

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

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2014

Volume 17



Southern Jewish History

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Articles appearing in *Southern Jewish History* are abstracted and/or indexed in *Historical Abstracts*; *America: History and Life*; *Index to Jewish Periodicals*; *Journal of American History*; *Journal of Southern History*; RAMBI-National Library of Israel; the Immigration and Ethnic Historical Society *Newsletter*; and the *Berman Jewish Policy Archive* (www.bjpa.org).

Southern Jewish History acknowledges with deep appreciation grants from the Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, New York, and the Gale Foundation, Beaumont, Texas.

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ISSN 1521-4206

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Marx Cohen and Clear Springs Plantation

by

Seth R. Clare*

Historian Jacob Rader Marcus observed that a full and accurate telling of American Jewish history can be accomplished only by looking at “the horizontal spread of the many” as opposed to “the eminence of the few.”¹ It was my intention to explore the “spread of the many” when I discovered the plantation records of Marx E. Cohen in the Manuscripts Division of the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina.² Born and raised in Charleston, Cohen was one of only a few Jewish plantation owners in the antebellum South. I had hoped to use these records to create a microhistory of Clear Springs, his rice plantation on the Ashley River roughly fifteen miles outside Charleston, and to explicate Cohen’s life and times in order to add his life story to an already large corpus of literature on Lowcountry rice planters. To have done so would have resulted in a historiographical milestone, as it would have been the first full-scale biography of a Jewish rice planter.

However, as is often the case with historical scholarship, the more I researched the plantation records, the more I realized that other historians and I had made unfounded assumptions in examining Cohen. It has been natural to assume that because Clear Springs was a rice plantation, Cohen must have grown rice as a major cash crop and principal source of income. However, my

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analysis of the Clear Springs records, among other primary sources, revealed a disparity between the reality of Marx Cohen's management of the plantation and the manner in which several historians have portrayed it. While most historians have called Marx Cohen a "rice planter," my research led to the conclusion that this title is misleading. This essay will show that while Cohen did come from a wealthy, land-endowed family, owned a plantation, and even referred to himself as a "planter," life on his plantation did not conform to the prototypical economic pattern

*Marx Edwin Cohen, Sr. Artist unknown, c. 1875. Private collection.
(Courtesy of Natalie Moses, Brasstown, NC.)*

of a Lowcountry rice plantation. Instead, Cohen generated income from a variety of economic activities, primarily using Clear Springs to produce and sell bricks and lumber, and cultivated only negligible amounts of rice. While Cohen and Clear Springs represent only a single case study, this essay offers an important model for what may have been the typical economic activities of antebellum southern Jewish plantation owners.

Historians' Assumptions

This analysis of Cohen and Clear Springs contradicts assumptions long made by historians of pre-Civil War southern Jewish life. Historian Clive Webb writes that in seeking to understand more about Jews as slave owners and planters,

it is important to stress the paucity and poor quality of the sources. The methodological problems posed to the scholar are most clearly illustrated by the plantation records of Marx E. Cohen. Cohen owned one thousand acres on the Ashley River in South Carolina, fourteen miles from the city of Charleston. Although his records are the most extensive bequeathed by any Jewish slaveholder, they are singularly unenlightening.³

Although Webb is generally accurate in his assessment of the extant Jewish-owned plantation sources, this essay will demonstrate that Cohen's plantation records are, contrary to Webb's statement, quite enlightening. Aside from various deeds and wills that show that Jews did indeed own plantations in the Old South, few primary sources are available that explicate how these operated on a daily basis.

The dominant narrative of southern Jewish history is one of acceptance and inclusion of Jews in southern society. One need not look beyond the titles of some of the best-known books in the field to illustrate this trend. Rosengarten and Rosengarten's *A Portion of the People*, Hagy's *This Happy Land: The Jews of Colonial and Antebellum Charleston*, Ferris and Greenberg's *Jewish Roots in Southern Soil*, and Rosen's *The Jewish Confederates* all bear witness to this dominant theme.⁴ But because Jews were so highly integrated into southern society, some historians may have assumed too much. The few descriptions of Marx Cohen all convey the same general message: he was a planter who used his plantation to produce large quantities of cash crops. In *The Hebrews in America*, Isaac Markens describes Cohen as "an extensive planter." Barnett Elzas, in *The Jews of South Carolina*, describes him as "a planter who lived near Charleston." In *Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South*, Bertram Korn says that Marx Cohen owned a "farm" in St. Andrews Parish, yet this is also misrepresentative

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because few yeomen farmers in the Old South could afford to retain as many slaves as Cohen did. One website even claims that Cohen “produced about six to eight 550-pound bales [of] cotton each year,” a sum that is totally unsubstantiated.⁵

Such assessments of Cohen could not have been based on a critical analysis of his extant plantation records. Because Cohen listed himself as a planter in the Charleston city directories of 1849 and 1855, as well as in a federal census conducted in 1860, it is possible that these historians have assumed that, in fact, he planted for a living.⁶ These historians may also have reached such a conclusion based on other primary sources. For example, Lee Cohen, one of Marx Cohen’s daughters, vividly recounts her family’s slaves singing as they threshed rice in an essay called “In the Days When We Were Young”:

A voice, melodious yet plaintive, was singing a plantation song. The words stamped the man as a ‘low country,’ South Carolina darkey, and carried my memory back to the splendid days of my childhood. Once more the chorus trilled out on the air:

T-r-a-sh your rice,
Ya mingo ho!
B-e-a-t your rice,
Ya mingo ho!
F-a-n your rice,
Ya mingo ho!
Ole man Jeems,
Ya mingo ho!⁷

Perhaps this account from Lee Cohen, or others like it, led historians to postulate that Marx Cohen’s slaves labored primarily in rice production. However, a critical examination of this account reveals that her father’s slaves did not “by the light of the blazing pine knots . . . beat and thresh rice from the chaff” in order for it to be produced and sold in bulk, but rather to make it “ready for the next day’s meal.” Lee continues, “If there is one thing a ‘low country’ negro loves, it is rice—and he can cook it to perfection.”⁸ If there is any hard evidence that the rice on Clear Springs was meant for anything beyond household consumption, it has yet to

surface. Until new sources are discovered, the Cohen plantation records are, as Webb claims, the “most extensive” historians have at their disposal and provide an unparalleled source for reevaluating past assumptions.⁹

Using plantation records to elucidate the life and times of antebellum plantation owners is by no means unprecedented. *Tombee: Portrait of a Cotton Planter*; *The South Carolina Rice Plantation as Revealed in the Papers of Robert F. W. Allston*; and *Life and Labor on Argyle Island* are three of the excellent studies which have done just that.¹⁰ However, no one has yet endeavored to use plantation records to write a biographical sketch of a Jewish plantation owner. This essay represents the first attempt to do so.

