

Florida Jewish History Month January

Background Information

In October of 2003, Governor Jeb Bush signed a historic bill into law designating January of each year as Florida Jewish History Month. The legislation for Florida Jewish History Month was initiated at the Jewish Museum of Florida by, the Museum's Founding Executive Director and Chief Curator, Marcia Zerivitz. Ms. Zerivitz and State Senator Gwen Margolis worked closely with legislators to translate the Museum's mission into a statewide observance. It seemed appropriate to honor Jewish contributions to the State, as sixteen percent, over 850,000 people of the American Jewish community lives in Florida.

Since 1763, when the first Jews settled in Pensacola immediately after the Treaty of Paris ceded Florida to Great Britain from Spain, Jews had come to Florida to escape persecution, for economic opportunity, to join family members already here, for the climate and lifestyle, for their health and to retire. It is a common belief that Florida Jewish history began after World War II, but in actuality, the history of Floridian Jews begins much earlier. The largest number of Jews settled in Florida after World War II, but the Jewish community in Florida reaches much further into the history of this State than simply the last half-century. Jews have actively participated in shaping the destiny of Florida since its inception, but until research of the 1980s, most of the facts were little known. One such fact is that David Levy Yulee, a Jewish pioneer, brought Florida into statehood in 1845, served as its first U.S. senator and was the first person of Jewish ancestry to serve in the U.S. Congress.

Floridian Jews have contributed greatly to the development of the entire state, but in recent history much of the Jewish community's involvement has been primarily within southeast Florida. The earliest known permanent Jewish settler in Miami was Isidor Cohen, a signatory of the city's charter. He helped found many civic organizations, as well as Jewish organizations. The heartbreak of the Holocaust came close to home for the Jews of Miami Beach, who experienced a feeling of helplessness when the *S.S. St. Louis*, a ship filled with Jews fleeing Hitler and Nazism, was denied permission to anchor there in June 1939. The American government of the time refused to allow the *St. Louis* to land its human cargo on the shores of south Florida. The steamer anchored for two hours within sight of Miami Beach.

The Jewish populace of Miami has worked hard to help develop their community. Today, Miami is the nation's ninth largest Jewish community and continues to grow in population and cohesive strength. Palm Beach County is host to Florida's largest Jewish population in the state, Broward County the second largest and Miami - Dade is third in number.

Throughout the history of the State, and like other groups, Jewish people have actively participated in shaping the destiny and direction of Florida at its roots. In 250 years, the Jewish community of Florida has left their indelible footprints across the entire State. Floridian Jews have served in every U.S. war, and have been prominent in the cattle, citrus, tomato and tobacco industries, to name a few. Diverse cultures have enriched the state of Florida since its earliest days and Florida's Jewish communities have become an integral part of the state and its history. Jewish History Month is a time to learn about the rich tapestry of Jewish life here. Since 1763, Jews have been involved in enhancing the lives and dreams of *all* Floridians. Florida Jewish History Month celebrates these accomplishments.

Florida Jewish History Month has been so successful since its establishment that it inspired the legislation for Jewish American Heritage Month, which is observed in May with a Proclamation signed by President George W. Bush in April 2006. The Proclamation states that “The faith and hard work of Jewish Americans have played an integral role in shaping the cultural fabric of America. During Jewish American Heritage Month, we celebrate the vital contributions of Jewish Americans to our Nation. Throughout our history, Jewish Americans have contributed to the strength of our country and the preservation of our values. The talent and imagination of these citizens have helped our Nation prosper.”

TIMELINE AND WHO’S WHO

FLORIDA STATE’S JEWISH PIONEERS AND THEIR HISTORY

Note: The list of Jewish pioneers who contributed to Florida’s history is vast. “The contributions made by Jews to the development of Florida are in every sector: retail and wholesale, real estate and development, military and science, education and health, law and medicine, citrus and tobacco, cattle and poultry, politics and government, insurance and banking, as well as the arts.” (*Jewish Life in America*, Mosaic, Inc. 1991) The following is just a sampling of those dedicated visionaries who inspired generations to settle in what has become known as the Sunshine State.

