Is it hometown bragging to say that Charleston is the best place in North America to study Jewish history? Other cities make great claims, and it’s true, if you scratch the surface, almost every place has a remarkable Jewish history to tell. But what the Jews of Charleston and the state of South Carolina have is longevity, and they share with other citizens a preservation ethos that has protected a significant portion of the historic infrastructure of the city.

The history of Jews in Charleston is uniquely long and well preserved. The conventional story begins with The Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, ca. 1669. Though never enacted, this instrument of rule expressed the Proprietors’ original intent to allow Jews, along with “Heathens, and other Dissenters,” to settle and practice their religion. In common with French Protestants, Jews were appreciated for their mercantile connections.

They also were welcomed as white people—people of European ancestry—to help offset a growing majority of people of African origin. In addition to religious liberty, The Fundamental Constitutions dictated a pattern of land ownership and agriculture predicated on enslaved labor. Counted with whites, Jewish settlers could enjoy not only religious freedom but extraordinary opportunities to participate in the economy and even in governance. As slave masters and mistresses, brokers and merchants, ship owners, and public officials, Jewish Carolinians followed the mores of white society.

Charleston trade swelled in the decades after the Revolutionary War and its Jewish population grew apace. By the early 19th century, the city claimed the largest Jewish population in the United States—a fact that still surprises many.

Through the 18th and 19th centuries, Charleston was a bellwether of American Jewish history.

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, one of the first five colonial congregations, spawned the first Hebrew Benevolent Society, first Hebrew Orphan Society, and first Reform movement in the young nation. In the early 1850s, immigrants from Central Europe began an Orthodox minyan that became Brith Sholom.

President’s Message  By Phyllis Leffler

As a nation, we are living through dark and difficult days. All 50 states in the U.S. have been impacted by the coronavirus, COVID-19. We have all witnessed major cancellations, from school systems to basketball tournaments to book festivals and concerts. So many universities have sent students home, only to try to teach through online mechanisms. Borders have been closed. Every sector has been affected. We watch in dismay as we see how many people are suffering.

You might think that this would not affect SJHS. After all, we have only one major conference a year—and that is at the end of October. Other than that, our communications with our valued members are through newsletters such as the Rambler, e-mail, or regular mail.

But in fact, we have been affected. On March 16, we were scheduled to hold our first-ever SJHS-sponsored panel in Atlanta. We spent months organizing for this, working with The Temple in Atlanta. We planned for a panel of experts to talk about how our journal, Southern Jewish History, has documented the rich history of the Atlanta region. The panel was going to address changing historiographical trends as well as the evolution of the journal itself.

We were excited to launch this new initiative. But, like so many other organizations, we decided it was prudent and responsible to cancel—to keep our members and their families safe and to avoid unnecessary air travel. We will reschedule after the health emergency has passed.

We had several goals for this event. First, we want to make SJHS and its important work better known. If we can sponsor regional events, we can spread the word about the valuable role of SJHS in promoting and preserving the Jewish history of the South. We hope that will encourage others to join us, building our membership base.

Second, we want to position SJHS for the future by ensuring the quality production of our journal, so ably stewarded by Mark K. Bauman over the 20 years of its publication. To do this, we are seeking financial support that will eventually lead to the endowment of the journal.

Third, we hope to spread the word about our grants program that supports new research, helps bring projects to completion, and funds archival preservation work. The need for this support is great. We could do so much more with additional financial resources.

We will reschedule our Atlanta event. And we are also thinking about how we might develop regional events in other locations. We want to talk to people who are interested in enhancing knowledge of southern Jewish history and preserving it for future generations. We want to talk with people who can help us move this forward.

So, here’s my request: If you know of people we should contact, or if, perhaps, you are one of them, please be in touch. If you think your community can sponsor a regional program, please be in touch. This effort is being spearheaded by our vice-president, Jay Silverberg, and myself. Please contact one of us at jbsilverberg@gmail.com or pleffler@virginia.edu. 

Passover 2020, Part 1: Different from All Other Nights

SJHS members from Texas to South Africa held virtual seders this year. Hollace Weiner sent us this festive view from Fort Worth. For more, see page 6. Photo by Hollace Weiner.
Two Alabama Archives Enlarge their Southern Jewish History Holdings

With the SJHS 2020 conference set to revolve around the theme of “Expanding the Archive(s) of Southern Jewish History,” we thought we would take the opportunity to highlight two Alabama universities that are doing just that.

