

JEWISH FAMILIES
u
COAHOMA COUNTY
1817-1867

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PREFACE

Why didn't I ask? A visit to the cemetery and seeing all the names of people I can cover in this book created the reason I did this research. Why didn't someone record the story when the individuals lived? We think we'll never forget the information until no one is alive to remember. Each story, a disconnected puzzle piece, needs to be added to the next one to see the total picture.

These families stories show the following:

COTTON symbolizes daily activities related to productivity.

FAMILY works together as the mainstay of life, and

RELIGION glues all parts together.

This historical documentation includes a cultural and economic view by using government records, newspaper articles, and other secondary references plus oral interviews of those who can say, "Lived there, know this."

Previously, the website Issaquena Avenue maintained on-going data. I removed it because the author can no longer pay the fees, and no one volunteered to continue it. Thanks to all the families who participated in providing data. Several of their great grandchildren used the website over the years and expressed gratitude for the work done.

This unpublished manuscript and digitized copy can be found at the following institutions:

Carnegie Public Library, Clarksdale, Mississippi,

Temple Israel, Memphis, TN (includes raw data records)

American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio

The Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life, Jackson, Mississippi

This historical and genealogical information was found in government documents and city directories between 1880 and 2003. The assistance of the library staff including Missy Craig, Past Director of Library, and Joanne Blue, Acting Director, is greatly appreciated.

To you who feel dates and stories aren't the same as you remember, keep in mind I am not an academic historian, so the raw data in this book may not always be exact facts authenticated by two sources of data. Nor did I analyze the data given, this presentation is pure raw data collected because of the time it takes to find each fragmented piece.

Hearty thanks to those who supported me in this endeavor. I do not remember all the people who contributed such information, be it small or large. I failed to keep a list of contributors in the twenty-five years to accumulate and record what I've written. How true it is that it takes a village to get a job done.

This historical perspective starting in 1868 chronicles the Jewish story of Coahoma County. The Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life ISJL website features the history of the local Congregation Beth Israel. See the 1939 Religious School photo on ISJL's website (Appendix), and the list(s) identifying names possible in the photo.

Although the first chapter includes 1868 and 1869, each remaining chapter represents a decade between 1968 and 1940. The last chapter covers information during and since World War II and other data from news articles and oral interviews between 1941 and 2000.

Within each chapter, the yearly subsection gives general data, such as both Mississippi's and Clarksdale events occurring during the year. The rest of the chapter lists alphabetically the Jewish family names. All data coming from newspaper articles and oral memories is quoted. Paraphrasing is used for U.S. Census and other governmental documents plus secondary resources, names, State of Mississippi, Memphis, Tennessee, and Helena, Arkansas.

Because this may be helpful to genealogical research, its purpose is not genealogical even though some genealogical data is included, primarily marriage dates and children names and obituaries. Copies of obituaries can be found in the Appendix.

Because this type of history is more folklore than accurate documentation, If you believe it is wrong and have evidence to improve the accuracy, notify the Librarian or whomever is in charge of the institution.

Rabbi Wax, Temple Israel, Memphis Tennessee, was asked: "How Jews had survived in America," he answered to Marion Solomon, "Jews learned to assimilate without becoming assimilated.

WHERE THE SOUTH BEGINS

When you come to a land
Where everybody is a friend
Where, when you get off your train
Cordially, you are invited to remain.
There's where the South begins

When you come to a land where cotton is king
Where Negroes in the field, work while they sing
Where folks walk slowly, dragging their feet
Where folks hang out on each corner of the street
There's where the south begins

When you come to a land where you can settle on a farm
Where you can share the crop, on the strength of your arm
Where, if you never cropped, they will let you learn
Where, they furnish grub and money before you earn
There's where the South begins

When you come to a land, where you can settle in town
Where, if you are broke, they won't turn you down
Where you can start in business on a shoestring or two

Where in the course of a few years, you will be well to do
There's where the South begins

When you come to a land, where girls are fair
Where in virtue and charm have more than their share
Where a stranger is met with a smiling eye
Where your heart goes throbbing, Oh my, my
There's where the South begins

When you come to a land, where they vote democratic
Where men are brave, their features aristocratic
Where capital is always at peace with labor
Where people regard each other as neighbor
There's where the South begins

If you are dissatisfied elsewhere, come to the fair south
To the Delta, where we have no storm, cloudburst or drought
Where the Levees are safe, where we are cozy and dry
Where we have everything in the world that money can buy.

