



# The A-Mazing Mendes Cohen

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

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.

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**At age 33, Mendes decided to retire from banking and start a new adventure - traveling the world.** Mendes traveled for three years, exploring much of Europe, northern Africa and the Middle East. An unmarried man of means, he had an opportunity not available to many. Mendes wrote to his brothers just prior to his departure, anticipating a pleasant voyage.

**Mendes was a prolific letter writer.** Each letter home was filled with fascinating information. Almost like journals, the letters contained his itinerary and appointments, as well as impressions of the people and places he visited. They also provide insight into his character.

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### Mendes' Letters Activity

During his travels in Europe and Asia, Mendes Cohen wrote letters to his family describing what he saw, as well as keeping a journal.

- Explore the online exhibit [theamazingmendes.com](http://theamazingmendes.com) under the section [Traveling The World](#). Note: This section begins with "A Three-Year Odyssey."
- Read the attached excerpts from the years 1829-1832

Write a response about Mendes' journey. You can choose to write a newspaper article, a letter from Mendes' family to a friend telling them about his travels, or a short essay. You can focus on one subject or write something more general. Your response should be no shorter than two paragraphs and no longer than one page.

Answer the following questions in your response:

- What did Mendes do or where did he go that was noteworthy?
- Why are Mendes' writings useful in learning about the past?

Consider the following subjects:

- What did Mendes think was interesting? What topics does he focus on?
  - What famous sites did Mendes see? Did he meet any well-known people?
  - What were some differences between the countries Mendes visited?
  - Was Mendes patriotic?
  - Was Mendes ever in danger?
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**Excerpts from Mendes Cohen's Letters**  
**(MDHS MS 251.3 Boxes 1,2,4. Dates October 1829 – July 1832)**

**Oct. 15, 1829 (New York, USA)**

I need a package from Mr. Evan Thomas with a pill on sea sickness, which I have endeavored to guard against. Have purchased pickles, onions, etc, anchovies in [illegible], lemons, oranges, limes, Congress water, lavender, smelling salts ...we have about 20 to 25 passengers. I am No. 1 on the list and have the best berth—a state room to myself....several bets made on 20 days—we shall see, she is a splendid ship.

**Dec. 24th, 1829 (London, England)**

In Regents Street the buildings are very splendid, modern....crossed to the Strand... passing on the same [illeg] of street to Ludgate in the middle of which St. Paul's is situated....Saw various public buildings and only time to go thro' one, the Exchange. Here I saw the great banker Mr. Rothschild at his post...all eager to talk to him.

**Jan. 5, 1830 (London, England)**

I have been in the 'City' all day and went with Mr. Philips to be introduced to Mr. Rothschild at his country house. He was glad to see me. He has given me a very handsome letter of credit on 'De Rothschild & Bros.' Paris for £1,000 and to give me letters to his friends in the various parts, etc., etc. Found him very affable, he has of course a large establishment. He told me he [will] leave for Paris tomorrow night and offered me a passage on board the boat across the Channel....He says he will see me in Paris if I should not go in the boat.

**Jan. 10, 1830 (Paris, France)**

I...left many enjoying the merry dances, the quadrille and waltz were alternately danced. 2 rooms for dancing, 2 card rooms, 3 sitting rooms, and a supper room all on one floor...and many ornaments of diamonds decorated the forms of the ladies. The apartments are filled up in style of princely magnificence, painted ceilings, columns, mirrors, chandeliers, splendid, superior to any I have yet seen or perhaps will see.... I was introduced to the Baron by Mr. Rothschild....The supper table was splendid...long enough to accommodate...800 by going and returning to it, waiters a plenty and servants in splendid livery.

**Feb 3, 1830 (Paris, France)**

London bears no comparison to Paris. Everything is totally different. Paris has its palaces...its monuments...its triumphal arches... thousands of other things which L. has not and to most you get access without any difficulty.... troops of various kinds are on duty constantly day and night at every public building....one would [illeg] that the government had adopted the old maxim of an 'ounce of preventative' or really was apprehensive that the minds of the people might readily be kindled into a flame.

