



SJHS Charleston Conference: Worth the Wait

SJHS members enthusiastically gathered in person for the first time in three years at the 2022 conference in Charleston in October. Panels on an impressive variety of topics—many related to the conference theme of “Jews in the Atlantic World”—alternated with formal and informal socializing to make for an enlightening and enjoyable weekend.

Conference sessions kicked off on Friday morning with a look at “Jews, Modernism, and the Cosmopolitan South.” Samuel Gruber focused on modernist architecture in post-World War II southern synagogues, using vivid examples from the Jewish Heritage Collection’s postcard collection. He noted the great contrast with the Art Deco style of previous decades as Jews became less concerned about “fitting in” and more interested in “self-definition.” Leonard Rogoff related how the Cone sisters of North Carolina and Baltimore became groundbreaking collectors of modern art. “Raised as southern ladies but aspiring to be new women,” the sisters integrated old-fashioned gentility with progressive, even revolutionary ideas.

In a Friday afternoon panel on colonial Jews, José Alberto Tavim showed how 18th-century businessman Aaron Lopez used far-flung kinship networks to ship enslaved people from Africa to the Americas, transport Latin American sugar to New England, and send New England-made goods and rum back to Africa, with Charleston as one of his bases of operation. Rivi Feinsilber discussed the contentious life of Jacob Lumbrozo, known as “The Jew Doctor” in 17th-century Maryland. His medical skills helped him gain acceptance, but when he denied that Jesus was the Messiah, he found himself convicted of blasphemy. Yet despite his religion and frequent clashes with others, he never became a social outcast.

Heather Nathans kicked off a session on performance and memory by illuminating the popularity of the biblical story of Esther for audiences of all types in the 19th-century South, including the minstrel circuit. Esther appeared in different incarnations, as Blacks and whites alike found aspects of the story that spoke to them. Michael Hoberman examined how interpretation is evolving at the Mordecai Mansion and Historic Park in Raleigh. While the home and furnishings remain the same, “our interests have shifted,” and formerly untold stories of the household’s enslaved residents have come to the fore, thus

altering our view of the Mordecai family. Gabrielle Berlinger described the transformation of a Jewish-owned Greensboro, North Carolina, thrift store into the innovative “Elsewhere” museum, which puts the former owner’s collection of material culture at the disposal of artists, who use the objects to create new meanings.

In the panel “Encounters with the State,” Seth Tillman conducted a Perry Mason-like inquiry into Jacob Henry, regarded as the first Jew to serve in the North Carolina legislature and known for defending religious freedom when his right to serve was

threatened in 1809 because he hadn’t taken a Protestant oath. Tillman questioned many aspects of this long-accepted story, arguing that in fact Henry might not have been Jewish. Eric Eisner discussed how the years-long debate over the “Jew Bill” in Maryland—which passed in 1826, enabling Jews to hold public office by releasing them from having to swear a Christian oath—reflected the increasing role of race and declining role of religion in setting the boundaries of political life in that state.

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Clockwise from top left: Seven past SJHS presidents gathered for this historic photo (from left: Jay Silverberg, Dale Rosengarten, Hollace Weiner, Phyllis Leffler, Janice Blumberg, Leonard Rogoff, and Bruce Beeber). *Photo by Samuel Gruber.* Socializing at the Saturday evening reception. *Photo by Joe Atherton.* Sunday morning panel. *Photo by Samuel Gruber.* Coming Street Cemetery, site of one of the conference tours. *Photo by Deborah Weiner.*



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Historical Society

President's Message By Josh Parshall



When the Southern Jewish Historical Society convenes for our 47th annual conference in Houston this fall, I will be celebrating a decade and a half since my introduction to the SJHS. As a graduate student in folklore, I delivered my very first conference paper at the 2008 meeting in Atlanta. Eric Goldstein (current SJHS vice president) served as program chair. Lee Shai Weissbach (z"l), who chaired my panel, gently noted that I should have read his work on small towns. The SJHS reimbursed me for my travel expenses that year, and since then I've benefited repeatedly from my association with the Society—through opportunities to publish and present my research, and as a result of the indispensable professional network that SJHS provides. I have been honored to serve the SJHS in return, first as a program committee member for the 2015 Nashville meeting and later as a board member. Now I have the pleasure of writing my first "President's Message," and I do so with excitement as well as gratitude.

