

*The Jewish Community of North Alabama:
A Brief History*



Alabama is probably not the first place that comes to mind when you think about the Jewish experience in the United States, but it turns out that Jews have been a presence in the state's history going back quite a long way. The earliest reference is unfortunately a negative one, involving a 1724 decree by the French governor of the Mobile region ordering the expulsion of Jews and restricting religious worship to Roman Catholicism.

On a more positive note, individual Jewish merchants and entrepreneurs began settling in Alabama as early as 1800, one of them, Abraham Mordecai, building the state's first cotton gin in 1802 near the junction of the Coosa and Tallapoosa Rivers. By around 1850 there were established Jewish communities in Mobile and Montgomery, each with their own synagogues. (Perhaps the Jewish names most familiar to us from that period would be Henry, Emanuel, and Mayer Lehman who established Lehman Brothers, a cotton trading business that eventually evolved into one of the country's largest investment banks.)

Development of a Jewish community in north Alabama began somewhat later than in the southern part of the state. The first Jews

that we know about here were two brothers, Zalegman and Joseph Andrews, who by 1829 were operating a dry goods store on the south side of Courthouse Square in Huntsville. Like most Jewish émigrés to the United States in the early and mid-nineteenth century they probably came from small towns in Germany and followed some version of Reform Jewish religious practice, which allowed for greater accommodation with Christian society than more traditional forms of Judaism.

The Andrewses' business folded during the Panic of 1837, one of the first major economic recessions in the United States, but other Jews settled in the region over the next couple of decades. Louis Falk, originally from Prussia, moved to Florence, Alabama in 1857



Louis M. Falk

and soon thereafter opened up a business in rural Morgan county, about twenty miles south of Decatur. The place became a stop on the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, and later took the name Falkville. The Huntsville city directory for 1859 lists several Jews involved in



Smith, Herstein & Co., 1868

local businesses: Robert Herstein, a dealer in "clothing and furniture goods,"; Morris Bernstein, a jeweler who subsequently moved into real estate (he had earlier married a Huntsville woman, Henrietta Newman, in 1852); Adolphus Kahn, owner of a dry goods store at the corner of Randolph and Washington Streets, and his clerk, Solomon Habel; Aaron Moses, a cotton merchant at the firm of Drake and Moses on Franklin Street; and August Newmayer, a music teacher at the Huntsville Female Seminary on Randolph Avenue.

Judaism since the time of the prophets has been a religion very much concerned with social justice, but during the antebellum period

the outlook of Jews in the South generally reflected that of their white neighbors when it came to the overriding issue of slavery. Records indicate that Morris Bernstein purchased a slave named Sally for \$500 in 1859 and an eight-year old boy named Virgil for \$322.50 in 1861. (This might also be taken as a measure of his prosperity since \$500 back then would be worth about \$15,000 today.) When the Civil War came most Jews supported the Confederacy and several served in the Confederate army, including the aforementioned Louis Falk. Also serving were Daniel Schiffman, who with his brother Solomon, had arrived in Huntsville in 1857 to start a dry goods business, and Isaac Rosenau, from Athens, Alabama, who fought under the command of General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson.

Jewish immigration continued during the postwar period, which included a large group that moved down from Cincinnati. Jews also became more established in their respective communities. Rosenau set up a clothing store near the courthouse in Athens in 1865 and one of his employees, Henry Warten, opened a grocery store on the north side of the square in the early 1880s. A few years after his military service, Louis Falk had moved to Decatur to open up a

Athens, Mo., March 22 1886

No. _____

ISAAC ROSENAU.

— DEALER IN —

☛ Dry Goods, Boots, Shoes, Hats, Etc ☛

NORTH SIDE PUBLIC SQUARE.



furniture store. A local publisher described him as "one of the leading and progressive business men of this [region]." Indeed, by the early 20th century, seven of the sixteen dry goods stores in Decatur were owned by Jews.

