

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part)

Early History of Jews of Chicago

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Introduction

“The name ‘Chicago’ is derived from a French rendering of the Native American word *shikaakwa*. The first known reference to the site of the current city of Chicago as ‘Checagou’ was by Robert de LaSalle around 1679 in a memoir. Henri Joutel, in his journal of 1688, noted that the wild garlic, called ‘chicagoua’, grew abundantly in the area.

“In the mid-18th century, the area was inhabited by a Native American tribe known as the Potawatomi, who had taken the place of the Miami and Sauk and Fox peoples. The first known non-indigenous permanent settler in Chicago was Jean Baptiste Point du Sable. Du Sable was of African and French descent and arrived in the 1780s. He is commonly known as the ‘Founder of Chicago.’

“In 1795, following the Northwest Indian War, an area that was to be part of Chicago was turned over to the United States for a military post by native tribes in accordance with the Treaty of Greenville. In 1803, the United States Army built Fort Dearborn, which was destroyed in 1812 in the Battle of Fort Dearborn and later rebuilt. The Ottawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi tribes had ceded additional land to the United States in the 1816 Treaty of St. Louis. The Potawatomi were forcibly removed from their land after the Treaty of Chicago in 1833.

“On August 12, 1833, the Town of Chicago was organized with a population of about 200. Within seven years it grew to more than 4,000 people. On June 15, 1835, the first public land sales commenced with Edmund Dick Taylor as U.S. receiver of public moneys. The City of Chicago was incorporated on Saturday, March 4, 1837 and for several decades was the fastest growing city in the world.

“A flourishing economy brought residents from rural communities and immigrants from abroad. Manufacturing and retail and finance sectors became dominant, influencing the American economy. The Chicago Board of Trade (established 1848) listed the first ever standardized ‘exchange traded’ forward contracts, which were called futures contracts.”¹

Jews Settle in Chicago

“According to the statements of the oldest Jewish inhabitants (of Chicago), the first Jew who made Chicago his home was J. Gottlieb, who arrived here in 1838. Very little is known about this first pioneer of the Chicago Jewish community. Prior to 1838 there were no Jews in the State of Illinois, at least, no records can be found of their presence in the State. In 1840 four more co-religionists arrived in Chicago, Isaac Ziegler, the brothers Benedict and Jacob Schubert, and Phillip Newburg.”²

Ziegler was for a number of years a peddler in the city and vicinity. He married some years after his arrival in Chicago. Benedict Schubert was also a bachelor when he came to Chicago, and he also married a few years after settling in Chicago. “He was the first Jew to establish a merchant-tailoring business in Chicago. He prospered, and became one of the leading men in his trade. The first brick house in the city was built for him on Lake Street, and he carried on business there for a number of years. Philip Newberg was the first Jewish tobacco-dealer. The first Jewish child born in Chicago was a son of Jacob Rosenberg, whose wife was Hannah Reese.

“About twenty German Jews arrived between 1840 and 1844, and the community was slowly augmented by incoming settlers up to 1849, in which year a strong tide of Jewish immigration set in, following the completion of the Galena and Chicago Railway to Elgin. Most of the early settlers were German Jews, principally from Bavaria and the Rhenish Palatinate.”³

In 1845 the first Jewish organization in Chicago was established under the name of the “Jewish Burial Ground Society.” Isaac Wormser was the president. The society purchased one acre of ground from the city for \$46 for a cemetery. “This was the first act by which the Jews of Chicago demonstrated their existence as a body corporate. This cemetery was located on the north side, east of the then city limits, along the shore of Lake Michigan, now within the confines of Lincoln Park. This first Jewish cemetery of Chicago had to be abandoned as a burial ground in 1857, the city having become meanwhile so extensive, that the cemetery was within the city limits.

“Religious services were held for the first time in the Jewish settlement of Chicago on the Day of Atonement, 1845. The temporary congregation met in a private room above a store on Wells street, now Fifth Avenue.

“As but a *minyan* (ten male adults, the requisite number for public worship) was present, the services had to be discontinued whenever one of the congregation left the room and the hazan and assembly waited until the absent member returned. The second public services were held on Yom Kippur of 1846, also in a private room above the dry goods store of Rosenfeld & Rosenberg, 155 Lake Street. Not many more worshippers were present at this service than at the first. The brothers Kohn brought a *Sepher Torah* with them from Germany, and this scroll of the law was used at both services.”⁴

Congregation Kehilath Anshe Mayriv [K.A.M.]

“In the spring of 1847 there came to Chicago an elderly Jewish lady of the name of Dila Kohn, nee Hirsch, with two of her sons and her daughter Clara. Tradition among the old Jewish settlers of Chicago ascribes to Mrs. Kohn the honor of having played an important part in the movement which was started in that year tending toward the formation of K. A. M.

“There was no shochet in the community. Mrs. Dila Kohn positively would eat no trepha, and she subsisted for a time on a vegetable diet, eating only bread, potatoes, eggs and the like. Her devoted sons would not permit this state of affairs to continue and began to agitate the organization of a congregation.”⁵

“In light of this (and the increasing Jewish population of the city), **Kehillat Anshe Ma’arab**, the first Jewish congregation in Chicago, was established on Nov. 3, 1847, when a constitution was adopted and signed by fourteen members. Morris L. Leopold, a young man of twenty-six, born in Laubheim, Württemberg, was elected president. The Jewish Burial-Ground Society turned over to the congregation all its property, including the cemetery, and dissolved. Kehillat Anshe Ma’arab held its first regular service in a private room on the second floor of a building on the southwest corner of Lake and Wells streets, and in 1849 leased a lot on Clark street, between Adams and Quincy streets (where the post-office now stands), on which it erected a frame synagogue.”⁶ This first Jewish house of worship in the State of Illinois was dedicated on Friday, June 13, 1851.

Before continuing, some comments about the name of this congregation are in order. In transcribing the Hebrew *Kehilath Anshe Maariv* somebody made the mistake of rendering it “Kehilath Anshe Mayriv” instead of “Kehilath Anshe Maarabh” meaning “Congregation of the Men of the West.” The charter was obtained for this misspelled English name, which remained the legal name of the Congregation. The synagogue was generally referred to as K.A.M.

Shortly after the establishment of the Congregation, Abraham Kohn, one of Mrs. Kohn’s sons, went to New York, and made the acquaintance of Rev. Ignatz Kunreuther (1810 – 1884). He recommended him to the Chicago congregation, and Mr. Kunreuther was elected its Rabbi, reader and shochet.

At the time the congregation was founded Minhag Ashkenaz was adopted as the ritual for the synagogue, and it was a strictly Orthodox shul. This is not at all surprising in light of the fact that most of the Jews who first settled in Chicago were from Germany. However, as was the case in most synagogues in America during the middle of the 19th Century, many congregants began to agitate for reforms. In light of this, Rev. Kunreuther severed his ties with the congregation in 1853 and retired to private life. Sadly, it did not take long after this for K.A.M. to become a reform temple.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago#Beginnings>

² **The Jews of Chicago** by H. Elliassof, *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society (1893 – 1961)*, 1903; 11, AJHS Journal page 117 and ff.

³ <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4320-chicago>

⁴ **The Jews of Chicago** by H. Elliassof

⁵ **History of Kehillath Anshe Maarabh (Congregation of the Men of the West)** by Dr. B. Felsenthal and Herman Elliassof, Chicago, 1897 pages 17-18.

⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago#Beginnings>