The Cohen Family

Marx Edwin Cohen was born on July 25, 1810, and became a plantation owner the same way that most others did in the nineteenth century: by being born into a family of exceptional wealth. His father, Mordecai Cohen, was one of the richest men in South Carolina. Born in 1763 in Zamosc, Poland, Mordecai Cohen came to the United States in 1788. Although his place of arrival and first residence remain unclear, the earliest record of him in South Carolina is a certificate of his oath of allegiance to the United States dated 1794. In *This Happy Land*, James Hagy describes him as one of “two outstanding Jewish merchants in the antebellum period.” Poor at first, Mordecai Cohen’s hard work propelled him from peddler, to shopkeeper, to merchant, and finally to wealthy landowner. Rather than closing his mercantile enterprises and real estate speculation when he became a plantation owner, Mordecai Cohen opted to pursue diverse business interests, a practice common among planters given the risky nature of plantation agriculture. Besides his Ashley River plantation, the senior Cohen had land holdings in downtown Charleston, upstate South Carolina, and North Carolina. At the age of thirty-two, Mordecai married Leah Lazarus, then seventeen, the eldest daughter from a respectable family of Sephardic origin in Charleston.¹¹

As he rose to prominence, Mordecai served as commissioner of the Charleston Poor House and Orphan House, commissioner

*Mordecai Cohen, Marx E. Cohen's father.
Portrait by Theodore Sidney Moïse, c. 1830.
(Courtesy of the Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina
Art Association, Charleston, SC.)*

of markets, and director of the Wilmington and Raleigh Railroad. Before bequeathing Clear Springs to his son, Marx, Mordecai Cohen had twenty-seven slaves laboring at the Ashley River plantation. Indeed, Mordecai Cohen actively participated in the slave trade, buying twenty-five individuals and selling twenty-six between 1795 and 1838. Ownership of so many slaves required serious capital, and Mordecai was among the richest men in Charleston. When General Lafayette visited Charleston in 1825, the gold plate and silver used at the banquet in his honor was borrowed from the Cohen household. Such was the affluence of the Cohen family that in remarks made at Marx Cohen's 1882 funeral, he is described as a man "born to fortune" and "reared in

*Leah Lazarus Cohen, Marx E. Cohen's mother.
Portrait by John Canter, c. 1820.
(Courtesy of the Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina
Art Association, Charleston, SC.)*

luxury.”¹² While few Jewish immigrants reached the same level of prosperity and wealth as Mordecai Cohen, the fact that he was able to do so shows how Jews were free to rise to the highest strata of southern society, at least economically. Whether or not Mordecai Cohen mingled with the city’s gentile upper class socially is difficult to discern, but based on his involvement with non-Jewish civic organizations, he was able to do so, even if his social life was anchored firmly within Charleston’s Jewish community.

Marx Cohen was educated at the University of Glasgow in Scotland. He married Armida Harby, daughter of the famed Jewish intellectual and religious reformer Isaac Harby, on November 14, 1838. While they lived in Charleston, the family enjoyed a lux-

urious existence. A tax assessment reveals that Cohen owned a piano, sterling silver dishes (possibly the same set used during General Lafayette's visit), and a gold watch. The Clear Springs plantation records divulge that Cohen held railroad bonds and other stocks worth thousands of dollars. He acquired Clear Springs plantation from his father in a deed of gift dated October 23, 1833. The deed indicates that Clear Springs contained 673 acres of forested highlands, 484 acres of rice fields, 28 acres of salt marsh, and 26 acres of freshwater swamp.¹³ Along with land, the senior Cohen also bequeathed a score of slaves to his son, including two unnamed infants priced at one hundred dollars each and Sam, who presumably had some special skill set, valued at three hundred and fifty dollars. The values of the other enslaved individuals fell between these figures.

While the Clear Springs rice fields were modest in size compared to the typical Lowcountry rice plantation, Cohen's property holdings in Charleston were befitting a true aristocrat. He owned dozens of buildings on Ashley Street, King Street, and throughout the downtown area. In 1845, Cohen commissioned the building of a Greek Revival summerhouse at 85 King Street which can still be seen today. Like other well-to-do Charlestonians who owned plantations, Cohen migrated to his posh urban dwelling in the summer months, exchanging the hot and buggy plantation locale for the Charleston peninsula's refreshing ocean breeze. The Cohen plantation records mention, for example, a trip to and from Charleston in September 1855. It is unclear if Clear Springs served as the Cohens' primary residence. The fact that Cohen did not employ white overseers to manage his slaves and made daily notations in his plantation journal, where he also recorded several visits to Charleston, all indicate that Cohen lived at Clear Springs for a substantial portion of the year. On the other hand, the federal census of 1860 lists Cohen as living in the Sixth Ward of the City of Charleston. According to an unpublished memoir written by one of Cohen's grandsons, Herbert A. Moses, the Cohen family "lived at times . . . in the city of Charleston."¹⁴

Like many of Charleston's other distinguished Jewish citizens, Cohen supported Charleston's Hebrew Orphan Society. Occasionally he also sold this institution white corn grown at Clear Springs.¹⁵ Founded in 1801, the Hebrew Orphan Society is the oldest Jewish charitable organization in the United States.¹⁶ The preamble to the society's constitution states that

a Hebrew society should be formed, for the purpose of relieving widows, educating, clothing and maintaining orphans . . . making it a particular care to inculcate strict principals of piety, morality, and industry . . . [so that they] may freely assume an equal station in this favored land with the cheering conviction that their virtues and acquirements may lead them to every honor and advantage their fellow citizens can attain.¹⁷

The society's first president was David Lopez, Sr., the father of the renowned builder discussed below. Marx Cohen's father was among the organization's twenty-two founders. As a board member and benefactor of the Hebrew Orphan Society for more than four decades, Mordecai Cohen's tombstone memorializes his generous spirit: "[By] his strict integrity, his just and charitable disposition, he won the confidence and esteem of his community."¹⁸ It is evident that Marx Cohen took part in the same charitable responsibilities conferred upon his father and the rest of Charleston's Jewish elite. He also worked in civic offices serving on the Charleston Board of Health from 1846 to 1849 and as a magistrate to the St. Andrews Parish from 1843 to 1845.¹⁹

Together with Armida, Marx raised four daughters and one son, Marx Cohen, Jr. A dentist by trade, Marx, Jr., enlisted in the Confederate cavalry early in the Civil War. Had he sought to avoid combat, he could have utilized the "twenty-negro law," which permitted Confederate families to exempt a white man from conscription for every twenty slaves they owned. Yet he chose to enlist. By 1864, Marx, Jr., was a member of Hart's artillery company, part of Hampton's cavalry brigade. His demise was ironic: although he left a duel with another Confederate soldier unscathed on the morning of March 19, 1865, he was killed by artillery fire that same day at the Battle of Bentonville, the last major battle of the Civil War.²⁰ Young Cohen's participation in the tradi-

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tion of dueling, along with his willingness to fight for the southern cause, illustrated that he considered himself as much a part of southern society as any upper-class white person.

Four generations of the Harby/Cohen family, 1895.
Back row: Armida Harby Cohen (center, pasted in), who married Marx Cohen, pictured at the age of 75. Left is her daughter Lee Cohen Harby, age 45; right, Lee's daughter, Lily Lee Harby Isaacs, age 25. Front row: Lily's sons, Arthur Sydney Isaacs, age four, and Cyril A. Isaacs, age three. (Gift of Octavia Moses Mahon, courtesy of Special Collections, College of Charleston.)

