

The Ambush of Francis Salvador, August 1, 1776 (diorama).
Robert N. S. Whitelaw, 1970. Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim.

Charleston Jewry: 320 Years and Counting

by Stuart Rockoff, Dale Rosengarten, and Alyssa Neely

Charleston, South Carolina, was one of a handful of port cities where the early years of American Jewish history were played out. Jewish immigrants began arriving in the colonial capital as early as the 1690s, drawn by the promise of economic opportunity and the town's reputation for religious freedom. As late as 1820, Charleston was home to the largest Jewish community in the United States. As the city was outpaced by ports such as New York and New Orleans, its Jewish population failed to match the growth of

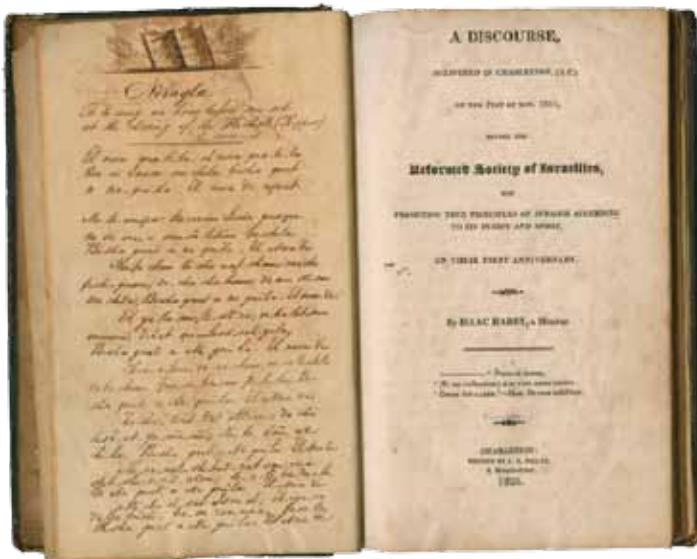
other communities in the young republic. Yet it remained a center of Jewish life in South Carolina and the region.

Traders and Patriots: 1690–1820

By the 1730s Charles Town (as Charleston was originally called) counted about ten Jewish households; by 1749 there were enough Jewish residents to form a congregation. Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim adopted the Sephardic rites of worship, as did her sister congregations in New York, Newport, Savannah, and Philadelphia.

During the American Revolution, the city's 200 Jews by and large supported the Patriot cause. As many as 28 Jewish men served in a company of the Charles Town Regiment known informally as the "Jew Company." Within a year of arriving in South Carolina, Francis Salvador was elected to the First Provincial Congress as one of ten deputies from the upland district of Ninety Six, thus becoming the first practicing Jew to serve in a legislative body in America. When fighting broke out the 29-year-old Salvador joined the local militia and was killed by British-allied Indians—the first Jew known to have died in the War of Independence.

Charleston's Jewish population grew to an estimated 500 by the turn of the 19th century, bolstered by war refugees returning from other seaboard cities and by immigrants from Europe and the West Indies. In 1791, Beth Elohim, numbering 53 families, purchased land for a synagogue, which was completed in 1794.



Prayer book manuscript by Isaac Harby, bound with his Discourse... before the Reformed Society of Israelites, 1825. Temple Sinai Archives, Special Collections, College of Charleston.

Civil Wars in Charleston: 1821–1865

In 1824, Charleston produced the first home-grown movement to reform Judaism in America. It was led by young, native-born Jews who believed that if Judaism did not change, it would not survive under the conditions of unprecedented freedom they enjoyed. To combat the “apathy and neglect” they saw afflicting Jewish youth, Isaac Harby and 46 others submitted a petition to Beth Elohim’s leadership calling for a style of worship more like that of their gentile neighbors, with shorter services, a more decorous system of offerings, and a sermon on the Sabbath preached in English.

When the adjuncta, or board of trustees, dismissed their plea, 12 petitioners, led by Harby, Abraham Moïse, and David Nunes Carvalho, broke from Beth Elohim and formed The Reformed Society of Israelites. They compiled their own “reformed” prayer book, the first of its kind in America, and made plans to build a sanctuary. By 1833, however, five years after Harby’s untimely death, the movement had lost some of its steam; most of the reformers rejoined Beth Elohim, where they would work for change from within.

In 1836, Abraham Moïse, Jr., helped draft Beth Elohim’s new constitution, and two years later, following the model of Rebecca Gratz in Philadelphia, the congregation established a religious school. That same year, in April 1838, the synagogue was destroyed by fire. During rebuilding, a fierce debate over the installation of an organ led to a second split. In 1840, 40 traditionalists formed a new congregation, Shearit Israel, and seven years later built their own synagogue.

By 1852, a group of German and Polish immigrants, led by the Lithuanian-born Hirsch Zvi Margolis Levine, had



Rabbi Hirsch Levine (1807–1887), wearing tallit and tefillin. Courtesy of Carol Kaminsky.

begun meeting for prayer. Two years later they formed their own congregation, Berith Shalome (now Brith Sholom), which held services using the traditional Polish rite in a small building on St. Philip Street rented from John L. Francis, a free person of color.

Charleston’s Jews owned slaves in the same proportions as their Christian counterparts—according to historian James Hagy, in 1830, 83 percent of Jewish households in Charleston owned at least one slave—



Penina Moïse, portrait by T. S. Moïse, ca. 1840. Penina wrote many of the lyrics collected in Beth Elohim’s 1842 hymnal, the first volume of its kind published by a Jewish congregation in America. Collection of Anita Moïse Rosenberg.

and when the time came to fight, they joined the Confederacy in numbers greater than their share of the population.

