Register now for spring meeting in Charleston and Summerville, SC
May 20–21, 2017
In this issue

"Little Jerusalem" – Alyssa Neely and Dale Rosengarten – This photo essay features some of the many Eastern European Jewish immigrants who helped to shape Charleston’s commercial district in the 20th century. It heralds a new online exhibit titled Mapping Jewish Charleston, which showcases numerous images of Jewish life in the port city from the era of the American Revolution to the present. 4

"The ‘Kingdom of Israel’ in this town”: Jewish Merchants in Antebellum Charleston – Shari Rabin – Jewish merchants in 19th-century Charleston, like non-Jews, were subject to the vagaries of running a business. It was important to cultivate relationships and earn a good reputation. Early credit reports not only assessed the soundness of a merchant’s finances, but revealed his standing in the community. Jewish identity also was noted in the evaluations. 8

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From Pineland to Flowertown: Jewish Merchants of Summerville – Lynne Post – Summerville, South Carolina, was attractive to Jewish immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s for the economic opportunities it offered as a health resort. Over time it proved to be valuable for its proximity to Charleston with its Jewish institutions. This Summerville native describes growing up among the pines, while going to school at the Charleston Hebrew Institute and Porter Gaud. 11

A New Project and a New Endowment – Martin Perlmutter – The Society sets its sights on broader horizons with the announcement of an ambitious history project and a new means for raising funds. 15

Letter from the President

The Jewish Historical Society’s Fall 2016 meeting in Greenville provided a wonderful opportunity to meet members of Beth Israel Congregation and learn about the region’s rich history. On Saturday we listed keynoter Diane Vecchio and participants in two panels traced the arc of change in Jewish life in the Upstate since the 19th century—a progression from peddling to retailing and manufacturing to professional occupations, and from Old Country ways to Upcountry identities. Our Sunday panel and afternoon tour focused on the life and contributions of visionary mayor Max Heller, who is widely credited with inspiring today’s vibrant urban fabric of downtown Greenville.

JHSSC’s board and officers warmly invite you to our Spring 2017 meeting, “The ‘Kingdom of Israel’ in this Town”: Jewish Merchants of Charleston and Summerville, May 20th and 21st.

A New Project and a New Endowment – Martin Perlmutter – The Society sets its sights on broader horizons with the announcement of an ambitious history project and a new means for raising funds. 15

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On the cover: 171 King Street by Norma Mazo Perlmutter, 1934. Sketches of George and Sonia Mazo’s grocery and deli on King Street, drawn by their daughter Norma. Courtesy of Benjamin and Samuel Means.

Right: Aleck Ellison, circa 1930, in Ellison’s Dry Goods, 560 King Street, Charleston, SC, forerunner to Ellison’s Dress Shop. Special Collections, College of Charleston.

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The ‘Kingdom of Israel’ in this town”: Jewish Merchants in Antebellum Charleston

by Shari Rabin

In 1845 pharmacist Philip M. Cohen (1808-1879) was described as “...doing a large and lucrative business who has made [considerable] money. In distress and indefatigable.” This evaluation comes not from a letter or a newspaper article, but rather, from America’s earliest credit reports. In 1841 the Mercantile Agency began collecting local opinions of businessmen from correspondents across the country, with an eye toward determining their creditworthiness. These records are a remarkable and largely unsung source for exploring the lives and reputations of Charleston Jews. Further evidence of their activities can be found in newspapers, census data, city directories, and archival collections, which have been explored anew by historical researcher Sarah Fick as part of Mapping Jewish Charleston, an ambitious digital project from the Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture. Philip M. Cohen’s activities are particularly well documented in an ambitious digital project from the Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture. PHILIP M. COHEN'S ACTIVITIES ARE PARTICULARLY WELL DOCUMENTED

