

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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## Exhibit Reviews

**A Better Life for Their Children: Julius Rosenwald, Booker T. Washington, and the 4,978 Schools that Changed America.** Produced and curated by Andrew Feiler. Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, New Orleans, Louisiana.

On the second floor of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, Andrew Feiler's black and white photographs, each accompanied by a text panel, line the exposed brick walls of a small gallery. The exhibition, titled *A Better Life for Their Children*, examines the Rosenwald schools. According to the opening text panel, Feiler documented 105 of the surviving five hundred Rosenwald school buildings, drove more than twenty-five thousand miles, and interviewed "dozens of former students, teachers, preservationists, and community leaders in all fifteen of the program states."

Described as "one of the earliest collaborations between Jews and African Americans," Julius Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington established the program to address significant discrepancies in facilities, funding, and opportunity for Black students, whose public schools were often in "terrible facilities with outdated materials." Between 1912 and 1932, the program built 4,977 schools across fifteen states, with one final school built in 1937.

The exhibition opens with three images that provide context for the rest of the show. Two stately photographs of individual portraits of the program's founders hang above a map. Washington gazes back at the viewer from his frame in the Tuskegee University president's home, and

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*(Courtesy of the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience, New Orleans.)*

Rosenwald's small portrait hangs on the nondescript white walls of the Noble Hill School in Bartow County, Georgia. Below the portraits is a reproduction of a 1932 map from the Fisk University archives indicating the sites of Rosenwald schools, teachers' homes, and industrial education shops. Although this wall provides important historical context, it leaves the viewer wondering which of the remaining five hundred structures Feiler documented and where they are located. An additional map showing the aforementioned information would help situate the show in the present day and tie past and present together. The images throughout the show also do not include the dates on which they were photographed – another important detail that would help contextualize the work.

Across from the images of Washington and Rosenwald, a photograph of a historical marker in Lee County, Alabama, indicates the site of the Loachapoka School – the first Rosenwald school and a logical first photograph. The blurred motion of a train passing through the right side of the frame and a truck speeding through the left side emphasize the stoic stillness of the sign, which is centered in the frame and in sharp focus.

This contrast suggests that this site is often ignored and that perhaps we should pay more attention to what is overlooked but right in front of us.

Meticulously composed and in traditional black frames and over-mats, Feiler's images sit squarely within the American documentary tradition. The photographs are generally punchy and high contrast, with roads, footpaths, and clouds framing his subject, leading the viewer's eye to what he wants us to examine. Recurring motifs of American flags remind the viewer exactly where these sites are situated, who they are about, and ask questions of American identity and regionalism. Wooden slats on floors, walls, and ceilings provide visual unity, indicate the similarity between many of the structures, and hint at the era in which they were built.

Portraits and photographs of archival material are interspersed between the images of the buildings, indicating who once occupied them and what might have been left behind. Feiler portrays his subjects with dignity and respect. They are often situated in the relevant environment or accompanied by photographs or other archival material related to their specific experiences with Rosenwald schools. The variety of images creates a dynamic show that consistently reemphasizes the relationship between past and present while remaining focused.

The show also includes three archival objects: two student desks and a lunch tray. The incorporation of these objects presents the viewer with a glimpse of the material reality of the spaces described by the images. The desks in particular echo Feiler's image of the lone desk in the otherwise empty Emory school of Hale County, Alabama.

The photographs and associated text panels are informative and tell a wide variety of stories, including enough text to tell a complete anecdote without overwhelming or losing the viewer. Some of the written material focuses more on individuals, such as the text accompanying the portrait of Ellie J. Dahmer, alumna of the Jasper County, Mississippi, Rosenwald school and the widow of slain civil rights leader Vernon Dahmer, Sr. Some give broader overviews of the Rosenwald school shown, or the Rosenwald program, such as the image of the restored classroom at the Pine Grove School in Richland County, South Carolina. The text panel informs the viewer about the number of students, size of the school, and the long-term impacts of Rosenwald education. Some texts talk about the interactions between the Black community and other marginalized communities in

the relevant area, such as the interactions between the Latinx and Black communities of Turkey Scratch, Arkansas, and Black and Indigenous communities of Oklahoma.

Given the space limitations of the gallery and the breadth of Feiler's work, the show is ambitious. About twenty schools are represented. Visitors should plan to spend at least an hour in the gallery in order to read all of the text and spend adequate time with the photographs.

*Emily Rena Williams*, Haverford College

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**What is Jewish Washington?** Curated by Sarah Leavitt. The Lillian and Albert Small Capital Jewish Museum, 575 3rd Street, Washington, DC.

