

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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## SJHS Rolls Down the River to Natchez

Some 140 attendees got a taste of life on the Mississippi at the Southern Jewish Historical Society's 41st annual conference, held in

Natchez from November 4 to 6, 2016. The crowd—which far exceeded organizers' expectations—enjoyed a memorable weekend courtesy of our co-host, the Institute of Southern Jewish Life (ISJL), the SJHS program committee, and Jewish residents of Natchez and Vicksburg.

The weekend kicked off with a Friday bus tour of Jewish communities in the Mississippi Delta, past and present. Program Co-Chair Stuart Rockoff provided running commentary, starting with a history of the Jews of Jackson, the conference gathering place, as the bus headed toward the Delta. He recounted the dramatic story of the 1967 bombings of Jackson's Temple Beth Israel and the home of Rabbi Perry Nussbaum, whose work on behalf of civil rights had enraged white supremacists.

As we made our way toward the river, Rockoff discussed the Jewish networks that historically connected the Delta to larger markets and noted the civic prominence of the region's Jewish businesspeople, who were "remarkably integrated" into Delta society. But the tenacity of Jews in maintaining their faith and identity was a constant theme. Passing near the Henry S. Jacobs camp, we learned that it was built in 1970 to instill Jewish education and socialization. The camp, which requires fully 40 percent of the region's Jewish children to attend in order to succeed, is still going strong, attracting families from Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Tennessee even as small-town Jewish populations continue to shrink. Today, only around 1,500 Jews live in Mississippi-half in Jackson.







Top: Natchez sunset. *Photo by Marcus D. Rosenbaum* Middle: Teri Tillman leads tour of Natchez Jewish cemetery. *Photo by Rachel Myers* 

Bottom: All panel sessions were held in Temple B'nai Israel's beautiful sanctuary. *Photo by Rachel Myers* 

Persistence of Jewish life was exemplified by resident Richard Marcus, who met the crowd at Anshe Chesed synagogue. One of 11 Jews

The bus stopped at the river town of Vicksburg, where the stubborn

Chesed synagogue. One of 11 Jews still residing in Vicksburg, Marcus offered a history of the congregation, which recently celebrated its 175<sup>th</sup> birthday. He reported that services today draw 12 to 15 people, mostly non-Jews.

The group then toured the adjoining cemetery, located on former farmland devastated in the 1863 battle of Vicksburg and purchased by the congregation just after the Civil War. More than 1,000 Jewish graves (including graves moved from an earlier cemetery) rest amidst plaques describing the movement of troops across the landscape. The congregation is in the process of deeding the cemetery to the Vicksburg National Military Park, which now surrounds it.

After lunch at the former B'nai B'rith Clubhouse, a beautifully restored landmark in downtown Vicksburg, the group proceeded to Port Gibson to visit the oldest standing synagogue in Mississippi. Architectural historian Sam Gruber spoke about the 125year-old building's "Moorish and eclectic" style, and current owner Doug Lum described purchasing and restoring the structure, which had fallen into disrepair.

The group rolled into Natchez in midafternoon and convened at Temple B'nai Israel, where the congregation's president, Jay Lehmann, offered greetings on behalf of the Natchez Jewish community. Mayor Darrell Grennell welcomed the SJHS, proudly noting that his town recently celebrated its 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary yet maintains a forward-thinking, inclusive view of its future. *continued on page 3...* 

## President's Message By Dan J. Puckett

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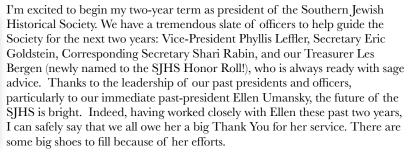
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I became involved with the SJHS in 2005 when Mark Bauman invited me to submit an article to *Southern Jewish History* and encouraged me to present some of my work at the upcoming conference. The SJHS became my favorite scholarly organization not long after and has felt like home ever since. I have always enjoyed, and in fact greatly prefer, the mix of academics and non-academics in the Society. It is, without question, the friendliest and most intimate organization I've ever been a part of. Our annual meetings have the feel of old (and new) friends coming together to hear high-quality scholarship on southern Jewish history. Our meeting each fall is a highlight for me.

