

Congregation Mickve Israel: A Self-Guided Tour

PART ONE: DOWNSTAIRS IN THE SANCTUARY

Welcome to Congregation Mickve Israel and to our historic sanctuary and museum. We are the 3rd oldest Jewish congregation in the US – dating from 1733 – and are still active 283 years after the arrival of our founders in Savannah. (The first congregation was Shearith Israel in New York in 1654, followed by Touro in Newport in 1658, then Savannah in 1733, Philadelphia in 1740, Charleston in 1758 and Richmond, VA in 1790; these were the only Jewish congregations that existed when George Washington was inaugurated.) Thus Congregation Mickve Israel began before the birth of the United States and you can actually follow the history of the nation through our eyes and experiences.

Our story begins in 1492 when all Jews were expelled from Spain near the beginning of the Inquisition. Many Spanish Jews then moved to Portugal, where they enjoyed five good years before the Portugal's own Expulsion and Inquisition caught up with them there. At this point, many of them were killed, many of them fled, and many became what we call Crypto Jews, Secret Jews or Conversos, living outwardly Catholic lives while secretly practicing their Judaism.

One of these Portuguese Conversos in the 1720's was Dr. Diego Nunez Ribiero, who was the chief physician for the Chief Inquisitor while leading a secret life as a Jew. He and his wife were captured by the Inquisition but were 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 thirty-four Portuguese and Spanish Jews to England. He hired a British ship and the passengers told their friends and relatives that they were going to a party aboard the ship. They then sailed for England under cover of darkness. Upon arrival in London they became a part of the Bevis Marks Synagogue, the oldest congregation in Great Britain, dating back to 1656.

Once in London, the Portuguese Jews struggled for a number of years, trying to figure out who they were, what their Judaism was all about and trying to eke out a living. The men and boys were circumcised, the couples were remarried in Jewish ceremonies, and everyone was given a Hebrew name. Thus, Dr. Diego Nunez became Dr. Samuel Nunez and his wife became Rebecca.

In 1732, King George granted a charter to James Edward Oglethorpe to establish the Colony of Georgia at the point where the Savannah River flows out to the Atlantic, therefore acting as a buffer between Spanish Florida and British Charleston. Oglethorpe arrived in Savannah on February 12, 1733 with 114 colonists. When two gentlemen from the Bevis Marks Synagogue in London, Francis Salvadore and Jacob Suasso, learned about Oglethorpe's plans for a new colony, they decided to fund the passage of the thirty-four Jews from Portugal to the New World. Together with two families from Germany, the Sheftalls and the Minises, they set sail for the New World in January of 1733 on the ship William and Sarah. On July 11, 1733, forty-one of them arrived in Savannah; a child had died during the voyage.

Audio presentation is played; when it ends, using the doorway to the right, take the elevator or stairs to the Museum on the 2nd floor, where the tour will continue.

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PART TWO: UPSTAIRS IN THE GUTSTEIN MUSEUM

Note that we do not allow flash photography in the museum. Thank you for your cooperation.

Go first to the center case, housing our two historic Torahs. These are the oldest Torahs in the US, handwritten by scribes on deerskin in the mid-15th century, probably in 1461. The first arrived here in 1733, brought by the original settlers, and the second came four years later, sent by a Dr. Lindo of the Bevis Marks congregation in London. The case containing our first Torah also contains a historic yad or pointer, and the case holding our second Torah has a wimple dating from 1794.

Now walk over to the time line mounted across from the ship model of the *William and Sarah*. It begins with the theme of the entire museum, "In the beginning we were here," and covers the entire period from 1492 to the present, highlighting major events in our story. Notice that in the 1740's most Sephardic Jews (from Spain and Portugal) left Savannah; this congregation has been composed of primarily Ashkenazi Jews (of eastern European background) since then.

Aside from the time line, the rest of the museum is arranged thematically.

Turn to the left and notice the panel titled Primary Sources. Read about the Sheftall Diaries, the original charter of incorporation and seal. Make sure you examine our first minutes book in the case below. Note how special it is to have all these original documents.

