

SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

Journal of the Southern Jewish Historical Society

Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

MarkKBauman@aol.com

Bryan Edward Stone, *Managing Editor*

bstone@delmar.edu

Scott M. Langston, *Primary Sources Section Editor*

sclangston@charter.net

Stephen J. Whitfield, *Book Review Editor*

swhitfie@brandeis.edu

Ashley Walters, *Exhibit and Film Review Editor*

waltersa1@cofc.edu

Shari Rabin, *Website Review Editor*

srabin@oberlin.edu

Lance J. Sussman and Karen S. Franklin

Memoirs Section Editors

lancejsussman@gmail.com, karenfranklin@gmail.com

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Founding Managing Editor*

2024
Volume 27



Southern Jewish History

Editorial Board

Ronald Bayor
Charles L. Chavis, Jr.
Miriam Sanua Dalin
Hasia Diner
Mark Goldberg

Michael Hoberman
Amy Milligan
Melissa Young
Gary P. Zola

Southern Jewish History is a publication of the Southern Jewish Historical Society available by subscription and a benefit of membership in the society. The opinions and statements expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of the journal or of the Southern Jewish Historical Society.

Southern Jewish Historical Society OFFICERS: Josh Parshall, *President*; Eric Goldstein, *Vice President and President Elect*; Anna Tucker, *Secretary*; Jay Silverberg, *Treasurer*; Jay Silverberg, *Immediate Past President*. BOARD OF DIRECTORS: Rachel Barnett, Gemma Birnbaum, Catherine R. Eskin, Joshua Furman, Stephen Krause, Jacob Morrow-Spitzer, Shari Rabin, Ellen Uman-sky, Ashley Walters, Stephen J. Whitfield; Bernie Wax, z"l, *Board Member Emeritus*.

For submission information and author guidelines, see <http://www.jewishsouth.org/submission-information-and-guidelines-authors>. For queries and all editorial matters: Mark K. Bauman, Editor, *Southern Jewish History*, 6856 Flagstone Way, Flowery Branch, GA 30542, e-mail: MarkKBauman@aol.com. For journal subscriptions and advertising: Bryan Edward Stone, Managing Editor, PO Box 271432, Corpus Christi, TX 78427, e-mail: bstone@delmar.edu. For membership and general information about the Southern Jewish Historical Society, visit www.jewishsouth.org or write to PO Box 71601, Marietta, GA 30007-1601.

Articles appearing in *Southern Jewish History* are abstracted and/or indexed in *Historical Abstracts*; *America: History and Life*; *Index to Jewish Periodicals*; *Journal of American History*; *Journal of Southern History*; *RAMBI-National Library of Israel*; *Immigration and Ethnic History Society Newsletter*; and the *Berman Jewish Policy Archive* (www.bjpa.org).

Full-text content is available to subscribing libraries on EBSCOhost Academic Search Ultimate and the Atla Religion Database. Full-text content is also available free on Academia.edu at <http://independent.academia.edu/SouthernJewishHistory> and on the SJHS website at www.jewishsouth.org.

PERMISSION STATEMENT

Consent by the Southern Jewish Historical Society is given for private use of articles and images that have appeared in *Southern Jewish History*. Copying or distributing any journal, article, image, or portion thereof, for any use other than private, is forbidden without the written permission of *Southern Jewish History*. To obtain that permission, please contact the editors at journal@jewishsouth.org.

Website Review

Synagogues of the South: Architecture and Jewish Identity. Researched and written by Samuel D. Gruber. Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture, College of Charleston. <https://synagoguesofthesouth.cofc.edu>. Reviewed March 2024.

Postcards are, at their core, the most ephemeral of things. They are cheap to make, cheap to buy, and cheap to mail. The words written on the backs of them are often fleeting as well. Yet postcards are also remarkably durable. At any antique store or flea market, one quickly learns how hard it is for people to get rid of the postcards they received. Meanwhile, the images emblazoned on the front—people, times, and places lost to time etched upon postcards—provide us enduring glimpses of the past.