Our recent meeting in Natchez was a great success. While there was some initial trepidation due to logistics, Natchez turned out to be one of our most successful meetings to date, with 135 registering for the conference. Our upcoming meeting this November in Cincinnati has the potential to be even better, with the American Jewish Archives hosting the meeting, and Gary Zola and Dana Herman heading the program committee.

As I begin my term, I'm grateful for the advice of Ellen, Les, and those who have been in leadership roles in the Society. I will continue to rely on their advice. I would also encourage thoughts and suggestions from members on how we can make the organization better. Remember, this is *our* Society.

## Atlanta Theater to Debut Play of The Temple Bombing

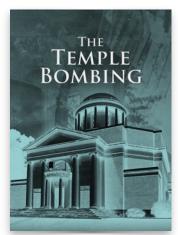
On February 22, the acclaimed Alliance Theatre of Atlanta will host the world premiere of *The Temple Bombing*, an original play inspired by

Melissa Fay Greene's best-selling book about events surrounding the bombing of Atlanta's Temple in 1958. The play is a collaboration between the Theatre, the Temple, and the Tectonic Theater Company of New York, which specializes in docudramas and is best known for producing *The Laramie Project.* 

Developed on the occasion of The Temple's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the play originated with Anniversary Co-chair Debbie Neese, who brought the idea to Susan Booth, artistic director of the Tony-award winning regional theatre company. "In under three minutes, she said 'I

would love to do it," Neese relates. The Temple is helping bring the production to fruition under the leadership of Neese and fellow Anniversary Cochairs Patty Reid and Amie Herbert.

Says Susan Booth, the play "celebrates a city that came together in the face of hatred." After the Temple was bombed by white supremacists



Courtesy of Alliance Theatre

angered by Rabbi Jacob Rothschild's forceful advocacy of civil rights, support for The Temple locally and nationally bolstered Atlanta city leaders' resolve to investigate and prosecute the crime. Ironically, the incident paved the way for dramatic social change and improved race relations.

The play's leading characters are Rabbi Rothschild and his wife Janice—known to SJHS members as Janice Rothschild Blumberg, past president and active member of SJHS. They will be portrayed by veteran Broadway actors. All other

actors will take on multiple roles, representing "all voices and perspectives," says Neese.

## CALL FOR PAPERS

### Borders and Borderlands of Southern Jewish History

42<sup>nd</sup> Annual Conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

## Hosted by the Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives

#### November 3–5, 2017, Cincinnati, Ohio

The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives (AJA) will host the 42<sup>nd</sup> annual conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society on November 3–5, 2017, in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The conference theme is "Borders and Borderlands of Southern Jewish History." Historically, the river city of Cincinnati has served as a boundary between North and South, slavery and freedom. We would like to explore this concept within the framework of southern Jewish history. How might these themes expand our understanding of the southern Jewish experience? Possible topics based on primary



The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives Courtesy of AJA

source research include the history of Jews in border states, the western frontiers, and the Mexican border; Jewish encounters with indigenous peoples and imperial powers; religious and cultural cross-fertilization; migration studies; the development of border industries and trade across natural and political boundaries. Historiographical analyses will also be considered. Since the AJA is located on the historic Cincinnati campus of Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion, Reform Judaism's distinguished institution of higher Jewish learning established in 1875 by Isaac Mayer Wise, the planning committee is particularly interested in receiving submissions that focus on significant personalities and the history of the seminary as it relates to southern Jewish history.

Of course, we welcome all proposals dealing with the totality of southern Jewish history. Full panel proposals are also encouraged.

The deadline for submissions is March 15, 2017. Send a one-page proposal along with current resume or curriculum vitae to Dana Herman (dherman@huc.edu) or Shari Rabin (rabinsl@cofc.edu). Dana Herman will be happy to respond to all queries.

### An Important Message from Our Conference Hosts

The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives looks forward to serving as the host institution for the 42<sup>nd</sup> annual SJHS conference. This year marks the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a permanent Jewish presence in the "Queen City" of Cincinnati.

The Marcus Center will also be hosting a **Synagogue Archiving Conference** immediately following the SJHS conference, which will run from Sunday afternoon, November 5, through Monday, November 6. More information and a full schedule are forthcoming.

