

A Historical Perspective
On Temple Beth Tefilloh
And
Brunswick Georgia's Jewish Community
By Mason Stewart

Contrary to popular northern myths about the South, many Jews found a haven in Georgia and were actually more welcome here than in many other parts of the country. Most colonies, for instance, summarily banned Roman Catholics and Jews. Colonies such as Connecticut, Massachusetts and New Hampshire went even further by setting up and supporting "established churches" for their colonists. Peter Stuyvesant of New York actively petitioned the Dutch Government to ban all Jews permanently from his colony. In contrast, the pragmatic and politically savvy General Oglethorpe, not only allowed the Jews (who arrived on his shore unexpectedly) to stay, but more importantly, he provided them with full colonial rights. These rights included owning land, bearing arms, serving in the militia, and eventually holding official positions of trust and authority within the colony. It is important to note here that Oglethorpe granted these privileges to the Jews of Savannah over the loud objections of his Charter members, and during a time when the commonly accepted Christian theology practiced both in Europe and in the colonies openly portrayed Jews as unworthy villains.

The incredible history of Georgia's Jews begins in July of 1733 when forty two "Hebrews" arrived unexpectedly at the port of Savannah. Their story is detailed in the definitive work on Savannah's Jews entitled "*Third to None*" written by Temple Beth Tefilloh's Rabbi Emeritus, Saul Rubin. It reads like a modern suspense novel. It involves political double dealing, a politically savvy General, a raging yellow fever epidemic that had already taken the life of the only doctor in the struggling Georgia colony, and a boat-load of displaced Jews that just happens to include a former Court Physician to the Grand Inquisitor of Portugal whose medical specialty was "infectious diseases". It is truly ironic that the arrival of a boat-load of unwanted Jewish refugees actually saved the fragile new colony of Georgia and probably prevented its total collapse.

Brunswick's Jewish community, however, does not seem to have been an offshoot from these original forty-two Jewish immigrants, as most of these original Savannah Jews -- fearing a likely invasion from Spanish Florida in 1741-- fled to the safety of more northern cities such as Philadelphia and New York. So, rather than coming from colonial England, Spain, or even Savannah, Brunswick's Jewish community has its roots much later in 19th century European immigration that began arriving in significant numbers after the American Revolution.

History has not revealed exactly why they chose to come to this area, but come they did; at first as simple peddlers and merchants, leaving the crowded cities and striking out cautiously in small numbers, providing basic products and

services to the wilder areas of the deep south once referred to by England and Spain as the "Disputed Lands". It could be that, as many of these early Jewish merchants in the Golden Isles were Ashkenazi immigrants from Central Europe, the name Brunswick may have held a special appeal for them, for the name Brunswick (or Braunschweig) is of German and western Ashkenazi origin, which along with its actual meaning of "Bruno's dwelling", had also --due to being close to an easy river crossing--idiomatically come to mean an "ideal resting place for merchants". Therefore, perhaps those few early Jewish immigrant merchants of Brunswick, like Gustavius Friedlander or Jacob Lissner (that we only know of through early census records), felt a special kinship to our ideal resting place, or "safe harbor" here on the Georgia coast.

Unfortunately though, just as in the Revolutionary War and precisely because it was a safe or good harbor, Brunswick suffered terribly during the War Between the States. After most able-bodied men were mustered into Company "A" of the 26th Georgia Regiment and marched north to defend their homeland, Brunswick's port was blockaded, her businesses closed, and her residents--Jews and Christians alike--were evacuated to safer areas further inland....and Brunswick pretty much ceased to exist.

It is not known how many of the early Jewish merchants marched north under the banner of "The Brunswick Rifles", but existing records indicate that merchants Friedlander and Cohen donated material to the "Brunswick Ladies" who met regularly (in exile, probably near Waynesville, Georgia) to sew uniforms and blankets for the Confederate soldiers.

Though Brunswick lost many of its residents and most of its economy to the disastrous consequences of the Civil War, it was the urgent needs of post-war reconstruction that became the phoenix of Brunswick's resurrection...And it was here during the turbulent times of the 1870's and 80's where the history of Temple Beth Tefilloh really begins. However, it is not a story of a Temple or Synagogue, as its name implies, but rather the story of a small group of Jewish immigrants from central Europe who, though struggling to survive in a strange new world, clung to their ancient faith and coalesced into a vibrant and dynamic community that became the congregation of Temple Beth Tefilloh.

Rather than a story of an historic structure, it is a story of a continuous unbroken thread of names.... hauntingly familiar names from the distant past that we hear recited in our Yahrzeit (memorial) services, or we see lighted on our memorial plaques. Names from the past that bring a smile of remembrance as we recall those who continued to build on the solid foundation left by that small group of Jewish immigrants so many years ago.