(Abraham Isaacson, New Yorker, October, 1950, CPLCC)

INTRODUCTION: MISSISSIPPI RIVER AND THE DELTA

At the time Mississippi became a state in 1817 and for a couple of decades after the Civil War, the Mississippians called the Mississippi-Yazoo

Delta—"The Bottoms" or "The Mississippi Swamps"¹This plush Yazoo River Basin of black alluvial soil extends 200 miles long and 70 miles wide. Lying between Memphis, Tennessee, and Vicksburg, Mississippi. It grew as a result of torrid weather and floodwaters depositing silt from the Upper Mississippi valleys. In the northwest corner of the basin and within Coahoma County, the Yazoo Pass converges into the Coldwater River. This flows south to the Tallahatchie, to join the Yalobusha River to form the Yazoo River. The Yazoo flows southwest and empties into the Mississippi at Vicksburg. Boatman roamed the bayous and rivers, such as the Sunflower and Hushpuckena, looking for the calmest clearings and the best plots to settle.

Most pioneers preferred to build their plantations and towns along the riverbanks since the bald eagles, panthers, wolves, plus the wild cats, possums, rats, as well as snakes, alligators and bears occupied the swampy wilderness. Many settlers knew about the Delta's tremendous wealth-producing potential, but few had capital, credit and the labor force of slaves to tame the area included within the Choctaw Cession.

On the 400th anniversary (5/22/1941) of the discovery of the Mississippi River the National Society of Colonial Dames erected a handsome marker at the intersection of Highway 49 and Highway 61 confirming DeSoto's visit. It is identical to the marker standing at the mouth of the Manatee River in Florida, where the conquistador landed in 1539. The latter commemorates the

explorers 4,000 mile marched into the wilderness of the southern part of the United States. The marker at Clarksdale commemorates DeSoto's discovery of the Mississippi River in Coahoma County.²

The grueling, fast-paced fanning followed the production schedule of cotton:

1. Land preparation: From late January to mid-March, the families clear, ditch and repair large acres of land to prepare for planting.
2. Planting: In April and May they plow and plant regardless of the heavy rains.
3. Cultivation/Irrigation then hoeing followed during the severe hot summer days.
4. Insect control/ Mature Cotton/ Open cotton fields/Hand/ mechanical picking/Gins. Bales/Winter.
5. Although they pick some early cotton in August, the picking season starts in September. The harvesting and ginning continue through the freezing rain, ice and snow of November, December and early January.³

The cycle of the cotton plant:

1. Seedling Cotton
2. White bloom
3. Red bloom
4. Green boll
5. Cracked boll
6. Open boll
7. Defoliation



COTTON CLOCK

(Harris Barnes)

COTTON FACTORS

The cotton factor served a significant financial role in cotton production:

Chronic money shortages created the need for credit from the factor serving as a middleman. Between planting and harvesting, storekeepers and large planters who were called plantation owners used financial notes from factors for supplies, for financing the crop and for selling it in the market towns. The factors borrowed money from the cotton wholesalers and repaid them in cotton. The wholesaler received money from New York bankers who loaned out 90 days notes. Their financed only the sale of cotton in the marketplace, not the year-round production. At harvest time, the banker's notes forced the wholesaler to push the factor who pushed the planter to ship cotton as soon as possible. Because the factor could not finance year-round production schedules or the small cotton grower's debt, a country merchant acted as the factor. The storekeeper consented to one year's credit for supplies and assisted in various types of arrangements for negotiating with many factors. In

addition, the merchant agreed to other barter-type transactions. Thus, his customers thought of him as more than storekeeper because he resolved the trading needs for both large and small cotton producing families.⁴

The Commercial Appeal article (6/30/2006) gives credit to cotton as the link between the Delta, the national economy and the world during the 19th Century.

January 3: Two French vessels arrived at Ship Island with 300 settlers for Pascagoula and Bay St. Louis. (Date not available)

CHAPTER 1

1811 TO 1867 EARLIEST GROWTH OF CLARKSDALE

1811

December 11: The greatest earthquake in American history caused a stretch of the Mississippi River from north Mississippi to Madrid, Missouri, flowed backwards. Today, New Madrid, MO, replaced Madrid because the latter became submerged.