The Huntsville Jewish community was also flourishing. Robert Herstein served as the city's treasurer during Reconstruction,

while Morris Bernstein's daughter, Betty Goldsmith, was involved in local charity work and helped convince city leaders to build a hospital. The Jewish community was now large enough to establish religious institutions. In 1874 they

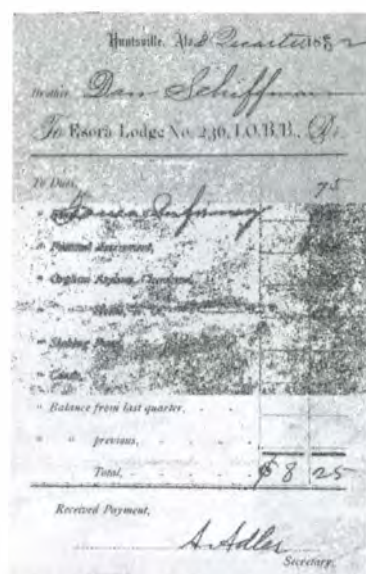


purchased land for Jewish burials in *Betty Bernstein Goldsmith* Maple Hill Cemetery. A chapter of B'nai Brith (Children of the Covenant), a fraternal and self-help organization, was established in 1875, and the following year they formed Congregation B'nai Sholom (Children of Peace), initially comprised of 32 members. Like most southern congregations, B'nai Sholom followed the Reform Movement within Judaism, based in Cincinnati, Ohio, an affiliation that continues to the present.

The constitution of the new congregation was based upon that of Bene Yeshuran in Cincinnati whose spiritual leader was Isaac Mayer Wise, one of the founders of American Reform Judaism. The cost of attending High Holiday services was three dollars for a single man and five dollars for a man with a family. "Divine Services" were

held on Friday nights and Saturday mornings. There was also a "Sabbath School" for children on Sunday and a choir consisting of both Jewish and non-Jewish members. (The constitution required that a member of the Choir Committee attend every rehearsal to insure that "order and decorum are maintained.")

Although early on services may have been held in the Opera House, through almost the end of the nineteenth century the members of B'nai Sholom worshipped in rented rooms at the Masonic Lodge on Lincoln Street. (Several of the original members were also Masons.) A Bavarian-born merchant named Abe Newman led services and oversaw the religious school. When Newman died in 1890, the congregation sought its first full-time Rabbi, and in 1892 they hired Rabbi A. M. Bloch of Port Gibson, Mississippi. (One of the requirements for employment was fluency in German.) Rabbi Bloch lasted less than a year, however, as his sermons were deemed "distasteful to the entire congregation"--evidently he called out the names of absent members during services. His replacement, Rabbi I. E. Wagenheim, was the first of seven rabbis who remained at B'nai Sholom for periods of one to three years. The most distinguished of



A receipt for Daniel Schiffman's membership dues in B'nai Brith and the former Masonic Lodge on Lincoln Street in Huntsville.

these was perhaps Rabbi Jacob Zallel Lauterbach, a Talmudic scholar who wrote several books and was the author or co-author of some 260 articles in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*. He served at B'nai Sholom for about two years. Upon departing he was given a solid gold watch which he proudly showed to his students at Hebrew Union College, the Reform movement's seminary, where he was a professor for many years.

Interestingly, during a brief vacancy in 1905, the congregation accepted the offer of the Reverend W. N. Claybrook, a minister at the

neighboring Episcopal Church of the Nativity, to lead Friday night services on a volunteer basis.

The Huntsville Jewish community put down permanent roots with the purchase of land at the corner of Lincoln Street and Clinton Avenue in May 1898 and the construction of the building that still houses the congregation. (The cost was \$16,000, equal to around half a million dollars today.) Reporting on the building's dedication on November 26, 1899, the *Huntsville Weekly Democrat* wrote: "The erection of this Temple gives us food for thought regarding the industry of the people who built it. The Jews of Huntsville are examples of industry and thrift. . . . There are Jewish merchants who came to this town with little more than their clothes, and a small stock of merchandise that could be packed in a goods box. . . . [They] have become the leading merchants and desirable citizens. . . . One cannot help but admire a people who through industry have achieved such results in a few years."

While Jewish immigration continued in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, these more recent arrivals came mainly from Eastern Europe rather than Germany, a significant cultural difference.



