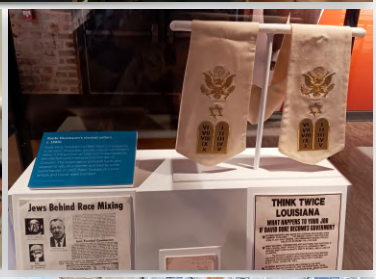
THE RAMBLER

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY WINTER 2026 VOLUME 30, NUMBER 1

SJHS 2025 Offered Deep Dive into NOLA Jewish Life

The October 2025 SJHS conference in New Orleans spotlighted cities from Pensacola to Charlotte, Atlanta to Charleston. Historical actors ranged from an early 19th century civic leader to a late 20th century drag queen. Topics covered everything from war to jazz to real estate to food. Above all, the conference featured the city of New Orleans: its history, culture, and Jewish life.

Friday's activities kicked off at Touro Synagogue with a panel addressing how New Orleans Jews responded to the traumas of World War II and Hurricane Katrina. On a lighter note, Israeli cultural historian Leonard Stein described how New Orleans jazz traveled to Israel, where it mixed with influences from Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East to create a distinctive Israeli jazz style.



Clockwise from top left: A full house at Temple Sinai listens to Marni Davis discuss Atlanta Jewish developers on Saturday. *Photo by Samuel Gruber*. A compelling display at the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience. *Photo by Deb Weiner*. Pre-conference tour of the French Quarter. *Photo by Eric Goldstein*. A streetcar passes by Touro Synagogue, our Friday host. *Photo by Deb Weiner*. Nancy Prager of Atlanta engages with Sunday panel. *Photo by Samuel Gruber*.

World War II and Hurricane Katrina reappeared in later sessions. A Friday afternoon roundtable with staffers from the New Orleans-based World War II Museum revived poignant memories of five young Jewish New Orleanians killed in action in northern Africa, the Philippines, and Europe. Their bodies were repatriated to Louisiana and laid to rest in Jewish cemeteries. After Friday night services at Touro, Karla Goldman brought Jewish stories of Katrina to light and discussed how the hurricane has shaped Jewish life in New Orleans in a lecture sponsored by the Tulane Grant Center for the American Jewish Experience.

The Confederacy was another recurring topic. Presenting the Dr. Lawrence J. Kanter Keynote Lecture, Adam Mendelsohn painted a darker picture of the Confederate homefront than most historians, who tend to emphasize the Confederacy's acceptance of Jews. Mendelsohn showed how attitudes changed as the economic situation in the South deteriorated. Jews offered "an internal enemy to rally against," leading to increased antisemitism. On Saturday at Temple Sinai, speakers from the Shapell Roster of Jewish Service in the American Civil War presented their latest research. They have now identified almost 3,300 Jewish service members, including 1,527 Confederates and 1,076 who fought for the Union. At least 382 Louisiana Jews served—and not all on the Confederate side.

Noted journalist Nicholas Lemann delivered the Janice Rothschild Blumberg Keynote Lecture, using his own New Orleans family lineage to discuss "The Irony of Southern Jewish History." His family's anomalous position in both southern white society and American Jewish society meant that they were never completely comfortable with their Jewish identity. Yet, because of their ability to live with contradictions, Lemann concluded, southern Jews have something to offer larger society.

Identity loomed as a topic in several other presentations. Golan Moscowitz profiled Mickey Gil, a former Israeli army major who became the leading drag queen of New Orleans in the 1980s. The epitome of "out and proud," Gil was credited with saving Gay Mardi Gras after its near extinction during the AIDS crisis. Stephen Whitfield offered a portrait of essayist and speechwriter David Kohn, a Mississippi Delta native and apologist for Jim Crow. Marilyn Miller depicted early philanthropist Judah Touro as an example of the "creolization" of New Orleans and its nascent Jewish community.

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— President's Message —

"Thank You for Your Message"... Reflections on the SJHS's 50th Anniversary Year

By Eric L. Goldstein

As SJHS president, one of the duties that I greet with some trepidation is fielding queries sent to us through our website. Most of the messages come from individuals trying to market a service or promote materials irrelevant to the Society's mission. The few relevant queries are usually ones we cannot answer because the writer assumes we are an archive or library set up to answer research questions. However, once in a while, a message comes through that reminds me of the value of inviting public inquiry.

