

Maine + Jewish

מיין + יידישקייט

TWO CENTURIES



MAINE STATE MUSEUM

COVER

Israel Goldman in Amity, ca. 1910 | *Maine State Museum*
Goldman, a peddler who lived in Bangor, likely began his career carrying goods on his back until he could afford this cart and horse. By 1909, he ran a clothing store in Old Town.

YMHA basketball champs, Auburn, 1912 | *Barbara Shapiro*
Young Men's/Women's Hebrew Associations were the Jewish equivalent of the YMCA and YWCA, which in the early 20th century were distinctly Christian organizations. Branches in Auburn, Bangor, and Portland provided young Jewish Mainers with a comfortable environment in which to engage in athletics and other American recreational activities.

Girls at Camp Modin, 1930s | *Camp Modin*
Camp Modin, established in 1922, is the oldest surviving Jewish summer camp in New England. Maine's Jewish camps have long attracted children from communities throughout the Northeast.

Shaina Katz at her bat mitzvah ceremony, 1998 | *Robert Katz*
Shaina Katz celebrated her bat mitzvah at Temple Beth El in Augusta. It is customary for Jewish children to have a bar mitzvah (for boys) or bat mitzvah (for girls) at which the honoree demonstrates his or her ability to assume responsibilities of communal leadership such as chanting biblical passages, leading prayers, and teaching the community. In this photo, Shaina is reading from the Torah scroll.

Background: *View to Mt. Desert from Islesford* by Henry Isaacs (ca. 2009–2016). Henry Isaacs is a Jewish landscape painter who lives and works primarily in Portland.

Maine + Jewish

מיון + יידישקייט

TWO CENTURIES

Maine State Museum Exhibition Handbook Series
Number 3 September 2018



FROM THE MUSEUM DIRECTOR

In its breadth of comprehension, depth of exploration, and sharp focus on one ethnic entity, *Maine + Jewish: Two Centuries* is a departure from nearly 50 years of exhibitions at the Maine State Museum. The museum has touched on matters of ethnic identity before: 1982's *Chez-Nous: The St. John Valley* considered the ethnic and cultural distinction of the small, mixed Maine border community that was its subject. The museum has also presented three significant exhibits on aspects of Maine's Native American history, but only in 2016's *Beyond Boundaries: the World of the Capote* did it explore a specific tribal culture (Maliseet), and only through the narrow lens of a single outstanding item of Native attire.

No exhibit before *Maine + Jewish* has explored the whole range of a large Maine ethnic community's history, connections, and many cultural manifestations.

With *Maine + Jewish* we've taken on the interpretation of a whole ethnic "community" in the largest sense, a group sharing a common religion, similar ancestry, related historical background and outlook, and a distinct degree of communal connection and purpose. This is also a group with an indelible, extensive presence in Maine's past, present and future, and one with global implications going back some three thousand years. This exhibit project has been an enormous, perhaps even a presumptuous pursuit, especially as presented in a single exhibition gallery with only 1,500 sq. ft. of space. It is fair to ask why we chose to do this kind of project and what we hope might be accomplished by it.

At its most basic level, I thought the museum should occasionally leave the safe exhibit zones of commemorative history, decorative arts, industry, and the natural world, and be a little bolder by examining larger themes that involve real people, some of them now alive, and pose and possibly answer some big questions. What is a "community"? How does a community evolve? How do ethnic or religious connections support meaningful community life, and for how long? What are some distinctive and meaningful community markers that have helped shape Maine? And what might people be interested in learning about communities unfamiliar to them?

I thought that starting with Maine's Jewish community might be a way to pose such inquiries. I was already familiar with American Jewish history, having directed a Jewish museum in Baltimore early in my career. I knew something about Maine's Jewish communities and businesses, because for years my family owned four small Maine department stores, of the 'Five and Dime' variety, under the name of M.H. Fishman Company. I assumed that Maine's Jewish history would already be pretty well known and the sources for that history pretty well identified, making museum research in such a new area direct and not impossibly complicated. And I was sure that it would be novel, dramatic, and instructive for the state museum to develop a Jewish exhibit, and for the people of Maine to have a chance to learn about a group that had been on the scene for centuries, but remained largely unknown to most Mainers.

Opening of the M. H. Fishman Co. store in Calais, 1932 | *St. Croix Historical Society*

FROM THE GUEST CURATOR

I believe that these possibilities have largely been realized. Writing this introduction before the actual exhibit opening, I am curious to see how Maine's Jewish community will react to this largest exhibit ever produced about itself, even if it is not nearly large enough to offer an exhaustive treatment of its subject, or make more than brief references to the extensive landscape of Maine Jewish living patterns, domestic conditions, businesses, institutions, or social, political and religious engagement. It will also be instructive to see how non-Jewish Mainers react to seeing this community revealed in the museum's spotlight and to what degree the exhibit will promote those old but eternal values of understanding and knowledge, and the more recently emphasized ones of interest and engagement.

The development of this exhibit expanded the emotional connections and the research abilities of the Maine State Museum, and also our organizational and physical capacities: it has the largest number of loans (62) of any exhibit the museum has mounted, as well as an unusually complex and densely-populated design. A novel element was the acquisition, dismantling, fifty mile move, storing and reassembling of a majestic Torah ark; and the inclusion of contemporary art installations and interactives is emphasized to a new degree. Little about this exhibit was routine. It is my hope that what we have learned here will in time also assist us in developing other major exhibits about other major Maine communities, other human streams contributing to the peopling of our state.

We were lucky to engage as the exhibit's Guest Curator Dr. Amy E. Waterman, who has brought great knowledge and creativity to this effort. I thank our advisory group, and especially Dr. David Freidenreich of Colby College, who brought the thinking and resources of Colby's Center for Small Town Jewish Life to the great enrichment of this project. On the museum staff, Amy Thompson, registrar; Natalie Liberace, collections manager; Teresa Myers, objects conservator; Linda Carrell, conservation specialist; Ryan Walker, exhibits preparator; Joanna Torow, chief educator; and Sheila McDonald, deputy director, each contributed essential skill and work that made the exhibit not just possible but in many ways glorious. The compelling and engaging design was provided by Brewster Buttfield. The lead exhibit sponsor was the Sam L. Cohen Foundation, whose substantial gift ignited the whole endeavor. Significant support was also provided by the Maine Humanities Council, the Jewish Community Endowment Associates (Bangor), and the Unobskey Foundation, among dozens of supportive private and institutional friends. It is hard to believe that this single exhibit required almost three years of planning and development, but the result is something that is a source of pride for the museum, and that I hope will be a source of pride for all of Maine.

BERNARD FISHMAN

When I was six and my sister was nine, our parents took a three-week trip to Europe. A month earlier, they had told us that we would each stay with a different set of grandparents. They asked if we had preferences. Although we adored both pairs, we reached our verdicts quickly and harmoniously: Myra would stay in Brookline with the paternal set, and I'd head north to my mom's folks in Calais.

