



Above: the Jewish Juniors champion basketball team in Charleston, 1927. Below: a historical marker commemorating Revolutionary War patriot Francis Salvador stands at Coronaca, northeast of Greenwood.

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here. To be successful, they needed to attract willing and capable settlers to immigrate to their challenging frontier territory. In a 17th-Century effort to create a “market niche,” the Lords Proprietors began recruiting religious dissenters across Europe as potential settlers in the Carolina Colony.

With the assistance of John Locke—then the private secretary to the lead Lord Proprietor, Lord Shaftesbury, and later recognized as one of the great minds of the century—a colonial constitution was proposed in 1669 that sought to protect religious rights. Known as the “Fundamental Constitutions,” the document guaranteed religious freedom to “Jews, Heathens and other Dissenters” and prohibited the use of “reproachful, reviling or abusive language against the religion of any church or profession.” The Carolina Colony’s constitution represented the first instance in human history where religious freedom was made a constitutional right.

# PALMETTO JEWS

*Celebrating  
300 Years in  
“This Happy Land”*

By Belinda & Richard Gergel

As the New World opened in the late 17th Century, the persecution of religious minorities was common in Europe. Huguenots in France, Puritans in England and Jews across Europe found little opportunity to practice their religions openly. They frequently became the subjects of private and government-sponsored abuse. Many religious dissenters looked to the frontier of the New World as a potential refuge from the Old World’s religious intolerance.

The eight Lords Proprietors, owners of the Carolina Colony, sought to establish a successful commercial enterprise

Word soon spread across the dissenter communities in Europe and the West Indies of the opportunities available in Carolina. Huguenots, Quakers, Jews and other religious minorities arrived in Charleston and immediately became an integral part of the thriving colonial economy and civic life. Indeed, one observer estimated that two-thirds of the early Carolina Colony was composed of religious dissenters. By 1697, when minorities still were being commonly persecuted throughout the Old World and in many other colonies, 64 religious dissenters, including four Jews, were granted full citizenship rights here. By comparison, Jews were not made citizens in England for another 43 years.



*Temple Beth El in Camden was organized in 1921.*

In the early decades of the 18th Century, Jews settled in significant numbers in the vibrant port of Charleston. In 1749, Charleston Jews formed their first synagogue, Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (KKBE), the Holy Congregation of the House of God. KKBE quickly established itself as a major voice in the New World's Jewish community and later was the founding synagogue of America's Reform Jewish movement, now the largest denomination of Jewry in the United States. By 1800, Charleston had the largest Jewish population of any city in North America, a distinction it would hold for a number of decades. Charleston became in the early years of the 19th Century the unofficial Jewish capital of America, with what one scholar has described as the "largest,

most prosperous, and probably most cultivated and intellectually sophisticated Jewish community in the New World." Today, KKBE is the oldest continuously operated synagogue in the United States.

Jews felt an extraordinary attachment to their new home in South Carolina. In 1806, in an address to the Charleston Jewish community, Myer Moses urged further Jewish settlement of the young state: "Collect together thy long scattered people, and let their gathering place be in this place of milk and honey." Jewish playwright and philosopher Isaac Harby of Charleston wrote Secretary of State James Monroe in

1816, describing the special place of religious minorities in South Carolina:

[Jews] are by no means to be considered a religious sect, tolerated by the government; they constitute a portion of the people. . . . Quakers and Catholics, Episcopalians and Presbyterians, Baptists and Jews, all constitute one great political family.

Jews soon settled in South Carolina's backcountry and small towns, including Georgetown, Columbia, Camden and Sumter. Charleston Jews, who like most Charlestonians viewed the rest of the state as provincial and backward, referred to their brethren outside the Holy City as the "country Jews." These "country Jews," while always constituting a small minority in their communities, established a remarkable record of economic and political success in the early life of the state.



*Jewish legislators and mayors posed in front of the state house in Columbia in 2000. L–R: Joel Lourie (House, 1998–present), Isadore E. Lourie (House, 1965–72; Senate, 1973–93), Hyman Rubin (Columbia city councilman and mayor pro tem, 1952–66; Senate, 1966–84), Sylvia Dreyfus (House, 1976–78), David Taub (Beaufort mayor, 1990–99), Irene Krugman Rudnick (House, 1973–78, 1981–84, 1987–93), Arnold Goodstein (House, 1970–74; Senate, 1975–80), Richard Moses (Sumter mayor, 1972–76), Harriet Keyserling (House, 1976–92), William Keyserling (House, 1993–96), Leonard Krawcheck (House, 1967–70).*

A notable example is the Salvadore family, wealthy London merchants who purchased 100,000 acres of land in the South Carolina Up Country in 1755. So vast were the Salvadore family holdings that the area near modern Greenwood became known as the “Jews Land of South Carolina.” Most remarkable was the 1774 election of Francis Salvadore to South Carolina’s First Provincial Congress. Salvadore managed the family’s holdings in the state. His election represented the first instance in the modern world where a Jew was elected to public office. Salvadore would have another, perhaps less desirable, “first” when his death in an early skirmish

of the Revolutionary War in 1776 made him the first Jew to give his life for American independence.

