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Unlikely Sites of Holocaust Memory in the American South: The Cases of Charleston and Whitwell

by

Ashley Valanzola and Chad S. A. Gibbs *

When people think of historical memory in the American South, the Holocaust is probably not the first thing that comes to mind. Nevertheless, the South is home to a range of sites dedicated to Holocaust remembrance, including plaques, memorials, and museums. Places of Holocaust memory in the region, as anywhere, are distinct products of their environment and their creators. Intentionally or not, these sites exist in conversation with an area's local history and residents, reflecting their priorities, politics, and aspirations. Two case studies of memorial efforts in Charleston, South Carolina, and Whitwell, Tennessee, embody the complexity and continuing evolution of Holocaust memory. In 1972, Maurice Fox and Henry Popowski, two leaders of the Jewish community in Charleston, posed for a photographer in front of a newly installed plaque honoring Jews murdered during the Holocaust. The tablet these men stood before that day owed its existence to efforts undertaken by Charlot Karesh, Gertrude Solomon, and other women of the dedication committee formed for that purpose. Although the group's women drove the process, local press and most of the community gave credit to the Charleston Kalushiner Society, a *landsmanshaft* comprised of Jews from Kałuszyn, Poland.¹ That society voted itself out of existence at about the same time the memorial went up on an interior courtyard wall

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¹ P. Maurice Fox, "Speech Delivered at the Kalushiner Society Plaque Dedication to the Six Million," *Center Talk*, January 1972, 8, *Center Talk* Issues Collection – Jewish Heritage Collection, Addlestone Library Special Collections, College of Charleston.

*Maurice Fox, president of the Jewish Community Center, and Henry Popowski, last president of the Kalushiner Society of Charleston, view the plaque donated by the Kalushiner Society, January 9, 1972.
(Courtesy of the Jewish Heritage Collection,
College of Charleston.)*

of what was then the Charleston Jewish Community Center.² The placement of this plaque, the persons involved, and the likely audience of that installation in comparison to its large, central, and publicly supported successor, the Charleston Holocaust Memorial, can tell us much about changes to Charleston Jewish life. The latter, dedicated on June 6, 1999, is located in a park at the core of Charleston's identity as a historic Southern city and leisure travel destination. In 2024, efforts to refurbish the memorial and add new wording again displayed the positions, desires, and anxieties of the local Jewish community.

Rural Appalachian Tennessee, meanwhile, might seem like an even less likely location for a Holocaust memorial. Nevertheless, a site known as the Children's Holocaust Memorial now sits on the grounds of the local middle school in Whitwell. This memorial evolved from an educational initiative and collecting project over several decades that brought national and international attention to this small Southern town. A closer look at the evolution of this initiative reveals how Holocaust memorialization has the potential to socially, physically, and psychologically transform a rural town from an isolated community into an internationally connected locale. It is the perfect case study to understand how memorials become part of the collective memory of a community, even if the community is completely divorced from the event being memorialized.³

Charleston and Whitwell were chosen for this study because they embody two entirely different forms of Holocaust memorialization in the South. One project stemmed from a local, vibrant Jewish community appalled by the atrocities of the genocide; the other began as an educational initiative in a town with no Jewish residents. In terms of aesthetics, the memorial in Charleston carefully avoided visual representations of mass murder, while the Whitwell Children's Memorial sought to house their memorial in a German boxcar because, for the organizers of this project, it

² Ashley Walters, "What Kalushin Tells: The Life, Death, and Afterlife of a Polish Shtetl," unpublished presentation, College of Charleston, September 8, 2024; Ashley Walters, "Fraternity, Ethnicity, and Welfare in the Holy City: The Kalushiner Society of Charleston, South Carolina," *Southern Jewish History* 29A (Winter 2026): 29–65. The authors thank Ashley Walters for sharing her research on the Charleston Kalushiner Society and her assistance with this article.

³ Natasha Goldman, *Memory Passages: Holocaust Memorials in the United States and Germany* (Philadelphia, 2020), 3.

was the ultimate symbol of the Holocaust. Despite these differences, both projects bring to light important themes for understanding Holocaust memory in the American South, foremost among them the presence of religious and racial tensions. In both locations, expanding Holocaust education and creating a memorial space positively impacted the local community. Yet, as with other physical memorials, the meaning and purpose of these sites gradually evolved.⁴ The Whitwell project shifted away from a drive to educate and memorialize into an effort to promote a certain image of the town. Simultaneously, the Charleston Holocaust Memorial has become something of a barometer for the worries of a small Jewish community in our troubled present. In all their complexities, both memorials reflect local anxieties and a peculiarly Southern spin on Holocaust memorialization, revealing much about each community and the region writ large.

Whatever purposes these sites serve for their local communities, both memorials offer survivors and their descendants a place to mourn. For Jews in the aftermath of the Holocaust, memorials often served as symbolic graves for murdered friends and family members. Due to the nature of the genocide, few Jews received a proper burial, and family members were robbed of the opportunity to complete the rituals associated with death.⁵ Building a memorial as a symbolic grave to cope with absence and loss partly motivated the committee in Charleston, but in Whitwell, the project was not initiated by Jews and had no locally connected Jewish victims to commemorate. Instead, the Whitwell project emerged from the classroom efforts of middle school teachers and students. The founders of the Whitwell memorial did not have specific people in mind when they built the site but instead concentrated on all individuals—Jews and other victim groups—murdered during the Second World War. This type of memorialization is therefore more ambiguous and less rooted in the people and events of the Holocaust than is usually the case.

⁴ James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven, 1993), x.

⁵ Ashley Valanzola, *When She Remembered: Seven Women who Transformed French Holocaust Memory* (Bloomington, IN, 2026), 130–31.

