



# The A-Mazing Mendes Cohen

Mendes I. Cohen  
Born: 1796  
Death: 1879  
Birthplace: Richmond, VA

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Mendes I. Cohen was the son of Israel Cohen, an immigrant from Oberdorf, Bavaria, and Judith Cohen, from Bristol, England. Israel's brother, Jacob I. Cohen, was the first in the family to immigrate to North America, arriving in 1773 and ultimately settling in Richmond, VA. Israel Cohen and his wife joined Jacob there to build their family. Mendes was one of seven children who was born in Richmond. When Israel Cohen died in 1808, Judith Cohen moved the family to Baltimore. At the age of eighteen, Mendes volunteered to serve and protect Fort McHenry during the bombardment of 1814. After the war, he entered into the family banking and lottery business with his brothers and conducted business at the various branches of J.I. Cohen, Jr. and Brothers.

Mendes I. Cohen retired from business in 1829 and made an extensive foreign tour (1829 -1835) through Great Britain, Europe, Asia Minor, and the Middle East. While in Egypt, Cohen traveled up the Nile River and was the first American to bear the U.S. flag up the Nile after the ratification of the Treaty with Turkey. While abroad, he acquired numerous objects and antiques (eventually numbering 680 objects!), including pieces from the great collection of Consul-General Salt. This collection was presented by his nephews to Johns Hopkins University in 1884, where it remains an integral part of the collection. Throughout his travels, Mendes Cohen spent time with European leaders, sheiks, and prominent individuals like the Rothschilds. He also attended events of international importance, such as the coronation of Queen Victoria.

Mendes Cohen served a term in the Maryland House of Delegates from 1847 to 1848, where he introduced several important bills. He served many years as a trustee of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad as well as the Fireman's Insurance Company. Cohen was vice-president of the Hebrew Benevolent Society for over twenty years and was prominently identified with the establishment of a Jewish hospital in Baltimore. He was also a prominent member of various commercial and charitable associations, such as the Maryland Historical Society.

[theamazingmendes.com](http://theamazingmendes.com)

Before 1826, Maryland's constitution required a belief in Christianity for a person to serve as a city councilman, senator, lawyer or a commissioned officer in the military. The state constitution declared, "All persons professing the Christian religion are equally entitled to protection in their religious liberty." Mendes Cohen's brother Jacob was very active in the fight to pass the Jew Bill and guarantee Maryland's Jewish community political equality. Jews petitioned the state legislature and wrote letters to the editors of newspapers, trying to change the law. This change was officially called An Act for the Relief of the Jews in Maryland, or the Jew Bill. It became a law in 1826.

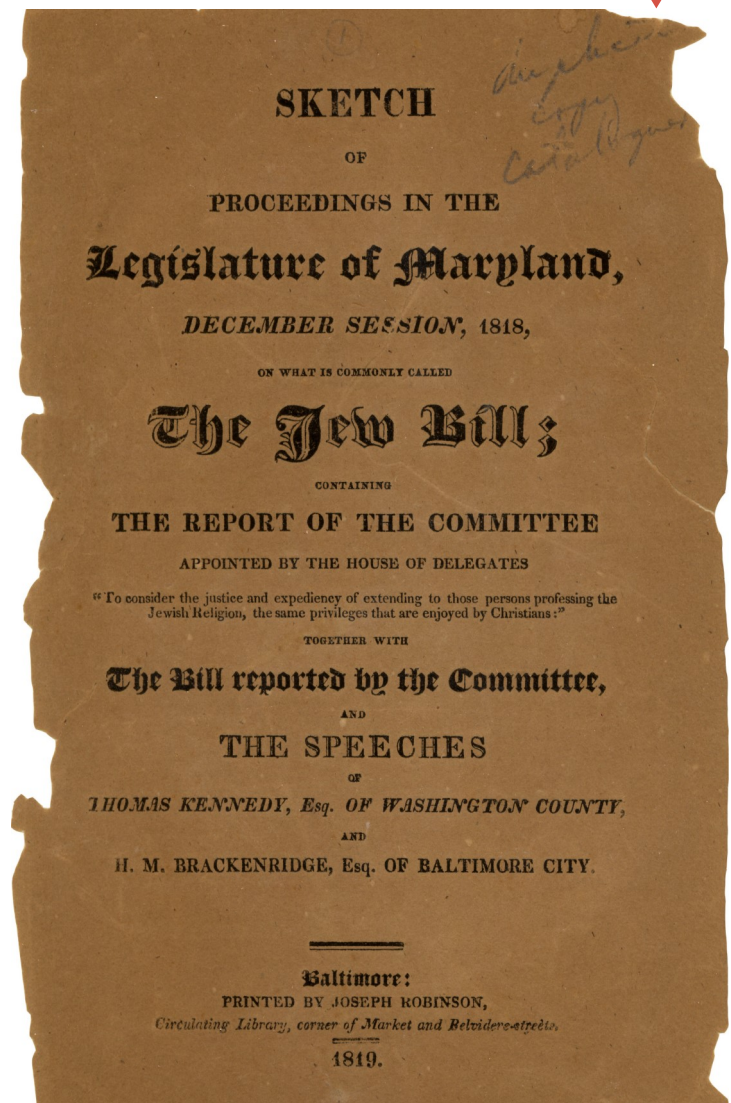
Explore an excerpt from an original copy of the "Jew Bill," made in 1819 in the JMM's online collection [here](#).