Charleston’s Jewish Community: 1865–1900

The Civil War’s toll on Beth Elohim and Shearit Israel led the two groups to merge. In 1866 they negotiated a compromise on issues regarding leadership, rites, and rituals. A handful of members left the congregation, but most bowed to necessity and turned their attention to getting back on their feet.

By 1867, almost one-third of the city’s 50 dry goods stores and half of the 20 clothing businesses were owned by Jews. Among the most successful, Hornik’s Bargain House opened in 1886 as a small wholesale business. By 1901, it had grown to fill a four-story building and sent out 40,000 catalogs to its mail-order customers.

Meanwhile, Charleston’s “downtown Jews”—typically members of old families of German ancestry—embraced Reform Judaism fully. In 1872, Beth Elohim bought an organ to replace the one lost in the Civil War and, a year later, joined Isaac Mayer Wise’s new Union of American Hebrew Congregations. By 1879, the congregation had gotten rid of its shohet and instituted “family pews,” where men and women sat together.

Dissatisfied with the laxity of other congregants, members of Brith Sholom who practiced strict Orthodoxy formed their own congregation, Shari Emouna, in 1886. Eleven years later, for reasons lost to history, the two groups decided to reunite. Conflicts over the degree of observance remained a thorny issue and after two decades Brith Sholom split again.



*Elihu Mazo's grocery, 478 King Street, Charleston, S.C., ca 1925.
Photo courtesy of Harriet Spanier.*

New Waves of Immigrants: 1900–1945

Between 1900 and 1920, the number of Jews in South Carolina doubled from 2,500 to 5,000. Like those who had come in the mid-19th century, these new arrivals from Eastern Europe started as peddlers and often ended up owning small retail stores along King Street, north of Calhoun. Followers of Orthodox Judaism, most “uptown Jews” kept their stores closed on Saturday. Catering to the city’s African-American population, they were more likely to offer black customers credit and to allow them to try on merchandise than were other white merchants. In 1911, a group of strict Sabbath observers, including many recent immigrants, split from Brith Sholom to form Beth Israel.

Zionism attracted a small but dedicated following in Charleston. The city’s first Zionist organization, the B’nei Zion Society, was founded some time before 1917. Joseph Goldman was the longtime leader of the group. Zionism in Charleston was not exclusively an Orthodox immigrant cause. Breaking with other Reform rabbis, Jacob Raisin of Beth Elohim was an ardent supporter and, with official permission from the trustees, attended the World Zionist Congress in 1932. His wife Jane had helped to found a Charleston chapter of Hadassah in 1914.

Charleston Jews since World War II: 1945–present

By 1948, three quarters of Charleston Jews were American-born. Among the newcomers were GIs from the Northeast who had been stationed at one of South Carolina’s many military bases and refugees from Hitler’s war. Jews were still heavily concentrated in small enterprise, with 53 percent of household heads either owning or managing a business. Only 12 percent were professionals, while 7 percent were skilled laborers. The most common Jewish-owned businesses were clothing, grocery, furniture, and liquor stores. A few Jewish families were engaged in manufacturing such items as undergarments, ties, and mattresses. Two kosher butcher shops and several kosher delis operated in the city.

A majority of Charleston Jewish families—58 percent—identified as Orthodox. Beth Israel had 240 members in 1948, when they built a new synagogue on Rutledge Avenue. Brith Sholom had 280 members. The city’s Reform congregation, Beth Elohim, also remained strong, with 270 member families.

Even before World War II, some members of Brith Sholom were pushing for change. As elsewhere in the United States, the Conservative movement took hold in Charleston as urban residents abandoned their old neighborhoods and moved to the suburbs. They wanted to drive to shul on the Sabbath—prohibited by Jewish law—and to sit next to their wives in synagogue.

In 1947 the drive for change failed narrowly in a congregational vote. Almost half of Brith Sholom’s membership and much of the leadership walked out and formed a new Conservative congregation, Emanu-El. This split left the 100-year-old “Big Shul” greatly weakened. By contrast, Beth Israel—the “Little Shul,” or “Kaluzsyner Shul”—was thriving. It had hired its first full-time rabbi in 1945 and, soon after, moved into its new synagogue, with room to grow.

After years of negotiations made difficult by past disagreements, the two Orthodox congregations agreed in 1954 to merge as Brith Sholom Beth Israel. They decided to use Beth Israel’s sanctuary, and in a public ceremony, members of Brith Sholom carried their Torahs to the new BSBI. In 1955, the congregation hired Rabbi Nachum Rabinovitch. A tireless builder, Rabinovitch established the Charleston Hebrew Institute in 1956, which, in 1976, became Addlestone Hebrew Academy.

William Ackerman, a prominent Pennsylvania-born lawyer, helped lead Charleston into the suburban era, developing the first shopping mall and housing subdivision west of the Ashley River. As Jews moved to South Windermere, their institutions crossed the river with them. In 1959, the Jewish Community Center bought land west of the Ashley and seven years later completed a new facility. Following its membership, Emanu-El moved west to the suburbs in 1979.

Charleston’s changing Jewish geography has raised serious challenges for BSBI, with one faction, including many of the congregation’s old-timers, committed to keeping the synagogue downtown, while two Orthodox minyanim meet across the river. In the meantime, Beth Elohim’s membership has grown significantly, from 285 families in 1992 to 461 in 2008, and Emanu-El has experienced a modest increase.

For an in-depth study of Charleston's Jewish history, go to Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities at The Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, www.isjl.org.