The Maine relatives were, for me, more exotic. They had the quainter customs, the Yiddish accents, the telephone with the party line. Plus, at that point, my associations with Maine were tantalizing sensory ones: fragrant salt sea air, the tang of my grandfather's homemade garlic pickles, the ping of blueberries dropping onto tin.

Customarily, our family spent winter vacations at the Calais house (I remember once having to tunnel out after a blizzard of surprising speed and proportion) and a big chunk of each summer at the camp in Red Beach, near Robbinston. But this early autumn visit was a novelty. I even joined the local first grade, where I was, as my mother had been three decades prior, the only Jewish girl in the class.

Plus, there were lessons to learn: Papa showed me how to filet a flounder. With Nana, I helped prepare dough for blintzes and picked sorrel for a soup called *shav*. They kept kosher and they lit Shabbos candles. While our nuclear family back in Massachusetts was made up of synagogue- and Hebrew-school-goers, we were more casual than that.

It astonished me then, as it does today, that, despite distinct odds, those grandparents – my grandmother, in particular – adhered to ancestral traditions carried across the Atlantic from Eastern Europe early in the 20th century. Like other Maine Jewish families who lived (live!) hours away from urban centers – let's say, Sanford or Presque Isle – the commitment to preserve and to observe needed to be strong. In this instance, it helped that my grandfather's Unobskey relatives made a point of building a synagogue for the handful of families in Calais and nearby Washington County towns, and from across the border in St. Stephen, N.B.

When I was invited to curate this exhibition, my astonishment, combined with a deep admiration, still lingered. And as I logged hundreds and hundreds of miles, and encountered dozens and dozens of exhibition lenders and informants, those sentiments only grew.

I wondered, as visitors to this exhibition may wonder, what has made the Jewish community in Maine, itself comprised of many communities, distinctive? In what ways does it/do they differ from Jewish populations of similarly modest size in Montana or Mississippi? How have the experiences of this minority immigrant community in Maine been like or unlike those of the Irish or the French Canadians who came earlier, or the Somalis and Bantus who followed?

Not to disappoint: the exhibit does not provide full or explicit answers to these questions. However, it suggests some threads commonly shared by immigrants, perhaps made more pronounced by life in the Pine Tree State: adaptability; independence; resourcefulness; the centrality of family; the value placed on education; the resolve, once assisted, to assist others in turn.

In my own effort to collect information and gather materials that might represent the multi-dimensional story of Jews in Maine, I was assisted on many fronts. Among the many to whom I am indebted: the talented, untiring, and obliging staff members of the Maine State Museum; the sensitive and thoughtful members of our advisory committee – in particular, Dr. David Freidenreich, an insightful partner throughout; dozens of helpful colleagues at other cultural institutions; and the countless forthcoming and generous individuals who shared stories and personal treasures with trust and open hearts.

I must thank, in addition, my gracious early hosts, the ones who forged my fidelity to this state: Morris Holland and Rae Freeman Holland of Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia, and Maine; and my beloved late parents, Bob and Sylvia Waterman, who journeyed east rather than west.

AMY E. WATERMAN



In 1932, young Sylvia Holland and her mother Rae were part of this Robbinston picnic. | Amy E. Waterman

Maine + Jewish: Two Centuries

ESSAY BY DAVID M. FREIDENREICH

The author is the Pulver Family Associate Professor of Jewish Studies at Colby College. He is the founding associate director of the Center for Small Town Jewish Life at Colby and established the college's Maine Jewish History Project.

What does it mean to be from Maine? Those who live here, and even many people who do not, have an answer to this question. Their responses vary widely but probably overlap in certain ways, for example by including reference to the state's natural beauty.

What does it mean to be Jewish? Here too, Jews and non-Jews alike know how to answer this question, but their responses are even more diverse. Americans typically think about Jewishness in terms of religion, placing Judaism in the same category as Christianity and Islam. That is certainly true, but it's only part of the picture: Jewishness involves much more than just religion. Most American Jews say that being Jewish is mainly a matter of ancestry and culture, not religion, and more than one in five self-identify as "Jews of no religion." This percentage is likely higher in Maine, given the state's non-religious profile overall. Maine has many Jewish houses of worship, but the religious services that take place in these synagogues have played a marginal role in the lives of most Jewish Mainers past and present.

It makes more sense to think about Jewish Americans in the same category as Maine's Irish American, Franco American, and Lebanese American communities, all of which are ethnic groups. Their members are bound to one another by food practices and family ties, a common language, and a shared migration history during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Religion traditionally plays an important role in each of these ethnic communities, but the fact that Irish, Franco, and Lebanese Mainers are all originally Catholic does not mean that they all celebrate Christmas in the same way or that they do so in the same church (if they attend church at all).

Culture shapes the ways in which communities express their religious identities, and ancestry informs culture. Of course, communal culture also changes over time and adapts to new locations. Irish Mainers, for instance, celebrate St. Patrick's Day differently than their ancestors did in Ireland 200 years ago; these celebrations also differ from the ones held today in Dublin or Boston. Jewishness in Maine has also changed over time and, in the process, has adapted to the distinctive features of this state. For many Jewish Mainers, what it means to be Jewish now intertwines with what it means to be from Maine.



William and Sarah Levine (seated), with seven of their nine children. Waterville, ca. 1914. William and Sarah, who settled in Waterville in 1889, founded a major clothing store on Main Street that survived until 1996. The success of “Levine’s” attracted relatives: from 1900–1930, a third of the Jewish families in Waterville had ties to William or Sarah. | *Eric Bloom*

JEWISH GEOGRAPHY

Unlike Irish, Franco, and Lebanese Mainers, Jewish Mainers trace their ancestry to many different places around the world. This variety contributes to the diversity of Maine’s Jews.

The first Jews to settle here in the early and mid-19th century came from German-speaking parts of Central Europe. In all, there may have been about 500 Jews in Maine in the late 1870s, a tiny fraction of the state’s total population. Those numbers swelled to approximately 5,500 in 1930 (roughly 0.7% of Maine’s population) thanks to the arrival of Jewish immigrants from Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe. During the first decades of the 20th century, immigrants typically moved to Maine after spending time in other states; many left after a few years, only to be replaced by other newcomers. Jews who found success and happiness, however, put down deep roots and often attracted family members to join them.



