

Based on Rabin's two short chapters, each of which address a different time period, how

did the existence of slavery in the South before the Civil War shape Jewish life and the places/roles Jews held in southern society? Do you see any differences between the colonial period (addressed in chap. 1) and the immediate antebellum years (chap. 6)?

The Jewish South

AN AMERICAN HISTORY

Remember to think of three questions for the discussion board

*post three questions about the readings on Canvas
(under "Discussions") in advance of our class meeting*

Shari Rabin

*To my friend
Eric*

*Best,
SR
AC*

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How do slavery play a role in Jewish life & social roles?
How did this differ comparing the colonial and antebellum eras?
Other relevant info

CHAPTER 1

Jews, Heathens, and Other Dissenters

Visiting Georgia in 1735, a colonial official wrote that “a Jew workman bred in the Brazil taught” the colonists to build houses “nimblly and in a neat manner.” In 1741, as he navigated a growing population of “clamorous malcontents,” another official wrote that “nothing had given me so much pleasure since my arrival” as the vineyard of “Mr. Lyon, a Portuguese Jew.”¹ That these men took notice of these particular activities was no coincidence. The English understood the construction of homes to be a sign of land’s possession, and they envisioned the “New World” as a garden that they should cause to “be fruitful and multiply,” following God’s command in Genesis. Founded in 1732, Georgia was a late outpost of the British Empire, cut out of the Carolina colony to create a charitable utopia.² At the southern edge of Britain’s continental colonies, it was part of a large expanse of land that abutted the Atlantic Ocean south of the Chesapeake Bay and curved around the northern edge of the Gulf of Mexico. At various times, the British, the French, and the Spanish all exploited and relied on the peoples native to this hot, wet region. Ships took from its shores animal furs and skins, crops grown on seized land, and enslaved people; they returned with manufactured goods as well as laborers kidnapped from diverse African civilizations—although Georgia was free from slavery, at least at first.³

What does this mean?

Amid a massive, ongoing, and violent exchange, Jews joined a fragile new colony. They hoped to find safety and prosperity, but it was far from guaranteed. Looking westward across the territory that would come to be known as the South, they knew that much of it was off limits to them. The places where they could and did live were governed by and for Christians. The early South—the South before “the South”—was a place where racial domination commingled with Christian power, even as diverse religious traditions found expression. Jewish men and women would carve out places for themselves in southern port cities. Indeed, Lyon—known in other sources as Abraham DeLyon—and his unnamed coreligionists were not only building shelter or growing crops but enacting British claims to land that they insisted was “empty,” despite the active presence of Native peoples.⁴ They also helped create a congregation, still in existence today, in which they continued to affirm their difference.

In Georgia, as in other colonial contexts, Jews were present in two ways: in the minds of colonial officials, who saw them as useful but persistently other, and as flesh and blood human beings, trying to build comfortable lives on the colonial frontier.⁵ They were able to do so because of the presence of Native groups and enslaved Africans who, in the eyes of colonial elites, simply seemed more threatening. Jews troubled the ideals of English Protestant empire, and yet they were Europeans with a shared antipathy toward Catholic Spain.⁶ Positioned on the right side of two out of three hierarchical dichotomies that defined England’s empire, Jews would gain access to new political rights, as well as to the most valuable and violently acquired resources available: land and other human beings. Although part of a global and Atlantic community, the Jews of Charleston and Savannah, along with those soon living in other southern locales, would eventually come to see themselves as Americans. They would prove ready and willing to overthrow the political order in which they had gained these opportunities and to find their footing in an ambitious but violent new nation.⁷

In Virginia and in Barbados—colonized by the English in 1607 and 1627, respectively—freedom was defined by Christianity, but over the course of the seventeenth century, it was recast in terms of whiteness,

sometimes quite literally on bureaucratic documents. This was a result of the growing number of Black and Indigenous Christians, but it occurred at the moment Jews were coming to reside in England and its colonies.⁸ While no Jews appear to have settled in agricultural Virginia, Barbados was home to a Jewish congregation by 1654, made up of Jews fleeing the oncoming Portuguese in Brazil.⁹ The next year, under the rule of Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell, the question of readmitting Jews to England itself was revived and, after a vigorous public debate, tacitly allowed. One reason that Englishmen were willing to entertain the presence of Jews in their midst was the hope that Jewish dispersion would facilitate the return of Christ.¹⁰ Another was a growing culture of English “toleration,” born of the realities of post-Reformation Protestant sectarianism and the alternating religious commitments of the country’s monarchs. At the same time, philosophers were beginning to champion reason—over and above revelation—as a source of human knowledge, and to argue that humans possessed “natural rights.”¹¹ This push toward freedom of expression, which historians associate with the “Enlightenment,” was further encouraged by economic competition with the Dutch, who had granted Jews permission to settle in Amsterdam and the Dutch colonies in 1604.¹²

*Legal disadvantage
in the
colonies
and
slavery*

As non-Anglicans and as foreigners, Jews remained at a legal disadvantage, and they were occasionally targeted with specific restrictions. In Barbados, for instance, they were allowed to testify in court on the five books of Moses, but from 1688 to 1706 there were restrictions on Jewish slaveholding.¹³ Gradually, the category of “white” worked to elevate the status of non-Anglican Europeans, including Jews.¹⁴ By the end of the seventeenth century, significant numbers of Iberian Jewish refugees had settled in Port Royal, Jamaica; Newport, Rhode Island; and New York; as well as in the Dutch colonies of Curaçao and Suriname (which had been English before 1667). These communities included individuals whose distance from the Inquisition varied, but who understood themselves to be members of an expansive *nação*, or “nation,” of Spanish and Portuguese Jews.¹⁵ Through their participation in transatlantic trade and their ongoing connections with coreligionists on both sides of the Atlantic, some of these “Port Jews” acquired considerable

wealth, which they used to establish synagogues, Jewish cemeteries, and *mikva'ot* (ritual baths).¹⁶