1817

McLemore wrote:

Another religious group that has become an integral part of Mississippi life is the Jewish community. At the time of statehood in 1817, there were possibly 100 Jews in Mississippi. The Universal Jewish Encyclopedia gave the following account of further migration of Jews into Mississippi: a number of migrants to the United States from Eastern Europe settled in Mississippi, particularly in the cities and towns between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers in what is known as the Delta section. Here many became not only merchants and professional men but also owners of farms and plantations. About fifty communities of Mississippi had ten Jews or more in 1942 Mississippi admitted to Union.⁵

1820

First signs of community life in this region: Either William Oldham or John Chism were the first to settle Port Royal, 7 miles west of Friars Point.⁶

1830

September 27: Dancing Rabbit Creek Treaty signed with Choctaw Indians.⁷ The diminution [cessions] of the Choctaw estate in Mississippi began in 1801 with Fort Adams being the first...The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek liquidated the Choctaws Nation in Mississippi. They surrendered their remaining Mississippi lands, [i.e.] ten and one-half million acres or 10,428,130 acres.⁸

Selma Lewis writes: “The first known Jewish settlers in Tennessee were probably peddlers who in the late 1830s and 1840s moved north from New Orleans, from the river towns of Mississippi, south from St. Louis, and west from Cincinnati and Louisville.”⁹

1836

Following the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, the Coahoma County is established by act of the State Legislature.¹⁰ On February 9, 1836, the state legislature mapped out the thirteen counties acquired from the Choctaw Cession of 1830.

River south to Vicksburg, a distance of approximately 175 miles and a breadth up to about 60 miles. It is located in the very center of an alluvial empire.

1838

Robert Friar, John Clark and other woodchoppers came to clear out the swamps of Coahoma for the few plantation owners who yearned to reap mighty-fine cotton crops.¹¹

1839

John Clark ventured up river for timber and for exploring the inland waterways. He began to use the east bank of the Little Sunflower River in Coahoma.

In a meeting with Alvin Labens, Burt Jaegar and Irwin Kaufman, Labens pointed out where the Mississippi River ran through Clarksdale: When you drive into Lyon, the low place is the riverbed where John got his first logs out of town. John Clark pulled out his logs and sold them at Delta Avenue where the road goes to the Country Club the old Friars Point Road. He used his money to buy the land.¹²

1840

From 1840 when Russians segregated Russian Jews into Pale Of Settlement, special groups were selected by financial or educational qualifications for purpose of best to win rights and privileges (merchants of first guild-university graduates, incorporated artisans).

1840 Census reports 763 whites/524 black slaves.

Delta post office opened.

“McLemore wrote, “No evidence of Jewish Immigration or organized Jewish life in Mississippi before the 1840s. Most of the early Jews in the state were immigrants from Germany, with a few from England. Late arrivals in the antebellum period emigrated from Russia and Poland. They supported themselves as peddlers and small merchants. Hard-working, enterprising men, more often than not they started out with no more than could be carried on their backs.”¹³

Cemeteries usually preceded the organization of Jewish congregations. The Jews of Natchez bought a cemetery in 1840, and they organized as the Congregation B'nai Israel in 1843. Memphis started the Jewish cemetery in 1847, but the congregation did not become chartered until 1857. Clarksdale started with the congregation, and the cemetery was purchased circa 1916. (1840)

1841

Friars Point begins to be used as a store port.

Port Royal: venue for circuit court; however, Port Royal and Old Delta did not survive the high water years. In 1841, the Mississippi [outgrew] its banks at Port Royal. From the earliest legends, the ever-changing course of the Mississippi created the need for major family decisions. With alarming regularity, the riverbanks caved in due to massive mudslides, gullies and avalanches.¹⁴

An organized Jewish congregation was established in Vicksburg in 1841. Initially known as the Hebrew Benevolent Congregation of the Men of Mercy, it assumed the name, Congregation Anshe Chesed, when it was formally incorporated in 1862. At the time of its organization there were between twenty-five- and thirty Jewish families living in Vicksburg. Religious services were conducted in various private homes or in a warehouse on Levee Street. The latter was owned by one

of the more prosperous members, Barnard Yoste, who acted as their president and conducted the Orthodox services. It was not until 1868 that ground was broken for a temple. At the outbreak of the Civil War about fifty families belonged to the congregation. Although occupying a minority position in the community, they were apparently well accepted. M.A. Levy served as a selectman in 1832 and again in 1833, while L. M. Lowenberg held the office of Justice of the Peace in Warren County.¹⁵

1842

The boundary of Coahoma County changed due to releasing a large portion to Bolivar. An election is held for the selection of the county seat, Delta, at the mouth of Yazoo Pass, winning over Port Royal and Friar's Point. Delta selected as county seat.¹⁶

1844

February 24: The University of Mississippi was chartered.