Cantor Kurt Messerschmidt grew up in Berlin, Germany. During World War II, the Nazis sent him and his wife, Sonja, to separate death camps. Miraculously, both survived, and they found each other after the war. The Messerschmidts were among a number of Holocaust survivors who ultimately settled in Maine. Kurt served for 34 years as the beloved cantor of Portland’s Temple Beth El, where he touched the lives of countless individuals with his beautiful tenor voice and his eagerness to foster and sustain lasting relationships. Many of those relationships continued until his death in 2017 at the age of 102. | *Portland Press Herald, Herb Swanson*

Today, Maine’s Jewish community includes many members whose families have been in Maine for several generations. There are also many Jews in Maine who moved here from other states, especially Massachusetts and New York, and, to a much lesser degree, from other countries, especially Israel and the former Soviet Union. While most community members were born into Jewish families, others became Jews by choice through religious conversion, marriage, or personal self-identification. Rough estimates of the current Jewish population in Maine range from 15,000–30,000, about 1–2% of the state’s total population. (About 2.2% of all Americans are Jewish.)

JEWISH MAINERS AND THE STATE OF ISRAEL

Many Jewish Mainers feel a deep connection to the State of Israel, just as many Irish Mainers maintain close personal ties to Ireland. Maine’s Jewish communities raised funds to support the establishment of Israel in 1948 and continue to send contributions to a wide range of Israeli causes. Today, it is common for Jewish Mainers to visit Israel, often on tours for teens and young adults or group trips organized by local synagogues. A 2007 survey of Southern Maine found that a third of Jewish respondents describe themselves as very attached or extremely attached to Israel, although this does not necessarily mean that they support the policies of any given Israeli government.



A set of candlesticks and a ritual wine cup purchased in Israel by Fred and Marilyn Weinberg of Bath, who use them to celebrate Shabbat. | *The Weinberg Family*



The Jewish National Fund (JNF), founded in 1901, distributed iconic blue-and-white boxes around the world. Many Jewish Mainers deposited coins in these boxes to support the purchase and development of land in Israel. | *Maine State Museum from Beth Abraham Synagogue, Auburn*

American Jews past and present tend to live in the country’s major metropolitan areas. As a result, Maine has always been on the margins of American Jewish life. Within Maine, Jews replicate national patterns to a significant degree by settling

primarily—and increasingly—in and around the state’s largest cities. Most Jewish Mainers today live in the Greater Portland area; the next largest concentration of Jews is in the Bangor area. Lewiston-Auburn, the Midcoast, and the Augusta/Waterville region are all home to smaller organized communities. One can also find Jewish households scattered throughout the state.



Deena, Jacques, Ben, and Rachel Weinstein, outside their home in Garland in the early 1980s. Deena and Jacques came to Maine in 1972 as part of the back-to-the-land movement. Like other Jewish homesteaders, they fuse their religious and cultural identities with their commitments to simplicity, environmental sustainability, and growing their own food. | *Deena Weinstein*

Why do Jews move to Maine? For the same reason as everyone else: in search of a better life. Susman Russakoff's story is typical. Raised in Russia, Russakoff arrived in New York City's Lower East Side in 1904 with skills as a watch repairer. As he recounts in his memoirs, "I hated the place like poison—the filth, the crowded tenements, the inescapable smell, the climbing of endless flights of stairs to reach my own uninviting quarters. All these things oppressed me." Russakoff persevered while saving enough money to enable his future wife, Manya, to join him in America. Shortly after their marriage, an acquaintance living in Skowhegan, Maine, sent Russakoff a watch to repair: no one nearby could fix it.

That gave me food for thought. Here I was about to become a father. I must do something for my wife and child but have only three hundred and fifty dollars. What can I do with so little? How can I set up a business with so small a sum? I want to establish my family in a decent home. Do I have to remain a worker at the bench, depending on my week's pay?



Susman Russakoff in his Skowhegan jewelry store, ca. 1910. | *Andrew and Donna Russakoff*

In January 1907, Russakoff set off for Skowhegan to see if he might be able to open his own business. "When I arrived, the air was beautifully clear and frosty. The snow was as white as snow could ever be, and as one walked on it, it responded with a crispy clear singing. Its song was one of welcome to me." Satisfied by the business prospects and delighted by the weather, Russakoff immediately put down a deposit on a shop with upstairs living quarters.

As Susman Russakoff's story illustrates, Jews who came to Maine were dissatisfied with life in the big city, wanted the opportunity to work for themselves, and enjoyed the prospect of living in a beautiful place whose climate reminded them of the Old Country. (It's no coincidence that the first Jewish Mainers came primarily from northern parts of present-day Germany, Poland, Russia, and Lithuania.) Maine's quality of life, climate, and natural beauty continue to attract Jews to the state. These factors, of course, apply equally to members of all ethnic groups, not just Jews.

WORK, SCHOOL, AND PLAY

Unless newcomers to Maine are already retired, they also hope to find attractive jobs. In this respect, however, members of different ethnic groups once tended to make different choices. Francos, for example, moved to Maine from Quebec during the 19th and early 20th centuries to work in the state's factories. They were accustomed to manual labor, and the mills provided more reliable income than the farms from which they came. Maine's much smaller Lebanese community also came to work in the mills. They, however, tended to work specifically in factories that manufactured wool products because they came to America with valuable woolworking skills. During this



Wolf Lipsky of Bangor. Lipsky held a variety of jobs over the years: census records report that he was a peddler in 1900 (around the time this photo was taken), a dry goods merchant in 1910, a lumberman in 1920 (most likely selling lumber), and the proprietor of a clothing store in 1930. | *Bangor Public Library*



Robert Markowitz



Emerson School, Portland, 1919. Public schools sought to Americanize immigrant children like Peggy Davidson (left). Jews were especially receptive to messages about the importance of formal education. | *Maine Historical Society*



Harry Zaitlin of Saco Junk Co., ca. 1950. Peddlers not only sold new and used items, they also collected household junk that they could sell to makers of recycled goods. Some chose to enter the junk trade instead of becoming merchants. Jews played an active role in this facet of Maine's economy during the early and mid-20th century. | *Diane Bowie Zaitlin*

period, many Jewish immigrants came to America with commercial skills, experience making clothing, or both. Jews who settled in New York and other major cities often worked in garment factories, but those who moved to Maine usually did so in the hopes of becoming an independent merchant. It's no surprise that they often opened clothing stores.

To start off, however, many Jewish Mainers worked as peddlers. They traveled door to door selling new and used clothing along with a wide range of other items. In an era before cars and paved roads, rural families rarely traveled to Maine's cities, so peddlers played an important role by bringing them the latest consumer goods. Urban families working long factory shifts also appreciated being able to buy affordable products right at their doorstep. Life as a peddler, however, was often lonely and miserable: those who served rural populations left home on Sunday and did not return until Friday afternoon. Peddlers aspired to open their own stores, and they did so in towns throughout the state as soon as they could save enough money.

