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Jewish Business Community During the 19th Century

By Marjorie Ann Reeves

The European exodus provided a Jewish community to be a part of Huntsville's history. The first known Jewish settlers in Huntsville were the Andrew brothers, Zalegman and Joseph, in 1829. They purchased a lot on the south side of the square and opened the Andrews and Brothers Mercantile store. Plans for a new bank on that plot were developed when the Andrew's Brothers sold their house and lot in 1837. Over the years, the Jewish settlers continued to come to Huntsville and contributed to the growth of businesses around the square.

Turner and Coleman were the next to open a mercantile store on the square. More Jewish families moved to Huntsville developing establishments that decorated the square with cotton merchants, bankers, lawyers, mercantile, jewelry, furniture, millinery, repair shops, harness and saddles, locksmith, photo gallery, sewing, tailor, hotels, grocery stores, barber, hardware, confectionary, book stores, restaurants, taverns, drug stores and doctor's offices.



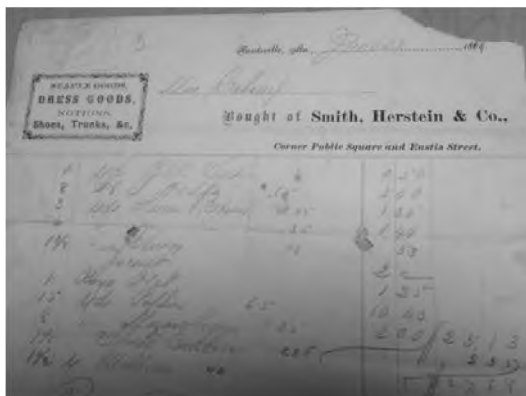
Morris Bernstein established a jewelry and watch repair shop at #3 lot on Commercial Row in 1852. He was an experienced watch maker and learned his craft in Switzerland.



His wife, Henrietta Newman Bernstein,

created a notions store near her husband's jewelry store. They raised their family upstairs above the jewelry store.

Robert Herstein came to Huntsville in 1859 and opened a store of clothing and furniture goods. Herstein went into business with Mr. Smith renting in the location of the future Schiffman Building. In



1878, Robert purchased a building on the north side of the square in a joint venture with Morris Bernstein called "The Trade Palace."

The Jewish population in the South supported the Confederacy when the states seceded. Like their neighbors, they were loyal to their home

and family. Being familiar to persecution in the old country, the Jewish families supported their state for independence. It was their home being invaded not the North. "The fact of the matter is that older Jewish families of the South achieved a more genuinely integrated status with their neighbors than has seemed possible in any part of the Union," according to Bertram Korn.

During the first Federal invasion of Huntsville in 1862, businesses stayed open only by taking the oath of loyalty to the Federal government. Public buildings as well as private residences were taken over by the Federals. The business community including the Bernsteins and Hersteins used their business sense to maintain commercial ties to both sides and keep their businesses going. All business transactions were regulated and supervised by the governing yankee martial law. Col. Horner was the provost

marshal under Gen. Mitchel during the invasion and the first Federal occupation. He sent residents to prison in hopes of limiting any form of rebellion by the citizens. Stores and owners were at the mercy of the yankees who usually had no mercy in them. Prices were high and items could only be bought with Federal cash currency. The Federals kept close watch over all activities of the local citizens during the occupations. Gen. Mitchell said he, “would starve the citizens into submission.” Federal control was successful in destroying civil government which, in turn, opened the door to robbery, murder, and arson by soldiers and gangs against the citizens comprised mostly of women, children, and older residents. Gen. Buell stated, “Habitual lawlessness prevailed in a portion of Gen. Mitchel’s command.” The lack of discipline among Mitchel’s army contributed to Mitchel’s transfer to S.C.

After the war, Mrs. Virginia Clay wrote in her dairy that during the middle of November she, like most Huntsvillians, was low on funds. Mr. Robert Herstein, a kindly merchant of Huntsville, advanced her a hundred dollars and material for a silk gown to be made and worn when she arrived in Washington to obtain release of her husband, C.C. Clay, from prison in 1866.

After her husband’s passing, Mrs. Herstein continued to carry on the business of the dry goods and clothing store. The Herstein’s daughter married Henry Lowenthal and he changed the name of the business to Herstein and Lowenthal.



The Jewish community came together to support their heritage in 1876 by organizing the congregation B'nai Sholom. The first officers were B.W. Temple, J. Weil, D. Wise, and Simon Katz. The Temple was built 14 years later with Isaac Schiffman as Chairman of the Building Committee.

Daniel Schiffman moved into Huntsville and opened a dry goods store after the War Between the States in the 1860s. Solomon Schiffman moved into Huntsville after his brother Daniel in the 1870s. The Schiffman brothers formed the Schiffman & Company and together bought most of the block on the north side of the square during the latter part of 19th century. These were prime business properties because of its proximity to the courthouse. They owned lots 8,9,10,11,12,13, and 14 on Exchange Row along with what stores still stood. Schiffman Brothers ran a dry goods store.



Solomon Schiffman

They accepted their nephew Isaac Schiffman, who arrived from Germany in 1875, into the family business. He inherited all the business upon his Uncle Solomon's death. Isaac left the Schiffman Company to his son, Robert, and Robert Schiffman left it to his son-in-law, Lawrence B. Goldsmith Sr., who left it all to his son Lawrence B. Goldsmith, Jr. An unknown builder constructed the Schiffman Building on the east side of the square in 1845. The original makeup had three buildings with a wall built between the buildings, each with three stories, now only one building of the three is still standing. The Schiffman building was a drugstore

when bought by The Southern Building Loan Association who added the front design on to it in 1895. Later the building was sold to Isaac Schiffman.

About the Author: Marjorie Ann Reeves is a local historian, a member of the Historical Society, and resident of Madison.

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