

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part 5_)

The Early Jewish Community of Charleston, South Carolina

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*Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from **The Jews of Charleston, A History of an American Jewish Community** by Charles Reznikoff in collaboration with Uriah Z. Engelman, The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1950.*

The English first settled at Albemarle Point in what is now the state of South Carolina in 1670. In 1680 this settlement was moved to a peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers, and became Charles Town (named in honor King Charles II). The new location was more healthful than the original settlement, and, since it was behind the islands of a land-locked harbor, provided safety from attack. The name was changed to Charleston at the end of the War of Independence. “By the late 1680s, the colony was beginning to enjoy prosperity, especially in the coastal areas. Its economic base depended initially on the fur trade, which fostered generally good relations between the Carolinian settlers and the local Indian tribes.”¹

In 1695, four Indians from Florida (then Spanish territory), who had been captured by the Yamasee Indians, were brought to town: the captives “could speak *Spanish*,” wrote the governor of the colony afterwards, “and I had a *Jew* for an interpreter, so upon examination I found they profess'd the Christian Religion as the Papists do; and the governor, accordingly, sent the captives back to St. Augustine.” (Page 4)

This is the first mention we have of a Jew in the Carolinas. Given that he knew Spanish, he may very well have been a Marrano (one of the Jews compelled to profess Christianity during the Inquisition).

The constitution of the colony was heavily influenced by the political philosopher John Locke, resulting in a veritable Magna Charta of liberty and tolerance.

In 1697, the colonial Assembly declared that religious persecution had forced aliens to settle in South Carolina and acknowledged that these had proved themselves law-abiding and industrious; accordingly, the Assembly enacted that “all aliens ... of what nation soever, which now are inhabitants of South Carolina” should have all the rights of any person born of English parents. Full freedom of worship was granted, however, only to Christians - “Papists excepted”; but all other rights were granted every alien who applied by petition if such alien would swear allegiance to the king. (Page 4)

It is little wonder then that Jews as well as other persecuted minorities such as Huguenots and German Palatines found South Carolina a safe haven and settled there in increasing numbers.

The Jews who first went to Charles Town came, almost all of them, from England and English possessions in the western hemisphere: from New York to the north, from Georgia to the south, and, like the English from Barbados, from the British West Indies. For the most part they came to the growing port as merchants; but like other merchants in Charles Town some hoped, no doubt, to buy land and become planters. If a few were men of consequence with transactions involving large sums, others, as stated above, were no more than petty tradesmen, ready to sell a loaf of bread or of sugar, a ribbon for a lady or a cut of rough cloth for a slave.

About 1741, Jews, as well as many Christians, who had been among the earliest settlers in Georgia, left Savannah because the trustees of the colony would not let them have the use of Negro slaves. (Many returned to Georgia when slavery was permitted in 1749.) (Pages 11 – 12)

Synagogue and Social Life

After the arrival of the Jews from Georgia, there were certainly enough Jews in Charleston to sustain a regular minyan. However, it was not until 1749 that a congregation which they called *Beth Elokim Unveh Shalom* was formed. However, the synagogue soon became known as Kahal Kodesh (Holy Congregation) Beth Elokim (KKBE). It was the third or fourth synagogue to be founded in America.

From 1750 to 1757, *Kahal Kodesh* met for worship in a small wooden house - that had been most likely used for a dwelling - on Union Street (now State Street and so since the days of the Secession). From 1757 to 1764, the Charles Town congregation met in a house "back in the yard," afterwards 318 King Street, near Hasell Street; and, from 1764 until 1780, on Beresford Street near King Street. (Pages 17 – 18)

The synagogue was Orthodox and followed the Sephardic ritual. (This was the case with all synagogues founded in the American colonies.) Moses Cohen served as the first Chazzan and reader and Joseph Tobias was the first Parnas (president).

Almost sixty years after the death of the haham, Beth Elokim in its constitution of 1820 provided that "on every Kippur night perpetually, the first escaba (prayer for the dead) shall be made for the Reverend Moses Cohen because he was appointed and confirmed the Reverend Doctor of this Congregation from its establishment." (Page 18)

The Jewish community of Charleston “flourished,” so that by 1820 a number of Charleston Jewish families had resided in the community for several generations.

In 1820, the estimated Jewish population of Charleston was 700 as compared to 550 in New York City, 450 in Philadelphia, 200 in Richmond, 150 in Baltimore, 100 in Savannah and 500 to 600 others scattered in the balance of the United States.

The religious, cultural and economic climate of Charleston was favorable to Jews and Jews were accepted easily in community life. Jews voted in an election in 1703, probably the first time in the Western world, and participated actively in almost every area of life. Many of them had fought in the Revolution. Leading Jews of Charleston brought steam navigation to the Savannah River, established a line of steamships between Charleston and Havana, reestablished the Chamber of Commerce, introduced illuminating gas to the city and pioneered in other industrial enterprises. The community abounded with well-known Jewish writers, painters, teachers, lawyers and physicians. At one time, during this period, of the four newspapers in Charleston, two were edited by Jews. Of the nine people who founded the Supreme Council of Scottish Rite Masonry in Charleston in 1801, “Mother Council of the World,” four were Jews. And Jews were also prominent in the social and charitable life of the region.²

However, not all was as well as it appeared. Many of the Jews of Charleston were influenced by its long tradition of liberalism and pluralism as well as the new waves of thought that were affecting various segments of Protestant America at this time. They were certainly aware of the beginnings of the Reform movement in Germany. In addition, some of Charleston’s Jews undoubtedly were affected by the development of the Unitarian Church in Charleston under the leadership of Samuel Gilman (1791 – 1858). Some of the Jews compared the Orthodox services conducted at KKBE with those of their fellow Christians and found them lacking in decorum and dignity.

It is therefore perhaps not surprising that in 1824 forty-seven members of the KKBE presented a petition to the congregation which in part said

[they] Are now seriously impressed with the belief that certain defects which are apparent in the present system of worship are the sole causes of the evils complained of. In pointing out these defects, however, your memorialists seek no other end than the future welfare and respectability of the nation (Judaism). As members of the great family of Israel, they cannot consent to place before their children examples which are only calculated to darken the mind, and withhold from the rising generation the more rational means of worshipping the true God ... We wish not to overthrow, but to rebuild; we wish not to destroy, but to reform and revise the evils complained of; we wish not to abandon the institutions of Moses, but to understand and observe them ...³

Their initial request for change was modest – they wanted the Hebrew prayers translated into English, a shortening of services by the omission of some of the prayers, the abolishment of monetary pledges during services, and an English sermon based on the portion of the week.

This petition was rejected by the officers of KKBE on the grounds that it violated the Constitution of the synagogue. However, this was by no means the end of the matter. Indeed, it eventually led to the establishment of the first Reform temple in America.

(To be continued.)

¹ <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h637.html>

² **The Charleston Organ Case** by Allan Tarshish, Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, 54, 1965. This article is available at no cost at <http://www.ajhs.org/reference/adaje.cfm>

³ Ibid.