

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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Exhibit Review

The First Jewish Americans: Freedom and Culture in the New World. New-York Historical Society, October 28, 2016, through March 12, 2017. Curated by Dale Rosengarten and Adam Mendelsohn.

During winter 2016–2017, the New-York Historical Society (NYHS) turned over several of its lofty gallery rooms to showcase the experience of early American Jewry. Through the display of historic maps, original documents, paintings, and material objects, it presented the exhibit *The First Jewish Americans*, subtitled “Freedom and Culture in the New World,” which covered the period from the seventeenth century into the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century. It explored the ways in which Jews, mostly in what became the United States, went about the process of making homes for themselves as individuals and creating space for their Jewish communal institutions, primarily synagogues.

The First Jewish Americans evolved out of the original exhibition *By Dawn’s Early Light: Jewish Contributions to American Culture from the Nation’s Founding to the Civil War*, organized by the Princeton University Library; curated by Adam Mendelsohn, director of the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at the University of Cape Town, South Africa; and cocurated by Dale Rosengarten, archivist of the Jewish Heritage Collection at the College of Charleston Library in Charleston, South Carolina, and codirector of the college’s Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture. The original exhibition, on display at Princeton in Spring 2016 had not been intended to travel until the board chairperson of the NYHS read the accompanying catalogue and requested the show. The NYHS took some creative liberties and changed the exhibit to be more New York-focused.

The exhibit moved along both a temporal and a geographic arc. It began in Suriname and other parts of the Caribbean region where in the sixteenth century the first Jews settled and, for the most part, prospered through commerce. It then moved visitors on to the mainland of British North America telling, one by one, a well-known tale of New York, Philadelphia, and Charleston, looking in that order at the eighteenth century, the age of the American Revolution, and then the early Republic period, respectively. A final two sections of the exhibit abandoned spatial specificity to explore first the rise, nationally, of a distinctively American form of Judaism and then highlight the contributions of Jews to the artistic and cultural life of the new nation.

*Materials related to Charleston, SC, from The First Jewish Americans.
(Photo by Glenn Castellano, courtesy of the New-York Historical Society.)*

For each place, the exhibit's organizers displayed artifacts and images as well as key documents that accomplished two purposes. The items on display told about the life of the Jewish community, be it in New York or Charleston, Philadelphia or Newport, stressing the growth of Jewish life in the form of congregations and cemeteries and, for the later period, voluntary Jewish associations outside of the synagogue orbit. For each of these places, the viewer could engage with the formal apparatus of public Jewish life. For Charleston, for example, visitors had a chance to see Penina Moïse's hymnal used for Sabbath services at Kahal Kodesh Beth Elohim, the first of its kind in American and indeed world Jewish history. But the exhibit also featured the more quotidian lives of individual early American Jews, exploring through a range of eye-catching objects how Jews lived. It showed how they made a living, mainly in commerce and artisanship, snippets about the interior furnishings of their homes, details about gender and family relationships, and importantly how they interacted as individuals with the non-Jews among whom they lived. *The First Jewish Americans* struck a fine balance between the formal life of the Jewish communities and the details about Jews as ordinary women and men, who, for the most part, took advantage of an expansive set of civic options.

As to the aesthetics of *The First Jewish Americans*, the organizers prepared a beautiful and rich show, assembling material never seen together, and all complementing each other. Silver objects crafted by Myer Meyers, the portraits of the Franks family, a circumcision log of slaves from a Jewish-owned plantation in Suriname, and paintings by Camille Pissaro and Solomon Nunes Carvalho offered much to see, enjoy, and think about in this exploration of the journeys undertaken by the small number of European Jews who joined the risky journey to what they understood to be the "new world."

For all the richness of the material and the care in the selection process, the exhibit stumbled for its conventionality and lack of probing of certain key concepts. It claimed to be dedicated to the theme of "freedom," as do so many other renditions of American Jewish history. But it never interrogated the term's meaning and how freedom for one group, particularly in that time and place, depended on the denial of freedom for others. We learned little about the Jews' involvement with slavery, their interactions with indigenous people, or the historic reality that the

*Oil painting of Kahal Kadosh Beth
Elohim interior, 1838, by
Solomon Nunes Carvalho
(Courtesy of Special Collections,
College of Charleston.)*

freedom Jews enjoyed made them different from Catholics who suffered grievously in these places. The exhibition texts consistently employed such self-congratulatory terms as “remarkable” and “resilience” without asking if the experience of these early American Jews stood out as particularly notable or different from that of other white people who cast their lot with the Americas.

Likewise, “resilience” as a positive word assumes that an individual or a group made a mighty effort in the face of extraordinary difficulty. But the term ignores the fact that the Jews of the Americas occupied a highly advantageous position given their ability to activate their own global trade networks and their family and communal ties that linked them commercially to Jews around the world. Jews benefitted the colonial authorities who founded these outposts purely for the purpose of making a profit, and, inasmuch as Jews helped in this effort, they needed less in the way of their own sterling qualities and more in the way of kin and community around the Atlantic and Mediterranean worlds. Additionally, we know that Jews, like other free white people, moved around the colonies, and many went back to Europe for longer or

shorter periods of time, making the definition of them as “American” Jews less than convincing.

This exhibit failed finally to deal with the internal struggles and differences within the world of early American Jewry, for the most part paying no attention to the presence and then numerical superiority of Jews from northern and eastern Europe. It did not treat the rise of second congregations by the beginning of the nineteenth century as newly arriving Jews, Ashkenazim, rebelled against the domination of the old-timers. It did not highlight the general loosening of cultural and economic controls in the new nation with the rise of a culture of *laissez-faire*, nor did it treat the emergence of Jewish institutions outside the sphere of the congregations, which challenged the hegemony of the synagogues, as freedom came to mean freedom to be Jews as they wanted.

Despite these limitations, the decision of the New-York Historical Society to stage *The First Jewish Americans* provided New Yorkers and tourists to the city a chance to learn much and have a visually inspiring experience.

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