**Jews in Antebellum South Carolina**

*Ya’akov Aronson*

**Description:** This presentation will deal with Jewish involvement in the history of South Carolina, and more specifically of Charleston, from the earliest days of the colony to the outbreak of the War Between the States. In addition to the role Jews played in the general development of South Carolina, the internal organization of the Jewish community will be covered.

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**The Jewish presence in South Carolina in the Colonial and Antebellum periods**

To some people, hearing “South Carolina” reminds them of the War Between the States and segregation. And for many years after the War and the freeing of the slaves South Carolina had Jim Crow laws and was a stronghold of segregation but this phenomenon hardly ever affected the Jews. To slightly modify the phrase used in the Supreme Court ruling *Plessy vs Ferguson* in 1896, the ruling that permitted segregated schools if they were “separate but equal”, it can be said about the Jews in South Carolina that they were considered *different but equal*. They might even have been considered special. For example, when in the 1700’s two Jews acquired large land holdings in District 96,
an area on the South Carolina-Georgia border including the towns of Greenwood, Abbeville and Laurens, but certainly not a majority of the land in the District, the area became known as Jews’ Land. And during the American Revolution when a company of soldiers was recruited in an area of Charleston where many Jews lived, though the Jews didn’t make up 1/3 of the company, it was referred to as the Jews’ Company.

And as well as I understand this use of the appellation Jews it was not meant to be derogatory.

To cite two examples demonstrating the position of Jews in contemporary SC, one of which also shows the change of attitudes toward blacks, Charleston had a black Jewish police chief from 1982 to 2005.
Chief Reuben Greenberg’s father was Jewish but not his mother so according to Jewish law he wasn’t Jewish since a person’s lineage is passed through the mother. But he was so impressed by his father’s religion that at the age 26 he converted and attended the Conservative synagogue in Charleston.
His tenure as Chief of Police was very successful as shown by the fact that during that period Charleston’s population increased by 64% but crime decreased by 11%. In an article about Chief Greenberg in the Los Angeles Times the headline read "A Black, Jewish, Roller-Skating Cop Brings a New Way to Fight Crime to the Old South."

Another example showing the acceptance of and importance afforded to contemporary Jews in South Carolina: in 2014 a resolution was passed by the House of Representatives of the South Carolina General Assembly “TO SALUTE STUART KAUFMAN OF MOUNT PLEASANT (a town adjacent to Charleston)
FOR HIS MANY ACHIEVEMENTS AND FOR THE CONTRIBUTION OF HIS TIME, TALENTS, AND RESOURCES IN PROTECTING OUR AMERICAN LIBERTIES, IN HONORING THE SERVICE OF OUR VETERANS, AND IN SUPPORTING THE STATE OF ISRAEL.” The resolution further refers to Israel as “the only nation directly established by the Creator”. Remember, South Carolina is in the Bible Belt and the words of the Bible are taken seriously. And you might think such recognition would be appropriate for a native son but Stuart Kaufman had moved to South Carolina only 2 years before the passage of the resolution. This inclusion of Jews in society goes back to the founding of the colony in the 1600’s.

The title of my presentation, THIS HAPPY LAND, is a phrase appearing in letters written by Jews in early South Carolina when describing their experiences in the state and was used as the title of a book about the Jews of colonial and antebellum
Charleston by Prof. James Hagy, for many years a member of the History Department at the College of Charleston. And in the same vein, the famed Carolina newspaper editor and humorist Harry Golden published a collection of his essays entitled *Jewish Roots in the Carolinas* which he subtitled *A Pattern of American Philo-Semitism*, a phrase rarely heard today.

This presentation will briefly discuss why Jews had that feeling about SC, and the United States in general, and, though there is a wealth of information about the participation of Jews in the general history of SC and the activities of Jews with a connection to South Carolina in American history, because of time limitations the presentation will primarily deal with highlights of the internal organization of the Charleston Jewish community.

Originally one colony called Carolina was granted to eight nobles by King Charles II of England in 1663. Charles in Latin is Carolus thus the name Carolina.
Later in the early 1700’s the colony was split into two separate colonies, North Carolina and South Carolina, and the original grant was reduced in size.
One of the nobles to whom the colony was granted was Sir Anthony Ashley Cooper, later Lord Shaftsbury. The two rivers framing Charleston are named for him, the Ashley to the west and the Cooper to the east.

