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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Dana M. Greene, *Book Review Editor*

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PRIMARY SOURCES

Tales of Two Weddings

Henrietta Shebeiner marries Aaron Davis,
June 7, 1870, Eufaula, Alabama

During Reconstruction southern newspaper editors consistently illustrated an interest in their Jewish neighbors and a fascination with their customs. Near the time of major Jewish holidays, articles explaining the history of the celebration and the associated rituals were routinely printed. The Jews themselves, largely German-born immigrants who established small stores, were welcomed and valued for their economic contributions, their education, their commitment to their faith, and even a certain degree of exoticism they brought to their adopted communities. The editor of a Tallahassee newspaper esteemed many of his Jewish neighbors as “the most orderly, enterprising, and public spirited citizens we have.”¹

An example of this favorable attitude and interest is found in a charming article in the Bainbridge [Georgia] *Southern Sun* reprinted from the *Eufaula* [Alabama] *Times*. The editor of the Eufaula newspaper describes his pleasure at attending the celebration of the wedding of Mr. Aaron Davis of Bainbridge and Miss Henrietta Shebeiner of Eufaula held at the residence of the bride’s uncle, Mr. W. E. Barnett in Eufaula. His enthusiasm and delight speak for themselves. Yet note that his use of the phrases “Israelitish friends” and

“Hebrew friends” could be read as both inclusive and exclusive even though there is nothing else in the article indicating that this wedding was different from others held in the town.

It is easy to think of Jewish life in small towns as isolated. Yet this and even more so the following document illustrate ties of family often reinforced through business between Jews in neighboring towns and states, in this case Bainbridge, Georgia, and Eufaula, Alabama. Jews thus fashioned a community from southeastern Alabama to northern Florida and southern Georgia. In many ways, although not evident here, Savannah, with its port for goods and Jewish infrastructure—rabbis, foods, larger pool of potential Jewish mates, Jewish social outlets, etc.—acted as a center to these peripheral communities.

MARRIED—On the evening of June 7th, 1870, at the residence of the bride’s uncle, Mr. W. E. Barnett, Mr. Aaron Davis, of Bainbridge, Ga. to Miss Henrietta Shebeiner, of this city [Eufaula, AL].

This is the first Jewish wedding ever happened in Eufaula, and our Israelitish friends spared neither pains nor money to make it a grand affair, and they can now feel assured that they were entirely successful. As we (the Junior) were fortunate enough to be present on this occasion we speak knowingly when we say that it was indeed a grand affair. The supper was particularly fine, and reflects much credit on Mr. Leben, the confectioner who furnished it, and was evidently enjoyed exceedingly by the large crowd in attendance. After the supper was over, music was introduced, and then those who felt inclined to ‘trip the light fantastic toe,’ were offered an opportunity, and all present seemed to take advantage of it, and the dance was kept up until the ‘wee sma’ hours.

We would like very much to give an extended notice of this wedding, but our time and space will not permit—We will remark, however, that we hope some other Hebrew friends will soon marry, and we may be present on the occasion; for we have a great weakness for good eating and drinking, and have

discovered that they are behind none when it comes to ‘fixing up’ for a wedding.

–Bainbridge, Georgia, *Southern Sun*, June 16, 1870 from *Eufaula Times*, June 9, 1870.

Daniel R. Weinfeld is an attorney residing in Hartsdale, New York.



Rosa Benjamin marries Jacob Katz,
July 7, 1886, Micanopy, Florida

The Rosa Benjamin/Jacob Katz wedding brought together an extended Benjamin family that originated in Prussia, many of whose members settled in North Central Florida in the 1860s, 1870s, and early 1880s. They and their descendants became involved in Jewish organizations and contributed to the development of the state in business, transportation, politics, and architecture, primarily in Micanopy, Ocala, Jacksonville, and Orlando. The wedding story illustrates their economic success and integration into the larger non-Jewish society and reveals kinship, marriage, and business connections as well as a family chain migration pattern.

Rosa Benjamin and her family were not the first Jews associated with Micanopy. The original landowner was Moses Elias Levy, who, in 1822, purchased massive acreage that included what was to become the town. By the time Levy’s son, David Levy Yulee, ushered Florida into statehood in 1845 about one hundred Jews called the state home. A substantial migration augmented this number following the Civil War.² The Benjamins exemplify the settlement patterns of both the pre- and postwar migrations.