This major flood of 1844 happened only months after James Alcorn arrived from Kentucky. Coahoma County voters sent him to the state legislature to propose his levee bill. The state legislature passed his two bills to approve the levee.¹⁷

Andrew Jackson, a one-time property holder in Coahoma County, is reputed to have constructed a private levee running from near what is known at Rescue Landing a point prominent in Coahoma's history.¹⁸

1846

Mexican-American War (1846-1848) Two citizen in Coahoma County participated: "Benjamin Saunders and Isaac N. Brown."¹⁹

1848

Clark bought 101 acres to send logs easier along the Sunflower to the Mississippi to avoid fierce competition; however. most settlers carved out prosperity at the river landings, such as Union (commonly call) Friars Point, Port Royal, and Old Delta.²⁰

Delta is incorporated.²¹

Old Delta's streets turned to canals as floodwaters forced high ridges to crumble. Although some families rebuilt New Delta, most picked up and shifted downstream seven miles southwest to Union where the river lowed at the J-shaped bend. Because everyone thought of Union as Robert Friar's town, the local citizens always said Friars Point. Families moved close-b because the cotton crop yield kept doubling, and they owed the commission agent or factor.

1850

Nearly one million pounds of cotton to send to market every year was produced and was ginned by 2,780 black and white settlers with their.²²

Levees: The first whites established their wood yards and small clearings on the higher spots of the river bank, the problem of protection from overflows remained a significant issue. Prior to 1850,

little progress made in levee building but in this year the work greatly stimulated by a generous grant of lands from Congress.²³

1851

Sewing machine invented by Elias How improved by Singer between 1851 and 1856. Many immigrants had gained knowledge and experience in Europe in the manufacture of clothing. Trained in the old country, they came to America at a time when ready-made clothing developing popularity and their skills were timely assets in this industry.²⁴

1852

Friars Point is incorporated under the name of "Union", and in the same year, the name is changed to read "Point Friar".²⁵

1854

“Officially, Temple Israel [formerly Children of Israel Congregation] came into being on Match 2, 1854.”²⁶ Originally, the congregation followed Orthodox law. Word spread by word of mouth and southern Jewish publications. Many Jewish immigrants throughout Arkansas. Mississippi and Tennessee went to Memphis for weddings, births, bar mitzvahs, deaths or any major life cycle events as no other synagogue existed nearby.

1856

June 1856 to 1863: From 1840 when Russians segregated Russian Jews into Pale Of Settlement: Special groups were selected by financial or educational qualifications for purpose of best to win rights and privileges (merchants of first guild-university graduates, incorporated artisans).

1858

Another flood: legislature created a general level district for the entire Delta. Even though the major flood of 1858 initiated the start of the 262-mile levee; the state had not borrowed the full amount (estimated \$6.25 million) to complete it.²⁷

1859

John Clark, founder, begins building his home near Sunflower River.²⁸

1860

January 9: Mississippi, the second state, seceded from the Union.

January 23: Rabbi Tuska, Congregation of Children of Israel, Memphis, TN publishes an editorial on anti-defamation issues in the Commercial Appeal about the Jews accused of theft. The accusation led to the infamous Order #11 by General Grant.²⁹

February 18: Jefferson Davis inaugurated President of the Confederate States of America.

March: Abraham Lincoln inaugurated as President of the United States.

April 14: (Civil War began): The most able-bodied men, like Major General Nathaniel Bradford Forrest, left to fight for the Confederacy. Prior to the war, Forrest had lived in southwest Coahoma County at Green Grove, a 1,000-acre plantation.³⁰

May 4: First volunteers from Coahoma County leave for the War Between the States. The Coahoma Invincibles became Company B of the “Eleventh Mississippi Regiment.”³¹

Prior to the Civil War, there were many Jewish immigrants in Tennessee, Arkansas and lower Mississippi. They traveled by packet boat(s) to the Delta river towns. Coahoma County 1860 census does not list Jewish settlers.

Selma Lewis described the early Jewish peddlers: the immigrants wore backpacks filled with farm items and walked to each farmhouse. The farmers liked the peddlers because the farmers rarely saw strangers. The peddler would unpack in the middle of the room near the fireplace. They unfastened the pack to roll back the awning striped cover [to expose] brightly colored clothes in his first bag.”³² The smells came after opening the canvas: “sachets cheap perfumes, soaps, leather goods and spices filled the room with tantalizing fragrances.”³³

When peddlers saved enough money, they bought horses and buggies.”³⁴ When they put together a little more capital, they stopped traveling to buy inventories of bankruptcy stores to start their stores or “became wholesale dealers for other retailers.”³⁵ Many were successful from these small beginnings: Macy's, Lowenstein, Goldsmith, and Julius Lewis in larger towns like New York and Memphis; however, even smaller towns eventually had a Jewish department store.

