

Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part --)

The Early Jewish Settlement of Texas

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Introduction

In 1519 Alonso Álvarez de Pineda, Spanish explorer and cartographer, led an expedition into Texas with the goal of finding a passage between the Gulf of Mexico and Asia. He and his men were probably the first Europeans to see the land which became known as Texas. At various times between 1519 and 1848 all or parts of Texas were claimed by Spain, France, Mexico, the Republic of Texas and the United States.

Beginning in 1810 the people of Mexico rebelled against Spanish rule and started what became known as the Mexican War of Independence. This armed conflict ended in 1821 with Spain losing control of its North American territories. The new country of Mexico was formed from much of the land that had comprised New Spain - including Spanish Texas.

The history of the Jews who settled in Texas is both varied and exciting. Adventurers, colonizers, soldiers, businessmen, and physicians were among the early Jewish pioneers who came to Texas.

Jewish Settlement in Texas

In 1821 Stephen F. Austin (1793 – 1836) established the first legal settlement of 300 North American families (termed the Old 300) in Mexican owned Texas. Amongst this group was Samuel Isaacs – the first Jew to be recorded as settling in Texas. He was granted land located in Fort Bend County. Nothing more is known about him other than he served in the Texas army from 1836 to 1837,

The founding of Austin's colony marked the beginning of a wave of immigration from the United States to Texas, which at this time was not a part of the US. As many as 30,000 American immigrants had arrived by 1835. More followed throughout the rest of the 19th century, and some of these were, of course, Jews. We shall focus on a few of them. They are unusual not just because they contributed to the development of Texas, but also because they were observant Jews who did their utmost to maintain Yiddishkeit in an environment that was often not particularly conducive to religious observance.

The Seeligsons, Dyers, and Ostermans

The Seeligsons, Dyers, and Ostermans were meticulously observant in traditional religious practice. They did not consider it a deterrent to their absorption into the civic and political activity of the bustling port city. They formed the religious nucleus which created the first Jewish communal organization in the state [of Texas], the Galveston Jewish cemetery (The Occident, Vol. X, No. 7, October, 1852). Reacting to this event, **The Galveston News** of August 31, 1852, with an eye to the future, wrote: “But we anticipate the organization of a Jewish congregation and the addition of a synagogue to the number of our places of public worship, at no very distant day.”¹

Michael Seeligson

Michael Seeligson (1797–1867/1868) was born in Holland in 1797 to Sephardic Jewish parents, whose ancestors had fled to northern Europe from the Spanish Inquisition. He came to Galveston, Texas in 1838. The following year his wife Adelaide [nee Gottschalk, an aunt of the famous 19th century American composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk (1829 – 1869)] and his family joined him. Michael and two of his sons played a critical role in the movement to have the Republic of Texas annexed to the United States. Michael served as alderman of the city of Galveston in 1840 and 1848 and in 1853 he was elected the first Jewish mayor of the city. His friend Isaac Leeser (1806 – 1868) wrote him a letter congratulating him on his election to this office. In response, Seeligson wrote:

Galveston, June 19, 1853

“I accepted the office not for the sake of lucre, but merely to thwart the designs of a certain clique who, by the by, were preaching publicly the crusades against our nation [the Jews]. This is certainly evidence, if our people would only sustain their rights and privileges [sic] in this republican country, and demean themselves accordingly, they can be elevated to any office they aspire.”²

Michael was especially noted for his wisdom and kindness. These exceptional attributes must have played no small role in the willingness of the predominantly non-Jewish population of Galveston to elect an observant Jew to such a high office.

Leon and Isidore Dyer

Leon (1807 - 1883) and Isidore (1813 - 1888) Dyer were born in Dessau, Germany. Their parents, who moved to Baltimore while they were both relatively young, were instrumental in the founding of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation in 1830.