As they worked within the dynamic system that historians call “the Atlantic World,” some Jewish traders likely ventured northward from Caribbean centers to the southeastern parts of North America.¹⁷ It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Jews were imagined as part of the Carolina colony before they arrived there. On March 1, 1669, the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina (FCC) was adopted by the province’s eight founding proprietors. Overseen by Anthony Ashley Cooper and a young John Locke, this document laid out in punctilious detail their utopian plan for a new colony. It was frequently revised and never fully implemented, but it was widely circulated as an advertisement for emigration and it helped shape the contours of Carolinian society and politics. It envisioned an orderly, balanced, and hierarchical society run by a hereditary nobility under the authority of the king and the Church of England. It also granted explicit permission to “Jews, heathens, and other dissenters from the purity of Christian religion” to create “a church or profession.”¹⁸

The relevant section begins by dividing those outside of the Church of England into two categories: “the natives of that place . . . [who are] utterly strangers to Christianity” and “those who remove from other parts to plant there [who] will unavoidably be of different opinions concerning matters of religion.” The former, “whose idolatry, ignorance, or mistake gives us no right to expel or use them ill,” are granted a negative form of toleration, while the latter will positively “expect to have [liberty] allowed them.” Jews are clearly not “natives of the place,” but their explicit mention later in the paragraph makes it unclear whether they are included as those “of different opinions.” The language of “Jews, heathens, and other dissenters” suggests that Jews constituted a third category alongside Native Americans and dissenting Protestants. Indeed, in earlier writings Locke had distinguished Jews and other non-Christians from Christian dissenters.¹⁹ Undergirding the acceptance of all these groups was the assumption that they “may be won over to embrace and unfeignedly receive the truth,” of the Church of England. Jews were to be tolerated, then, but the nature and degree of their difference was left unclear, and the goal was to eliminate it altogether.²⁰

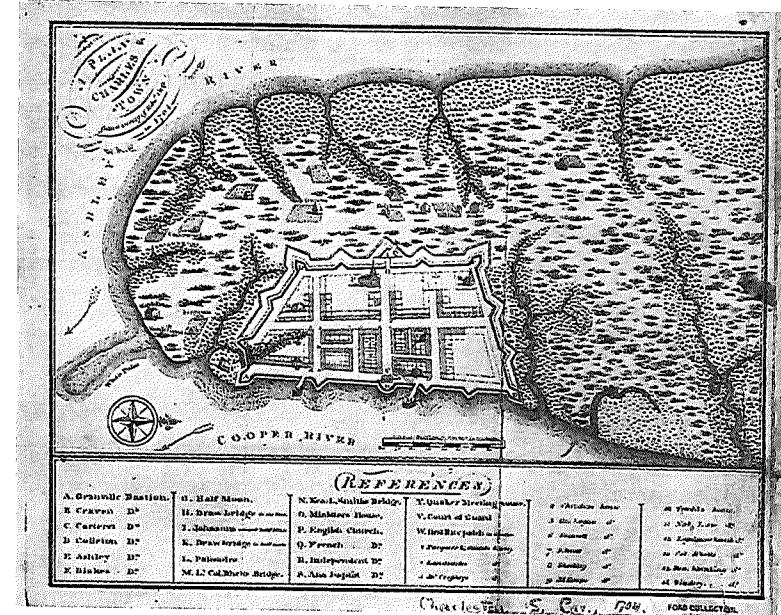


FIGURE 1.1. “A Plan of Charles Town” by Edward Crisp, 1704. From the New York Public Library.

The city of Charles Town (figure 1.1; renamed Charleston in 1783) was founded in 1670 and soon attracted a steady stream of European settlers, among them a large number from Barbados, which was plagued by overcrowded lands and declining fortunes. Ultimately centered on a peninsula between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers and surrounded by dangerous swamps, the new city, and its colony, was shaped by the pursuit of profit and the conflict with Catholic Spain in nearby Florida.²¹ For Jews enmeshed in international trade networks, whose ancestors or coreligionists had been expelled or persecuted by the Spanish, Carolina would have held considerable risk but also a clear appeal. The evidence from this period is scarce, but it shows Jews seeking their place within a multireligious colonial project. The first concrete documentation of a Jew in Carolina is from 1695, when Governor John Archdale, a Quaker, used a Spanish-speaking “Jew for an interpreter” with the Yamasee.²²

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This was one among a number of Mississippian groups in the region, including the Westo, the Savannah, and the more proximate Natives who came to be known as "Settlement Indians." They shared a culture of agriculture and hunting, living in dispersed towns linked by kinship networks.²³ The encounter between the unnamed Jew and Yamasee was part of a complex system of intersecting economic and diplomatic ties. Carolinians relied on trade with Native Americans, primarily in deerskins and in enslaved people, and competed with the Spanish for alliances to ensure their security. These relationships provided the Yamasee and other groups with access to global markets and military support, but they also instigated conflict within and among Native groups, as well as between Natives and their so-called allies. In 1714, the frustrated Yamasee killed two colonial officials, triggering a bloody war that sharpened divisions and deepened distrust between Natives and the European settlers with whom Jews had cast their lot.²⁴

The colony's Barbadian residents, among whom were likely its first Jews, brought with them a penchant for both slavery and single-crop agriculture. Relying on the knowledge and skill of enslaved Africans, they soon fixed upon rice as the colony's main crop for export, and by 1708 there were more enslaved people than free ones in Carolina, even as the colony continued to export large numbers of enslaved Natives.²⁵ Slavery enriched the colony but also inspired fear of rebellion, especially after 1693, when the Spanish offered freedom to any who escaped to Florida.²⁶ Although few Jews seem to have engaged in agriculture, from which they had been legally excluded in Christian Europe, they profited from slavery early on.²⁷ Jewish religious authorities understood slavery to be legally permitted, and shared with Christians the tradition that Africans were descendants of the biblical Noah's cursed son Ham.²⁸ In Barbados in 1679, all but five of fifty-four Jewish families had owned enslaved people, and Charleston records show that in 1696 Simon Valentine, a Jewish merchant who had previously lived in New York and Jamaica, purchased an enslaved man named Dick from Samuel Mincks, a fellow Jew.²⁹ Ashley Cooper and Locke had planned for slavery, firmly yoking it to race. The FCC declared that "every freeman of Carolina shall have absolute power and authority over his negro slaves, of what

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opinion or religion soever" and reiterated that religious affiliation would not affect "any man's civil estate or right."³⁰ In 1712 a law was passed stating yet again that baptism would not bring manumission.³¹