One such message arrived in December from Marsha Silver Greenhill of Charleston, South Carolina. Marsha sought information about her mother Helen Silver, an active SJHS member in the 1980s and 1990s and longtime editor of our newsletter. Marsha was writing an essay about her mother for the Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina's magazine and wanted to know the dates of her service to the SJHS. Glad to have a question we could answer, I forwarded Marsha's message to a group of SJHS leaders to see what they knew. The flood of responses not only shed light on Helen Silver's contributions to the Society, but also told a larger story about the growth and development of the SJHS and its rich history as a vibrant grassroots organization.

The first response came from Mark Bauman, a pillar of the Society for over four decades and editor of our journal *Southern Jewish History*. "I remember Helen Silver well," Mark replied to Marsha and the entire group, explaining that Helen edited the newsletter before it was called *The Rambler*. Going deeper into SJHS newsletter history, he recalled that another past president, Sol Breibart, was editor before Helen, and that some of the articles from that early period were solicited by Emory professor Arnold Shankman, a pioneer in the field of southern Jewish history who unfortunately passed away at a young age. Finally, Mark shared that a nearly complete set of SJHS newsletters collected by the late Janice Rothschild Blumberg (another past president!) was housed in the SJHS archives in the College of Charleston's Jewish Heritage Collection.

Mark added two past presidents, Len Rogoff and Rachel Heimovics Braun, to the discussion to invite their memories. We soon heard from Len, a distinguished historian of North Carolina Jewry, who recalled that he took over the newsletter editorship from Helen Silver in 1996, hired a new printer and graphic designer, and renamed the publication *The Rambler*. He credited longtime SJHS treasurer Bernie Wax with facilitating these transitions. Len also recalled that Helen shared with him her own collection of past newsletters, which later ended up in the SJHS archives.

Another SJHS past president then stepped into the conversation. Dale Rosengarten, founding curator of the Jewish Heritage Collection, shared a detailed description of relevant holdings in the SJHS archives (including a full run of the newsletter under its various titles) and supplied information about Helen Silver's papers, donated by Marsha years earlier. SJHS board member and current Jewish Heritage Collection coordinator Max Daniel chimed in, offering to help Marsha in copying material relevant to her research.

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More conference photos! Left: Golan Moscowitz presents the fabulous Mickey Gil, a key player in the New Orleans drag scene. Right: Leonard Stein poses a question at Sunday's panel. *Photos by Samuel Gruber.*

CALL FOR PAPERS

"The Past, Present, and Future of Southern Jewish History"

50th Anniversary Conference of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

October 16–18, 2026 Atlanta, Georgia

The Southern Jewish Historical Society invites proposals for its 50th annual conference, to be held in Atlanta on October 16–18, 2026, in partnership with Emory University's Tam Institute for Jewish Studies. The theme of this conference is "The Past, Present, and Future of Southern Jewish History."

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Southern Jewish Historical Society. The organization's first conference, held in October 1976 in Richmond, Virginia, gathered scholars, community chroniclers, and others interested in the history of Jewish southerners. For the five decades since, the SJHS has distributed dozens of grants and scholarships supporting historical projects; published a peer-reviewed scholarly journal; and convened an annual conference in cities all around the South.

Courtesy of The Breman Museum.

For the coming conference, we welcome proposals for panels, individual papers, roundtables, and lightning sessions that consider the history not only of our organization, but of southern Jewish history itself. How has our topic of collective examination and interest changed over time? How have methods for interpreting Jewish life in the region evolved over the past 50 years? And what directions might our field take in the future?

We also welcome presentations that explore broader themes of southern Jewish life, with particular interest in the history of Jewish life in Atlanta—a major population center and economic hub for Jews in the South—and in Georgia more broadly.

The proposal deadline is **March 31, 2026**. Graduate students, independent scholars, fiction writers, and artists are encouraged to apply. (A limited number of travel grants may be available for graduate students.)

- Paper proposals: please submit a one-page abstract (250 words).
- Panel or roundtable proposals: please submit a short (150 words) description, with individual paper abstracts attached for panels.
- All proposed presenters should also send a short CV or résumé (2 pages).

