

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

MarkKBauman@aol.com

Bryan Edward Stone, *Managing Editor*

bstone@delmar.edu

Scott M. Langston, *Primary Sources Section Editor*

sclangston@charter.net

Stephen J. Whitfield, *Book Review Editor*

swhitfie@brandeis.edu

Jeremy Katz, *Exhibit and Film Review Editor*

jrkatz@thebreman.org

Adam Mendelsohn, *Website Review Editor*

adam.mendelsohn@uct.ac.za

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Founding Managing Editor*

rheimovics@cfl.rr.com

2016
Volume 19



Southern Jewish History

Editorial Board

Robert Abzug	Lance Sussman
Ronald Bayor	Ellen Umansky
Karen Franklin	Deborah Weiner
Adam Meyer	Daniel Weinfeld
Stuart Rockoff	Lee Shai Weissbach

Stephen Whitfield

Southern Jewish History is a publication of the Southern Jewish Historical Society available by subscription and a benefit of membership in the Society. The opinions and statements expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the journal or of the Southern Jewish Historical Society.

Southern Jewish Historical Society OFFICERS: Ellen Umansky, *President*; Dan Puckett, *Vice President and President Elect*; Phyllis Leffler, *Secretary*; Les Bergen, *Treasurer*; Shari Rabin, *Corresponding Secretary*; Dale Rosengarten, *Immediate Past President*. BOARD OF TRUSTEES: Ronald Bayor, Perry Brickman, Michael R. Cohen, Bonnie Eisenman, Sol Kimerling, Peggy Pearlstein, Jim Pfeifer, Jay Silverberg, Jarrod Tanny, Teri Tillman; Bernard Wax, *Board Member Emeritus*; Rachel Reager Schulman, *Ex-Officio Board Member*.

For submission information and author guidelines, see <http://www.jewishsouth.org/submission-information-and-guidelines-authors>. For queries and all editorial matters: Mark K. Bauman, Editor, *Southern Jewish History*, 6856 Flagstone Way, Flowery Branch, GA 30542, e-mail: MarkKBauman@aol.com. For journal subscriptions and advertising: Bryan Edward Stone, Managing Editor, PO Box 271432, Corpus Christi, TX 78427, e-mail: bstone@delmar.edu. For membership and general information about the Southern Jewish Historical Society, visit www.jewishsouth.org or write to PO Box 71601, Marietta, GA 30007-1601.

Articles appearing in *Southern Jewish History* are abstracted and/or indexed in Historical Abstracts, America: History and Life, Index to Jewish Periodicals, *Journal of American History*, *Journal of Southern History*, RAMBI–National Library of Israel, Immigration and Ethnic History Society *Newsletter*, and the Berman Jewish Policy Archive.

Southern Jewish History acknowledges with deep appreciation grants from the
Lucius N. Littauer Foundation, New York, and
the Gale Foundation, Beaumont, Texas.

Copyright © 2016 by the Southern Jewish Historical Society

ISSN 1521-4206

PERMISSION STATEMENT

Consent by the Southern Jewish Historical Society is given for private use of articles and images that have appeared in *Southern Jewish History*. Copying or distributing any journal, article, image, or portion thereof, for any use other than private, is forbidden without the written permission of *Southern Jewish History*. To obtain that permission, contact the editor, Mark K. Bauman, at MarkKBauman@aol.com or the managing editor, Bryan Edward Stone, at bstone@delmar.edu.

Exhibit Reviews

Seeking Justice: The Leo Frank Case Revisited. Organized by the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum, on display at the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History, Kennesaw, Georgia, August 2015 through November 2015. Curated by Sandra Berman and Jane Leavey.

A few miles from where an angry mob lynched Jewish businessman Leo Frank a century ago, a Georgia museum recently hosted an exhibition probing the events leading to his murder. Inside the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History in Kennesaw, one could see a life-size facsimile of the hanging tree as well as Frank's delicate, white baby shoes. With such compelling displays, *Seeking Justice: The Leo Frank Case Revisited*, organized by the William Breman Jewish Heritage Museum in Atlanta, transported the viewer back to a dark time when Frank's killers knew they would not be held accountable for their crime.