Provide each student a copy of the *Jew Bill* and a copy of *The Maryland Advertiser*.

Explain to students that the copy of the Jew Bill is an authentic primary source from the collections of the Jewish Museum of Maryland. Whereas, *The Maryland Advertiser* is a fictional secondary source created by the JMM for this activity.

Provide students the accompanying worksheet.

*Jew Bill Leaflet, 1819. JMM  
1987.82.1*



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## **An Act for the Relief of the Jews in Maryland**

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Maryland. That every citizen of this State professing the Jewish Religion and who shall hereafter be appointed to any office or public trust under the State of Maryland shall in addition to the oaths required to be taken by the Constitution and Laws of the State, or of the United States, make and subscribe a declaration of his belief in a future State of Rewards and Punishments, in the stead of the declaration now required by the Constitution and form of Government of this State.

And be enacted. That the several clauses and sections of the declaration of rights, Constitution and form of Government and every part of any law of this State contrary to the provisions of this act, so far as respects the Sect of people aforesaid shall be and the same is hereby declared to be repealed and annulled on the confirmation hereof.

And be it enacted. That if this act shall be confirmed by the General Assembly of Maryland after the next election of Delegates in the first Session after such new election as the Constitution and forms of Government directs, in such case this Act and the alterations of the said Constitution and form of Government shall constitute and be valid.

By the Senate Delegates

February 26<sup>th</sup> 1825

This engrossed Bill the original

Of which passed the Senate

House on the 25<sup>th</sup> February 1825

was this day read and

assented to

By Order Wm Kilty, Clk

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# *The Maryland Advertiser*

*Annapolis*

*All the News Under Your Nose, Since 1632*

*1/2 Pound*

## *From Actual Newspapers:*

**From the Philadelphia Aurora, 1819-** *The Legislature of Maryland have recently decided, by a large majority, that Jews shall not enjoy, in that state, an equality of political rights with other denominations of persons. It is remarkable, and indeed disgraceful, that such a measure should be adopted in one of the republics of America.*

**From the Maryland Gazette, 1819-** *The Jews may exercise any office under the constitution of the United States, even president. By the constitution of this state, they may also exercise any office in the state if they submit to the laws of the state, made for all other sorts of citizens.*

**From the Sherperdstown Eagle, Virginia, 1819-** *The Legislature of Maryland have decided by a vote of 50 to 24 against admitting the Jews "to have an equal participation of rights with other citizens'...*

**From the Maryland Censor, 1819-** *We are truly mortified that the bill for extending to the Jews, the civil rights enjoyed by other citizens of the state has been rejected...*

## *The Fight for the Jew Bill*

**Annapolis, 1825-** Since the Revolutionary War ended, more and more Jews are moving to Maryland. People of all religions are coming here because of the economic opportunities.

However, not everything is perfect. Since Maryland became the seventh state, the state constitution has required a belief in Christianity for a person to serve as a city councilman, senator, or representative. Nor can someone become a lawyer or a commissioned officer in the military without taking a religious oath. The state constitution declares, "All persons professing the Christian religion are equally entitled to protection in their religious liberty." This is a problem since not everyone in Maryland is a Christian.

In 1819, a bill came before the Maryland legislature which would have given Jews equal political rights. Unfortunately, it failed to pass and Jews remain second-class citizens. We have reprinted what newspapers had to say about the 1819 bill on the side of this page.

It is now 1825! Almost every other state gives full rights to people of all religious beliefs. Many people in Maryland are upset. They don't understand how they can have religious freedom under the Constitution of the United States of America but not in their state's constitution. Many Jews are petitioning the state legislature and writing letters to the editors of newspapers, trying to change the law. This change is officially called *An Act for the Relief of the Jews in Maryland*, or the Jew Bill. Let's hope it passes!

*Weather Forecast:* According to the old sailor saying, "Red sky at night, sailor's delight. Red sky in morning, sailors take warning."

*Letters to the Editor on Page 12, Advertisements on Page 36, Articles of Interest on Page 27*



## The Jew Bill

Maryland's state constitution, ratified in 1776, included a clause stating that all citizens had to declare their faith in Christianity in order to participate as full citizens of the state. The Jew Bill was a bill designed to give Maryland Jews full rights as citizens. It failed several times before finally passing in 1826. Look at the copy of *The Maryland Advertiser* and the text of the Jew Bill and answer the following questions.

1. Before the Jew Bill was passed, Christianity was a required belief for which professions?
  2. What steps did Jews take to change the requirement of taking a Christian oath?
  3. What was *The Philadelphia Aurora's* response to the 1819 Jew Bill's failure?
  4. Was the Jew Bill a state law or a national law?
  5. Thomas Kennedy was a legislator who championed the Jew Bill, even though he had never met a Jew before. Why do you think he fought so hard for it? Is it important for people to fight for other people's rights? Why?
  6. Almost 200 years ago, the Jew Bill granted political equality to Maryland's Jewish community. Can you think of any other times in American history when groups have had to struggle for equality?
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