I left our long delayed in-person conference in Charleston feeling energized for the work ahead, both by the quality and variety of scholarship addressing southern and Jewish topics, and also by the sense of community that pervades the Society's work. Everyone who helped plan and execute the conference—from the original 2020 program committee to the group who eventually pulled it off in 2022—deserves a hearty congratulations. It was a real joy to learn from senior scholars as well as newcomers, catch up with old friends from several phases of my career, and talk with newer acquaintances about the SJHS and its work.

The success of the Charleston conference reflected the strength of our organization. I'm especially thankful to our immediate past president, Jay Silverberg, who secured significant donations, oversaw administrative improvements, and spearheaded several partnerships with other organizations during his tenure. He also worked with our administrator, Barbara Tahsler, and treasurer/consultant David Meola to reach out to lapsed members, and we now boast 350 members. That puts us in a great position not only to continue our work but also to expand programs and take on new challenges.

Of course, the biggest event of the SJHS year is our conference. I'm thrilled that Josh Furman agreed to take on the work of program chair and that he has recruited an excellent team, including co-chair Mark Goldberg. They will share more details over the course of the year, but suffice it to say that I'm genuinely excited for what they are planning.

As we move forward, I'll be working with SJHS leadership on a few emerging projects, but I also want to hear from our members, whether they are local historians, professional scholars, or history enthusiasts. What programs or resources would you like to see? What we are doing well? What might need to change? I appreciate the wide range of members who make up the SJHS, and I'm thankful for your participation in and support of the important work that we do.



Clockwise from top left:
The Texas contingent meets up in Charleston (from left: Joshua Furman, John Campbell, Hollace Weiner, Erin Solka, Sheldon Lippman, and Debra Polsky). *Photo by Samuel Gruber.*

Jay Silverberg, outgoing SJHS president. *Photo by Ken Hoffman.*

Sunday morning panel. *Photo by Samuel Gruber.*



CALL FOR PAPERS

“Space and Place in Southern Jewish History”

47th Annual Conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

October 20–22, 2023 Houston, Texas

The Southern Jewish Historical Society will convene on the campus of Rice University in Houston, Texas, for its 47th annual conference on October 20–22, 2023. The conference is co-sponsored by Rice’s Program in Jewish Studies and the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives.

Known as the “Bayou City,” “Energy City,” “Clutch City,” and “Space City,” Houston’s many names highlight its diverse and rich history. The city’s multifaceted identity reflects its position as a crossroad between the American South and the American West, and between Latin America and the United States.

As we gather just around the corner from the NASA Johnson Space Center, this year’s conference theme is “Space and Place in Southern Jewish History.” We seek to understand how physical spaces—neighborhoods, borders, boundaries, and the built environment—have shaped southern Jewish history, and we also aspire to make space in the field for underrepresented narratives, such as the experiences of Jews of Latinx, Black, Sephardi, and Middle Eastern/North African descent, exploring how they have made a place for themselves in the American South.



From the collections of the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives, Woodson Research Center, Rice University.

Centering the notion of “space and place” in various ways, paper and panel submissions are encouraged to explore southern Jewish history through the lens of social, cultural, environmental, transnational, and legal frameworks. How has the idea of “space”—whether homeland, border, diaspora, neighborhood, or building—informed and transformed southern Jewish identity? How can mapping software and other digital humanities tools help us to understand the southern Jewish experience in new ways? How have southern Jews found their place in a region defined by racial, political, sexual, and other boundaries? Finally, how does making space for southern Jews who identify as Latinx, Black, Sephardi, or Middle Eastern, as well as those who come from crypto-Jewish backgrounds, modify and enrich our understanding of southern Jewish identity?

The deadline for panel and paper proposals is March 15, 2023. We are especially interested in roundtables and workshops, in addition to traditional panels, and we encourage submissions from graduate students. Please send a proposal and curriculum vitae, as well as any questions, to conference co-chairs Joshua Furman and Mark Goldberg at southernjewish2023@gmail.com.

In Memoriam: Lee Shai Weissbach

Lee Shai Weissbach, who passed away this fall after a long illness, served the SJHS as a board member, contributor to our journal, and participant in our conferences. More importantly to those who knew him as friend, scholar and colleague, Lee Shai was a mensch. Intellectually accomplished, he was modest and generous, with a quick and ready laugh.