*Boxcar at Children's Holocaust Memorial, Whitwell, TN.
(Photograph by Ashley Valanzola, 2024).*

Another fascinating dynamic of Holocaust memorialization raised by these two sites concerns the questions of distance and aesthetics. These memorials relate to events that took place on another continent. In some ways, the distance from Europe allows for more local influence than memorials at sites such as Auschwitz-Birkenau or the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. These American memorials relate to their surroundings, including the Citadel and the Whitwell Middle School, in a way that would perhaps seem bizarre or even inappropriate for sites in Europe. Their aesthetics also raise interesting questions—do they need to be literal in their presentation of the Holocaust because they lack local context or memory related to the events they memorialize? In the case of Whitwell, a boxcar—perhaps one of the most well-known symbols of the genocide—is central to the outdoor memorial space. In contrast, planners of the Charleston memorial intentionally refrained from jarring or heavy designs. The abstract nature of this monument led to some confusion over time, prompting the creation of new signage and messaging. These cases prove that some form of narrative interpretation needs to accompany sites of Holocaust memory.

Historiography and Factors Beyond South Carolina and Tennessee

Sites like Charleston and Whitwell must be situated within the longer trajectory of American Holocaust memory. The efforts of American Jews to preserve Holocaust memory began in the immediate aftermath of the war. Despite the prevailing myth of Jewish silence as it related to the atrocities in Europe, historian Hasia Diner reveals the myriad ways in which “the mass murder of so many Europeans infused every sector of American Jewry.” Diner demonstrates how, from 1945 to 1962, American Jews participated in a wide range of memory work including cemetery markers, plaques, scholarly works, music, poems, and drama. They did so as they raised money for Holocaust survivors and pushed to hold perpetrators accountable. Diner aligns with other historians who pinpoint certain international events that further triggered American Jews’ involvement with Holocaust memorialization during the 1950s, such as the founding of the Claims Conference in 1951, the show trials and executions of Jewish political and intellectual figures in Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union during the early 1950s, and the publication of Anne Frank’s diary in English in 1952, followed by the movie in 1959.⁶

Diner and other scholars recognize the importance of events in Israel for shaping American Jews’ involvement with Holocaust memory. Starting with the Israeli Declaration of Independence in 1948, then becoming more pronounced with the trial of Adolf Eichmann and the wars of 1967 and 1973, American Jews’ involvement with Holocaust memory often increased as these major events unfolded in Israel.⁷ Journalist Judith Miller argues that challenges to Israel’s occupation policies in the 1980s made Jews “uncomfortable . . . with efforts to commemorate the Holocaust,” suggesting that an unfavorable public perception of Israel directly impacted the ability of American Jews to gather support for Holocaust memorialization.⁸ Scholar Rochelle Saidel challenges this correlation by asserting that instead of making Jews uncomfortable with Holocaust commemorations, disappointment with Israel’s policies, alongside fear of

⁶ Hasia R. Diner, *We Remember with Reverence and Love: American Jews and the Myth of Silence after the Holocaust, 1945–1962* (New York, 2009), 3, 12, 16; Rochelle G. Saidel, *Never Too Late to Remember: The Politics Behind New York City’s Holocaust Museum* (New York, 1996), 28.

⁷ Diner, *We Remember*, 16; Judith Miller, *One, by One, by One: Facing the Holocaust* (New York, 1990), 221–22; Saidel, *Never Too Late*, 28.

⁸ Miller, *One, by One, by One*, 229–30.

antisemitism, resulted in the Holocaust becoming a major symbol of Jewish identity in the United States. It substituted for support for and alignment with the state of Israel.⁹ As seen with the recent changes to the Charleston Memorial following the attacks of October 7, 2023, what happens in Israel still greatly affects the way American Jews perceive themselves and shapes how they approach and reconsider sites of Holocaust memory.

By the time the projects in Whitwell and Charleston were underway in the 1990s, Holocaust memorialization in the United States had continued to grow. In 1978, the miniseries *Holocaust* helped bring new focus and larger audiences to this history in ways that had not been seen since the television spectacle of the Eichmann trial during the early 1960s.¹⁰ That same year, Holocaust memorialization achieved federal recognition with Jimmy Carter's creation of the President's Commission on the Holocaust. The commission took the form of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, which opened its doors in 1993—the same year that the epic Steven Spielberg film *Schindler's List* thoroughly captivated American audiences.¹¹ As institutions, memorials, and museums on the Holocaust proliferated throughout the United States, Whitwell and Charleston could pull from and reference these larger projects as they undertook their memorialization plans.

With all the scholarship on Holocaust memorialization in the United States, Southern memorials like those in Charleston and Whitwell have received relatively little attention as compared to sites in major American metropolitan centers or those in Europe and Israel.¹² What scholarship does exist on Holocaust memory and museums in the South tends to

⁹ Sidel, *Never Too Late*, 40–41.

¹⁰ Barry Trachtenberg, *The United States and the Nazi Holocaust: Race, Refuge, and Remembrance* (New York, 2018), 168–70, 173–75.

¹¹ Trachtenberg, *The United States and the Nazi Holocaust*, 175–76, 159; Goldman, *Memory Passages*, 56; Sidel, *Never Too Late*, 28–29.

¹² On the Charleston Holocaust Memorial and the work of the International Survey of Jewish Monuments to track all Jewish memorials, see Samuel Gruber, “USA: Charleston’s Holocaust Memorial in Shadow of Calhoun Monument,” Samuel Gruber’s Jewish Art and Monuments (blog), February 26, 2017, accessed February 20, 2025, <https://samgrubers-jewishartmonuments.blogspot.com/2017/02/usa-charlestons-holocaust-memorial-in.html>; “Welcome,” International Survey of Jewish Monuments, accessed March 1, 2025, <https://isjm.org>.

examine these institutions from a museum studies perspective, or uses specific sites to explore larger themes such as religion and memory practices.¹³ A few standalone projects attempt to understand what life was like for Holocaust survivors in the South. However, memorialization features little in these discussions.¹⁴

Existing literature on these sites has traditionally been the work of locals or other individuals involved with the memorialization projects in question. Site-specific documentaries and related memoirs provide fascinating insight into the decision-making processes behind these memorials, and we cite several examples in this article.¹⁵ Beyond such first-hand accounts, our goal is to expand the context in which these projects are considered by placing them into the larger categories of memorialization, localized Southern history, and Holocaust memory.