The same could be said of Marx Cohen's daughter Lee. While Marx, Jr., displayed his devotion to the South on the battlefield with saber and pistol, Lee used her pen and paper. Like other young women of her class and status, she received an education at home from family members and private tutors. The Cohen family was rife with literary role models for the young Lee, who would become an accomplished writer herself. Her aunt Octavia Harby Moses and great aunt Caroline de Litchfield Harby were poets, and her older sister Caroline Cohen Joachimsen wrote for newspapers, magazines, and Jewish periodicals. In 1869, Lee married her cousin John de la Motta Harby. The couple moved to Texas, where she found the subject matter for her more historical works. The American Historical Association (AHA) published her articles "The Earliest Texans" and "The Tejas: Their Habits, Government, and Superstitions" in the *AHA Annual Report* for 1891 and 1894, respectively.²¹ In 1888, her article "City of a Prince," an account of the founding of the German community of New Braunfels, Texas, appeared in the *Magazine of American History*. Lee Cohen is probably best remembered for composing the "Flag Song of Texas," which she wrote for a contest sponsored by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas and which later became the official flag song of the state. The song's Victorian lyrics raise an interesting question:

Oh, prairie breeze, blow sweet and pure,
 And, Southern sun, shine bright
 To bless our flag wher'er may gleam
 Its single star of light;
 But should thy sky grow dark with wrath,
 The Tempest burst and rave,
 It still shall float undauntedly —
 The standard of the brave!²²

Since the sun rises in the east and sets in the west, is the "Southern sun" alluding to Confederate pride? It is difficult to say in this instance, but overall there can be no doubt that Lee was a proud Confederate, given her written remarks for the 1901 United Daughters of Confederacy State Convention describing the Battle of Fort Sumter:

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[When] the two days' fight was over, when the Palmetto Stars and Bars replaced the flag which had come to mean to us oppression and wrong, when "the boys came home," . . . [there] arose a very babble of exultation and thanksgiving, while sweethearts embraced without shame (for do not the brave deserve the fair?), and mothers clasped their sons, and fathers wrung their hands and felt proud of their boys, just passed through such a baptism of fire. . . . God bless them all – the sacred dead in their graves, and the old veterans that are left to us, living monuments of the spirit and the glory of the South!²³

Although she passionately supported the Confederate cause, Lee and her husband eventually moved to New York City, where she established herself "as a role model for her generation and for feminists to come." Her essay "On Women and Their Possibilities" advised Jewish women to become educated and self-reliant, and she used Sorosis, a women's club in New York City, as a venue for the promotion of the intellectual freedom of women.²⁴

Marx E. Cohen, Jr., c. 1860.
(*Courtesy of Special Collections,*
College of Charleston.)

Despite Lee's rousing words and the voluntary enlistment of Marx, Jr., into Hart's battery, it is still uncertain if the Cohen family, and Marx Cohen, Sr., in particular, supported southern independence. Many southerners opposed secession yet came to support the Confederacy after the war broke out. When the younger Marx enlisted in the Confederate Army at the start of the conflict, he was one of many young southern men to do so regardless of their fathers' position. While South Carolina's plantocracy overwhelmingly supported secession, Cohen was not a typical southern plantation owner, and his family members were not typical upper-class southerners. Instead they were urban-dwelling Jews from an immigrant background on Mordecai Cohen's side of the family. Without more primary sources, it is impossible to draw any substantial conclusions from the 1882 obituary of Marx Cohen, Sr., which claimed "A Union man from his youth, [Cohen] did not enter heart and soul into the secession movement."²⁵

Just as one cannot know for certain if Marx Cohen and his family supported secession, so too is it difficult to understand the family's religious convictions. Cohen and his family lived in a momentous time and place in Jewish religious history. Marx Cohen's father-in-law, Isaac Harby, served as the intellectual backbone of the Reformed Society of Israelites, the first formalized effort to reform Judaism in North America. Before turning his attention to religious reformation, Harby was an editor and newspaper publisher, playwright, educator, and respected political and social commentator at a time when Charleston was one of America's most important cultural centers. His biographer, Gary Phillip Zola, describes him as "one of the most distinguished publicists, litterateurs, journalists, and critics of this period in American history."²⁶ Though Harby died in 1828, Cohen helped to realize the reforms that his father-in-law had instigated. On July 26, 1840, members of Charleston's Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (KKBE) voted on whether or not to install an organ in the sanctuary. Such a reform would have broken with over a millennium of Jewish tradition because most rabbis believed that the destruction of the First Temple warranted the removal of joy from religious services. It was believed that as long as Jews remained in exile, they should

not play music in the synagogue. Nevertheless, the proposal to install the organ passed by a vote of forty-six to forty, with Mordecai and Marx Cohen both voting with the "Organ Party."²⁷ The Cohen men thus participated in one of Reform Judaism's earliest alterations to synagogue services. The organ incident resulted in a major court case and ultimate schism in the congregation.

Aside from Marx Cohen's vote to reform KKBE's services, Cohen clearly identified as a Jew and raised his children as Jews. They attended services at KKBE, married within the faith, and are buried in Hebrew cemeteries. In an illustration of her Jewish upbringing, Lee Cohen reminded her readers in the *Jewish Messenger* that Yom Kippur "is the most sacred of Jewish holidays. . . . [O]rthodox and reform join issues on this point and concede it to be the most holy of all holy days." Further illustrative of the next generation, Cohen's daughter Octavia served as president of the Sumter Temple Sinai's Ladies Aid Society. Her husband, Altamont Moses, presided over the Hebrew Benevolent Society and the Sumter Society of Israelites, and they raised six children, all Jewish. However, the remarks by Charles H. Möise at Cohen's funeral, reprinted in an issue of *The Watchman and Southron* newspaper on March 7, 1882, suggest that while Cohen was culturally and socially Jewish, he was not necessarily a devout, practicing Jew in a spiritual sense. "He was not," said Möise, "what we call a religious man. He did not pretend to sentiments which he did not feel. . . . [In] addition to the fine qualities of head and heart which he possessed, a pious faith was not vouchsafed to him."²⁸ Such a remark is not surprising—Cohen was a Reform Jew, and his vote to reform KKBE was part of a broader trend that devalued ritual observance and the mystical aspects of Judaism.

Lowcountry Rice Cultivation

Before examining Cohen's management of Clear Springs, it would be useful to briefly describe rice planting in the South Carolina Lowcountry. European colonists built some of the region's first rice plantations on land obtained through grants from the British monarch. On May 5, 1704, for example, Shem Butler received a royal grant and named his property "Tipseeboo," which

in Cusabo means "Clear Springs." This land eventually became Cohen's plantation property. Initially, rice-growing operations were established adjacent to inland swamps, but this changed in the mid-eighteenth century with the introduction of new tidal technology.²⁹

Indeed, this development signaled the dawn of a new era in rice cultivation. Whereas inland swamps tended to drain and flood unpredictably, tidal river zones, with creeks that ebbed and flowed with the ocean tide, were easier to predict and control. Using the tides to control water levels in the rice fields proved to be revolutionary. By designing massive embankments and flood-gates called "trunks," planters eliminated the hazards of the devastating flash floods of the swamps. They could use the river water to kill grass and weeds that stole nutrients from rice plants; the growing season was shortened, and crop yields per acre significantly increased. However, use of the tides strictly limited where rice could be grown. A rice plantation too close to the ocean suffered from periodic saltwater encroachments that ruined entire harvests, while one too far from the sea would be unaffected by the tides. Consequently only a stretch of ten to twenty miles on any given tidal river was suitable for this sort of rice planting. Geographic restrictions on rice planting were thus so severe that, according to historian James Clifton, had Cohen cultivated rice at Clear Springs, he would have been one of fewer than five hundred rice planters in all of South Carolina in 1850.³⁰ Furthermore, the twenty-eight acres of salt marsh mentioned in the Clear Springs deed of gift indicate that the Ashley River water flowing through Cohen's property might have been brackish. Had this been the case, Cohen would have had to depend on fresh water held in reservoirs to irrigate his rice fields.