Like many early toilers in our field, Lee Shai came to southern Jewish history from elsewhere. After graduating from the University of Cincinnati, he earned a doctorate from Harvard and first published in French history. At the University of Louisville, where he spent his academic career, he gravitated toward Jewish studies.

Lee Shai’s works on southern Jewry were pathbreaking. *The Synagogues of Kentucky* (2005) was innovative, utilizing the built environment as a portal into social history. *Jewish Life in Small-Town America: A History* (2013) recast our understanding of Jewish settlement in heartland America. Defining a “classical” period of small-town settlement in the 1920s, he placed southern Jewish

communities in a national context. His comparative approach, embracing both qualitative and quantitative scholarship, demonstrated that Jewish communities regardless of region were constantly remade by mobility.



The book that inspired Lee Shai’s passion was *A Jewish Life on Three Continents* (2013), a Hebrew memoir by his grandfather Menachem Mendel Frieden, which he edited, annotated, and translated. His grandfather’s journey from Eastern Europe to the American South and then to Palestine was a Jewish saga that spoke to his own cosmopolitan roots.

Born in Haifa, Lee Shai arrived in America at age five, his family settling in Cincinnati where his mother taught in Jewish schools. Immersed in Yiddishkeit, he was very much about family. He was devoted to his wife Sharon, a native Kentuckian, and spoke often and proudly of his son Cobi and daughter Maya. Among his friends at SJHS, Lee Shai will be missed. —*Leonard Rogoff*

A Recurring Intolerance: Antisemitism in Early 20th-Century Virginia

By Michael Jacobs

Recent years have seen a marked rise in antisemitic rhetoric and attacks. This is nothing new, as there is a deep history of antisemitism in the U.S. Similarly, Virginia has seen a recent increase in such attacks and has experienced an ebb and flow of antisemitism over its history. Today's rise in antisemitism mirrors an early 20th-century increase both in Virginia and the U.S.

Before the Civil War, due to their small numbers and their position as potential “masters” through owning the enslaved, Jews faced little overt antisemitism. Postwar Virginia was a very different place for its Jews. The racial and social hierarchy of the old South was in ruins. Without their status as “masters,” their position as white was in question, opening them up to attack.

The Jewish population grew from 2,000 at the close of the war to 15,000 by 1900, and hatred of Jews followed suit. Jealousy, anger, or resentment could have motivated a string of attacks on Jewish merchants in

Norfolk County during 1911. The headline for the front-page story in the *Virginian-Pilot* on October 31, 1911, read, “Another county citizen beaten and robbed while asleep; Berson may Die . . . Jews Protest against the poor police protection.” The previous night, Norfolk County merchant Michael Berson and his wife had been clubbed and robbed of \$60 while they slept. County residents R.M. Rentz and his family were also clubbed in their sleep and robbed, the article noted. Jews in Portsmouth raised \$300 (9k today) to find the culprit, to no avail.

Yet Virginia's history is full of paradoxes. Even as Jews felt more threatened, they were achieving success. In 1912, B.A. Banks of Norfolk became the first Jewish member of the Virginia House of Delegates. In Charlottesville, as historian Phyllis Leffler has shown, Jewish families were becoming deeply intertwined in the social and civil life of the town as their retail stores flourished, most notably the Kaufman and Oberdorfer stores. They served in the city council, helped establish the first chamber of commerce, and created aid societies.

But even as Charlottesville Jews made a clear and definitive impact on the city's progress and growth, its institutions began to work against them. Historian Lewis S. Feuer notes that the University of Virginia hired the nation's first Jewish professor of a secular subject, James Joseph Sylvester, in 1841. Subsequently,

however, UVA became a breeding ground for white supremacy through scientific racism. The university produced generations of students who were trained and taught the study of eugenics and race purification.

Two men, Ivey Foreman Lewis and John Powell, would be instrumental in teaching this pseudoscience to future legislators. Lewis taught eugenics and, while dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, categorized student applicants as “Virginians, non-Virginians, and Hebrews,” Leffler relates. UVA alumnus John Powell, pianist, composer, and Ku Klux Klan member, cofounded the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America with Earnest Sevier Cox in Richmond in 1922. The goal of the club was simple: to preserve the Anglo-Saxon race. Like the KKK, the Anglo-Saxon clubs attracted men from many walks of life, spreading their influence across the Commonwealth.

