

## **Congregation Mickve Israel: Background Information for Docents**

Our story begins in 1492 when the Jews were expelled from Spain during the Inquisition, ending a 300 year period known as the Golden Age of Jewry. Expulsion gave the Jews three choices: convert to Christianity (become Conversos); leave the country; or face imprisonment and the penalties of the Inquisition. Five years later, Portugal expelled the Jews from that country. While many Jews fled and many were imprisoned and/or killed, some became Conversos. Of the Conversos, though, some continued to practice Judaism in secret while living outwardly Catholic lives. These were the Crypto Jews. The Inquisitions and the Expulsions lasted for a very long time. The Inquisition wasn't revoked in Spain until 1834, and the Expulsion wasn't lifted until 1968.

In Portugal during the early 1700's Dr. Diego Nunez Ribiero was a wealthy, prominent physician. He was the chief physician to the Chief Inquisitor and to the Dominican monastery, and it was discovered that he was a Crypto Jew. He and his wife were imprisoned by the Inquisition but later released, probably because of his high position in the community. Taking his capture as a wake up call, in 1725 he orchestrated the escape of his family and other Crypto Jews to England. He hired a British ship and the men and women escaping Portugal told their friends that they were going to a party aboard the ship. The women sewed their lightweight jewelry and other valuables into the hoops of their skirts and the men carried what they could in picnic baskets. They sailed to London where they became part of Bevis Marks synagogue, the oldest congregation in Great Britain, founded by an earlier Sephardic group in 1656.

Once in London the men and boys were circumcised, the couples remarried in Jewish ceremonies and everyone exchanged their Christian first names for a Hebrew name. Diego Nunez became Samuel; his wife became Rebecca, etc. The group struggled economically and spiritually, however, trying to eke out a living as immigrants and trying to figure out what their Judaism was all about.

In 1732 King George II granted the charter for the Colony of Georgia to James Edward Oglethorpe and his trustees. The colony was to be located at the point south of the Savannah River, therefore acting as a buffer between Spanish Florida and British South Carolina. When the leaders of Bevis Marks learned of Oglethorpe's plans they approached the Trustees about including the Jews from Portugal but were refused. They then decided to fund the passage themselves. The immigrants had become an economic drain on the congregation and something of a Judaic embarrassment. Together with two families (8 people) from Germany, the Sheftalls and the Minises, 34 of the Portuguese Jews set sail on the "William and Sarah" for the New World in January, 1733. After a difficult crossing during which the ship was damaged and was forced to put ashore on the North Carolina coast for repairs, 41 arrived in Savannah on July 11, 1733. A child had died during the voyage. This was the largest contingent of Jews to arrive in colonial America.

When the “William and Sarah” arrived, Oglethorpe welcomed them with open arms because between February and July he had lost a third of his population due to “swamp illness”, probably yellow fever, and one who died was his only physician. Dr. Nunez was immediately put to work and was successful quelling the epidemic. All of his patients survived.

Oglethorpe had arrived in Savannah on February 12, 1733, with 114 colonists. He granted each family a 60 foot by 90 foot plot of land around a square for a home, a five acre garden plot and acreage in the country. Oglethorpe granted the new arrivals all of the privileges that were granted to the other colonists as well as later a cemetery plot. This first cemetery can be seen marked by a monument with a menorah etched on it in the median at Oglethorpe Avenue and Bull Street.

In November of 1733 the Trustees of the colony sent Oglethorpe a letter admonishing him to make sure that no Jews were to be allowed to settle in Georgia. Oglethorpe responded by having his charter reviewed by Crown representatives in Charleston and responding to the Trustees that the charter guaranteed personal freedom and freedom of worship to all colonists who would abide by the rules of the colony.... except Papists (Catholics). England and Spain were engaged in a religious war at the time. Therefore, the Jews stayed and integrated into all walks of colonial life.

There is a popular local story that the charter prohibited rum, slavery, Papists and lawyers, but that is not quite accurate. In 1735 the Trustees issued another set of rules which indeed prohibited “Negroes and Rum,” but lawyers were never banned.

The Jewish colonists had brought with them a Torah scroll and circumcision kit which had been given them by Bevis Marks. They began to hold religious services soon after arrival, naming their congregation Kahal Kodosh Mickva Israel, Holy Congregation of the Hope of Israel. They soon established a ritual bath and later the cemetery noted earlier. Another Torah scroll reached the colony from Bevis Marks in 1737. Both originated in the Spain/Portugal/Morocco area in the 1400's, are scribed on deerskin, and are displayed in the museum.