The FCC described the Church of England as "the only true and Orthodox, and the National Religion of all the King's Dominions, so also of Carolina."³² In reality, however, the Church was slow to start in the colony. After 1701, the newly founded Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts sent Anglican ministers from London, although there was often a shortage because many died or abandoned the disease-ridden colony.³³ Those who stayed fought uphill battles to convert Natives and enslaved Africans, among whom were practitioners of Indigenous religious traditions, Catholicism, and Islam.³⁴ Nor did the Church of England have a monopoly among European settlers. The FCC had required only that colonists believe in God and attend some kind of public worship, further dictating that "no person whatsoever shall disturb, molest, or persecute another for his speculative opinions in religion, or his way of worship."³⁵ Already by 1700, Anglicans accounted for less than half of the European settlers in the colony.³⁶

Among the dissenting groups attracted to Carolina were Huguenots—Protestant refugees from Catholic France who were closely allied with the Anglicans—as well as Scottish Presbyterians, Quakers, Lutherans, and Baptists.³⁷ In 1697 Simon Valentine and a small group of fellow Jewish men joined with the Huguenots in requesting naturalization, which the colonial legislature granted them as part of an "Act for Making Aliens Free of this Part of this Province, and Granting Liberty of Conscience to all Protestants." Although associated here with Protestant dissenters, in other documents Jews were described as "of the Jewish nation," indicating that Jewish difference still went beyond a matter of "speculative opinions in religion" alone.³⁸ There is little evidence about Jewish practice in this period, but it is likely that Jews resembled the colonists described by minister Brian Hunt in 1728: "Not a few Parishioners worship God in their own way, that is at home in a way they do not apprise the world."³⁹

In the face of Carolina's tremendous diversity, there were ongoing debates about the extent of toleration, especially in political life. In 1704

(Handwritten notes on the left margin: "Jews were not welcome in New Orleans," "French Louisiana," "Spanish and Portuguese Jews," "Catholics vs. Protestants," "Race and Religion," "Colonial Society," "The Slave Trade," "Religious Freedom," "Political Rights," "Elections," "Parishes," "Steeple," "Cock," "Christ's return," "Anglican power," "Jews paid taxes," "Maintenance," "Shadow," "Soaring steeple," "Catholics never openly welcomed," "Officially excluded from the colony in 1716."

the Anglican Church was formally established, which meant, among other things, that non-Anglicans could not serve in public office. Dissenting Protestants responded by raising questions about the legitimacy of the governing assembly. They complained to the House of Lords that “all sorts of people, even aliens, Jews, servants, common sailors and negroes were admitted to vote at elections.”⁴⁰ In trying to recover their own rights, Protestant dissenters carved out a conception of political belonging that excluded Jews and classed them with a range of communal outsiders. Ultimately, the establishment was upheld, but dissenters’ political rights restored. The colony was divided into ten parishes, which acted as both religious and political districts; they were run by vestrymen elected by Anglican parishioners. After 1722, Charleston’s skyline was dominated by Saint Philip’s Church, a monumental structure with three large porticos, a cupola, and a dome. Its steeple was topped by a cock, invoking the anticipation of Christ’s return and asserting Anglican power over the city.⁴¹ Jews paid taxes that contributed to its maintenance and they lived almost literally in its shadow, looking up at its soaring steeple as they walked through the city. Catholics, never openly welcomed, were officially excluded from the colony in 1716.⁴²

England’s Catholic enemies configured race and religion very differently and in ways that explicitly excluded Jews. Inquisitorial documents from New Spain record in considerable detail accusations and punishments for “Guarding and Observing the Dead Laws of Moses,” although not nearly as many as in Spain itself.⁴³ As historian David Graizbord argues, “Jews and *judeoconversos* constituted a ‘race’ or a consanguineous ‘caste’ that was culturally unassimilable, indeed toxic to the Old Christian community of faith—and blood.”⁴⁴ In French Louisiana the very first article of the 1724 Code Noir required the colony’s directors and officers “to drive out of the said country all Jews who may have established their residence there. These, as declared enemies of the Christian name, We command to leave in three months.”⁴⁵ Adapted from codes used to govern French holdings in the Caribbean, the Code Noir forbade religions other than Catholicism and, among other regulations, required that enslaved people be baptized. While in practice some privileged Jews were allowed to operate within French territories, it is

unlikely that any Jews settled in New Orleans in the initial decades following its 1718 founding.⁴⁶ In Louisiana, as in Carolina, Jews were imagined before they had arrived there, although in the French Catholic context their settlement was pointedly forbidden.

By contrast, Jewish settlers arrived somewhat unexpectedly in the new colony of Georgia, which was designed by its trustees as a charitable sanctuary for impoverished Englishmen and persecuted European Protestants.⁴⁷ Among those collecting funds for the enterprise were a group of Spanish and Portuguese Jews in London, who interpreted the colony’s promise of religious sanctuary as maximally inclusive and used their funds to send a group of their coreligionists.⁴⁸ On paper, the colony’s charter offered “liberty of conscience . . . in the worship of God to all persons . . . except papists,” which would seem to include Jews.⁴⁹ In practice, however, the trustees complained that “certain Jews have been sent to Georgia contrary to the intentions of the Trustees, and which may be of ill consequences to the Colony.”⁵⁰ They tried to persuade resident trustee James Oglethorpe to make the Jews leave, but they had already arrived, and to a community in the midst of a vicious epidemic. According to Oglethorpe, Samuel Nunes Ribeiro, a Portuguese Jewish physician, “immediately undertook our people and refused to take any pay for it.”⁵¹ Jews were implicitly excluded from the vision of the colony of Georgia, but the precarity of the colonial endeavor nevertheless enabled them to claim a place within it.

