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Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center Spotlight

Discovering and Documenting Maine's Jewish History

For those of us living in southern New England, the state of Maine beckons with an enchanting combination of coastline, forests, lakes, and mountains. The state's image is also burnished by the image of the laconic, flinty, down-East resident, right out of central casting.

Perhaps because of this Yankee stereotype many people in the Jewish community are surprised to learn that Maine has a rich and fascinating Jewish history. Over the past year, we at the Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center (JHC) at New England Historic Genealogical Society have been working with Documenting Maine Jewry (DMJ) to form a consortium of New England Jewish history organizations. Our partnership will identify and promote the unique history, characteristics, and resources of the New England Jewish experience. Our work

geographical and cultural imprint Maine has had on its Jewish population.

Maine's Jewish history

Although the first documented Jew to live in Maine arrived in 1785, few Jews settled in Maine before the nineteenth century because of its remote location and distance from more established Jewish communities. Not until the 1840s did a small group of German Jews put down communal roots in Bangor, building the first synagogue in the state and an associated cemetery in 1849. A second wave of Jewish immigration to America took place in the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century, as Jews escaped persecution and pogroms in Eastern Europe; beginning in the 1880s, Jews settled in Portland, then Waterville, Lewiston, Greater Biddeford, Bath, and smaller towns. Jewish communities in Maine were considerably smaller than those that burgeoned in urban areas such as New York or Boston. But many Jewish immigrants chose to come to Maine for the open spaces and climate that reminded them of their Eastern European homes, or to escape urban poverty or unsanitary conditions and seek a better life.¹

Like other members of immigrant groups, some Jews found work on Maine's potato farms or in the ship-building trade. Most, however, became merchants, getting their start as peddlers, then establishing their own stores selling dry goods, clothing, or

Below: Campers at Center Day Camp, Windham, Maine, ca. 1960. Opposite page, top: Annual convention of Maine State Zionists, Old Orchard Beach, Maine, 1926. Opposite page, bottom: Morris S. Povich standing in front of his store, Morris Povich Shoes and Boots, Bath, Maine, date unknown. All photos courtesy of Documenting Maine Jewry.



with DMJ—an online source of historical data, documentation, and stories—has given us a deeper appreciation for the history of Jews in Maine. This history both parallels the Jewish experience in other New England states and differs from it, thanks to the distinctive

groceries. In the first half of the twentieth century, Portland and Bangor, and smaller towns such as Bath and Old Town, featured Jewish “main street” retail businesses.² New Jewish arrivals to these communities built synagogues and maintained their traditions and customs, while also adapting to Maine life and becoming Americanized more readily than their counterparts in other parts of the country.

As Jewish communities grew in the early and mid-twentieth century, they encountered local antisemitism that prevented them from full participation in Maine civic life.³ In response, Jews created their own business, philanthropic, and recreational institutions. Not welcome in several of the state’s vacation areas, Jews established a summer enclave in Old Orchard Beach, which became a famed destination for Jewish vacationers from other parts of New England and Canada. Similarly, from the 1940s, Jewish summer camps in Maine drew generations of children from all over the Northeast.

Jewish Mainers today are one of the most secular Jewish communities in the country,⁴ connecting with the cultural parts of Judaism while also fully integrating into Maine life. Their dual identity is a source of pride; for many with multi-generational Maine roots, what it means to be Jewish is intertwined with what it means to be from Maine. One resident, who recalled hearing her first-generation grandfather speaking Yiddish with a down-East accent, wrote: “The edges of my life swirl together like my mother’s marble cake and I can’t tell where the Jewish in me ends and the Maine in me begins.”⁵

A central resource for genealogists and historians

In 2007, Harris Gleckman, a second-generation Jewish Mainer, was researching his family’s plots in an old Jewish cemetery in Portland. The burial records were so inadequate that he invited other volunteers to help him organize the surviving documents. The



group discovered that the cemetery had served not only Portland’s Jewish community but a much larger geographical area. After tracking down records for the names on the graves—and learning the stories behind them—the group pivoted from compiling burial records for one cemetery to collecting the histories of Jewish communities across the state. Thus, Documenting Maine Jewry was born.

Today the DMJ website (mainejews.org) is a central resource where people can both research *and* contribute to Maine’s Jewish history. The website can be searched by person (more than 28,000 names are indexed), timeline (1860s to the present), community (including eight current and eight former Jewish communities), or theme. Themes include migrant experiences; culture; gender; and civic, community, family, religious, and working life. Also included are lists of clergy, summer camps, libraries with Jewish materials, Jewish businesses, and more. The site features many digitized images, along with photo “challenges,”



that invite users to help identify people and places. Genealogists can peruse burial records for the sixteen Jewish cemeteries in the state, census records, membership and community records, yearbooks, memorial boards, and much more. In 2020—DMJ’s “bar mitzvah” year, according to Gleckman—Documenting Maine Jewry conducted a user survey which indicated great interest in the website and its value for genealogists. Indeed, DMJ is the Maine branch of the

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Jeckel/Yakely of Miles Twp., Centre County. His birth in 1763 fit the age of the Georg enumerated in the 1820 Miles Twp. census. However—unless he married twice—the names and ages of his wives conflicted. The wife of the George born in Mahanoy Twp., Anna M. Groh, was born before 1774, based on the 1800 census. The wife of Georg in Miles Twp., Catharina, was likely born between 1776 and 1794, according to the 1820 census.