Holding one end of the historical thread that is Temple Beth Tefilloh is, of course, David Glauber, the recognized founder of our congregation, who on December

16th, 1886 proffered a resolution to twenty-one other Jewish men that stated in part:

“Imbued with a like spirit, a number of Israelites of this city of Brunswick...have taken the initiary step to form a Hebrew Congregation and to devise ways and means to erect ... a house to the Lord, to the glory of Him and the well-being of mankind.”

Though there is no record of the actual vote tally and though, historically, Jews rarely agree unanimously on anything (especially when four of the 22 men voting that December night were not followers of the relatively new American Jewish Reform movement, but were instead, “Old World” Orthodox Jews); the resolution nevertheless passed, and Temple Beth Tefilloh (TBT) was born.

As a note of historical context on other events occurring at the time of Temple Beth Tefilloh’s creation in 1886:

- **President Grover Cleveland solemnly dedicated the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor forever memorializing the Jewish poet, Emma Lazarus’ famous lines: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...”**
- **And in the same year, while a few of Europe’s recently arrived “huddled masses yearning to breathe free” were indeed freely forming a new synagogue in the safe harbor of Brunswick, Georgia, other Jews were being forcibly expelled from all Prussian territories in Europe by order of Otto Von Bismarck.**

From the very beginning, the founding group of twenty-two “like spirited Israelites” that founded, organized, and led TBT in the early years of its existence set a high bar for others to follow, for they immediately organized working committees, set about enlarging the congregation, started raising funds to build a synagogue, and engaged the services of Temple Beth Tefilloh’s first Rabbi, a “**Mr.**” **Eisenberg**; all the while still being actively engaged in the continued growth and development of downtown Brunswick. These early shapers of Temple Beth Tefilloh were not just involved in synagogue life; they also represented a dynamic cross section of Brunswick’s municipal, commercial, and professional elite.

The extent to which Brunswick’s Jewish community was also fully integrated into the larger community can best be demonstrated by the following excerpt from an article in the *American Israelite* (commenting on the many toasts) at the occasion of the dedication of the new synagogue in 1890.

“The responses [toasts] were characteristic in more than one respect. In the first place they were novel to the ear of the cool prosaic men of the North by their ... floridly poetic diction and vehement delivery, in comparison with which the Northern speakers appear like a kind of iceberg... In the second place the eloquence displayed, demonstrated the cosmopolitan character of the city, or perhaps of the whole State of Georgia. The fraternization of the human family was enunciated with particular stress and that “Love thy neighbor as thyself” was placed as the apex upon the great pyramid of all progress in religion, liberty, justice and humanity... Sentiments of this description are beautiful and extremely pleasant to hear. All this however, seems to be true in Brunswick, which is a cosmopolitan city in the noblest sense of the term. We met there, for instance, one Israelite President of the Board of Education (David Glauber) another, Chief of the Fire Commission (Robert Levinson), a third one, Treasurer of the city and the President of the congregation, Mr. Ullman, who is also the presiding officer of the Board of Alderman... Surely, that is a cosmopolitan city. It is a pity that we have no cosmopolitan country.”

Cosmopolitan, indeed, for had the writer of the above checked further, he would have also found that the City Recorder was a Jewish attorney named **Sam Borchardt** and that nearly a third of Brunswick’s Board of Trade members were local “Israelites”. As a matter of fact, if the eloquent reporter from *American Israelite* who wrote the above quote had been able to look into the future he would have also reported that the cosmopolitan nature of our fair city was not a short lived phenomenon, but continues even to this day. Surely, he would have noted that in one year (in the 1960’s), for instance, the head of the Elks Club, Rotary Club, Kiwanis Club, Brunswick Woman’s Club, and the Association of University Women were all members of Brunswick’s Temple Beth Tefillah.

It is clear that **David Glauber** and the twenty-two extraordinary gentlemen who skillfully melded the area’s disbursed Jewish groups into a cohesive congregation also took special care to effectively weave the thread of Brunswick’s relatively small Jewish community into the larger civic fabric of the newly emerging post civil war economy, helping to create and solidify a lasting image of shared cooperation and tolerance for the many religious and ethnic groups that is Brunswick and the Golden Isles today.

Indeed, any recently expelled Polish or Jewish immigrant arriving on one of the many ships frequenting our port at the turn of the twentieth century would have immediately seen welcomingly familiar names like **Borchardt, Eichberg, Glauber, Lissner, Levinson, Levy, Nathan, Pfeiffer, Ullman, Weiss, and Zelmanovitz** decorating the commercial store fronts of downtown Brunswick. In later years, names like **Altman, Bluestein, Cohen, Farley, Fendig, Friedman,**

Gordon, Isenberg, Ringel, Salkin, and Schreiber, became defining features of Brunswick's core professional, political, municipal and commercial centers.