The Children's Holocaust Memorial of Whitwell, Tennessee

Whitwell is a small, picturesque town of approximately 1,600 people situated in the Sequatchie Valley, about thirty minutes outside Chattanooga.¹⁶ Originally founded as a coal mining town in 1877, Whitwell made national news for a tragic 1981 mine accident that resulted in the deaths of

¹³ For example, see Chaim Noy, "'Really made you feel for the Jews who went through this terrible time in History': Holocaust Audience Re-Mediation and Re-Narrativization at the Florida Holocaust Museum," in *Visitor Experience at Holocaust Memorials and Museums*, ed. Diana I. Popescu (New York, 2023), chapter 3; Ashley Valanzola and Jonathan Zisook, "Afterlife of the Sacred: Torah Scrolls on Display in Regional Holocaust Museums," *Jewish Social Studies* 30 (Fall 2025): 176–219; Daniel H. Magilow, "Counting to Six Million: Collecting Projects and Holocaust Memorialization," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 14 (Fall 2007): 23–39.

¹⁴ For example, see Hannah Herzog, "Rewriting History: Holocaust Survivors in the Jim Crow South and Civil Rights Era, 1945–Present," (master's thesis, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, 2018).

¹⁵ For example, see Linda Hooper and Sharon Shadrick, *The Power of a Paper Clip: A Holocaust Study in Rural Appalachia Opens Up the World to Its Students* (Chapel Hill, 2024); Peter W. Schroeder and Dagmar Schroeder-Hildebrand, *Six Million Paper Clips: The Making of a Children's Holocaust Memorial* (Minneapolis, MN, 2004); *Paper Clips*, dir. Elliot Berlin and Joe Fab (Ottawa, ON, Ergo Entertainment, 2004).

¹⁶ Sources list between 1,600 and 1,800 local residents. WDEF News, "Our Town: Whitwell," July 31, 2023, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.wdef.com/our-town-whitwell>.

thirteen people.¹⁷ The last Whitwell underground mine closed in 1997, a major economic hit for the community.¹⁸ Residents of Whitwell are predominantly white and Protestant, and several surrounding towns have been classified as sundown towns—having previously introduced ordinances to keep the towns “all white.”¹⁹ Whitwell has no known Jewish residents.

At the outset, the monolithic makeup of the local population factored into the decisions to create a Holocaust memorial. In 1998, educators at the local middle school formed a voluntary group dedicated to studying the Holocaust. The afterschool program began because a parent urged school officials to “address more actively issues of multi-culturalism and prejudice in the curriculum.” They chose to study the Holocaust because they wanted “students to learn the importance of respecting different cultures while understanding the effects of intolerance.” Approximately sixteen eighth-grade students comprised the first cohort.²⁰

A few years later, the 2000–2001 class of the afterschool Holocaust study group came to the school principal, Linda Hooper, to ask if they could collect an object to help them conceptualize six million deaths.²¹ After some brainstorming, the students decided to collect paper clips to

¹⁷ “Whitwell Tennessee,” Sequatchie Valley National Scenic Byway, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://sequatchievalleyscenicbyway.com/whitwell>.

¹⁸ “Last Whitwell coal mine closes,” *Coal Age* 102 (December 1997): 18; Jerry Summers and Frank “Mickey” Robbins, “Mine 21 Disaster—gone but not forgotten,” *Chattanooga Times Free Press*, December 2018, accessed June 26, 2025, <https://www.timesfreepress.com/news/2018/dec/09/summers-robbins-mine-21-disaster-gone-not-f/>; “Coal Miners Museum in Whitwell TN Steeped in History,” *Travel Southeast Tennessee*, August 2020, accessed September 21, 2025, <https://www.southeasttennessee.com/coal-miners-museum-in-whitwell-tn-steeped-in-history>.

¹⁹ James W. Loewen and Matt Cheney, “Tennessee,” *History and Social Justice*, accessed September 13, 2025, <https://justice.tougaloo.edu/location/tennessee>. An article from 2001 notes how of the four hundred students at Whitwell Middle School, there are no Jewish students and only six students who are Black or Hispanic. John Gehring, “School’s Paper Clip Project Attracts Worldwide Attention,” *Education Week*, May 2, 2001, accessed May 23, 2026, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/schools-paper-clip-project-attracts-worldwide-attention/2001/05>.

²⁰ Magilow, “Counting to Six Million,” 24; “History,” Whitwell Middle School, accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.whitwellmiddleschool.org/childrensholocaustmemorial>; Hooper and Shadrick, *Power of a Paper Clip*, 6.

²¹ Hooper and Shadrick, *Power of a Paper Clip*, 10.

better understand the scale of murder during the Holocaust. Teachers selected the paper clip at the time because they inaccurately believed non-Jewish Norwegians wore them on their lapels during the German occupation to protest the deportation of Jews. With parental and teacher support, students launched a letter-writing campaign to spread the news of their collecting project. They met with moderate success until the attention of three journalists helped launch their project well beyond their classroom.

Dagmar and Peter Schroeder, German White House correspondents, penned several articles about the Paper Clip Project for the German media. In their articles, they asked readers to mail paper clips to Whitwell to support the children's efforts. In response to their reporting, the Schroeders received a range of positive correspondence that they transformed into a book. This book landed in the hands of *Washington Post* editor Dita Smith, a woman who became instrumental to the growth of the project. After visiting Whitwell, Smith published an article about the Paper Clip Project in

Linda Hooper in 2022, with a sculpture of a tree holding eighty-six paperclips.

Behind her are shelves of correspondence about the project.

(Courtesy of the Rural Schools Collaborative.)

the *Washington Post* on April 7, 2001, that opened the flood gates for millions of paper clips to pour into the school.²²

The combined publicity brought about by the Schroeders and Smith resulted in two distinct developments. The resounding success of the collection project fostered a desire to create a physical site in which to store the paper clips and honor the memory of the murdered Jews they represented. Simultaneously, the attention brought upon Whitwell led some locals to fear being negatively stereotyped as rural Southerners. When it came to the larger memorialization initiative, a local defensive discourse embodied this fear.

