

Wabash County Jewish Heritage

Wabash County, located in north-central Indiana was named after the Wabash River. Its largest city, Wabash, became the county seat in 1835.¹ The area developed in response to the construction of the Wabash and Erie Canal, part of an ambitious state project to provide waterway transportation across Indiana. North Manchester, the second largest city in Wabash County, is home to Manchester College. From its founding through the turn of the nineteenth century, Jewish immigrants played an important role in shaping the history and development of Wabash County. While the Jewish population was concentrated mostly within the city of Wabash, there was also a Jewish presence in North Manchester, with other families scattered throughout the county.

In terms of Indiana Jewry, Wabash's first Jewish resident was Michael Hyman who settled there in 1846.² Work opportunities also attracted new residents to Wabash. With the construction of the Wabash and Erie Canal, Wabash became a regional market and shipping center. Early industries included lumber, flour and grain mills, livestock, corn and wheat. Wabash also had a cannery, brewery, slaughterhouse and furniture factory. A variety of Jewish businessmen opened stores, markets, factories, and other services that served all citizens of Wabash. In 1854, Charles Herff, Michael Hyman, and Leonard Hyman pooled their resources to purchase one acre of land, which became known as the Hebrew Cemetery.³ The gentlemen held this ground until the Rodet Sholem Congregation was organized in 1869, when they donated the land to the congregation. Today, the cemetery



Rodet Sholem Cemetery in Wabash (Wabash County).

contains approximately 300 Jewish graves.⁴ By 1877, the Congregation Rodef Sholem were able to secure a regular rabbi. They established a B'nai B'rith and a ladies Aid Society. Rodef Sholem was formally dissolved in 1946.⁵

Michael Hyman settled in Wabash in 1846.⁶ He began as a peddler in the county, but eventually saved enough money to start a grocery store and dry good business. Hyman worked as a clerk until he founded a dry goods and clothing store in 1840s along with Leonard Hyman. He was also involved in the *Star Woolen Mills* and a



The grave of Michael Hyman, the first Jewish resident of Wabash (Wabash County).

linseed oil mill. Besides several successful business ventures, Hyman was an influential leader in the Jewish community, joining his brother Leonard Hyman and Charles Herff in establishing Wabash's first Jewish cemetery in 1854. Hyman was involved in forming the Jewish congregation of Rodef Sholem and served in various roles, such as a negotiator in the purchase of its building.⁷

Wabash had at least three Jewish owned meat markets: Nathan and Benie Bockman owned *Bockman Meat Market*, Max Kahn owned *Kahn Meat Market* and also sold liquors, cigars, and tobacco, and Louis Wolf was grocer.

Isaac Beitman and his family were active in the establishment of the Rodef Sholem congregation.⁸ Isaac was one of the founders of the *Beitman & Wolf* store. The store was founded in 1865, selling household goods, dry goods, and groceries. By 1934, the store sold exclusively men's' and women's clothing. The store closed in 1980.⁹

In the 1840s, Charles Herff and Benjamin Moses both ran grocery stores, while M. and L. Hyman owned a dry good and grocery store.¹⁰

Benjamin Wolf purchased this store in 1865; the store became known as *Beitman and Wolf*.¹¹ Wolf, a Jew,

was born in 1842. He came to America in 1860. By 1863, he opened a butcher shop and then began opening other businesses. He purchased *M. and L. Hyman Store* in 1865.¹² In 1865, he joined David Beitman and opened *Wolf & Beitman*.¹³ He also bought and sold various properties in the county, owned farms and bought and sold horses. He was involved in civic organizations, was one of organizers of *Wabash National*



The location of Wolf & Beitman in Wabash (Wabash County).

Bank and served on its board of directors; later he was involved in *Farmers and Merchants Bank* of Wabash. The Wolf family was involved in the establishment of Rodef Sholem Congregation.¹⁴ Benjamin died in 1912.¹⁵

Isaac New, a German, was a Wabash businessman for over 40 years. He moved to Lagro in Wabash County in 1861 and then into the city of Wabash. He died in 1907. He owned a dry goods and clothing store, *I. New and Sons*.¹⁹ His son Alexander was born in Wabash in 1861. After attending Wabash public schools, Alexander attended Washington and Jefferson University where he graduated with a law degree. He moved away to Kansas City, but in 1930, he donated a statue of Abraham Lincoln to the city of Wabash in his parents' name.

The city of Wabash had two scrap businesses owned by Jewish families. Abraham and Jeanette Sposeep owned *A. Sposeep & Sons*. Abe came to American from Russia in 1912, settling in Fort Wayne. By 1926, he moved to Wabash and started the scrap yard. Michael Sposeep, grandson of Abe currently runs the business; he served as a Wabash City Court Judge in the 1970s also.²⁰ Benjamin Cook was a partner with Moie Cook in the *Simon Cook Co.*

Other individuals in the community include Charles Herff, who helped found the Jewish cemetery, was a trustee of Rodef Sholem congregation, and owned a grocery store; David Marks formed partnership



A. Sposeep & Sons is a scrap yard in Wabash (Wabash County), one of several Jewish owned yards in town.

with Jacob Hyman and purchased *Star Woolen Mills*.²¹ Hyman was a wool buyer before founding the mill; Carrie Staadecker was a successful businesswoman in Wabash. She owned a millinery shop and was involved in Rodef Sholem congregation; Moses Mandelbaum was a cigar maker, while Aaron Mandelbaum was a city attorney along with his involvement in the grocery store *Wolf & Mandelbaum*. Edward Beitman was a partner in *Beitman & Wolf* and involved in Rodef Sholem. Samuel Simon was a partner with his brother Aaron in *Simon Brothers*, a dry goods and clothing store.

