

Jews in Mississippi

By Stuart Rockoff

Jews have always been a small minority of Mississippi's population, yet over the centuries they have forged communities in the state and preserved their religious traditions.

Their religious traditions go far back into world history. The history of the Jews began with Abraham, the founder of the Jewish religion in Hebron, twenty miles south of Jerusalem in the Judaeen hills. The Jews created an identity earlier than most other people — more than 4,000 years ago — and that identity still survives. Jews first arrived in North America in 1654.

They arrived in what is now the state of Mississippi in the mid-1700s when the area was under Spanish control. However, the first significant Jewish community was not established until 1800 in Natchez when the first Jewish religious service was reportedly held. The Jews of Natchez bought land for a cemetery in 1840 — the establishment of a cemetery usually preceded the organization of a Jewish congregation — but did not formally organize one of the state's oldest congregations, B'nai Israel (Children of Israel), until 1843. Jews in Vicksburg initially formed as the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation of the Men of Mercy in 1841, but changed its name to Anshe Chesed (Men of Kindness), when the congregation was formally incorporated in 1862. Congregations usually held their worship services in private homes.

The first Jewish house of worship was constructed by the Beth Israel (House of Israel) Congregation in Jackson. On May 2, 1867, the *Weekly Clarion* of Jackson reported: "We are gratified that measures are in progress for the erection of a place of worship in this city by our fellow citizens of the Hebrew descent." The newspaper item referred to the purchase of property at the corner of South State and South streets on which the Beth Israel Congregation would soon erect a small, wood-frame building which they would use as a school and a house of worship.

Town merchants

Jewish immigrants from Germany and Alsace settled in Mississippi in the 1840s. They were joined by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many of the Jewish immigrants initially worked as traveling peddlers. Since most Jews had been legally prevented from owning land in Europe, they had no experience with farming. Legal discrimination had made it hard for Jews in Europe to rely on someone else to support them economically, so they learned to support themselves through business ownership. When they came to Mississippi, they drew on this entrepreneurial experience and became involved in commerce. Peddlers went from town to town, providing necessary supplies to farmers and their families. Often the peddlers received merchandise from wholesalers in Memphis, Tennessee, or New Orleans, and traveled the state looking for customers.

Once the peddlers, usually young single men, had saved up enough money, they would open a store in one of the towns they had traveled through. Jews spread themselves throughout Mississippi. By 1937, Jews lived in one hundred and seven Mississippi towns. In many of the towns, Jewish merchants dominated main street where they specialized in clothes, shoes, and jewelry. Their prominent economic role gave them a visibility that transcended their relatively small population. The most notable success story of Mississippi Jewish merchants was Stein Mart, now a national department store chain, which had its roots in a dry-goods store in Greenville, Mississippi, founded by Russian Jewish immigrant Sam Stein in 1908.

The role as merchant brought great opportunity to Jewish families as well as real challenges. Since Mississippi laws prevented merchants from opening their stores on Sunday, most Jewish merchants had no choice but to work on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath on which all work is traditionally prohibited. Jews sought ways to balance their religious traditions with the demands of their new home. In the early 1900s, the Orthodox Jewish congregation in Meridian would hold religious services from 6 a.m. to 8 a.m. on Saturday, enabling its members to worship on their Sabbath and still be able to open their stores.

It was also difficult to follow Jewish dietary restrictions in a place with no easily available supply of kosher meat. On matters of diet and

Sabbath observance, Mississippi Jews were forced to adapt their traditional religious practices to fit their new environment. Most Mississippi Jews eventually embraced Reform Judaism, which used more English than Hebrew in its services and more closely resembled the Christian style of worship with choirs, organs, sermons, and mixed-gender seating.

Civic life

For the most part, Jews have enjoyed remarkable acceptance in Mississippi. Several Mississippi Jews have been elected to local office, many to the office of mayor. For example, Isaac Lowenberg served two terms as mayor of Natchez beginning in 1873. Sam Rosenthal served as mayor of Rolling Fork for forty years beginning in 1929, while William "Willie" Sklar served as alderman of Louise for fifteen years before he was elected mayor in 1953, an office he held through 1964. Laurence E. Leyens, a fifth-generation native of Vicksburg, was first elected mayor of Vicksburg in 2001.

Jewish civic involvement was not unique to Mississippi, as Jews across the South were elected to public service positions. One reason for this acceptance was that Jews assimilated to Southern culture. While remaining faithful to their unique religion and culture, Mississippi Jews have worked to lessen the barriers and differences between themselves and their Gentile neighbors. They have embraced the cultural values of the region, for better or worse.