Maine's 19th- and early 20th-century Jewish peddlers and merchants were participants in an ethnic network similar in certain respects to today's Amazon.com. Like Amazon, peddlers provided customers with home delivery of the latest products. In fact, Maine's Jewish merchants worked closely with local Jewish peddlers to sell goods to customers who did not have time to shop in their stores. Merchants provided peddlers with merchandise on credit, trusting that they would be repaid when the peddler returned to town at the end of each week. Those merchants, in turn, received their goods from Jewish manufacturers and wholesalers in cities like New York and Boston, who also extended credit to the stores that sold their products. Because this arrangement depended on a high degree of trust and mutual assistance, Jews tended to work with fellow Jews from the same European hometowns: they could usually count on family and communal ties to keep one another honest. Wholesalers informed merchants about current fashions, while peddlers got to know their customers' interests and, in Amazon-like fashion, provided valuable consumer data that flowed back to the wholesalers and manufacturers. This ethnic economy worked to the benefit of all of its participants, including Maine's non-Jewish consumers.

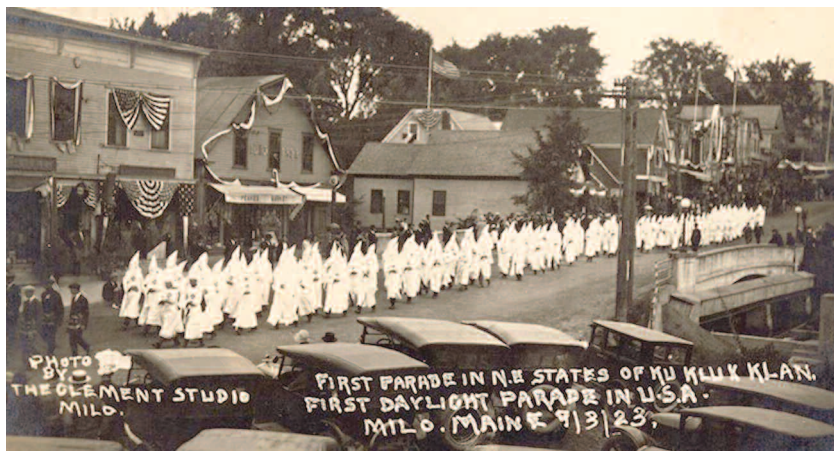
Successful Jewish merchants were especially likely to ensure that their children graduated high school and, eventually, college. Wages in Maine's factories were often so low that workers needed their teenage children to drop out of school in order to get a job themselves. Jewish kids often helped out their parents by working in the family store, but they could do so outside of school hours. For cultural reasons, middle class Jewish businessmen in Maine were also far more likely than their non-Jewish counterparts to provide their children with a college education during the first half of the 20th century. In Lewiston-Auburn, over 60% of college-age Jews attended school during 1929–30



Shenson & Jolovitz Grocers, Winslow, ca. 1915. As Lester Jolovitz recalls, “My mother and the three of us, the children, if they got busy downstairs, we had a signal. My father would rap, knock on one of the pipes that came from the store upstairs, I guess a water pipe or whatever, and that was a signal that somebody should go down and help out, that we were busy. So, we all participated in the store; we didn’t have certain hours or whatever.” | *Lester Jolovitz and Alan Aranson*

academic year, an astoundingly high figure made possible in part by the fact that many commuted to Bates College. Overall, only 29% of Auburn residents aged 18–20 were in school that year; in primarily working-class Lewiston, that figure was only 13%. Thanks to their time in college, many Jews born in Maine during the early 20th century entered professions such as law, medicine, and teaching. To this day, Jewish Mainers (and Jewish Americans in general) continue to have exceptionally high levels of undergraduate and graduate education.

Hard-working Jewish merchants and their children quickly rose into the middle class. Longstanding members of Maine’s elite, however, did not want Jews to join their social circles or assume high-status positions. As a result, Jewish Mainers faced significant discrimination for much of the 20th century. In Bangor, for example, Jews

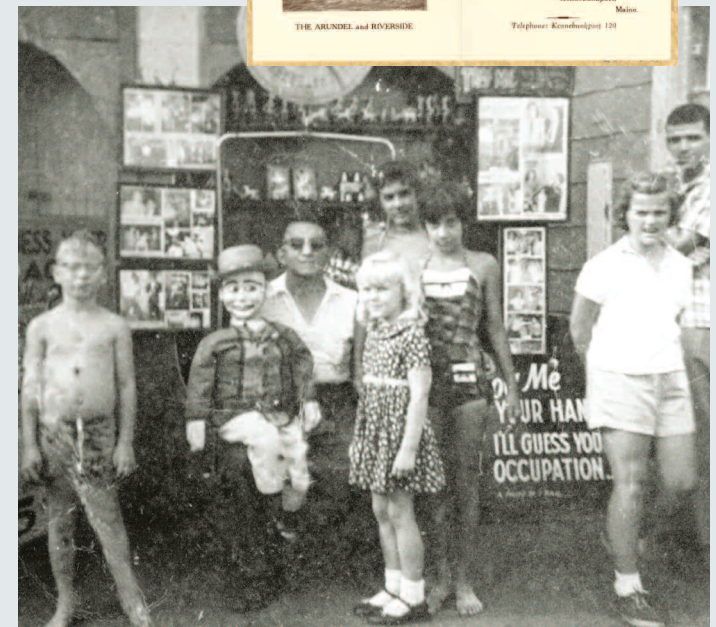
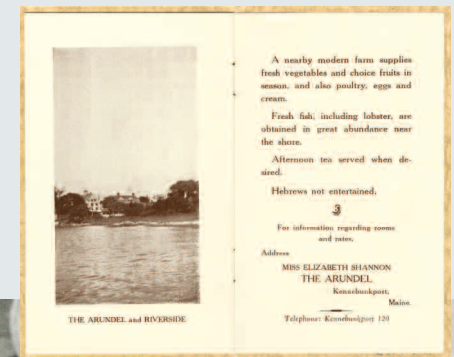


The Ku Klux Klan was especially active in Maine in the 1920s. Many state and local government officials shared its hostility toward Catholics, Jews, and other immigrants. | *Maine State Museum*

were denied jobs at the hospital, banks, and prominent law firms until after World War II. The citizens of Portland adopted a new structure for city government in 1923 whose purpose was to prevent Jews and members of other immigrant groups from winning election to the city council. Real estate agents refused to sell homes in certain upscale neighborhoods to Jewish buyers. Bowdoin College, among others, severely restricted the number of Jews it would accept, and campus fraternities excluded Jewish students. Jews encountered similar discrimination throughout the United States, but a 1957 study found that Maine had the highest rate of resort discrimination in the country: 63% of the state’s hotels and resorts reportedly refused to treat all prospective guests equally.

JEWIS IN VACATIONLAND

Anti-Semitic discrimination was blatant in Maine’s tourism sector for much of the 20th century, as can be seen in this brochure from the 1920s. Excluded from places like The Arundel and Riverside in Kennebunk (right), many Jewish Mainers instead spent their summer in Old Orchard Beach. Franco Mainers, along with many Catholics and Jews from Quebec, gravitated to Old Orchard Beach for similar reasons. Dave Glovsky, a Jewish Portlander who ran an iconic guessing booth on the town’s amusement strip, entertained visitors in both English and French from 1945 into the 1990s.