Herman and Carrie Wolf were livestock dealers, owning *H & H Wolf*. Also were partners in *Rindsberg & Wolf*, a dealer in fine horses. By 1901, he was owner of *Wolf & Talbert*, importers of horses. Herman had a grocery store with his son Louis at the turn of the century. By 1907, Aaron Mandelbaum was involved in the grocery store, *Wolf & Mandelbaum*.

Herman and Blanche Schwarts (Schwartz) owned a tailor shop in the 1940s. Before that, Herman was a partner with Roy Packard in *Schwartz & Packard billiards* (1912). Louis and Herbert Bockman owned *L. Bockman & Son* shoe store (1907-1924). Louis Hyman was president of the *Wabash Canning Company*. Abe Simon and Louis Bockman owned *Simon & Bockman* boots and shoe store (1897-1901). Abe was also involved in the Wabash chapter No. 292 of the Independent Order of B'nai B'rith, serving as an officer. By 1918, Abe Simon had a buggy business in downtown Wabash. Adolph Doob operated the New York Store and was dry goods dealer. Henry Herff owned *Herff Saloon and Billiards* (1897).

The Pioneer Hat Works, founded by Nathan Meyers, recruited and employed a large number of Jewish immigrants. There were approximately 100 Jews living in Wabash prior to World War I.¹⁶ When the *Pioneer*

The Pioneer Hat Work, which was owned by Nathan Meyers, recruited large number of Jewish immigrant to work at the factory.



Hat Works closed shortly after war, Wabash's Jewish population began to decline. By the 1940s, Wabash's Jewish population had fallen so sharply that the few remaining families were not sufficient to support the temple. The Rodef-Sholem Congregation disbanded and the building was sold to a Christian denomination.¹⁷ It is believed that only four Jewish families remained in Wabash by the 1970s- the Wolf family, son and grandson of Mr. and Mrs. Abe Sposeep (Sam and Michael Sposeep) and Robert Zimmerman's widow and family.¹⁸

NORTH MANCHESTER

Best known for its association with Manchester College, which was renamed and moved to North Manchester in 1889 (formerly located in Roanoke, Indiana and known as Roanoke Classical Seminary),²⁴ North Manchester was laid out beside the Eel River, several miles from the Wabash and Erie Canal. North Manchester benefited from its proximity to the canal until the town of Lagro eclipsed it, which was closer to the canal. With the construction of the railroad, which went through North Manchester, it again became an important shipping point for goods.²⁵ The town was platted in 1836 and incorporated in 1874.²⁶ North Manchester had one



The house to the right was one of the Oppenheim homes in North Manchester (Wabash County).

particularly prominent Jewish family, the Oppenheims. Jacob Oppenheim operated a clothing store (Oppenheim's). Jacob was from East Prussia and came to America in 1870. He opened his first store in Paw Paw, Michigan in 1873. By 1875, he sold this store and moved to North Manchester. He opened Oppenheim's New York Cheap Store. Jacob also



This building was the location of the Oppenheim Store in North Manchester.

founded the North Manchester Telephone Company.²⁷ Jacob died in 1883, when the store passed to Jacob's son Benjamin; from 1922 to 1949, Ben's son Gene operated the store; Gene's son Phil took over control. The store celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1975. The store has since closed, but the building remains.²⁸ The family also established the Oppenheimer Foundation.

Footnotes

¹ Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana, Wabash County Interim Report, Indianapolis: Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana, 1982.

² Joseph Levine, From Peddlers to Merchants, *Indiana Jewish History*: July 1979, 12.

³ International Association of Jewish Genealogical Societies, *Cemeteries of North American – Indiana*, <http://www.jewishgen.org/cemetery/northamerica/indiana.html> (accessed August 11, 2006).

⁴ Levine, 12-13; Indiana Division of Historic Preservation and Archaeology, *Indiana Cemetery and Burial Ground Registry Form - Hebrew Cemetery*, 2001.

⁵ *Ibid.*, iv.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁷ John Morris, History of Wabash County, Indiana. Containing a History of the County: Its Townships, Towns, Military Record, Portraits of Early Settlers and Prominent Men: Personal Reminiscences, Etc, Chicago: John Morris, Printer, 224.

⁸ Levine, 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹¹ Morris, 252.

¹² Levine, 6.

¹³ Weesner, 576.

¹⁴ Levine, 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, iv.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹ "Wabash Historical Information 1880s-1970s", M 743 IJHS, box 119, folder 22, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana; Weesner, 561; Homer T. Showalter, *The Story of the Lincoln Monument and its Donor- Alexander New*, Wabash: Wabash County Historical Society, no date.

²⁰ Lezlie Leeka, Lori Ver Maas, and Ron Woodward, *Junk Dealers Licenses 1919-1948 of Wabash County*, Wabash, Indiana: Wabash County Genealogical Society, 2006.

²¹ Morris, 255.

²² John Morris, *History of Wabash County, Indiana* (Chicago: John Morris Printer Chicago, 1884), 224.

²³ Linda Robertson, *Wabash County History Centennial Edition 1976* (Wabash, Indiana: Wabash County Historical Museum, 1976), 167.

²⁴ National Register Nomination, North Manchester HD, Section 8,9, 10: 20.

²⁵ National Register Nomination, North Manchester HD, Section 8,9, 10: 18).

²⁶ National Register Nomination, North Manchester HD, Section 8,9, 10: 18-20.

²⁷ Carolyn Blackwell, *Jews, Peopling Indiana*, Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1996, 323.

²⁸ Levine, 22-27.