Jews were prominent in many aspects of Charleston’s public life, and a number of them were fabulously wealthy. But Jewish merchants were a diverse lot, including men and women, immigrants and nativists born, well-to-do and of modest means. Their businesses ranged from pharmacies and groceries to hardware shops and dry goods stores. Through these various activities, Jews made their way in the city, although success was neither easy nor guaranteed. No matter their background or line of business, Jewish merchants discovered that what mattered most were relationships and reputations. According to the credit reports, in the late 1840s Cohen was worth $20,000, had a good reputation, and owned a home and “several negroes.” Slave-owning marked Cohen as a typical, if relatively well-off, Charleston Jew. Members of Charleston’s Jewish merchant community regularly owned slaves and several worked with much success as slave traders. Whatever their “commodity” of choice, however, Jewish merchants’ economic status was not certain to rise. Many Jewish merchants, especially immigrants, floated into town, failed to achieve economic stability, and left soon after.

Even for a native Charlestonian like Cohen, business was not easy. Mounting debts, robust competition, and disasters all could trouble economic life. By 1853 Cohen was working with a Jewish partner named Philip Wineman and was failing behind on payments to their creditors. Next, a fire broke out at his place of business and though they had insurance, it did not cover their costs. Popular opinion held that “even if he [should] recover the insurance money (which is somewhat doubtful) he will be worth, when ‘boiled down to cash’ about one dollar.” This turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. By February 1855 the store had failed. The following year, with backing from friends, Cohen opened a more modest drugstore and operated under his wife’s name to avoid association with his previous failure. While it is unclear how active Cordelia was in this new business, other women did enjoy an independent status as “feme sole” or “sole trader.” These were single women, widows, and wives, whose husbands gave permission for them to conduct business and own property.

Jewish men and women alike entered into business with non-Jews, though they often worked with co-religionists, if not relatives. Philip M. Cohen’s brother Lawrence L. Cohen, also a Medical College graduate, joined him in the business; by 1841 their uncle Hyam—Cohen’s brother—was a prominent supporter of the Confederate cause. Moïse Mordecai was a wealthy slave trader, and the credit reporters estimated that he purchased the store’s stock at half of its actual value. He turned the store over to J. H. Ashurst, the former bookkeeper, and kept Wineman on as clerk, pushing Cohen out.

While these relationships determined access to capital, reputation shaped access to credit, which was becoming increasingly important in the mid-19th century. Moïse and Grierson were deemed “steady and temperate” although Moïse’s “style of living”—considering that he owned no property—seemed to the credit reporter “unsuitable.” Potential creditors, he determined, should thus be “very cautious.” Of Edwin Moïse, in 1853 one credit reporter could “see 0/0 [nothing] to prevent him from getting...
his share of ‘plunder’ out of this wide world.’ By March 1856, however, he had quit business and was described as ‘character below par.’”

Besides noting financial and personal attributes, credit reporters often mentioned the Jewish identity of the merchant and considered it in evaluating creditworthiness. Descriptions of Philip Cohen regularly mentioned he was a “Jew,” sometimes differentiating him as a (presumably more trustworthy) “Native Jew.” After his failure, however, he was described as “an Israelite indeed but not without guile.”

Within six weeks of Benjamin Mordecai’s takeover of Cohen’s business, it had “acquired a very smutty reputation.” The new owner was described as “possess[ing] of a large share of the qualities so generally attributed to Israelites” and “JEWS from A to Z.” The report elaborated, “If paying is profitable + politic they will pay.”

Jewish identity could be a liability, then, but it could also be an asset. When Moise and Grie rson opened for business, the credit reporter noted that competition was fierce, but predicted they would get the patronage of the “Kingdom of Israel” in this town, a large Kingdom.”

In the first half of the 19th century, even as religious reform and sectionalist politics were on the rise, Charleston Jews were working to put food on their tables. Many of them did so by buying and selling commodities, work in which their Jewishness shaped their business relationships, their financial identities, and their economic trajectories.

Shari Rabin is assistant professor of Jewish Studies and acting director of the Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture, http://jewishsouth.cofc.edu/

NOTES
2. Charleston Courier, January 13, 1845, 3.
6. Ibid., appendix p. 411.
9. Fish, 1833 Research for Mapping Jewish Charleston. 10. Ibid.
12. Fish, 1833 Research for Mapping Jewish Charleston.