The effects of white supremacist ideology began to influence Jews' daily lives. Restricted access to hotels, country clubs, and venues became prevalent during the early 20th century. This discrimination reflected the racial laws spreading across the South. In Virginia Beach, Jews were banned from the Princess Anne and Cavalier Clubs. In Charlottesville, sons of the Kaufmans, who had co-founded the Farmington Country Club, withdrew their membership after none of their Jewish friends were allowed to become members, states Leffler. Historian Melvin Urofsky notes that the Commonwealth Club in Richmond banned Jews by the 1920s even though a co-founder was Jewish. Ironically, the Boonsboro Country Club in

**ANOTHER COUNTY CITIZEN
BEATEN AND ROBBED WHILE
ASLEEP; BERSON MAY DIE**
**R. M. Rentz, Of Oakley, Is Assaulted In Same
Manner As Berson-Jews Protest Against
The Poor Police Protection**

A crime wave hit Norfolk county early last Sunday morning. Michael Berson, a merchant, and his wife, corner of Gulf and Godfrey streets, Douglas Park, were not the only victims of an escaped robber. It became known yesterday that R. M. Rentz, of Oakley, on the Indian River road, was also clubbed as he lay asleep and his house ransacked by an unidentified robber, who also made his escape.

Results came to Norfolk yesterday to have his wounds treated and report the assault and robbery to the city police. It was understood that the same manner as the Bersons were treated at almost the same hour.

According to the story, he told the Norfolk police, an unidentified man, he was awakened by fearful palms in his head. He found that blood was streaming from a wound over his right ear.

An aftermath of the Berson assault also came yesterday. The Jewish citizens of Norfolk county, especially in the neighborhood of Douglas Park, are highly incensed over the assault upon the Bersons. Yesterday their look steps to petition the county authorities for better police protection in that section.

The county Jews, many of whom are substantial citizens of the county, feel that they are not given the police protection that is due them. As a result, help Sunday night at the Chamberlain street synagogue, nearly \$300 was raised as a reward for the capture and conviction.



Clockwise from top left: Front page of the *Virginian-Pilot*, October 31, 1911. Application form for Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America. *Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia*. Graffiti on gravestone in Fairfax, Virginia, 2022. *Patch News*. Commonwealth Club, Richmond, from a 1914 postcard. *Wikicommons*.

Richmond, Va., 19.....

To Virginia Post No. 1,
ANGLO-SAXON CLUBS OF AMERICA,
Richmond, Va.

GENTLEMEN:

I herewith make application for membership in your organization, and give you the following information in this connection:

Name in full
(County or City) (State)

Place of birth
(County or City) (State)

Present address
How long have you lived here?
Age Height Weight Occupation
Are you single, married, a widower or divorced?
Are you a member of any secret or fraternal order? If so, state which
Are you a member of any church? If so, state which
If not, what are your religious views?
If not, why?
I affirm that the above information is accurate, and hand you herewith the sum of \$10.00 (ten dollars) (check), with the distinct understanding that it will be returned to me if my application should be rejected.



Lynchburg, which barred Jews, asked scrap iron businessman Abe Cohen for financial support. As described in the Institute of Southern Jewish Life online encyclopedia, Cohen “balked at the request, reportedly retorting, ‘Why should I help a club to which I cannot belong?’” Eventually, he was admitted to the club.

The intolerance espoused 100 years ago is, unfortunately, being seen again in the modern Commonwealth. To combat the antisemitism of the early 21st century, it is essential understand its manifestations in the early 20th century.

Michael Jacobs is a public historian specializing in southern Jewish history with degrees from the University of Pittsburgh and American University.

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In a panel examining the “Politics of Preservation,” George McDaniel discussed efforts to document the life of Col. Richard Lushington, the Quaker merchant who commanded the so-called “Jews Company” of Charlestonians during the Revolutionary War. Most Quakers later left the South because of their antislavery views, leaving few advocates for preserving their landmarks; the Quaker cemetery where he was buried was eventually paved over. Barry Stiefel examined 19th-century Jewish involvement in preserving American historic sites, with a focus on Jewish women’s involvement in the Mount Vernon Ladies Association. Hannah Lebovitz discussed challenges to preserving local Jewish history in the face of the *baal tshuvah* movement in Dallas. Jews returning to Orthodox Judaism tend to discount previous iterations of Jewish community; she raised the question of how to activate an understanding of the importance of local history and preservation among this growing segment of the Jewish population.