The Arundel and Riverside | *Maine State Museum*; Dave Glovsky and kids at Old Orchard Beach | *Maine Historical Society*

Prominent country clubs and social organizations continued to exclude Jews until non-Jewish allies mobilized to end the practice. In 1969, Governor Kenneth Curtis, a Democrat, proposed a bill denying food and liquor licenses to private clubs that practiced discrimination. Republican legislator Peter Mills eagerly sponsored the bill, angry over the fact that Portland's Cumberland Club had recently turned down a membership application from the new director of the Portland Symphony Orchestra simply because he was a Jew. "I couldn't stop thinking about it," Mills recalled. "I thought it was a disgrace that the State of Maine could tolerate such a situation where a person could be barred because of race, religion, or color." The bill passed easily, and within a year the Cumberland Club and others began to admit Jews and African Americans as members.

COMMUNAL LIFE

Jews in Maine created a wide variety of communal organizations. Some, like synagogues, serve specifically Jewish needs. Others, like Jewish country clubs, provided alternatives to existing organizations that refused to admit Jews as members. Jewish Mainers have also participated actively in the communal life of the towns in which they live.

Synagogues play a special role in Jewish communal life. They serve not only as houses of worship but also as sites of communal gathering and learning as well as hubs for social action and mutual aid. The most ornate space in a synagogue building is its sanctuary, where religious services take place. That room is oriented toward an ark, a special cabinet that houses the most sacred Jewish object, a Torah scroll. The scroll, written in a manner largely unchanged for 1,500 years, contains the first five books of



The sanctuary of Congregation Beth Israel in Bangor features a grand ark topped with an eternal light. The Torah scroll is read from the table in front of the ark. | *Congregation Beth Israel*

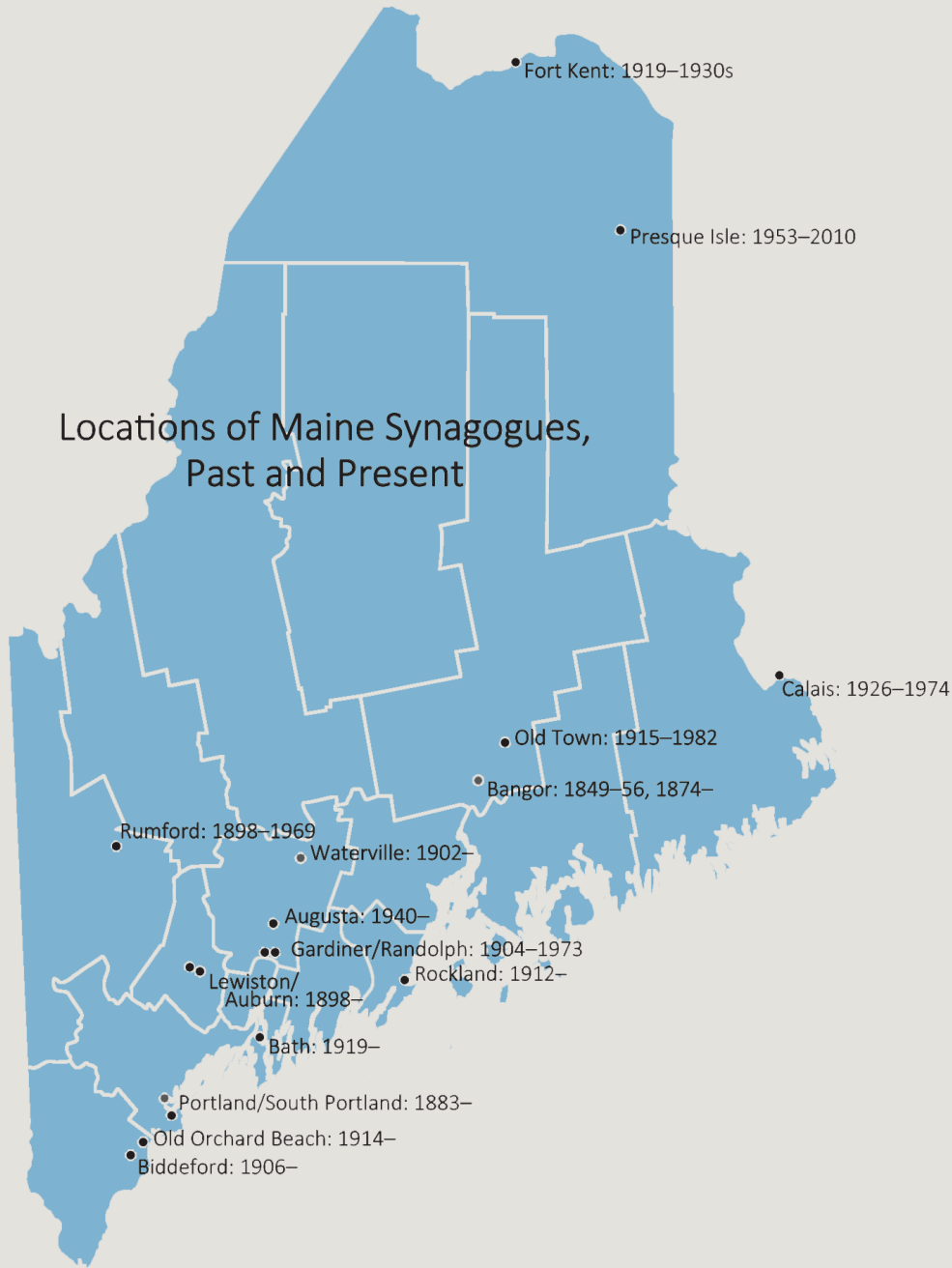


Rabbi Hillel Katzir holding a Torah scroll in front of the ark at Auburn's Temple Shalom. He is wearing a striped shawl called a *tallit* and leather boxes and straps called *tefillin*. These traditional prayer garments call to mind the Torah's most important lessons. | *Temple Shalom Synagogue Center*

the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Knowledgeable Jews chant passages from the Torah scroll in Hebrew during the climactic portion of many worship services. In certain respects, however, the most important space in any synagogue is not its sanctuary but rather the community room in which members socialize over food, attend lectures and programs, and engage in volunteer work. Most synagogues also have classrooms, kitchens, and libraries, as well as offices for their rabbi (spiritual leader) and other staff.