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**Excerpts from Mendes Cohen's Letters Continued**  
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**Feb. 21, 1830 (Paris, France)**

It is the first day of the [illeg] of Carnival and you can form no idea how...each Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday) now kept. Sunday a very large boeuf (ox) is carried or drove around the city followed by the brothers in dresses whilst the children, men, and women (mixed with the crowd) masked parade the streets. There are so many of the higher as much as the lower order of the people out in carriages... which today formed a continued line through the whole length of the boulevards ....At the head of every street was placed two soldiers on foot... the sole object being to prevent confusion and the people on foot from being run over which certainly would have been the case...Now and then might be seen the carriage of a member of the Royal family rolling along the centre of the street....

You will receive in the no. [news]...the motion in the British Parliament for the removal of the civil disabilities of our people supported by Mr. O'Connell which will make him in my opinion among the great men of the age. Had he stopped when the Catholics were emancipated he would have been a condemned man but we find he is a Liberal in the true sense. The measure meets the approbation of the Duke of Wellington as also the minister as also the King...You will perceive there are men (or a man) yet living whose notions of things are too narrow or contracted for the present enlightened age.

**May 23, 1830 (Paris, France)**

I have not as yet seen anything so magnificent as this palace of Versailles nor do I expect to in the course of my travels. It was this building which gave rise to the Revolution and it was here that many scene were acted which at this day it chills the blood to think of ....

The papers will inform you of the rejection of the Jew Bill in the House of Commons. Speeches by...O'Connell, Sir Robert Wilson, etc., be in favor...Mr. Peck spoke against it, that was enough being a minister, if he speaks on the other side next time it will pass. I now think he advocated the Catholic bill more from fear than conviction, if not he must have spoken on the Jew Bill adverse to his private opinion. Galaghaim paper I send will give you the result—a very full house and 63 majority against ....Nearly all the papers were in favor.

**Jan. 25, 1831 (Rome, Italy)**

The same day made my first visit to St. Peters, the mother of all churches I have yet seen. A performance of music hastened me thither and was much pleased with the performance.... with all this splendid magnificence one cannot avoid thinking of the folly to erect such buildings at the expense of making the people beggars for such is the fact it is the poor who pay it in the end from their hard earnings...and convinces me of the policy of the president's message that it is better money should remain in the people's pockets.

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**Excerpts from Mendes Cohen's Letters Continued**  
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**Jan. 29, 1831 (Rome, Italy)**

I reached it just in time to heard from the portico the announcement of the new Pope.... I got an early entrance to the palace and finally to the hall of conclave, passing between several squads of soldiers...the entres were paying their homage to the new pope....each person kneeling to the floor and embracing the toe or foot of the new elected ruler, his left foot received this token of affection which was covered with a crimson velvet shoe with gold ornaments.... several took the hand of the new pope which he cordially received in his and to several he replied to when addressed....To all this humility my mind revolted and to be introduced or not was the inward question to myself: to degrade myself as an individual and to bend the knee to human power and submit to the degradation of kissing the foot of any man was too revolting to the feelings of an American, but to pay a [illeg] respect to a chief magistrate I thought not the smallest objection. I...requested to be introduced...the cardinal drawing the attention of the pope beg to be allowed to introduce Signore Cohen, Americano, to which I made one of my best French bow, to which he reciprocated.

**Sept. 10, 1831 (Turkey)**

Here it was that I find some of the ladies of our people. My sight was a little strained at first but by a little perseverance accustomed it to the brilliant spectacle of a halo of diamonds which adorned the headdress of three of the four ladies intermixed with emeralds and a profusion of pearls....The dresses were of oriental silks and some all ermine with around the body a cincture with large gold clasps....The ladies that wore these rich dresses were all married, one of them about 16 years of age had been married to the son of the person whose house I was in, he is 18 years of age, they having been married three years. They had never seen each other before marriage, the parents arranging all that for them....I must serve you with the dinner, on a circular table brought into contact with the ottomans....I had a plate, all the others eat from the common stock or dish placed in the centre, each using a fork or their fingers as most convenient or a piece of their bread. One dish was brought one at a time...perhaps 15 different kinds ....The unmarried are never to be seen...the elder ladies are placed behind a thick lattice work of wood.