And people in Charleston have been known to say that at the tip of Charleston the Ashley and Cooper rivers meet to form the Atlantic Ocean.

John Locke, the famous English philosopher from whose writings Thomas Jefferson gleaned some of the ideas found in the Declaration of Independence, served as Cooper’s private secretary and was asked to draw up a constitution for the new colony. The result, the *Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina* was finished in 1669 before the colony was split. Though never formally adopted, the document later provided the basic ideas implemented in South Carolina. To encourage settlers, included in the *Fundamental Constitutions* was a clause stating in order “that Jews, heathens and other dissenters . . . may not be scared and kept at a distance . . . any seven or more persons agreeing in any religion may constitute a
church”. (Their required number for a minyan apparently was different than ours!) Of course the ultimate intent was for those non Christians to convert to Christianity. This attitude of tolerance was quite different than that in some other colonies which did tolerate minorities but were set up for specific sects. Examples are Massachusetts for Puritans, Maryland for Catholics and Pennsylvania for Quakers.

An example of the friendly attitude toward Jews in the United States as a whole can be seen in George Washington’s response to a letter from four Jewish congregations, those of Charleston, New York, Philadelphia and Richmond, congratulating him upon his election as President. He wrote that “the liberality of sentiment towards each other, which marks every political and religious denomination of men in this country, stands unparalleled in the history of nations” and he thanked the congregations for their good wishes. “May the same temporal and eternal blessings which you implore for me, rest upon your congregation” Washington added. No better testimony to the liberal attitude to Jews in the United States can be cited, but, though there might have been some anti Jewish sentiment expressed from time to time, the positive attitude toward Jews in South Carolina was a constant whereas in some other states this was not the case.

The first mention of Jews in the Carolinas in contemporary documents is in 1695. The first record of Jews meeting for prayer refers to Charleston in 1749. During the early period services were held in private homes. Many of the Jews in Charleston had come from England and had been members of the Bevis Marks Synagogue in London, a very active Sephardic congregation, and the Charleston group followed the same Sephardic custom as had been followed in London.
The name adopted for their congregation was Kahal Kadosh Beit Elohim (KKBE). It was a strictly Orthodox congregation and its constitution declared that violators of the Sabbath and/or Jewish holidays would be fined and denied further membership in the congregation.

During this period the Jewish community of Charleston was constantly growing as reflected by the congregation’s move to larger buildings in 1757 and again in 1764.

Contributing to this growth was the fact that Charleston was one of the three leading seaports in the American colonies, in fact larger than New York or Philadelphia. The route of sailing ships crossing the Atlantic from Europe to the Americas had to take advantage of the trade winds which led them to the Caribbean.

**Trade winds (black)**
From there they would continue on to the English colonies on the North American continent taking advantage of the Gulf Stream.

This route would bring them to the Charleston area first and as a result Charleston became the leading North American seaport, prosperous both in terms of business transacted and the arrival of new settlers.

In 1790 there were 200-250 Jews, making up 2-3% of the white population of Charleston. It is important to stress WHITE population because the black population, slaves and free blacks, was larger than the white population until the War Between the States and the position of Jews was strengthened by the simple fact that they were white.

At that time New York City possibly had a few more Jews than Charleston, exact numbers are hard to find, but by 1800 Charleston had the largest Jewish population in the United States, more than 400. By 1820 the number had increased according
to one source to more than 670, according to another close to 800. New York City at the time had 550 Jews. The percentage of Jews in the white population of Charleston had now risen to 5%. Charlestown was not the only town in South Carolina with Jews among the population. They were scattered in a number other towns. At one time 10% of Georgetown’s population was Jewish. But Georgetown only had about 800 residents at the time, thus only 80 Jews.

After 1820 the Jewish percentage of Charleston’s population declined. A major cause was the development of the steamship which was not dependent on wind as a source of power. Because the trip from Europe to New York and Philadelphia was shorter than to Charleston the new steam powered vessels brought their cargo and people to those ports.

The growth of the community was due not only to the influx of new people but also a high birth rate among some of the Jewish families. Records of very large families as well as large age gaps between husbands and wives exist. An example is the marriage in 1807 of Isaiah Moses at the age of 35 to Rebecca Phillips, aged 15.