The group that arrived from London on July 11, 1733, included forty-one Jews, who made up as much as a quarter of the colony’s total European population at the time.⁵² Thirty-three were of Spanish or Portuguese descent, and eight were from German lands. They brought with them a Torah scroll and a circumcision box, signaling their intention to establish sacred space and perpetuate religious identity in the new city, located on a bluff overlooking the Savannah River.⁵³ Shaped by its charitable mission, Georgia’s population included an eclectic mix of “German Pietists, Highland warriors, Lowland gentry, and English servants.”⁵⁴ It was settled less than twenty years after the traumatic Yamasee War, and its survival was secured through careful diplomacy between James Oglethorpe and Native groups. Especially important were the Creeks,

(Handwritten note on the right margin: "Georgia")

a powerful confederation with a decentralized and consensus-oriented political organization.⁵⁵ The trustees initially restricted land ownership and prohibited slavery in the colony, although there were other forms of unfreedom present, including indenture.⁵⁶ Among the early Jewish settlers there were a number of servants, including Shem Noah, possibly a man of African descent, who arrived as a servant to Zippora Nunes Ribeiro. In the following months, Abraham DeLyon's wife, two daughters, and "servant David" joined them, as did a Mr. Deas and his servant Abram.⁵⁷

There is much more robust documentation of Jews in early Georgia than in Carolina, because they arrived later and in greater numbers. There were also several enthusiastic diarists in the colony who recorded their impressions, taking special interest in the Jews' internal divisions. An Anglican minister reported that compared with the German Jews, the Portuguese "are more lax in their way, and dispense with a great many of their Jewish Rites."⁵⁸ Whereas the former came from open Jewish communities, some of the Iberian Jews had lived portions of their lives as public Christians and suffered under the Inquisition. These differences apparently fueled discord between the two groups; Lutheran minister Johann Boltzius reported, "There is hate and persecution among themselves."⁵⁹ Evidence from elsewhere in the Jewish Atlantic shows that Portuguese Jews in particular were protective of their status as members of an exclusive *nacão*.⁶⁰

While ministers and state officials highlighted the novelty of Jewish conflict, the two groups were part of a shared community. Benjamin Sheftall, one of the so-called German Jews, kept records of births, deaths, marriages, arrivals, and departures of Jews in Savannah, regardless of origin.⁶¹ Sheftall was a devout man who would live the rest of his days in Georgia. Within his first year there, he had recorded the community's first birth and its first marriage. In 1735 he noted the founding of a congregation. According to a Christian minister, "A boy speaking several languages, and especially good in Hebrew is their reader and is paid for his services."⁶²

The congregation was called Mickve Israel—"hope of Israel"—gesturing toward the fervent messianic expectations that were shared

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by Jewish communities throughout the Atlantic world. A book of that name, published in 1650 by the Amsterdam rabbi Menasseh ben Israel, had argued that the readmission of the Jews to England would pave the way for the end of history and the advent of a new era of perfection. While Christian messianism centered on Christ's return and rule, Jews imagined the resurrection of the dead, a return to the land of Israel, and the rebuilding of the holy Temple. In 1651, Curaçao's congregation, the leader in the Americas at that point, had chosen the name Mikveh Israel; Barbados's congregation, founded in 1654, called itself Nidhe Israel, or "dispersed of Israel," pointing to the eventual ingathering of the exiles in the world to come. Messianic expectations flourished during these years of upheaval and transformation, reaching an apex with the appearance in the Ottoman Empire of a suspected messiah named Shabbatei Zevi. His 1666 conversion to Islam had disappointed most Jews, and yet they continued to express messianic longings. New York's congregation, in operation since the early 1700s, chose the name Shearith Israel, or the "remnant of Israel" who would be saved at the end of days.

Sheftall eventually purchased a burial ground and received a shipment of a Torah scroll, a Hanukkah menorah, and a parcel of Jewish books from London.⁶³ The new Torah scroll may have replaced a damaged original or been used to facilitate multiple worship services. The menorah would allow for observance of the minor postbiblical festival celebrating Jewish persistence under foreign rule. The books may have facilitated Torah study among adult men or the education of the growing number of Jewish children in the colony. Although not all children survived to adulthood—in 1734 the Sheftalls lost a son after his nurse fed him poisonous acorns—in the first seven years of the community's existence, Sheftall recorded eighteen Jewish births in the city.⁶⁴

For Jewish women, the births—and deaths—of children must have been significant moments of religious reflection, as they considered the fragility of their bodies and the future of their community.⁶⁵ Among the initial Jewish settlers there were eight married women and seven girls, including Judith Olivera, married to Jacob, and their daughter Leah.⁶⁶ Sex and procreation were reliant on women's immersion in what

Jewish texts describe as “living water,” in concert with their menstrual cycles. Purifying their bodies was one of just three commandments designated for women, and also seen as a vehicle of Jewish messianism, a means by which women could help prepare the world for its redemption.⁶⁷ A designated *mikvah* opened in Savannah in April of 1738.

A little over a month later, Anglican minister George Whitefield arrived in the colony. On his way to Georgia, Whitefield had visited a synagogue on the island of Gibraltar:

I continued with them their whole Service and spent most of my Time there in secret Prayer to God. *That the Veil might be taken from their Hearts, and that blessed Time might come when his chosen people should again be engrafted into their own Olive-Tree and all Israel be saved.*⁶⁸

For Whitefield and other Protestant ministers, Jews remained a theological problem and a target of evangelism. While there is no record of Whitefield’s interactions with Savannah’s Jews, both the Lutheran Boltzius and Methodist John Wesley made unsuccessful attempts to evangelize them.⁶⁹ Notions of Christian supremacy continued to exert an influence in other ways as well. In 1738, “the Jews applied for Liberty to sign” a petition of “settlers, freeholders, and inhabitants,” but the organizers “did not think it proper to join them in any of our measures.” The petitioners requested more liberal land policies as well as “the use of negroes,” which they argued would “occasion great numbers of white people to come here.” The organizers operated within a clear hierarchy of race and of class; servants were prohibited from signing to avoid the appearance of duress, as were widows and orphans, because some might claim “that they were not proper judges.” No reason was given for the exclusion of Jews, although the organizers sought out the participation of Boltzius and the Lutherans.⁷⁰

In this moment Jews were excluded as non-Protestants from the social and political life of the colony, and yet their application demonstrates their own feelings of belonging and their commitment to being counted among white “settlers, freeholders, and inhabitants.” They worked in a number of capacities in support of the colony—for instance,

