

10-1-1975

## In Retrospect: One Hundred Years of Reform Judaism in Huntsville

Doris Kirshtein

Marsha Kass Marks

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review>



Part of the [History of Art, Architecture, and Archaeology Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Kirshtein, Doris and Marks, Marsha Kass (1975) "In Retrospect: One Hundred Years of Reform Judaism in Huntsville," *Huntsville Historical Review*. Vol. 5: No. 4, Article 3.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol5/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Huntsville Historical Review by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

IN RETROSPECT: ONE HUNDRED YEARS  
OF REFORM JUDAISM IN HUNTSVILLE

by Mrs. Doris Kirshtein  
and Marsha Kass Marks

Huntsville is the second oldest city in Alabama as well as the oldest English settlement in the state. The first permanent settlers arrived before 1810 and Huntsville was incorporated in 1811. Jews had already been in the state for some 26 years. The first, Abraham Mordecai, was a native of Pennsylvania. Like most to follow, he was an itinerant trader. Later he received permission of Creek chiefs and white officials to establish a cotton gin on William Weatherford's race track on the Alabama<sup>1</sup> or Tallapoosa<sup>2</sup> River near Coosada. Mordecai purchased Indian cotton in small quantities, ginned it and transported it to Augusta, Georgia, on pack horses.

Jewish people began to arrive in Huntsville possibly in the 1840's and Jewish marriages occurred here at least as early as 1855. These first pioneers were primarily merchants and cotton factors. They began to prosper very late in the ante-bellum period, some beginning to acquire important real estate in Huntsville and the surrounding area in 1860.<sup>3</sup> Some owned slaves and there are records of sales transactions involving slaves before the Civil War, the papers of which are still in the hands of present members of the congregation.

The first known Jews in Huntsville were Robert Herstein and Morris Berstein; both were listed in the 1859 Huntsville City Directory. Herstein was listed as a dealer in "gents' ready-made clothing, furnishing goods, etc., on Eustis and Franklin"; evidently he did not own property, for he boarded with William Fleming on the north side of Holmes Avenue opposite Lincoln Street. Bernstein was listed as a dealer in "watches, jewelry, etc. on the south side of Eustis between Franklin and Green."<sup>4</sup> Morris was married on July 5, 1855 to Jenetta or Henrietta Newman. This is the first recorded marriage

of a Jewish couple in Huntsville. Evidently this was the only Jewish marriage before the Civil War.

During the Civil War the Jewish population generally supported the Confederacy and at least one member served with the Confederate military forces during the conflict.

After the war a number of Jews moved to Huntsville from Cincinnati, Ohio. Earlier they had emigrated to the United States from Central European states, principally the Germanies. In the 1870's steps were taken to form a congregation. At a meeting in the Masonic Hall on September 10, 1876, eighteen men formed "B'nai Sholum" congregation. In this group was Bernhardt W. Wise, born in 1811 in Bavaria, who had emigrated to Cincinnati, Ohio in 1832 and came to Huntsville in 1865. Wise's sons David, Meyer B., Isaac H., and Abe W. were also in the group of founders. Other founders of the congregation were Joseph Klaus, J. Weil, Robert Herstein, Daniel Shiffman, A. Newman, Seimon Katz, Max Landauer, Isador Weil, Philip Schwartz, S. Schaumack, Isaac Shiffman, Isaac Adler, A. Adler, and H. Wind.<sup>5</sup> At this time there were approximately 230,000 Israelites and 270 congregations in the United States.

The Wise family arrived from Cincinnati, Ohio in 1865. Bernhardt Wise, the head of this family, came to the United States and opened a business in Cincinnati. In 1865, he opened his store in Huntsville. As a successful merchant, he was also a major force in the organization of Jewish community. He served as the first (1876-1879) and the fourth (1803-1892) president of the congregation; he was a charter member of the Bsora Lodge of Bnai Brith which was founded in 1875 and he also served the city of Huntsville on the City Council.