## Natchez Conference Report continued from page 1...

Local historian Teri Tillman then managed to pack 200-plus years of Natchez Jewish history into 15 minutes, covering the arrival of Jews in the 1700s, the development of religious institutions, the prominent role of Jews in civic life (including two Jewish mayors), economic pursuits, and late-20<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish population decline. She noted that ISJL will soon take over the Temple building, ensuring its preservation. Picking up on Tillman's reference to the importance of the women's auxiliary in maintaining Jewish life, Jennifer Stollman then spoke about southern Jewish women more generally. Arguing that the theme of assimilation has been overemphasized in southern Jewish history, she asserted that women's activities invariably focused on trying to keep Judaism alive. After dinner at a nearby bistro it was back to the Temple, where ISJL Rabbi Jeremy Simons led services. Keynote speaker Robin Amer presented the 2016 SJHS Helen Stern Cultural Encounter, a poignant and humorous look at "Growing Up with the Last Jews of Natchez." Mixing music, recorded interview clips, and personal reminiscence, Amer used her family's culinary traditions (e.g., matzo balls with turkey gravy) to relate the pride with which her relatives had forged a distinct southern Jewish identity—with emphasis on the "southern." During the Oneg Shabbat, ISJL President Macy Hart talked of the Institute's work in preserving the past and ensuring the future of southern Jewish life. Stephen Whitfield presented SJHS Treasurer Les Bergen with the Society's Honor Roll award (see Society News). *continued on next page...* 

After morning services led by Rabbi Stanley Garfein, Saturday's first panel revealed how late-19th-century southern Jews used communal ceremonies to articulate an ideal relationship with non-Jews. Sam Gruber spoke of the Masonic influence on synagogue cornerstonelaying ceremonies. The prestige of Freemasonry, along with Masonic ideals of universalism and tolerance, powerfully attracted Jews, and their inclusion of Masonic rites expressed their desire to join the local elite without relinquishing Judaism. In the same vein, Kay Goldman described Purim balls-widely popular social occasions where Jews and non-Jews partied late into the night-as a way for Texas Jews to assimilate and still "perform" Judaism (though without much actual religious content). Both Gruber and Goldman noted the lavish praise these events received in the local press.

On a more somber note, the next panel addressed the impact of epidemics and natural disasters on southern Jewish communities. Anton Hieke discussed how yellow fever epidemics that swept the 19th-century South (especially port cities such as New Orleans) disproportionately ravaged immigrants and the poor. However, these events spurred positive change: they led to the founding of Jewish hospitals, promoted solidarity as Jews around the U.S. mobilized to aid their coreligionists, and strengthened local relations between Jews and non-Jews, fellow sufferers.

Michael Cohen recounted the story of Bayou Sara, an important Louisiana cotton trading town that was often hit by flooding and "finally succumbed to the river in 1925." Describing how the fortunes of the local Jewish community rose and fell with the flood tides, Cohen noted the importance of investigating a neglected topic: how the South's natural environment influenced Jewish life. Marlene Trestman reported on the children from far-flung communities who ended up at the New Orleans Jewish Orphans Home, often because of catastrophes that struck their families. She is working towards a "collective biography" of these children, to illuminate not only the circumstances that brought them to the home, but









also how the orphanage shaped their values.

After a southern-style buffet at the Carriage House, luncheon speaker Stephen Whitfield spoke on "Jews against the Ku Klux Klan." Founded to restore white supremacy in the South after the Civil War, the Klan reemerged nationwide in the 1910s as a popular expression of "100 percent Americanism" and white Anglo Saxon identity, gaining force through the Leo Frank lynching and the release of the pro-Klan film Birth of a Nation. Jews joined in the NAACP's campaign against the film, while the Klan's most high-profile southern Jewish opponent, Norfolk newspaper editor Louis Jaffe, courageously editorialized against the group through the 1920s. The Klan rose again in the 1950s, but at a time of "ecumenical consensus" over civil rights, it was now considered a fringe group rather than an expression of Americanism. It became an object of mockery by Jewish comics such as Woody Allen and Lenny Bruce, whose humor helped to delegitimize the organization.