In 1739 the War of Jenkins' Ear broke out between Great Britain and Spain. The Portuguese Jews became nervous, with good reason, because the Spanish in Florida were getting close to Savannah. They were afraid that the Inquisition would catch up with them, so they fled to points north; Charleston, Philadelphia and New York. The German families, joined by other German Jews who immigrated to Georgia, kept the congregation going.

Throughout the rest of the 1700's the Jewish population continued to grow, integrate into Savannah's life, and prosper. When the Revolutionary War broke out, though, most of Savannah's Jews sided with the Colonials. Many joined the

Continental Army, were imprisoned, or fled. Mordecai Sheftall became the highest ranking Jewish officer in Washington's army. Unfortunately, he and his son, Sheftall Sheftall, were captured and spent two years in British prisons. After the war, however, Governor Edward Telfair, the first Governor of the new state of Georgia, granted Sheftall the charter for Congregation Mickve Israel.

The charter dates us back to 1733, making ours the oldest Jewish congregation in the South and the third oldest in America. The first congregation was Shearith Israel, the Sephardic synagogue in Manhattan. The second was Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island. Mickva Israel in Philadelphia was fourth, Beth Elohim in Charleston was fifth, and Richmond's Beth Ahabah was sixth. These are the six "Colonial" congregations, all existing at the birth of the United States.

As Savannah recovered from the war the Jews continued to be an integral part of life in Savannah, practicing their religion in members' homes or rented spaces. In 1820 they erected their first building, a wooden structure on the corner of Whitaker Street and Perry Lane, the second synagogue in the South. The building burned down in 1829, and a replacement was dedicated in 1838 in the same location.

The community continued to grow until the Civil War, during which many Savannah Jews sided with and fought for the Confederacy, while others sided with the Union. The war took its toll on the city and it took some years to recover. By the 1870's though, the congregation was bursting at the seams of their little building. They broke ground for the current building on Monterey Square in 1876, and it was completed in 1878.

It is a neo-Gothic structure with all of the elements of Gothic design. However, it was built to be a synagogue, never a church, and it is the only remaining Gothic style synagogue in North America. The temple was built in the Gothic style simply because that was the style of architecture prevalent in Savannah in 1876. Across the street where the United Way building now stands was a Gothic style Presbyterian church which burned down in the 1920's; behind Mickve Israel is a Gothic style Methodist church; and four blocks away is the Cathedral of St John the Baptist

The first social hall was built behind the sanctuary building in 1904. That one story building came down and was replaced by a two story building in 1956. The latter was replaced by the present three-story building in 2003. The windows above the ark and the chairs on the bimah are original to the sanctuary. The windows were installed for the cost of \$530 and the sanctuary itself cost \$50,000. The rest of the stained glass windows were installed from the 1890's to the 1930's, most of them being memorials to congregants. The faux marble pillars in the sanctuary are made of cast iron, one of the earliest uses of cast iron in interior construction.

The Jewish community of Savannah grew from those 41 founding members of Mickve Israel who came in 1733 and it has thrived. Today there are about 4000 Jews in a population of 300,000 in the Savannah area, with Jews prominent in all walks of professional, civic and political life.

Savannah has a Jewish day school as well as a combined Hebrew/Sunday school shared by the Conservative and Orthodox congregations. There is also the Jewish Educational Alliance (Jewish Community Center) which was founded in 1911 to assist the many Eastern European Jews coming to Savannah.

As for religious practices, Congregation Mickve Israel predates all separate groups of Judaism. Its members were simply Jews following traditional practices. At the dedication of the 1820 building an organ, borrowed from the nearby Presbyterian Church was used at a Friday night service. Following the custom of the time, Mickve Israel did not have mixed seating in that building, but the women did come to sit with the men when sermons were delivered. Mixed seating was established in 1868. The current building has always had mixed seating as well as an organ.

Savannah now has three congregations – Orthodox (B'nai B'rith Jacob), Conservative (Agudith Achim) and Reform (Mickve Israel). Congregation Mickve Israel officially became a Reform congregation in 1904. We currently have about 1000 members.