

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

The Jews of Washington, D.C. During the Civil War

Dr. Yitzchok Levine
Department of Mathematical Sciences
Stevens Institute of Technology
Hoboken, NJ 07030
llevine@stevens.edu

*Note: Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes are from **The Jewish Community of Washington, D.C., during the Civil War** by Robert Shosteck American Jewish Historical Quarterly (1961-1978); Sep 1966-Jun 1967; 56, 1-4; AJHS Journal. This article is available online at <http://www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm>*

Introduction

Washington, D.C. (officially known as the District of Columbia) was created in 1790 as a result of a political compromise. “Washington was a Federal city. It did not have a ‘State’ government. It was under the direct control of Congress for even the simplest of things; schools, streets, courts and land use by private individuals and corporations. Accordingly, Congress dutifully passed on the last day of the first session of the 28th Congress, June 17, 1844, ‘A Bill, concerning conveyances or devices of places of public worship in the District of Columbia.’ The bill did not specifically identify any single religious group or denomination. It did provide that the District Court system would have the ability to appoint or replace trustees overseeing the property or governance of any religious institution.

“The understanding and practice of the law was that only Christian Churches were to be recognized in the nation's capital. A Jewish house of worship was not welcome.”¹

The Washington Hebrew Congregation

“The Washington Hebrew Congregation was the center of Jewish religious life in the Nation's capital during the Civil War period. It was organized on April 25, 1852, at the home of Herman Listberger on Pennsylvania Avenue near 21st Street. Solomon Pribram was chosen president of the new group. The twenty or more founders were almost all recent immigrants from Germany. Two years later the Congregation had increased to about forty and included Capt. Jonas P. Levy among its supporters.”

In light of this growth, the Congregation began making plans to erect a permanent house of worship. However, there was one problem. While the 1844 law passed by the 28th Congress did not say so explicitly, it was understood that it applied only to Christian churches. Hence, the members of the Washington Hebrew Congregation feared that a Jewish house of worship would not be welcome. Their only recourse was to get

Congress to explicitly state that the 1844 law applied to Jewish houses of worship as well.

“An important event in the life of the young congregation occurred in 1856, under the presidency of Joseph Friedenwald. They submitted through Senator Lewis Cass, a memorial [petition] to the 34th Congress on February 5, 1856, requesting an amendment to existing laws whereby the Hebrew Congregation in Washington would be granted the same rights, privileges and immunities as were granted Christian churches under a law passed [on] June 17, 1844. This bill was passed, and the act was signed by President Franklin Pierce on June 2, 1856. Now the Washington Hebrew Congregation saw its way clear to incorporate under the charter granted by Congress.

“The growing congregation soon was faced with the problem of finding a suitable place of worship. The editor of the Occident reported [in April 1856] on the matter as follows:

“We learn from the Evening Star that the Israelites are making strenuous exertions to provide themselves with a suitable place of worship. They are highly spoken of for their industry and general good conduct, and have won the good opinion of other denominations. They lately celebrated the receipt of a Sepher Torah, on which occasion they had a public dinner. We trust, however, to hear before many months have elapsed, that the contemplated Synagogue has been completed, and is the resort of many devout and pious Israelites.”

It was not long before the Congregation had a Chazzan/Shochet by the name of H. Melle. In July 1857 it formally adopted a constitution and by-laws, and was incorporated.

By October, 1860, the Congregation was looking for larger quarters for its growing membership.

“A news item [Occident November, 1860] tells this story as follows:

“We are informed that the Israelites of the national capital are now about closing the purchase of a beautiful large church on Tenth Street, between E and F Streets. The building cost originally \$13,000, but the price to be paid for it is \$10,000; first payment \$2,000 ... As the Washington Congregation is neither rich nor numerous, though steadily increasing, our friends would be greatly indebted to all Israelites to assist them to obtain a suitable house of worship.”

“A Philadelphia correspondent, reports on his visit to Washington: Six years ago there was not a Minyan to be found in that city; now there are about four hundred Yehudim there ... great credit should be accorded to Capt. Jonas P. Levy, through whose exertions and perseverance, not only a congregation has been formed, but a new building has just been purchased”

A new constitution was adopted by the Congregation in 1861. It prescribed “an ‘Aschkeness’ [sic!] Minhag, according to the Redelheim [Rodelheim] prayer book.” This

Constitution [also] provided for salaried officers consisting of ‘Hazan, Schocath, [sic!] and Teacher in German and Hebrew. Preacher and Lecturer, if desired.’”