Wise's eldest son, David, came to Huntsville with the family and eventually aided his father in founding the synagogue. He is listed in the minutes as the congregation's first secretary. He was also the director of the Huntsville Building and Loan Company. Meyer B. Wise, another son, also came to Huntsville in 1865 and later aided in the founding of the synagogue. He, like his father, served on the Huntsville City Council, for a total of six terms. Isaac A. Wise, a third son of

Kirshtein and Marks: In Retrospect: One Hundred Years of Reform Judaism in Huntsville  
Bernhardt Wise, came to Huntsville in 1865. He is recorded as having been on the original board of directors of the Huntsville cotton mill, which was the first cotton factory in Huntsville (around 1880). Abe Wise, a fourth son, also helped in the founding of the synagogue.

Phillip Wind, a son of Isadore Wind, reported in an interview concerning his family that after a treacherous journey through Europe, from Hungary, his father arrived in New York City. He came via Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, and Nashville, Tennessee to Huntsville about 1888. This second founding family was active in the Jewish Community and Isadore himself was major organizer of the Huntsville Branch of the American Red Cross.

The Constitution, submitted at the founding meeting, contained the laws and standing rules similar to those of Congregation B'ne Yeshurn (B'ne Jeshurn) of Cincinnati, which was served by Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise.<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to keep the Jewish community together it was decided that any member marrying beyond the pale of the Jewish Religion was to forfeit his membership in the Congregation.<sup>7</sup> Dues were set at \$1.00 for every male head of a family and \$.50 for a single male, both on a quarterly basis.<sup>8</sup> Financial stability was also provided for in the Constitution, for if a member became three months delinquent in his dues he was suspended, then if he became six months in arrears, he could be expelled, with ten days prior written notice to be given.<sup>9</sup> The mode of worship was to be in accordance with Wise's radical prayer book *Minha-Amerika* (written in Hebrew and German). The membership set up Finance, School and Choir Committees. The religious functions of the Hazzan<sup>10</sup> (whose title was later changed to Rabbi)<sup>11</sup> and a Shamas<sup>12</sup> were performed by members of the congregation. The Rabbi performed all the duties of a Hazzan, conducted regular and special services, performed funerals, led the Sunday School and instructed the scholars. Another gentleman trained the choir and instructed in liturgy.

It is possible that Divine Services had previously

been held at the Opera House, but for the High Holy Days of 1876 they were conducted in the newly-refurbished room rented at the Masonic Hall. An organ was purchased, a mixed and non-Jewish choir hired. There was mixed seating, (males and females sitting together) and hats were worn "with due respect to the service."

In June 1877 a motion was approved to apply to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC)<sup>13</sup> for membership. However, at various times in the future the Congregation was forced to withdraw from the organization due to lack of funding.

It was necessary to restrict Temple admittance to contributing members in order to compel unaffiliated residents of the community to join. They were charged \$25 a visit or \$5.00 a family or \$3.00 for a single person during High Holy Days, although out-of-town visitors were welcome. The Temple also controlled and maintained the Jewish Section of the cemetery, formed soon after the establishment of the Temple. A fee was required for burial of Jewish non-members in this section.

The Hebrew Ladies Aid Society,<sup>14</sup> formed soon after the establishment of the Temple, was the bulwark of the Congregation and was called upon and volunteered to assist on numerous occasions. They raised funds and held social functions, sometimes inviting the Huntsville City community.

After the death of a faithful lay-leader, the Congregation in 1890 decided for the first time to obtain the services of a full-time Rabbi and advertised in Wise's publication, The American Israelite. The advertisement called for a Rabbi who must speak English fluently. Salary was set at \$1,000.00 annually, with traveling expenses paid only to the successful candidate. A student Rabbi conducted services during the Holidays in 1890 and an older Rabbi served in 1891. On November 23, 1892, the Congregation secured the services of its first ordained religious leader, Rabbi A.M. Bloch, whose contract was terminated by a dissatisfied congregation before the year had passed. Rabbi I.E. Wagenheim, who assumed the pulpit in 1894 and remained until 1897,

Kirshstein and Marks: In Retrospect: One Hundred Years of Reform Judaism in Huntsville provided firm and progressive leadership. He was the first in a series of seven Rabbis who remained from one to three years and then moved to larger congregations. In February, 1898, the Union Prayer book, which had been published in 1894, was adopted.