In Chronological Order from arrival in Florida or date of Major Contribution (Dates are approximate)

1763 England acquires Florida. It divides the territory into two colonies: East and West Florida. **Joseph D. Palacios, Alexander Solomons** and **Samuel Israel** were the first Jews to settle in Pensacola in 1763.

Samuel Israel (1763) was one of three documented Jews to arrive in Pensacola, Florida. Israel was a merchant who supplied wood and other goods to the British and traded with Jews in Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia.

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1769 **Isaac Monsanto** was a businessman who sold family slaves to finance his trip to Pensacola from New Orleans. The Spanish governor expelled Monsanto, saying, “They are [sic] are to leave this province before the end of the next month the Jew Monsanto, for the reason that [he is] undesirable on account of the nature of [his] business and of the religion

[he] profess[es].” He outfitted the British Commander of West Florida for an expedition up the Mississippi River.

- 1793** **Isaac Mendes** migrated to West Florida from Jamaica and then moved to Pensacola in 1767. He sold goods for use as “Indian presents” to West Florida Governor Johnstone in 1763.
- 1821** **Moses Elias Levy** moved to Florida in 1821 and brought sugar cane and fruit trees for his plantations. Levy was a St. Thomas lumber merchant, and Cuban businessman who purchased over 50,000 acres in Micanopy in what is now St. Johns, Volusia and Alachua Counties. His family had migrated to Morocco following the Spanish Inquisition where the family name was translated to Ibn Yulee, and in Gibraltar it was changed to Levy. In 1822 he builds “Pilgrimage Plantation,” a refuge for Jews that lasted until 1835. Levy was an early advocate for the abolition of slavery and was a proponent for free education in Florida. He publishes a plan to end slavery and also serves as Florida’s first Education Commissioner.
- Samuel Myers** settles in Pensacola, becomes alderman and an officer in the military. In 1822, he and his wife, Louisa, have Virginia, the first-known Jewish child born in Florida.
- 1835** **Colonel Leon Dyer** served in the Florida Indian Wars (1835-1842, 1855-1858).
- Camden de Leon, David**, an army doctor, served in the Florida Indian Wars (1835-1842, 1855-1858).
- Samuel Noah** was one of the first graduates of West Point, and served in the Florida Indian Wars (1835-1842, 1855-1858).
- 1836** **Abraham C. Myers**, a West Point graduate, was an Army Quartermaster and hero during the Indian Wars. His father-in-law, General David E. Twiggs, the fort commander, named Ft. Myers for him.
- 1837** **Raphael Jacob Moses** opened a store in Tallahassee. He later became a lawyer and practiced in Apalachicola. He was chosen as a delegate from Florida to the 1847 Democratic National Convention.
- 1839** **Emanuel Judah** was an actor who built a theatre in Apalachicola.
- 1841** **David Levy Yulee**, the younger son of Moses Elias Levy, became a lawyer and was instrumental in helping Florida become the twenty-seventh state. He helped write Florida’s Constitution in 1841. Yulee was the first known Jew to serve in the United States Senate (1845-1851; 1855-1861). He represented the views of the Southern agricultural plantation system, first against the Seminole Indians and later against the Union. He was instrumental in helping to build a railroad from Fernandina to Cedar Key, the first to cross the state from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic Ocean. In 1853, he organized the Florida Railroad

Company. He and his friends developed an intrastate telegraph line and a fast-mail ship route from Cedar Key to Havana. Yulee City (Nassau County) and Levy County, honor his family's name.

