

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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COVER PICTURE: *Max and Trude Heller announcing Max's candidacy for mayor of Greenville, South Carolina, 1971. Heller's life and career are documented in the article by Andrew Harrison Baker in this issue. (Courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Furman University.)*

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Website Review

The Jewish Merchant Project. Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina in partnership with Historic Columbia and the College of Charleston. <https://merchants.jhssc.org>. Reviewed May 2022.

The Jewish Merchant Project is an invaluable resource for researchers and others interested in the history of Jewish merchants in South Carolina. The descendants of these merchants will find the project a helpful addition in creating their family histories. It will also be of interest to chambers of commerce and other economic and regional development interests as well as historians of economic history. The goal of the website is to chronicle the merchants of the state who established businesses beginning in the late nineteenth century. A joint endeavor by the Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina (JHSSC), Historic Columbia, and the College of Charleston, the impetus for the project came from Senator Isadore Lourie, who served in the South Carolina General Assembly from 1965 until his retirement in 1993. Lourie realized that Jewish life in the small towns of South Carolina was disappearing and that chronicling the history of merchants comprised one way to keep that history alive.

The introductory article written by Stephen J. Whitfield, titled “Merchants: The Marrow of the Southern Jewish Experience,” provides a good place to start navigating this website. Whitfield provides a broad overview of the significance of Jewish merchants in the South and demonstrates how Jewish migration created Jewish networks across continents whose contacts made it possible to secure credit and gain access to goods. South Carolina, like other southern states, provided an attractive

([https://merchants.jhssc.org/merchant-map/#merchants.](https://merchants.jhssc.org/merchant-map/#merchants))

destination for Jews seeking business opportunities as a means of making a living and controlling their lives. Both central and eastern European Jews established businesses across the state, from small hamlets to large towns. The website documents stories of businesses and their founders and includes an online map showing the locations of stores, complete with illustrations and narratives.

The Merchants List provides the names of businesses chronicled thus far and their locations in the state. By clicking on a star, the reader discovers a short history of a particular business enterprise found on the Merchant Map. For example, by clicking on the city of Greenwood, a Merchant Story pops up, in this case "R. Rosenbaum, Clothier." A short history highlights information on the founder, Rubin Rosenbaum, who emigrated from Warsaw, Poland, and settled in Greenwood with his family in 1901, establishing R. Rosenbaum, a dry goods and clothing store. His sons, Morris, Jacob, and Herman, helped in the store, and, after their father's death, two of the sons operated the business until 1930. Illustrations of advertisements from local newspapers as they appeared during the years the firms operated supplement these brief histories. Some

(<https://merchants.jhssc.org/merchants/r-rosenbaum.>)

Merchant Stories include photographs of the family who owned the enterprise as well.

The website reveals that Jewish merchants in South Carolina included liquor salesmen, dry goods merchants, grocers, tailors, and butchers who operated meat markets. Jewish merchants owned dry goods stores, ladies ready-to-wear, shoe stores, pawn shops, jewelry stores, and five-and-ten-cent stores. Simon Brown's Sons in Blackville sold horses, mules, buggies, wagons, and harnesses in the early twentieth century. After the horse-and-buggy era, they started selling Chevrolet cars. Samuel Libbert, from Manchester, England, moved to Lake City and opened a retail dry goods store where his wife, Anna, made the store's dresses by hand. Familial networks of migration and settlement drew prospective Jewish merchants to South Carolina. Traditions of mutual assistance and familial cooperation in pooling capital resources helped kin establish business enterprises. Many merchants achieved considerable success and flourished for decades after their arrival.

After researching Jewish businesses in the upcountry for several years, I noticed many prominent upstate Jewish merchants missing from

the website. Take for instance, Price's Men's Store, a landmark Jewish business in Spartanburg established in 1903 and still operating in the heart of downtown. Similarly, many Jewish businesses in Greenville and small upcountry towns are not included. Furthermore, it would be helpful to place these individual histories into the larger history of South Carolina merchants with analysis provided of the goods stocked and sold in their stores and the status of these merchants within their communities. This no doubt would require additional research but would provide a depth of analysis missing from the repository of merchants currently chronicled. The website does, however, provide a digital submission form allowing individuals to contribute additional businesses to the growing number of merchants included in this project.

Jews have been at the forefront of entrepreneurial activity in America since the nineteenth century. They moved into regions with promising and profitable market conditions. Many Jews emigrated directly from Europe to South Carolina, while others settled in other parts of the United States before a secondary migration brought them to the state. Many Jewish businesses operated for several generations as children and grandchildren of the founders continued the family business. Several, in fact, are still operating in the twenty-first century.

Jewish merchants have played an extraordinarily important role in providing goods and services to rural and urban Americans. Jewish merchants changed or adapted as storekeepers expanded their merchandise and new establishments surfaced to provide the latest consumer goods. Entire families participated in business endeavors with wives, children, siblings, nieces, and nephews often working in the family enterprise. As noted on the website, Jake Lurey opened a shoe store in Spartanburg, which he ran with the help of his father and brother, Morris, whereas Hyman Drucker, from Kartuz Beresa, Poland, opened a clothier and dry goods store in Honea Path with the help of his wife, Clara Kaplan. They operated the store until 1947.

The Jewish Merchants Project offers an important historical chronicle of Jewish merchants in South Carolina, providing insight into one of the most significant areas of Jewish endeavor in the United States.

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