

Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim:
Rich Archival History Deserves Preservation



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Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (KKBE) in Charleston, South Carolina, is the oldest synagogue in continuous use in the United States. Its story is one of faith, perseverance, and tolerance in the American tradition of religious freedom.

Charleston was established in 1670 and the earliest known reference to a Jew in the English settlement was in 1695. Attracted by the area's civil and religious freedom, Jewish settlement continued to grow. By 1749, the pioneers living in this dynamic city were sufficiently numerous to organize KKBE.

Fifteen years after KKBE was established, the congregation also established the Coming Street Cemetery, listed in the National Register of Historic Places as the oldest and largest colonial Jewish cemetery in the South.



Coming Street Cemetery

Long before there were distinctions between Orthodox, Conservative and Reform congregations, Coming Street was the cemetery for all of Charleston's most distinguished Jewish families. It contains over 500 graves, some unmarked. The oldest identifiable grave is that of Moses D. Cohen, the first ritual leader of Congregation Beth Elohim, who died in 1762.

The chief fascination of the Coming Street Cemetery is its rich archival legacy. Much of the history of one of the oldest Jewish communities in the United States and the contribution of Jews to South Carolina and America, can be deduced from these important records. Among those buried in the cemetery are 12 KKBE members who fought in the American Revolution, six soldiers of the War of 1812, two from the Seminole Wars in Florida, 23 Civil War participants, of whom eight died in the Confederate cause, six rabbis of the congregation, and 18 past presidents of the congregation.

Some older gravestones provide more details about the dead than do those of the past century, acting as veritable capsule biographies. During the century prior to the start of the Civil War, marked by the first shots fired on Fort Sumter, Charleston prospered from a thriving plantation economy. It was a busy seaport

and a center of commerce and culture. Jews in Charleston enjoyed religious freedom and economic opportunity, leaving their mark in all walks of life.

One such man was Mordecai Cohen (1767-1848). A native of Zamość, Poland, he rose from being a peddler to becoming the second wealthiest man in South Carolina. Noted for philanthropy and civic leadership, his tombstone reads:

He was a good citizen, an enterprising merchant, and one of the largest contributors to the improvement and revenue of this city. By his strict integrity, his just and charitable disposition, he won the confidence and esteem of the community.

Typical of Charleston Jews who held public office was Lyon Levy (1764-1835). A flat slab directly on the ground reflects:

A native of England, but for more than half a century a resident of Charleston, where he was employed nearly forty years in public service, and as a reward for his integrity was elected Treasurer of the State of South Carolina in the year of 1817.

Nearby is the grave of the most noted woman buried in the Coming Street Cemetery. It is marked by a simple upright stone with a restrained and austere inscription:

Died September 13th, 1888

Penina Moise

Age 83 years

The first Jewess poetess in the United States to publish a book of poetry (1834), she is particularly well-known for the hymns she wrote for Beth Elohim, which were included in a congregational hymnal published in 1842. Alongside her grave are those of her sister, Rachel Levy (1796-1872) and her niece, Jacqueline Levy (1816-1896). Known as "The trio," for many years, after the Civil War, they conducted a well-received private school at their home on lower Coming Street.

At first, congregants worshipped in private homes, but by 1780, they were using an improvised synagogue adjacent to the present temple grounds. In 1794 they dedicated a new cupolated (domed) Georgian synagogue building, described then

as the largest in the United States, “spacious and elegant.” In 1824, forty-seven KKBE congregants petitioned the trustees of the synagogue to change the Sephardic Orthodox liturgy. The petition, seeking a briefer Hebrew ritual, English translation of prayers, and a sermon in English, was denied. The disappointed members thereupon resigned from the congregation and organized “The Reformed Society of Israelites,” influenced by the ideas of Jewish Reform which had begun in Germany in 1810.

The new synagogue was destroyed in the great Charleston fire of 1838 and replaced in 1840 on the same Hasell Street site in Charleston’s historic district. The progressives rejoined the old congregation and persuaded a majority to install an organ in the new temple. The colonnaded temple, dedicated in early 1841, was constructed by member David Lopez and is renowned as one of country’s finest examples of Greek Revival architecture.

Temple grounds are fronted by a graceful iron fence dating from 1819. A large marble tablet above the huge entrance doors proclaims the *Sh’ma* (Deut. 6:4) in Hebrew and English, and in the foyer is the original dedication stone of the 1794 sanctuary.



The impressive Ark is made of Santo Domingo mahogany and classic, LowCountry egg and dart molding is used throughout the sanctuary.

By 1873, KKBE was one of the founding synagogues of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, now known as the Union for Reform Judaism. The current pews were installed in 1879 when the Bimah was moved from the center of the room to its current place in front of the Ark. Although women moved from the balconies to join the men on the main floor for worship services in 1879, the balconies remained until they were destroyed during the Great Earthquake of 1886. Stained glass windows featuring Jewish religious symbols are replacements of the plain glass windows destroyed in the earthquake.

Congregants who split with KKBE over the reforms went on to create an Orthodox synagogue and later, a further split occurred that resulted in the creation of a Conservative synagogue in 1947. As a result, many Jewish Charleston families have ties to all three congregations. While maintaining separate synagogues and religious practices, the Charleston Jewish community continues to jointly support a variety of special events, including concerts, Purim carnivals, Chanukah in the Square, and a series of Three Rabbi Panels on various topics.

KKBE also maintains vibrant relationships with various Christian congregations. KKBE and The Circular Congregational Church's youth groups work together on Social Action projects as often as possible. KKBE hosted Easter service for Grace Episcopal Church, whose sanctuary was damaged last year in a Virginia earthquake felt across the country. KKBE and St. Mary's Catholic Church, neighbors for 250 years, hold a joint block party every few years, enjoying each other's food and company in the middle of historic Hasell Street.

Today, KKBE is an active congregation of over 500 families. Hundreds of visitors tour the Sanctuary, museum, and cemeteries on Coming Street and Huguenin Avenue. Though dedicated to maintaining the unique historical record that the building and cemeteries represent, they face daunting restoration projects.

The sanctuary has survived earthquakes, hurricanes and the Civil War, but decades of moisture have caused the plaster ceiling to begin delaminating. Modern technological advances allow sensors to locate, monitor and prevent additional damage, however, repairing the visible delamination will be an expensive and complicated process.



Photo by Steven Hyatt www.stevenhyattphotography.com

Before the ceiling is scraped, and the plaster repaired and repainted, the historic pine floors must be reinforced to support scaffolding. Expert craftsmen will be required to repair the egg and dart molding. The actual repair will be done in stages so the sanctuary can continue to be used where possible.

Portions of the Coming Street Cemetery wall pre-date the Revolutionary War. Sadly, the surrounding brick stucco walls have been ravaged by the effects of time and the natural, but intrusive, power of the trees shading the graves.



Experts have been engaged to assess what is required to professionally restore the cemetery so future generations of visitors and historians can continue to visit. The Restoration Team includes a landscape architect, an arborist, structural engineers and an expert in the restoration of historic markers. In most cases, a specific phased plan has to be drawn up for sections and individual graves, considering what trees have to be trimmed or sections of walls rebuilt before a tombstone can be repaired and cleaned.

The congregation is currently seeking funds from individuals and organizations to support their efforts. If you are planning a trip to historic Charleston, be sure to stop by Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim for a free tour of the sanctuary and museum during business hours (large parties encouraged to call the temple office at 843-723-1090). For a tour of Coming Street Cemetery, call the temple office during business hours. More information on KKBE can be found at www.kkbe.org.