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6 B. DENBO 19
ATHENS, - - - ALA.

Ben Denbo

Russian-born Ben Denbo opened a farm supply store in Athens around 1900, and later became a leader of the Commercial Club, a group of businessmen interested in funding civic improvements. The brothers Benjamin and Israel Jaffe, also from Russia, operated, respectively, a dry goods and a clothing store in town. Others followed and within a few years we find an ad in the local newspaper announcing that nine Athens businesses would be closed in observance of the High Holy Days.

Jewish life followed a similar pattern in Decatur. The clothing

store Olshine's was founded by Harry Olshine who came to the United States in 1905 at the age of fifteen and worked as a peddler out of Jackson, Tennessee, before settling in north Alabama. Other prominent merchants in Decatur included Eli Cohen, who owned a grocery store, Aaron Cohen and Samuel Ory, who operated a dry goods store together, and Sam Frank of Frank's Hardware. One of the



Sam Frank, left, owner of Sam Frank's Hardware Store on Banks Street in Decatur, with James A. Nelson, Mayor of Decatur, in 1922

Jews To Observe Yom Kippur Here

The Jewish people of Decatur will begin the celebration of the Day of Atonement, known in Hebrew as "Yom Kippur" on Wednesday night, and their stores and places of business will be closed all of Thursday.

While there is no synagogue in Decatur, orthodox Jews are making plans to attend the services in the synagogues of nearby cities.

The day of atonement stands as one of the most sacred and solemn days in Jewish life.

*High Holy Days closure notice,
Decatur, AL,
early 20th century*

city's most prominent hotels was owned by the Lyons Family.

A high water mark for Jews in the region seems to have been



Hotel Lyons, Decatur, AL

Hotel Lyons

Decatur, Alabama

*Opens For Business
April 1, 1913*

New Building, Electric Elevator, Elaborately Furnished, 75 Rooms, 20 with Private Bath, 8 Elegant Sample Rooms, Running Hot and Cold Water, Steam Heat and Telephone in every Room, American Plan, \$2.50 per day, with Private Bath, \$3.00.

*A Home for
The Traveling Men*

reached in the period from about 1910-1920. Congregation B'nai Israel was founded in Decatur in 1916, and by 1919 it had 22 members, and a Hebrew school with two classes, two teachers, and 16 students. Although they never had their own building, meeting instead in the local Masonic lodge, they did purchase land for a Jewish section in the Decatur city cemetery. The Jews of Athens also formed a congregation in 1916; it consisted of around a dozen families and had a small Hebrew school as well.

Yet this period also marks the beginning of a decline in the area's Jewish population. Membership in Huntsville's Temple B'nai Sholom peaked in 1907 at 38 families. Lawrence Goldsmith, Jr., who was born in 1909, recalled that during his youth there was no temple



*Stone marking the Jewish section of the
Decatur City Cemetery*

religious school and that the few Jewish children in the community went to the Christian Science Sunday School as their parents, none of whom believed themselves qualified to teach, felt that their children should have some religious training. By 1940 membership had dropped to 23 families, which included some from Decatur and Athens whose congregations had disbanded during the 1930s. B'nai Sholom let go of its last full-time rabbi in 1913. One of its members, Gustav Marx, then became lay leader, with student rabbis being hired for the High Holy Days, but during the Great Depression the congregation could no longer afford to do so. By the end of World War II, the Temple counted only 16 contributing households.

A number of factors were involved in the diminishment of the Jewish population. First, Jewish immigrants in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries tended to settle in the major urban

centers of the North where they found both well-established communities of their co-religionists and greater economic opportunity. Second, a small number of Jews intermarried and their descendants ceased identifying as Jewish. Third, changes in American immigration laws in the early 1920s virtually closed the door to prospective Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. Finally, the rise of Nativist, America First, and overtly antisemitic movements like the Ku Klux Klan in the period after World War I made the South a less hospitable environment for Jews.

