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THE HISTORY OF THE JEWS OF MONTGOMERY.

BY RABBI ALFRED G. MOSES, *Mobile, Ala.*¹

The history of the Jews of Montgomery follows in its general lines almost a parallel course with the history of the Jews of Mobile, Ala., an account of which was presented by the author at the last annual meeting of the American Jewish Historical Society.² As was true of the latter, the history of the Montgomery Jews may be divided into a period of pre-organization and an epoch of organization and communal growth. Mobile, however, was a much older place of settlement than Montgomery, having been originally settled in 1701 by Louis de Bienville, had a considerable Colonial history and was over a century old when the present site of Montgomery was made the location of a fort by Lieut. Col. Benton of the United States Army, a commander under General Andrew Jackson who was engaged in the military occupation of Alabama after his victory at New Orleans over the British.³ This settlement took place in August, 1814. No Jews appeared in Montgomery proper until a much later date.

However, in what is now known as Montgomery County, of which Montgomery is the county-seat, a Jew by name of Abram Mordecai settled in 1785.⁴ He came from Pennsylvania as an Indian trader and established a trading post at Weathersford, two miles west of Line Creek and eighteen

¹For the early facts of which he is indebted to Mr. Leopold Young of Montgomery, Ala., who furnished him with a MSS. copy of a sketch of the first Jewish settlers of Montgomery.

²*Publications of American Jewish Historical Society*, 1904-5, Vol. XII.

³Cf. Hamilton's *Colonial Mobile*, p. 376.

⁴Pickett's *History of Alabama*, p. 469.

miles from the present site of Montgomery.⁸ Pickett in his history of Alabama refers to him as "an intelligent Jew who lived fifty years in the Creek Nation." He carried on an extensive trade with the Indians, "exchanging his goods for pinkroot, hickory-nut oil, and peltries of all kinds."⁹ Ball in his history on Clarke County states that his house was once burnt by Indians because of an intrigue with an Indian squaw.⁷ Mordecai believed that the Indians were originally Jews because in their green corn dances, he claims that he heard them utter in grateful tones, "Yavohoya, Yavohoya." Through his enterprise, the first cotton-gin in the State was constructed by two Jews, Lyon and Barrett of Georgia, "who brought their tools, gin-saws, and other material from that State on pack-horses."⁸ According to Leopold Young, Mordecai died in the 80's in Tallapoosa County, over a century old.⁹

The first Jew who settled in Montgomery City was Jacob Sacerdote, who kept a restaurant at the corner of Montgomery Street and Court Square.¹⁰ He was soon followed by Henry Isaac, Joseph Young, Isaiah Weil, Freedman R. Gans, and S. K. Gans. At the house of the former the first religious services were held. On November 17, 1846, a society, called *חברה מבקר חיל ים*, "Society for Relieving the Sick," was formed. The original members were Messrs. M. L. Gerson, L. Cellner, P. Kraus, G. Meyer, H. Lehman, J. Eberhardt, B. Kohn, J. Weil, M. Englander, J. Meyer, A. Englander, H. Weil.¹¹ This Society observed Rosh-ha-Shurah and Yom Kippur, and Jews living in the surrounding country came to Montgomery to attend the holiday services.

⁸ MSS. Sketch of Jewish History of Montgomery, by Leopold Young, p. 1. (Hereafter referred to as MSS. S.)

⁹ Pickett, History of Alabama, p. 469.

⁷ Ball: Clarke and its Surrounding, 1882, p. 430.

⁸ Pickett, History of Alabama.

⁹ MSS. S., p. 1.

¹⁰ MSS. S., p. 1.

¹¹ MSS. S., p. 1.

Unlike Mobile, Montgomery had practically no Sephardic or Portuguese-Jewish element preceding the incoming of German and Polish Jews as the character of the above-mentioned names indicates. The first Jewish settlers in Montgomery from Germany and Poland at once co-operated to form a Jewish religious union. On May 6, 1849, the chevra, alluded to, was enlarged into a regular congregation and called "Kahl Montgomery," or Temple Beth-Or." All the effects of the chevra including what is now part of the present cemetery was transferred to the new body. The first president was Isaiah Weil, and the number of members was about thirty. On the 12th of April, 1852, the congregation was legally incorporated and Joseph Weil elected president. The following also were members: Jacob Meyer, Jacob Abraham, S. Marx, Henry White, F. Benedick, Jacob Weil, Gabriel Meyer, H. Weil, Emanuel Lehman, Henry Lehman, Morris Heller, Meyer Uhlfelder, Joseph Young, Joseph Newman, M. L. Gerson, P. Kraus, M. Englander, and Jacob Strauss.¹²

No rabbi was employed, but several readers were engaged; a Mr. Marcuson in 1852, a Mr. Meyer in 1853, and a Mr. Hermann in 1858. In September, 1858, Rev. Joseph Blumenthal was employed as reader. In the same year Judah Touro, the great philanthropist of New Orleans left \$2000 to the congregation, which was set aside as the nucleus of a fund for the purpose of building a synagogue. In 1859, Mr. S. Neuman was chosen president. On March 8, 1862, after repeated efforts, a new synagogue was dedicated by the well-known Rabbi James K. Gutheim of New Orleans, who delivered a memorable sermon. The first reform was begun at the same time in the use of a choir and organ. Rev. J. Blumenthal continued to act as reader. In 1862, a school for imparting secular as well as religious instruction, such as was

¹² MSS. S., p. 2.