Perhaps the longest forward steps of the Congregation occurred when, in May 1, 1898, land was purchased at the corner of Lincoln and Clinton Streets for \$1,500. A building committee contracted with William Meyers of New York to construct a House of Worship for \$16,000. The architectural design is similar to that used in the construction of Central Presbyterian Church and five other structures in the area. The building was dedicated on November 26, 1899 with a reception; according to the Huntsville Weekly Democrat "a large congregation, representing every denomination, was present ... Rabbi Nathan Michnic delivered a fine sermon...." Later there was an auction for the choice of pews. Confirmation services had been held before the completion of the building.

There had been a recurring problem in obtaining and maintaining a Rabbi, and so in May, 1913, the Congregation decided to use lay readers instead of a full-time Rabbi, but to assume a Rabbi's expense in case of a death. During the illness of one of the Rabbis, in 1905, Reverend Claybrook of the Episcopal Church offered his services to the Congregation on Friday nights. The offer was accepted.

Sidewalks were constructed in 1922, and in 1923 the Jewish part of the cemetery was extended. The Congregation had the normal financial worries of periodic repairs and maintenance of the Temple building. As hard times began to make themselves felt in Huntsville, during the depression, the Temple was hit by a wave of dues reductions among the members of the Congregation. In 1935, the Rabbi acquired for the High Holidays was paid by subscription.

World War II marked the revitalization of this country and especially that of Huntsville. Redstone Arsenal was developed from a combination of two United States Army arsenals that were established here in 1941 for the

production of chemicals and explosives. At the peak of production during World War II, approximately 20,000 people were employed. In 1948, Redstone Arsenal was designated the center of research and development activities for rocketry. The George C. Marshall Space Flight Center officially began operations in mid-1960. In 1958, it had been decided to transfer aeronautical and science activities from the Army to NASA, which was created the same year.

The vitally important space and defense activities naturally attracted private contractors and Huntsville quickly became a major city in Alabama. The Jewish population of Huntsville also was enlarged, especially as scientists, engineers and other professional people were attracted to the city. Many of these new arrivals joined the congregation and the Religious School enrollment increased to the point where more classrooms were required. In June, 1956, a successful move was made to buy the Carlisle Davis House, located adjacent to the Temple, for \$18,500. The Temple Sisterhood held Holland bulb sales, rummage sales and numerous card parties and dinners to help pay off the mortgage on this property.

Student Rabbis were engaged to conduct High Holiday Services from 1948 through 1952. Student Rabbis were employed on a bi-weekly basis from 1953 until August 1963. At this time Rabbi Sherman Stein became the first full-time Rabbi since 1913. The congregation purchased a house for the Rabbi for the first time in the history of the congregation. He served through August, 1966, after which Rabbi Abraham Feinstein of Chattanooga served for the High Holidays during that year and commuted to Huntsville on a weekly basis to serve the needs of the Temple. Rabbi Feinstein retired in June, 1969, and Rabbi Michael Eisenstat of New York City was elected. Rabbi Charles Emanuel of New York City became the present Rabbi in 1973.

The congregation became so large that it was necessary to enlarge the existing Temple facilities. The Davis home was demolished and in 1967 the Educational Building was begun. It was completed in 1968 at a cost of \$100,000.





In 1975, renovation of the sanctuary was undertaken and completed. The congregation is extremely proud of its "new" house of worship and is particularly grateful that this accomplishment was completed in time for its centennial celebration.

Almost from the beginning of the congregation its young people have served it well. Additional service groups and ceremonies were instituted after World War II to serve the expanding needs of the Temple. Although the first Confirmation Class was held in 1897, the first Bar Mitzvah<sup>15</sup> was held in 1958 and Bat Mitzvahs<sup>16</sup> approximately ten years later.

The historic significance of the Temple was recognized on August 1, 1977, when the Alabama Historical Commission informed the Congregation that the Temple had been recognized as a major landmark in Alabama by its being added to the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage.

#### SISTERHOOD

The Sisterhood of Temple B'nai Sholom has been a strong arm of the Temple from its very inception. It began as a small, informal group and has grown over the years to become a highly organized and valuable auxiliary of the Temple.

