Diaspora North:
Early Jewish Settlement in Lewiston and Auburn

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It is commonly said that the Jewish Diaspora has propelled Jews and the Jewish religion to the most unlikely places—to every corner of the globe. Maine, while not the corner of the globe, is at least the corner of the United States, and here, too, did Jews emigrate, settle, and form a community. Lewiston became something of a center for Jewry in Maine. At its height, the Jewish community in Lewiston numbered something along the lines of 1,400 peoples.¹ In the 1930s and 40s there Zionist organizations within the city, all-Jewish fraternities and sororities at the local high schools, and even an all-Jewish Boy Scout troop.² By the 1930s, when the Jewish community constituted only one-and-a-half percent of the total population of the two cities³, their economic and cultural influences far belied their actual numbers. Like most beginnings, though, the earliest history of the Jews in Lewiston and Auburn is humble in scale. First, however, we must put Jewish settlement in Lewiston in the larger context of Jewish migration and immigration in Northern New England and Maine in particular.

The first Jewish pioneer known to have settled in Maine was a man named Susman Abrams. Sometime during the Revolutionary War Abrams settled in Waldoborough with his Christian wife. His fellow Jews were slow in coming, however. There is very little evidence that suggests Jewish settlement in Maine at this time was anything more than a very minute trickle. That is not to say, however, that Jews were wholly unknown here. Quite probably the first Jew to enter Lewiston was not a settler,

¹ *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. “Maine.”
³ Alprent and Bornstein incorrectly state the percentage as 14%.
but one of many Jewish peddlers who radiated north from Boston and New York to Southern Maine to peddle various goods. Some believe settlement occurred in Lewiston as early as the founding of the town 1795.\textsuperscript{4} If this contention is true, these early Jewish Lewistonians most likely did not stay long, living not in their own residences but as boarders in the many boarding houses that existed. Boston, the biggest and oldest urban center of New England, did not have a sizable or organized Jewish community until the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century. Even so, it took only a decade after Boston’s first congregation was organized for Maine’s Jewry to organize one of their own. This occurred, amazingly, not in Lewiston or Portland, but in the bustling lumber town of Bangor. The first Jew in Bangor was a man named Haiman Philip Spitz who arrived there in 1848 and set up shop as a clothier catering to the large population of lumber workers. He must have been successful for he was followed by five more Jewish families. Both the Jewish community and the congregation, however, did not survive the economic panic of 1856-57.\textsuperscript{5} In conceptualizing Jewish migration in New England, a simplistic and misleading notion would be to assume the migration took place in successive waves emanating from the population loci of New York and Boston up on northward, much in the fashion of the Californian missions. This does not seem to be the case. Rather it seems that Jewish families and entrepreneurs were very transient in nature, following swiftly on the heels of regional economic successes wherever they might be. The example of Bangor in the 1850s is a case in point. If Jews made it as far north as Bangor by 1848, it is very likely that Lewiston’s and Auburn’s booming manufacturing industry and swelling immigrant

\textsuperscript{4} Paul K. Wason, Yvette LaChapelle, Paul LaChapelle et al, “The Churches of Lewiston-Auburn: A Pictorial History 1795-1995.” (I am told Rabbi Webber wrote the section on the two Jewish Congregations)  
\textsuperscript{5} Encyclopedia Judaica, s.v. “Maine” and “Boston.”
populations lured, for a time, at least a few Jewish businessmen or even families before permanent settlement occurred after the Civil War.

Local tradition holds that three Jewish men settled in Lewiston with their families shortly after the Civil War and quickly rose to economic and social prominence. According to Paul H. Gottlieb, who wrote on the Jewish community in Lewiston in the late 1970s, and who conducted several interviews, the three first settlers were the Ehrenfrieds, the Greenbergs, and one I. Isaacson. Gottlieb tells us the traditional year of arrival was thought to be 1865.6 Israel Alpren and Hymen Bornstein, however, broaden the possible settlement period to the years 1865-1868. Alpren and Bornstein, writing in 1930, name the same three as Gottlieb. Their information appears to have come directly from community interviews and is reckoned not mere tradition but fact.7 Rohna Isaacson (quite possibly a descendent of I. Isaacson) records in a Bates sociology paper written in 1949, that “the Jewish portion of the Lewiston population began with a nucleus of about three leading families all successful merchants.”8