Isaiah Moses and Rebecca Phillips Moses
They had 12 children. Isaiah previously had 4 children in England with his first wife who passed away there. Other large families included that of Rachael Lazarus with 17 children, Lucretia Mordecai had 18 and the union of Andrew Jackson Moses and Octavia Harby produced 17 children of whom 14 lived. Giving the name Andrew Jackson is an indication of the feeling of closeness Jews felt toward America. This son was born in 1815 when Jackson’s troops captured New Orleans in the War of 1812. Actually, when New Orleans was captured the war was already over but as there was no rapid means of communication the fact was unknown to Jackson. Generally bringing up so many children was not as complicated as we might think because, we have to remember, they were cared for by slaves.

One of the first institutions established in a Jewish community is a cemetery. In 1754 the DaCosta family set up a family cemetery on Coming Street

**Coming Street Cemetery**
The tombstone pictured here is that of Dr. Marx E Cohen Jr. Depicted on the tombstone at the top are the crossed flags of the Confederacy and South Carolina. Dr. Cohen was killed in the battle of Bentonville, North Carolina in March 1865 in the Confederacy’s last effort to stop the northward march of the army of William Tecumseh Sherman, infamous for his march through Georgia.

The cemetery was transferred to KKBE 10 years later and today is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. At the time of the transfer Isaac DaCosta, the head of the family, included a proviso that only those “who do and conform to the Jewish rites and ceremonies in general” and who observed the regulations of KKBE be buried there. The regulations of KKBE denied membership in the congregation to Jews who had married outside the faith thus denied them burial in the synagogue cemetery.

Despite this strictness on paper in relating to intermarriage, we know that at one point the daughter of the first Hazan of the synagogue (title given to the synagogue’s religious leader), did exactly that. And at the time of the American Revolution the second Hazan married a non Jewish woman who converted but when she died wasn’t buried in the Jewish cemetery because the synagogue’s constitution only allowed the burial of those converted in a congregation that had a Rabbi and a Beit Din (Rabbinical Court). Thus a person converted in Charleston, which had no Beit Din, could not be buried there. Later when intermarried members of the Lopez family were denied burial in the congregation’s cemetery the family bought a plot of land adjacent to the synagogue’s cemetery and established its own family cemetery. Eventually this also was incorporated into the KKBE cemetery.
Internal divisions in the 1770’s and 1780’s led to a schism in the congregation. There are different opinions as to the cause. Some say that the leaders of the congregation had changed a number of the practices ordained by the congregation’s constitution and complaints about this were voiced. Upon not receiving the desired results from these complaints the members involved formed a second congregation. Others point out that a number of German Jews had arrived in Charleston and this influenced the development of KKBE. The dispute ended with the establishment of a second congregation, Beit Elohim Uneve Shallom, by the Sephardic old timers with the new German arrivals retaining control of the original congregation but continuing use of the Sephardic ritual. There are no official records from Beit Elohim Uneve Shallom known today but its existence has been verified by its mention in contemporary documents relating to various matters. It seems to have lasted until about 1790. The members gradually rejoined KKBE but it doesn’t seem that they were in leadership positions because when the congregation laid the corner stone for its first permanent building in 1794 seven of the eight men involved were of German origin.

Original KKBE Building destroyed by fire 1838
The interior of the synagogue used the Sephardic seating arrangement with all the men’s seats facing the central reading desk (bima). This is a picture of the interior as painted by Solomon Nunes Carvalho from memory after the original synagogue building was destroyed by fire in 1838. Solomon Carvalho will be discussed later.

Interior of KKBE before fire (Solomon Carvalho)

During this period KKBE had a number of spiritual leaders who, as mentioned, bore the title Hazan. Abraham Azuby, the congregation’s first paid Hazan, held the position in the latter part of the 1700’s and the beginning of the 1800’s. When he died in 1805 a request was sent to the Bevis Marks Synagogue in London to find a successor. There were two candidates, one of whom had been born in Charleston.
Before WWII promising yeshiva students in the US were sent to Eastern Europe to continue their studies in what were considered the important yeshivas of the day. It seems that this tradition had a much earlier genesis in the form of this young man who had been sent to London to further his studies.

