

## Jews in Nineteenth Century America

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Jews had remarkable acceptance and economic opportunity in America as compared to the rest of the world. But, religious intolerance and discriminatory state laws remained problems. Fortunately, over the course of the nineteenth century, these discriminatory laws were removed. The removal of laws that favored a particular religion or discriminated against citizens based on their religious belief is of the earliest examples of progress towards greater equality in America.

However, like other efforts to provide greater equality for all Americans, this process could be slow and challenging. In Maryland, for example, Jews began to petition for the right to hold office in 1797. Twenty one years later, in 1818, a "Jew Bill" to give them this right was finally introduced into the state legislature. The effort to give Jews political equality was led by a member of the legislature named Thomas Kennedy. It is noteworthy that he did not "have the slightest acquaintance with any Jew in the world." He simply felt that religion was "a question which rests, or ought to rest, between man and his Creator alone."

Opposition to the bill was strong and it was defeated. Another bill to give Jews political equality was introduced in 1822, was sharply debated, and became a major issue in the election of 1823. A "Christian Ticket" succeeded in defeating many of the bill's supporters, including Thomas Kennedy, with the result that this bill was also defeated. But opponents of religious discrimination continued their efforts and finally, in 1826, a bill was passed. The first Jews were elected to office in Maryland later that year.

The removal of discriminatory laws was not limited to political issues. For example, Connecticut allowed Jewish public worship, the right to pray in a synagogue instead of a private home, in 1843. The last laws that discriminated against Jews were finally removed in 1877 when New Hampshire amended its constitution to abolish the requirement that state office holders be Protestant.

The contrast between the progressive attitude towards religious minorities at the federal level and the legal discrimination that could exist at the state level is revealed by the story of the first Jew to hold a major federal post. In 1801, Thomas Jefferson appointed Reuben Etting as the U.S. Marshall for Maryland. Ironically, religious qualifications for state office in Maryland would have barred Etting from holding any state position at that time.

It is important to note that despite laws to prohibit discrimination by the government and despite the ability for Jews to succeed, anti-Jewish bigotry remained. This is a familiar experience for many minority groups in America who have achieved legal equality but continue to experience discrimination from individuals and institutions.

In the early nineteenth century, this continued anti-Jewish bigotry paled in comparison to the challenges faced by Jews in Europe. As a result, beginning in the 1820s, many Jews in German speaking lands immigrated to America seeking greater economic opportunity, religious tolerance, and political stability. This wave of German-Jewish immigration, which lasted from 1820 until 1880, transformed American Jewish demographics. The Jewish population increased almost ten-fold as approximately a quarter million Jews immigrated. In addition, the American Jewish population shifted from being predominantly Sephardi Jews, who traced their ancestry to

Spain, Portugal, and North Africa, to being predominantly Ashkenazi Jews, who traced their ancestry to Central and Eastern Europe.

Though both groups were Jewish, they had different traditions and customs. This contributed to the religious diversity of the American Jewish community. Another factor that contributed to this religious diversity was changing views of religious tradition. For millennia, Jews had discussed and interpreted their religious commandments while affirming the importance of the continuity with tradition. Beginning in the 1820s, some Jewish congregations asserted that they could maintain their Jewish heritage yet make significant changes. These changes included the use of musical instruments as part of the prayer service, delivering sermons in English, and teaching that Judaism's ritual commandments, such as dietary restrictions, were optional while ethical commandments, such as the responsibility to assist the needy, remained obligatory. Other Jewish communities maintained their millennia-old traditional practices. This diversity in American Judaism remains today.

The new Jewish immigrants from Central Europe came from areas where for centuries anti-Jewish laws had prohibited Jews from most professions. As a result, many were peddlers, traveling merchants who sold small goods. When they arrived in America, these peddlers typically resumed their old occupation in the new land. But in America, Jewish peddlers could prosper much more greatly than they could in Europe. In fact, the experiences of these peddlers are often seen as an embodiment of the rags to riches American dream (rising from poverty to great wealth).

Jewish peddlers played a key role in the American economy as middlemen who brought goods to rural areas and settlers in the West. Many started with only what they could carry on their backs and traveled by foot. Over time, they saved their profits and bought horses, then wagons. Eventually, many were able to open permanent stores that served cities and towns. Some eventually expanded these operations into banking, investment, or new industries such as the mail order catalogue.

Bringing goods to remote, underserved communities could lead the development of close relationships between Jewish merchants and Native American communities. For example, Julius Meyer, a German Jew, was a merchant in Omaha who served as an interpreter for Native Americans in the area, including Sitting Bull and Red Cloud when they passed through. He was reportedly able to speak six Native American languages. One German Jew even became the chief of a Native American tribe! Solomon Bibb developed strong relationships with Native Americans in the New Mexico territory. He married an Acoma Pueblo woman who converted to Judaism. In 1885, he was elected the tribe's governor, equivalent to a tribal chief who serves for a limited term. He is possibly the only non-Native American ever to serve as governor of a Pueblo tribe.

In addition to working as merchants, Jews went West to pursue the same variety of economic opportunities as other Americans. Jews became miners, chicken ranchers, cowboys, and farmers. The presence of Jews in the westward migration and the California Gold Rush reveals a dimension of the American West's multiculturalism that is often overlooked.

In fact, one of the most famous participants in the California Gold Rush was a German-Jewish immigrant. After opening a dry-goods store in San Francisco in 1853, Levi Strauss recognized that there was a great demand for something more durable than the cloth pants most miners wore. In the 1870s, he began to manufacture denim overalls. His company became the first blue jeans company in the world and Levis remains one of the most popular brands of jeans.

The realities of frontier life gave Jews, like women, greater opportunity for civic participation in the American West than elsewhere. The generally relaxed attitude towards religious differences even enabled Jews to become mayors in cities such as Tucson, Tombstone, and El Paso.

On the other hand, Jews also faced challenges in the West. Despite widespread tolerance and the ability for Jewish individuals to succeed, antisemitic views, such as the belief that Jews were greedier or less trustworthy than others, remained. Jews also faced the challenge of maintaining their Jewish identities in areas with no synagogues and few other Jews.

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 presented additional challenges for the Jewish community. Like the rest of the country, Jews were divided by the war. During the course of the war there were approximately 7,000 Jewish soldiers on the Union side and approximately 3,000 Jewish soldiers on the Confederate side. Jews became high ranking officers on both sides of the conflict; this is particularly notable because they would have been barred from such positions in most of the rest of the world.

Jewish Americans also faced challenges that most other Americans did not have to face. In 1861, at the beginning of the war, Congress passed a bill that barred anyone except Christians from becoming military chaplains. This left Jewish soldiers without the important religious support that was provided to Christian soldiers. Fortunately, President Lincoln intervened and due to his influence the law was amended in 1862 to allow chaplains from any religious denomination.

The Civil War was also the backdrop to the most significant act of government antisemitism in America's history. In 1862, General Grant issued General Order No. 11, which expelled all Jews from Kentucky, Mississippi, and Tennessee. He associated Jews with the merchants who were violating trade restrictions in the area even though most of the violators were not Jewish. President Lincoln had the order revoked after direct appeals from prominent Jewish Americans. Grant later apologized and there are no other antisemitic incidents associated with him. In fact, as president, Grant named several Jews to high office, and he was the first president to visit a synagogue while in office.