The rich insight offered by these seemingly insignificant objects animates a new digital exhibit on the lost histories of Jewish life in the American South. Titled “Synagogues of the South” and published by the College of Charleston’s Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture, the project harnesses postcards featuring historic synagogues to reconstruct the built environment of southern Judaism. The nearly one hundred postcards that illustrate the exhibit come from the College of Charleston’s William A. Rosenthal Judaica Collection and feature everything from the colonial stylings of the 180-year-old Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim synagogue in Charleston to the coastal colors of a Miami synagogue built in 1966. The rich collection showcases nearly every architectural style, with interpretive text written by noted architect and historic preservationist Samuel D. Gruber. Across the exhibit’s twelve

Synagogues of the South
(<https://synagoguesofthesouth.cofc.edu>)

short pages, Gruber provides an accessible overview of the major architectural styles of southern synagogues as well as original research on the history of these buildings.

The exhibit opens with a page on the four-hundred-year presence of Jews in what became the American South, as well as one focused on the use of postcards in historical research. It then moves through the architectural history of southern synagogues, opening with the various revival styles that dominated the long nineteenth century before documenting moments in the twentieth century's obsession with modernist architecture. Each page contains a brief essay on the major characteristics of a specific architectural style followed by a display of postcards from the Rosenthal Collection that feature synagogues in that style. Clicking on a postcard then brings up a high-quality scan of the image, alongside another essay by Gruber that relays the history of the synagogue featured in the postcard. The page on synagogues done in what was then known as Moorish style, for example, notes that the popularity of this architecture around the turn of the twentieth century spoke to the shared and distinctive features of southern Jewish life. While the elaborate structures done

in this style reflected the economic recovery of the South in the decades after the Civil War, their decidedly Middle Eastern, or “Oriental,” motifs spoke to the desire of southern Jews to carve a distinctive presence in the region. Visiting the page on Nashville’s Kahl Kadesh Ohavai Sholom temple then tells the tale of that vibrant community, as the synagogue’s 1876 dedication brought in both Isaac Mayer Wise and former President Andrew Johnson.

This dance between the general and the particular carries forward through the rest of history as the architectural preferences of southern Jews shifted from Gothic and Moorish Revival to more classical and then modernist norms. The result is something of a revived directory of southern Jewish life, one that shows the depth and breadth of Judaism’s presence in a region long known for its evangelical Protestant sensibilities. In the variability of architectural styles, one gets a sense of the diversity of southern Jewish life. The remarkably detailed histories of each community, in turn, showcase their importance to local life. Gruber marshals this history to show that southern Jewish history is very much American and

southern history. “In religiously and culturally pluralist America, with its vast geographic expanse,” he writes, “Jewish communities have probably built more types, sizes, forms, and styles of synagogues in two centuries than in the entire history of Jewish synagogue construction.”

Although rich in historical interpretation and documentation, the site curiously underutilizes the digital medium in which it is published. While the exhibit’s sections are roughly chronological, for example, the site does not let users “turn the page,” so to speak, with some kind of “next” or “previous” button. The viewer can only move through the exhibit by utilizing a dropdown menu or returning to the home page and finding the next section. This is like needing to return to a book’s table of contents every time you wanted to start a new chapter.

One also cannot view or explore the collection of postcards on the site outside of the curation provided by the site itself. No gallery view or browse page of every item exists, only a map that shows the locations of the synagogues. But even the map only offers an outline of states, which requires a user to click on a state to bring up the images and locations of the postcards available there. A more dynamic map would have allowed for a richer interpretative view of the collection.

More unfortunately, the project is digitally divorced from the archival collection on which it is based. Although the exhibit draws on more than eighty postcards from the Rosenthal Collection, the items ultimately serve only as illustrations rather than resources from which the visitors can learn. The site fails to inform visitors that the featured images are but a handful of the nearly four thousand postcards held in the collection that are scanned and placed online—a fact I only learned after independently searching for the collection and finding its full digital presence on the College of Charleston’s library website. At a time when digital humanities emphasizes developing linked datasets, it seems like a lost opportunity not to have the postcards on “Synagogues of the South” connect with their permanent archival presence on the web.

Despite these technical concerns, “Synagogues of the South” stands as an important contribution to the public history of American Judaism. Gruber’s prose is clear and accessible. Thus, the site could serve as a resource for educators who teach southern history, architectural history, or the history of American Judaism. It could also serve as a prompt for future research, as students and scholars fill out the histories begun by Gruber.

Indeed, the College of Charleston's Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture identifies one of the project's major goals as: "[to] spawn more research and prompt the discovery of additional images, creating a more comprehensive picture of the built heritage of the Jewish South." The site's comprehensive histories, however, mean that it stands as a resource for scholars of every religion and region as well.

Christopher D. Cantwell, Loyola University Chicago

The reviewer may be contacted at ccantwell1@luc.edu.