¹³ Golden Jubilee Souvenir, Kahl Montgomery, 1902. List of Charter Members.

founded later in Mobile, was organized. On September 23, 1863, James K. Gutheim was engaged as rabbi. However, both he and Rev. Blumenthal resigned in 1864, the former returning to his old congregation in New Orleans, where he remained until his death. In 1865, Rev. M. H. Meyers was elected as rabbi and superintendent of the school, but he resigned in 1865, and a Mr. Blumenthal was engaged as reader. He was succeeded in 1866 by Rev. G. L. Rosenberger, who acted as Chasan, Sebochet, and Teacher. He remained until 1869, and was followed by Rabbi E. B. M. Brown, who has held Jewish pulpits at Columbus, Ga., New York City, and elsewhere. Through the efforts of Mr. M. Strassburger, still living, my father, Adolph Moses, was brought over from Segnitz, Germany, where he was a teacher in a private school, and elected as the rabbi. He remained in Montgomery until 1872, when he was called to the pulpit of the Mobile congregation. His successor was Rabbi B. E. Jacobs. In 1872, Mr. David Weil was elected president, and served almost continuously until 1902 with fidelity and distinction. He is still living, one of the revered survivors of the early times. In 1876, Rabbi S. Hecht, now of Los Angeles, Cal., was elected rabbi. During his long incumbency of twelve years, he gave tone and solidity to Kahl Montgomery and brought it into touch with the progressive Judaism of to-day. He was especially active in religious instruction, and the Jewish literary spirit which is still active in Montgomery and fostered by several talented Jews and Jewesses of that city was given birth and impetus by his untiring efforts. A new cemetery was laid out in 1880. Rabbi Hecht resigned in 1888 to accept a call from Temple Emanuel of Milwaukee, Wis., and was succeeded by Rabbi E. K. Fisher of Quincy, Ill., who held the pulpit until 1892. Rabbi David Davidson, a professor at the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati, was chosen as rabbi. He remained until 1895 after a very effective service, and became the rabbi of Congregation Ahavath Chesed of New York City. Rabbi Israel Joseph of

Wilkesbarre, Pa., a graduate of the Hebrew Union College, was tendered the position, which he filled with ever-growing esteem and popularity until his untimely death in the prime of a promising manhood on October 30, 1896. He was buried with great honors in New York City. The vacancy was filled in 1897 by the election of the present incumbent, Rabbi A. J. Messing, Jr., of Peoria, Ill. He is a graduate of the Hebrew Union College and a son of Rabbi A. J. Messing, Sr., of Chicago, Ill. In 1902, a new Temple was dedicated with elaborate ceremonies. Only one charter member, Jacob Strauss, was still living.

The Jewish community of Montgomery numbers to-day almost one thousand souls, which is a considerable Jewish population in a city of its size. There are strong Jewish organizations, such as the B'nai B'rith, whose local lodges are among the most active in the country. The Jews of the city are prominent in commercial and professional affairs. There are very many Jewish lawyers and physicians. Julius Sternfeld of Montgomery is influential in Republican State politics. He holds the position of Assistant District Attorney and during the crusade against peonage acted as the special agent of the Administration in ferreting out and prosecuting such violations of the Federal Law. Philip Stern of Montgomery has held various posts in the regular army, and, in 1901, was a captain in the Twenty-ninth Regular Infantry, which served in the Philippine Islands.¹⁴ The new town of Sheffield was laid out in 1884 by a land company, among whose prime movers were two Jewish brothers, by name of Moses, from Montgomery.¹⁵ Captain Alfred Moses, who had been in the Confederate service, was the first manager of the company, and under his able administration the enterprise prospered.¹⁶

¹⁴ *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Article on Alabama, p. 315.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Judah P. Benjamin was a resident of Montgomery from 1862, when it was the first capital of the Confederacy. There he lived during his service as Attorney-General of the Provisional Government of the Confederacy, and later as Attorney-General under Jefferson Davis. He did not, however, affiliate socially or religiously with his co-religionists.¹⁷

Among the earliest Jewish settlers of Montgomery was Jacob Kohn, who arrived there in 1848 from Bavaria when there was scarcely a handful of Jews. In his native land he had learned the shoemaker's trade, which he at once began to ply in Montgomery. He met with great success and soon founded a shoe-house under the name of J. Kohn & Sons in 1849. The firm grew more and more in commercial prestige and influence. When the Civil War broke out in 1861, Jacob Kohn and his brother Alexander Kohn volunteered their services to the Confederacy. Both of them being skilled shoemakers, the Commissary Department, whose headquarters were then in Montgomery, concluded to manufacture shoes there, and Jacob Kohn was made the superintendent and foreman of the Confederate shoe factory, which was located on Talapoosa Street between Coosa and Commerce Streets. Here, thousands of pairs of boots and shoes were made for the Confederate army under his direction. He died honored and esteemed at a ripe old age in Montgomery in 1897.

This business is still maintained by Alfred A. Kohn and bears the distinction of being the oldest business house in the city of Montgomery of any character and the oldest shoe-house in the Southern States.¹⁸

The Montgomery Jewish community maintains a Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Society, founded in 1861; a United Hebrew Charities, organized in 1862; two B'nai B'rith lodges, and several minor organizations. In 1904, a magnificent club building, combined with all the features of a social house and a gymnasium, was erected.

¹⁷ *Jewish Encyclopedia*, Article on Alabama, p. 315.

¹⁸ For the foregoing the author is indebted to Alfred A. Kohn of New York City.