More than two hundred Mississippi Jews fought for the Confederacy during the American Civil War. After the war, they celebrated Confederate Memorial Day, even those who had not even been in the United States at the time of the war. Many Jews embraced the symbolism and mythology of the Old South. Jane Wexler, a Jewish woman, was the second queen of the Natchez Pilgrimage in 1932. Her mother was one of the founding members of the Pilgrimage organization. During the civil rights movement, many Jews shared the prejudices of their white Gentile neighbors, although others spoke out in favor of racial equality and integration.

Anti-Semitism

During times of social upheaval, Jews in America have sometimes been the target of anti-Semitism. This was the case in Summit, Mississippi, in the 1890s. During the economic depression of that time, some whites resented the growing economic power of merchants who had acquired land from poor farmers for nonpayment of debts. This resentment took on a racial cast as many merchants rented farmland to black sharecroppers, and some whites thought these black farmers were given too much independence. Since many rural merchants were Jewish, the aggrieved whites began to lump all merchants, both Jewish and Gentile, into a "Jewish conspiracy."

A violent underground group, known informally as whitecappers, targeted black sharecroppers and their Jewish landlords. During the elections of 1892, so-called white caps began to force black renters from Jewish-owned farms in southern Mississippi. In Summit, they targeted H. Hiller, a successful Jewish merchant who owned four hundred small farms in the area. During a two-month period, whitecappers burned down twenty-seven tenant houses on Hiller's land, and Hiller was unable to find renters to work his land. He eventually sold his business and moved to New Orleans.

Anti-Semitism was most visible during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. In September 1967, the Ku Klux Klan bombed Temple Beth Israel in Jackson and two months later, the group bombed the home of Rabbi Perry Nussbaum, who advocated racial integration. Nussbaum had traveled every week to the State Penitentiary at Parchman in the summer of 1961 to minister to Freedom Riders, both Jewish and Gentile. Freedom Riders were black and white activists who rode buses into the South in the early 1960s in order to challenge racial segregation. Nussbaum had written many letters to parents of jailed Freedom Riders to give reports on their children. Several months later, in May 1968, the same Klan group bombed Temple Beth Israel in Meridian. The incidents galvanized much of the local Gentile community who denounced these violent acts.

Jewish identity

Although Mississippi Jews worked hard to fit in and to help build better communities, they also sought to maintain their distinct Jewish identity. Jewish parents encouraged their children to date and marry other Jews, which could be quite a challenge if only a few Jewish families lived in one's town. As a result, Mississippi Jews built state and regional social networks to ensure that their children had access to Jewish peers. It was not unusual for Jewish teenagers to travel hours along Mississippi's roads to attend balls and social mixers designed to introduce young Jews to potential spouses.

The Henry S. Jacobs Camp, founded in 1970 in Utica, Mississippi, became one of the most significant Jewish experiences for young Jews in Mississippi and the surrounding areas. In 1986, camp director Macy B. Hart created the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, which now has sites in Utica and Natchez. The museum tells the story of Jewish life in the small towns of Mississippi and the rest of the South.

Population in decline

The Jewish population of Mississippi has been in decline for decades. It reached its peak in 1927, with 6,420 Jews. Since then, it has declined steadily. In 2001, only 1,500 Jews lived in Mississippi, with Jackson having the largest community. The Mississippi Delta, once the center of the state's Jewish population, had 2,300 Jews in 1937, but now it has fewer than 300. Generations of Jewish merchants produced children who became college-educated professionals who had little interest in taking over the family businesses.

The decline of Mississippi's rural economy and the rise of national retail chains have also pushed Mississippi Jews to large Southern cities such as Atlanta, Georgia, and the Texas cities of Dallas and Houston. In many Mississippi towns, empty storefronts now line the main business streets. Jewish names are visible in sidewalk tiles in front of old buildings or on faded signs, and stand as testament to Jewish retailers' former prominence in the community.

Today, there are thirteen Jewish congregations in the state, although only two, Beth Israel in Jackson and B'nai Israel in Hattiesburg, have a

full-time rabbi. Despite their small size, most of the congregations continue to hold regular worship services with lay leaders, student rabbis from the Jewish seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio, or retired visiting rabbis. Though their congregations are small, Mississippi Jews continue to follow their religious traditions, and have kept Judaism alive in the Magnolia State.

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