Because he was only 16 at the time he was deemed too young for the position. So Bevis Marks sent the other candidate who was found by KKBE to be in poor health and not sufficiently learned so they immediately purchased a steamship ticket and sent him back to London. Different members of the congregation served short periods as the spiritual leader until 1806 and the appointment of member Jacob Suares to the position. He served until 1811 when the congregation hired Emanuel Nunes Carvalho who had been a teacher in the school of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City. Shearith Israel was the first synagogue established in North America back in 1654. Carvalho was a member of a family that would play a prominent role in the Charleston community. One of its members, Solomon Nunes Carvalho, mentioned above, was the official photographer on John C. Freemont’s fifth expedition (1854) to explore the western part of the United States. Abraham Ottolengui, the 16 year old who was not considered old enough for the position of Hazan for the synagogue in 1805 eventually returned to Charleston and taught Hebrew.

Hazan Carvalho seems to have gotten himself into trouble at KKBE. According to a local resident the Hazan taught the children of the congregation a nice tune for the last Psalm recited in the morning service which was greatly appreciated by the congregation. Then, and the only description offered for this action is “for a whim or caper”, he wouldn’t let the children sing the Psalm any more. The adjunta, board of the congregation, tried to get him to reinstate the melody but he refused and was suspended from his duties for five days to give him time to think over the
matter. The episode ended with a riot in the synagogue with those supporting the Hazan and those supporting the adjunta “battling with clubs & bruising boxing, etc.” Carvalho is found in a Rabbinic position in Philadelphia in 1814.

Moving ahead to 1824, a group of KKBE’s members petitioned the board of the synagogue for the introduction of changes in, among other things, the content of the services, including using English for sermons. Up until then Spanish, and sometimes Ladino, had been used. Not having their requests approved they formed a new group entitled the *Reformed Society of Israelites*. A number of additional causes for this break have been cited. Among them mention is made of the fact that a number of German immigrants who had firsthand experience with the new Reform Judaism that had developed in that country had arrived in Charleston and saw the new reform as, so to speak, the wave of the future. Another cause cited is the entry of many Jews into the middle class and they wanted to have a form of religion considered more in tune with the openness of American society. In this they were probably influenced by a reforming movement in the Protestant churches in Charleston at the same time. Many of the important families in Charleston were counted among the members of this *Society*, Moïse, Cardoza, Carvalho. Also involved was Isaac Harby, a local newspaper editor and teacher who played a major role.

**Isaac Harby**
From this silhouette of Harby he seems to have been a very dapper gentleman. In addition to his other activities he was a playwright and President James Monroe was present at an early performance of one of his plays. A manuscript of a prayer book Harby composed for the *Reformed Society of Israelites* is in the library of the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati.

Inside front cover of Harby Prayer Book Manuscript

Harby was very active in the early activities of the *Society* but when his wife died in 1827 he moved to New York. From 1828 Abraham Moïse served as its President until it disbanded in 1833.

The reforms introduced into the ritual of this new congregation apparently weren’t as popular as had been expected and the *Society* declined because of this and other factors, one of which the member, Maurice Mayer, said was “not appropriate for public disclosure.” Thus ended the first reform movement in Judaism in North America. Gradually the members rejoined KKBE but seem to have had the last word because when a new synagogue building in the Greek Revival style was erected in 1840, after the previous building was destroyed by fire two years earlier, an organ was installed. The present building, like the Coming Street Cemetery is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.
KK BE Building 1840

KK BE Today
The Greek Revival style of architecture which was popular at the time was based upon the Parthenon.

Parthenon (447-432 BCE) on the Acropolis in Athens.

This interior of the synagogue as appears today:

**KKBE interior today**
In 1838, the year of the fire, the congregation upon the urging of Sally Lopez, of the family previously mentioned as establishing its own cemetery, began a Sunday School to instruct the congregation’s children in the Jewish tradition and hopefully provide for dedicated future members. Another woman active in the Sunday School and later its Principal was Penina Moïse, a noted poetess who wrote 64 of the 70 hymns in the first hymnal produced for use in the reformed KKBE.