Although the early beginnings are vague, old Temple Minutes reveal that the ladies of the Temple volunteered their efforts willingly without being asked, and later, as a group, anticipated needs. From the very beginning, they found a need to sew for the congregation -- a curtain or a Torah cover. They donated a "gas lighter" -- a coal scuttle -- whatever was necessary at the time. Those were the years, beginning in July, 1976, when the congregation set up a room at the Masonic Lodge.

The ladies were also very community-minded, even in those days. They cared for the poor by sewing clothing and preparing soup. They even made shrouds.

In 1879, the organization was known as the Hebrew Ladies Aid Society. At this time, it was recorded that a black stand cover and curtain were made for the congregation. The Minutes mention a motion was made that

the ladies be thanked and appreciation be published in the American Israelite and the Jewish South.<sup>17</sup> "The thanks" was approved by the 100% male board, but its publication was denied as the cost was deemed excessive.

The following year the ladies were requested to "fix up" the schule (temple) with the congregation paying half the expense. This same year the ladies were asked to organize a choir.

In 1885, the Hebrew Ladies Aid Society gave a charitable Ball at the Huntsville Hotel. Fifty dollars of the proceeds from this affair was given to the Temple toward the purchase of carpeting, furnishings and painting.

In 1895, the Temple Board instructed the ladies to form a Sunday School Board consisting of five women. The Ladies Aid Society rejected the proposal -- so five women were appointed by the Congregation.

When plans were formed for the building of the Temple, the group subscribed \$125. Most of the stained glass windows in this building were donated by women -- but on an individual basis -- as most of them were young widows and these were memorials. Incidentally, the average cost was about \$75 each. They are irreplaceable today.

The ladies worked with the choir, for the Denver-Jewish Hospital, cleaned the Temple, encouraged attendance at services, taught Sunday School, paid for repairs, and they continue to do the same things today, one century later.

As time marched on, the Hebrew Ladies Aid Society became known as the Ladies Aid Society, and later as as Temple Sisterhood. Mrs. Isadore Wind was the first president on record, and she served in that capacity for many years.

The first "real" organization was established when the ladies became affiliated with the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods. This occurred in the 1930's. Sisterhood then became very organized, and raised funds through card parties, suppers and sales. Various funds were established for contributions and the Sisterhood actively supported community projects, donating to



services such as the Community Chest, Red Cross, Union of American Congregations, Hebrew Union College, and United Jewish Appeal, and later on supplied funds and personnel for work with the blind.

In recent years, the ladies of the Temple have worked many hours with Holland bulb sales and rummage sales (mainly the selling of used clothing) through the years to assist in raising funds for the Temple. Profits from these two sales were the source of funds for the purchase of the adjoining lot (and house) on which the Educational Annex was constructed. When the old house was replaced by the Educational Building, the Sisterhood equipped the kitchen. Ground-work for the recent sanctuary renovation was begun by the Sisterhood, and in 1976 the renovation was completed. Currently, the Sisterhood maintains four projects almost entirely by contributions: service to the blind; building or memorial fund; birthday, anniversary and recovery fund; and Temple library fund.

#### BROTHERHOOD

The Brotherhood was formed in 1962 for social, cultural and religious purposes. It is the belief of this organization that Jewish men become better men through their attaining a greater knowledge of Judaism and by increased participation in Temple and Brotherhood functions. The Brotherhood also, through the Jewish Chautauqua Society, attempts to create better understanding and appreciation of Jews and Judaism in the area through education and other means of communication between Jews and the non-Jew.



FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Lucile Griffin, Alabama A Documentary History to 1900 (University, 1968), p. 190.

<sup>2</sup>Charles G. Summersell, Alabama History for Schools (Birmingham, 1971), pp. 122 & 618.

<sup>3</sup>Deed record books, Madison County, CC: 598, QD:192, QQ139.

<sup>4</sup>Huntsville City Directory 1859, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas McAdory Owen, History of Alabama, and Directory of Alabama Biography, (Chicago, 1921) V. 3., p. 1792.