Dependent on and benefiting from slave labor, antebellum rice plantations were extremely profitable and productive. Although rice production in the Lowcountry temporarily declined in the 1820s as a consequence of trade embargoes, the War of 1812, and a short-lived recession, it otherwise increased steadily until the Civil War. Carolina rice plantations were so productive between 1850 and 1860 that some have called this decade the

“zenith” or “golden era” of South Carolina rice planting. One study estimates that of the five million bushels of American rice grown in 1860, South Carolina plantations produced three and a half million. Rice prices slowly rose from the late 1790s until the 1860s, and, when all went well on the plantation, profits could be astounding. Charles Manigault of Georgia effused in an 1847 letter that his rice plantation had “in 14 years paid for itself twice, and is going on to pay for itself a third time. . . . [By] placing \$20,000 down I have . . . by a little industry made a moderate sum produce a steady income which it would require more than \$200,000—placed at Legal Interest to yield.” William Dusinberre estimates that Manigault’s Gowrie plantation made over \$266,000 in profit from an original investment of less than \$49,500, which, all things considered, was “not an inconsiderable return.”³¹

Most Lowcountry rice plantations, and certainly those that turned profits like Gowrie, occupied massive properties and utilized large numbers of slaves. By 1860, South Carolina had, on average, the largest farms of any state in the country, doubtless due to the massive scale of rice plantations, which averaged about one thousand acres. During the so-called “zenith” of Lowcountry rice planting, South Carolina produced more rice with fewer but larger plantations. For example, of the eighty-eight rice planters in 1860 in the preeminent rice-producing region of Georgetown County, one produced a crop exceeding four million pounds, another more than two million, and ten others in excess of one million. This is a staggering increase in output compared to 1849, when only four plantation owners produced more than a million pounds of rice in a pool of many more individual plantations. These figures suggest that while Georgetown County housed fewer rice plantations in 1860, those that remained tended to be bigger—although improvements in the mechanization of rice threshing also contributed to this increase in output.³²

Large rice plantations required large numbers of laborers to work them, which explains why rice planters made up the overwhelming majority of antebellum slave owners who possessed more than one hundred slaves. Moreover, according to reports

from the National Census Office, of the fourteen southern plantations in 1860 that housed more than five hundred enslaved workers, nine grew rice. In Georgetown County, the median number of slaves per plantation totaled 135. The labor requirements of these enormous rice plantations were also reflected in the region's demographics, with slaves comprising over 74 percent of the Lowcountry's population in 1850. Aside from sugarcane plantations, there were probably no more grueling working conditions for a slave than in the Lowcountry rice fields. Lee Cohen's assertion that "the little darkeys" living on rice plantations "lived better and easier than any other working class on the face of the earth" is dubious at best.³³

*Managing Clear Springs:
Production, Customers, and the Planter's Identity*

While Marx Cohen's experience with Clear Springs illustrates certain similarities with the trends described above, it nevertheless appears to diverge from the norm. Although historians have often called Clear Springs a "rice plantation," this is a most unfitting title. If Cohen's own plantation records leave any ambiguity concerning rice cultivation at Clear Springs, the 1860 agricultural census leaves little to the imagination. While Clear Springs is reported to have produced one thousand bushels of Indian corn that year, no rice production of any quantity is listed. This information corroborates Cohen's plantation records, which frequently mention the sale of corn yet nowhere note rice sales. Moreover, only two hundred of the property's thousand acres are listed as improved (suitable for farming).³⁴ Between 1833, when Cohen acquired the property, and 1860, the property's arable land was reduced to less than half its original size, another sign that Cohen did not put his time, money, or other resources towards agribusiness. While Lee Harby had fond memories of her father's slaves winnowing rice, the grain was almost certainly grown as a provision crop, considering that Cohen's plantation records fail to mention rice threshing or sending any rice to market. Notation of the hydraulic technology and "trunks" associated with tidal rice irrigation is

*Lap desk owned by Marx E. Cohen. The nameplate reads,
"M. E. Cohen, Charleston, Feby. 1, 1823."
(Courtesy of Natalie Moses, Brasstown, NC.)*

also absent from the plantation records. Rice used to sustain the enslaved labor on Clear Springs was probably irrigated with reservoirs of fresh water rather than directly from the Ashley River.

Nevertheless, Clear Springs was likely a successful financial enterprise. Cohen used the plantation for a robust brick and timber business. Because planting was chancy even in the best of times, many planters sought diverse, nonagricultural income. Like Marx Cohen and his father Mordecai, plantation owners were often more capitalist-entrepreneurs than pure agrarians. Yet Cohen is anomalous because instead of using brick and timber to supplement the cultivation of cash crops, he apparently resorted to these endeavors in lieu of planting. Cohen's field hands spent most of their days either hauling and chopping wood or making bricks. With the advantage of a wharf located on the outskirts of his property, Cohen was able to send his bricks and timber down the Ashley River to Charleston, where they were in high demand. Although there is no record of Cohen having sold any rice in 1853, he did sell more than 150,000 hard brown, soft brown, gray, and red bricks in May of that year alone. Clear Springs was also endowed with a variety of timber species, including oak and loblolly and yellow pine. Although his laborers apparently spent the most time cutting loblolly, yellow pine was considered the more valuable commodity. Cohen's business receipts from the West Point rice mill in Charleston are particularly enlightening. Rather than Cohen's paying the mill to process rice, the mill paid Cohen for wood.³⁵

Analysis of Cohen's labor force offers another indication of his economic enterprise. The Clear Springs records indicate that between 1850 and 1860 Cohen kept about twenty slaves at Clear Springs, far fewer than the typical rice plantation. Of those enslaved at Clear Springs, females outnumbered males and both were given the same types of tasks, although the slaves were typically segregated by gender for work. According to the slave schedules of the 1850 federal census, Cohen owned forty-two slaves. Thus Clear Springs's enslaved labor accounted for about half of Cohen's overall slave holdings.³⁶ Although Cohen's work-

ers were spared from toiling in rice fields (work considered especially insalubrious even by the standards of slave owners), their master nevertheless kept them busy. According to Cohen's plantation journals, his slaves cleared land, cut wood, made bricks, dug potatoes, ground corn, cut hay, and burned brush.

To accomplish such tasks, Cohen apparently divided the labor into small groups, each assigned to a different chore without close supervision. For example, on November 15, 1840, Cohen's workers split into separate groups to make bricks, cut wood, and tend to potatoes. Only briefly did Cohen have the help of a white overseer at Clear Springs. On May 24, 1841, Cohen hired a Mr. Martin to be his overseer through November 24 at a rate of eleven dollars per month. Yet he did not rehire Martin. The plantation records mention Martin's "bad management" and indicate that Cohen never again hired an overseer.³⁷

Had he grown rice, Cohen's decision not to keep an overseer on staff would have been at odds with traditional Lowcountry planting practices, where work was apportioned according to the task system rather than organized by the system of gang labor used to grow other cash crops, such as cotton, tobacco, and sugar. While some variations exist, the gang system generally was characterized by a slave force working in unison under the supervision of a taskmaster or overseer. Slaves finished a day's work and returned to their living quarters only after being given permission to do so. The task system, on the other hand, involved slaves working on individual tasks with little or no supervision. While rice planters typically employed overseers, the large number of slaves and acreage of rice plantations made close monitoring problematic. If a slave finished his or her task(s) early in the day, then he or she may have had some measure of free time to hunt, fish, make baskets and other useful (and salable) objects, cultivate a garden, cook, sew, care for children, or socialize. Why the task system became tradition on South Carolina and Georgia rice plantations but nowhere else remains a subject of debate.³⁸ In any case, since Cohen apparently did not grow cash crops at Clear Springs, it is not surprising that he adhered to neither the gang labor system nor the task system.