- 1850** **Morris Dzialynski** reached Jacksonville from Prussia along with his father and eight siblings. He opened a store in Bartow with his brother-in-law, Jacob R. Cohen. Later he opened general stores in Fort Meade (1876) and in Tampa (1879). Dzialynski also established a hotel in Fort Meade, invested in citrus groves, and exported alligator skins. This is the longest-continuing Jewish family in Florida. He later served as the mayor of Jacksonville from 1881-1883.
- 1857** The first Jewish cemetery in Florida is established in Jacksonville. The first-known Jewish boy is born in Florida, **George Dzialynski**.
- 1865** **Judah P. Benjamin** from Louisiana serves as Attorney General, Secretary of State and Secretary of War for the Confederacy (1861-1865). At the end of the Civil War, he escapes from the Union Army by hiding in the Gamble mansion (Manatee County).
- Robert Williams** moved to Tallahassee and became a cotton planter, and was active in civic affairs. Often he led prayers on Jewish holidays and is remembered for installing the first street lights in Tallahassee.
- 1867** **Jacob Raphael Cohen** arrived in Jacksonville from Savannah, opened stores throughout Florida in the 1860's and settled in Orlando. Cohen helped write the Orlando City Charter in 1875 and was elected first alderman. He served as a delegate to the Democratic National Convention.
- 1869** **Samuel Fleishman** defended former slaves as free men. The Ku Klux Klan demanded he leave Marianna.
- 1878** Temple Beth El (Pensacola), the oldest congregation in the State, is founded.
- 1879** **Henry Brash** elected Mayor of Marianna, the first-known of more than 150 Jewish mayors in Florida. He served three terms as mayor of Marianna.
- 1882** The Okeechobee Land and Development Company adopts a plan to save Jews in Russia. The Company starts an agricultural colony above the Everglades.
- 1883** **Morris Benjamin**, along with Saul Benjamin, Israel Brown, and William Fox, established an ice factory, using water from Howard Springs.
- 1884** **Joseph Wolfson** was shipwrecked off the coast of Key West on a ship from Romania. He founded a small Jewish community and sent for the rest of his family in Romania to join him.

Simon Benjamin founded the East Florida Ice Manufacturing Company, the first ice-making plant in Florida. In 1892, he and his brother Solomon formed the Silver Springs and Ocala Gulf Railroad.

1885 **Abraham Wolkowsky** arrived in Key West from Romania. He began as a peddler but soon opened a clothing store, a change that may have resulted from the anti-peddler tax established in Key West.

Philip Walter served, as a tax collector in Jacksonville, was chief supervisor of elections and clerk of the United States Court of Florida. In 1885, he represented Duval County in the Florida Constitutional Convention.

1886 **Charles and Hannah Peyser** began manufacturing El Tropico cigars.

1888 **Herman Glogowski** (1888-1892) served as mayor in Tampa.

1890 **Dr. Louis Oppenheimer** of Bartow establishes the local school system.

Michael Davis served as mayor of DeLand.

1895 Key West Jews raise funds for Cuban revolutionaries fighting for independence from Spain.

1896 The first permanent Jewish settlers arrive in the Miami area. **Isadore Cohen** is considered the first permanent Jewish settler in Miami. By 1900, he was one of only two remaining Jewish merchants in Miami. Considered one of the "great pioneers," Cohen was one of the first signers of the charter to incorporate Miami and was one of the organizers of the Miami Board of Trade, which became the Chamber of Commerce. He and his wife Ida began many philanthropic organizations. In 1921, Cohen was one of the city's 15-member board that wrote the Miami City Charter.

1910 **Henry Seitlin** escaped from Russia and came to Florida. In 1912, he opened the Boston Shoe Store in Miami. The Miami community celebrated its first Jewish wedding when his sister Rose married Max Lehrman of Homestead in 1913.

1912 **Saul Snyder**. By the 1950s he owned 5,000 head of cattle and was the founder of the Florida Cattlemen's Association in 1934. A Russian immigrant, Snyder settled in St. Augustine.

1913 **P.G. Blanck** established a popular department store in downtown Miami, near Burdines.

Alvin Cassel. His family, in partnership with Daniel Cromer, opened a department store in what is now downtown Miami in 1913. In 1926, they opened the most modern and innovative department store which contained many modern conveniences, including an escalator and a

cooling system. Native-Americans visited the store to buy sewing items. He was the co-founder of the Broad and Cassel law firm and one of Miami's earliest native residents.

Joe Weiss, with his wife Jennie, established a restaurant in Miami Beach which ultimately became Joe's Famous Stone Crab Restaurant.

1920 **Louis Seitlin** came to Florida from Russia in 1920. When his wife died, her death inspired Miami's Jewish community to establish their own congregation and cemetery.

Max and Jennie Cypen moved to St. Petersburg and established a meat-producing farm.

Nathan Stone. When he and his family were denied rooms at the Roney Plaza, he built the Blackstone Hotel on Miami Beach. This was the first hotel to allow Jewish and Black guests.