Friday night, conference goers gathered at historic KKBE synagogue for dinner, services, and the Dr. Lawrence J. Kanter Lecture. Tulane University professor Michael Cohen presented “The Economics of Southern Jewish History,” based on research from his forthcoming book on American Jewish economic history. Noting the central importance of the cotton industry, he delved into the role of Jews in various aspects of the industry.

On Saturday morning, tours of the historic Coming Street Cemetery, the Old Slave Mart Museum, and the Jewish merchant legacy in downtown Charleston gave conference goers a chance to explore a slice of this historic city.

The mid-morning panel featured newer scholars. Michael Jacobs discussed the understudied role of women in the construction of a southern Jewish identity, focusing on such figures as the Confederate spy Eugenia Phillips. Jacob Morrow-Spitzer noted the startling rise of Jewish mayors in the post-Civil War South (more than 50 between 1870 and 1900). Mostly Democrats and “Redeemers,” they were motivated by a belief in white supremacy as “good for the Jews,” a desire to halt federal promotion of labor rights for Blacks, and a fear of centralized government’s ability to impose religious strictures at a time of growing Christian influence. Mimi Brown Wooten showed how the New York-based Ladino press reconciled its idealistic view of American justice with the lynching of Leo Frank by advancing the notion that antisemitism was confined to the South, a region separate and apart from the rest of the nation.

At lunchtime, Shari Rabin presented the Beeber Family Lecture, sponsored by the Helen Stern Fund. In “Dissent, Providentialism, and Slavery: A New Interpretation of Early Charleston Jewish Life,” she discussed how local conditions shaped expressions of Judaism and Jewishness. In Charleston, factors such as a long tradition of religious tolerance enabled

Jews to publicly display religious sentiment more freely than elsewhere in the U.S.

Panelists in the first Saturday afternoon session used the stories of three individuals to discuss issues of race and Jewish identity. Jeremy Popkin described how Lexington, Kentucky’s first Jewish resident, Philadelphia transplant Benjamin Gratz, easily entered into the local elite. A factory owner and one of Lexington’s largest enslavers, he married a non-Jew but insisted on a Jewish funeral. Howard Ashford recounted the murder of respected merchant Abraham Sternberger in Mississippi in 1865 following allegations that he “associated with freedmen and urged them to demand their rights.” Little is actually known of Sternberger’s actions, though his friendship with a transplanted northern lawyer who defended freedmen may have played a role. Andrew Baker discussed the career of Max Heller, a refugee from Nazism who became a popular mayor of Greenville, South Carolina, in the 1970s. His transatlantic connections and promotion

of economic development benefited both Greenville and the state of South Carolina.

In a panel on “Agents of Change,” Anne Blankenship compared the charitable efforts of Jewish women in Charleston, Philadelphia, and Cincinnati in regard to immigrants. Anne Gessler discussed the progressive activism of New Orleans Hadassah founder Ida Weiss Friend. Though she supported labor rights and women’s suffrage, her

progressivism did not extend to the Black population, and she also subscribed to the pseudo-science of eugenics. Amy Milligan examined folklore surrounding Abraham Mordechai (b. 1755), known as “The Dark-Eyed Jew of Alabama,” who traded with indigenous people and promoted cotton cultivation. Later narratives of his life ranged from honoring him as a pioneer to denigrating him as a Jew. Similarly, Rebecca Shimoni Stoll examined the afterlife of Francis Salvador, seen as a Jewish Revolutionary War hero who died defending his country. Though little is actually known about Salvador, his story became popular in the early 20th century partly as a way to assert Jewish patriotism at a time of mass immigration from Eastern Europe.

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An engaged crowd enjoys Saturday afternoon’s roundtable discussion on material culture. Photo by Samuel Gruber.