Abraham Minis supplied the colonial military fort at Frederica in addition to operating a popular tavern—and several joined the local masonic lodge.⁷¹ Boltzius wrote in 1739, “The German Jews have in Savannah the same liberties as any Englishman. They drill with a rifle, as all the soldiers do,” a rather remarkable sight given the enthusiastic debates that would soon be unleashed in Europe about the question of Jewish military service.⁷² The next year he elaborated,

The Englishmen, nobility and common folks alike, treat the Jews as their equal. They drink, gamble, and walk together with them; in fact, let them take part in all their fun. Yes, they desecrate Sunday with them, a thing that no Jew would do on their Sabbath just to please a Christian.⁷³

Theology of the Petition of the Jews excused of their hierarchy and class

Jews were contrasted here with Englishmen and with Christians, who treated these national and religious others equally, to their own moral detriment. As in Carolina three decades earlier, Jews served as a point of contention between dominant Anglicans and dissenting Protestants. Anglicans might occasionally include Jews as part of a white society, but dissenters were quick to recast the community in Christian terms. In Boltzius’s view, Jews were deniers of Christ who led good Christians astray. And yet, by 1741 one of the trustees who had been against Jewish settlement was arguing that Jews “behaved so well as to their morals, peaceableness, and charity, that they were a reproach to the Christian inhabitants.”⁷⁴ These writers agreed that Jews were a distinct and identifiable group, although they came to different conclusions about their character and influence.

In 1740, Parliament passed the Act for Naturalizing such Foreign Protestants, and Others therein Mentioned, as are Settled or Shall Settle, in any of his Majesty’s Colonies in America. Thus classified, Jews in the British colonies, along with Quakers, were now eligible to obtain a form of naturalization that would transcend any one colony, and they could do so without making an oath “upon the true Faith of a Christian.” Jewish naturalization would remain restricted in England proper, but the colonies operated by different rules. As one British official put it in 1753, “The discouraging of [Jews] to go and settle in our American

colonies, would be a great loss, if not the ruin, of every one of them.”⁷⁵ Few among those understood to be “professing the Jewish religion” took advantage of the new form of naturalization—between 1740 and 1753, only one Carolina Jew did so.⁷⁶ And yet this new law was a sign of increasing centralization across the British colonies and of the utility of Jews to the imperial project.

By 1740, however, most of Georgia’s Jews had departed. The year before, the War of Jenkins’ Ear had begun, a conflict between England and Spain apocryphally instigated by the severed appendage of an English ship’s captain. Fear of the approaching Spanish—who might subject Jews to the Inquisition—led most of Savannah’s Jews to flee over the course of the next two years; a number of families, including the Nuneses and the Oliveras, moved to nearby Charleston. The German Sheftall and Minis families would remain, but the congregation—their “hope of Israel”—disbanded.⁷⁷ Historian Alan Gallay has argued of the colonial South, “Monarchy, colonial proprietors, the church, merchants, colonists, and indigenous peoples all contributed to the construction of ideologies of imperialism through their thoughts and actions.”⁷⁸ As merchants and colonists, and through interactions with other groups, so too did Jews. They brought their knowledge, their networks, and their God to the Americas and to the corner of it that would one day come to be known as “the South.” Although they contributed enthusiastically to the project of British colonization, Jews still retained an ambiguous position. Seven decades after the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina, it was still unclear whether they were equivalent to “dissenters,” or if their difference would be interpreted as something more troubling.

Why did
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in the colonies?

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CHAPTER 6

Peculiar Institutions

On August 29, 1852, the Jews of Galveston, Texas, consecrated a burial ground. To oversee the proceedings, Rosanna Osterman, who had lived in the city for almost fifteen years, invited Moses N. Nathans from New Orleans. The English-born minister, newly arrived from the Caribbean, congratulated and flattered Galveston's Jews. He predicted "the spread and growth of our peculiar institutions" in Texas, and marveled that Hebrew prayers were being recited, "on this verdant prairie, which once resounded with the war-whoop of the Indian."¹ He thus analogized the distinctiveness of Judaism to that of southern slavery and elaborated his own version of manifest destiny, a political ideology that imagined US sovereignty from the Atlantic to the Pacific as inevitable and beneficent. By the 1850s, a federal policy of Indian removal had pushed most Cherokees, Creeks, and other Native groups out of the southeast and into the far west, even as a peace treaty with Mexico had completed the United States' continental expansion.² This violent transfer of land was deeply intertwined with the politics of slavery, as politicians debated whether or not enslaved labor should be allowed in the new territories.³

Nathans's optimistic embrace of American empire was tempered only by his concerns about local religious life. There might not be another minister in Galveston for a long while, so he took the opportunity to exhort local Jews to greater piety. Galveston's Jews should circumcise their sons, ensure that their children married fellow Jews, and cease

Manifest
Destiny
in
Slavery

attending church services, Nathans argued. Even in a place with few Jews, the basics of Judaism could and should be followed, not only because God commanded them but for the sake of “public opinion, which, in all right-thinking societies condemns and frowns on irreligion and infidelity.”⁴ Speaking to immigrant Jews in a heterogeneous southern port city, he insisted that loyalty to Judaism was not a hindrance but a help to their local standing.

Galveston’s burial ground was only one of a flurry of Jewish institutions created across the United States in the antebellum period, amid a mass migration of Jews from German-speaking lands. These new arrivals were incredibly mobile, always keeping an eye on other regions and nations, but they also worked to assert their place in southern communities. As they did, they would find that, depending on the context, they could access whiteness fully, conditionally, or not at all. They rejected Christianity, they were immigrants, and they were conspicuous as peddlers and merchants. All of this troubled white Christians, who felt besieged and increasingly powerless as slavery, the basis of their economy and society, was challenged and finally, after a bloody civil war, abolished. The South, now understood as a distinct region, included a heady and unstable mixture of “jealous yeomen and arrogant planters . . . pretending slaves and wary masters, post-seventeenth-century South Carolinians and pre-twentieth-century Lousianians,” according to one historian.⁵ Among them were enterprising Jews, including a growing number of immigrants, whose presence belies the popular image of the “Old South” as hermetically sealed, centered on plantations, and united in Protestant worship.