Submit all materials via email to Dr. Marni Davis, conference program chair, at marnidavis@gsu.edu, with "SJHS 2026 Proposal" as the subject line. All questions and further queries can be sent to Dr. Davis as well.

Left: Adam Mendelsohn discusses the Confederate homefront at the Kanter Lecture on Friday at Touro Synagogue. *Photo by Sharon Fahrer*. Right: Cat Eskin presents the SJHS awards at the "Challah King Cake" event at MSJE on Saturday evening. *Photo by Eric Goldstein*.

Awards Announced at New Orleans Conference

SJHS Article Prize

The winner of the award for best article in *Southern Jewish History*, 2021 through 2024, is Andrew Sperling. His essay, "Creative Power: A Jewish Refugee in the Jim Crow South, 1939–1946" (2021, Volume 24), introduces readers to Victor Lowenfeld, an art educator who fled Vienna with his wife and seven-year-old son in March 1938. The article explores how, rather than internalizing his pain "out of fear of inconveniencing others with a specifically Jewish hardship," Lowenfeld "repurposed the events in Europe to make a difference in southern society." Sperling opens the door for historians to reconsider the deep cultural alliances between refugee scholars in the Jim Crow South and the communities they served.

Saul Viener Award for Distinguished Service to the SJHS

This award memorializes Saul Viener, a founding father of the Society. It has been awarded only four times since it was instituted in 2008 and this will be its first appearance in 10 years. Previous winners were Bernie Wax (2008), Eli Evans (2010), Catherine Kahn (2013), and Rachel Heimovics Braun (2015).

Saul Viener (1921–2006) was a West Virginia native who settled in Richmond, Virginia, where he helped manage his family's scrap metal business. An avid student of history with an M.A. from West Virginia University, he became the Richmond Jewish community's unofficial historian. He helped found the SJHS in 1958, but the organization struggled and became defunct. In 1976, Viener revived the Society with institutional and financial support it had not previously enjoyed. He was the first SJHS president and, over the next three decades, its guiding light.

Jay Silverberg receiving the Saul Viener Award from Cat Eskin at the Saturday evening awards ceremony. *Photo by Eric Goldstein.*

The Saul Viener Award for Distinguished Service goes to Jay Silverberg, a relative newcomer to the Society. According to Jacob Morrow-Spitzer, his co-chair for the New Orleans conference, "No one works more tirelessly for the health and future of the SJHS than Jay Silverberg." Jay first joined the board in 2015 and rose to become our president from 2021 to 2023.

As president, Jay aggressively turned his attention to fundraising, raising substantial funds to greatly enhance the SJHS grants program and to create both the Lawrence J. Kanter and Janice Rothschild Blumberg lecture series. He shepherded the Society through much of the pandemic, no mean feat. As past-president, his dedication to every aspect of the 2025 annual conference—fundraising, organizing, managing logistics—was "nothing short of remarkable," according to Jacob. Jay not only raised thousands of dollars for the conference, but also planned special events and coordinated with vendors, sponsors, tour guides, museums, planners, hotels, and building managers.

Rachel Barnett, executive director of the Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina, worked with Jay on the Charleston conference—aborted in 2020, on-line in 2021, and finally realized in 2022. She calls him a "mensch," but also insists that "Jay is a take charge, no holds barred person. His love for southern Jewish history is exemplified not only in his leadership roles, but also as a scholar who has pursued his family's history with gusto." All of that is possible because of his deep commitment to the importance of southern Jewish history.

(Adapted from Awards Committee chair Cat Eskin's remarks at the 2025 conference.)

Bettie "Minette" Cooper, 1937–2025

We are sad to report that Minette Cooper passed away on October 14. A longtime member of the SJHS, Minette participated in the society's conferences for many decades and served as president in 2004.

Born in New York and raised in Vicksburg, Mississippi, Minette and her husband Charles settled in his hometown of Norfolk in the early 1960s. She was a proud "professional volunteer" in the Jewish community and the larger cultural scene. The first female president of Norfolk's Ohef Sholom Temple, she also led in efforts to preserve Hampton Roads Jewish history. She was involved in the Peninsula Jewish Historical Society and a driving force in saving and restoring the Chevra T'helim Synagogue in Portsmouth as a Jewish Museum & Cultural Center. Minette invited many SJHS members to speak in the center's lecture series, and the Coopers were gracious and generous hosts at their elegant waterfront home.