The genesis of the physical site grew from the need to store and display the overwhelming number of paper clips the students and teachers amassed in the early years of the collecting initiative. In a recent coauthored memoir about the project's history, Linda Hooper and Sharon Shadrick mention how the idea to store the paper clips in a boxcar came about during a dinner conversation between the Schroeders and Hooper. At this dinner, Hooper proposed that perhaps if an "authentic German transport car" housed the paper clips that had been collected, that this arrangement could "transform it [the boxcar] from a symbol of hate and intolerance to a symbol of hope." The Schroeders agreed to help, and, through extensive efforts, they procured a train car from Germany. In September 2001, the car arrived to great fanfare. In front of Whitwell Middle School, the car was set upon tracks dating from the war years. Locals dedicated their time to configuring the boxcar to store the paper clips, creating a park around it, as well as designing a butterfly sculpture and painting butterfly steppingstones. They chose the butterfly motif to memorialize Jewish children who died at Terezin and dedicated the site as the Children's Holocaust Memorial. As such, it fulfilled its purpose of serving as a repository for the collection project, while also becoming a memorial for those hoping to honor the victims of Nazi genocide. Regardless of the absence of Jews in Whitwell, the Children's Holocaust Memorial has since drawn Jews from outside the community to reflect and mourn.²³

²² Schroeder and Schroeder-Hildebrand, *Six Million Paper Clips*, 20–22; Dita Smith, "A Measure of Hope: The Whitwell, Tenn., Holocaust Project Has Spread Far Beyond the Classroom," *Washington Post*, April 6, 2001.

²³ Hooper and Shadrick, *Power of a Paper Clip*, 20, 22–23, 30, 43.

*The Children's Holocaust Memorial, Whitwell, TN, 2024.
(Photographs by Ashley Valanzola).*

*Items from the Children's Holocaust Museum collection, including
a concentration camp uniform showing identification numbers.
(Courtesy of the Rural Schools Collaborative.)*

In 2008, the town constructed a new middle school and moved the Children's Holocaust Memorial to a spot outside that new building. Today, the boxcar, plaques, and memorial butterfly garden sit only a few feet outside the main entrance of the school. A classroom space designated the Holocaust Artifacts Library is located inside the school, to the right of the main entrance. Besides paper clips, this room contains a remarkable range of objects donated to the school, including a Torah scroll and concentration camp uniform. Project leaders have also collected and organized all correspondence related to the initiative.

Going forward, the town plans for these objects and the larger outdoor site to become part of the Whitwell Education and Heritage Center. The steady number of visitors alongside object preservation concerns drove local leadership to seek a different home for the memorial.²⁴ The proposed center would house the Holocaust-related materials and exhibitions, a mining museum, public library, senior center, and veteran's services. This new site will remain located on middle school grounds. To date, locals have raised just over one hundred thousand dollars of the estimated two million dollars needed.²⁵ Over time, the evolution of the project into a memorial site imbued the entire town with a sense of purpose and pride, making the Children's Holocaust Memorial something that reflected how individuals from Whitwell viewed themselves and their town, as much as it was about the Holocaust. This transformation can be seen in the film on the Paper Clip Project.

The 2004 Miramax documentary *Paper Clips* lays out the full history of Whitwell's engagement with Holocaust memory from the first group of students to participate in the after-school program to the memorial site dedication in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. The film features the key actors involved with the project including the Schroeders, Linda Hooper, Dita Smith, the Whitwell children, middle school educators, and Holocaust survivors who visited the town. The documentary has been criticized by scholars such as Helene Meyers, who points out the underlying "Christian nationalist narratives of tolerance that supersede unequal but nevertheless interwoven legacies of U.S. racism and antisemitism." Her critique is tied to the fear that a memorialization project on the

²⁴ Ibid., 109–12.

²⁵ "Whitwell Education & Heritage Center," accessed June 16, 2025, <https://www.whitwell-center.org>.

Holocaust in Whitwell would create memorial competition between Jews and African Americans by placing greater emphasis on the Holocaust over a consideration of local Black history. She notes that the Klan's hometown is one hundred miles away, and, in the same vein, highlights the bombings that targeted Nashville's Jewish community because of its support for the civil rights movement. She believes that tensions caused by "competitive memory syndrome likely encourage Jews to embrace white southerners who embrace the Holocaust and token Jews as their own."²⁶ We were unable to confirm if any sort of tension or memorial competition occurred as a result of Holocaust memorialization in Whitwell. The low number of local Black residents alongside a general reluctance to speak out about a rural Holocaust memorialization project could account for this general silence. Or perhaps people no longer conceive of memory as a "zero sum struggle," at least not in this context.²⁷

Meyers's article raises valid questions about the underlying motives of the project, but she fails to address the defensive posture that underscores many of the key figures' positioning in the film. One of the initial educators involved with the project, David Smith, delivers powerful commentary about the fears Whitwell residents had concerning a documentary focused on their town: "I believe people from the north and west, I believe when they look at children in the South they think — dumb little redneck children. And they're stereotyped. And that's what we're trying to teach in this project: you can't stereotype anyone because you yourself are stereotyped. . . . [T]hat's what we're trying to do. Break those stereotypes."²⁸

The same fears about being stereotyped by outsiders are present everywhere in Hooper and Shadrick's memoir as it relates to their initial encounters with journalists in the early stages of the project and especially during filming of the documentary. When Whitwell residents learned the Schroeders were coming to town, Hooper and Shadrick emphasize how "it was exciting to think of the upcoming visit, but it was also nerve-racking. . . . [T]he students and adults were aware of the stereotypes that

²⁶ Helene Meyers, "The Unmarked Chains of Paperclips," *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 32 (Spring 2024): 31, 39, 42, 43.

²⁷ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA, 2009), 3.

²⁸ *Paper Clips*, 25:00–25:35.

*Promotional poster for the
2004 film Paper Clips.
(IMDB.com.)*

exist about the American South, Southerners, Appalachians. Would the Schroeders look at them through the prism of those stereotypes?"²⁹ As with other journalists they met, their fears regarding the Schroeders turned out to be unjustified; the Schroeders were immediately taken with the children and the project's mission.