Jewish Oral History Project Announced in Mobile

The McCall Library of the University of South Alabama has launched a new community-based archives initiative funded by the Alabama Humanities Foundation: the Jewish Mobile Oral History Project.

The project will produce a body of narrative interviews from members of Mobile’s Jewish community about the history, development, and present-day experience of a religious minority in Alabama. Interviewees will also be invited to donate archival materials that help to illuminate Jewish institutions, businesses, and family life.

To inaugurate the collection, the library will host a public event in the fall promoting intercultural exchange. “We plan to highlight the importance of expanding our ability to understand the experience of another,” says Deborah Gurt, the library’s interim director.

The interviews at the heart of the project will capture the historical memory of older community members while also exploring Mobile’s contemporary Jewish community as a diverse, continuous, and valued feature of Alabama’s social landscape. Performing the critical function of preserving the past before it disappears, the interviews will also reveal the many ways of being Jewish in 2020 in America. The broader public will have an opportunity to experience conversations, stories, foodways, and points of view they might not otherwise interact with—the human story always at the center.

To expand the reach of the collection, the McCall Library will not only preserve the interviews as research objects, but will build a web portal where they will be accessible online. For more information, contact Deborah Gurt at dgurt@southalabama.edu.

Goldsmith-Schiffman Family Collection at the University of Alabama in Huntsville

One of Alabama’s most prominent Jewish families now has nearly 170 years of personal and business documents available to the public at the Archives and Special Collections of the University of Alabama in Huntsville. The Goldsmith-Schiffman Family Collection, comprising more than 100 linear feet of archival material, is one of the flagship local history collections at the university.

Researchers interested in economic history will be able to dive into a century’s worth of ledgers from I. Schiffman and Co., a Huntsville-based business that operated as a bank, managed agricultural and industrial interests, and ran the state’s first Dodge dealership. People studying race or class relations in the American South will find numerous rabbit holes to explore, from slave receipts to remembrances of life with beloved nurses in Jim Crow Alabama. And of course, Jewish history is well represented.

Highlights include documents related to the founding of Temple B’nai Sholom, the state’s oldest synagogue in continuous use, and hundreds of pieces of desperate correspondence between family members in Huntsville and those trapped in Nazi Germany. In addition to documents, the collection includes a small number of artifacts pertaining to the history of the I. Schiffman & Co. building as well as personal effects dating back nearly two centuries.

Family historian Margaret Anne Goldsmith has been poring over and organizing the collection for 25 years. She currently employs archivist Vaughn Bocchino, who has processed the collection to fit within UAH’s archival practices.

For general information about the collection, contact the Archives and Special Collections at UAH, archives@uah.edu. For more specific inquiries, contact Vaughn Bocchino at vaughn.bocchino@gmail.com.
A Conservative congregation named Emanu-El broke from Orthodoxy in 1947, and Brith Sholom and Beth Israel negotiated a merger seven years later. In more recent years, Charleston's Jews jumped across two rivers, with outposts west of the Ashley, now home to Modern Orthodox congregation Dor Tikvah, and east of the Cooper, where the Chabad movement has built an impressive community center.

Over the centuries, Charleston's Jews have shared in the city's ups and downs. They took part in the two great wars that were fought within the city, followed by two world wars. In their businesses and social lives they have adapted to modernity, while sustaining an Orthodox element that is more diverse and assertive than ever.

South Carolina has emerged as a national leader in preserving Jewish history, starting with initiatives in Holocaust education and memorialization. In the 1990s, the College of Charleston launched a Jewish studies program that has become a powerhouse in the Southeast, while the Jewish Heritage Collection at Addlestone Library has developed into an important engine of research.

Charleston offers marvelous opportunities to explore Jewish history. We hope to welcome you all here in October.

Dale Rosengarten, founding curator of the Jewish Heritage Collection at the College of Charleston, is co-chair of the SJHS 2020 conference program committee.