The exhibit was one of several events commemorating the passing of one hundred years since the only known lynching of a Jewish person in twentieth-century America. On the exact date, August 16, 2015, in Marietta, the town where the hanging took place, Rabbi Steven Lebow of Kol Emeth synagogue paid tribute to Frank by planting an oak sapling he termed a "tree of life." Some 350 people, including local politicians, lawyers, and judges, attended the prayer service that followed. At a historic theater nearby, the Georgia Historical Society sponsored a talk by Steve Oney, author of *And the Dead Shall Rise: The Murder of Mary Phagan and the Lynching of Leo Frank* (2003). Oney's interpretation of the case served as inspiration for the Breman exhibit. In downtown Atlanta, meanwhile, docents gave Jewish-themed tours at Oakland Cemetery, where Frank's widow, Lucille Selig Frank, is buried.

*Leo M. Frank. (Courtesy of the Cuba
Family Archives for Southern
Jewish History at the Breman
Museum, Atlanta.)*

From this reviewer's perspective, the curators magnificently met the challenge of not only conveying the complexity of the Frank affair, but also suggesting its continued relevance. Breman archivist Sandra Berman, the museum's former executive director Jane Leavey, and historian Andrew Ambrose, former deputy director of the Atlanta History Center, included the word "revisited" in the title to emphasize the latest findings regarding this perplexing episode. To do so, they assembled an impressive array of primary sources that are viscerally and intellectually stimulating. These items range from the benign—a sweet portrait of thirteen-year-old "Little Mary" Phagan, whom Frank was found guilty of murdering—to the macabre—a souvenir toothpick carved from the notorious oak tree. During the 1960s, this ancient specimen was chopped down to make way for a highway lined with fast food joints, and today no one would know that something awful happened there. It is more famous for being the home of the fifty-six-foot-tall "Big Chicken," which beckons drivers to pull over to eat the South's most iconic dish.

The most interesting pieces in *Seeking Justice* demonstrate the enormous efforts deployed to prosecute and defend the stoic, thirty-year-old engineer charged with strangling Mary Phagan, one of the many child laborers at Atlanta's National Pencil Factory. Prosecutors had an architectural model of the factory built to recreate the scene for jurors. Frank's

lawyers tried to pin the girl's murder on Jim Conley, a janitor at the factory, and their version of the story can be traced in a gruesome photographic reenactment that depicts a black-faced man eerily hovering over Phagan's corpse. After deliberating for two hours, Frank was convicted and sentenced to die on the gallows. Outside the court, hollers and shouts in praise of the finding emerged from a large crowd that had gathered in sympathy for Phagan. By this point, she had been elevated to martyr status. Subsequent to the verdict, a famous folk singer, "Fiddlin'" John Carson, even penned a song about Phagan's plight, with lyrics stating, "Little Mary was in heaven," and the judge "sent Leo Frank to hell."

Frank sought a new trial, contending that the courtroom atmosphere undermined justice. When he lost this plea, prominent Jewish leaders from outside the South were prompted to assist him in appealing the verdict. Top-notch lawyers paid by *New York Times* publisher Adolf Ochs and advertising mogul Albert D. Lasker invested thousands of dollars to pursue multiple legal avenues for Frank, the former president of Atlanta's B'nai B'rith chapter. Excerpts from the legal briefs trace their strategy, and accompanying newspaper articles show a growing awareness among opinion leaders that Frank had not gotten a fair shake.

In keeping with the theme of new revelations, the exhibit also included evidence unearthed by contemporary historians and even individuals involved in the 1913 case that suggests that Conley was the culprit in Phagan's murder. First, there is a note written thirty-five years too late by Conley's lawyer, William Smith, explaining why he had come to believe that his client and not Frank had killed the child laborer. Second, one could view a handwritten deathbed confession by Alonzo Mann, a coworker of Conley's, who said he saw the janitor carry Phagan's dead body to the basement of the pencil factory. Mann recounted in a video on display in the show that he never came forth to spare Frank because Conley threatened to kill him.

In the introductory section, visitors could learn that the Leo Frank affair was part and parcel of a specific historical context: the early-twentieth-century drive to transfer New York values to Atlanta. The transition of the former Confederacy from a rural agrarian past to an urban, industrial New South generated sharp racial, class, and ethnic tensions.

Scenes from Seeking Justice: The Leo Frank Case Reconsidered.
At top, Frank's office at the National Pencil Factory. Below,
news reports chronicling the aftermath of Frank's murder.
(Courtesy of the Cuba Family Archives for Southern Jewish
History at the Breman Museum.)

Demagogues like Populist politician Tom Watson and other scandal-mongering editors exacerbated conflict, as seen in the inflammatory headlines of sepia-toned newspapers. "Police have the Strangler," read the banner atop the *Georgian*, an Atlanta daily owned by William Randolph Hearst, on the day after Frank's arrest. Newspapers sold the idea that the

transplanted New Yorker could not keep his hands off comely southern girls; Phagan was “innocence defiled.”