Minette first became involved in the SJHS when she applied for and received an archival grant for her temple. She and Charles, who passed away last February, regularly contributed to the journal endowment fund and the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, where she served on the board. The Coopers will be greatly missed and long-remembered.

ISJL "Southern & Jewish" Conference Comes to Charlotte in 2026

A note from our colleagues at the ISJL.

We're excited to invite you to "Southern & Jewish 2026," taking place June 21–23 in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Southern & Jewish is the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life's annual conference, and we are thrilled to partner with Charlotte's vibrant Jewish community to host three days of learning, connection, and community.

Southern & Jewish brings people together from across the South and beyond to connect, learn, and share ideas for sustaining Jewish life where they live. Held from Sunday noon through Tuesday noon, the conference features nationally recognized speakers and performers, hands-on learning opportunities, and plenty of time for meaningful conversation and community-building. As one recent attendee shared, "It was such a warm and welcoming experience—I kept forgetting it was my first time!"

The ISJL and Beth Israel are moving forward after the January 10 arson attack, buoyed by the support they've received locally and nationally. Jackson's Northminster Baptist Church provided this spacious room to air out a smoke-damaged Torah. *Courtesy of Beth Israel.*

The 2026 theme, "*B'Yachad*: All Together Now," reflects the power of coming together across communities, generations, and identities. Like the ISJL itself, the conference is trans-denominational and open to all. Affinity group meetups offer opportunities to connect with others who share similar interests, identities, or life experiences.

Whether you are a teacher, lay leader, parent, local historian, or simply someone who cares about Jewish life in the South, Southern & Jewish offers inspiration, connection, and community. **Learn more and register at isjl.org/conference.html.** Additional details about sessions and speakers will be announced soon.

A Message from Beth Israel and the ISJL

To the SJHS community,

Thank you so much for the care you have shown us since the arson attack this January.

To continue to support the rebuilding of Beth Israel Congregation, please visit bethisraelms.org.

—The staff at the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life and Beth Israel Congregation, Jackson, Mississippi

"Thank You for Your Message"... Reflections on the SJHS's 50th Anniversary Year **continued from page 2...**

The final response came from Rachel, longtime managing editor of *Southern Jewish History* and a friend of Helen's who had hosted her on a visit to Florida. Rachel knew of an article on Sol Breibart that said he edited the newsletter from 1981 to 1990, thus establishing the date that Helen took it over. Rachel added that she, too, had donated a full run of the newsletter to the Jewish Heritage Collection when she downsized.

While this amazing exchange of emails successfully answered Marsha's question, to me the conversation was even more revealing in what it said about the SJHS. First, it reflected the tremendous work that so many Society members have done to build the organization and create the resources necessary to study and preserve the southern Jewish past. With a simple group email, I was able to tap into decades of knowledge and experience from those who wrote the books, edited the publications, created the archives, and saved the precious materials on which our field relies for its existence. Second, the group's rapid and enthusiastic responses revealed the deeply personal relationships that exist among members and builders of the SJHS.

Two other longtime Society stalwarts, past president Hollace Weiner and *Rambler* editor Deb Weiner (related only by SJHS), take in the sights in New Orleans. *Photo by Eric Goldstein.*

The emails showed a group that had worked together in support of a common cause, built on each other's accomplishments, and continued to cherish the memories of what they had built. As we begin our 50th anniversary year, I will be keeping this email conversation in mind as a symbol of what is so special about the SJHS and as a model of what we should continue to strive for as we enter our next half-century of work toward our mission.

An Update from Baytown

On July 8, 2024, Hurricane Beryl's strong winds ripped bricks off the front facade of the historic Congregation K'Nesseth Israel (CKI) synagogue in Baytown, Texas (see *Rambler*, Fall 2024). After more than a year of extensive analysis and planning with a structural engineer and a team of architects, restoration work began in October 2025.

The first step was the removal of the remaining bricks on the front facade. This was done to enable repair of damaged wood that was found underneath the bricks. Electrical wiring to original exterior lighting was also completed. A moisture barrier was attached to the building to prevent future water ingress. The next step will be putting the salvaged bricks back onto the front facade.