**Dec. 22, 1831 (Gulf of Satalia, Anatolia – Modern-Day Turkey)**

I now have to communicate to you a short account of our Shipwreck which occurred on Tuesday night .... The wind from the south and east obliged us to bear before it, our little barque performed wonders and our men worked incessantly in shifting sails, etc. Tuesday morning the same weather continued with rain and we made this land, let go two anchors about 200 yards from the shore. From that moment the waves began to thump the vessel to such a degree as to apprehend some great danger. We anchored at 2pm on Tuesday and the thumping continued from that time till 10 o'clock at night when one more violent broke the rudder and a general shriek was made from the females. I jumped on deck and soon found the vessel would soon go about the waves of the surf.

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The captain and pilot seeing the situation of the vessel passed out the cable our anchor remaining firm. The boat was then got out. I had remained hold of the latter and one of the ropes when she went on her side when the sea broke over the vessel wetting us all at every surge. I jumped from the side of the vessel to the boat and got in; however, the boat was got alongside and all but 5 got in and we reached the shore and the others remained on for a time and we got them off. I write now on a chest of one of the passengers....We are encamped on shore and I employed part of my time in drying clothes. My baggage I have saved all, having fastened my door before leaving the vessel and they could not float out. My portmanteau only wet, sacks, bag, writing case, etc. not wet.

**February 21, 1832 (Beirut, Lebanon)**

We have had rumors of the plague existing in the town, which has caused much alarm....it is ascertained to be in...the country outside of the wall a few hundred of yards....the governor has placed a *guard sanitaire* to cut off all communication with that part of the city and that with other precautions my keep it out. The Franks have already commenced a partial system of quarantine by not touching persons, etc., tho' not to the extent of passing everything thro' water before they take it in their houses and taking up all clothes from floors, tables, etc.

**March 2, 1832 (Acre, Israel)**

We enjoyed a beautiful prospect of the whole army encamped around us....The reveille summoned us to this prospect which was played by trumpets and drums sufficiently sweet to lull me again to my slumbers but the pleasing recollections of other times when myself was encamped in our own army....The Egyptian army are about 30,000 strong...consisting of cavalry, artillery, infantry, bombardiers, sappers, miners, a corps of mounted Bedoins, with many Arabs of the mountains attendants on their Prince Emir Bashir. As the assault on the town will be made in a few days...I shall remain to enter the town....Bonaparte was not able to take it altho' he besieged it two months.

**March 8, 1832 (Acre, Israel)**

The fate of the day is decided. At daybreak this morning the assault was made by the troops...For 5 hours the firing was incessant of cannon and musketry, after which the assault troops had to retire leaving Mahomet Bey and about 100 men within the wall which they had gained. Many were killed and about 300 wounded, not mortally. All is tranquil at present—not a gun to be heard.

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**March 19, 1832 (Jerusalem, Israel)**

I must now say something of the present Jerusalem. It contains about 12,000 inhabitants, of whom about 4,000 are Jews, the rest Turks, Arabs, Greeks, Armenians, and a few Franks or Europeans....There are at present here about 3,000 Greek pilgrims with a proportion of Armenians, Copts from Russia, Turkey, Greece, Wallachia, Moldavia, Rumelia, etc., most of whom save their hard earnings from year to year to visit the holy land....Tomorrow we set out for the River Jordan and the Dead Sea, we are eight in number, all well armed and have an escort of 15 soldiers with an Arab chief to accompany us whom the governor sent for. Persons going on this pilgrimage generally have much to fear...on our return shall pass thro Bethlehem, famous in the New T. (St. Matthew, C. 2, V. 1-10) and in the Old as the burial place of Rachael (Genesis C. 48, V. 7).

**March 26, 1832 (Jerusalem, Israel)**

I measured the Jordan in width and found it to be 116 feet and about 4 and a half feet....I have preserved a bottle of water and also one of the Dead Sea. Having preserved 12 stones from the Jordan as a memorial and visited the supposed site of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

**April, 1832 (Cairo, Egypt)**

Having a few days ago contracted with a Reis [captain] for his boat at 500 piasters per month to go up the Nile to Thebes and perhaps as far as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Cataract, from which time I shall commence a return to my native land....I expect to be absent up the Nile two to three months, and by the time I return the waters will have commenced to rise. It reminds me of our own Mississippi, only the Nile runs from south to north, the Mississippi from north to south.