When it came time to consider a documentary about the project, Hooper and Shadrick even more explicitly articulated concerns about stereotyping and being presented in a negative light. Their memoir discusses how Hooper was reluctant to engage with filmmakers because she remembered how the media negatively portrayed Whitwell following the 1981 mining accident that shook the community. Hooper and Shadrick present a synopsis of what Hooper said to the filmmakers: "Just to be sure the group understood how fiercely protective Mrs. Hooper was of the students, staff, and community, she said, 'I want this documentary to be about the children. I want lots of footage of children even if they are not a part of the project. I want them to see themselves on the screen and have a sense of pride. And last, but not least, if you make these children or this

²⁹ Hooper and Shadrick, *Power of a Paper Clip*, 13.

community look like redneck trailer trash, I will rip your heart out and eat it for breakfast.”³⁰

Hooper and others associated with the project sought to break down stereotypes they assumed outsiders had about their children, and, in the process, “give the students and the community a chance to shine and receive credit for all their hard work.”³¹ These statements reveal exactly how multilayered the motives behind the project were for the creators: education, memorialization, and recognition factored into their thinking. In fulfilling these goals through a Holocaust memorialization project, the initial project leaders hoped to dispel certain negative ideas others outside Whitwell may (or may not) have held about the people in their town.

Besides a concerted effort to project a positive image of Whitwell, those involved with the project soon recognized the benefits of having a Holocaust memorial. Matthew Hiltzik, the upper-level Miramax representative who helped launch the documentary, realized this fact early when he noted how “distributing this film would put Whitwell on the map as a real destination for visitors around the world.”³² Hiltzik’s observation proved prescient. Whitwell has made the map for those passing through the area – so much so that it has been coopted as a site of “heritage tourism” by the town and surrounding area.

The Children’s Holocaust Memorial is promoted on tourist web pages for Whitwell, Chattanooga, and the Sequatchie Valley National Scenic Byway. This type of heritage is claimed by Whitwell and the surrounding region as the result of a memorialization project, instead of a direct connection to the event or the people memorialized, as with the Charleston Holocaust Memorial. Almost thirty years after the launch of the Holocaust after-school program, the Children’s Holocaust Memorial has become part of Whitwell’s identity. The participants’ efforts and the ways in which they assigned this site a central role in their town’s self-presentation show how engaging with Holocaust memory – despite being completely divorced from the event – can transform a place and a group of people. Whether or not the Children’s Holocaust Memorial has broken down any stereotypes of the town, it has changed the town’s impression of itself – imbuing it with the pride of creation. In this sense, Holocaust

³⁰ Ibid., 15–16, 17.

³¹ Ibid., 16–17.

³² Ibid., 38.

memorialization has become a “place-making” event, despite the passage of time and the geographical distance between where the horrors unfolded and where they are being memorialized.³³

The Charleston Holocaust Memorial and Its Evolution

In Charleston, the placement, timing, and uses of the initial community plaque and the later large-scale monument to the Holocaust are as revealing as the evolution of the Whitwell Paper Clip Project. Starting during the 1960s, Charleston Jews—united by an association of landmen from the old country—sought to memorialize the lost on the wall of the community’s space. Not fully thirty years later, however, the next generation of Jewish community leaders replaced associations tied to their migrant origins and the use of a specifically Jewish location with a civic committee tasked with memorializing the Holocaust in the heart of Charleston for all to see.³⁴ The locations and goals of the early memorial plaque and the later Charleston Holocaust Memorial tell an additional tale of evolving Jewish place-making and community roles in the American South. This is a story at once recognizable anywhere, yet also greatly influenced by its Southern setting and the wider society and geography in which it sits.

The city of Charleston spreads over three peninsulas and several islands on the Atlantic coast. Its main historic area rests on a strip of land between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers bordered to the south by the harbor and the iconic remains of Fort Sumter. Everyone thinks of this core area when they hear the name Charleston, though the West Ashley area on the opposite side of the Ashley River is home to a greater portion of the city’s population and houses more of its possibilities for growth. Hemmed in to the north by the City of North Charleston and the east by the posh confines of Mount Pleasant, Charleston’s future lies in the geography of West Ashley. Local Jewish leaders and the wider population have long understood these facts.

When Maurice Fox and Henry Popowski attended the mounting of the new plaque made possible by Karesh, Solomon, and the other women of the committee, they stood in what was then the relatively new Jewish

³³ Tim Cole, *Holocaust Landscapes* (London, 2016), 2.

³⁴ David Popowski, “To Honor the Survivors and Remember the Dead: Building a Memorial in Marion Square,” *Jewish Historical Society of South Carolina Magazine* (Spring 2018): 10–11.

Community Center (JCC) building in West Ashley. Their presence in that location for this event was one of several actions around that time quietly heralding a change of eras for Charleston Jews. The Kalushiner Society of Charleston was at its end. As was the case for other *landsmanshaft* organizations comprised of migrants and descendants of Jews from the same towns or cities, the group had outlived its function with members aging, passing away, or turning the focus of their community building efforts to organizations without defining connections to the old country. Fox and Popowski became the public faces of this event for the photographer at the JCC in the fast-expanding western corridor of the city. Their geography made sense, as did the audience for this tribute.

The West Ashley JCC building opened in 1966 on what was then called Millbrook Drive, but soon renamed Raoul Wallenberg Boulevard as a memorial to the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Jews during the Holocaust. This new structure stands in for an older building in downtown Charleston that is now demolished, replaced with buildings owned by the College of Charleston.³⁵ At this time, Jews and non-Jews tended to look to the west. The Charleston core did not become the tourist mecca it is today until the tenure of Mayor Joe Reilly from 1975 to 2015. With his work to preserve the historic character of the downtown area while infusing a new economic driver in the form of leisure and tourism dollars, Reilly and those of his era returned a focus to the lower peninsula to levels it had not seen in decades, if not since before the Civil War.³⁶

An economic boom and a resurgent old city core in Charleston developed around the same time Americans turned toward study and commemoration of the Holocaust in far greater numbers. Amid this tide of increased Holocaust memorialization, some Jewish residents of Charleston began to call for the creation of a central memorial that would claim secular, non-Jewish space inside the city's new tourist area. In the early 1990s, Charlestonians Pincus Kolender and Joe Engel approached David Popowski with their desire to build a new memorial in the city. Auschwitz survivors Kolender and Engel had made new lives as owners

³⁵ "Jewish Community Center," Mapping Jewish Charleston, accessed October 24, 2024, <https://mappingjewishcharleston.cofc.edu/jewish-community-center>.