The primary icon is the Jewish immigrant in the clothing business; however, immigrant Jews found diverse opportunities. Thus, for many the dry goods and general merchandise were a beginning. In addition, they became cotton brokers and factors, real estate brokers, barbers, auctioneers, wholesalers, grocers, liquor and wine dealers, tobacco and candy merchants, purveyors of leather goods, tailors, boots and shoes repair, cattle brokers, hatters and dry cleaners.

McLemore wrote, “Thus, on the eve of the Civil War, the few Jews who were in Mississippi resided for the most part in the towns and villages. Organized religious life existed at five different points: Vicksburg, Natchez, Columbus, Port Gibson, and Jackson. However, none of the congregations owned an official house of worship nor did any enjoy the services of a resident rabbi. Although no official census figures are available, one might safely place the number of Jews in the state in 1860 at approximately six hundred.”³⁶

Coahoma County population was 6,606 with 13 churches; land averaged \$30,000.³⁷

1861

John Clark stops building home due to Civil War, and he stopped increasing his holdings to become the tax collector for the district.³⁸ First volunteers from Coahoma County leave for the War between the States.³⁹

Plantations and cotton crops, especially the large crop of 1861, remained exposed to attacks by Yankee soldiers.

The women fought by protecting the family property. This included growing cotton, maintaining control of the slave and dealing with the unwelcome Yankee visitors.

1862

April; The Union forces occupied Now Orleans. Fort Penny (Helena, Ark) General Buford used James Robinson house as Union headquarters in Friars Point.⁴⁰

June 6: Confederate forces abandoned Memphis 6.

December 17: Order #11 by General Grant prohibited Jewish merchants from engaging in trade with the Treasury Department of the Union, especially soldiers' supplies.⁴¹ The order was issued in Kentucky. Because a Jewish friend of President Lincoln's wrote him about the order, Lincoln rescinded as soon as he read the letter.

Trading conditions in Memphis had a rippling affect throughout the Delta. Selma Lewis wrote, "Memphis became a major center of illegal trading after falling to Union forces because of its location on the Mississippi River and because it was the nearest city to St. Louis, the source of badly-needed pharmaceuticals."⁴²

Rabbi Bertram Korn wrote about the tensions in Memphis, "The outbreak of the war had created an impasse. Supplies from the North were cut off and a Union blockade of southern ports prevented importation of products from Europe. Shortages of all manufactured goods resulted in rapid inflation and the beginning of illegal traffic between the North and South. Union commanders ordered the cotton to be confiscated and declared cotton trading forbidden. The Delta planters faced perverse decisions: smuggling the cotton illegally to Mexican traders, having it confiscated by the Federals or letting the Confederates bum it. The families used remote warehouses or hidden sheds to protect themselves and the crops from Yankee searches."⁴³

1863

May-June: Delta burned by Sherman. ⁴⁴ Gen. Sherman's army of 32,000 men with a fleet of transports and gunboats, on their way to Vicksburg, rendezvous at Friars Point. Union forces by order of Gen. Sherman open a way through Yazoo Pass in seeking a route to Vicksburg down the Yazoo River but Confederate booby traps. Blocked these troops. Coahoma rebels joined the hundreds of their slaves who lined up along the bayous shores and threw rocks, spears and bullets. It delayed the Union troops a month, and it provided the time for the Confederates to prepare for Grant at the Yazoo River. However, this valiant effort did not save Vicksburg or the mighty Mississippi from total Union control in July 1863. In Coahoma County, cotton remained king but their beloved land belonged to the enemy who set the labor forces free.⁴⁵

1865

April 9: Civil War ends officially with the surrender of General Robert E. Lee to General Grant at Appomattox, Virginia.

1866

April 25: The nation's first Declaration Day held (currently called Memorial Day) at Columbus. The town's women placed flowers on the graves of both Confederate and Union soldiers.

According to Cobb during his description of this year, investors leasing the land did not survive long. Short crops of 1866 and 1867 created severe problems leading to heavy losses. The cotton-growing schedule had required more workers than they could hire. The freed slaves left to search for their children and relatives separated by slave trading before the war. They believed this new freedom meant, not only working when they wanted to, but owning land, a piece of the action. They insisted on negotiating for land, not wages, for their work but the families refused.⁴⁶

1867

According to Baucom and Sage, “The Negroes exercise the right of the ballot for the first time, in the election held for or against a State Constitutional Convention.”⁴⁷

CHAPTER 1: MISSISSIPPI AND THE DELTA

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