Dale Rosengarten Honored

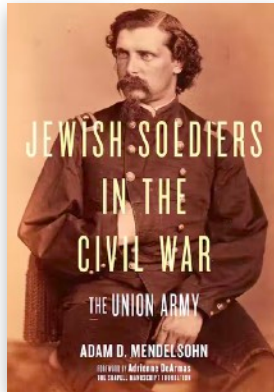
Dale Rosengarten and her husband Ted listen to a speaker at the Saturday night reception, which was held in Dale’s honor. The noted author, curator, archivist, and former SJHS president recently retired from the College of Charleston’s Jewish Heritage Collection, which she founded in 1995.

Photo by Joe Atherton.



SJHS Co-Sponsors Event on Jews in Civil War

SJHS partnered with the Shapell Manuscript Foundation and the Haberman Institute for Jewish Studies to present “The Jewish American Experience in the American Civil War” on December 14. During the live and virtual event, held at B’nai Israel synagogue in Rockville, MD, former SJHS board member Adam Mendelsohn discussed his new book, *Jewish Soldiers in the Civil War: The Union Army*, in conversation with American University professor Pamela Nadell. The event also featured a presentation on the Shapell Roster of Jewish Service in the American Civil War by the roster’s director, Adrienne DeArmas.



Mendelsohn’s work draws on the Shapell Roster’s massive database of verified listings of Jewish soldiers serving in the Civil War, as well as letters, diaries, memoirs, and newspapers, to examine the collective experience of Jewish soldiers and to recover their individual voices and stories. He is now working on the second volume, which will cover Jews who served in the Confederate army.

The event can be viewed online at habermaninstitute.org/events-2022-fall-1/2022/12/14/the-jewish-american-experience-in-the-civil-war.

Four SJHS Grants Awarded in 2022

The SJHS grants committee received nine grant applications in 2022. It awarded a total of \$6,000, its allotted budget, to four recipients:

- ▶ **Tim Quevillon** (faculty, Kansas State) received a Dr. Lawrence J. Kanter Grant to travel to Memphis in support of his work on the Jewish Mapping Project.
- ▶ **Keira Williams** (faculty, Queen’s University, Belfast, UK) received a Dr. Lawrence J. Kanter Grant to travel through the Carolinas for research on her book project about the Ku Klux Klan’s activities there.
- ▶ **Emily Williams** (graduate student, LSU) received a Rabbi Allen Krause Endowment Grant to support travel costs through Texas in support of her photography/oral history project on small-town Jewish life.

▶ **Margaret Norman/Congregation Beth El**

(Birmingham, AL) received a Project Completion Grant to support exhibit development and artifacts for ongoing work on a synagogue exhibit for the Beth El Civil Rights Experience, a multimedia project.

The committee also fulfilled a Project Completion Grant awarded in 2021 to **Marlene Trestman** to fund the indexing of her book, *Most Fortunate Unfortunates: New Orleans’s Jewish Orphans’ Home, 1855-1946*, forthcoming from LSU Press. The grant was awarded pending final acceptance from the publisher.

Grants Committee members include Phyllis Leffler (chair), Stephen Whitfield, Peggy Pearlstein, Anna Tucker, Joshua Furman, and Catherine Eskin.

Grant Deadline for 2023 Coming Up

The SJHS is adjusting the timing of its grants cycle. Grant applications will now be accepted in the spring so that summer projects can be funded. **The 2023 deadline is March 15.** For more information, visit jewishsouth.org/sjhs-grants-applications or contact Phyllis Leffler at pk16h@virginia.edu.

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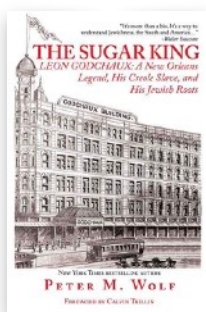
A Saturday roundtable on material culture featured a freewheeling conversation among archivists and curators Gabrielle Berlinger, Dale Rosengarten, Hilit Surowitz-Israel, and Anna Tucker, moderated by Joshua Furman. Panelists discussed the power of artifacts to evoke historical events, deepen our engagement with historical themes, and capture memories. As one participant put it, “A tattered flag is a story waiting to be told.”

The final conference session, held Sunday morning, addressed issues related to social justice. Eli Rosenblatt discussed Charles Russell, bishop in the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church,

who became a respected Talmudist in the mid-20th century after studying with rabbis in the South and at Dropsie College. His interest in rabbinic Judaism was part of a Black intellectual engagement with Jewish theology. Margaret Norman and Melissa Young detailed the civil rights activism of Fred and Anny Kraus. Refugees from Nazism who moved to Birmingham in 1953, they joined the civil rights group Concerned White Citizens of Alabama and participated in the march on Selma. Leah Cannon Burnham described the efforts of Jewish lawyers who advocated for Cubans detained in Atlanta’s federal penitentiary after arriving in the Mariel boatlift of the 1980s.