The Saturday afternoon panel showed how stories individuals collect about their own families can reveal significant trends and themes in southern Jewish history. Clara Silverstein told of her grandmother Bertha Sussman Silverstein, who grew up in small-town North Carolina as the daughter of a Polish Jewish immigrant and a local Christian woman who converted. In an oral history, Bertha described how, despite being the only Jewish family in town, her parents managed to pass along a solid Jewish identity to their children. Sally Wolff King used a family photo album to illustrate her family's experience in the Mississippi Delta, telling a tale that included economic insecurity, floods, and lots of moving around among Mississippi, Louisiana, and Arkansas.

Top: Ann Gerache of Vicksburg's Congregation Anshe Chesed talks about its historic cemetery. Middle Top: Sam Gruber points out architectural features at Port Gibson's Gemiluth Chassed synagogue.

Middle Bottom: SJHS audience members were, as usual, deeply engaged in conference sessions.

Bottom: Attendees enjoy a break between sessions in the Natchez sunshine. *All photos by Rachel Myers* 

Attendees participated in various guided tours of Natchez late Saturday afternoon. Local residents Teri Tillman and Mimi Miller led a fascinating bus tour of Jewish Natchez that included the stately homes of former merchants; the picturesque Jewish cemetery; and the historic "Under the Hill" district, a stretch of riverbank with a strong 19th-century Jewish presence and a notorious reputation thanks to its saloons, gambling dens, and brothels. Saturday night, conference goers sampled the lively (though relatively tame) Natchez restaurant scene.

The first Sunday morning panel focused on interactions between southern synagogues and the larger society. Viewing synagogues as legal and political bodies, Shari Rabin examined how disputes within the Jewish community as well as between Jews and non-Jews were adjudicated by southern courts. Southern synagogues had no qualms about taking internal battles over mixed seating and Sabbath observance into the courts, which readily weighed in, showing the system's acceptance of synagogues as legal entities. Josh Furman reported on how southern Jews in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century participated in Brotherhood Week, an annual interfaith program of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. In an era marked by the







Top Left: Vicksburg native Richard Marcus discusses his town's Jewish community. Right: Mayor Darrell Grennell welcomes the SJHS to Natchez. *Photos by Rachel Myers* 

Middle: Ellen Umansky queries panel speaker Shari Rabin. Photo by Marcus D. Rosenbaum

Bottom: Lunch at Vicksburg's elegant BB Club. Photo by Rachel Myers

resurgence of the Klan and conflict over civil rights, Brotherhood Week presented an alternative vision of interfaith harmony and religious tolerance embraced by mainstream southern churches as well as synagogues.

The final conference panel, "Speak, Memory," considered two memoirists with widely contrasting perspectives on southern Jewish life. Bryan Stone analyzed the memoir of Alexander Gurwitz, a pious Russian Jew who immigrated around 1910 and served the Jewish community of San Antonio as shohet and melamed. He learned neither English nor Spanish during his 40 years in Texas, teaching the town's Orthodox children in Yiddish. His memoir suggests it was possible to live in the South without acculturating at all, in contrast to the diary of Helen Jacobus Apte, a southern Jewish belle and "committed classical Reform Jew" who was both thoroughly southern and thoroughly Jewish, according to panelist Marcus Rosenbaum, her grandson. Helen's diary shows how intertwined these two identities could be. Both works demonstrate the value of first-person accounts not only in providing details of everyday life, but in revealing how historical trends and events were felt by ordinary people.

—Deborah R. Weiner

### Atlanta Theater to Debut Play of The Temple Bombing

continued from page 2...

The casting is race- and gendernon-specific. Characters include the bombers, their lawyers and prosecutors, congregation members, politicians, and wellknown figures such as Atlanta editor Ralph McGill and Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Says Janice Blumberg, "I've never seen a play documented so precisely as this is, with most of the lines exactly as spoken by the real characters at the time." Playwright-director Jimmy Maize has consulted with numerous Atlantans and conducted in-depth research. "He even quotes from my husband's personal letters and



from transcripts of interviews by Melissa Greene when she was researching her book." She notes the relevance of the play for today's audiences. "It's about many layers of history, including strong connections with issues we're facing today. I wouldn't be surprised if it plays in cities other than Atlanta."