Courtesy of Joan Linares.

We anticipate being fully operational in early 2026. CKI was fortunate to receive an Intervention Grant from the Partners for Sacred Places along with insurance money and generous contributions from individual donors.

— *Joan Linares, CKI president.*

SJHS in New Orleans 2025 **continued from page 1...**

Two panels addressed public history and memorialization. In one, Samuel Gruber showed photos of "Holocaust Memorials Across the South" and discussed how such monuments have evolved. He encouraged the audience to contribute entries to a worldwide database of Holocaust monuments now being constructed (google Holocaust Memorial Monuments). A panel on Charlotte's Judah P. Benjamin monument analyzed the history and meaning of the 1,600-pound granite marker, which was erected at the urging of Jewish congregations in 1948 and was largely ignored until the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 led to its removal (and into the MSJE collection).

Clockwise from top left: SJHS president Eric Goldstein. Shari Rabin responds to panelists Marcie Cohen Ferris, Adam Domby, Michael Cohen, and conference chair Jacob Morrow-Spitzer. *Photos by Samuel Gruber*. Galatoire's restaurant in the French Quarter attracted many SJHSers. *Photo by Deb Weiner*. A College of Charleston reunion. From left: Adam Mendelsohn, Dale Rosengarten, Adam Domby, Shari Rabin, Ashley Walters, Max Daniel, Ted Rosengarten. *Photo by Sharon Fahrer*.

Other presentations reflected the broad sweep of southern Jewish historical research: the role of a Jewish real estate developer in creating Atlanta's 20th century Jewish neighborhoods; what a North Carolina museum's Judaic gallery says about southern Jewish identity; the Hadassah chapter in Pensacola, Florida; Atlanta's Ladino-speaking Ottoman Jews; Jewish involvement in a South Carolina legal proceeding to determine whether a Syrian non-Jew was "white"; epigenetics and New Orleans Jews; and the accessibility of southern synagogue records.

On Saturday evening, participants explored the rich collections and exhibits at the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, gathering later to decorate their own "Challah King Cakes," a Jewish variation on the famous Mardi Gras pastry. Later, some attendees enjoyed dinner and a presentation by popular New Orleans chef Nathanial Zimet, sponsored by the Grant Center.

The conference concluded on Sunday with a session on Shari Rabin's groundbreaking new book *The Jewish South: An American History*, the first scholarly narrative history of southern Jewry. Panelists noted that while Rabin makes the case for a distinctive southern Jewish experience, she places southern Jewish history firmly within American Jewish historical trends —while showing that southern Jews "did not speak all in one voice." The book also "asks the hard questions" about Jews and slavery as well as other thorny issues. Concluded panelist Marcie Cohen Ferris, the book "does not neatly package southern Jewish history, but opens it up wider," offering directions for future scholarship.

NEWS AND NOTES

Mickve Israel to Open Special Exhibit on Religious Freedom

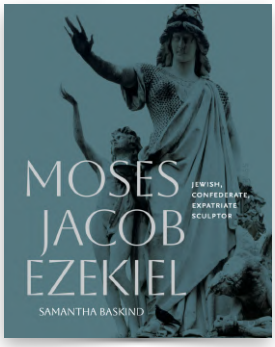
To mark the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Congregation Mickve Israel in Savannah is curating a special exhibit, "Forging Our Sacred Liberty: The Declaration of Independence and Religious Freedom in Georgia, 1733–1790."

From its founding in 1733 through the drafting of the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution, Savannah served as a crucible for democratic ideals and religious freedom. The exhibit will highlight the role of the Jewish community in the city's emergence and growth during this era.

When a ship with 41 Jews aboard arrived in Savannah on July 11, 1733, they were welcomed to participate as equals in colonial commerce, governance, and society. The Declaration of Independence anniversary offers an opportunity to honor the lived experiences of Jews and other religious minorities in the Georgia colony, and to reflect on the foundational principles of religious tolerance and the separation of church and state—innovations that remain cornerstones of the American experiment.

The exhibit will open in May 2026 and will run until January 2027. To learn more, please visit mickveisrael.org/america250.

