

PERSONALITY PROFILE

Harry Reyner: Individualism and Community
in Newport News, Virginia

by

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My uncle, Harry Reyner, who was born in Newport News, Virginia, in 1889, was eulogized in 1978 at the time of his death. The editor of the [Newport News] *Times Herald* wrote:

“Harry Reyner was so closely allied with the expanding city of Newport News that it is difficult to identify a single milestone in the city’s commercial and industrial progress not positively influenced by his sharp, incisive mind.”¹

On September 8, 1997, the city of Newport News, the Virginia War Museum and the United Jewish Community of the Virginia Peninsula dedicated a permanent memorial to him in the form of a stage, garden, and plaque next to that city’s Holocaust Living Monument.²

The three sponsors of this dedication reflect the three areas of his extraordinary service to Newport News, service that helped that city grow tenfold from twenty thousand to the approximately two hundred thousand residents in the thriving metropolis of today.³ Appreciation of his legacy of long civic service, patriotism, and war service, and active participation in the Jewish community reflect the ideals of the present community and explain why his life and its inspiration were so honored nineteen years after his death.

Consideration of the life and times of Harry Reyner offer insight into one individual’s considerable accomplishments in the South, the factors that influenced him, the coalitions he formed

and our knowledge and appreciation of southern Jewish history. Although some qualities that served to make him so long remembered were uniquely his—good looks, charm, refined speech, impeccable grooming—many were truly representative of those Jewish men and women who settled in Newport News in the late 1800's and thus have a wider significance than the consideration of a single life.⁴

Harry Reyner's parents, my grandparents, came to this country from Germany and Austria, met and married in Baltimore. Their older daughters, Lotta and Celia, were born there (Celia, my mother, in 1884). Joseph Reyner worked his way down the Eastern Shore with his family. Another daughter, Bessie, was born in Dover, Delaware. He used his skills in farming and in the preparation of food, working at times as a butcher, a grocer or a farmer.

The life of a farmer, even with his own property, was not to the liking of his educated Austrian wife, Sarah. Attracted by the possibilities of the port and harbor, the business opportunities offered by the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad's Newport News terminus and word of the ship repair business started by Collis P. Huntington,⁵ Joseph and Sarah Reyner arrived in Newport News with their three daughters in 1887. Harry Reyner was born shortly thereafter, a much cherished and favored only son.

Joseph Reyner opened a grocery store. His love for growing plants became only a lifelong hobby, evidenced by the flower pots on the roof garden of the Reyner's home above the grocery store and later the grape arbor, the fig trees, the crepe myrtles, the wisteria plants, and the rose garden that were part of their second residence in Newport News, 3207 West Avenue.

In the first years in Newport News, Joseph Reyner was making a more humble living than he and his wife had anticipated, though pictures of that roof garden of their home above the store and their personal attire look quite nice. He was ambitious and to improve his prospects he hired a black man to row him out into the deeper waters of Chesapeake Bay where large ships lay at anchor, and he sold food and supplies to the ships' officers and men. From this small beginning his firm, J. Reyner &

Joseph Reyner

Son, grew into one of the largest ship chandler businesses in the world with offices in Belgium and London in addition to the large grocery business on Washington Avenue and 25th Street in Newport News. A publication of the Chamber of Commerce in Newport News in 1921 shows nine photographs of the J. Reyner & Son's facilities with four pages of text attesting to the modern and sanitary aspects of that operation. Additionally, a photograph of the Reyner home is pictured, showing the affluence achieved.⁶

Joseph Reyner's profits provided a great life style for a number of years – maids, chauffeurs, travel – but the firm did go out of business in time. Refrigeration came in. Ships no longer had to buy supplies in Newport News; they could load up in New York. That transformation led to the firm's closing in the late 1920's.

Despite the Reyners being one of few Jewish families, Joseph Reyner achieved substance and respectability in the emerging

port city and served on the first city council when the town was incorporated in 1896. Two of the lasting accomplishments during his tenure were the purchase of the small boat harbor (a plaque with his name on it was located on that ground for many years) and the beginning of the city farm where prisoners could farm instead of remaining entirely in their cells. Harry Reyner's long history of public service was a family legacy. Considering it a great honor to be selected for public office, Joseph Reyner served without salary. Harry was paid at most two thousand dollars annually and was careful never to profit financially otherwise from his civic role. In frequent conversations he referred to opportunities he had rejected.

Early on other Jewish immigrants arrived in Newport News from Russia, Poland, England, and Austria. By 1893 a small Orthodox synagogue was formed, Adath Jeshurun. Boys like Harry were taught Hebrew, but there was no Sabbath school for boys or girls. Joseph and Sarah Reyner sent their children to the Episcopal Church for Sunday School. Sarah Reyner told the church authorities, "The children were Jewish but they were to have some moral training. They were not, however, to be mixed up." There is a family picture of the four Reyner children at an Episcopal Sunday school picnic by the old church in Jamestown, Virginia. This was an adjustment mechanism for people in a small Jewish community.

