

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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## Website Review

**Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life.** <http://www.isjl.org>. Reviewed June 13–25, 2012.

The first website review published in the 2011 volume of *Southern Jewish History* described the on-line site of the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives, a pre-eminent institution for scholars of American Jewish history as well as southern Jewish history. This review concerns an organization and website dedicated specifically to southern Jewish history. The Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL) is descended from one of the first institutions concerned with documenting and disseminating knowledge about southern Jewish life. Founded in 1986 in Jackson, Mississippi, as the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, the ISJL's stated mission is "to preserve, document, and promote the practice, culture, and legacy of Judaism in the South" (<http://www.isjl.org/about/index.html>). The museum, now a subsidiary of the ISJL, collects the artifacts and stories of small southern Jewish communities with the purpose of preserving their dwindling legacies.

Perusing the website, it becomes obvious that the institute is much more than a museum dedicated to the past. It is also actively engaged in providing religious, cultural, and educational programs to communities in the thirteen states it defines as the southern U.S. A circuit-riding rabbi travels to various small-town southern Jewish communities to provide rabbinic services to shrinking congregations lacking permanent rabbis. The institute also provides support for small southern Jewish communities with religious school curricula, teacher training, and outreach from its educational staff. Additionally, the ISJL organizes Jewish cultural events throughout the region and supports interfaith and cooperative efforts between southern Jewish communities and the

*Website at [www.isjl.org/](http://www.isjl.org/).*

general public. Separate sections of the website detail each of these programs, clearly linking them from a menu on the main page.

Visitors can click on the history department link to find the section of the ISJL's website most useful to historians and others interested in the southern Jewish past. The online "Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities" is the most noteworthy feature for historians. The encyclopedia includes entries for cities, towns, and regions in nine of the thirteen states served by the institute, and is organized by state through an interactive map. While Texas contains entries for regions of the state as well as specific towns and cities, other states lack this element. The encyclopedia is an on-going joint effort, with entries researched and written by ISJL interns and Dr. Stuart Rockoff, director of the history department, who also serves as editor. Rockoff invites readers to submit information to him at [rockoff@isjl.org](mailto:rockoff@isjl.org). While a list of contributors is provided, the archival and scholarly sources for the encyclopedia could be more clearly cited. For instance, the Atlanta entry lists the Breman Jewish Heritage Museum as a resource as well as Steven Hertzberg's *Strangers within the Gate City*, but many of the other entries only cite sources for their images.

*"Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities"*  
at [www.isjl.org/history/archive/index.html](http://www.isjl.org/history/archive/index.html).

The layout of this encyclopedia makes it intuitive to navigate and read. Each entry contains a brief overview of the history of the Jewish residents of that town dating back to the earliest settlement. Peppered throughout the entries are an interesting array of visuals from each community's archives, including not only photographs but also advertisements, paintings, and archival documents. The narratives are largely descriptive, telling the stories of these communities through the lives of prominent Jewish business people, those involved in local civic affairs, and religious leaders. Demonstrating the substantial contribution of Jews to political life in the South, there is a page listing past southern Jewish mayors organized by city and date. The entries also detail the specifics of Jewish communal organizing, synagogue histories, and demographic shifts over time. Interesting anecdotes in the histories of these communities are described with accompanying audiovisuals, such as the photo of Yiddish theater actress Molly Picon's visit to Fitzgerald, Georgia, and the video of Austin's Jim Novy introducing his friend President Lyndon Johnson as the keynote speaker at Congregation Agudas Achim's dedication ceremony.

The institute claims to possess an oral history archive with over seven hundred interviews. The website thoughtfully explores the ethics and procedures involved in creating oral history collections and provides links to educational resources for creators and users of oral histories. A small sample of the ISJL's oral history collection can be accessed on the website in a section called, "Southern Jewish Voices." Nine people are featured from small-town southern Jewish communities, organized thematically to correspond with a family education program. Each interview is summarized with a brief blurb, and short video excerpts are provided from the interviews. The multimedia video streaming worked seamlessly, even on my somewhat outdated computer.

My one critique of the ISJL website is in the lack of information provided about the oral history collection. Although more than seven hundred audio and video recordings have been collected, there is very little hint to that wealth of data here and no information about how to access the interviews for research purposes. It would be useful to have longer video or audio clips of more oral histories, or even transcriptions, which many other oral history collections do provide on their websites. A less labor-intensive, yet still useful, suggestion is that the ISJL website be amended to include a list of names, ages, and locations of the people included in their oral history collection, or at least a random sampling of such. To date, there is no information about the contents of the oral histories, other than the nine short snippets contained on the "Southern Jewish Voices" page.

Overall, I found the institute's website to be a beneficial starting point for those interested in the small-town Jewish south. The website is clearly and attractively laid out to promote the institute's many and varied programs. It is well-organized and easy to navigate, with clear headings and aesthetically pleasing visuals. The two features that should not be missed are the online "Encyclopedia of Southern Jewish Communities" and the slideshows with archival photos and artwork linked to each of the major website sections.

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