The scant evidence that exists, however, does not support this tradition. The Stanwood Company issued directories for Lewiston and Auburn in the years 1860 and 1864 listing the heads of households and other males living in the cities, and also giving a listing of the local businesses. In these directories no ostensible Jewish names are to be seen.9 The business of making directories appears to have been taken over by the Greenough, Jones & Co., later the W. A. Greenough & Co. The next directory issued, I

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7 Alpren and Bornstein, p. 4.
8 Rohna Isaacson, “The Jewish Community of Lewiston” (sociology paper, Bates College, 1949) p. 3.
9 The Lewiston and Auburn Directory, containing the names of the inhabitants, their occupation and places of business, &c., with a History of Lewiston and Auburn (Stanwood & Co. 1850, 1864).
think, was a Greenough directory for the year 1872.\textsuperscript{10} Here, three Jewish names are recognizable. They are not however, the three named by tradition. There appears to be two brothers, Joseph and Faibel Friedman, residing at 17 Lisbon Street and operating J. Friedman & Co. sellers of dry goods. The other Jewish man is George Ehrenfried residing a couple doors down at 20 Lisbon Street and making a living by selling fancy goods. We cannot know for sure when these two families came to Lewiston, but by 1872 they were apparently operating successful businesses. The next Lewiston-Auburn directory was issued by the Greenough, Jones & Co. for the years 1874-75. Still there is no mention of Greenbergs or Isaacsons.\textsuperscript{11} Gottlieb purports to have found an 1876 Greenough directory that lists an Isaac Greenberg, a Nathan Greenberg, and a J. Greenburg.\textsuperscript{12} I have not found this directory. The next directory I found was another Greenough directory for the years 1880-81. In addition to the Friedmans and the Ehrenfieds, there have arrived in Lewiston two Greenbergs and two Greenburgs, all clustered together on Lisbon Street. One Isaac Greenberg, residing at 154 Lisbon, made a living selling fancy goods. A T. Greenburg also sold fancy goods but at 15 Lisbon and a Nathan Greenberg lived or worked alongside T. Greenburg at 15 Lisbon Street as well. Joseph Greenburg, at 2 Lisbon Street, sold dry goods. The kinship ties, if any, that bound these four men are ambiguous. Furthermore, J. Friedman appears to have died since we last saw him in the 1874-74 directory, but his business, J. Friedman & Co. is still in existence and run by his heirs, probably Faibel Friedman. Helen, his widow, is also

\textsuperscript{10} Gottlieb cites incorrectly as a Stanwood directory. Also, the Greenough directories probably overlap with Stanwood directories, though the 1872 directory is the first Greenough that the Lewiston Public Library has in its collection.

\textsuperscript{11} *Greenough's Directory of the Inhabitants, Institutions, Manufacturing Establishments, Societies, Business Firms, etc., etc., in Lewiston and Auburn* (Boston: W. A Greenough & Co., 1872, pp. 44, 44; 1874.

\textsuperscript{12} Gottlieb p. 3; It is possible that Gottlieb has mistaken the 1887 Greenough for a 1876 Greenough.
noted in the directory. The next Greenough directory of 1883 still lists no Isaacson. By now, J. Friedman & Co. is no longer in existence, though Faibel Friedman is still living in Lewiston. Also, a Michael Greenberg has settled in Lewiston selling dry goods and boarding on Ash St. George Ehrenfried, whose business was profitable enough to put out an add in the 1874 Greenough Directory, has by this time moved off Lisbon to the presumably nicer domicile at 28 Middle St. The 1885 Greenough Directory lists an Aaron Berman boarding at Lincoln House. There is no mention of this man in any of the texts I encountered, however, both his first and last names are common Jewish names. In addition, the Berman name was a common name among future Jewish residents of Lewiston-Auburn. Mr. Berman was partners with Lucius C. Dunham and Charles F. Anderson in the firm Aaron Berman & Co., specializing in the copying of photos. Joining Michael Greenberg sometime before the printing of the 1885 Directory is his brother Gilbert. Together they ran the firm Greenberg Bros. at 234 Lisbon.

