

Jewish Life

Inside Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim
SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTO

TRAVEL

FILM

BOOKS

HANUKKAH

COMEDY

PARASHAH



Discovering early Jewish history in Charleston

SANDY BORNSTEIN
SPECIAL TO THE CJN, CHARLESTON, S.C.

There's an incredible amount of Jewish history here, a city that is also well known for its low country cuisine and former plantations, historical buildings, and war memorials. And where else in the U.S. can you visit the oldest and largest colonial Jewish cemetery in the South, the oldest American synagogue in continuous use, and the birthplace of the American Reform movement?

Back at the end of the 17th century, Jews had migrated to Charleston, S.C. for economic opportunities and religious tolerance. In 1749, the Sephardic Orthodox community established Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (KKBE).

By the time Charleston's Jews had become organized, only a small number of Sephardic Jews had found their way to the New World and had established communities in New York City, Newport, Rhode Island, and Savannah. Some of

the estimated 2,000 Jews who resided in the colonies at the time of the American Revolution took up arms in the fight for independence. Francis Salvador, a member of KKBE, was the first Jew to hold elective office in the colonies and also was the first Jew to die during the war.

From 1780 to 1792, the congregants worshiped in a converted cotton gin. A synagogue constructed in 1792 was later destroyed by the Great Fire of 1838 and then rebuilt in 1840 by David Lopez, Jr., a prominent builder in a time when few Jews entered this trade. It was the first time in American history that a practicing Jew built a synagogue.

This 19th century colonnaded building is considered one of the finest examples of Greek Revival architecture. Inside the synagogue, our tour guides, Randi Serrins and Anita Moise Rosenberg, reminded us that Charleston boasted "the largest, wealthiest, and most cultured Jewish community in North America in the beginning of the 19th century."

In the aftermath of the 1838 fire, the

more liberal-minded Jews were able to convince the majority of the KKBE congregants to install an organ in the new sanctuary. This radical departure from Jewish tradition was the first time that an American synagogue permitted instrumental music during a religious service.

To meet the needs of the more traditionally-minded Sephardic Jews, a second synagogue, Shearit Israel (SI), was organized. Lopez's nephew, David Lopez Cohen, built SI. It was the second American synagogue to be constructed by a practicing Jew. With the financial assistance of Judah Touro, a New Orleans philanthropist, this Orthodox group purchased their own burial ground next to KKBE's cemetery and constructed a wall to separate the two parcels.

A third cemetery was started in 1843, after David Lopez's Christian wife died within days of giving birth to their sixth child. According to Jewish tradition, his wife and her infant child were denied burial within a Jewish cemetery. Lopez, an SI leader, opted to purchase a tiny

strip of land adjacent to the SI cemetery for his wife and family and arranged for the construction of an elaborate stone and stucco Gothic revival monument to honour his first wife.

During the Civil War, the Jews of Charleston supported the Confederacy. Many local Confederate Jewish soldiers are buried in the Coming Street Cemetery. After the war, the South suffered and the population started to decline. To keep Jewish life intact, the liberal members of KKBE and the traditional members of SI merged into one congregation. The walls separating the two sections of the cemetery were removed.

An influx of eastern European Jewish immigrants in the 19th century created the need for an Ashkenazic synagogue. Berith Shalome (currently Brith Sholom Beth Israel) was established in 1854 and shortly thereafter purchased land for a cemetery. KKBE opened a second cemetery in 1887.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

Additional synagogues opened to meet the needs of the community.

Serrins and Rosenberg, along with fellow docents share the KKBE narrative with individuals and tour groups. Out-of-town visitors seeking access to the Coming Street Cemetery will need to make an appointment to enter the 12-foot stucco and brick-walled cemetery.

Inside are approximately 500 marked graves of veterans of the Revolution, the War of 1812, and the Civil War, congregational rabbis and leaders as well as congregants. Several hundred more graves remain unmarked. About one-fifth of the marked 19th century graves were for children who died before the age of three, many from an epidemic of smallpox.

Today, the three sections of the cemetery have become one sacred place that serenely illustrates Charleston's early Jewish history. Lopez's efforts to memorialize his wife with a grandiose Gothic canopy are an eye-catching spectacle for modern visitors who are intrigued by Lopez's response to his SI congregation and the modern Coming Street Cemetery's inclusive policy.

Congregants, historians, preservationists, community service groups, and volunteers have worked hand-in-hand to keep the cemetery intact. In recent years,

“

Today, the three sections of the cemetery have become one sacred place.

Frances H. Ford, a conservation lab specialist and expert in historic preservation, has continued the tedious process of restoring the deteriorating gravestones. Despite her efforts, significant restorative work remains to be performed on gravestones and the unstable exterior walls. At the time of our visit, KKBE and the Coming Street Cemetery restoration committee had only partially secured funding to cover the repair and maintenance expenses.

Serrins and Rosenberg remain confident that the required upkeep will be accomplished soon and that KKBE and the Coming Street Cemetery will continue to showcase Southern Jewish history. ■

Sandy Bornstein's visit to Charleston and Mt. Pleasant, S.C., was hosted by Explore Charleston.



The Coming Street Cemetery path. SANDY BORNSTEIN PHOTO

STEP INTO *Fall* AT FORESTVIEW

INDEPENDENT LIVING with meals, housekeeping, activities and more

FULL SERVICE LIVING with care services including medication management, 24hr emergency response, personal care, and more

ASSISTED LIVING with care services including medication management, 24hr emergency response, personal care, and more

ADVENT FORESTVIEW RETIREMENT RESIDENCE

416-398-4999 | 537 FINCH AVE. W. TORONTO, ON, M2R 0A8 | www.ForestviewRR.org

PESACH 2020 AT THE BEAUTIFUL MARCO POLO BEACH RESORT

CELEBRATING 25 Years!

HOSTED BY:
The Schechter Family
Trusted Leaders in Passover Tours

FOR RESERVATIONS
CALL HOWIE SARNOFF:
800-327-8165
marcopolopassover@gmail.com

Call Joy of AMIT Children
SOUTHEAST REGION
954-922-5100

FIRST CHILD FREE!
OFFER EXPIRES 12/31/19

- Oversized newly renovated rooms, many with terraces
- Poolside fitness, sauna, steam room
- Superb day camp program
- Private seder rooms available
- Gourmet glatt kosher cuisine with renowned Chef Andy Serano
- Cantor led or private seders
- Sumptuous Tea Room
- Top name entertainment
- Trips to major attractions
- Daily services, shiurim, lectures
- Scholar-in-Residence Program

RAMADA PLAZA MARCO POLO Beach Resort

19201 COLLINS AVE • SUNNY ISLES BEACH, FLORIDA
www.MarcoPoloBeachResort.com