

Posted June 24, 2017 07:31 pm

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Presidential letters show support of religious, community freedom for Congregation Mickve Israel



Letters from 13 U.S. presidents received by Mickve Isreal on display at the congregation's museum. (Josh Galemore/Savannah Morning News)



A letter from President George Washington received by Mickve Isreal on display at the congregation's museum. (Josh Galemore/Savannah Morning News)



***A letter from President Barack Obama received by Mickve Isreal on display at the congregation's museum. (Josh Galemore/Savannah Morning News)
President George Washington appreciated the efforts and beliefs of Congregation Mickve Israel and all Jewish people, as written in a letter to Congregation President Levi Sheftall dated June 14, 1790. The same can be said about letters written in 1820 by former presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.***

These letters are among 13 written by presidents of the United States now on permanent display at the museum on the second floor of Congregation Mickve Israel at Monterey Square. Each president's letter is in response to a letter written by the congregation to that respective head of state.

It is all about religious and community freedom.

"The Jewish community wanted to tell the president [Washington] and in essence, our government, how lucky we felt that we had this freedom," according to Norman Hirsch, the head of Congregation Mickve Israel's docents.

"Most probably, Savannah itself was the first time in 2,000 years the Jews were completely free. The first place we know in history where Jews were accepted as complete citizens. The Jewish community was so thankful for what this country provided, we wanted to write letters letting him know. That was the real motivation behind it."

Sheftall initiated the first written conversation on May 6, 1789, after Washington was elected president Feb. 4 and took the oath of office April 6. He wrote to express an appreciation for Washington and the founding fathers.

Sheftall, in part, wrote, "Your unexampled liberality and extensive philanthropy have dispelled that cloud of bigotry and superstition which has long, as a veil, shaded religion, unriveted the fetters of enthusiasm, enfranchised us with all the privileges and immunities of free citizens, and initiated us into the grand mass of legislative mechanism."

Washington responded in the letter on display, in part, and often using similar phrases: "...I rejoice that a spirit of liberality and philanthropy is much more prevalent than it formerly was among the enlightened nations of the earth; and that your brethren will benefit thereby in proportion as it shall become still more extensive ...

"May the same wonder-working Deity, who long since delivering the Hebrews from their Egyptian oppressors, planted them in the promised land, whose providential agency has lately been conspicuous in establishing these United States as an independent nation, still continue to water them with the dews of Heaven, and make the inhabitants of every denomination partake in the temporal and spiritual blessings of that people, whose God is Jehova."

The dated manuscript from Washington to the congregation is part of the Washington Papers contained in his "Letter Book" at the Library of Congress, according to Congregation Mickve Israel.

Washington's penned affirmation reflects the joyous feeling of freedom, in citizenship and in religion, found by the Jewish community in Savannah, Hirsch said.

There were six colonial Jewish congregations at the time Washington took office. The first established was in New York, followed by one in Rhode Island. The third was Congregation Mickve Israel in Savannah. The next three were in Philadelphia, Charleston, S.C., and Richmond, Va.

They all discussed writing a joint letter congratulating Washington on becoming president, Hirsch said. "As typical organizations do, they bantered around on how to do it for over a year. So, Levi got antsy and sent along a letter from our congregation," which was then answered by Washington.

"Following that, Rhode Island sent one, and Washington answered that. The other four congregations sent a single letter jointly. The one quoted mostly is the Rhode Island letter." The letter from Washington on display is a photo copy. While no one knows the location of the original letter, the letter is acknowledged by the Library of Congress, Hirsch said. More recent letters to presidents were less political, simply congratulating them for their success. Recent presidential responses acknowledge Congregation Mickve Israel's history. The most current letter is from President Barack Obama, written during his second term. "... Older than the Union, Congregation Mickve Israel helped lay the foundation for the Jewish tradition in America and witnessed some of the greatest moments in our Nation's history," wrote Obama. "... May President Washington's wish, expressed in his letter to your congregation so many years ago, continue to bless your community, and our Nation, for generations to come ..."

A letter from the congregation was recently sent to President Donald Trump, and the congregation awaits his response.

THE PRESIDENTS

These are the presidents who responded to letters of congratulations by Congregation Mickve Israel and can now be seen as part of the museum.

- George Washington, June 14, 1790
- James Madison, August 1820
- Thomas Jefferson, Sept. 20, 1820
- Franklin D. Roosevelt, Nov. 26, 1940
- Dwight D. Eisenhower, Jan. 14, 1954

- Richard Nixon, April 4, 1973
- Gerald R. Ford, Aug. 20, 1974
- Jimmy Carter, March 7, 1977
- Ronald Reagan, July 6, 1983
- George H.W. Bush, Nov. 30, 1990
- Bill Clinton, June 21, 1993
- George W. Bush, Oct. 29, 2002
- Barack Obama, July 11, 2013