Regardless of his organization of labor, Cohen was a typical plantation master in that he provided his slaves consistent rations at fixed intervals of time. Lee Cohen describes this ritual in detail:

Early every Sunday the negroes drew their supplies for the week. First they assembled at "the bank" and received their sweet potatoes; next they went to the barn and got their rations of corn, peas, and rice; to the smoke house and got their allowance of bacon or pork, and fish; from their master's store-room they were given their salt, syrup, and tobacco, and the gardener gave to them the cabbages, or turnips, or whatever vegetables they were to have.³⁹

Cohen's plantation records corroborate Lee's account, showing that each week the slaves received some variety of potatoes, fish, tobacco, bacon, rice, and corn. The amounts of each seem to have been based on need rather than productivity. For example, in one tallying of rations, Cohen gave more potatoes to women with children than to men, even though the men had been more productive than the mothers at cutting wood during the prior week.⁴⁰

Workers at Clear Springs produced subsistence crops and livestock that Cohen used to sustain his rural (and possibly urban) labor force rather than take to market. Field hands at Clear Springs grew small quantities of peas, white corn, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and rice. Cohen raised dairy cattle, hogs, sheep, and poultry of both common and exotic varieties. According to the federal agricultural census of June 1, 1860, Clear Springs housed four horses, six asses and mules, forty milk cows, thirty sheep, and forty swine. Since Cohen's bookkeeping never mentions the sale of this livestock, it was probably intended for work and household consumption. The ample amount of bacon that Cohen distributed to his slaves further supports this conclusion. Because rice plantations were spread out from one another along a river rather than clustered together near a town, geographic constraints necessitated that they evolve into self-sufficient institutions.⁴¹ Thus Cohen's practices in this regard mirrored the rice planter norm.

Clear Springs was not an archetypal rice plantation by any means, but Cohen seems to have observed one ubiquitous practice

*Page 7 from the first volume of Marx Cohen's plantation journal,
describing the daily labors at Clear Springs
between July and November 1840.*

*Page 11 from the first volume of Marx Cohen's plantation journal, noting the occurrence of Christmas 1840 and "play days" for the slaves.
(Both this and facing page courtesy of South Caroliniana Library,
University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.)*

among rice planters. Although Cohen was Jewish, rice planter tradition dictated that Christmas Day was the slaves' one true break from work, and the Clear Springs plantation journal shows this along with two additional days in late December indicated as "play days" for the slaves.⁴² While it is not known if Cohen offered any special meals or gifts to his slaves on Christmas, the records make clear that no plantation work was accomplished. Christmas was a time of revelry for the white people at Clear Springs as well. "For who ever knew a southern planter's home," writes Lee Cohen, "that was not full to overflowing at the Christmas tide. . . . Speak about a New England Thanksgiving! Its cheer could never compare with that of a Southern Christmas!"⁴³

Cohen's choice to devote Clear Springs to the production of timber, bricks, and provision crops rather than rice cultivation likely arose, at least in part, from the uncertainty of rice planting. While Charles Manigault, owner of Gowrie rice plantation, sometimes earned profits of more than 25 percent in a given year, a hurricane, slave-killing cholera outbreak, or poor harvest could just as easily produce losses of equal or greater magnitude. Rice plantations, more than any other producers of staple crops, were especially vulnerable to mishaps as a result of inattention or poor management. As journalist Edward King observed on a tour of South Carolina, "A rice plantation is in fact a huge hydraulic machine, maintained by constant war against the rivers," and as a result "the utmost attention and vigilance is necessary, and the labor must be ready at a moment's notice for the most exhaustive of efforts." Without the help of an experienced overseer, it would have been up to Cohen to exercise sound judgment in the speed of rice milling, manage the rice fields' water levels, plant at just the right time, and foresee floods.⁴⁴ Educated and wealthy, Cohen would have been well aware of just how demanding and financially perilous rice planting could be.

Perhaps most important, the banks of the Ashley River did not provide optimal conditions for growing rice. The most productive Lowcountry tidal rice plantations were found on the Combahee, Santee, Waccamaw, and Savannah Rivers. Indeed, many Ashley River plantations such as Middleton and Magnolia,

with their sprawling and grandiose gardens, were used as venues of entertainment rather than to grow cash crops. Clear Springs was directly across the river from the famed Magnolia gardens.⁴⁵ If Cohen's supply of water from the Ashley River was brackish, that would explain why the owners of nearby plantations also chose not to grow rice. Both the Middleton and Drayton families, respective owners of Middleton and Magnolia plantations, owned many other properties on which they depended for income. Clear Springs may not have been so different from Magnolia or Middleton. According to the remarks made by Charles H. Möise at Cohen's funeral in Sumter, "many are the happy memories of the joyous days passed in [Cohen's] genial home in Charleston, or at his pleasant county house at Clear Springs!"⁴⁶ This statement indicates that the property served as a rural retreat, although probably a pecuniary affair first and a "pleasant country house" second. Had Cohen wished only to own a countryside getaway, he could have done so on a much smaller and cheaper estate with fewer slaves and less responsibility.

Cohen's business practices could also be explained as a pragmatic response to the Great Charleston Fire of 1838. On the eve of

*Marx E. Cohen residence
at 85 King Street in
Charleston, South
Carolina. (Courtesy of
Paul D. Saylor,
Preservation Society of
Charleston, 2014.)*

April 27, a fire ignited near the corner of King and Beresford (now Fulton) Streets and destroyed five hundred properties and eleven hundred buildings in the heart of the city's commercial district. Many Charlestonians blamed the fire's rampant destruction on the fact that most of the affected buildings were made of wood rather than brick. Following the fire, the Charleston City Council passed a series of ordinances limiting the use of wood for reconstruction. On June 1, 1838, the South Carolina General Assembly ratified an Act for Rebuilding the City of Charleston, "proposing to rebuild that portion of the city of Charleston now lying in ruins." Builders were offered state-issued loans on the "condition, that the money loaned shall . . . be expended in the erection of brick or stone buildings."⁴⁷ The Great Fire and subsequent legislation caused a tremendous increase in the demand for bricks and may explain why Cohen thought his workers' time was most valuably spent in this industry.

Cohen's best brick and timber customer was renowned Jewish builder-architect David Lopez, Jr., whose demand for building materials was all but insatiable in the aftermath of the Great Fire. Born in Charleston and educated at Yale, Lopez first was exposed to construction when he worked as a supplier of building materials for other contractors. During his career he built houses, apartments, commercial and civic buildings, and churches, solidifying his place in history by designing Institute Hall, where the South Carolina Ordinance of Secession was signed in 1860.⁴⁸ Lopez's first big break came, however, when he obtained a contract to rebuild Charleston's synagogue, KKBE, after it was destroyed in the 1838 conflagration.⁴⁹ Lopez's purchases from Cohen between 1839 and 1841 suggest that Clear Springs likely produced some of the bricks that still support the synagogue at 90 Hasell Street.