Book on Sculptor Moses Ezekiel Published



Samantha Baskind's book *Moses Jacob Ezekiel: Jewish, Confederate, Expatriate Sculptor* was recently published by Penn State University Press. A Virginia native, Ezekiel was the first renowned Jewish American artist and one of the most popular artist-celebrities of his day. He fought for the Confederacy at the Battle of New Market as a teenager and was a friend of Robert E. Lee. After the war, he established himself as an artist in Rome, where he was honored by European royalty and enjoyed friendships with the likes of Franz Liszt, Queen Margherita, and Kaiser Wilhelm II.

Ezekiel created well over 100 sculptures, but his hotly contested Confederate works have since obscured his other major accomplishments. Drawing on a wealth of primary sources, Baskind resurrects this complicated artist's life and work, including fascinating details of how his sculptures were commissioned and made. Ezekiel's work sheds light on the modernization of American Jewry, radical changes in the art world concerning style and patronage, and Civil War commemoration. The conflicting allegiances that motivated him—his conservative Confederate leanings alongside his liberal views on peace, Judaism, and religious liberty—make him an intriguing lens through which to understand 19th-century transatlantic culture and history.

Bridging Academia and Tourism to Bring Southern Jewish History to Life

Educator and tour guide Ronnie Ludwin recently launched Charleston Jewish Tours and an affiliated initiative, Southern Jewish Journeys. The tours offer immersive experiences that bring southern Jewish history to life for visiting groups. "The goal is to translate scholarship into engaging, on-the-ground encounters with southern Jewish culture," says Ludwin.

While Charleston Jewish Tours focuses on that city's unique Jewish presence, Southern Jewish Journeys expands the story across the region in response to growing interest from synagogues, federations, and community groups seeking multi-day experiences. Drawing on scholarship such as Dale Rosengarten's *A Portion of the People* and Shari Rabin's *The Jewish South*, the initiative helps bridge the gap between academic research and public engagement.

Ronnie Ludwin at the "Founding of Beth Elohim" mural in Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim's social hall, by Charleston artist William Halsey. *Courtesy of Ronnie Ludwin.*

Tours embrace historical complexity, exploring topics such as Jewish involvement in slavery, the rise of American Reform Judaism, evolving roles for women, and Jewish economic life within the racialized structures of the 19th and early 20th centuries, all framed in the broader southern context.

Currently focused on Charleston and Savannah, Southern Jewish Journeys plans to expand to additional cities as interest grows. Collaborating with historians, institutions such as the ISJL and College of Charleston, and locally trained guides, the initiative contributes to preserving and sharing the diverse histories of Jewish life in the South. Learn more at southernjewishjourneys.com.

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Member Spotlight

Arthur and Judy Marks (Sarasota, FL)

Courtesy of Judy and Arthur Marks.

When did you join the SJHS and why?

We joined after attending our first conference back in 2010, in Chapel Hill. Having been raised in an Orthodox Brooklyn community, I, Arthur, exemplified New York provincialism at its best/worst. By contrast, Judy coming from Pittsburgh was much more American, but coming South (to Chapel Hill) in 1974 brought us into an expanded Jewish community we hardly knew existed. There were Jews from Mississippi, from Arkansas, even from Alabama! And in meeting them we came to enjoy our differences, but more remarkably our similarities.

What is your favorite part of SJHS membership?

Through the annual meetings and from the pages of *Southern Jewish History*, the Society's journal, our membership in SJHS has given us a welcome insight into how this diverse, dispersed, yet unified people came into being and has persisted. And through the conferences we have been introduced to their various institutions and monuments. We look forward to many more years of learning and collegiality!

Our "Member Spotlight" feature seeks participants! If you are open to being spotlighted in a forthcoming Rambler, *please send your answers to SJHS vice-president Shari Rabin at sharirabin@gmail.com. Please limit your submission to no more than 400 words.*

CALL FOR GRANT SUBMISSIONS

The SJHS offers grants for projects relevant to Southern Jewish History. Categories include project completion grants, research grants, and archival grants. Deadline for applications is March 14, 2026.

For more information and application guidelines, see jewishsouth.org/sjhs-grants-applications.
If you require more information, contact waltersa1@cofc.edu.

www.jewishsouth.org/sjhs-grants-applications