³⁶ Robert N. Rosen, *A Short History of Charleston* (rev. ed., Columbia, SC, 2021), 159–90.

of small businesses on King Street—a major thoroughfare of the downtown core and center of Jewish commerce.³⁷

David Popowski is the son of Henry, another local Holocaust survivor and last president of the Kalushiner Society of Charleston, who was photographed putting up the original plaque. In the Popowski family story, we can see many of the forces that took this Jewish community from a small prewar core, to new institutions and wealth on the west side, and then back again to prominence on the revitalized old peninsula. David's parents, Henry and Paula, arrived in Charleston as refugees sponsored by the Zucker family. David attended law school and returned to open a practice in the downtown area. Kolender approached David about the memorial because of his legal training and personal connections to Holocaust history through his parents.³⁸

In a short piece he wrote on the history of the current memorial and his involvement in its creation, David states that he was at first not convinced of the need for a Holocaust memorial given the small size of the Jewish community in the city, although he was soon spurred on by the outpouring of Jewish and non-Jewish support.³⁹ The timing of this drive, around the premier of *Schindler's List* and the opening of the national museum, likely drove community interest. Even with that national trend, the eager acceptance and support of this memorial idea by non-Jewish Charlestonians was a surprise. The drive's success, as other locally important ideas failed, also illustrates its deep and lasting significance in the Southern context.

Around the same time as planning to create the Holocaust memorial, a group of Black Charlestonians attempted to build a monument to Denmark Vesey in the same area. Vesey was a Black man who remarkably purchased his freedom and later tried to lead a revolt of enslaved people in 1822. His plot was discovered and violently suppressed. Local officials hanged Vesey along with thirty-four of the sixty-seven others convicted for the attempt. White Charlestonians further reacted to Vesey's resistance

³⁷ Popowski, "To Honor the Survivors," 11. A plaque on the wall of the Sylvia Vlosky Yaschik Jewish Studies Center describes Pincus Kolender's career as a peddler and later shop owner on King Street. For Joe Engel's biography, see *To Auschwitz and Back: The Joe Engel Story*, dir. Ron Small (Synagogue Emanu-El and Anchor Media Group, 2017).

³⁸ Popowski, "To Honor the Survivors," 11.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

by destroying the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, where he and other members of this resistance movement had congregated.⁴⁰

Efforts by African American community leaders to build a Vesey monument did not come to fruition until 2014. In years of arguments over the proposed memorial, opponents characterized Vesey as a “terrorist,” compared him to Osama Bin Laden, or called him “an outlaw who was hanged for plotting to kill white people.”⁴¹ Such commentators apparently had no wish to remember what those white people were then doing to Vesey’s friends and relatives. Ultimately, proponents of the Vesey statue were unsuccessful in bringing his memory to the central and tourist-laden Marion Square. Today the statue of Vesey stands in Hampton Park—across from the new Citadel—further up the peninsula and outside the well-visited city core.⁴² In an interview with Ted Rosengarten, one Black

*Denmark Vesey statue,
Hampton Park, Charleston.
(Britannica.com.)*

⁴⁰ “Denmark Vesey,” U.S. National Park Service, accessed October 25, 2024, <https://www.nps.gov/people/denmark-vesey.htm>.

⁴¹ Jack Hunter, “Denmark Vesey Was a Terrorist,” *Charleston City Paper*, February 10, 2010, accessed May 23, 2026, <https://charlestoncitypaper.com/2010/02/10/denmark-vesey-was-a-terrorist>; Elsa McDowell, “Monument’s Future Needs Consideration,” (Charleston SC) *Post and Courier*, January 23, 2001.

⁴² “Denmark Vesey.”

educator and lifelong Charlestonian recalled the tangled and often insulting process that brought this to be. Preferring to remain anonymous even today, the person said:

There was no deep sense of competition with the Jewish people. It was a small group of people that worked for eighteen years to have the city recognize Denmark Vesey only to be told we have to wait our turn. That tells you who is considered not important. . . . The city never would give us the land — that hurt because we have been here a very long time, and we have done a lot for the city. But that's how the city of Charleston rolls. They sent us out to Hampton Park, so we went from the old Citadel to the new one in Hampton Park. The Citadel never could shake us. We were the reason for the Citadel in the first place.⁴³

Rosengarten's interviewee points us to the reality that the Citadel was an outgrowth of Vesey's would-be rebellion. Having narrowly avoided their ultimate fear of an uprising by enslaved people, white South Carolinians founded their military academy, today's Citadel, to prepare and arm themselves for such an event in the future.⁴⁴

The Marion Square location sought by supporters of the Vesey memorial neighbors the original Citadel building and the historic Citadel Baptist Church that was hit by shellfire during the Civil War. This park was also home to a large statue honoring one-time vice president and ardent supporter of slavery John C. Calhoun — until its removal after the murder of George Floyd — and still contains an obelisk honoring the Confederate general, South Carolina politician, and enslaver Wade Hampton. Just off Marion Square stands Mother Emanuel AME Church, the successor to Denmark Vesey's destroyed congregation and, in 2015, the site of the racist mass shooting at a bible study session that brought the city to national attention and began America's wider reckoning with Confederate memorials.⁴⁵ Many of these sites combine to give Vesey and his memory strong connections to this downtown space.

⁴³ "Ted Rosengarten Interview with Anonymous Charleston Black Educator," September 3, 2025, transcript in possession of the authors. The authors thank Ted Rosengarten and Dale Rosengarten for their expertise, their help with research, and their provision of personal connections to Charleston histories.

⁴⁴ "Universities Studying Slavery," Office of Civility and Engagement, The Citadel, accessed September 21, 2025, <https://www.citadel.edu/oce/universities-studying-slavery>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.; Herb Frazier, Bernard Edward Powers Jr., and Marjory Wentworth, *We Are Charleston: Tragedy and Triumph at Mother Emanuel* (Nashville, 2016).