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A Day-Trip Up the Coast

The early and continued presence of Jews in Georgetown, 60 miles north of Charleston, has left its mark on the physical and cultural landscape, from antebellum rice plantations to shops that lined Front Street. For a pre-conference day-trip we are planning to travel to the old rice port and visit Hobcaw Barony, Bernard Baruch's winter retreat, now a renowned research facility; the Kaminski House, a city-run museum; Kaminski Hardware, operated by the Rice Museum; and Beth Elohim's temple and cemetery. The Georgetown County Library is scheduled to showcase the Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina's traveling exhibition, A Store at Every Crossroads—a welcoming venue for a conference reception.

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Left to right: Ben Yaschik in his store, with daughter Dena, wife Vera, and mother-in-law Ida Blacher, 1930. Processional bringing Brith Sholom's Torahs to Beth Israel Synagogue, renamed Brith Sholom Beth Israel upon the merger of the two Orthodox congregations, 1955. Lena and Meyer Collis’s bakery, 165 King Street, Charleston, ca. 1944. Special Collections, College of Charleston.
On March 24, 2020, while under a shelter-in-place order in Ohio, I spoke via Zoom to Dr. Dale Rosengarten, founding director of Charleston’s Jewish Heritage Collection (jhc.cofc.edu), at her home in McClellanville, South Carolina. In this edited version of our conversation, we touch on themes we hope to explore at the SJHS conference, “Expanding the Archive(s) of Southern Jewish History,” which will honor the Collection’s 25th anniversary.

**What is the Jewish Heritage Collection?**

It is an archival collection of manuscripts and oral histories, although there are other things involved. It resides within Special Collections at the College of Charleston’s Addlestone Library. For 25 years we’ve been proactively researching, interpreting, and collecting in the area of southern Jewish history and culture.

**How did the Collection come to be?**

A whole lot of important pieces came together at once. I would start with Isadore Lourie, a state senator. He had a long-time dream of creating a Jewish historical society which would collect oral histories of his parents’ cohort, the small-town immigrant Jewish community that was declining if not departing from the scene. We had all these big guns behind us, so to speak—this new, ambitious historical society, the College of Charleston’s library and Jewish studies program, and McKissick Museum at the University of South Carolina. Each had its own agenda, but they all wanted to see Jewish history in the state documented and preserved.

They hired me as project director in January 1995. We started collecting oral histories right away because that was what Izzy wanted, and it was also the right thing to do. And it turned out to be the perfect strategy for finding exhibit objects. After seven years of what I call “primary accumulation,” we put together this big show titled *A Portion of the People.*

Archivally, we were also building on the very first gift. In 1993, Solomon Breibart arranged for the records of K.K. Beth Elohim to be moved to the College library, so we already had on our shelves what was arguably the most important single southern Jewish collection.

The Jewish community was really ready to participate, to have people ask them about their heritage, to collect materials and build exhibitions. Right from the get-go the project straddled being a scholarly collection at an academic library and also something of a community archives.

**How have you decided what to collect?**

As an academic research library, our mantra is research value. Because Special Collections is a manuscript and rare book repository, we’re limited mainly to paper objects. We’re not a museum but we do produce exhibits, so we’ve given ourselves permission to acquire some small objects. At first we focused very tightly on South Carolina. That has included congregational and organizational records, business papers, and family history materials: minute books, ledgers, memoirs, correspondence, photographs, albums, immigration papers, and ephemera—the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life. When we accepted the Southern Jewish Historical Society papers, we broadened our range to regional. That said, we always try to work with our colleagues across the region to place things where they’ll get the most use. We have virtually no acquisition budget, so we rely almost entirely on what people want to give us.

**What kinds of items do you wish you had more of?**

I always wished we’d find a peddler’s pack and we never did. It’s easier to collect high end objects and papers and documents than it is to collect the quotidian objects. I also would like to include more “outsider” perspectives in our oral history collection. We interview people who are Jewish and live in South Carolina, but I’d like to interview more non-Jewish people, especially people who worked for Jewish families or worked in Jewish-owned stores or were customers or clients, to record their sides of the story.

**What do you see as the major accomplishments of the JHC?**

We started with the goal of putting South Carolina on the map of American Jewish history and I think we’ve succeeded. Twenty-five years ago, a number of southern states had done big projects on their Jewish settlers, but South Carolina had not. We felt, and I still feel, that South Carolina has the biggest story to tell.

We’ve also become a real research hub. My colleagues in the reading room report JHC is one of the most in-demand collections. And our Research Fellowship program under the auspices of the Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture is truly an engine of new research (see blogs.cofc.edu/southern-studies-minor/category/southern-jewish-history/).