As the earliest Temple records only recorded male members and their activities, it would be a mistake to assume that the Mrs. **Borchardt, Gordon, Nathan, and Ringel**, et al were quietly sitting home knitting shawls and having babies. Well, truth be told, they were having babies, but from the very start, were also actively involved in steering Temple Beth Tefilloh's community outreach programs, organizing and administering significant fund raising activities for internal projects, such as prayer book purchases, periodic building repairs, landscaping, etc, as well as collecting and distributing a seemingly continuous stream of funds for worthy charitable endeavors on both the local and national level. Even a cursory review of the Sisterhood minute books dating back to 1929 reveals an impressive portrait of the women of TBT that is every bit as capable, competent, and well read as their male counterparts. These amazing ladies of TBT not only kept everything running smoothly within the local Temple family, but also in the truest manifestation of concern for *k'lal Yisrael* (the whole Jewish people), they also found ways to send a continuous stream of funds to such diverse organizations as:

- The National Farm School; a Jewish "back to nature" effort in the 1920's to get Jews out of the urban slums;
- The Hebrew National Hospital in Denver, which became the Nation's primary pulmonary research and treatment center for TB;
- The Jewish Braille Institute for the Blind;
- Hebrew Orphans' Home;
- United Palestine appeal;
- The Red Cross, pledging in 1917 "to assist in any way, bodily and financially";
- The March of Dimes;
- The synagogue in Jamestown, PA which was destroyed by a tragic flood in March of 1936;
- And S.O.S. -- a massive relief effort to help the refugees and Holocaust survivors of WWII.

They also eagerly engaged in the traditional patriotic events of the times, like serving as hostesses at the U.S.O. as well as organizing a string of social affairs

for service men to be held in local homes. At one point they even had a Purim (costume) ball at the local U.S.O. Indeed, their creativity in coming up with innovative ways to raise funds for various charities and special causes is nothing short of awe inspiring.

Like their husbands, the Temple Sisterhood had a special sense of the importance of assimilating fully into the larger Brunswick community.

It is clear from the records that the financial and business skills of the Temple Beth Tefilloh ladies would have allowed them to easily survive on their own, but from its original formation (even before it decided on an official name) the Temple Beth Tefilloh Sisterhood created and maintained a Community Interfaith Committee charged with establishing and maintaining positive cooperative relationships with the various religious faiths and denominations in the area. According to Sisterhood minutes, they regularly participated in many local interfaith programs. And like their male counterparts, were (and are) well represented in most of Brunswick's social organizations and booster clubs.

Thanks to the friendly and caring relationships established by the Sisterhood's interfaith committee over the years, our neighbor, the First Methodist Church (located across Norwich Street from TBT), felt comfortable using our sanctuary until theirs could be re-built following a terrible fire in 1954. And again, in 1958 and '59 their Fellowship class used our facilities while they were undergoing expansion. There is a beautiful Kiddush cup in our sanctuary donated by the First Methodist church commemorating these examples of interfaith friendship and support.

Interestingly, even though Temple Beth Tefilloh has been blessed with some exceptional Rabbis throughout its long history; the Rabbis have not been the "glue" that has held this congregation together for over 125 years. Instead, a review of the historical data available quickly reveals that Temple Beth Tefilloh's continued existence seems to be directly attributable to the extraordinary skill and dedication of core members (both men and women) of the congregation who always step forward and freely give of their time and energy for the good of Brunswick's Jewish community.

Over the years, Temple Beth Tefilloh's congregation has fluctuated between twenty two original members in 1886 to around sixty member families in the 1960's; however, it has typically averaged around forty families for most of the time. As with most organizations though, Temple Beth Tefilloh has been actively sustained by a much smaller core group of dedicated congregants whose names appear over and over again, year after year.

In the early years it was names like: **Borchardt, Hirsch, Lissner, Pfeiffer,** and **Ullman**. Later it was **Borchardt, Fendig, Pfeiffer, Nathan,** and **Zell**; followed by the **Altmans, the Bluesteins, the Isenberg's, the Ringels, the Salkins,** and,

oh yes, **Pfeiffer**. Actually, **Fred Pfeiffer** joined Temple Beth Tefilloh around the beginning of the twentieth century and served as Temple Treasurer for over fifty years, and was documented to be the longest serving member of our congregation.

The cycle of core participants continued into the 1970's through the 90's with the repeated occurrences of familiar names such as, **Altman, Nathan, and Zell** that were now second generation core congregants along with fondly remembered names like **Berman, Isenberg, Klein, Ringel, Salkin, Schlaer, Schreiber, and Weiss**. And that powerful tradition of L'dor V'dor (from generation to generation) started by those "like spirited Hebrews" so many years ago still continues to this day. It is the defining element of Brunswick's Jewish community and Temple Beth Tefilloh.

This brief historical perspective has highlighted some of the many names that were instrumental in starting, lengthening, and strengthening the congregational thread that is the fabric of Temple Beth Tefilloh. However, in reality, (because some names were surely missed) all the names from, "Altman to Zell" should be honored for their efforts and service in creating and preserving a warm and familiar gathering place where all who desire may come freely and once again drink from those ancient wells of truth.