Indeed, while Jews in north Alabama had become integrated into the business and civic lives of their communities, their social life seems to have remained separate from that of their neighbors. The Jews of Huntsville, for example, organized The Standard Club, one of whose functions was to introduce young people of marriageable age to one another. A notice in the April 13, 1898, edition of *The Weekly Mercury* reads: "The Standard Club opened its season Monday night with a full dress German [evidently shorthand for a certain kind of formal ball] in which thirty couples participated. Dancing was the order from 9 to 2, refreshments being served by Mrs. Geo. M. Neely at



Twenty-first birthday party for Robert Lowenthal, held in 1906 at the family home, corner of Franklin and Williams Streets in Huntsville. Guests include (clockwise from left) Henry J. Weil, Leo Damson, Leo P. Cohen, Ike Schiffman, Fred Wright, Aaron Metzger, Henry Lowenthal, Robert Lowenthal, Joe Landauer, Lawrence B. Goldsmith, Sr., Sam Weil, Mortimer W. Weil, and George Heyman

12 o'clock. Music was furnished by Prof. Rubenstein's band. Among the dancers were Misses Josie Wise of Owensboro, Ky., Miss Ida Cohen of Nashville, Estelle Kuttner and Rica Cohen of Rome Ga." Although Huntsville never had a *de facto* Jewish neighborhood, it's clear that the mixing of Jews and Christians in small southern towns

only went so far.

A pivotal event for Jews in America, and particularly for southern Jews, was the Leo Frank case of 1913. Frank, the Jewish superintendent of a pencil factory in Atlanta, was convicted (wrongly it later turned out) of the rape and murder of a female employee, and sentenced to death. When the governor of Georgia commuted the sentence to life in prison, prominent citizens from the victim's hometown kidnapped Frank from prison and the next morning hanged him from an oak tree. In the aftermath, half of Georgia's 3000 Jews left the state. As journalist Steve Oney, author of a book on the Frank lynching, wrote, "What it did to Southern Jews can't be discounted It drove them into a state of denial about their Judaism. They became even more assimilated, anti-Israel, Episcopalian. The Temple did away with *chupahs* (ritual canopies over held over the bride and groom) at weddings – anything that would draw attention."

While the Jewish community in north Alabama did not experience anything as traumatic as the Frank tragedy, at least one story from the period indicates that Jews had to deal with a significant level of antisemitism in the years that followed. As a young man

Label Mishkind emigrated from Russia in 1913 to escape the pogroms that periodically terrorized Jewish communities. After stops in Brooklyn, Tennessee, and Decatur, Label Mishkind--whose name had now become Louis Miller--arrived in Huntsville in 1916 where he became the manager, and later the owner, of the Tennessee Poultry and Hide Company. Coming to work one morning in the 1920s Miller found a handwritten note nailed to the front door: "GET OUT OF TOWN. [signed] KU KLUX KLAN."

Years later, he told his son, Buddy, how he felt after he read the notice: "I was mad as hell. I had traveled half way around the world to find a place where I could live in freedom, and I'll be damned if I was going to let those sons of bitches run me out of Huntsville!"

Miller had come to the Klan's attention because he had been vocal in his opposition to them, at one point saying that one day he was going to buy their robes and turn them into wiping rags. When confronted with the threat, Miller refused to be intimidated, and in response became an expert marksman with rifles and pistols, a fact that became well known to everyone in town. Ultimately, it was the Klan who backed down, and in the 1930s when its power waned,

Miller did indeed buy their robes and turn the high quality white cotton cloth into premium grade wiping rags.



Tennessee Poultry and Hide Company



Louis Miller and his Colt, 1933

Antisemitism in Europe also affected the local Jewish community. B'nai Sholom member Annie Schiffman Goldsmith had first cousins in Germany whose lives were becoming increasingly desperate under Nazi rule. Beginning in 1937 her husband, Lawrence Goldsmith, Sr., undertook efforts to assist his wife's relatives in immigrating to the United States.