What other reforms would follow? This was influenced by the arrival of Gustavus Poznanski in 1837, about whom Solomon Breibart, a home grown historian of Charleston Jewry wrote: Poznanski was “probably the most controversial personality in American Judaism in that era”. Born in Poland he apparently came to the US from Germany. He was hired as an Orthodox Rabbi who succeeded at the outset of his ministry in breathing new life into the congregation. But in 1840 Poznanski supported those favoring the installation of an organ in the new synagogue building. And later in an 1843 sermon he proposed abolishing the second day of major Jewish holidays observed outside of the land of Israel. Because of the great argument caused by his ideas Poznanski resigned his position but continued to lead the congregation as a volunteer as no replacement was found. In the meanwhile a court case was initiated about the legality of installing an organ as this was an act not in accord with Orthodox custom as was prescribed as the official policy of the congregation in its constitution. During the period of the court case use of the main sanctuary of the synagogue building on Shabbat rotated between the two conflicting groups with the other group using a smaller room in the building for Shabbat prayers on its “out Shabbat”. The case, which dragged on for three years, was settled by the South Carolina Supreme Court in 1846 in favor of the group promoting the installation of the organ. Additional reforms later
introduced at KKBE were the abolition of the second day of Jewish holidays as Hazan Poznanski had suggested, and using the ancient Palestinian three year cycle for completing the Shabbat Torah readings instead of the one year cycle established in Babylonia. This change shortened the Shabbat morning service as only 1/3 of the weekly portion was read, the first third in the first year of the cycle, the second third in the second year and the portion completed during the third year of the cycle.

A further reform Poznanski introduced was an abridgement of Maimonides’ Thirteen Principles of Faith in which he deleted any mention of the coming of a personal messiah to redeem Israel and any mention of a belief in the resurrection of the body. These changes had been included in the text of the 13 Principles of Faith on a plaque that hung on the eastern wall of the synagogue. But within KKBE there was further debate about these changes in the Maimonidean formulation of the 13 Principles of Faith which resulted in the removal of the plaque. But, interestingly enough, so was the Rabbi who had supported removing it after only one year in his position. The loss of the trial to the reform faction caused a new break in the congregation and in 1846 Congregation Shearith Israel was formed using the Orthodox Portuguese minhag. This congregation erected its own building and existed until 1866 when the two congregations rejoined.
Shearith Israel

Prior to this in 1854 new arrivals in Charleston wanted a synagogue with the Ashkenazi minhag and formed Brith Shalom which, fast forwarding ahead, was unified in 1954 with Beth Israel, a congregation founded later. This combined congregation exists today as BSBI.

The KKBE constitution opened membership to all who followed its requirements except people of color. But it is known that a slave named Billy Simmons, called by the congregants Uncle Billy, attended the synagogue in the 1850’s. He claimed that he was from the Rechabite tribe in Africa. This group appears in the 35th chapter of Jeremiah. They originally lived in the Land of Israel and according to the commentary Metsudat David on the book of Jeremiah the tribe traced its linage back to Jethro, Moses’s father in law who, according to tradition, converted. Billy always wore an old top hat, such as seen in the pictures of Abraham Lincoln.
Uncle Billy Simmons

It is said that on Shabbat he would wear a shiny black silk hat, a black suit and a frilly shirt. You might wonder how a slave could wander around and come to the synagogue on Shabbat. Uncle Billy was owned by a local newspaper editor and his job was to deliver the papers. Many slave holders hired out some of their slaves as laborers and these had much more what may be called freedom than slaves on the plantations as when they finished their assigned job they were free for the rest of the day. There is also on record the attendance at services of a black member of the congregation in 1857. He had been converted abroad and apparently since he met the constitution’s requirement for converts the fact that he was black was ignored. But most of the Jewish population of Charleston and South Carolina in general, as did their fellow citizens, supported the institution of slavery and many owned slaves themselves.
Jewish self help organizations also came into existence during this period. The Hebrew Benevolent Society, which in addition to its charitable acts acted as a *hevra kedisha*, the burial society, was established in 1784.

Seal of the Hebrew Benevolent Society

(it’s a mystery to me why they had to be so graphic in their symbol and depict a skeleton) and a Hebrew Orphans Society, the first chartered Jewish charity in the United States, was set up in 1802. Its purpose was to help widows, orphans and the children of indigent parents.

From the description above we can see that from its earliest days Charleston had a very vibrant Jewish community.
Selected Bibliography