<sup>6</sup>Wise, Isaac Mayer (1819-1900): U.S. Reform leader. Immigrating to the U.S. from Bohemia in 1846, he officiated for two years in Albany and thereafter in Cincinnati. He was responsible for organizing the main instruments of the U.S. Reform Movement, namely the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (1873), the Hebrew Union College (1875), of which he was the first president, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (1889). He compiled the Reform prayer book Minha-Amerika (1857; replaced in 1896 by the Union Prayer Book) and was an advocate of shorter services, the use of English and the organ in the synagogue, and the Friday evening lecture-service. Convinced of the profound harmony between American and Jewish ideals, he stressed the Ten Commandments as the basis of Judaism under the slogan "Back to Mosaism". He envisioned the creation of a universal faith to be pioneered by Judaism; this was to be based on (1) monotheism; (2) the concept that man is created in the image of God and is accountable to Him; (3) the idea that Israel has been Divinely chosen to convey these truths to the world. From R.J. Zwi Werblowsky and Geoffrey Wigoder, the Encyclopedia of Jewish Religion (New York, 1965), pp. 403-404.

<sup>7</sup>Constitution of 1876, Article 8, Section 6.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., Article 10, Section 1.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., Article 8, Section 7.

<sup>10</sup>HAZZAN (Hebraic): Communal official; in later usage also CANTOR: During the Second Temple Period, one of his functions was to attend to the priestly robes and accompany pilgrims to the Temple. Another task was that of announcing the beginning and conclusion of the Sabbath. Among his synagogal duties was the care of the building and the education of the children. At times the hazzan would also be charged with tending the sick and needy. The hazzan was often a poet and supplemented the service with his compositions; consequently, he stood beside the reader and eventually supplanted him. Encyclopedia, p. 178.

<sup>11</sup>RABBI (Hebrew, "my master"): Honorific term originally used in Palestine in addressing sages, but developing gradually into a title for any person qualified to give decisions of Jewish law. At a later period it was decreed that a candidate for the office of Rabbi must sit for an examination in Talmud and codes. The Rabbi is the spiritual leader of the congregation. However, in matters such as the administration of the community and their relations with civil authorities, the Rabbi acts in concert with (and is to some extent subject to) the lay leadership of the congregation. Ibid., pp. 319-320.

<sup>12</sup>HEBRAIC ("servant"): The equivalent in the synagogue to a church sexton or the usher. Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>13</sup>Union of American Hebrew Congregations: Organization representing the Reform congregations and their members in the United States. It was founded by Isaac Mayer Wise in Cincinnati in 1873. Its purpose, as stated in its constitution, is "to encourage and aid the organization and development of Jewish congregations; to promote Jewish education and enrich and

and intensify Jewish life; to maintain the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion; to foster other activities for the perpetuation and advancement of Judaism". It was the earliest Jewish congregational federation in the United States. Affiliated with the Union were various Reform Jewish religious organizations representing the men, women, youth, and administrative officials of Reform temples. Its headquarters are located in New York City, and its membership totals several hundreds of thousands of families. Ibid., p. 393

<sup>14</sup>Now, the Sisterhood.

<sup>15</sup>BAR MITZVAH: An adult male Jew obligated to perform the commandments; hence, the ceremony at which a 13-year-old boy becomes an adult member of the community for the ceremonial purposes. Although one of the most widely observed of all Jewish rites, it is devoid of ancient authority or sanction. The term itself in its present-day connotation is unknown; in the Talmud though it is found as a general term applying to an adult male. The Talmud merely states that a male child reaches his religious majority upon attaining puberty, which as a general but not an exclusive rule is set at the age of 13 and a day. From this age on, he is regarded as a responsible person, liable for the results of his own actions. Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>16</sup>BAT MITZVAH: An adult female Jew obligated to perform the commandments; hence the ceremony on the occasion of a girl's reaching her religious majority (according to Jewish law at the age of twelve years and one day -- a year earlier than the comparable ceremony, BAR-MITZVAH, in the case of a boy, but generally postponed to the age of 13 or even later). Conservative and Reform synagogues have introduced a confirmation-ceremony in the synagogue or Temple at any participation of females in the synagogue service. Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>17</sup>The two most important and influential Jewish newspapers in the eastern part of the United States.