It is not until the 1887 Greenough directory that the name Isaacson appears. By this year there are two Isaacs in Lewiston, Isaac B. and Sussel A., in the clothing business together under the name of S. A Isaacson & Co. at 15 Lisbon St. Sometime between the years 1883 and 1887 these Isaacson brothers settled in Lewiston and set up what was to be a very successful enterprise. Aaron Berman is now listed as a traveling salesman and still boards at Lincoln House. Helen Friedman is still alive, outlasting both Joseph and Faibel, and living at 168 Bates St.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{13}}\] Greenough's Directory 1880-81 pp. 70, 62.  
\[\text{\textsuperscript{14}}\] Greenough's Directory for 1874-75, p. 1 of advertising section.  
\[\text{\textsuperscript{15}}\] Greenough directories 1883 pp. 85; 1885 pp. 49, 96.  
\[\text{\textsuperscript{16}}\] Greenough's Directory 1887 pp. 60, 106, 128.
Why does tradition differ so markedly from the available evidence? This is an intriguing question and one that cannot be fully answered: not only is tradition inevitably flawed but the use of directories as evidence is far from ideal. A brief word on the use of directories, first. Though the Stanwood directories of the years 1860 and 1864 list no easily identifiable Jewish names this does not mean Jews were absent entirely. Jewish surnames are often hard to pin down beyond doubt as Jewish. Furthermore, many Jewish surnames were Americanized or “Anglocized” upon emigration to English speaking areas. Another cause for alarm is the fact that the 1864 Stanwood directory lists no French surnames. French migration, starting sometime around 1860, must have yielded at least a very small population of French-Canadians residing in Lewiston by 1864. It is possible that the language barrier prevented the listing of French speaking people in the 1864 directory. Or, possibly those who recorded names mistook the French-Canadians as itinerant laborers whose presumed temporary status did not warrant inclusion. The same could have also occurred to the earliest of the Jewish settlers who often led very fluid existences as peddlers.

Even so, the tradition of the three successful Jewish families settling in Lewiston after the Civil War seems to smack of something other than historically based truth. The earliest mention of this tradition that I found was in Alpren’s and Bornstein’s paper of 1930. By this time Lewiston’s and Auburn’s Jewry had come a long way from rather humble beginnings. It is these humble beginnings that this tradition tries to displace. Of the first three Jewish men in Lewiston, only George Ehrenfried encountered much sustained success. Yet eventually one of the Ehrenfrieds converts to Christianity (it might have been George himself) and the family lives on in Lewiston but no longer as
Jews. The other two men, Joseph and Faible Friedman are moderately successful but far from the patriarchs and progenitors of large and proud Jewish families. The Friedmans are easily forgotten and displaced by the Greenbergs and the Isaacsons; the Ehrenfrieds remain a presence in Lewiston Auburn (even into the late 20th century), and the Ehrenfrieds Department Store that subsequently formed probably elicited the disparate emotions of pride and disgust in the future Jewish community. If we examine the two families that eventually replaced the failed Friedmans in the local historical consciousness we see more evidence of success, but this time success that the Jewish community could claim as their own. The Greenbergs, in addition to becoming successful businessmen, as Alpren and Bornstein state, are also the holders of “outstanding” real estate. Isaac Isaacson meets with much success as a merchant in the clothing business. From there he becomes a member of the Lewiston Board of Trade. He is then elected to the State Legislature, becomes a member of the city council, and even campaigns (unsuccessfully) for the position of Sheriff. Isaacson becomes something like the hero of the Jewish community. The collective Jewish mentality that gave life to this tradition would much rather have wanted their present success built on a firm foundation of economic and social success rather than the shaky historical substratum provided by the Friedmans. The forming of this tradition, like many traditions, took some historical re-arranging but eventually entered its permanent place in the collective conscious of the Lewiston-Auburn Jewish community.

17 Isaacson, p. 1; Gottlieb, p. 4.  
18 Alpren and Bornstein, p. 4.
Bibliography


