, I knew only that he had lived on Staten Island. I learned that he had been valedictorian of his high school class, worked as a banker and realtor. And he had been a suspect in the 1924 murder of Maude Bauer.

Okay, this I hadn't expected.

All that aside, I really wanted to find my rumored Jewish ancestor and I hadn't found him yet. So I turned back to Judah, my original search. And, just like before, I was repeatedly teased by promising leads, only to have my efforts thwarted.

Then one night I stumbled on Oratio Sharrat. Hmm.

I pulled up records on Oratio's immediate family—from an 1880 census, taken when my great-grandfather would have been about 9 years old.

I found Washington Sharrat, a boatman of Port Richmond on Staten Island, married to Anna Sharrat, with children Gertrude, Oratio, Olive, and Clinton.

My grandmother's full name was Olive Gertrude Sharrett deShazo, and she had told me stories about her aunts, Olive and Gertrude, feuding over what their niece would be called. Although my grandmother would later be known as Babe, her Aunt Gertrude registered her for school under the name Gertrude instead of Olive.

The names were right. The dates were right. The place was right. This had to be them. I'd found Horatio and his sisters. But the trail ran dry when I tried to find their parents, Washington and Anna. And still no Jew.

By sheer luck, I stumbled onto the American Jewish Archives website. I knew the Sharretts were Huguenots and that I likely wouldn't find any Jewish ancestors in that line, but I plugged "Anna Sharrett" into the website's search engine anyway. Up came Anna Judah Sharrett.

Judah!

I downloaded the Judah family tree, beginning with Judah Leib in Breslau and ending with Anna and Washington's firstborn, Gertrude. After years of frustrated attempts, I knew I had gotten lucky. I had a family tree stretching back to Breslau, currently in Poland, but first recorded in the 10th century as part of Bohemia. We're not only Jewish, we're Bohemians! The Hapsburgs of Austria ordered the area's forceful return to Catholicism in the late 1600s. That means pogroms. I suppose this is why Baruch Judah (son of Judah Leib) decided to make the trip across the Atlantic. He likely came from Europe as an indentured servant, since he was first recorded in Brookhaven, Connecticut, in 1700, becoming a freeman in 1715 or 1716 in New York.

All this time, I'd been looking for a man who had supposedly served in the U.S. government. Instead it was my great-great-grandmother, a Jew who married a Huguenot, who was the key.

I scanned the branches of the family tree, plugging each name into search engines, looking for the American presidential connection. I never found one. But I had found my Jewish line, and it was a closer relative than anyone had expected.

No, this didn't make me a shoo-in for Jewish conversion. I was still required to take classes, meet with my rabbi, the whole nine yards. But the family connection made me feel like I had a right to Judaism, that I was reclaiming a family tradition that had been lost.

A rabbi friend tells of a legend that whenever a Jew marries into another faith, a descendant a few generations down the road will make the choice to come back to Judaism through conversion. He called it *gilgul hanefesh*—literally “rolling of the soul,” a reincarnation of sorts.

I suppose I am that returning Jew, and having this proof of my own Jewish heritage has helped and encouraged me in my conversion process. Now when I light candles on Shabbat or dance at Simchat Torah, I think of my great-great-grandmother Anna and her ancestors before her, knowing I am keeping their heritage alive.

**Jennifer Willis** *was raised in a family steeped in lore and with a passion for genealogy. Currently, she works as a freelance writer specializing in topics related to sustainable living and spirituality. She lives in Portland, Oregon, and can be found online at [rev.jen@gmail.com](mailto:rev.jen@gmail.com).*

## Comments Welcome

Name

Mail (will not be published)

Website

© 2009 Ancestry.com