Later in the exhibit, there were surprising disclosures on the backgrounds of the men who kidnapped Frank from his jail cell in Milledgeville so they could prevent the “Jew pervert” from preying on other women should he be set free. For decades, this mob was seen the same way it was described in a 1915 *Chicago Tribune* cover story: representing a “half educated [South]” . . . “a region of illiteracy, blatant self-righteousness, cruelty and violence.” But, following the work of Oney, the exhibit has revealed that the ringleaders were upstanding members of their community: lawyers, a doctor, a sheriff, a judge.

For those looking for something positive to glean from Frank’s ordeal, the exhibit has highlighted the principled action of Georgia governor John Slaton. His decision to commute Frank’s death sentence to life imprisonment, despite risking political suicide and his own lynching, is recounted by his great-niece in a videotaped interview that was viewable in the exhibit.

Listening to the interviews with the families of Frank and Phagan in the show’s final room made clear that this will not be the last word on this subject. Frank’s great-niece, sixty-nine-year-old Catherine Smithline from New Jersey, and her counterpart, sixty-one-year-old Mary Phagan Kean, who lives in northern Georgia, both grew up ignorant of how their families’ histories were intertwined. However, while Smithline views her uncle as a scapegoat, Kean conducted her own investigation and published a book, *The Murder of Little Mary Phagan* (1989), concluding that Frank was indeed the killer. Although not mentioned in the exhibit, Kean has become a darling of white supremacists who share the distorted ideology of the lynch mob.

While touring the exhibit over the Thanksgiving holiday at the Southern Museum, a docent warned our group about the adult nature of the display. My take as a historian and a mother is that what is shown is no more disturbing than the way television depicts crime, with the added benefit that all perspectives are relayed empathetically. Jewish visitors, exposed to the Holocaust at an early age, would find what they saw tame in comparison. Like the most sophisticated Holocaust exhibits, this one pointed to causes and consequences as well as the horrors that unfolded.

The most significant consequences have to do with issues that unfortunately remain germane in the twenty-first century. The case gave rise to a rebirth of America's premier racist and nativist group, the Ku Klux Klan. The group chose the top of Stone Mountain, an ancient granite outcropping that overlooks Atlanta, to engage in cross burnings for the next half century. In 1924, the United Daughters of the Confederacy sponsored the construction of an enormous carving on the side of the mountain, similar to Mount Rushmore, depicting their heroes, Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson. One could see a commemorative Klan postcard depicting this marvel in *Seeking Justice*. Whether this white supremacist monument should still be displayed is an ongoing debate in today's multiethnic Georgia.

To combat the antisemitism dredged up by the Frank case, national Jewish leaders of B'nai B'rith founded the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), which successfully attained a 1986 ruling by the Georgia Board of Pardons and Paroles recognizing the state's failure to protect Frank from being murdered. The ADL would have preferred that Georgia issue a posthumous pardon exonerating Frank.

Given the scope of *Seeking Justice*, more than an hour would have been needed to appreciate the entire exhibit, especially if one wanted to listen to the absorbing video oral histories. After leaving Georgia, the exhibit traveled to the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, the state where Frank was raised, educated, and buried. It was in New York until the end of August 2016.

Ellen G. Rafshoon, Georgia Gwinnett College

The reviewer may be contacted at erafshoo@ggc.edu.

Congregation Mickve Israel Museum. Congregation Mickve Israel, Savannah, Georgia. Curated by the Mickve Israel Museum Committee. Permanent exhibition.

Every Jew living in Savannah wears the community's history as a badge of honor, but perhaps proudest of all are the members of Kahal Kadosh Mickve Israel (KKMI). Formed in 1735 by the original forty-one

Jewish settlers who arrived on the banks of the Savannah River in July 1733, Mickve Israel is the third oldest Jewish congregation in the United States. In fact, some of the current members trace their lineage back to the original settlers. Their current building was constructed in 1876 and is the last known neo-Gothic synagogue in the country. Located within Savannah's beautiful historic district on Monterey Square (which it shares with its more notorious neighbor, the Mercer-Williams House of *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* fame), in addition to being an active synagogue, KKMI is a popular destination that serves more than ten thousand visitors a year for tours of its sanctuary and museum.

Visits to KKMI begin in the sanctuary. Groups are seated in the pews to hear the story of how the original settlers came to arrive on the shores of Savannah. It is a tale of Jewish hardship that begins in the time of the Inquisition, since nearly all of the original settlers were from Iberia.

