

Beth Elohim First Reformed Jewish Synagogi

Almost from the beginning of its history, Charleston has had an active Jewish community. The city's first Jews were Sephardic Jews from Portugal, Spain and England, who built a synagogue in 1692, the oldest in continuous use in the country.

Actually Charleston in the late 18th century was a good place for Jews to seek refuge. It was a cosmopolitan seaport in which persecuted minorities and some black freedmen had rights they didn't have in other colonies.

There were enough Jews in Charleston by 1749 to organize the congregation, Kahal Kadesh Beth Elohim (Holy Congregation House of God) and, 15 years later, to establish the now historic Coming Street Cemetery, the oldest Jewish burial ground in the South.

At first prayers were recited in private quarters and then from 1795 in a synagogue adjacent to modern temple grounds. In 1792 work began on a big and impressive new synagogue. The dedication came two years later.

From the 18th century, Beth Elohim has produced a number of important and famous congregants. The list includes Moses Lindo, the developer of indigo cultivation; Joseph Levy, probably the first Jewish officer in America; and Frances Salvatore, who served as a delegate to the South Carolina Provincial Congress of 1775 and 1776 and thus became the first Jew to serve in a legislative body. Later, he became the first Jew to die in the Revolutionary War.

In all, more than two dozen men of Beth Elohim served in the Revolutionary War.

When George Washington became president in 1790, Beth Elohim wrote congratulations. Washington replied, saying, "the affectionate expression of your address excites my gratitude and received my warmest acknowledgement. May

the same temporal and eternal blessings, which you implore for me, rest upon your congregation..."

In 1824 controversy arose among the synagogue's congregation when 47 members asked for changes in the traditional orthodox liturgy. Among their demands were the desire to have an English translation of the Hebrew service and introduction of an organ during services.

After the petition was denied, the members resigned and formed the Reformed Society of Israelites. It lasted for nine years during which time many of the practices that are part of today's Reform Judaism originated. To Beth Elohim goes the distinction of being the first Reformed congregation in the country.

Later in 1873 Beth Elohim became one of the founding synagogues of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. The synagogue has become committed to Reformed Judaism to this day.

When the great Charleston fire of 1838 destroyed the synagogue, it was replaced on the same site by another fine structure.

Since its early days, the congregation has been involved in community service. In 1784 members established the Charleston Hebrew Benevolent Society, the nation's oldest Jewish charitable organization and, in 1801, the Hebrew Orphan Society, also the country's oldest. Its most famous alumnus is Judah P. Benjamin, U.S. senator and later secretary of state of the Confederacy.

Commitment to formal education goes back to the middle of the 18th century with the opening of a Hebrew school where secular as well as religious topics were taught.

In 1838 the congregation organized the second oldest Jewish secondary school in the U.S. The noted blind poetess Penina Moise was an early superintendent.

Today, the illustrious tradition of

Beth Elohim is carried on by its membership that includes families belonging for generations and newly-affiliated congregants.

During recent years the congregation's membership has held steady. Beth Elohim is one of 700 Reform congregations which support theological seminaries in

Cincinnati, New York and Los Angeles and serve about 1 million Jews in the United States.

Beth Elohim is now on the National Register of Historic Places. Tours are conducted for the many thousands of tourists who come to historic Charleston each year.