Despite these challenges the Jews remained a notable presence in the region, especially in the local business community. Through the middle decades of the twentieth century, stores owned by Jewish families in Huntsville included Rose Jewelers, Alabama Wholesale Grocery, I. Wind & Co., The Mary Shoppe, Rutenberg's, Pizitz Department Store, Becker's Department Store, Uncle Sam's Loan Office, Budd's Clothing, The Boston Shoppe, and Marlin's Delicatessen, among others. Abe Goldstein, owner of Becker's, was particularly active in civic affairs, serving on the Zoning

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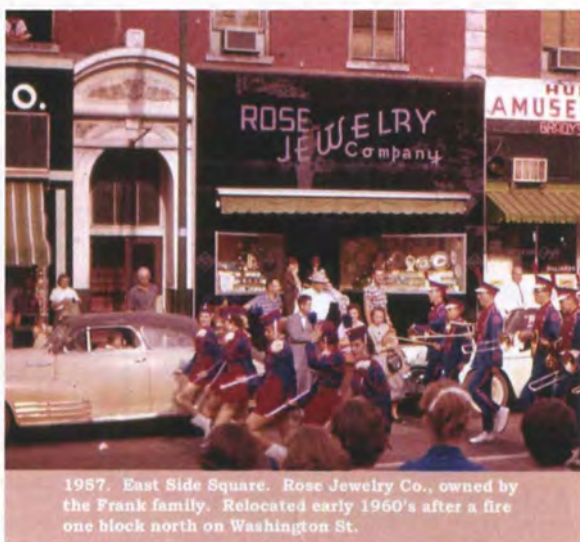
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B	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Rutenberg's
HEART OF HUNTSVILLE SHOPPING MALL



Board, the Planning Commission, and as President of the American Legion chapter. He was also north Alabama campaign chairman for Governor James “Big Jim” Folsom.

Lawrence Goldsmith, Sr. was also involved in the transformation of Huntsville from a small southern mill town into a major urban center



Jewish-owned shops were an important part of Huntsville's business community through the nineteen sixties.



Alabama Grocery Co. Mort Weil Sr. and Mort Weil Jr.
West Holmes Ave.



Budd's

WHITESBURG SHOPPING CENTER
THE MALL

dedicated to high technology research. In 1938 the federal government was considering several sites in the Tennessee Valley for a munitions and storage complex. The chamber of commerce appointed Goldsmith and another local business leader to guide government officials on a tour of possible locations in Madison county. The site chosen on the Tennessee River was named Redstone Arsenal, and after World War II, it became home to the U. S. Army Missile

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Command, and later the Marshall Space Flight Center, which brought tens of thousands of scientists, engineers, and other professionals to north Alabama. The Jewish population of the region started growing again. Student rabbis were employed during the 1950s, and in 1956 the Temple purchased the house



Lawrence Goldsmith, Sr.

next door on Lincoln Street (since razed and replaced by the current Education Building in 1968) to provide classroom space for an expanding religious school. Confirmation ceremonies were reinstituted in the 1950s, and the Temple held its first bar and bat mitzvahs in 1958 and 1967, respectively. Finally, in 1963, after a hiatus of half a century, the Temple began hiring full-time rabbis, a practice that continues to this day.

During the lean years of the middle-twentieth century when funds were limited, maintenance of the Temple building had often been deferred. Finally in 1975 a full-scale renovation of the sanctuary was undertaken which was completed in time for the congregation's

centennial celebration. Major structural repairs to the building were made in 1993-94. In 2003 a house next door on Clinton Avenue that had been owned by the Temple was moved, with the lot subsequently converted into green space and a playground.



The many Jews who arrived in Huntsville during the postwar period came from a variety of religious backgrounds, some more traditional than others, and so a Conservative congregation, Etz Chayim (Tree of Life), was founded in 1962. After meeting in rented rooms and later a rented house for several years, the congregation

purchased a former church building on Bailey Cove Road in south Huntsville. Their first spiritual lay leader was Fred Glusman, whose father had been the long-term cantor at the Conservative synagogue in Nashville.

Currently, the synagogue's member families are served by student rabbis from the Conservative Movement's Jewish Theological Seminary, as well as retired visiting rabbis. Etz Chayim and B'nai Sholom have lately combined resources to establish a joint religious school, and both congregations also support the Jewish Federation of North Alabama, which raises funds for Jewish needs nationally, internationally, and in Israel. The group hosts an annual Yom Ha-Shoah program in memory of those lost during the Holocaust, and an Israel Independence Day celebration. Another recent development in the Jewish community here has been the arrival of a resident rabbi from the ultra-Orthodox Chabad movement



Congregation Etz Chayim

who conducts various outreach activities.