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Nathans argued for the unique glory of the Jewish people—“our brethren in lineage and faith”—but others were less sanguine about the meaning of Jewish difference.⁶ As the geography and economy of the South changed, the Enlightenment rationalism that had facilitated Jews’ civic inclusion declined in influence. Increasingly, evangelicalism encouraged the view that Jews were stubborn unbelievers in need of conversion, and romanticism fueled ambivalence about Jews’ connection to an idealized southern land and folk.⁷ In the established eastern states in particular, public Christianity became increasingly noticeable.

When James Joseph Sylvester was appointed to a teaching position at the University of Virginia in 1842, for instance, a Presbyterian newspaper loudly protested, classifying Judaism with Catholicism and Unitarianism as “errors subversive of Christianity.”⁸ In 1844, Charleston Jews complained about a Christian thanksgiving prayer, as they had in 1812, but this time the governor refused to apologize. Instead he declared South Carolina a Christian state and claimed, “It did not occur to me, that there might be Israelites, Deists, Atheists, or an other class of persons in the State who denied the divinity of Jesus Christ.”⁹ After three decades, Jews were still an afterthought, but they no longer seemed to merit conciliation.

While these exclusions proved irritating to Jewish citizens, none did more so than Sunday closing laws. In Charleston in 1840, Jacob Meyer was found guilty of selling suspenders to a Black man on a Sunday, and five years later Solomon A. Benjamin faced the same charges for selling gloves. Benjamin appealed, complaining that the law violated his religious freedom, but the judge claimed that it was merely a police ordinance and that, in any event, Christianity was both part of the common law and the basis of morality.¹⁰ The opinion expressed a “deep respect for the ancient people of whom the defendant is one,” but set up a sharp distinction from “us, who are called Christians,” insisting, “We say to [the Jews] simply, *respect us*.¹¹ Even as some Jews challenged local political institutions, however, others worked to become part of them. When ardent pro-slavery senator John C. Calhoun died in 1850, Charleston’s Hebrew Benevolent Society and Hebrew Orphan asylum marched in his funeral parade, presenting themselves as proud white South Carolinians.¹² More directly, Judah P. Benjamin, Henry M. Hyams, and Doctor Edwin Warren Moïse all served in high political offices in Louisiana: as US senator, lieutenant-governor, and speaker of the legislature, respectively. All three men, enslavers married to Christian women, had been born to Jewish families in Charleston.¹³

By the 1840s, multicultural New Orleans had replaced Charleston as the region’s main economic hub and Jewish center.¹⁴ When Joseph Lyons contemplated moving there in 1835, he described it as “that emporium of wine, women, and segars [sic], etc.”¹⁵ While Lyons never

*which
part
sign
is
the
race
of
the
customer
or
the
date?*

*Born
Jews in
antebellum
era. Allowed
to hold office.
Owned slaves
enfranchised
themselves
w/ slavery.
Charged
Christian work*

actually moved, other Jews from Charleston did, joining coreligionists from eastern states as well as from Europe, all eager to make their fortunes in the freewheeling city. Texas also attracted Jewish migrants, to Galveston and places further inland. One of its most enthusiastic boosters was Jacob De Cordova, a Jamaican-born Jewish state legislator. On a tour of northern cities in 1858, he described Texas as a biblically resonant “land flowing with milk and honey.” He felt pride in the state but also some estrangement from his audience, noting that “churches are to be found in every portion of the State; and I regret that I cannot speak on the subject with the fulness which its importance demands.”¹⁶ De Cordova felt empowered to speak publicly on behalf of the territory, while never forgetting that in some ways he remained outside of its mainstream.

In Texas and elsewhere in the Southwest, cotton was planted on what was seen as “virgin land” and picked by enslaved workers forced to maximum productivity. The crop they picked made fortunes locally, nationally, and globally, and yet its ascendancy was accompanied by an intensified critique of the slavery upon which it relied. Even after the compromise of 1850, which admitted California as a free state and passed stricter fugitive slave laws, conflicts over the question of slavery’s expansion continued, and many southerners moved to defend it by any means necessary.¹⁷ In 1858 De Cordova published his lectures, specifically to refute critics who accused him of advocating for a “free soil” Texas. He declared himself to “have always been proslavery,” and “def[ied] the sharpest of them to put his finger on a single sentence which leans in the slightest degree toward abolitionism.”¹⁸ Indeed, the abolitionist cause remained unpopular among Jews both North and South, perhaps because of the enthusiastic Christian piety, and occasional anti-Jewish sentiment, expressed by its leaders.¹⁹

The development of the Southwest encouraged continued movement away from eastern cities—through new steamboat and railroad lines—on the part of white Americans, who brought with them the people they enslaved. Among those entering the region were also central European immigrants, including the first mass migration of Jews in US history.²⁰ In German-speaking lands, Jews were subject to far-reaching restrictions

on occupation and settlement, and their citizenship was an ongoing matter of public debate. Those who migrated sought to escape this fraught political status and to pursue greater economic opportunity. The average Jewish migrant was an unmarried man in his late teens or early twenties who began as a peddler in the hinterland, relying on relatives and coreligionists in larger cities to get started, while hoping to eventually settle down as a merchant. If he went to the Southwest, he could easily find himself in the cotton business. Some Jews became cotton factors who helped planters sell their crops in a port city, or proprietors of small-town general stores who accepted payment in cotton and extended credit to local planters. Among the most successful of these men was Henry Lehman, an immigrant from Bavaria, who established a store in Montgomery, Alabama, in the 1840s and soon went into business with his brothers, creating a firm that would endure until the 2008 financial crisis.²¹

Jewish businesses were part of the fabric of the developing southern frontier, and yet in an environment of intensifying political pressure and economic strife, they were increasingly viewed with mistrust. After the Panic of 1837, an earlier moment of financial crisis, the governor of Mississippi had argued that the Rothschilds, the European Jewish banking family to whom the states of Alabama and Mississippi were indebted, were “the blood of Shylock and Judas,” Jewish villains of Shakespeare and the New Testament, respectively.²² Local Jews of much more modest means were also viewed through the lens of anti-Jewish stereotypes. Former peddler David Steinheimer recalled an exchange with a farmer and his family in rural Georgia in the 1850s: “When I told them I was a Jew, they were astonished—they thought a Jew had horns.” Curiosity could evolve into demonization, especially as peddling came under increased scrutiny as a disrupter of local economies; Jews were visible as peddlers, and in many critiques the two were conflated.²³