The focus then shifts to the magnificent but most unusual – for a synagogue – architecture. The docent uses a recorded audio presentation narrated by the late Alan Gaynor, a local attorney and lifelong congregant who died in 2010. In his smooth voice with a charming southern accent, Gaynor describes the features of the historic building.

While the sanctuary, with its nave and transept, bears a remarkable resemblance to churches and cathedrals constructed in the Gothic style that was all the rage of the Victorian era, the narrator assures us it was built as a synagogue. Although the choice of architecture was intentional, we learn that the long and narrow “trust lot” on which the synagogue is built also influenced the design of the building. All around are sights to behold – magnificent stained glass windows, original Gothic furniture, the distinctive Holy Ark.

Along with the narration is background music that includes liturgical selections sung by KKMI's professional choir and the famed tenor Mandy Patinkin, who sang at the congregation's 275th anniversary celebration in 2008. Their singing is accompanied by KKMI's pipe organ, another of the synagogue's unique features. The strains of the organ on the recording are at once soothing and unexpected. Popular only in a limited number of Reform Jewish congregations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the pipe organ has virtually disappeared from the American synagogue. Even churches are turning to other forms of music that appeal to younger generations.

*Mickve Israel, Savannah. (Library of Congress, left.
Courtesy of Lynn Levine, right.)*

KKMI was the first Jewish congregation in America to play instrumental music in worship services when, in 1820, it used a borrowed organ during the dedication of its original synagogue, the first in the South. The year prior, Sheftall Sheftall, a descendant of a founding member, attended the dedication of the new sanctuary at the nearby Independent Presbyterian Church, where he heard organ music played. This experience inspired him to have the same for KKMI. The visitor sees that the current organ fills the center of a choir loft. While some are tempted to surmise that the loft once served as seating for the congregation's women, we learn that KKMI was on a path of religious liberalization even before occupying this building, having mixed seating in the pews since 1868. The congregation officially affiliated with the Reform movement in 1904.

The tour moves upstairs to the Nancy and Lawrence Gutstein Museum, which underwent a major one-million-dollar renovation completed in 2015. The compact space, approximately six hundred square feet, now uses museum-quality lighting and display casing to exhibit the congregation's treasures collected for almost three hundred years. The docent points out a panel noting that of six colonial Jewish congregations, only

KKMI has complete primary records from its founding up until the present. Beneath it is a case with the journal of the Minis family, one of the founding families. The journal was discovered with some items gifted to the University of Georgia in the 1950s and then returned to the congregation. A timeline with the congregation's history stands in front of a rail where visitors can look down at a model of the *William and Sarah*, the ship that carried the first settlers from London to Savannah in 1733.

Seven descriptive panels and five large exhibit cases cover the other three walls of the room. The panels are used as much to supply context for the congregation's place in the history of the United States and Savannah as to provide a detailed history of the congregation. In addition to the story of KKMI's founding, there are examples of accomplishments of members and their descendants, such as Herman Myers, the first Jewish mayor of Savannah, or the great-great-grandson of a congregation founder, the distinguished naval commodore Uriah Levy, who purchased Monticello and saved it from ruin after Thomas Jefferson's death. The exhibit cases contain artifacts as varied as a *hanukiya* and circumcision kit that belonged to the original settlers and a *Playbill* for *Driving Miss Daisy*, written by Alfred Uhry, a congregant's cousin.

Also in the exhibit cases are replicas of some of the congregation's presidential letters. KKMI has letters written to the congregation by every president of the United States since George Washington. The originals are safely archived at the Georgia Historical Society.

The center of the room is dominated by two cases containing KKMI's prized possessions: two *sifrei Torah*, written on deerskins, that have been deemed the oldest in existence in the United States. One was carried by the original settlers and another by a group soon after. Both were produced in Italy during the fifteenth century.

Mickve Israel is Savannah's second most popular site on the Trip Advisor tourism application, and it is easy to understand why. Although it is difficult to compress almost three hundred years of any history into a single room, Mickve Israel has done so admirably. A stop at this historic site, along with a tour conducted by one of its well-trained docents, leaves visitors with a good perspective of the long history of Jews in the South, particularly of this storied congregation in Savannah.

Tours of the sanctuary and museum take place Monday through Friday (excluding Jewish and federal holidays), from 10 A.M. to 4 P.M., closed 1–2 P.M. for lunch. The last tour begins at 3:30 P.M. There is a requested donation of seven dollars per person.

Lynn Levine, Savannah Jewish News

The reviewer may be contacted at lynn.r.levine@gmail.com.