While the past few decades have been a period of relative stability, the future is not a given, as of course it never is. The 1954 *Jewish Tourist's Guide to the United States* lists now-defunct Jewish congregations in Bessemer, Demopolis, Florence, Gadsden, Jasper, and Sheffield. Temple Mishkan Israel in Selma, which was built in 1899, the same year as B'nai Sholom, has only a few members today and proposals have been made to turn it into a museum and community meeting space. Urbanization generally and the consolidation of the retail industry in particular has meant that viable Jewish communities in Alabama now function only in the few largest cities, plus the two major university towns.

Ironically, perhaps, were it not for the arrival here in 1950 of Wernher von Braun and his team of rocket engineers who, whatever their personal convictions, were once employed by a nation-state whose expressed goal was the destruction of the Jewish people, Huntsville might well have become another declining mill town whose Jews would have gradually drifted away, and whose beautiful old synagogue could have become a church, like so many others in the

small towns of
the South.
Happily, that is
not the story of
this Jewish
community,
whose members
continue to
affirm, despite



Temple B'nai Sholom

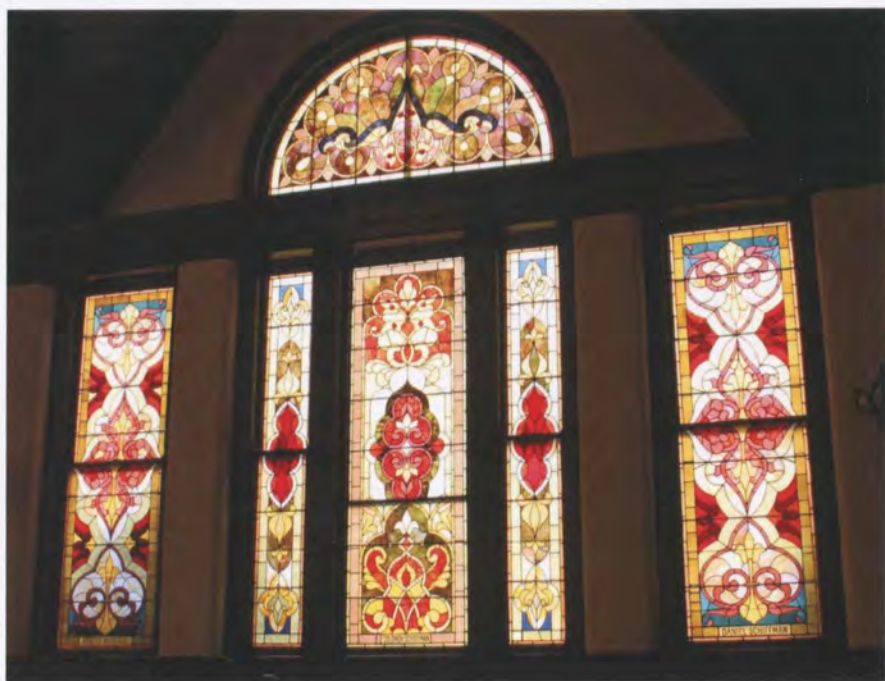
many challenges, the informal mantra of Jews down through the
centuries: we are still here.



*Additional copies of this booklet may be purchased from
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County Archives, Morgan County Archives, UAH Goldsmith Schiffman
Collection, Blake Hudson, and Solomon Miller.*

*Cover Photos, clockwise from top left: I. Wind and Company, Huntsville, AL,
late 1800s; Rosh Hashanah, Huntsville, AL, 1895; Gravestone of Isaac B.
Wohl who died in World War I, Decatur Cemetery, Decatur, AL; M. Teks
and Ben Jaffe's stores, Athens, AL, 1930s; Temple B'nai Sholom Religious
School, Huntsville, AL, 1950s; Tile Floor of the old Frank's Hardware
Store, Decatur, AL.*



Stained glass windows, Temple B'nai Sholom

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