Samuel Weil was elected Chazzan in 1859 and served until 1869. An anonymous correspondent for the weekly newspaper the **Jewish Messenger**, founded in January, 1857 by Samuel M. Isaacs, wrote on January 24, 1862:

“There being at present no regular minister, a young man, named [Samuel] *Weil*, conducts the services. He has a pleasant voice, and his style of reading is not too pronounced. We observe he has introduced some changes in the *Minhag* -- whether they are conducive to increased decorum and devoutness, we cannot say. The portion of the Prophets is read in German, and certain parts of the liturgy are omitted. The prayer for the government [*Ha Noteyn Tshuah*] was likewise, by some oversight, forgotten. Strange to say, they still retain the selling of Mitzvahs [auctioning of the *aliyot*], which did not add, on our opinion, to the solemnity of the service. Otherwise, the congregants conducted themselves with marked decorum, and there was a pretty good attendance.”²

It is not clear to this writer what Weil hoped to accomplish with these “changes.” They certainly did not preserve the Orthodoxy of the synagogue, because the “Traditional practice [of the Washington Hebrew Congregation] soon gave way to religious reforms including the use of German and English. When the congregation added an organ to their service in 1869, some members left to form the orthodox Adas Israel Congregation.”³ Sadly, the Washington Hebrew Congregation had become a reform temple.

The Economic Status of the Jews

“A few Jewish merchants, attracted by the business prospects of Washington, settled in the early 1850’s. More came in the latter part of the decade, almost all recent arrivals from the German states and principalities.

“On the eve of the outbreak of the Civil War, Washington, including the prosperous port of Georgetown, had a population of 75,000.” All of this changed drastically after the outbreak of the war.

“Freight yards, hotels, restaurants, and barrooms carried on a rushing business. Soldiers were everywhere. The price of foodstuffs soared. The city enjoyed a new material prosperity as the war went on. Commissary and Quartermaster supplies poured into the city month after month. New warehouses went up and the Government bought, leased, or built offices, hospitals, and workshops for repair of military equipment. Twenty-five military hospitals came into existence in the Washington area.”

The Jewish population of the city also increased. The **Jewish Messenger** reported the following on January 24, 1862:

“The city of Washington necessarily attracts more attention at this time, than at any previous season. It is thronged with strangers, the hotels and boarding houses are full, and a fair proportion of the ‘old inhabitants’ find themselves dispossessed, and forced to put

up with rather confined quarters, in order to accommodate the additional residents of whom Washington boasts.

“The number of Israelites quartered at Washington and its vicinity (exclusive of those in the army) cannot fall short of two thousand. As an evidence of their presence, there are, at least, half a dozen *kosher* Restaurants, all of which appear to flourish to the satisfaction of their proprietors.⁴ At one of them in particular, about dinner hour, there were some forty guests seated at the same time, and on their departure, an equal number ready to take their places. Many are the commercial establishments, conducted under names familiar to a New Yorker. All departments of trade seem to be favored with a full representation from the metropolitan district.”⁵

There were also “a number of Jewish-owned or operated boarding houses and hotels. Isaac Beggardt [Biggardtl, Myer May, and Alois Kohn are the boarding house operators; while William Rothschild ran the Admiral House and William Hochherz the Clinton Hotel.

“The following advertisement appeared in the Occident on several occasions during the war period.

כשר

BOARDING HOUSE AT WASHINGTON, D. C.

No. 366 C Street, between 4-1/2 and 6th Streets

The subscriber takes this method of informing the public that he has lately taken the above establishment, formerly kept by Mr. J. Hildesheim, and will endeavor to do all in his power to render customers' stay agreeable while at his house, which is within a few minutes walk of the capitol, and in a pleasant part of the city.”

Conclusion

During the Civil War the Jewish community of Washington, D.C. was a small minority of the total population of the city – about one per cent. Its members were primarily from Germany and had arrived within fifteen years prior to the outbreak of the conflict. Virtually all of Washington's Jews at this time were in business. They shared the same hopes and beliefs toward the basic issues of slavery and the preservation of the Union as the population at large. The victories and defeats of the Union Army during the Civil War affected them just as much as their gentile neighbors and in similar ways.

¹ **The Swiss Treaty and the Washington Hebrew Congregation** by Jerry Klinger, <http://www.jewishmag.com/110mag/swissbill/swissbill.htm>

² <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/washdc.htm>

³ <http://www.jhsgw.org/exhibitions/online/goldberg/photographs/washington-hebrew-congregation>

⁴ It is of interest to note that a recent Internet search showed that there was only one kosher restaurant located in the District of Columbia today.

⁵ <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/washdc.htm>