The Lillian and Albert Small Capital Jewish Museum (CJM) opened to the public during summer 2023. Located in Washington D.C.'s Penn Quarter, the 32,500-square-foot museum stands out among Judiciary Square's many municipal courthouses and office buildings. The structure includes a modern, three-story exhibit space attached to the impeccably restored, red-bricked Adas Israel Synagogue that dates back to 1876. Named after donors to the historic building's restoration, the CJM encapsulates the past and present of Jewish culture in the nation's capital. Although Washington houses one of the largest Jewish communities in America, the city is not typically viewed as a Jewish mecca in the same vein as New York. The CJM proves that despite a dearth of scholarship on "Jewish Washington," it is in fact a place with a strong and influential Jewish heritage.

The museum's introductory exhibit, *What is Jewish Washington?*, traces over two hundred years of Jewish history in the region. The earliest known Jewish resident of the district, Isaac Pollock, arrived in 1795 as a builder who contributed to the first group of houses in the city. In subsequent decades, most Jews in the larger region lived as shopkeepers in nearby Annapolis, Baltimore, or Richmond. Many worked as peddlers in rural towns in Maryland and Virginia. Not until the 1850s did Jews establish small communities in D.C. Adas Israel, the oldest surviving synagogue in the city, was dedicated in 1876 with President Ulysses S.

Grant present. The event signified the first time in American history that a president attended a Jewish service. Upstairs, museum goers can walk in the synagogue's sanctuary where multimedia displays narrate the story of Grant's visit. Grant observed the dedication ceremony for three hours in the sweltering summer heat, and Jewish residents welcomed his presence as a sign of acceptance regardless of the antisemitic General Order 11 he had issued during the Civil War.

The rest of the exhibit frames Jewish Washington as a community of prominent civic leaders including politicians, Supreme Court justices, and average citizens whose business endeavors shaped the city. Washingtonians will recognize the names of regional staples such as Giant Food, a supermarket chain started by Jewish grocers during the Great Depression. Jews in Washington opened countless grocery stores, bagel shops and bakeries, bookstores, and more, depicted in an interactive map of the city. Entrepreneurial Jews thrived, but many residents encountered discrimination as well. One of the most striking exhibit objects is a housing advertisement for Spring Valley, a bucolic neighborhood surrounding American University. The ad promises that homes in Spring Valley are protected by "covenants which insure" a "selected personnel." Leases for

*(Imagine Photography, courtesy of the Capital Jewish Museum.)*



the neighborhood forbade “any person of the Semitic race,” including “Jews and Hebrews” from renting. For every instance of prejudice curators show, Jewish Washingtonians resisted. The exhibit spotlights the landmark Supreme Court case *Shelley v. Kraemer*, which held in 1948 that racially restrictive covenants were unconstitutional. Jewish attorneys, as well as Justice Felix Frankfurter, played a part in the outcome.

Jewish activism provides an essential component of the CJM’s narrative. Curators highlight how local Jews lobbied fiercely for causes that had national implications, including civil rights. Scholars of Jewish history or the civil rights movement likely know that many D.C.-area Jews marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., during the famous March on Washington in 1963. For visitors and school groups unfamiliar with the history, the museum places Jews at such iconic scenes. It further dedicates a heavily interactive space to issues of contemporary social justice. Geared toward younger visitors, the “Connect, Reflect, Act” exhibition introduces guests to one hundred Washingtonians whose Jewish values have informed their political practices. Curators use ample quotes from oral history collections to accentuate Jewish belief in “allyship,” which includes fighting for voting and reproductive rights and defeating Islamophobia. The exhibit deftly connects historical examples of injustice with present-day topics as told from a Jewish perspective.

Although impressively presented, the CJM’s historical chronology glosses over some key moments in local Jewish history. Urban renewal projects in the city, for instance, displaced Jewish communities during the 1950s. Talmud Torah, a large synagogue in Southwest D.C., stood for more than half a century before the structure was razed for redevelopment. Community displacement and adaptation would be worthwhile themes to explore, especially as the museum seeks to illuminate Jewish resilience. Some of the more compelling stories of Jewish Washington are also buried or minimized in the overall presentation. Visitors learn that the nation’s capital first implemented Prohibition in 1917, a few years before the Eighteenth Amendment established it nationally. Prohibition officers frequently targeted area Jews, but the exhibit does little to explore the ramifications.

The museum exhibit nevertheless accomplishes its goal of capturing the essence of “Jewish Washington.” The space proudly sports numerous

artifacts, including Ruth Bader Ginsburg's specially commissioned lace collar, family Torah scrolls as old as the 1840s, and posters printed in Yiddish that helped boost census participation from Jewish residents. The items on display suggest answers to the museum's central question—What is Jewish Washington?—as they come from Jews both famous and anonymous. No matter where or in what capacity they worked, the Jews of Washington, D.C., evidently left their mark.

*Andrew Sperling*, Center for Jewish History

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**Infinite Poem.** Produced and curated by Emily Rena Williams. Louisiana State University School of Art Alfred C. Glassell, Jr. Exhibition Gallery, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. March 2024.