NEWS AND NOTES

The Sugar King Chronicles 19th-Century New Orleans Jewish Business Titan



Author and New Orleanian Peter M. Wolf recently published *The Sugar King: Leon Godchaux: A New Orleans Legend, His Creole Slave, and His Jewish Roots*, the story of his great-great grandfather. Godchaux arrived in New Orleans in 1837 as a penniless teenager from Alsace-Lorraine and built a business empire that included a department store, a railroad, and the Godchaux Sugar Company. He was also illiterate, relying on his wife Justine for critical

support in reading and writing. The couple had 10 children, and *The Sugar King* explores their family life as well as their involvement in the New Orleans Jewish community. The book also delves into Godchaux's close friendship and business relationship with Joachim Tassin, a formerly enslaved man.

The Sugar King has received rave reviews from noted authors. Nicholas Lemann calls it "a remarkable, vivid, and meticulously researched story about an unjustly forgotten major figure of the 19th century," while Walter Isaacson lauds the book as "more than a bio. It's a way to understand Jewishness, the South, and America." Available on amazon.

Alabama Jewish Folklife Symposium

The Jewish Alabama Folklife Working Group will hold a Symposium in Montgomery, AL, in late July 2023. The Symposium will feature research presentations, panel discussions, an art exhibit, an oral history exhibit, archival documentation, and open time for conversation. It is designed to provide a unique opportunity for those interested in Alabama Jewish culture and preservation to convene and collaborate. The Symposium is funded in part by the Alabama State Council on the Arts.

The Working Group formed in March 2022 to connect communities, researchers, and ideas to strengthen the documentation of Jewish life in Alabama. All are welcome to join its quarterly zoom meetings. Please contact Emily Blejwas at the Alabama Folklife Association to be added to the list: alabamafolklife@gmail.com.



Site of the former Agudas Achim synagogue, West Blocton, AL. Courtesy of Caity Bell and Elli Cochran, University of Alabama Department of Religious Studies.

JewishGen Launches Finding Aid for Shul Records and Seeks Your Help

The JewishGen USA Research Division has launched *Shul Records America*, jewishgen.org/sra/, a new finding aid for American synagogue records. To date, the finding aid lists more than 450 collections held at 47 repositories. Invaluable for family history researchers and academics alike, synagogue records can include birth, marriage, and death registers; mohel or circumcision lists; *ketubot*; and *yahrzeit* memorial plaques. Other records that may yield important information include membership and student lists, newsletters, board minutes, eulogies, and photos.

JewishGen is working to grow this free resource and needs your help to identify where American synagogue records are located, both online and offline. These records can be difficult to track down, especially for inactive congregations or records held in local archives. To add additional

collections or for more information, visit usa.jewishgen.org/synagogue-research/shul-records-america or contact Ellen Kowitz at ekowitz@JewishGen.org.



Congregation Sha'arai Shomayim, Mobile, AL, ca. 1900. Its records can be found at the American Jewish Archives, according to JewishGen's new finding aid. *Wikicommons*.

Legacy Gift Secures Future of South Texas Jewish History at Rice University



In the wake of Hurricane Harvey in 2017, SJHS board member Joshua Furman, along with Rice University staff, students, and local volunteers, organized a spontaneous effort to rescue endangered historical records from Houston's Jewish families and institutions. The Houston Jewish History Archive was created in 2018 to provide a home for these records in Rice's Fondren Library, where they could be preserved and studied. In 2020, the Archive launched a project to gather oral histories of Jewish Texans.

In January 2023, with the generous support of a legacy gift from the Alexander family of Houston, the collection was renamed the Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives. The Archives will now cover the entire South Texas region, including San Antonio, Corpus Christi, Laredo, Galveston, Beaumont, and other towns. The upcoming SJHS conference in Houston will provide an opportunity to see highlights of the collection up close. To learn more, contact Joshua Furman at JF36@rice.edu or 713.348.3418, or visit jewishstudies.rice.edu.



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