Simon H. (known as S. H.) Benjamin, a dry goods and furniture merchant and brother of the bride, had emigrated

with his family from Prussia to Savannah in 1872. By 1880 he was head of a household in Micanopy that included his father, H. Benjamin, age sixty-one; his mother Hanna, age fifty-five; and his sister Rosa, nineteen. Such extended family living arrangements remained fairly common among middle and upper class Jews until some time after World War II.³

In 1883 S. H. Benjamin invited Prussian immigrant Jacob Katz to become his partner in S. H. Benjamin and Co. The company included stores in Micanopy and Jacksonville. Also in 1883 Benjamin and Katz purchased ten acres of land. Two years later they built the Benjamin Building, Micanopy's first two-story brick business structure. The partnership, cemented by marriage ties the year after the building opened, continued until 1901, when the partnership was dissolved.⁴

By the time S. H. Benjamin and his family settled in Micanopy, his cousins were living twenty-six miles to the south in Ocala.⁵ Perhaps the first of those Benjamins to arrive in Florida was Simon Benjamin. Born in 1850 in Prussia, he arrived in Waldo, Florida, at the age of seventeen. There he ran a store that was probably purchased for him by relatives. He remained in Waldo for a few years until, according to family lore, he was run out of town by the Ku Klux Klan because he was a Jew. Under the protection of a former Confederate officer, Simon relocated to Ocala, where he was soon joined by his elder brother Solomon and later by brothers, Morris and Herman, and at least two of his four sisters.⁶

By 1873 Ocala's Jewish population was sufficiently large to found a congregation, United Hebrews of Ocala, and to establish a cemetery. According to the congregation's history, Ocala offered much to draw these pioneers: "Mild climate, rich soil, and abundant available water made possible the surplus production of citrus, cotton, vegetables, and livestock. The east-west chain of rivers and lakes, with portage needed only for short overland distances, seemed to invite entrepreneurs in transportation and marketing."⁷

In 1884 brothers Simon, Solomon, and Morris, and brother-in-law William Fox were four of the five principals

who established the East Florida Ice Co. that pioneered refrigeration and cold storage in Marion County. Then, in 1892, Simon, Solomon, and brother-in-law, Louis Fox, were among investors that formed the Silver Springs, Ocala, and Gulf Railroad. In 1882, Solomon served as president of the Marion County Board of Commissioners. Both William Fox and Simon Benjamin succeeded him on the commission in the 1890s.⁸ At the time of the wedding, Simon and his brother Morris were living in Atlanta. But Simon soon returned to Ocala where he and his immediate family remained until they moved to Jacksonville in 1901.

Eighty guests traveled from as far away as Charleston and Atlanta, representing family friends and relatives throughout the South. Yet the gift list and honeymoon plans illustrate broader ties. Gifts came from New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey besides Florida, Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia, and the newlyweds spent their first two months as husband and wife visiting Atlanta, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Chicago, and New York. Dr. Isaac P. Mendes of Savannah officiated. Perhaps the family had special ties to the rabbi because other rabbis resided in Florida by that time.⁹ Although living in small towns, these Jews were clearly not isolated.

The affluence and prestige of the family is clearly shown, as the family intended, in the descriptions of the wedding, women's clothing, gift list, and especially the who's who guest list. Joining in the wedding festivities, besides Benjamin relatives, were Jewish families from North Central Florida and distant places, but also notable citizens of Micanopy. As a highly ecumenical example of the latter, John E. Thrasher III writes, "Rev. Bailey was one of the founding members of the New Mt. Arnow Baptist Church at Flemington (a community about eight miles south of Micanopy) and later pastor of the Micanopy Baptist Church. His wife was the founder of the Baptist Church's Women's Christian Missionary Union, which spread nationwide." Dr. Harvey Lucious Montgomery, Sr., and

his wife, John Jacob Barr and his wife Lillian, and the Edwards and Turner families were affluent and outstanding town folk.¹⁰

S. H. Benjamin arranged a highlight with the superintendent of the Florida Southern Railway. The train made a special stop to pick up the newlyweds in the afternoon following the ceremony to begin their honeymoon.¹¹

In 1901 S. H. Benjamin and Jacob Katz dissolved their partnership. S. H. and his wife, Flora, moved to Newburg, New York, where he died in 1919.¹² Jacob and Rosa Katz remained in town until a fire destroyed the store in 1903. They then may have moved to Savannah briefly, where their son, Harry, previously celebrated his bar mitzvah on June 29, 1901. By 1910 Rosa resided as a widow in Jacksonville.¹³

Simon of Ocala had moved to Jacksonville in 1901. He served as president of congregation Ahaveth Chesed from 1911 to 1921, a position his son, Julien P. Benjamin, Sr., held from 1928 to 1931.¹⁴ Another son, Roy Benjamin, Sr., became an architect renowned throughout the state especially for his theaters.