Emily Rena Williams's photography and oral history project, *We had to know who we were; We had to know who we weren't*, represents her fascination with and appreciation for Jewish communities in the Deep South, places that are "often perceived as the very edges of the diaspora." The project's most recent iteration took the form of an exhibition entitled *Infinite Poem*, which was on display at the LSU School of Art Alfred C. Glassell, Jr., Exhibition Gallery in Baton Rouge from March 19 to March 28, 2024. The exhibit represents Williams's master's thesis, the capstone project in her MFA in photography from LSU. Williams began her graduate program in 2022 and has quickly become embedded in the close-knit southern Jewish community. She has taken several long road trips across the Deep South over summer and winter breaks to make photographs of Jewish spaces in more than sixty towns and to interview the people who are the stewards of those spaces.

The exhibit begins with large format 4x5 photographs of abandoned, unused, and (in the case of Woodville, Mississippi) razed southern Jewish spaces. This way of making photographs is "old school," Williams admits—a way to be connected to history through both subject and medium. Centrally placed as visitors enter the exhibit is Yehuda Amichai's "Infinite Poem," from which the exhibit takes its name. "Inside the brand-new museum / there's an old synagogue," the poem begins.

Inside and beyond those first black and white photographs exists a world of light and color — photographs of currently in-use synagogue interiors grouped by category of space, from spaces of prayer and worship to spaces of memory, education, and administration. In the center of the gallery, speakers play short clips of Williams’s dozens of oral history interviews, the voices guiding visitors through the space. The contemporary images blend together, hung on the walls to emphasize movement, suggesting one large southern Jewish synagogue rather than dozens of individual buildings with shared characteristics.

I was struck by the ways in which these photographs highlight the materiality of Jewish congregational life. The photographs feature objects used for ritual, including *tallesim*, prayer books, and a Shabbat song sheet left on a pew; objects used for signaling beliefs, including flags and posters in classrooms (“You can change the world”); and objects for operational purposes, like hangers in a coat closet and an ancient desktop computer with a long list of Alt codes taped to it. All of these objects are of equal importance for running a Jewish community, a task that is both spiritually meaningful and incredibly laborious.

As a viewer, I could not stop thinking about work. A photograph of Temple B’nai Israel in Victoria, Texas, features a close-up of peeling and discolored wallpaper. A photograph of Temple Beth Or in Montgomery, Alabama, features a row of filing cabinets filled with synagogue records. The leaders and members of these congregations must do both the labor of physical maintenance and the labor of memory-keeping.

Care, humor, and loss are written across the exhibit. Care is symbolized in a bulletin board full of letters and donations sent to Congregation K’nesseth Israel in Baytown, Texas, following Hurricane Harvey. Humor is illustrated in a small, cheeky photograph of fuzzy Torah scrolls in an ark at Adas Yeshurun Synagogue in Augusta, Georgia. Loss is evidenced in a photograph of memorial plaques at Temple Kol Emeth in Marietta, Georgia. I scanned this photograph relatively quickly in my first pass of the exhibit, then turned back to look more closely and noticed Leo Frank’s name in the lower right corner.

In an artist’s talk in the exhibit space, Williams spoke about the importance of the oral histories associated with the exhibit. The interviews are crucial, she said, “because I’m not from here.” A Chicago native,

*(Courtesy of Emily Rena Williams.)*

Williams is careful to let southern Jews speak for themselves through her project. The echoing voices in the gallery demonstrate Williams's affection for her subjects, besides bringing the photographs to life. But the choice not to include people in the images (which Williams attributes to a need for deeper intimacy before making a portrait of a subject) means that these can feel like images of emptiness and liminality. The gallery is full of rooms that people just left; you stand in front of an image (perhaps of a hallway at Ahavas Chesed Synagogue in Mobile, Alabama) and wait patiently for someone to step into frame and welcome you inside, but they never arrive.

Williams's emphasis on rural and small-town communities means that this is inherently a story about loss and decay (not just in the Jewish South, but across rural America). I found myself considering the transition that many rural and small-town synagogues will inevitably make from activity into disuse and wondering about those buildings in the black and white images. Who was the last person to step out onto the synagogue steps? Did they know that they would be the last one to lock the door

behind them? How many of these contemporary buildings will become nothing more than a historical marker and a memory?

For many visitors to the exhibit (and visitors to future exhibitions, of which I am sure there will be many), these photographs will provide an entry point into a small but vibrant type of community that is becoming increasingly less visible. In their charming and deliberate way, these images provide a peek into a private world. In one of my favorite photographs in the exhibit, the camera is positioned just before the half-open doors of the sanctuary of Congregation K'nesseth Israel in Baytown, Texas. From the doorway, the pews and bright white walls are bathed in perfect midday light. The viewer and Williams stand side by side, careful and caring outsiders waiting to be ushered through the doors.

*Nora Katz*, Medgar and Myrlie Evers Home National Monument  
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