The play will run until March 12. For tickets and information, visit alliancetheatre.org/ thetemplebombing or call 404.733.5000.

Janice Blumberg and playwright-director Jimmy Maize. Photo by David Schendowich, courtesy William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum

## **NEWS AND NOTES**

#### UNC Asheville Jewish Studies Program Marks Anniversary



Established in 1982, the University of North Carolina at Asheville's Center for Jewish Studies will celebrate its 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary and Dr. Rick Chess's 25<sup>th</sup> year as director with a special series of events on March 23–26, 2017. Dr. Chess will lead off on Thursday, March 23, at 7 p.m. at the Reuter Center, where he will present the Annual Phyllis Freed Sollod Memorial Lecture, "An Andalusian Poet Reads the *New York Times* and Other Adventures in Jewish Culture." A reception will follow.

Dr. Richard Chess. *Photo by Laurie Johnson* 

On Friday, March 24, renowned Israeli-born actor, singer, teacher, and writer Danny Maseng will present

"The Passion, The Beauty, The Heartbreak: Israel through Poetry and Music" at 3 p.m. at the Reuter Center. Maseng will offer an evening of musical performance and story on Sunday, March 26, at Isis, a West Asheville concert venue and restaurant. Preceding the performance, a screening of a documentary on CJS, produced by Marty Gillen, will offer personal testimonies to the impact CJS has had on UNCA students, faculty, and members of the Greater Asheville community. More details will be forthcoming.

Dr. Chess will be handing off the baton of leadership of the Center for Jewish Studies at the end of the 2017 academic year. For information about the position and applicant qualifications, go to cjs.unca.edu.

#### Two Historical Projects Seek Evidence

**World War I Commemorations**: In anticipation of the centennial of the entry of the United States into World War I, Hollace Weiner of the Fort Worth Jewish Archives and Sam Gruber of the International Survey of Jewish Monuments are collecting information about commemorative monuments, plaques, windows, and events for American Jewish soldiers who served in the Great War. Many synagogues, community centers, and cemeteries installed or erected markers; often bronze or stone plaques with an Honor Roll of names of those who served. If you know of examples, please send information and digital photos to Hollace and Sam at hollaceava@gmail.com and samuelgruber@gmail.com.

Jews and Masons: Sam Gruber requests help in expanding his Natchez conference presentation, "Jews, Masons, and Cornerstone Laying Ceremonies for Synagogues in the South." His talk referred to events in Birmingham, Charleston, Galveston, Houston, Natchez, Oklahoma City, Port Gibson, Richmond, and Tallahassee. He would be grateful to learn of other instances of Masonic involvement in cornerstone laying ceremonies, and especially to find programs, speeches, and images from such ceremonies in other towns and cities.



Fort Worth's honor roll of Jewish doughboys is being restored for the WWI centennial. Lettering and images that had totally faded are being inked in. What's the status of your local WWI monument?

Courtesy of Fort Worth Jewish Archives

#### **CSJC Welcomes Kinky Friedman and Steve Krause**

Spring 2017 will be a lively time at the Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture at the College of Charleston. On Thursday, March 30, it will host an "Evening with Kinky Friedman" at 7 p.m. in the Simons Recital Hall, 54 St. Philip Street. Among his many accomplishments, the iconoclastic Friedman founded the tongue-in-cheek country music band "Kinky Friedman and the Texas Jewboys" and once ran for governor of Texas. He will perform and participate in an on-stage conversation about his life and career. Tickets for this exciting event are free, but must be reserved ahead of time at tinyurl.com/ kinkychs.



Kinky Friedman. Courtesy of Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture

On Sunday, April 2, the Center will host Steve Krause, who spoke at the SJHS meeting in Nashville. He is the co-editor, with Mark Bauman, of a new book, *To Stand Aside or Stand Alone: Southern Reform Rabbis and the Civil Rights Movement*, based on interviews his father, P. Allen Krause, conducted as a young rabbinical student in the mid-1960s.

For the latest information about the Center's activities, check out jewishsouth.cofc.edu.

#### In Memoriam: Zelma Rivin

Zelma Goodman Rivin, a leading member of the Jewish community and longtime civic leader in Portsmouth, Virginia, passed away in October at age 95.

