

## Bartholomew County Jewish History

In September 1861 *The Israelite*, a Cincinnati-based Jewish weekly publication, reported that Columbus, Indiana Jews, though “few in number,” “have with a spirit of perseverance and liberality worthy of emulation, organized a new congregation under the title of Chisak Emuna.”<sup>1</sup> Members elected a Rabbi, as well as president, vice president, treasurer, secretary, and three trustees. For the next 150 years, the Columbus Jewry continued to worship together despite a small membership and organizational changes.

The city of Columbus boasts the largest recorded population of Jews in Bartholomew County and serves as the county seat. Since the nineteenth century Bartholomew County residents have relied on a largely agricultural and manufacturing based economy, yet, very few Jews farmed. Instead they usually leased their land to others.<sup>2</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, Columbus, like most Indiana cities, attracted Jewish families who settled and sustained their livelihoods through operating woolen mills and retail stores, as well as providing services.

The earliest Jewish residents in Indiana worked as peddlers, traveling between towns and selling goods from carts.<sup>3</sup> The first Jewish settler is believed to be man named Hodler, but little is known about him. Another early Jewish resident, Samuel Samuels peddled with his brother David in 1852. In 1854, the Samuels had saved enough funds to send for his parents in Germany. By 1857, they established a dry goods business, *Trade Palace*. Samuels’ other ventures also fared well. The entrepreneurs partnered with a Mr. Carter (it is uncertain of his religious affiliation) to build a woolen mill in Columbus in 1863 and another one in St. Louis in 1866. In 1869, Samuels partnered with his former employee Mr. Vogel to form *Samuels, Vogel & Co*. While this firm replaced Vogel’s previous business, *Schloss and Vogel*, it operated at the same site. The dry goods store, with its annual \$100,000 business and renovations, proved a source of pride to the city. An article in the

February 24, 1876 edition of *The Republican* asserted the business “[compared] favorable [sic] with the finest dry goods house of Indianapolis. This store room is now a credit to Columbus and an honor to the enterprising firm.”<sup>4</sup> The store’s notable features included separate departments for every category of goods, which enabled customers to easily locate items. *Samuels, Vogel & Co.* dissolved their partnership in 1879.

Other Columbus Jews established successful businesses at the turn of the twentieth century. Adolph Strauss resided in an 1890s vernacular, gable-fronted house. Strauss operated stores in Columbus, Terre Haute, Anderson, and Seymour after his arrival from New York City in 1870.

Once described as the “Number One [Columbus] Jewish family,” Lee Rosenbush, his sons, and their extended family moved to the city in 1884.<sup>5</sup> The family purchased the *Sam the Boss* clothing store, which thrived. Rosenbush’s brothers-in-law opened a Seymour branch, but moved after its failure. Rosenbush’s nephew Morris immigrated from Germany to partner with his uncle and they changed the name of the store to *L. Rosenbush & Co.* A store advertisement in the January 1, 1900 *Columbus Daily Herald* promised higher quality clothing at lower prices than their competitors.<sup>7</sup> The merchants offered men’s suits priced from \$2.75 to \$20.00 and men’s overcoats marked from \$3.00 to \$18.00. Morris may have bought out his uncle’s share of the business and renamed the firm Morris Rosenbush & Co.

Louis J. Lehman established *Lehman & Co.*, a dry goods and carpet store. Lehman directed a businessmen’s committee formed in Columbus in 1890. His wife and two daughters were described as “social favorites.”<sup>6</sup>

Joseph Kroot immigrated from Poland to Indianapolis and Edinburgh (near Columbus) in 1890 before settling in Columbus in 1900. He and his wife had six children who stayed in the Columbus area or moved to Indianapolis.

For several generations the Kroots operated scrap yards in Indianapolis and Columbus. *The Kroots Scrap Yard* in Columbus is still in operation today.

David Brunswick, a member of the first Jewish congregation, operated *Brunswick Clothing Company*. Brunswick and his two sons and two daughters came to town in 1897.

Oscar Bernhardt Fiegenbaum and his partner Mr. Meyer sold dry goods, carpets, and fancy and staple clothes. They advertised cloaks, blankets, underwear, wool hosiery, gloves, mitts, “fascinators,” carpet, linoleums, oilcloths, draperies, and shades and promised to show customers “a complete line.”<sup>8</sup> A life-long native of Bartholomew County, Fiegenbaum was born in 1864 in Waymansville and died in 1949 in Columbus.<sup>8</sup>

Other Jews operated disparate businesses in Columbus, yet did not leave as much documentary evidence. A Mr. Bengus opened a shoe store, as did a Mr. Hub. The Bergers operated a ready-to-wear store before relocating outside the city. Moses and Rosa Cahn lived on the corner of Eighth and California Streets and partnered with Adolph Strauss to run a retail business on California before they moved to Indianapolis. A Mr. Caplan started a men’s store. Frizinske went into the scrap business. Harry Frohman had a clothing store and ran a fruit stand with his wife Bessie. The Glassners managed a ladies’ dry goods general store. Ruth Kahn established a clothing store before relocating to Chicago. Hannah Kizer or Kaiser ran a boarding house. Aaron Tross ran a clothing store for men, women, and children in the building opposite the courthouse. A Mr. Wasserman sold clothing and shoes.