The ownership of Marion Square complicates the matter of Vesey's memorialization and the form of the eventual Charleston Holocaust Memorial. Although commonly thought to be a city park as reflected in the words of Rosengarten's interviewee, the land of Marion Square is actually held by an organization now called the Washington Light Infantry (WLI). The WLI—formerly the Washington Light Infantry and Sumter Guard and, before that, Hampton's Legion—is an undeniably Southern sort of social club with lineage to a militia unit that fought in the Civil War as a formation of the Confederate Army.⁴⁶ Although we do not know the private thoughts and deliberations of this group, when the Vesey monument was proposed, the local press reported that the group firmly opposed hosting a structure in his honor.⁴⁷ In contrast, David Popowski credits the WLI for being cooperative in hosting the Charleston Holocaust Memorial. The WLI continues to own the ground beneath the monument, which it leases to the Charleston Jewish Federation.

Popowski also does not comment on any design requirements from the WLI during the planning of the monument, although community members often speak of pressure to keep the symbolism light and not overtly invoke the Holocaust visually with statuary or other architectural effects that might be jarring to observers. Some talk of a Holocaust memorial that was not supposed to be too sad and definitely could not look like the Holocaust Memorial of Miami Beach with its design including dozens of statues depicting emaciated victims cast in grotesque states of agony.⁴⁸ That said, if the WLI truly did block the Vesey monument and kept the Holocaust memorial that it allowed from being too dark in its overall symbolism, it did not prevent the creation of a monument with wording that highlights the importance of racism and anti-gay bigotry.

Cast in bronze on the memorial's street-facing wall is a panel explaining the origins and progression of the Holocaust. The language

⁴⁶ "About Us," Washington Light Infantry, accessed October 24, 2025, <https://www.washingtonlightinfantry.org/about-us>.

⁴⁷ McDowell, "Monument's Future."

⁴⁸ See the particularly evocative architecture of the Holocaust Memorial of Miami Beach as an example of exactly what Charleston *did not* want. "The Holocaust Memorial," Holocaust Memorial Miami Beach, accessed October 25, 2024, <http://holocaustmemorialmiamibeach.org>.

The Charleston Holocaust Memorial.

(TOP: Kim Graham Photography, courtesy of Chad S. A. Gibbs;

BOTTOM: User EvanGuthrie, tripadvisor.com.)

employed on this installation is quite progressive and inclusive for the years before 1999. The memorial states:

From 1933-1945, the National Socialist (Nazi) regime in Germany implemented a racial theory declaring the "German Aryan Race" superior. The Nazis used this perverse theory and their military industrial might to dominate Europe and to separate, imprison, and ultimately destroy millions of human beings. Those whom the Nazis deemed undesirable and sought to eliminate included political dissidents, homosexuals, the mentally and physically disabled, Roma (so-called Gypsies) and Jehovah's Witnesses. But their chief victims were 6 million Jews.

What began as racial laws to strip Jews of their livelihood, their property, and their civil rights accelerated into a campaign to systematically slaughter millions of men, women, and children. By 1942, the machinery of mass murder was in full operation. Jews and other victims from all over Europe were sent to concentration and labor camps throughout Europe and the killing centers at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Sobibor, Majdanek, Treblinka, Belzec, and Chelmno located in Poland.

The denial of human rights combined with advanced technology and a pitiless will to dominate others caused the death of innocent millions and the annihilation of most of the Jews of Europe.⁴⁹

Remarkably in 1999, Charleston, South Carolina, had a Holocaust memorial that mentioned "homosexuals" nine years before such a thing existed in Berlin.⁵⁰ The capacious wording of this panel, placing Jews last in a list of major Nazi victim groups, is a sign of a time in which wider connections between minority groups and the intersectionality of Nazi persecution was easier to highlight. This wording also signaled the far less anxious times before 9/11 or the contentious, strife-torn, and warring early twenty-first century.

More recently, members of the Charleston Jewish Federation and several community partners requested that one of this article's authors, Chad Gibbs, join a committee working on refurbishment and additions to the Charleston Holocaust Memorial. The present drive to update the monument stems at least in part from discomfort and dissatisfaction with the vague and little-explained symbolism of the monument and the related tendency of tourists and some locals to completely misunderstand or just

⁴⁹ Charleston Holocaust Memorial, photos of text in authors' possession.

⁵⁰ "Berlin Remembers Persecuted Gays," BBC News, May 27, 2008, accessed October 28, 2024, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7422826.stm>.

plain miss what they are seeing. The legacy of those somewhat hushed discussions of what the Charleston memorial should look like resulted in a structure most casual observers and pedestrians do not recognize as Holocaust-related. When Gibbs takes students to the memorial each year (a ten-minute walk from the College of Charleston campus), at least a few with deep Charleston roots say something like “I had no idea this was here” or “I’ve seen this, but I had no idea it was a Holocaust memorial.” In an effort to fix this, new signage was added to the monument in 2024.

Along three main routes of approach, the Charleston Holocaust Memorial gained new structures that tell the visitor what they are about to see, explain its symbolism, and offer very brief lines on the Holocaust. As a committee member, Gibbs provided input on this wording and several style choices. He offered pushback to what he saw as a conspicuous narrowing of the meaning and commemoration of the memorial. The new wording reads as follows:

Charleston Holocaust Memorial

The Charleston Holocaust Memorial honors the memory of the six million Jews and millions of others murdered during the Holocaust.

It is a sacred space, a sanctuary, a place for contemplation, and a place to meditate and reflect.

The symbolic design elements invite each visitor’s individual interpretations to create a personal, meaningful, and emotional experience.

The inscription wall facing Calhoun Street details the history of the Holocaust and lists survivors who settled in South Carolina. This wall also includes the names of 24 major concentration, transit, and extermination camps positioned east to west to reflect their extent throughout Europe. An eternal flame across from the wall serves as a memorial candle for the victims.

The long bench in front of the wall offers a place to pause for thoughtful reflection. So too does the rectangular, sunken lawn on the north side of the Memorial.

The four-sided iron screen surrounding the Memorial defines a sacred space—a place apart.

A bronze tallit, or Jewish prayer shawl, drapes the center. One tassel, called a tzitzit, has been cut off. When this is done a tallit can be used as a burial shroud.



*New signage placed at all three main avenues of approach,
Charleston Holocaust Memorial, 2024.
(Photograph by Chad Gibbs.)*

Thank you for visiting this Memorial, and for taking the time to REMEMBER.