Probably the first Jewish wedding in the town, the occasion prompted major coverage in *The Micanopy Gazette*, written in the meticulous descriptive style of the times. Success had been achieved and these Jews felt sufficiently comfortable in their surroundings to celebrate it.

THE MARRIAGE OF MISS ROSA BENJAMIN AND MR. J. KATZ *The Ceremony – The Dress – Dinner – Departure. A Grand Affair.*¹⁵

The guests commenced to arrive at 9 o'clock on Wednesday morning and by the time appointed for the ceremony there were representatives from Atlanta, Savannah, Charleston, Ocala, Gainesville, Boardman, Tacoma and Micanopy; number 80 people. For a few minutes the guests chatted pleasantly until 10 o'clock when all eyes were turned toward the doorway to catch the first glimpse of the bride and groom. On entering the parlor where the ceremony took place, the bride leaning on the grooms

arm, they were accompanied by the bride's mother and brother, Mr. and Mrs. Wm Fox, Mr. and Mrs. Louis Fox and Mr. and Mrs. M. Shiretzki, and took their proper positions under a very pretty canopy, specially provided for the occasion, where the Rabbi, Dr. Mendes, of Savannah, performed the marriage ceremony according to the Jewish rites. The ceremony was very impressive and beautiful, and created a deep feeling among all present. At its conclusion Mrs. Benjamin showed deep emotion and was the first to tender her congratulations to the newly married couple, and was followed by other relatives and friends in turn.

The bride wore an enchanting wedding dress of ivory satin, the entire front of lace embroidery with pearl seed. An orange blossom garniture commencing on the veil in a superb coronet was continued throughout the costume. Her veil was of silk tulle three yards in length, completely enveloping her, and extending the entire length of her court train. The waist cut with square neck; Mary Antonio, collar edge with pearl seed, pearl neck-lace, corsage bouquet of the traditional orange blossoms, white satin fan with mother of pearl handle, and duchess lace handkerchief. She carried no flowers and wore no jewelry except a necklace and a gold wedding ring.

Mrs. H. Benjamin, mother of bride, wore a handsome black silk with jet trimmings.

Miss Rosalie Wish, niece of the groom, a cream albatross trimmed with Egyptian lace and ottoman ribbons, ornaments, natural flowers.

Mrs. Wm, Fox wore a handsome black silk, with cut jet trimmings.

Mrs. Louis Fox wore a garnet silk trimmed with garnet and gold embossed silk.

Mrs. M. Shiretzki wore a black cashmere with passamentarie trimmings

Miss Jennie Brown wore a pale pink nuns-veiling, with flounces of real lace ornaments of natural flowers and ribbons.

Mrs. D. Nathan wore a black silk.

Miss Gussie Nathan wore a white mull with front of Oriental lace.

Miss Lillie Nathan wore a white Persian lawn. The entire over-suit was of hand-worked lace.

Miss Hannah Nathan wore a white Egyptian lawn, with trimmings of lace.

Mrs. L. Montgomery wore a black silk with lace over-suit.

Mrs. R. B. Taylor wore a handsome black silk with cut jet trimmings.

Mrs. J. J. Barr wore a heavy black silk.

Miss Allie Brown wore a cream nunsveiling with lace over-suit, pearl ornaments.

Miss Tillie Brown wore a Nile green albatross with garnet velvet trimmings.

Miss Yetta Endel wore a dainty costume in pink, ornaments of natural flowers.

There were many other beautiful customs which our reporter failed to note.