Moses Cohen Mordecai—"by the standards of his day, a shipping tycoon and a civic colossus"—was another of Cohen's customers. Making his fortune importing fruit, sugar, tobacco, and coffee, Mordecai was Charleston's most prominent Jew. He represented his district in both houses of the South Carolina legislature. Even the less-than-tolerant South Carolina governor James

Henry Hammond, who once called Mordecai's brother Isaac "a miserable Jew," had to admit that Mordecai was "a man of impressive force and influence." As a senator, Mordecai expressed strong reservations about secession. He owned a controlling stake in *The Southern Standard*, a newspaper that opposed South Carolina's exit from the Union. Although Mordecai argued against secession, he wholeheartedly embraced the Confederacy once the Civil War began. In April 1861, Mordecai's steamer, the *Isabel*, removed Union defenders from Fort Sumter. It subsequently served as a blockade-runner for the Confederacy. Mordecai's shipping company brought the bodies of South Carolina soldiers killed at Gettysburg home at no cost to the families of the deceased. As the war drew to a close, Mordecai served as a member of a delegation sent to discuss South Carolina's return to the Union with President Andrew Johnson in 1865. Moses Cohen Mordecai, who lost twelve buildings in the fire of 1838 and frequently appears in Marx Cohen's plantation records, was probably the most distinguished purchaser of Clear Springs's bricks and timber.⁵⁰

Cohen's income stream from real estate conceivably could have dwarfed the annual profits (or losses) from Clear Springs. A census of Charleston conducted in 1861 reveals that E. Megher and Edward Simons lived as tenants in buildings Cohen owned at what were then, respectively, 128 King Street and 37 Ashley Street.⁵¹ This is only the tip of the iceberg. Between 1842 and 1869, Cohen acquired sixteen properties in downtown Charleston. Between 1839 and 1869, Cohen sold or mortgaged over fifty different properties in and around the city.⁵² Given these holdings, along with Cohen's investments in railroad bonds, it appears likely that Clear Springs was not Cohen's principal source of income.

First and foremost, Clear Springs served Marx Cohen as a symbol of wealth and gentility. Scholars have written exhaustively about the importance of land ownership in antebellum Charleston. As William and Jane Pease, authors of *The Web of Progress: Private Values and Public Styles in Boston and Charleston, 1828-1843*, succinctly put it: "those who had the choice opted for planting, for such noneconomic values as social prestige and polit-

ical power were vested in the conduct of large-scale agricultural pursuits." High social standing would have been unattainable without an impressive country property. Even if Cohen did not cultivate rice, owning a plantation property and his score of slaves would nevertheless have provided him with the social cachet tied to a planter's lifestyle. According to Lee Cohen, "the southern planters lived like princes, each on his own wide domain, surrounded by his own people. Their establishments and retinues were baronial, their entertainments the very height of hospitality." One simply cannot discuss what Clear Springs may have meant to Cohen as a financial enterprise without also considering the image of power and gentility he garnered through ownership of a landed estate and a rural work force. For men like Cohen, just as managing a plantation was a way to make money, it "was often an affair of heart and mind as well. The plantation was [a] way of life."⁵³ Being a plantation owner was more than a vocation; it was for some a source of identity. Based on Cohen's actions following the Civil War, however, plantation ownership was not his only source of identity.

The Postwar Years

If Clear Springs did not function as a typical rice plantation before the war, Cohen's postwar experience differed markedly from those of typical Lowcountry rice planters. "Often," writes historian James Roark, "a planter's postwar experience was a prosaic tale of gradual decline and relative poverty. Most escaped total collapse, but few escaped hardship."⁵⁴ Many postwar factors undercut the prosperity of plantation owners, but the loss of slave labor was the most significant, certainly in the short term, and most planters understood their utter dependence on slavery. When learning of emancipation, one plantation owner wrote to his business partner:

The Yankees have declared the negroes all free. . . . [We] have no authority to control them. . . . [C]ountry and town are filled with idle negroes, crops abandoned in many cases. On some plantations *all* the negroes have left. . . . In all our material interests, we are hopelessly ruined. The loss of our slaves, to a very great extent destroys the value of all other property.⁵⁵

Besides depriving the South's landowning class of slave labor, the Civil War wrought physical destruction as well. One historian has estimated that Confederate wealth declined by as much as 43 percent in the war years, excluding the value of freed slaves. A great deal of this had to do with declining land values. Northern and southern armies used once-productive plantations and farms as battlefields, hospitals, barracks, provision centers, labor pools, and recreation areas, all of which halted agricultural production. Both Confederate and Union troops also looted and stole from plantations. While the war raged, the destruction of Mother Nature accompanied that of man as swamps gradually reclaimed arable land across South Carolina. According to data compiled by the U.S. Census, in 1860 South Carolina had 4,472,060 acres of arable land, with the aggregate value of farms totaling \$139,653,508. By 1870, these figures had dropped to 3,010,539 acres and \$44,808,783.⁵⁶

While many plantation masters attempted to restore the profitability of their enterprises, doing so required a substantial capital investment and was made especially difficult by a lack of credit. With the loss of their slave property and plummeting land values, many plantation owners had insufficient collateral for loans, which had never been more expensive. In the aftermath of the Civil War, "plantations were reorganized, but prosperity remained elusive." Frequently, plantation owners had little choice but to abandon their identities as "masters of the big house" and forge a new life for themselves and their children. As former plantation owner George Bagby eloquently stated, "The houses, indeed, are still there, little changed, it may be on the outside, but the light, the life, the charm, are gone forever. 'The soul is fled.'"⁵⁷

Marx E. Cohen was one of countless plantation owners who left their beloved country properties after 1865, yet it seems that this was Cohen's choice in contrast to the many planters who found plantation management impossible in the postwar economy. The records of the Charleston County Register Mesne Conveyance Office reveal that during and immediately after the war, Cohen mortgaged or sold most of his residential and com-

mercial properties in Charleston. Even with falling real estate prices, this would have yielded a considerable amount of money. Clear Springs is not listed in the Register Mesne Conveyance Office records, and the fate of the property and of Cohen's slaves will remain a mystery until new sources are discovered. Herbert A. Moses claims in his unpublished memoir that the plantation was sold to phosphate prospectors but thereafter quickly fell into dereliction, although he does not specify when or to whom the property was sold. This account of Clear Springs follows a prevailing pattern: "from 1870 to 1900, the Lowcountry economy experienced a short revival with the creation of the new phosphate industry" and "phosphate emerged for many rice planters as the solution to their problems" when it became apparent that "their plantations often contained the richest deposits of phosphate."⁵⁸

The Cohen family left Charleston and moved to Sumter, South Carolina, in November 1868. According to Herbert A. Moses, Cohen sold Clear Springs and moved to Sumter "because of the drastic change in conditions." This supposition is corroborated by Cohen's plantation records, which have no entries after 1868. Perhaps Cohen was too bereaved from losing his only son in the war to continue living in Charleston. Given Lee Cohen's dark depiction of the "dread realities" of life during the war, including "the negro soldiery and their white brethren in arms who committed the dastardly outrages but too common in the city," it is possible that Charleston conjured up too many painful memories to continue dwelling there. Most likely the emancipation of Cohen's slaves accounted for the "drastic change in conditions." For obvious reasons, the Reconstruction period would have been an ideal time to be in the brick and lumber business, but perhaps Cohen was unable to remain in this industry in a cost-effective way if he had to pay his workers. Whatever Cohen's reasons, Moses tells us that his grandfather bought a new home at 14 South Washington Street and "his [Sumter land] holdings included not only this house and the land it is on, but also . . . 10 South Washington Street; and too he owned the lot directly on the opposite side on the street from us, the lot now vacant, and the lot on the

corner of Washington and Dugan Streets. . . . Having lived for years on a plantation, I guess [Marx Cohen] did not wish to be cooped up in narrow space in town, but wanted plenty of elbow room."⁵⁹

Clearly Cohen did not fare all that poorly after the Civil War if he had the means to buy so much property for the sake of "elbow room," especially when one considers that Cohen owned a separate building behind the house used as servants' quarters and had the resources to remodel his Washington Street property considerably. Aside from servants, the Cohen family managed to transplant many of the comforts of Clear Springs and Charleston to Sumter, including their grand piano, several pieces of furniture, and table silver.⁶⁰ While Lowcountry rice planters suffered financially during the Reconstruction era, Cohen seems to have spent his golden years quite comfortably.

