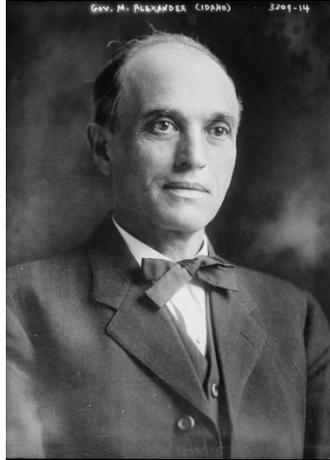


The First Jewish Governor in America

By Jerry Klinger



Governor Moses Alexander

“Grandpa, who was the first Jewish governor in America?”

“Well, Chandler, the answer it’s not that simple.

The first Catholic Governor in America is not identified with a nationality or ethnicity – just American

The first Protestant Governor in America is not identified with a nationality or ethnicity – just American.

Jews... Jews are different. Are Jews a nationality, an ethnicity, a religion, sometimes all three, before they are recognized as - just Americans?”

William Rabinowitz

I hurried to catch my flight to Fly-Over America from Washington’s Reagan National Airport. I was going to Boise, Idaho in search of the first Jewish American governor. My Bon Voyage friends, all whom live inside the Beltway, raised eyebrows of concern. *Idaho the land of the Aryan Nation, Syrian refugees and potatoes, is that a place for a Jew?*

Moses Alexander was the 11th governor of Idaho. He was a Jew. Some sources say he was the first Jewish governor, others, the second... or was he the third?

The National Governors Association has short write ups on all U.S. Governors. They wrote re: the 24th Governor of Georgia and Revolutionary War Hero, “DAVID EMANUEL, according to some sources the first Jewish governor to serve any state.” Emanuel was governor of Georgia for seven months in 1801. The Jewish Daily Forward was more assertive. “David Emanuel, governor of Georgia in 1801, is believed to be the first Jewish governor of any state”. The Political Graveyard – a Database of American history

re: Emanuel has to be taken with a grain of internet salt. They wrote, emphatically, Emanuel was "Jewish". Historical sources and historians go both ways on Emanuel.

A few years back, my society, the Jewish American Society for Historic Preservation, attempted to place a State historic highway marker for Governor Emanuel. We used approved, vetted, wording, "A Presbyterian by faith, he is believed to be the first governor in the United States of Jewish heritage." The wording set off a minor, local fire storm. The funded project had to be scrapped.

Where did the idea that Emanuel may have been Jewish come from? Local gossip about Emanuel was one source. The stories had been circulating for hundreds of years in Georgia. A second source was historian Leon Huhner, writing in the 1909 American Jewish Historical Society Publication, quoted a letter from a descendent of Emanuel's sister, Ruth Emanuel Twiggs. Judge H.D.D. Twiggs wrote, "I do not know where Governor David Emanuel came from, I only know that, beyond doubt, he was a Jew." Judge Twiggs was born many years after Emanuel died and did not know him.

The Jewish connection to Emanuel may seem strained but it is also curiously close.

Emanuel's sister Ruth married the famed Revolutionary War Hero General John Twiggs. They had a son whom they named David Emanuel Twiggs.

David E. Twiggs became a Confederate general. His daughter married Col. Abraham Myers, a West Point graduate and the grandson of Rabbi Moses Cohen of Charleston, South Carolina....

The military tradition stayed in the Myers/Twiggs family. Abraham's son John Twiggs Myers became commandant of the U.S. Marine Corp. He was the famed commander of the American Legation forces during the siege of Peking. Charleton Heston portayed him in the movie, 55 Days at Peking.

Fort Myers, Florida, the mildly Jewish West Coast Florida vacation resort is named after Abraham Myers. Abraham is buried in St. Paul's Episcopal Cemetery in Alexandria, Va. under a Cross.

David Emanuel, if he was Jewish, never wore his Jewishness on his sleeve. He died and was buried a believing Christian.

Washington Montgomery Bartlett was the 16th Governor of California. He died in 1887 having served nine months in office. His mother was a Sephardic Jew. His father was not Jewish. Bartlett, like Emanuel was not religious, did not participate in Jewish observances or identify as a Jew. When he died, his funeral was conducted in San Francisco's Trinity Episcopal Church rather than the oldest Jewish house of worship in California, San Francisco's Congregation Emanu-El.

Bartlett is not identified as being Jewish by the National Governors Association. He generally is identified as the first Jewish governor in America.

But was he?

Boise, Idaho is the Capital and largest city in Idaho. The name Boise traces back to the early years of Mountain Men, fur trappers and exploration. Today, Boise is the City of Trees.

Boise was the home of Moses Alexander, the 11th Governor of Idaho. Alexander was born in Germany. When he was twenty three he came to America finding work in his cousin's clothing store in Chillicothe,

Missouri. He demonstrated a real talent for the *schmatah* business. He married Hedwig Kaestner, reportedly, a Christian German immigrant who converted to Judaism. They had a daughter, Leha.

In Chillicothe Alexander first showed an interest in politics, especially the newly emerging politics associated with the Democrat party and Progressivism. America was very different from Germany; a Jew had opportunities in America that remained extreme challenges in Germany. 1886 Alexander was elected to the city council, quickly followed by two terms as Mayor.

Alexander heard stories about Alaska that beckoned to the brave and adventurous. 1891, he packed up his family and headed West. He made it as far as Boise when he realized he found his new home. Immediately, he opened up a clothing business that soon prospered into several clothing stores. His hard work, honesty, industry and business acumen were quickly recognized and rewarded by the citizenry of Idaho. Moses Alexander was elected Mayor of Boise in 1897 and then again for another two year term in 1901.

A Jewish community does not need a building to pray in. Ten Jews can assemble anywhere, even under a tree, to be a quorum to hold religious services. Rather, Jews built synagogues because they could in America. A Jewish house of worship was a visible, permanent statement – Jews are part of the community, they are part of America.



Cong. Ahavath Beth Israel

Jews had been Idaho miners, merchants, potato farmers and ranchers since territorial days. It was not until the 1895 that the Jewish community of Boise became large enough enabling Alexander to organize an effort to build the first permanent Jewish house of worship in Idaho, Congregation Beth Israel. Beth Israel followed the American Reform Jewish tradition. 120 years later, the synagogue remains the oldest in continuous use west of the Mississippi River.

1914, Moses Alexander was elected the eleventh governor of Idaho. He was the first openly, practicing Jew ever to be elected a U.S. State governor. Two years again, the citizens of Idaho reelected Alexander governor. His competence, ability and honesty were far more important to the citizens of Idaho than his religious identity.



Alexander burial site

Unlike David Emanuel or Washington Bartlett, Moses Alexander did care about being a Jew. He did not hide who he was. He openly and plainly lived his life as a Jew and chose to die as a Jew. In America, Alexander was free to choose who he was and not have others choose for him.

The National Governors Association does not identify Alexander as a Jew. He did it for himself.

“Chandler, Moses Alexander was the first *Jewish* governor in America.”

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