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## The Jews Of Washington During The Civil War

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*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 (available online at [www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm](http://www.ajhs.org/scholarship/adaje.cfm)).*

Washington, D.C. 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.”

### 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. There was one problem, however. 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, members of the Washington Hebrew Congregation feared 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.”

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 ....”

Samuel Weil was elected chazzan in 1859 and served until 1869. An anonymous correspondent for the weekly newspaper the Jewish Messenger 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 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.”

It is not clear 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.” The Washington Hebrew Congregation had become a Reform temple.

### **Economic Status of the Jews**

“A few Jewish merchants, attracted by the business prospects of Washington, settled in the early 1850s. 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 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. 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.”

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.”

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During the Civil War the Jewish community of Washington 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 concerning the 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 they did their gentile neighbors and in similar ways.

1. “The Swiss Treaty and the Washington Hebrew Congregation” by Jerry Klinger – [www.jewishmag.com/110mag/swissbill/swissbill.htm](http://www.jewishmag.com/110mag/swissbill/swissbill.htm)
2. [www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/washdc.htm](http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/washdc.htm)
3. [www.jhsgw.org/exhibitions/online/goldberg/photographs/washington-hebrew-congregation](http://www.jhsgw.org/exhibitions/online/goldberg/photographs/washington-hebrew-congregation)
4. [www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/washdc.htm](http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/washdc.htm)

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