Though he left Clear Springs behind, Cohen was "used to a plantation," according to his grandson, and "naturally wanted plenty of planting space." Cultivating crops became something of a hobby for Cohen in Sumter. His "vegetable garden" had "plenty of food crops, the usual vegetables, but also some more unusual" varieties including peaches, crab apples, gooseberries, and even a scuppernong grape arbor, the grapes of which the Cohens made into wine. Cohen's chicken coop must have held a great many fowl if, as Moses claims, it was almost two stories high. Along with chickens, Marx Cohen also kept cows and horses at his Sumter home.⁶¹ It would seem that while the plantation master left the plantation, the plantation never really left the master.

In addition to agricultural activities, Cohen also entered into commerce in Sumter. On August 20, 1870, Cohen invested four thousand dollars in a hardware and dry goods store located on the northwest corner of what were then Main and Liberty Streets. Given the time and place, this was a substantial investment, further demonstrating that Cohen left Charleston under financially stable circumstances. He joined in a partnership with C. E. Stubbs and L. G. Pate. There is no record to indicate that either was Jewish. According to Aaron D. Anderson's *Builders of a New South*,

after the Civil War recent Jewish immigrants usually formed business partnerships with other immigrant Jews, while native-born southerners typically went into business with other southerners. Cohen would have had more in common culturally, linguistically, and politically with gentile southerners than with Jewish immigrants. Thus it is unsurprising that he chose Stubbs and Pate as business partners. While the initial investment forged a partnership that lasted only one year, Cohen remained in the dry goods business until at least 1873.⁶²

One historian has claimed that the typical prewar Charleston elite considered a struggling plantation owner more genteel and noble than a thriving urban merchant. Indeed, for most plantation owners, transitioning from planter to shopkeeper would have been a demoralizing process, yet Cohen was not a typical plantation owner, and it is unclear if he harbored such sentiments. While Cohen's obituary claims that "in late years, his fortune was seriously impaired," his ability to shift from brick and timber production at Clear Springs to dry goods sales in Sumter nevertheless left him better off than most rice planters after the Civil War.

Because the average planter's identity was so vested in his agricultural occupation, many plantation owners desired to remain on their estates, clinging to their identities as the "masters of the big house." According to Lee Cohen, southern planters "developed a pride of birth and station which has been the source of all that is refined and noble in southern society—it was a matter of noblesse oblige with them, they could not fall beneath the standard requirements of their position." In some cases planters even reduced themselves to bankruptcy in an effort to continue their gentlemanly agrarian lifestyles despite the economic, environmental, and labor challenges posed to them in the aftermath of the Civil War. Cohen does not fit this description. He and his family lived comfortably enough thanks to his flexibility in switching from agrarian to mercantile enterprises. When Cohen died on February 24, 1882, he was buried in Sumter's Temple Sinai cemetery, and when his wife, Armida, died thirteen years later, she was buried next to him.⁶³

*Comparison with the Oaks at Goose Creek:
Economics and Religion*

Jewish plantation masters were few and far between in the Old South, and it is difficult to draw comparisons between the experience of Cohen and that of other Jewish planters. One cannot assume that because Cohen did not use his plantation for cash crop production, other Jews followed the same pattern. However, the Oaks Plantation at Goose Creek, located approximately seventeen miles from Charleston, seems to fit the Cohen model. While the Oaks did produce some rice, it was by no means the plantation master's main source of revenue. Created in 1680 as a warrant to Edward Middleton by the British Lord Proprietors, the Oaks remained in the Middleton family until they sold it in 1794. In 1813, a Bavarian-born Jew, Isaiah Moses (no relation to any of the aforementioned Moseses), and his wife, Rebecca, purchased the Oaks. Like Mordecai Cohen, Isaiah had immigrated to Charleston from Europe in search of prosperity. Between 1801 and 1813, he progressed from "grocer" to "shopkeeper" and finally to "planter" in the Charleston city directory.⁶⁴ Like Marx Cohen, Moses listed himself as a planter despite the fact that his wealth came principally from nonagrarian pursuits.

A plat of the Oaks based on a land survey conducted in 1817 shows 328 acres of cleared land, 389 acres of woodlands, but only 60 acres of rice-growing land—far short of the acreage necessary to justify the expense of a tidal irrigation system.⁶⁵ Indeed, the Middleton family, who owned many plantations in their heyday, had built the Oaks in order to display their wealth and to entertain rather than to grow cash crops. While the rice fields were peripheral to the Oaks, the avenue lined with picturesque oak trees leading up to the big house appeared visible from the road. Several published accounts marveling at the Oaks's beautiful entrance support the supposition that the plantation's builders meant for the property to be seen by passing travelers.⁶⁶

For twenty-eight years, the Moseses cultivated rice at the Oaks. Moses employed as many as fifty field hands on the plantation, a figure hardly warranted considering the small size of the property's rice fields. The Oaks also produced livestock, bricks,

*Marx E. Cohen sales invoice, September 18, 1873.
(Courtesy of Special Collections, College of Charleston.)*

and timber, making it entirely comparable to Clear Springs. Like Marx Cohen, Moses's plantation was not his principal source of income. For most, if not all, of the time the Moses family grew rice at the Oaks, the couple also operated a dry goods store in Charleston. In 1840, the Oaks plantation house burned down, and the following year, financially constrained by outstanding debts to KKBE, Moses sold the Oaks for some two thousand dollars less than he paid for it.⁶⁷ Thus, in the same year Moses was forced to sell his plantation, Cohen was reaping profits from the rebuilding of Charleston after the fire of 1838. While both Cohen and Moses seem to have owned plantations for the same entrepreneurial reasons, the key difference between them was that Cohen presumably could afford Clear Springs, while the less affluent Moses had to abandon his country property during hard times.⁶⁸

Comparisons between Cohen and Moses are all the more interesting when one considers their lives away from the plantation. Moses's ownership of so many enslaved people and his well-documented high volume of slave purchases and sales might tempt us to consider him upper class, yet many bills of sale show that he sold and bought the same slaves within just a few months. Most likely, Moses purchased these people, held them a short while, and sold them for a profit rather than retaining them for long-term labor at the Oaks or for urban servitude. Moses was an entrepreneur who looked for diversified profits rather than one who concentrated his resources in cash crop production at the Oaks. Since Moses consistently worked as a grocer and merchant in addition to planting, his main residence was probably in Charleston. In *This Happy Land*, Hagy describes Moses as "a solid member of the middle class."⁶⁹

Unlike Marx Cohen and his father, who both voted in favor of making organ music a part of synagogue services, Moses opposed reform. In 1820, as a member of the KKBE *adjunta*, Moses promulgated the implementation of a new, more traditional congregational constitution. Along with the rest of the *adjunta*, Moses had accomplished a great deal in life, enjoyed a respectable standard of living, and occupied a position of importance in the community. The trustees did not favor disturbing the status quo.