Antipathy towards Jews found a particularly potent vehicle in the credit report, a new technology that became central to success in the increasingly impersonal—and risky—antebellum economy. Reporters were tasked with determining the creditworthiness of local businesses, and they regularly noted Jewish identity, often, and increasingly, to disparage

Annotations from left margin:
 - Antislavery
 - Slaveholders
 - Slave
 - Sathers
 - Being
 - of
 - accused
 - Mi
 - sissippi
 - At the
 - made
 - of
 - discrediting
 - pro-slavery

Panic of
 1837
 -
 -
 -
 -
 -

Initially selected as slave traders +
businessmen but views changed

them. In the mid-1840s Benjamin Mordecai, a prominent Charleston slave trader and businessman, was described rather benignly as an "Old & Rich Jew [and] keen merch[ant]." Ten years later, he was found to be "possess[ing] of a large share of the qualities so generally attributed to Israelites." His firm was a "Jew Concern" and "JEWS from A to Z.... If paying is profitable + politic they will pay."²⁴ Around the same time, a credit reporter pointedly described the Lehman brothers as "Jews, but though Jews, are [considered] almost as good as 'white men'."²⁵

Inconspicuous
but seems
to have been
seen as
white

ACCURACY OF
UPON IMMIGRATION
in the
South
involved
participation
in slave
institutions
incl. slavery

In the late 1850s, Edward Rosewater, a teenaged telegraph operator living in Stevenson, Alabama, was similarly othered. He noted in his diary that an acquaintance had told him, "If I was a White man he would whip me."²⁶ Jews' racial privilege might be qualified in certain situations, then, but it was never fully eliminated. Rosewater, who had immigrated from Bohemia to Cleveland as a child, successfully pressed charges against a "big Russian [who] accosted and beat" him.²⁷ He enthusiastically participated in many aspects of small-town southern life, including hunting, eating barbecue, attending a minstrel show, and going to church, although he described one Methodist meeting as "awfull screaming & yelling."²⁸ Immigrant Jews adjusted quickly to southern life, including slavery, and some amassed the resources necessary to become enslavers themselves. Julius Weis, who came to New Orleans in 1845, initially expressed shock at seeing an enslaved person whipped, but went on to purchase several human beings himself.²⁹ Jewish merchants also sold to enslaved customers—in 1857 it was reported that the firm of Cohen and Levy of Richmond County, Georgia, was a "Jew shop but trades with negroes and all sorts."³⁰

While evidence about their Jewish ties is sparse, historian Lauren Winner has found that "some slaves who were owned by Jewish families considered themselves Jewish." Evidence of these individuals comes from the baptism records of Black Jews who participated in and eventually converted to Christianity. They refer to "brother George . . . long a practitioner of the Israelite faith, on account of being [owned] by a Jew," and of "Sarah[, who] has had familiarity with the teachings of the Lord, though she was a Jew." A man known as "Paul the Jew," who had been enslaved in South Carolina, was baptized after becoming convinced that

For enslaved people who were educated by Jews, was Judaism used as a means of imposition?

"perpetuating his loyalty to the Jews was no more than perpetuating his loyalty to his owner."³¹ There were almost certainly others like them, who encountered Judaism through their enslavers, or through other means, and found power in its beliefs or practices, although they almost certainly did not undergo formal *halakhic* conversion.

One example is known of a Jew of color who was accepted as a fellow worshipper in a southern congregation. In the 1850s an African American man named Billy Simons regularly attended services at Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim in Charleston, despite its rules excluding people of color. In 1857, the congregation's leader, Maurice Mayer, wrote to the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judenthums* that Simons, who claimed to have been converted by Jewish enslavers in Africa, sat among white Jewish men in the sanctuary and was "the most observant of those who go to the synagogue." While Protestants ministering to enslaved Africans carefully selected their biblical texts to encourage docility, the cyclical nature of Torah reading meant that Simons would have heard—at least once a year, in Hebrew—the story of the Israelite slaves' exodus from Egypt. He and other enslaved Jews likely saw Judaism as one source of spiritual power that they could combine with African traditions.³² Mayer had promised to bury Simons in a Jewish cemetery, although there is no evidence that he followed through.³³

Considering this +
Jewish merchant
selling goods
enslaved African
what degree
did Jews uphold
oppressive systems
Outside of the
context of the
larger Southern
Society?

If Black Jews were all but invisible within most Jewish communities, the opposite was true of the new immigrants. By the time Mayer was writing about Simons, an Ashkenazi congregation had been in operation in Charleston for two years. Richmond gained an Ashkenazi congregation in 1841, and a separate "Polish" one in 1856.³⁴ In New Orleans, Shangarai Chasset switched from the Sephardic to Ashkenazi rite sometime in the 1830s, and a new Sephardic congregation, *Netzufot Yehudah* (Dispersed of Judah), was founded in 1845. It was organized by Gershom Kursheedt, a Richmonder, but primarily funded by its namesake, Judah Touro, by then a wealthy philanthropist undertaking a late-in-life return to religious observance. By the late 1850s New Orleans was home to two additional congregations—one in neighboring Lafayette and one catering to "Polish" Jewish migrants—as well as a Hebrew Benevolent Society (1844) and an asylum for widows and orphans (1856).³⁵

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When Touro died in 1854, he bequeathed hundreds of thousands of dollars to Jewish causes in New Orleans, in his birthplace of Newport, and beyond, ranging from the Hebrew Congregation of Hartford, Connecticut, to the indigent Jews of Jerusalem.³⁶ Although few had Touro's resources, many southern Jews were engaged in transnational political and philanthropic activities. Meetings were held in cities across the region in 1840, after Jews in Damascus were accused of ritual murder. When a Jewish emissary from the Holy Land came to the United States in 1849 to raise funds, he garnered support from Jews in New Orleans, Charleston, Richmond, Mobile, and Montgomery.³⁷ Another round of public meetings and petitions met news of the 1859 Mortara Affair, which involved the kidnapping and secret baptism of a Jewish child in Italy; it must have struck particularly close to home in Catholic-inflected New Orleans.³⁸ Southern Jews offered aid to coreligionists abroad, and, on some occasions, sought their guidance. When a proposed memorial statue of Touro was decried by some Jews as a graven image that violated the second commandment, members of the Touro Monument Association solicited opinions on the matter from four rabbis, in London, Breslau, Frankfurt, and Prague.³⁹