Joseph Reyner later served as president of that Orthodox congregation, Adath Jeshurun, where both he and Harry retained life memberships. In 1913 a more liberal Conservative congregation, Rodef Sholom, was formed.⁷ Joseph Reyner consequently became honorary president of this synagogue. Joint congregation memberships and service in Orthodox and Conservative institutions illustrated transition patterns of acculturation for first and second generation immigrants. In a ceremony on October 5, 1969, Harry Reyner was honored by Rodef Sholom congregation at a Simchat Torah service for his:

Role in the growth of Rodef Sholom from his chairmanship of the Finance fund for the first Temple on 32nd Street, to chairman of the Building Committee for the present structure. He has

served as Vice president for several terms and is a life member of the Board of Directors and one of the three trustees of our Temple. For a full and dedicated life to his Temple and to his fellow man, Rodef Sholom is proud to honor Harry Reyner.⁸

Both congregations thrive today. Active synagogue participation on the part of prominent individuals has continued. Jane Susan Frank, wife of the present mayor of Newport News, was Rodef Sholom's president.

The Reyner life was one of privilege and sociability. Harry attended local public schools and later the private high school, Newport News Academy. At nineteen there are pictures of Harry on a trip to Cuba—this at a time when immigrants were arriving by steerage, not for years to take a pleasure trip at sea. There are photos of Harry with sisters and friends on his father's small boats, launches, each named for a family member. At twenty Harry went to Europe with his mother for a *grand tour*. Sarah Reyner made thirteen crossings. Living the life of the affluent, she never cooked except for matzo balls like marbles. She never cleaned, marketed nor worked in a store. She had exquisite taste and was, according to family stories, the first woman in the area to trade in the stock market as well as the first to fly in an airplane.

Harry was employed with his father in the ship chandler business with handsome office, male assistant and secretary, and the title of vice president and general manager. Joseph Reyner went to work at 5 a.m. coming home to his elegant residence for the heavy noon meal and a nap. Harry was a late riser who enjoyed many privileges of affluence.

My second husband, L. Reyner Samet, the son of Lotta Reyner Samet and also my first cousin, wrote a novella entitled "Ida and Her Family." Ida was the black woman who worked for the Reyner family for sixty-five years. Ida's family in the novella is the Reyner family. The story recounts the morning routine of Ida and Harry. Harry's breakfast came upstairs on a tray by way of the dumbwaiter leading from the kitchen to his upstairs bedroom. Ida could neither read nor write. In order to get his three minute eggs to his taste, Harry would call down when ready for breakfast, "Two choruses now, honey." Ida then sang two

choruses of “ Onward Christian Soldiers” to time the boiling eggs exactly.⁹

On April 6, 1917 the United States entered World War I. Harry tried to enlist, but the government believed the ship chandler business, which supplied the Navy, and had done so in the Spanish American War, was in the national interest. The effective management of J. Reyner & Son would be more important than the enlistment of that son. Harry found a black unit with a lieutenant colonel in command. Authorized at the time to accept recruits, he registered Harry’s enlistment. His choice of a black unit appears to have been a matter of expediency; however throughout the Reyner story there appears reliance upon African Americans as employees and customers and even in the paternalistic relationships, some kindness and caring. This was scarcely the norm when as late as the 1921 publication by the Chamber of Commerce, *The Harbor of a Thousand Ships*, only white residences of the city were listed.¹⁰

Harry became a buck private in the U.S. Army. The army in its wisdom found a better use for Henry Reyner. He was rapidly made a captain and sent from the Port Utility Headquarters in Newport News to the port of embarkation in New York where he was made assistant to the port utility officer in charge of purchases of supplies. He lived through the war at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in a tailored Brooks Brothers uniform, serving well but with elegance.

When Harry first ran for the city council in Newport News, he was young, considered something of a playboy with his Stutz Bearcat sportscar, and running against well established incumbent opponents. The Ku Klux Klan distributed leaflets on white doorsteps warning of the dire results if the Jew-Reyner were elected. The electorate in Virginia then as now appears to retreat from extreme rhetoric. Harry won and won election repeatedly. According to *Newport News: A Centennial History*, “In 1922 he was first elected to the city council and set a record for being re-elected six consecutive terms, serving a total of 31 years. Known as the ‘Depression Mayor,’ Reyner served as mayor of Newport News

Captain Harry Reyner, 1917, World War One

from 1930–1932, served four terms as vice mayor, and filled an unexpired term of three years.”

While in public office Harry Reyner sponsored the city’s pension system, initiated the city’s purchase of the waterworks, acted as prime mover in the city’s first port authority, wrote the first zoning ordinances, created the sinking fund for retirement of city bonds, established the Newport News traffic squad, marshaled the purchase of the Casino Park and the city’s first housing project (essential for employees of the growing Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company), started the city’s first street-widening program, and began health inspections. He authorized ordinances to establish the radio communications division, to put the municipal boat harbor on a commercial basis, and to call for state drivers’ tests.¹¹

Harry Reyner and his Stutz Bearcat

In 1935 he and his mother left Newport News for New York City. The Atlantic and Pacific food company desired to open a ship-supply company in New York and hired Harry to head this enterprise. Joseph Reyner had died in 1933 after two years of blindness, and J. Reyner & Son had been closed for four years. Harry and his mother sold the West Avenue residence, Harry resigned from the city council and they moved to New York. Anti-trust measures prevented the A&P from bringing this enterprise into existence. Harry was temporarily a successful broker on Wall Street, but was never happy away from the Virginia peninsula. He shortly returned to Newport News, entered the insurance business, and was returned to the city council.