Bangor's Jewish merchants and peddlers joined together to found the state's first synagogue, named Ahawas Achim (Brotherly Love), in 1849. The congregation's first order of business was to establish a Jewish burial ground and offer funeral services, just as churches did for their own communities. The congregation hired Samuel Heinemann to provide religious guidance and services to its members, including slaughtering their chickens in accordance with Jewish dietary law. Ahawas Achim closed in 1856 when nearly all of its members moved away. A later group of Jewish Bangorians of German ancestry reestablished this synagogue in the 1870s, but it disappeared at the end of the century. By that time, Eastern European immigrants to Bangor established their own cemetery, supported kosher slaughterers and bakers, and built Maine's first dedicated synagogue building for Congregation Beth Israel. Portland's Jewish community created a similar infrastructure during the last decades of the 19th century. Its first Jewish institution, founded in 1874, was not a synagogue but rather a lodge of the B'nai B'rith fraternal organization.

Locations of Maine Synagogues, Past and Present



The first half of the 20th century witnessed tremendous growth in the number, location, and diversity of Jewish communal organizations. A dozen synagogues formed in small cities and towns from Fort Kent to Biddeford and Rumford to Rockland. Maine's major metropolitan areas—Portland, Lewiston-Auburn, and Bangor—were each home to several synagogues, a Jewish Federation similar in nature to United Way, and a Jewish Community Center that provided adult and youth programs, athletic facilities and summer camps, and social services. Communities across Maine established branches of national organizations like B'nai B'rith, Jewish War Veterans, and the National Council of Jewish Women. A 1950 survey of Bangor's Jewish community found that 84% of respondents belonged to at least one of the city's 16 Jewish organizations, and nearly half belonged to three or more. Similarly high levels of engagement in Jewish communal life could be found throughout the state.



Portland's Jewish community built a sizeable community center downtown to replace the informal East End building that previously housed the YMHA and YWHA. It stood from 1938 until 1979, by which time Jews primarily participated in non-Jewish communal organizations. Portland went without a true Jewish Community Center building until 2017. Maine's other JCCs no longer exist. | *Jewish Community Alliance of Southern Maine*

WELCOMING THE STRANGER

During the early 1920s, ships carrying European immigrants to New York or Boston sometimes landed in Portland when those larger ports were overwhelmed. Newcomers temporarily barred from entering the country were detained on House Island in Casco Bay. Members of the Portland branch of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) supplied kosher food to Jewish detainees and provided other forms of assistance to these immigrants. Jewish Portlanders also aided immigrants who landed in New York but chose to settle in Maine. In the 1970s and '80s, Portland's Jewish community helped to resettle Jewish refugees from the Soviet Union. Today, NCJW and other Jewish organizations in Maine provide assistance to non-Jewish refugees.

Artist Jo Israelson, a Portland native, designed a series of aprons to honor members of the Portland Council of Jewish Women who aided immigrants in the 1920s. | *Jo Israelson*





Actor Judd Nelson campaigning on behalf of his mother. Merle Nelson represented Portland in the Maine House of Representatives from 1976–1986, where she spearheaded legislation to strengthen education and the arts. [Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity, University of Southern Maine]

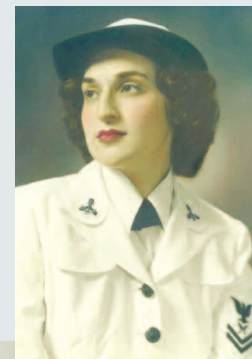
Involvement in Jewish organizations declined in the latter half of the twentieth century as non-Jewish organizations began to welcome Jews as members. Another crucial factor in this decline was the increasing involvement of women in the workforce. Myrt Wolman recalls that “at one point Waterville had three [Jewish] organizations, meaning the same people would go to three meetings a month, and that was ridiculous because of the pressures of work, the family, and other social work. Eventually we formed one meeting for all three: it was just too much, too much going on.” Across the state, Jewish organizations merged or simply dissolved once Jews could participate fully in the state’s economic, social, and cultural life.

A scandal broke out in Waterville’s Jewish community in 1973. The rabbi, asked by the local newspaper for a reaction to the Yom Kippur War between Israel and its Arab neighbors, declared “We are Jews first and Americans second.” As Sam Shapiro recalls, “It was one of the first times the synagogue moved at a fast pace. At 8 o’clock that morning we had a board meeting and he was gone because most of the board members were former veterans themselves and we are certainly *not* Jews first and Americans second!” Maine’s Jews expressed their Americanness in countless ways during the twentieth century. These included their heavy involvement in sports, their active participation in dances and other aspects of youth culture, the pride they expressed in veterans of the two World Wars, and their contributions to civic affairs on the local and state levels.

MAINE JEWS IN AMERICA’S WARS



Jewish Mainers responded each time America has gone to war. Among the earliest of these soldiers was Lewis Selbing of Augusta, who served in the Third Maine Infantry regiment during the Civil War and was injured at both the Second Battle of Bull Run and the Battle of Chancellorsville. Edith Dondis of Rockland served in WAVES, the women’s branch of the U.S. Naval Reserve, during World War II. A Torah scroll on loan from Bangor’s Congregation Beth Israel also participated in that war. Military chaplain Rabbi Harold H. Gordon, based at Dow Air Field, travelled more than 75,000 miles with this “Flying Torah” as he visited American Jewish servicemen throughout Europe.



Selbing, *Capital Weekly* and Tom McDonald; Dondis, *Edith Dondis*; Flying Torah, *Bangor Public Library*



Five bat mitzvah girls at Congregation Etz Chaim in Biddeford, 1956. The bar mitzvah ceremony, a coming-of-age celebration for boys, is several hundred years old; American Jews created a parallel ceremony for girls in the 1920s that gradually gained widespread acceptance. | *Sharon Sneider Camner*

Although men like Sam Shapiro served as the professional and lay leaders of Maine's synagogues and mixed-gender Jewish organizations until the late 20th century, women like Myrrt Wolman played crucial behind-the-scenes roles to ensure their vibrancy. It was once the norm in all synagogues that men and women sat separately and that only men could play public roles in the worship service. American Jews began to create mixed-seating synagogues in the mid-19th century and began to invite women to participate more actively in services in the early 20th century. Those changes were slow to arrive in Maine, however, as the state's synagogues were relatively conservative. After several failed attempts at establishing progressive

congregations in Portland and Bangor, Portland Jews founded Maine's first successful mixed-seating synagogue in 1947. When that congregation hired Rabbi Carolyn Braun in 1995, Temple Beth El became the largest synagogue of its kind in the country to have a woman rabbi. Today, half of Maine's synagogues employ women as their spiritual leaders, and a third of the state's congregational rabbis are gay or lesbian. In these respects among others, Jewish communal life in Maine is now more progressive than in some other parts of the country.