**What are some of your hopes for the future?**

We produce excellent digital resources and we need to get them out there more effectively, especially in times like this when everyone is depending on a computer screen for information. At the moment we have a moratorium on acquisition, but I think we will start up again. We’ve maybe got the tip of the iceberg but not a whole lot more than that.

Shari Rabin, assistant professor of Jewish studies and religion at Oberlin College, is co-chair of the SJHS 2020 conference program committee.
Southern Jewish History Expands Online Presence

Southern Jewish History, the Society’s annual peer-reviewed journal, recently made strides in our ongoing effort to expand our reach and become as accessible as possible to the greatest number of readers. First, Managing Editor Bryan Stone increased the number of volumes offered for free on the SJHS website from 14 to 20. Each year another volume will be made available in this fashion.

Second, Stone posted the full contents of the first 20 issues on the academic social networking site Academia.edu. Southern Jewish History now has a profile page on the site where the journal’s content can be viewed, searched, or downloaded. Users with Academia accounts (which are free to create) can “follow” us to receive updates whenever new material is posted.

Academia is an online resource for scholars in a wide variety of fields, where they can post original research, connect with other scholars, and receive notifications of new posts in their disciplines. Anyone can fully search the site, and account holders can download pdfs of posted documents.

Researchers looking for information about southern Jewish history, either through Academia or with a search page like Google, will now be directed to our articles. Since SJH joined in January, our profile page has been visited more than 300 times and our articles have been downloaded more than 90 times.

Most users accessing the online articles are in the United States, but readers from 23 other countries have found us on Academia, from India to Israel.

Each year, we’ll add one previous issue to our Academia page. Meanwhile, we’ll continue to sell the electronic contents of our latest two issues, as well as print copies of all past issues, on the SJHS website, jewishsouth.org.

The Academia SJH profile page can be accessed for free at independent.academia.edu/SouthernJewishHistory.

SJHS Honors Barbara Tahsler

By Phyllis Leffler

Most SJHS members know Barbara Tahsler only as the person who sends out the Society’s membership emails. But with more than 30 years of service, Barbara has been much more than a name on an email address. At our October meeting in Charlottesville, we acknowledged her remarkable contribution with the SJHS Service Award.

During the 1990s, Atlanta’s Beryl Weiner, of blessed memory, served as president of the Society. Beryl had a distinguished law practice, and Barbara was his longtime administrative assistant. He enlisted her help with SJHS business, since the Society had no full-time paid administrative staff or infrastructure (and still doesn’t). Former long-term treasurer Bernie Wax recalls, “Frankly we would not have survived without her.” Ever since, Barbara has maintained our membership records, managed our mailing lists, and handled all correspondence to our official address.

For years after Beryl’s death, she did this as a volunteer out of devotion to her former employer and in support of new SJHS friendships. “She was always fun to work with, no task was too difficult,” Bernie says. Les Bergen, another long-term treasurer, echoes, “Barbara cheerfully supported my work” through his ten-year stint. “The feeling was mutual for all of us who have had the pleasure of coordinating with her.” Most of her long relationships with SJHS officers have been entirely by phone and e-mail. Nevertheless, affirms Bernie, “She is certainly one of the SJHS stalwarts!”

Barbara is the bond that keeps us together. Writes Len Rogoff, former president and Rambler editor, “We in the Society are all dedicated to a common purpose, but we’re a scattered people. We depend upon Barbara to perform all the necessary duties without which the Society could not function. But beyond her official duties, which she performs with both efficiency and good cheer, Barbara has been our friend. We have been blessed to have her.”

Barbara: Kol Hakavod, Mazel Tov, Congratulations. We are all in your debt, and deeply thank you for all your support of SJHS.

Passover 2020, Part 2

Two more virtual seders.

Left: Brothers Simon (Rambler designer) and Adam (SJHS member) Mendelsohn with Adam’s kids, in Cape Town. Photo by Andrea Mendelsohn.

Right: SJHS conference co-chair Shari Rabin’s family. Photo by Shari Rabin.
NEWS AND NOTES

Award-Winning Biography Profiles
Morris B. Abram

Morris Abram’s accomplishments were worldwide, but none were more critical to southerners than his decades-long fight and eventual victory over Georgia’s electoral system wherein urban votes counted less than rural ones. His effort culminated in the historic “one man, one vote” Supreme Court decision. For that alone southerners should recognize his name, but few people do.