I wondered if I was missing a generation, and whether Georg in Miles Twp. was the son of George born in 1763 and thus the grandson of George Yeakley. That scenario could explain the wives with different names. However, when I examined Miles Twp. tax lists, I eliminated this theory. Only one George appeared consistently on tax lists though 1824. This was the same George on the 1820 census; therefore it appears that George in Miles Twp. was the George born in 1763 with a second wife named Catharina.

To test my theory, I built the “DNA Matches to Yeakley Descendants” chart on page 58. It shows AncestryDNA matches for my mother and their location in the George Yeakley Tree. The blue DNA matches are 5C1R to 5C3R. The amount of shared centimorgans is a little lower than the average for these relationships but they fit the expected range of 0-80 centimorgans.

Based on these DNA matches my working conclusion is that my Michael Yeagle was born April 14, 1810 in Miles Twp., Centre County, and baptized as Michael Jeckle. His parents were George and Catharina (___) Jeckle/Yeakley. Catharina was George’s second wife. George, the son of George Yeakley of Mahanoy Twp., moved from Northumberland County to Centre County, circa 1808 to 1810. A visit to family members in Lower Mahanoy Twp. may well have led to Michael’s introduction to his future wife, Sarah Kreilick.

Researchers disagree on the identity of the senior George Yeakley’s parents, so I am not able to extend

my Jeckle/Yeakley. family line further. However, George’s wife Anna Deppen appears to be the daughter of Christian Deppen who emigrated from Bern, Switzerland, in 1736.

Although I have no record stating that George of Miles Twp. is the son of George Yeakley of Mahanoy Twp., the addition of DNA evidence helps support this conclusion. I am still looking for more DNA matches. If I could find another descendant of George from Miles Twp., that person would be a fourth cousin to my mother. Since fourth cousins share about 35 centimorgans of DNA, a match between my mother and such a cousin would provide additional evidence that my theory is correct. Another possibility is to locate a male Yeagle descendant of Michael Yeagle and a male Yeakley descendant of George Yeakley and test their Y-DNA. Although such a test would not prove that George of Miles Twp. is the son of George Yeakley, a Y-DNA match between the two men would confirm that both lines have a common ancestor. ♦

(Maine’s Jewish History, continued from page 53)

International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies.⁶

Gleckman, DMJ’s “Project Shammas (caretaker),” emphasizes the unique resource the site has become—a combination of official and Jewish community records, and papers and photographs found in private attics and basements.⁷ He is proud that DMJ has developed a digital space that both provides data for genealogical research and focuses on community history. The website’s usefulness expands as people contribute their own family histories. “We’ve encouraged people to look at the intersection of their Jewish life and their Maine life; to put their own family, community, or synagogue history into the public domain; and to make it available to others,” he tells the JHC.

The Wyner Family Jewish Heritage Center is pleased to work with Documenting Maine Jewry, an important resource that tells the story of Maine Jews and offers genealogists and researchers a wealth of information. As a partner with DMJ in creating the New England Jewish History Collaborative, we are working together to develop resources and programs that highlight New England Jewish history, including the unique story of Jewish Maine, which deserves to be studied and told. ♦

NOTES

¹ David M. Freidenreich, “Making it in Maine: Stories of Jewish Life in Small-Town America,” *Maine History* 49.1 (2015): 5–38.

² David M. Freidenreich, “The Jews of Maine,” Maine Memory Network, mainememory.net/sitebuilder/site/1888/page/3104/display?use_mmn=1.

³ David M. Freidenreich, *Maine + Jewish: Two Centuries*, Maine State Museum Exhibition Handbook, Series Number 3, (Augusta, Me.: Maine State Museum, 2018), 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ Beth Hillson, “Judaism with a Downeast Flair,” April 2011, Maine Jewish History Project, Colby College, web.colby.edu/jewsinmaine/maine/downeast-judaism/.

⁶ Rabbi Rachel Isaacs, “Documenting Maine Jewry,” July 15, 2012, *Jewish Waterville*, jewishwaterville.blogspot.com/2012/07/documenting-maine-jewry.html.

⁷ Harris Gleckman, “A Project to Document Maine Jewry,” *Avotaynu* 27.2 (2011), 48–50.