Now walk over to the panel titled Building for a Congregation. On the way, notice the corner stone on the wall. On the panel, note the photo of current building as well as the interior photo of the sanctuary as it appeared shortly after it was built. Read about an early notice of past due rent, the first use of an organ and the road to reform Judaism.

To the left is another panel, this one titled Colonial Congregation. You will want to look at the map of early Savannah, where you will see evidence of Oglethorpe's plan for the new city, with its squares, trust lots, and tithe lots. Read about early cemeteries and the contributions of Dr. Nunez to the health of the new colony. Notice the fragment of our first ark, which burned in a fire in 1829.

Walk over to the case in the corner, which contains artifacts and documents from the earliest years here in Savannah. Read about the unique Inquisition-era Hanukkah menorah and the original circumcision kit that arrived with the early settlers in 1733. Note the interesting historic documents also on display.

To the left of the case is a panel that continues the story of this American Congregation, covering the Colonial Period through the Revolutionary War. It includes pictures and stories of important individuals and events central to the history of this nation. Included is Mordecai Sheftall, who was not only one of the first non-native babies born in Georgia but also the head of the committee that sent representatives to the Second Continental Congress, served as the highest-ranking Jewish officer in the Revolutionary War, and was a prisoner-of-war. Read the letter Levi Sheftall wrote to George Washington upon his inauguration as the nation's first president in 1790.

Below the panel is a digital display screen that contains additional images and stories from the early period of our history. Explore as you wish.

On the left is a case that contains not only the letter written by George Washington in response to Levi Sheftall's letter of congratulations, but letters from Presidents Jefferson and Madison, a Presidential Pardon of congregant Abraham Minis after the Civil War, a note of thanks from General Robert E. Lee to the druggist Mr. Solomon, a Chatham Artillery helmet belonging to Rabbi George Solomon, and Rabbi Solomon's chaplain arm band from WWI. These all provide evidence that the Jewish community here was very much involved in the central events of their nation.

A panel to the left continues the saga. It tells the very interesting story of the rescue of Monticello, Jefferson's home, by Uriah Phillips Levy, a descendant of Dr. Nunez. You can learn about Solomon Cohen and his achievements, about Savannah's first Jewish mayor, Herman Myer, and about a fascinating trio of siblings, all of whom were heroes during the Civil War.

The case in the corner begins the next theme, Congregation for Generations, as it fleshes out the story of those families who have been here in Savannah for generations celebrating holidays, life cycle events and living out their lives. Note the old haggadah dating from 1784, a historic megillah that has been in Savannah for hundreds of years, the Sabbath lamp (which also appears in a photograph on the panel to the left), and a set of our prayer books from 1891, the first printed with English prayers.

The panel to the left continues the Congregation for Generations theme. Note the beautiful old ketubah (marriage contract), photographs of an 1885 confirmation service and a wedding ceremony in the early 1900's, and an invitation to a 1901 bar mitzvah.

Below is another digital display screen with more images and stories to explore about the modern period of our history.

The case on the left contains additional artifacts related to the generations-to-generations theme. Read about the real Miss Daisy, the community wedding ring, the beautiful matzah cover that was this museum's first donation, and the unique confirmation chain.

The next panel and the case to its left cover the theme, a Modern Congregation, and emphasize the fact that our legacy is not just in the past but continues to the future. We are a congregation very much active here in our community. You can look at the pictures and artifacts and learn about the history of Girl Scouts in Savannah, the interfaith activities with which we are involved, and the wonderful Shalom Y'All Jewish Food Festival.

We hope you have enjoyed your visit to Congregation Mickve Israel! We have created a digital kiosk for you to use if you want to learn more about our history; it contains the text of our Presidential letters, detailed information about our sanctuary windows, and much more. It is located in the entrance foyer. You may also want to view the special exhibit on our Holocaust Torah in the undercroft space.

Please return this Self-Guided Tour to the staff at the entrance and let us know if you have any questions. Thank you for coming and please let others know on TripAdvisor.com how much you enjoyed your visit!