In Touched with Fire: Morris Abram and the Battle Against Racial and Religious Discrimination, David E. Lowe illuminates Abram’s multifaceted career, giving him the lasting recognition he deserves. The book was recently honored with the 2019 National Jewish Book Award for biography.

From his initial practice of law in Atlanta to his final assignment as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva, this son of Fitzgerald, Georgia, pursued justice in the sense of the Hebrew prophets. Evidence that he applied it universally is seen in the diversity of organizations he headed, from the American Jewish Committee to the United Negro College Fund.

Issued by University of Nebraska Press and available on Amazon, Touched with Fire is a good read and Morris B. Abram is well worth remembering.

—Janice Blumberg

Marni Davis Wins American Jewish History Prize

SJHS board member Marni Davis (Georgia State University) has won the American Jewish Historical Society’s Wasserman Prize, which recognizes the best article published in the previous year’s volume of American Jewish History. Her essay “Toward an ‘Immigrant Turn’ in Jewish Entrepreneurial History: A View from the New South,” published in October 2019, examines immigrant entrepreneurs in Atlanta between 1900 and 1930, foregrounding the shared settings and similar trajectories of Jews, Greeks, and Syrians.

“Davis’s article marshals original research in support of a new comparative framework for understanding Jewish economic activity,” the selection committee noted. “It challenges and reassesses common assumptions, and, in doing so, signifies an important advance. . . . The depth and breadth of her article and its originality, both in terms of evidence uncovered and ideas presented, greatly impressed the prize committee.”

New Book Wanders through the Jewish South

Sue Eisenfeld is a Yankee by birth and a Virginian by choice. In Wandering Dixie: Dispatches from the Lost Jewish South, she travels to nine states, uncovering how the history of Jewish southerners converges with her personal story and the region’s complex, conflicted present. In the process, she discovers the unexpected ways that race, religion, and hidden histories intertwine.

Eisenfeld explores the small towns where Jews once lived and thrived. She talks with the only Jews remaining in some of the “lost” places, from Selma to the Mississippi Delta, and visits areas with no Jewish community left except for an old temple or overgrown cemetery. She stops at the site where her distant cousin, civil rights activist Andrew Goodman, was murdered during 1964’s Freedom Summer, and follows her curiosity about Jewish Confederates and southern Jews’ participation in slavery. Her travels become a journey through our nation’s fraught history and a personal reckoning with the nature of America.

Published by Ohio State University Press, Wandering Dixie is available from Amazon and ohiostatepress.org.

Texas Conference Features Jewish Stories

The panel “Lone Stars of David: Fascinating Figures in Texas Jewish History,” moderated by SJHS past-president Hollace Weiner, was a hit at the Texas State History Association’s annual conference in Austin. Joshua Furman, director of the Houston Jewish Archive at Rice University, played 1940s radio recordings of “infamous” Houston rabbi Hyman Judah Schachtel, who started out as an anti-Zionist but later became staunchly pro-Israel. Rabbi, author, and raconteur Jimmy Kessler told stories about Galveston’s Jewish mayor Adrian Levy and his encounters with LBJ and FDR. University of Texas cultural anthropologist Suzanne Seriff aired a student-produced video about a University of Texas women’s rights leader and discussed her students’ research into “untold stories” about Texas Jews in the civil rights era.

The Association’s annual Liz Carpenter Award for best book on Texas women’s history went to Texas Women and Ranching (TAMU Press). The anthology includes a chapter by Hollace Weiner on Frances Rosenthal Kallison, the only Jewish woman in the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame.

Suzanne Seriff speaks about University of Texas Jewish activists. Photo by Joshua Furman.
Join SJHS OR Gift a Membership

The SJHS advances the study, preservation, and presentation of the Jewish experience in the American South. We award prizes and grants, publish original scholarship, and hold a stimulating annual conference. Members receive the quarterly *Rambler* and our annual journal, *Southern Jewish History*. You must be a member to attend the annual conference.

Our major source of funding is membership dues.

Please join us today—or if you are a current member, gift a membership to someone else!

To join online or by mail, visit [jewishsouth.org/store/annual-membership](http://jewishsouth.org/store/annual-membership) for details.