

Emergence of Jewish Life in Texas

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During the decades after the Revolutionary War, Americans swiftly pushed west opening unpopulated lands to new settlers. As part of the migration westward, Southerners pushed across the Mississippi River into Louisiana and the vast lands that by 1821 belonged to Mexico – in particular into Texas. Pioneers saw in Texas an empty territory offering unclaimed farmland, uncut lumber and unlimited opportunity – and for man, adventure.

European Jews bereft of political equality and economic opportunity in the lands of their birth sought refuge in America and many settled in the southern and western states. After the battle at San Jacinto, 1836, more Jewish men joined the swelling stream of pioneers to Texas hoping to make a new start. During the next several decades, the number of Jewish immigrants increased, and these settlers bound their future to that of other Texans, thus becoming an integral part of the emerging culture.

Conditions in Texas facilitated this transformation. Texas had a sparse population that allowed room for new settlers, Jews and non-Jews. The growing population and expanding frontiers created growth in emerging settlements. Jews arrived with the first settlers and spread throughout the entire developed territory. They established themselves in small communities – rather than only in major population areas. As these Jews demonstrated their willingness to be involved with and mix with the larger society, the society reciprocated.

In each aspect of their lives in Texas, these Jewish immigrants emerged from the disadvantages of limited social integration to become full participants in Texas frontier social life and culture. By participating in the multiple facets of Texas life – commercial, social and political – these Jewish men became crucial contributors to and developers of the burgeoning Texas society, thus allowing them to share in the progress they helped create.

In this presentation, we provide examples of Texan Jewish life, but we will try to do more. We illustrate, to some degree, the breadth of the involvement and acculturation of Texas Jewish men and women.