In addition to this position, he was appointed to and served for two six-year terms on the Virginia State Port Authority during years when the Norfolk and Western Railroad merchandising pier in Norfolk was built. He was a strong supporter and personal friend of the long-time governor and political power

Harry Reyner and Governor Harry F. Byrd

Harry F. Byrd and worked within that conservative fiscal establishment. He served as consul for the Dominican Republic, Costa Rica, and Guatemala for both Newport News and Norfolk.

Completely accepted socially by both Christian and Jewish groups, he was a charter member and one of two Jewish members of the James River Country Club. Harry never worked to get other Jews into his country club nor into the Propeller Club, although my first husband, Ellis Conn, then an electrical engineer in the Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Company, could not get admitted. Harry cemented social, political and business relationships in arenas denied to all but the two Jews. It took the next generation to see greater light, sit in the lunch counters, integrate the schools and library, and let the sound of "Hatikva" sound in the James River Country Club.

During his years of community service he was:

Vice President of the Hampton Roads Maritime Exchange, chairman of the United National Clothing Drive, president of the Newport News-Warwick Community Chest, chairman of the United Palestine Appeal, member of the Finance committee of the Yorktown Sesqui-Centennial, member of the boards of the Newport News Public Library, Newport News TB Association,

Traveler's Aid and Lower Peninsula Planning Committee. He was Exalted Ruler of the Newport News Elks, Chef-de-Gare of the 40 & 8, American Legion, chairman of the Tenth World Trade Conference at Old Point Comfort and of the memorial gift committee at Riverside Hospital.¹²

In 1976, two years before his death, the Bicentennial Commission honored him and noted that he:

Organized the charity that preceded the United Fund, was a life trustee of the War Memorial Museum, board member of Rodef Sholom congregation and chairman of the Newport News-Warwick Chapter of the Red Cross. A bachelor who was described by a local journalist as having "probably contributed as much to the community as any individual," Reyner dismissed his achievements with the comment, "A bachelor has to keep busy."¹³

He may have remained a bachelor partly as the result of his being so socially integrated into the Christian and Jewish social worlds, yet he lived in a time when intermarriage was less well accepted. Family members told of his love affairs with a Julia Robinson and others. He lived always with women who nurtured him—his mother, in later years my mother, then widowed, and always with fine black, caring women, Ida Davis Thomas for sixty-five years, Thelma Venable and Grace Fulgham thereafter.

Harry Reyner was an inspirational figure to the family as well as a source of pride while he showed the use of political positions for empowerment to the Jewish community. His legacy of unselfish public service continues in his family and in the city he served.

On September 8, 1997, at the dedication of the stage, garden, and plaque by the City of Newport News, the Virginia War Museum and the United Jewish Community of the Virginia Peninsula to Harry Reyner, it was evident that the inspiration of his life extended beyond family and affected positively southern Jewish history not only of his time but in its rich life of today.

Newport News has once again a Jewish mayor, Joe S. Frank, who spoke at that dedication. In 1978 when Harry Reyner died the same Joe Frank, then president of the Jewish Federation, wrote of the Reyner legacy:

His leadership in both Jewish and non-Jewish communities has set an example for many generations of the importance of interfaith involvement and cooperation. I've known Mr. Reyner since I was a little boy. I remember him as a person who was very much in love with the city of Newport News. He was highly respected by all who knew him as a political figure, a community leader and a human being.¹⁴

The life and times of Harry Reyner, part of southern Jewish history, contributed greatly to the thriving Virginia peninsula of today.

NOTES

¹ [Newport News] *Times Herald*, (August 2, 1978) Editorial.

² City of Newport News, Virginia War Museum and United Jewish Community of the Virginia Peninsula, (September 8, 1997), Program.

³ John V. Quarstein and Parke S. Rouse, Jr., *Newport News: A Centennial History* (Newport News, VA, 1996): 250.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 124.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶ *The Harbor of A Thousand Ships* (Newport News, VA, 1921);: 168-176. All pictures are in possession of the author unless otherwise noted.

⁷ Quarstein and Rouse, Jr., *Newport News*, 125.

⁸ Rodef Sholom Temple, Newport News, VA., Simchat Torah Services, October 5, 1969, Program.

⁹ L. Reyner Samet, "Ida and Her Family" (Unpublished manuscript, 1953): 43-48.

¹⁰ *The Harbor of a Thousand Ships*, 180-191.

¹¹ [Newport News] *Daily Press*, August 3, 1978, Editorial.

¹² Council of the City of Newport News: Resolution, "In Memoriam Harry Reyner", August 14, 1978.

¹³ [Newport News] *Times Herald*, (July 2, 1976): 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, (August 1, 1978): 1.