Salvadore’s election signaled the onset of an impressive pattern of political participation for Carolina’s Jews. In ante-bellum South Carolina, six Jews were elected to serve as mayor of Georgetown, two as mayor of Columbia and one as mayor of Camden. Charleston, Kershaw and Sumter counties elected Jewish state senators—at a time when a state senate seat was the most powerful and honored political position in a county.

The Sumter state senator, Franklin Moses Sr., later was elected chief justice of the South Carolina

Supreme Court—the first Jew to hold that office in any state in America.

In post-bellum South Carolina, the “country Jews” established a notable record of public service. In 1876, Edward Warren Moise of Sumter was elected state adjutant general and reportedly was offered the position of vestryman in the Episcopal Church as a tribute to his service to his state. Moise respectfully declined, explaining that “in spite of his close intimacy with the Christians,” he was a “strict Israelite.”

In 1936, Solomon Blatt of Barnwell, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, was elected speaker of the South Carolina House of Representatives. Blatt held the speakership for 33 years, longer than any person in American history, and dominated South Carolina political life for decades.

Other notable “country Jews” include Dr. Simon Baruch, a renowned Civil War surgeon from Camden and father of legendary financier Bernard Baruch; Julius “Bubba” Ness, a Bamberg state senator and later chief justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court; Dr. Joseph L. Goldstein of Kingstree, winner of the 1985 Nobel Prize in medicine; and Sen. Isadore Lourie, a native of St. George who served as the majority leader of the South Carolina Senate.

The “country Jews” were fixtures on the Main Street of small town South Carolina. Virtually no town of any size lacked Jewish-owned businesses; in some places Jewish merchants dominated commercial life. These merchants commonly were immigrants from Eastern Europe who arrived in America with only the clothes on their backs and little command of the English language. They began their new lives as peddlers, walking the rural back roads,

selling to farmers. As they were able, they opened stores and generally prospered. Legendary small-town Jewish businesses have included D. Poliakov in Abbeville, Freidheim’s Department Store in Rock Hill and Lourie’s of St. George and Columbia.

One story that reflects the unique position of the small-town Jewish immigrant merchant involved Israel From of Union. In the 1920s, the Klu Klux Klan paraded through Union’s business community with hoods covering their heads. As the parade passed From’s store, he spoke to each marcher, referring to him by first name. After the parade, a

group of anxious Klansmen approached and asked how he was able to identify them with their faces covered. From responded, “I sold you your shoes.”

As the state became more urbanized after World War II, Jews were elected to important offices in the state’s major urban areas. They included Max Heller, a refugee from Nazi Europe who was mayor of Greenville; Hyman Rubin, mayor pro tem of Columbia and later a state senator; Arnold Goodstein, a state senator from Charleston; Sylvia Dreyfus, a state legislator from Greenville; and Joel Lourie, a state legislator from Richland County and second-generation Jewish elected official. Smaller communities, meanwhile, have continued to elect Jewish officials. They include Harriett Keyserling and her son Billy Keyserling, state representatives from Beaufort; Irene Rudnick, a state legislator from Aiken; and Herb Kirsh, a state legislator from Clover.

Although Jews certainly have confronted anti-Semitism from time to time in the state’s history, South Carolina generally has offered its Jewish citizens enormous opportunities to participate fully in the economic life of the state, contribute through public service and practice their religion without fear of persecution. It is hardly accidental that early America’s largest Jewish community resided in South Carolina, the first constitutional protection for religious freedom can be found in the colony’s “Fundamental Constitutions,” and the first Jew ever elected to public office was from the state. Jews, in turn, have been devoted to their state and actively involved in civic and cultural life. This feeling perhaps was best expressed some 160 years ago by Rabbi Gustavus Poznanski at the dedication of the beautiful sanctuary of Charleston’s Beth Elohim: “This synagogue is our temple, this city our Jerusalem, this happy land our Palestine.” ❖

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*Dr. Belinda Gergel, former chair of the Columbia College history department, is president-elect of the Historic Columbia Foundation Board. Richard Gergel is a Columbia lawyer and senior partner of Gergel, Nickles and Solomon, P.A. They have co-authored a book, In Pursuit of the Tree of Life: A History of the Early Jews of Columbia, South Carolina, and many South Carolina history articles.*

Learn more about South Carolina Jews by seeing “A Portion of the People: Three Hundred Years of Jewish Life in South Carolina.” The exhibit of photos, paintings and Judaica is on display through November at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston. After a January–June stop at Yeshiva University Museum at the Center for Jewish History in New York, the exhibit will be at the Museum of the New South in Charlotte next autumn.

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