[Leon] Dyer was self-educated. In the early part of his career he worked in his father's beef-packing establishment (the first in America). As a young man he enjoyed great popularity with the citizens of Baltimore, and filled a number of minor public offices. When the great Baltimore bread riots broke out, he was

elected acting mayor, and through his intervention order was soon restored. While Dyer was engaged in business in New Orleans in 1836, Texas called for aid in her struggle for independence. Dyer was at that time quartermaster-general of the state militia of Louisiana. With several hundred citizens of New Orleans he embarked at once on a schooner bound for Galveston, arriving two days after the battle of San Jacinto. He received a commission as major in the Texas forces, signed by the first president, Burnett. The Louisiana contingent was assigned to the force of Gen. Thomas Jefferson Green, and saw active service clearing western Texas of bands of plundering Mexican troops. When Santa Anna was taken from Galveston to Washington, Major Dyer accompanied the guard, and Santa Anna's autograph letter thanking Dyer for courtesies received on the journey testifies to the general's gratitude.

In 1848 Colonel Dyer crossed the plains to California, and settled in San Francisco, where he founded a congregation - the first on the Pacific coast.³

Leon's younger brother Isidore moved to Galveston in 1840 and went into business. He was so successful that he was able to retire in 1861. However, given his business acumen, he was not allowed to enjoy his retirement for long. In 1866 he was elected president of the Galveston Union Marine and Fire Insurance and held this position until 1880. In 1856 the first organized Jewish religious services in Galveston were held in Isidore Dyer's home. He set aside a room in his house that served as a synagogue. Isidore was deeply involved in all aspects of the welfare of the Galveston community, both Jewish and non-Jewish. When he passed away he was universally mourned.

Rosanna and Joseph Osterman

Dutch born Joseph Osterman, a merchant and silversmith, married 16 year-old Rosanna Dyer (1809 – 1866) in Baltimore, MD on February 23, 1825. Rosanna was the sister of Leon and Isidore Dyer. After suffering some financial setbacks in Baltimore, Joseph, at Leon's urging, traveled to Galveston in 1837 and opened a mercantile store. Rosanna followed him the next year. Their business was soon trading with all parts of Texas and abroad. Indeed, they were so successful that by 1842 they were able to retire!

During the yellow fever epidemics that occurred between 1854 and 1866, Mrs. Osterman served as a volunteer nurse, and even used her home as a temporary hospital while caring for the sick and dying.

Shortly after the Civil War broke out in 1861, Federal military forces blockaded Galveston, and business came to a standstill. Although most of the city's residents left for the mainland, Rosanna – by then a childless widow – chose to stay in Galveston.

Many of the exigencies of the War were met by the humane efforts of Rosanna Dyer Osterman. The ample stores of the Osterman family were placed without reservation at the disposal of the Confederate and Union armies for the care of the sick and wounded. The famished hospitals were largely supplied by her liberality.

Her presence and her care gave hope and encouragement to the convalescent, or afforded the last consolation to those who were passing from the turmoils of time to the rest of eternity. She herself, throughout the blockade, unable to obtain kosher food, abstained from everything ritually forbidden.

At the end of the War this generous woman visited her relatives in Philadelphia and on her return met with a tragic death. On the morning of February 2, 1866, the steamer 'W. R. Carter' exploded not far from Vicksburg on the Mississippi. There were few survivors; the body of Mrs. Osterman was recovered for Jewish interment.

Some twenty-five institutions benefited by the provisions of her will, which was drawn up in the midst of the War. [Mrs. Osterman's estate amounted to over \$200,000, a huge sum in 1866.] The will provided that the city of Galveston organize a "Widows and Orphans Home" for the support of widows and orphans of all denominations. This particular bequest had a value in excess of \$100,000.⁴

The *Galveston News* paid her this tribute: "The history of Rosanna Osterman is more eloquently written in the untold charities that have been dispensed by her liberal hands than by any eulogy man can bestow. Her work made her distinguished for unselfish devotion to the suffering and the sick."

Rosanna Dyer Osterman unstintingly gave of herself to help others. She was the first major female Jewish philanthropist in America.

¹ **Trail Blazers of the Trans-Mississippi West**, American Jewish Archives Vol. 8, No.2, October 1956 pages 73 – 74.

² Ibid., page 74.

³ **The Jewish Encyclopedia**, Ktav Publishing House, 1906, Volume 5, page 23. This article is available at <http://tinyurl.com/29hpnan>

⁴ **Trail Blazers of the Trans-Mississippi West** page 76.