Anyone who sought to bring about change would have a difficult, if not impossible time. Moses was “vehemently opposed to reform” —he could never have acquiesced to installing an organ at KKBE or giving up the temple’s Sephardic Spanish and Portuguese liturgy. In 1846, when the traditionalists lost a court battle over control of the synagogue, they established the breakaway congregation Shearit Israel and chose Moses’s son-in-law, Jacob Rosenfeld, as the first hazan.⁷⁰

Cohen proved an exception to the pattern of upper-class opposition to reform. The difference goes beyond economics. While Marx Cohen was relatively nonobservant, Moses was just the opposite. A letter by Hannah M. Moses, a granddaughter of Isaiah Moses, written January 31, 1927, humorously depicts the extent of her grandfather’s piety:

Once when [Isaiah] was Vice President of the Synagogue, he had indigestion, couldn’t keep anything on his *breadbasket*, so the doctor told him to eat *raw oysters*—Great Mercy! What! Never! Against all Jewish law. No shellfish. Here our wonderful grandma spoke up. She said, “take them as medicine, your health requires it to be done.” Well in order not to set a wicked example to his family, he went out to the furthest corner of the Oaks with a trusted servant to open the oysters and began to eat the oysters—but alas! At that very corner just over the fence was a lot belonging to the Synagogue property. Just at that time two members came out to inspect it. What did they behold? Mr. Isaiah Moses, that pillar of the Synagogue, eating oysters!!! He was ordered to face the powers of the Congregation, but here again our wonderful Grandma came to the front. She brought the Doctor. He was absolved.⁷¹

In sum, despite their economic and religious differences, Isaiah Moses and Marx Cohen demonstrate that plantation ownership in the Old South did not make one a traditional planter.

Conclusion

If Marx Cohen’s plantation records offer posterity a rare glimpse into life on a Jewish-owned plantation, they tell a story much different from the classic Lowcountry rice plantation. Cohen owned a plantation but was not strictly speaking a planter. Suc-

cessful rice plantations were massive undertakings that utilized a great many slaves toiling on vast acreages of land and consumed the majority of the owners' time, energy, and capital in order to produce enormous quantities of rice. Aside from owning a rice plantation property, Cohen's financial enterprises have little in common with this business model. Cohen used Clear Springs to generate income by brick making and lumbering and to produce provision crops to feed his workers. Cohen also profited from land rents in Charleston and investments in railroad bonds. After the Civil War, Cohen managed to move to Sumter, become an urban merchant, and live in economic security with servants and a large property that would remain in his family for generations to come. This also departs from the typical experience of rice planters, who often fell on hard times after the Civil War.⁷² While it is unclear if Cohen's activities at Clear Springs produced the majority of his income, this essay has shown that he was not primarily a rice planter. Instead of cultivating rice, he used his plantation property dynamically, responding to the Great Fire of 1838 by producing timber and bricks. Though not a typical planter, Cohen's behavior was in a sense a precursor to what historian Aaron D. Anderson would call "a new kind of planter" in the Reconstruction period: men who "were always searching for other means of entrepreneurial endeavor that would complement their plantation holdings and existing businesses or open possibilities for profits in new areas."⁷³ They, and probably Cohen, were not romantically tied to plantation agriculture and viewed their plantations as no different from any other business venture. For Cohen as well as Anderson's "new kind of planter," plantation ownership was a means to the end of revenue, which contrasts with most antebellum planters who considered planting and the planter's lifestyle ends unto themselves.⁷⁴

Clear Springs and the Oaks show that historians cannot assume that ownership of a plantation made one a planter by vocation in the Old South. Cohen's plantation records serve as a sharp reminder that assumptions, no matter how logical or seemingly obvious, have no place in scholarly research. Indeed, this microhistory of Cohen has profoundly reshaped the historical

view of him, but more importantly, provided the first detailed analysis of a Jewish plantation master.

In conclusion, Cohen's management of Clear Springs clearly diverged from the common practices of gentile plantation operation, not because Jews and gentiles operated their plantations differently, but because Cohen simply was not a typical planter. Jews and gentiles may have exhibited important differences, however, in terms of how plantation ownership defined their identity. The literature on plantation owners stresses the importance of planting as a source of identity. Most scholars would agree that the "plantation was the heart of the master's world. It was the source of wealth, status, power, and often identity itself," but Cohen does not fit this description.⁷⁵ It would appear that after the Civil War, Cohen had enough money to remain on his plantation, and his decision to switch into mercantile pursuits is worth scrutinizing. While it is difficult to extrapolate without more research, perhaps Cohen's willingness to abandon plantation life highlights an important difference between Jewish and gentile plantation owners. Plantation ownership served as a source of his identity, yet it was not the only or even the primary source. Cohen also identified as a Jew, which explains why he may not have felt the same romantic ties to his plantation that consumed so many of the South's planter elites after the Civil War.

Indeed, it is quite possible that Marx Cohen's community of Jewish friends and family supplanted what Roark describes as the "heart of the master's world." Cohen's best customers at Clear Springs were other Jews; he attended synagogue, supported the Hebrew Orphan Society, and raised his children as Jews. Considering that Marx Cohen's father, Mordecai, came to the South as a pauper-immigrant, it is unlikely that he would have had his identity strongly vested in the ownership of a plantation. Cohen may have enjoyed having Clear Springs as a symbol of his wealth and power, but his ownership of the property probably did not define his identity. If this had been the case, it would be perplexing that he "did not enter heart and soul into the secession movement."⁷⁶ South Carolina was the first state to secede from the Union, in no small part because Lowcountry plantation owners overwhelm-

ingly dominated the state senate and were united in their acute fear of the economic consequences of emancipation.⁷⁷ Although there are few Jewish plantation masters with whom to compare Marx Cohen, one could argue that Isaiah Moses, who abandoned the Oaks when it became financially untenable and was actively involved in the affairs of KKBE and then Shearit Israel, also fits this pattern of Jewish identity and commercial traditions diminishing the significance of the planter identity. Perhaps, then, there was something unique about Jewish plantation masters after all.

NOTES

This article was originally written as a Bachelor's Essay in fulfillment of requirements for graduation from the Honors College at the College of Charleston. I am exceedingly grateful to the staff of the South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina and the Special Collections department of Addlestone Library at the College of Charleston for their extraordinary help with my research. I am particularly grateful to Harlan Greene for his assistance with deciphering the Cohen Plantation Records; Dale Rosengarten for being a truly world-class adviser, reader, and teacher during this project; and Adam Mendelsohn, who not only served as a secondary reader, but has been my scholarly mentor since my freshman year at the College of Charleston.

¹ Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776–1985* (Detroit, 1989), 1:16. Quoted in Gary P. Zola, "Why Study Southern Jewish History?" *Southern Jewish History* 1 (1998): 5.

² As a supplement to the Bachelor's Essay on which this article is based, I examined and wrote metadata for the first volume of Marx Cohen's Clear Springs plantation journal. To view the journal and metadata online, visit <http://digital.tcl.sc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/marxcohen/id/274/rec/1>.

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