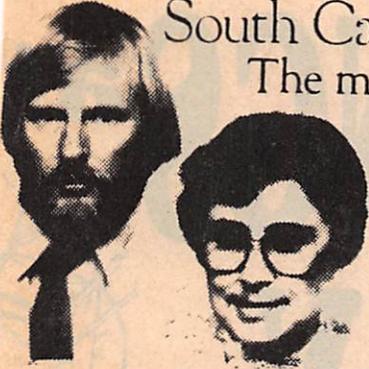


South Carolina's Story The making of a state



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Jews Came Early To South Carolina

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We have written about the contributions of Indians, Blacks, Scotch-Irish, and other ethnic groups to the making of South Carolina. Jewish people, too, have had a part to play in the history of the Palmetto State.

Jews came early to South Carolina. Charleston, for example, is the home of Beth Elohim, the second oldest synagogue in the United States.

It was here that one faithful and devoutly religious congregant, Penina Moise, spent much of her time. In 1842 she became superintendent of that temple's Sunday school and remained in that post for many years.

Penina applied her creative talents to church music. The great majority of the selections in *Hymns Written for the Use of Congregation Beth Elohim*, the first American Jewish hymnal, were her compositions.

In 1846 she published *Hymns Written for the Use of Hebrew Congregations*. Several of these hymns are used in Reform temples today.

Penina Moise was also a celebrated poet and Jewish author. She was born in Charleston in 1797, the sixth of nine children. Her parents had fled from a slave insurrection in Santa Domingo in 1791 and settled three years later in Charleston.

With the death of her father when she was 12, her formal education ended. But even though much of her time was consumed by the care of her brothers and sisters, Penina had a strong desire to learn. At night she would study and write often by moonlight.

She began with poetry as early as 1819 on both secular and Jewish themes. The poems began to appear in a number of newspapers from Charleston, Boston, Washington, and New Orleans, as well as *Godey's Lady's Book* and Jewish publications.

In 1833 she published a small book of poems called *Fancy's Sketchbooks*, the first book written by an American Jewess.

Penina Moise never married, perhaps the reason being that she had to devote her early years to the caring of her paralyzed mother. She loved and cared for people, as evidenced in 1854 when she spent months nursing victims of a yellow fever epidemic in Charleston.

Penina was a strong supporter of secession. When Charleston was attacked, she fled to Sumter where she remained during the Civil War.

By the end of the Civil War, her eyesight was failing her. Nevertheless, she managed to write poetry on a slate, which was transcribed by her niece, Jacqueline Levy. Penina kept the slate under her pillow to scrawl on at night.

Besides writing, she helped her sister, Rachel, run a girl's school and orally taught classes in literature.

Penina was also a leader in the intellectual circles in Charleston. Practically every Friday she held a salon at her house that attracted the cream of Charleston's literary society.

By the end of her life Penina was almost totally blind. She also became feeble with age and rarely left her room. She managed, however, to exercise by walking a mile a day.

Penina posed a distinctive figure to those who saw her. She would sit in a rocking chair in the corner of the room, a black woolen shawl over her head (even in summer), and green shades shielding her eyes. There she would remain "poor, blind, and very plain."

Her great comfort in old age was her religious faith. On High Holy Days, girls were sent from the Beth Elohim temple to record her parts of the service.

Penina Moise died in 1880, having authored more than 350 poems. Thirty-one years later she was honored by the Charleston Section of the National Council of Jewish Women, which published *Secular and Religious Works by Penina Moise*.