Am Chofshi, marching in the 1990 Portland Pride parade. Portland's Jewish GLBT advocacy group chose its name as a pun: the Hebrew phrase *am chofshi* literally means "a free people" but, with a bit of stretching, could also mean "the people of Vacationland." | *Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity, University of Southern Maine*



Laurie Osher of Old Town and other members of Bangor's Congregation Beth El lighting a moose-shaped Hanukkah menorah in 2011. | *Bangor Daily News, John Clarke Russ*

LIVING JEWISHLY IN MAINE

Jewishness has its roots in the ancient Land of Israel and in the texts of the Bible. Much has changed over the past 2,500+ years, however, as Jews have adapted to new places, technologies, and cultural contexts. According to sociologist Marshall Sklare, American Jews tend to retain traditional Jewish practices that they can redefine in modern terms and that align with American culture while, when necessary, providing a Jewish alternative to Christian practices. Traditional practices that are child-centered and relatively infrequent are especially popular, while those that involve a degree of social isolation or the adoption of a distinctive lifestyle often fall by the wayside. Sklare's insights, based on a 1950s study of Midwestern Jews, apply well to the behavior of Jewish Mainers past and present.

The popular holiday of Hanukkah is a good example. Hanukkah's importance sometimes seems to rival that of Christmas even though Christmas celebrates a foundational moment within Christianity (the birth of Jesus) while Hanukkah celebrates a relatively minor historical event (the rededication of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem).



Hanukkah menorah by Toby Rosenberg, a Maine-based potter who specializes in making personalized Jewish ritual objects. The village theme of this menorah reflects Rosenberg's passion for fostering a sense of community. | *Toby Rosenberg*

more simply ignore it. A similar pattern applies with respect to the observance of traditional Jewish dietary laws, which require specially prepared food and forbid eating lobster, among other popular Maine dishes. (American Jews who prioritize adherence to a traditional Jewish lifestyle often choose to live in major metropolitan areas within communities of like-minded Jews, rather than in places like Maine.)

Jewish Mainers have blended traditional practices and local culture in a variety of creative ways. On the fall harvest festival of Sukkot, for example, Jewish homesteaders celebrate with the crops of their own fields instead of or in addition to the traditional set of fruit and branches used in the ancient Land of Israel. Local cooks have created recipes for mock lobster salad and reimagined *charoset*—a classic Passover seder dish made with fruit, nuts, and wine—by using Maine blueberries. Several synagogues now offer prayer hikes as an alternative to traditional indoor services. Programs like this not only take advantage of Maine’s natural beauty but also respond to the broader cultural dynamics of a state in which only one in five residents attends worship services on a weekly basis. The Pew Research Center reports that Maine is among the least religious states in the country, as only 34% of Mainers say that religion is very important in their lives. We should not be surprised, then, that Jews in Maine often emphasize cultural rather than religious aspects of their Jewish identity.

Jewish life in Maine is noteworthy for the active participation of many non-Jews. One reason for this is that many Maine households include both Jewish and non-Jewish members. It was once relatively rare for Jews—or members of other American ethnic groups—to marry outside their own community, but such intermarriages are now commonplace. Jews in Maine are, in fact, more likely than other American Jews to be married to a non-Jewish spouse. Many of these couples choose to raise their children as Jews, and Maine’s synagogues now welcome the involvement of non-Jewish parents in their communities. Non-Jews with no Jewish family members also take advantage of educational and cultural opportunities provided by Jewish organizations. A significant number of entirely non-Jewish families enroll their children in Portland’s Jewish day school, early childhood education program, and Jewish summer camp, and non-Jews

serve as leaders of these organizations. Half of the audience members at the annual Maine Jewish Film Festival do not self-identify as Jews, an exceptionally high percentage for a program of this nature.



The Maine Jewish Film Festival, founded in 1998, screens films primarily in Portland but also in Bangor, Brunswick, Lewiston, Rockland, and Waterville. | *Maine Jewish Film Festival*

JEWISH WEDDINGS

Every culture has its own customs for marking life-cycle events like birth, death, and marriage. Jewish weddings traditionally involve a *ketubah*, a marriage contract that spells out some of the foundational obligations to which the partners commit. The wedding ceremony itself, which takes place under a canopy called a *chuppah*, consists of a series of blessings. It ends with the ceremonial breaking of a glass because even on the most joyous occasion one should remember the brokenness of our world. Jewish wedding celebrations customarily include circle dancing in which the bride, the groom, and sometimes their parents are the center of attention.



The *ketubah* of Sara and Michael Axelbaum, who were married in Boothbay Harbor and who summer in Maine. | *The Axelbaum Family*



Friends and family circle around Rose and Hyman Zaitlin at the 1951 wedding of their daughter Elizabeth to Phil Levinsky. This traditional dance, the *mezinke*, honors parents who have just married off their last child. | *The Levinsky Family*

WHAT IT MEANS

The story of American Jewish life typically revolves around Jews in major metropolitan areas like the New York City region. Many Jews from other states are surprised to learn that there is Jewish life in Maine at all! Jewish Mainers, after all, currently make up only about one in 400 American Jews. Their experiences past and present, however, merit close attention nonetheless. Jewish life thrives even in off-the-beaten-path Maine and, in some ways, it does so especially well. Maine's Jewish communities today are noteworthy for their openness, their spirit of innovation, and their eagerness to make the most of limited resources through collaboration. This too is what it means to be Jewish.

The story of Maine likewise tends to revolve around its dominant ethnic groups: Yankees and, to a lesser degree, Francos and Irish. Maine, however, is also home to many smaller groups whose members embrace the state's distinctive culture and contribute to it in especially valuable ways. Maine's Jewish and Lebanese communities alike exemplify this dynamic, and historical trends strongly suggest that Somalis, Latinos and other recent immigrants will do the same. The experiences of these Mainers new and old also reflect what it means to be from Maine.



The Maine Conference for Jewish Life, founded at Colby College in 2014, now attracts over 200 Jews from across the state and beyond for a weekend of Jewish learning and celebration. | *Center for Small Town Jewish Life, Colby College*

TO LEARN MORE

This essay draws to a significant degree on my article, "Making It in Maine: Stories of Jewish Life in Small-Town America," *Maine History* 49.1 (2015): 5–38, and, to a lesser degree, on a forthcoming *Maine History* article by myself and Kristin Esdale, "With a Little Help from My Friends: Jewish Mutual Assistance in Nineteenth-Century Maine." You can find these essays and many others at web.colby.edu/jewsinmaine/, the online home of Colby College's Maine Jewish History Project. For primary sources, genealogical data, and much more, see the website of Documenting Maine Jewry, www.mainejews.org. For a curated collection of photographs, see Abraham J. and Jean M. Peck, *Maine's Jewish Heritage* (2007).

Michael Hoberman's *How Strange It Seems* (2008) tells the story of Jewish life in small-town New England through ethnography and oral histories, including of several Mainers. Judith Goldstein's *Crossing Lines: Histories of Jews and Gentiles in Three Communities* (1992) offers an in-depth study of Jewish life in Bangor, Mount Desert Island, and Calais. Unfortunately, the only book-length history of Portland's Jewish community, by Benjamin Band, dates from 1955. Michael Cohen's "Adapting Orthodoxy to American Life," *Maine History* 44 (2009): 172–95, examines one facet of that city's Jewish history.