From the parlor the wedding party and company proceeded to the dining room where the wedding dinner was served. There were four tables, most handsomely decorated and loaded down with the choicest viands, which were greatly relished by the assembled hosts. Among the drinkables were champagne, Rhine, Hungarian and sweet wines. During the repast twenty-five telegrams of congratulations were read, from many of the leading cities of the South and East, which added an additional evidence of the great popularity of the bride and groom. Pleasing toasts were responded to by Messrs. Simon and Morris Benjamin, of Atlanta, L. Fox and I. Schwerin of Ocala, Revs. Turner and Bailey, Rabbi Mendes, Gus. Roth, Joe Manassee, and Dr. Montgomery.

After an hour's further pleasant social conversation the bride and groom made preparations for their departure. The bride's travelling dress consisted of very handsome steel gray cashimere, with trimmings to match. The special train arrived at 2:15 p.m., when the bride and groom took their departure for an extended wedding trip. It is expected they will visit Atlanta, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Chicago, New York, and many other leading cities. They will be absent about two months. They were followed by the best

wishes and benedictions of hosts of friends for their future happiness and prosperity which now seems so well assured.

THE PRESENTS

Elegant plush case of solid silver table ware, Benjamin Bros., of Atlanta; silver cake basket, Mrs. L. Montgomery; silver fruit and flower stand, Mr. and Mrs. M. Shiretzki; carving sett, Mr. Herrman Benjamin; silver lemonade sett, R. I. Kohn, N.Y.; silver cake basket, Misses Edwards and Marshall; silver butter dish, I. H. Levine Hawley, Pa; silver butter dish, Schwerin Bros., Ocala; silver syrup pitcher, Miss Endel, Gainesville; 1/2 dozen silver tablespoons, Mr. and Mrs. Wellman, Brooklyn, N.Y.; silver fish carving sett, Mr. and Miss Brown, Ocala; silver sugar spoon, Mr. and Mrs Cohn, Chester, S.C.; one plush case of 1/2 dozen silver teaspoons, butter knife and sugar spoon, Mr. and Mrs. Kaminskis, N.J.; 1/2 dozen teaspoons, Mr. and Mrs. I. Heyman, Chester S.C.; silver fish knife, T. Brown, Gainesville; 1/2 dozen silver teaspoons and sugar spoon, Mr. and Mrs. H. Beck, N.J.; plush case with silver soup ladel, S. H. Benjamin; silver cake basket, Isidor Bladey, Patterson, N.J.; silver swinging water pitcher goblets and tray, Messrs. Roth and Manassee, two hands bust figure, Mr. and Mrs. W. Fox, Ocala; photograph album, Alber Fox, Ocala; crochet tidy, Miss Annie Heyman, Chester; crochet tidy, Miss Ida Cohen, Chester; pillow shams, Misses Nathans; hand embroidery sofa pillow, Miss Tillie Brown, Gainesville; hand embroidered chenille photograph case Mrs. R. B. Taylor; hand embroidered plush tidy, Miss Baskett; bronze Plague, Mr. and Mrs. M. Bauer, N.J.; 2 steel engravings, Mr. and Mrs. L. Fox, Ocala; 2 oil paintings, Mr. Ottensoser, Eufala; 1 oil painting, Mr. and Mrs. Nathan; silver gravy spoon, Mr. and Mrs. S. M. Rosenberger, Camden, S.C.

— *The Micanopy Gazette*, July 8, 1886

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 NOTES

Thanks are extended to John E. Thrasher III, Assistant Archivist, Micanopy Historical Society Museum; Mike Knoll, Registrar, Jewish Museum of Florida; Toby Johnson, Reference Librarian, Marion County Public Library; and George Benjamin of Orlando and Jill Benjamin of Ft. McCoy, Florida, grandson and great granddaughter of Simon Benjamin of Ocala and Atlanta for their numerous contributions and assistance in researching this article.

¹ Tallahassee [Florida] *Sentinel*, October 1, 1870.

² Henry Alan Green and Marcia Kerstein Zerivitz, *Jewish Life in Florida: A Documentary Exhibit from 1763 to the Present* (Coral Gables, FL, 1991), 10.

³ Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Micanopy, Alachua County, Florida. Twenty years later, S. H. Benjamin (transcriber's error showed first name "Somers"), merchant, age forty-five, married for twelve years, was listed as the head of household that included wife Flora, age thirty-four, born in New York, and four children, ages three to eleven. The Katz family living next door was composed of Jacob Katz, age fifty, married fourteen years; wife, Rosa, born in Prussia, forty-three, (mother of five children, three living, ages seven to thirteen); and widowed mother Hanna Benjamin, seventy-two. Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900, Micanopy, Alachua County, Florida. Census information supplied by John E. Thrasher, III, assistant archivist, Micanopy Historical Society Museum, hereafter MHSM.