Nine months after Columbus Jews formed an organization in September 1861 and elected a rabbi and administrative officers, they advertised for a Shoet (ritual slaughterer) and a teacher of Hebrew.<sup>9</sup> The congregation listed themselves as Chasak Emunah, spelled slightly different than the name listed in the 1861 *The Israelite*. The congregation's executive officers did not waste time in gathering individuals who could perform religious rituals such as approving kosher meat and reading the Torah. In September 1871 the congregation, with its membership of fourteen families, dedicated the Chasak Emunah Synagogue, a small frame building. By 1877 the *American Israelite* reported that Chasak Emunah had grown to include fifteen to twenty members and provided Jewish Hoosiers the only place to worship between Indianapolis and Louisville along the Jeffersonville, Madison and Indianapolis Railroad. A weekly Sabbath school drew an average attendance of forty students. The Reform congregation actively engaged within the local community by hosting balls, fundraising for a theological college, and lecturing to Indiana Jews and non-Jews. Yet, Chasak Emunah's success faltered. One source asserts that Rabbi Samuel M. Laski created dissension amongst the congregation and numbers dwindled. The July 27, 1878 *Daily Evening Republic* printed a local church directory that included the Hebrew Synagogue on Vernon Street near Jackson Street. The advertisement listed their rabbi as "Rabbi, \_\_\_\_\_, Pastor" which indicated that the congregation no longer employed a resident rabbi. Nevertheless, services continued to be held every Friday and Saturday, and a Sunday school was offered. An 1888 published history of Bartholomew County included several paragraphs on the Columbus Hebrew community, noting that the synagogue peaked at thirty families or nearly 180 individuals.

According to the Columbus City Directory, another Jewish congregation called the Columbus Hebrew Congregation formed in the late 1960s. In the 1970s the congregation dwindled to five families as members moved away from Columbus for a variety of reasons.<sup>10</sup> Family services were only held twice a year for the high holidays Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) with a non-resident

rabbi secured to conduct the celebration.<sup>11</sup> Once the congregation ceased altogether, the more devout Jewish families traveled to Louisville or Indianapolis to attend temple.<sup>12</sup>

The Jewish congregation and Jewish business owners counted Christians among their patrons. The Columbus synagogue hosted a grand mask ball on February 14, 1877 at the local Pallas Theater to raise funds for the congregation. The Columbus community, regardless of denomination, heavily attended the ball and four previous events given by the Jewish congregation. The *Weekly Republican* declared the function “the hit of the season” and stated that its readership had come to expect nothing less than success from their “Israelite friends.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, people traveled as far away as New York, Louisville, and Cincinnati to enjoy the orchestra, dance, masked procession, and desserts. The Columbus Jewry could not have sustained the Jewish-owned stores alone.

In the late nineteenth century Columbus’ population of 5,000 included fourteen Jewish families. In the late 1970s that number had not changed much even though the city population had grown to over 30,000. Despite their small numbers, the Jewish residents maintained a strong and active presence. Members of the Columbus Jewry served on the city council, as the hospital foundation president, the human rights commission chair, vice-president of the chamber of commerce, and chair of the League of Women Voters. Other Columbus Jews volunteered as therapists and tutors within the school system and for social and philanthropic organizations such as Meals on Wheels, the March of Dimes, and the Bartholomew County Heart Association. The same “spirit of perseverance and liberality worthy of emulation” that the 1861 *Israelite* attributed to the Columbus Jewry continues to thrive.

While Bartholomew County contained a total of 2 different Jewish congregations, only six buildings are extant with any relation to the Jewish history. These sites include synagogues/temples, homes, and businesses. All six were rated Contributing.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Gladys Kaminsky, "History of the Jewish Community of Columbus, Indiana" (Fort Wayne: Indiana Jewish Historical Society, September 1978), 2. Indiana Historical Society, Pamphlet Collection.

<sup>2</sup> Carolyn S. Blackwell, *Peopling Indiana*, eds., Robert M. Taylor and Connie A. McBirney, (Indianapolis: The Indiana Historical Society, 1996), 324.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>4</sup> Kaminsky, 4.

<sup>5</sup> William E. Marsh, *I Discover Columbus* (Oklahoma City: Semco Color Press, 1956), 210.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Columbus Daily Herald*, 1 January 1900. The Indiana State Library, Newspaper Collection.

<sup>8</sup> [www.rootsweb.com](http://www.rootsweb.com) (accessed 24 August 2006).

<sup>9</sup> *Jewish Messenger*, 27 June 1871. Reprinted from Kaminsky, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Carolyne Stultz, *Bartholomew County, Indiana 1821-1999: Family Histories, Churches, and Schools* (Paducah, Kentucky: Turner Publishing Company, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> *History of Bartholomew County, Indiana, 1888* (Columbus, Indiana: Bartholomew County Historical Society, 1976), 112.

<sup>12</sup> Marsh, 121.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.