The Pew Research Center conducted an important 2013 survey on American Jewish life: see "A Portrait of American Jewish Life" at www.pewforum.org. (On Maine's general religious landscape, see Pew's 2014 Religious Landscape Study.) The American Jewish Population Project, ajpp.brandeis.edu, provides access to the latest demographic information about American Jews. There are many excellent books on American Jewish life. Two of my favorite histories are Jonathan Sarna's *American Judaism: A History* (2004) and Hasia Diner's *History of the Jews of the United States, 1654–2000* (2004). Marshall Sklare's insights into American Jewish life can be found in *Jewish Identity on the Suburban Frontier* (1979).

Maine + Jewish: Two Centuries

was made possible through the generous support of its lead funder, the Sam L. Cohen Foundation, and seven additional foundations:

Margaret E. Burnham Charitable Trust
Glickman Family Foundation
Hudson Foundation
Jewish Community Endowment Associates
(Bangor)
Lunder Foundation
Maine Humanities Council
Unobskey Foundation

The following individuals and organizations also expressed their commitment to the project through financial support:

Nancy and David Brenerman
Sherrie Bergman and Donald Quaid
Steven Cerf
Eliot Cutler and Dr. Melanie Cutler
Arnold Garson
Lisa M. Gorman
Elaine and Harvey Kahaner
Robert Katz and Stacey Mondschein Katz
Judith Glickman Lauder
Marcus Cleff & Mistreta P.A.
Leonard and Renee Minsky
Norman Minsky
Leonard and Merle Nelson
Drs. Leora Rabin and David Inger
Jody Sataloff and Steve Brinn
Gillian Schair and Seth Rigoletti
Edward and Harriet Schultz
Salwa and Robert P. Smith
Melvin L. Stone
Amy E. Waterman
William and Jodi Welch

The exhibition was also made possible through Maine State Museum appropriations authorized by the Maine Legislature and the administration of Governor Paul R. LePage on behalf of the people of Maine. The following Maine State Museum staff, contractors, and volunteers planned and implemented the exhibition:

Jennifer Baer – Graphics Designer
Mandy Browne – Museum Educator
Brewster Buttfeld – Exhibit Designer
Linda Carrell – Conservation Specialist
Bernard Fishman – Museum Director
Natalie Liberace – Collections Manager
Sheila McDonald – Deputy Director
Zack Mishoulam – Education Intern
Teresa Myers – Objects Conservator
Sam Sessions – Education Intern
Jeff Spencer – Carpenter
Amy Thompson – Acting Registrar
Ryan Walker – Exhibits Preparator
Judy Washuk – Conservation Specialist
Amy E. Waterman – Guest Curator

LENDERS OF OBJECTS

Toby Adelman
Adas Yoshurun Synagogue, Rockland
Alfond Youth Center
Jennie Aranovitch
Sara and Michael Axelbaum
Bangor Historical Society
Bangor Public Library
Peter Beckerman
Rabbi Gary Berenson
Sherrie Bergman
David Berman
Sheila Berman
Beth Abraham Synagogue, Auburn
Beth Israel Congregation, Bath
Beth Israel Congregation, Waterville

Eric Bloom
Bowdoin College Special Collections
Arlon Brown
Charles Burden
The Cedars
Chabad of Portland
Asherah Cinnamon
Keith Citrine
Congregation Beth Israel, Old Orchard Beach
Congregation Etz Chaim, Biddeford

Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh, Portland
Darrell and Judith Cooper
Gerald and Selma Cope
Eunice T. Cox
Susan Cummings, Lawrence
Edith Dondis
Hildy Dunham
Etz Chaim Synagogue, Portland
Barbara Fishman
Ellen Forman



The centerpiece of this exhibit, which features more than 400 objects and images, is a wooden ark originally used to store and display Torah scrolls in Auburn's Beth Abraham synagogue. That synagogue, established in 1934, closed in 2017. The ark is now part of the Maine State Museum's collection. | *Maine State Museum*

Judy Gatchell
 Martha Unobskey Goldner
 Dr. Jonathan Goldstein
 Guilford Historical Society
 Robert Hains
 Mary Herman and Angus King
 Holocaust & Human Rights Center of
 Maine
 Susan Horowitz
 Isaacson & Raymond
 Jo Israelson
 Jewish Community Alliance of Southern
 Maine
 Jewish Family Services-Portland
 Daniel G. Kagan
 Elaine Crasnick Kahaner
 Robert Katz and Stacey Mondschein Katz
 The Klingenstein Family
 Law Offices of Joe Bornstein
 Phil and Liz Levinsky
 Marcia Berson Lieberman
 Harvey Lipman
 Maine Historical Society
 Maine Jewish Museum
 Robert Markowitz
 Julie Miller-Soros
 Lorraine Minor
 National Museum of American Jewish
 History
 Lisa Pierce
 Toby Rosenberg
 Robin Rubinstein

Jean Byers Sampson Center for Diversity in
 Maine, University of Southern Maine
 Bruce and Nancy Schatz
 Karl Schatz and Margaret Hathaway
 Barbara Shapiro
 Marilyn Simonds
 Nancy K. Simpkins
 Ruthanne and George Z. Singal
 William Small
 Lorraine and Jonah Smith
 Eliezer Sollins
 Southern Maine Hillel
 Temple Beth El, Augusta
 Temple Beth El, Portland
 Miles Theeman
 Tides Institute & Museum of Art
 Jacob Wartell
 Amy E. Waterman
 Fred and Marilyn Weinberg
 Deena Weinstein
 Rabbi Moshe Wilansky
 Kalman Winer

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Dr. Erica Asch
 Dr. Libby Bischof
 Barbara Fishman
 Dr. David M. Freidenreich
 Matthew Goldfarb
 Phyllis Graber Jensen
 Elaine Crasnick Kahaner
 Dr. Abraham Peck
 Maryli Tiemann
 Marilyn Weinberg



From its inception in 1904, Shaarey Tphiloh sought to combine Jewish continuity with American respectability: the cornerstone of its magnificent synagogue building in the heart of Portland's immigrant Jewish community was laid by Mayor James P. Baxter. This ornamental silver crown, used to decorate a Torah scroll, was donated by Marcia and Ida Fireman, who were born in that East End neighborhood and who lived there for most of their lives. Most Jewish Portlanders, however, moved to more fashionable suburban neighborhoods such as Woodfords, where Shaarey Tphiloh opened a second building in 1954. The congregation sold its original building in the 1970s and its Woodfords building in 2016; it continues to meet in the building of Portland's Temple Beth El. | *Maine State Museum from Congregation Shaarey Tphiloh*



230 State Street
(Next to the Maine State House; Route 201)
Augusta, Maine 04330
Phone 207-287-2301
Call Maine Relay 711
www.mainestatemuseum.org