Many of the new migrants went to places with no Jewish infrastructure at all, however, and they worked to build it up. In places like Macon, Georgia, and Vicksburg, Mississippi, Jews created makeshift households in boardinghouses, often overseen by Jewish women, where they received a room and a daily meal in keeping—as best they could—with Jewish dietary laws.⁴⁰ When a critical mass emerged, local Jews would purchase a burial ground or found a Hebrew benevolent society. They might gather in rented quarters for High Holiday services one year, and then endeavor to organize a congregation. Next came efforts to purchase a synagogue building, marked by a celebratory consecration ceremony, attended by Christian neighbors and addressed by a Jewish minister visiting for the occasion, as in Galveston. If all went well, they would hire a *hazan*, a nonrabbinic religious functionary, to lead services, teach children, give sermons, and facilitate other necessities of Jewish life. Although they came from European places where Jewish institutions were government funded, migrants now paid out of pocket for

religious life, and their leaders were employees of the congregation.⁴¹ And although they were excluded from congregational governance and practice, Jewish women—like their Christian counterparts—were frequently among the most enthusiastic participants and supporters.⁴²

Whereas in 1790 there had been only 6 congregations in all of the United States, half of them in the South, one 1856 estimate found 26 congregations in southern states—out of 110 nationwide—with at least a dozen other incipient Jewish communities in the region.⁴³ In Tennessee, for example, Memphis Jews purchased a burial ground in 1847 and established a congregation in 1853; Nashville Jews hit the same milestones in 1851 and 1854, respectively; and Jews could also be found in the towns of Knoxville and Bolivar.⁴⁴ One Memphis Jew wrote in 1855 of his congregation, “Its members are newly assembled here from distant quarters of the world and various sections of the Union. It is natural to infer that different forms have been taught, different habits acquired, different modes of opinion on minor points inculcated.”⁴⁵ Even as, for many Jews, membership and attendance remained optional, disagreements flourished among congregants and with *hazanim* over matters of language, custom, and religious reforms like mixed seating.

Among other things, leaders expressed disapproval of the ongoing trend of Jewish men marrying Christian women. And yet, such men were increasingly insistent about passing Judaism on to their children. By 1859 C. Goldenberg of New Orleans was regularly performing circumcisions on sons born to Jewish fathers and Christian mothers.⁴⁶ Circumcision could be made part of a conversion process, but it is unclear how many children underwent the required immersion in a Jewish ritual bath; according to a later report, Christian mothers “[did] not want to have their children baptised as Jews.”⁴⁷ These women likely understood circumcision as a family practice, perhaps strange, but on its own negating neither whiteness nor Christianity. Circumcision was a clear marker of Jewish identity, but it was invisible at first sight, and it was linked to paternalistic values that white southerners could understand.⁴⁸ Circumcision was in fact one of the most widely practiced Jewish rituals in the South, even in far-flung places without Jewish institutions or skilled circumcisers. Many sons were circumcised well past the eighth

day of life, and in at least one case, in Galveston, a new father performed the rite himself. Congregations prioritized hiring functionaries who could perform circumcisions, and a number of skilled *mohalim* began traveling the region.

American Jews were increasingly knit together through the travel of religious functionaries and individuals, through family and correspondence, and through nascent institutions. In and beyond the South they established lodges of B'nai B'rith, a Jewish fraternal order founded in 1843 in New York City.⁴⁹ And they subscribed to American Jewish newspapers, beginning with the *Occident and American Jewish Advocate*, founded in 1843 by Isaac Leeser, a Philadelphia *hazan* who had lived in Richmond in the 1820s. The *Occident* had a wide readership in the region, as indicated by mentions of contact with "A Southern Jew," and "A gentleman residing in the interior of one of the Southern States."⁵⁰ Leeser regularly published reports of goings on in southern communities; one 1846 issue included notice of Jewish activities in Columbia, South Carolina; Augusta, Georgia; and Claiborne, Alabama.⁵¹ Leeser had a soft spot for the South, writing of Virginia, "We love this old commonwealth." Pointing to the new synagogues constructed in Mobile and New Orleans, he insisted that "more contributions are raised [in the South], in proportion to numbers and means, than in this vicinity."⁵²

Sectional tensions led to splits in several Christian denominations in the 1840s and 1850s, but Jewish leaders were just beginning efforts to create a national denominational body out of far-flung congregations.⁵³ Leeser first attempted to create such a body in 1840 and finally had some success in 1859, in the aftermath of the Mortara Affair. The new Board of Delegates of American Israelites sought to coordinate Jewish political advocacy and religious life; its first meeting included representatives from Richmond, Charleston, New Orleans, Donaldsonville, Norfolk, Jackson, Baton Rouge, Petersburg, and Mobile, along with those from a host of northern cities.⁵⁴ The rancor that marked the development of sectional identities among Christians was rare among American Jews, a tiny minority newly linked through the power of travel and the press.

In December 1860, Henry Loewenthal of Macon, Georgia, wrote a letter to the *Israelite*, a Cincinnati newspaper founded by Rabbi Isaac

Mayer Wise. He had recently visited the northern part of Florida, which had become a US state in 1845, in order to perform circumcisions. "In short our brethren here are healthy and wealthy, and are greatly respected by their neighbors for their uprightness and honesty," he wrote, naming the Jewish families in Tallahassee and Quincy. He listed off some of the many other towns in the area—"too many for me, at present to mention"—where Jews could be found. Although the names and places differed, Loewenthal's letter was nearly identical to numerous others that had appeared in the American Jewish press, documenting the spread of Jews throughout the region and the nation and their desire to place themselves on an emerging map of American Judaism. This version, however, was published on December 21, 1860, just one day after South Carolina seceded from the United States. Having spent several decades establishing themselves as members of local communities and as participants in broader Jewish networks, Jews like Loewenthal would soon find themselves divided from their northern coreligionists by a bloody civil war.⁵⁵