1923 **David Bilgore** moved to Clearwater to establish groves and open a packing house and cannery.

1925 **Mitchell Wolfson** came to Miami from Key West in the 1920's. Wolfson established the Wometco Theater in 1925, and expanded it from one theater to a chain of theaters. He created the Seaquarium, and began WTVJ, Miami's first television station. He became the first Jewish mayor of Miami Beach in 1943.

1927 **Simon Rosin** built the Arcadia Post Office.

Abrum O. Kanner represented Martin County as a representative and then as a senator (1936-1941) in the Florida Legislature and later as a judge.

1933 **David Sholtz** begins his term as Governor of Florida (1933-1936).

1936 **Max Hutkin**. was the son of Polish immigrants, and was often referred to as Mr. Boca Raton for his many civic contributions. He was the first chair of Boca Raton's Community Relations Board and founded the Chamber of Commerce there.

1941 **Admiral Ellis N. Zacharias**, of Jacksonville, Chief of Naval Intelligence, breaks the Japanese code. This leads to the U.S. victory in the Pacific.

1943 **Mitchell Wolfson** serves as Mayor of Miami Beach, the first of 15 Jewish mayors in that city.

1949 **Max Orvitz**. Together with area businessmen, founded Mount Sinai Hospital when Jewish doctors returning from the war were denied staff privileges at Miami area hospitals. Mt. Sinai also became the first hospital in Miami to allow African-American physicians to practice medicine.

- 1951** **Ruth Greenfield** opened the first integrated school for the cultural arts in Miami.
- 1953** **Abe Aronovitz** serves as Mayor of Miami, the only Jew to serve in this office.
- 1954** **Morris Lapidus** was the architect for the famed Fontainebleau Hotel, the Eden Roc Hotel, and Lincoln Road Mall.
- Ben Novak** built the Fontainebleau Hotel.
- 1968** **Marshall Warren Nirenberg** of Orlando receives the Nobel Prize in Medicine and Physiology for deciphering the genetic code.
- 1973** **Harry Kaplan**, a resident of Melbourne, contributed to the development of the astronauts' space suits and back-packs.
- 1974** **Richard Stone** begins his term as a U.S. Senator (1974-1980), the second Florida Jew to hold this office.
- 1975** **Arthur England** begins his term as Justice on Florida's Supreme Court (1975-1981). He becomes Chief Justice in 1978.
- 1981** **Raymond Ehrlich** begins his term on Florida's Supreme Court (1981-1991). He becomes Chief Justice in 1988. More than 250 Jews have served as judges in Florida.
- 1987** **Gerald Kogan** begins his term as Justice on Florida's Supreme Court (1987-1998). He becomes Chief Justice in 1996.
- 1990** "MOSAIC: Jewish Life in Florida," a traveling exhibit, begins its tour to 13 cities.
- Gwen Margolis** becomes the first female Florida Senate President.
- 1995** Jewish Museum of Florida opens.
- 1997** **Barbara Pariente** becomes the second woman appointed to the Florida Supreme Court. In 2004 she becomes Chief Justice.
- 2003** Governor Jeb Bush signs a Bill designating each January as Florida Jewish History Month.
- The Honorable Federal Magistrate, **Judge Ted Klein**, was appointed from Miami, Florida, as the first child survivor of the Holocaust to serve on the Federal bench.
- 2004** **Debbie Wasserman Schultz** is elected to the U.S. Congress, the first Jewish woman to represent Florida.

2006

President George Bush signs a Proclamation designating each May as Jewish American Heritage Month to honor contributions by Jewish Americans to our nation. The Jewish Museum of Florida was the birthplace of this legislation, with the effort led by Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz.

Timeline and Who's Who information provided with permission and courtesy of the following:

Jewish Museum of Florida, with much appreciation to Marcia Zerivitz, Executive Director, Miami Beach, Florida

Jerry Levine, Producer "Generations in the Sun" Film and Film Guide written by Dr. Miriam Klein Kassenoff and Dr. Anita Meyer Meinbach, 2003

Florida Jewish Heritage Trail (an outgrowth of MOSAIC), published by the Florida Department of State, Division of Historical Resources, 2000

South Florida Jewish Museum's publication, Jewish Life in Florida, published by Mosaic, Inc., 1991

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