Rivin and her late husband Bernard were founders of Temple Sinai, where she was elected first female president in 1975. One of her major accomplishments was the preservation of Chevra T'helim Synagogue, which served the Orthodox of Portsmouth from 1918 until its closing in 1985. In 2008, it reopened and was dedicated as the Jewish Museum and Cultural Center. It now hosts cinema, lectures, music, and other events. Rivin had a strong interest in her hometown, as her obituary in the *Virginian-Pilot* noted. She served on the Portsmouth school board in the 1970s and was honored as the 57<sup>th</sup> First Citizen of Portsmouth in 1995. She also founded Help and Emergency Response Inc., an emergency shelter for battered women in Hampton Roads. "There's not a lot of parts of the city she hasn't touched," stated her son Richard. Longtime friend Ida Kay Jordan noted, "She was a very caring, very devoted person. . . . To me, she's synonymous with Portsmouth."

For years, Rivin and her husband operated a women's clothing store known as The Famous, founded by her parents in 1916. "It was known for its women's clothing and bridal gowns and accessories people need when they're getting married," Jordan said.

## - Society News -

### SJHS Officers for 2017 Elected at Natchez Meeting

A new slate of officers was elected at the annual membership meeting in November. The incoming officers are: Dan Puckett, president; Phyllis Leffler, vice president; Eric Goldstein, secretary; Les Bergen, treasurer; and Ellen Umansky, immediate past president. In addition, Eric Goldstein will become chair of the grants committee and Shari Rabin has taken over as corresponding secretary.

### Expanded Helen M. Stern Bequest Announced

In 2015, the late Helen M. Stern of Atlanta made a bequest to the Society in honor of her friends Bruce and Linda Beeber. Her generous gift made possible the outstanding SJHS Helen Stern Cultural Encounters held at the Nashville and Natchez conferences. At the SJHS membership meeting in Natchez, outgoing President Ellen Umansky shared the exciting news that the Stern estate hopes to give \$10,000 per year for nine more years. The bequest will be used in part to fund the SJHS conference keynote speaker, which will now be known as the Beeber Family Speaker series of the Helen M. Stern Fund. The Society also plans to use the funds for grants for the development of southern Jewish culture.

### Les Bergen Added to SJHS Honor Roll

The SJHS Honor Roll was created to recognize outstanding, sustained service to the Society. It is bestowed on those who have made a significant contribution in institutional rather than in academic terms. The first recipients, Beryl Weiner and Sumner Levine, were recognized posthumously. In Natchez, honors and awards committee member Steve Whitfield presented the award to the third recipient, SJHS Treasurer Les Bergen, for his work in ensuring the Society's financial health and modernizing its record-keeping.



"Les has served unstintingly, enthusiastically, generously, unselfishly to keep the Society on an even keel financially," Whitfield stated. "As treasurer he has been decisive in keeping the books in balance, and even inaugurated the use of spread sheets—for the evolution of our Society, the equivalent to the Venetians in the Renaissance having invented double-entry bookkeeping." Congratulations, Les!

Jane and Les Bergen. Courtesy of Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina

### A Jewish Studies Celebration in Atlanta

Emory University's Tam Institute for Jewish Studies, one of the premier centers for Jewish Studies in the U.S. South, celebrated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in December. Preceding its anniversary dinner was a "Community of Scholars Showcase," where faculty presented panels highlighting their teaching and research specialties. Several SJHS members, pictured here, enjoyed the festivities. *Courtesy of Tam Institute for Jewish Studies* 

Left to right: Eric L. Goldstein, SJHS secretary and director of the Tam Institute; Jackie Metzel; Bernie Goldstein; former SJHS presidents Janice Rothschild Blumberg and Ellen Umansky (who taught at Emory in the 1980s); Rabbi Donald Tam (after whom the Tam Institute is named); and Shirley and Perry Brickman.





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You can now join the SJHS online at **jewishsouth.org/store/annual-membership**. Or, send below form and check payable to Southern Jewish Historical Society to: **Southern Jewish Historical Society, PO Box 71601, Marietta, GA 30007-1601** Please mark "Membership" or "Endowment" in the memo line of your check.

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