⁴ *The Micanopy Gazette*, July 8, 1886, carried a half dozen advertisements for S. H. Benjamin and Co. for such diverse commodities as baby carriages, Mason jars, millinery, and tomato wraps on the same page as the wedding story. The Benjamin Building exists today as O'Brisky's Book Store, minus its second story, which was destroyed by fire. Jacob Katz, handwritten statement of his life history (copy); deed of sale to S. H. Benjamin and Jacob Katz, Alachua County, State of Florida, July 12, 1883; mortgage deed to S. H. Benjamin; and notes by Marcia Jo Zerivitz from conversation with Olga Walker, granddaughter of Jacob Katz, 1988; all in Benjamin Family File, Micanopy archival box, Jewish Museum of Florida, Miami Beach (hereafter cited as Benjamin Family File).

⁵ George Benjamin, interview by Rachel Heimovics Braun, August 10, 2008.

⁶ Besides Florida, Benjamins lived in Charleston, SC, Savannah and Atlanta, GA, and elsewhere in the South. George Benjamin, telephone interview by Rachel Heimovics Braun, August 6, 2008. Simon Benjamin's family immigrated to the U.S., arriving in Savannah in 1854, when he was four years old. His grandfather, Simon Benjamin, was born in Prussia c. 1796, and married Rozalie; their son Michel, was born c. 1818 in Prussia. Michel married Roschen Braun c. 1840. Their children, all born in Hiereswerda, Prussia, were, in birth order: Solomon, Amalia, Rozalia, Simon, Morris, Dora, Jennie, and Herman. Dora married William Fox, and Jennie married his brother Louis, all lived in Ocala. Rozalia married Solomon Shiretski and Amalia married Michalis Shiretski, who may have been Solomon's

brother. (Elsewhere the name is spelled *Shiretzki*.) Jill Benjamin interview, by Rachel Heimovics Braun, August 10, 2008; Jill Benjamin email to Rachel Heimovics Braun, August 13, 2008. By 1880, Amalia and Michalis Shiretzki were living in Micanopy, where he ran a "billiards saloon." John E. Thrasher, III, email to Rachel Heimovics Braun, August 15, 2008. M. Shiretzki's residence was considered among the finest in town. See Carl Webber, *The Eden of the South* (New York, 1883), 58.

⁷ Both the congregation and cemetery continue to exist albeit under different names. *Temple B'nai Darom Celebrating Over One Hundred Years of Jewish Heritage in Ocala, Marion County, Florida* (Ocala, 1981), 15.

⁸ City of Ocala, Florida *Tuscawilla Park Historic District* <http://www.ocalafl.org/COO2.aspx?id=596> (accessed July 28, 2008). Citation graciously provided by Toby Johnson, Reference Librarian, Ocala.

⁹ Rabbis, for example, served Ahavath Chesed in Jacksonville continuously from 1882 through 1887. Natalie H. Glickstein, *That Ye May Remember: Congregation Ahavath Chesed, 1882-1982/5642-5742* (Jacksonville, FL, 1982), 118.

¹⁰ John E. Thrasher, III, email to Rachel Heimovics Braun, August 14, 2008; Webber, *Eden of the South*, 58.

¹¹ J. A. Lawerd, Superintendent, Florida Southern Division, Florida Southern Railway, Palatka, FL, July 1, 1886 to S. H. Benjamin, Micanopy, Benjamin Family File.

¹² Dissolution of Partnership (copy), March 1901, Benjamin Family File.

¹³ Biographical information about S. H. Benjamin and the Katz family in this paragraph supplied by John E. Thrasher, III. Invitation to Harry Katz's bar mitzvah, Benjamin collection, MHSM. On Rosa, her three children, and mother in Jacksonville, see Thirteenth Census of the United States, 1910, Jacksonville, Duval County, Florida.

¹⁴ Glickstein, *That Ye May Remember*, 118.

¹⁵ Original article in Benjamin collection, MHSM. MHSM houses a permanent Benjamin exhibit. John E. Thrasher, III, MHSM, prepared the final typescript of the article for this publication. The article appears without correction to errors in punctuation and spelling in the original.