Dedicated June 6, 1999
Hon. Joseph P. Riley, Jr., Mayor
City of Charleston⁵¹

As any product of a committee does, the wording on the monument represents a compromise between competing visions. The new text also represents a change from the original intent of those involved in 1999 and shows something of the zeitgeist of 2024, particularly in its opening lines. Just twenty-five years after Charleston listed homosexual victims on its monument, groups beyond Jews are now “millions of others” on this inscription. An earlier draft named only Jews as victims of Nazi persecution.

⁵¹ New signage plans, documents, and architectural schematics in possession of Chad S.A. Gibbs.

This most recent evolution of the Charleston memorial is an indication of its times and a window on the local and national anxieties of recent years. As Gibbs participated in the process of adding to the Charleston memorial, he came to see the recent drive to make the monument do more, educate more vigorously, and further underscore the history of Jews as victims as a sign of fears about the rise of antisemitism in the red-state South and globally in 2024. Committee members working on the memorial expressed as much and spoke openly of how their concerns also stem from their views on the post-October 7 world. Their voices demonstrate the present mood of a community that has undeniably done well in Charleston since 1945, as evidenced by their ability to achieve prominent position in the public space in a manner rarely granted to other minorities in Charleston.

Conclusion

Both Whitwell and Charleston give home to unlikely and unexpected Holocaust memorials. These Southern locales are kindred in their possession of memorials that display local anxieties and desires almost as much—if not more—than they teach about the lessons of the Shoah. In Charleston, we see peculiarly Southern issues concerning race and history play out in the Jewish community's access to central city space. At the same time, Charleston Jews are representative of the nervousness Southern Jewish communities face as they move toward the core of civic life while remaining concerned with widespread antisemitism. In Whitwell, absent a Jewish community, a different sort of Southern anxiety over representation and respect emerges. In this case, the lack of diversity in the town and fears of being stereotyped as racist pushed a community to study and memorialize the Holocaust. Simultaneously, each site demonstrates freighted views of a memorial's purpose.

The central Charleston Holocaust Memorial and the Whitwell Children's Holocaust Memorial came about following an explosion of public discourse on the Holocaust. A national increase in Holocaust education and awareness certainly played a role in the local acceptance of both projects. Also shared among these two memorial initiatives are the specifically Southern concerns of their wider communities. In Charleston, the Holocaust memorial found acceptance and a ready home at the base

of a memorial to John C. Calhoun (prior to its removal), while a near contemporaneous drive to honor Denmark Vesey was pushed further from the city core. Nonetheless, the final Holocaust design completely avoided confrontational or evocative aesthetics. In Whitwell, another monument to a crime committed thousands of miles away against peoples who do not live in the area achieved prominence while the more local tragedies of race violence, lynching, and the Klan remain unacknowledged in the public architecture.

The similarities between these memorials raise larger questions about education, race, and Jewish history in the South. Historian Shari Rabin's recent work, *The Jewish South: An American History*, provides a comprehensive history that reveals the balancing act of Southern Jews as they were, at times, both privileged and othered. The book also raises the important question about the way Jewish history is understood at sites of Holocaust memory. Holocaust education, as well as memorials like those in Charleston and Whitwell, demonstrate that the histories of faraway Jewish suffering have often been privileged over the creation of public displays and monuments to the persecution and resistance of Black people in America. Meanwhile, Rabin points out that these initiatives of Holocaust education and memorialization could potentially "be used to condemn prejudice elsewhere without fully confronting its prevalence at home."⁵² She is right in worrying about the use of Holocaust memory in the South if it enables the avoidance of more "uncomfortable" local histories, or as they have been recently termed in some Southern states, "divisive concepts."

However, other international examples demonstrate that different possibilities for Holocaust memory exist. For example, in Australia, the Holocaust has been used in comparative frameworks examining Australian colonial projects that legitimized the subjugation and dispossession of Indigenous people. Australian museums have been at the forefront of highlighting the connections between the genocidal violence in Europe and the colonial practices of racial segregation and extermination of Indigenous people in Australia.⁵³ In this sense, there is perhaps more to be

⁵² Shari Rabin, *The Jewish South: An American History* (Princeton, 2025), 200.

⁵³ Jennifer Barrett, Avril Alba, and A. Dirk Moses, "Introduction: The Holocaust and Human Rights: Transnational Perspectives on Contemporary Memorial Museums," in *The Holocaust*

gained by memorializing the Holocaust alongside the legacies of colonialism and enslavement in the American South.

Besides avoiding uncomfortable local histories or privileging Jewish history, Holocaust memorialization and education initiatives – especially in places without a vibrant Jewish community – risk introducing non-Jews to Jewish history through the Holocaust and antisemitism. By teaching the Holocaust and no other components of Jewish history – not even local Southern Jewish history – educators risk that the Holocaust “will become all that non-Jewish Americans know about a thousand years of European Jewish civilization.”⁵⁴

With the Charleston and Whitwell memorials maturing, connections in their evolution over time become apparent. As the product of a self-confident and relatively secure Jewish community in 1990s Charleston, the original public memorial spoke to wider issues of race and sexuality, while the fraught and distraught days and months after the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, have played a role in the push for this structure to do more, including a desire for it to educate the public against antisemitism. On similar ground, the Whitwell memorial – predominantly supported by non-Jews and mostly displaying their fears and desires – has moved toward a position as a visitation site and as an educational ambassador for a people who often feel maligned in national discourse. Only time will tell how these projects evolve in the future. What remains certain, however, are the ways in which both memorials speak to their Southern settings through uniquely localized takes on Holocaust education and memory.

and *Human Rights: Transnational Perspectives on Contemporary Memorials*, ed. Jennifer Barret, Avril Alba, and A. Dirk Moses (Philadelphia, 2025), 3–4.

⁵⁴ Saidel, *Never Too Late*, 42. Saidel quotes James Young articulating a similar sentiment. Dara Horn is another vocal critic of Holocaust education and memorialization initiatives like the one in Whitwell for introducing “students to Judaism by way of antisemitism.” Dara Horn, “Is Holocaust Education Making Anti-Semitism Worse?” *The Atlantic*, April 3, 2023, 12.