The ornate Plum Street Temple of Congregation B'nai Jeshurun was dedicated in 1866. The two slender minarets atop the exterior and the gilded arches of the interior give a Moorish appearance to this Cincinnati landmark.
Cincinnati's Jewish community has always been small in number, yet they have consistently contributed to the development of their community. Their history in the Queen City spans more than 200 years, since Jews lived in Cincinnati even before the city was incorporated in 1819. Despite their limited numbers, they can point with pride to several major accomplishments in the first half of the nineteenth century. Cincinnati was the cradle of the American Jewish Reform movement, had the first Jewish hospital in America, and was the place of publication of the first English-language Jewish weekly newspaper west of the Allegheny Mountains—the *Israelite*, still in circulation today.

A substantial number of the first Jewish settlers in Cincinnati came directly from England, and a few from France, the Netherlands, and Poland. Others migrated from New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Kentucky, and Indiana. Thousands of German immigrants also came to Cincinnati in the 1840's and 1850's, many of them Jews. For the most part, the German Jews were seeking the economic, political, social, and religious equality which had been denied them in Europe. By 1860, half of the Queen City's population was foreign-born, as was the case in New York, Chicago, Detroit, and San Francisco. A similar pattern emerged in the Cincinnati Jewish population, where half were foreign-born and nearly half (48%) were born in the United States.

Joseph Jonas, a watchmaker, mechanic, and silversmith from Plymouth, England, who arrived in the Queen City in 1817, is considered to be Cincinnati's first Jewish settler. However, Dr. Jacob R. Marcus, director of the American Jewish Archives on the Cincinnati campus of the Hebrew Union College—Jewish Institute of Religion, has observed that, "No Jew is ever the first Jew anywhere. There is always another who has been there before him." Such was the case in Cincinnati. Dr. Jonas Horowitz, who graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in 1815, embarked on a medical career in Cincinnati before the arrival of Joseph Jonas. The physician advertised his vaccine against smallpox in the April 8, 1816, issue of the Liberty Hall and Cincinnati Gazette. The disease was not yet prevalent in Cincinnati, but Dr. Horowitz suggested that it would be advisable for the citizens to be prepared. Local doctors accused Dr. Horowitz of being a scoundrel, and rather
than defending himself he quietly returned to Philadelphia.¹ From the present medical view the approach of Dr. Horowitz seems sound, but at that time the idea of preventive medicine was not widespread.

En route to Cincinnati through New York and Philadelphia, Joseph Jonas was cautioned by his coreligionists that there were no Israelites in the western region and that perhaps he should not venture there lest he forget his tradition. Undaunted, Jonas went ahead to Cincinnati, soon established himself as a watchmaker, and sent word home about the advantages of living in the community. As the only Hebrew in the area, he was quite a curiosity, as evidenced by an anecdote about a farmer who brought his watch to Jonas' watchmaker shop on Main and Third Streets for repair.

In a few days the farmer was again in town to get his watch but, to his surprise and fright, found the shop of Mr. Jonas closed. He thought the man had gone bankrupt, or had run away with his watch. However... upon [learning] that the man was a Jew and therefore kept his place of business closed that day for it was a Saturday, the farmer went home with his mind at ease. At home he told his mother... why he had not brought his watch back. She was greatly surprised to learn that there were still Jews in the world, about whom she had read so much in the Bible, and she urged her son to take her along with him to the city just once that she might see a Jew. Soon afterwards... they went to the watchmaker together. After the farmer had his watch back, the old woman asked the watchmaker: "Are you really and truly a Jew—a descendant of Abraham?" When the watchmaker had answered that he was, she folded her hands and lifted her eyes to Heaven and said: "How can I thank Thee, O Lord, that I have lived to see one of the descendants of Abraham before my death!"²

More immigrant Jews joined Joseph Jonas in Cincinnati in 1819, including his brother, Abraham Jonas, and his sister and brother-in-law, Sarah and Morris Moses. In 1820, David Israel, of Portsmouth, England, who had been nicknamed Johnson by friends in Indiana where he had resided for two years, moved to Cincinnati. His son, Frederick A. Johnson, born in 1821, was the first Jewish child born in the Queen City.

By 1824 the Israelites had grown to twenty families, enough to organize the Holy Congregation of B'nai Israel [Sons of Israel], chartered by the State of Ohio on January 8, 1830. Joseph Jonas served as the first president of the congregation, an office he held four times during his lifetime. The president was often the reader in the synagogue; he performed the marriage ceremony and carried out the necessary religious duties.

The synagogue in the United States embodied the same functions as it did in Europe: it was a house of worship, a house of study, and a house of gathering. Here the immigrant heard the same melodies and repeated the same prayers
The first permanent Jewish settler in Cincinnati was Joseph Jonas (below), who arrived in the city in 1817. David Israel Johnson (opposite), another early leader in the Jewish community, moved to Cincinnati in 1820. Both men were instrumental in the founding of Congregation B'nai Israel in 1824.
that he had recited in Europe. It gave him solace and comfort, for it reminded him that he was still a part of the Jewish people. Religious education for children was also centered here. In the synagogue the congregants found friends, made business acquaintances, and relaxed. The slaughtering of kosher meat was supervised by the synagogue. The vestry settled all private disagreements between synagogue members and often made available interest-free loans to its members. The synagogue provided for the general welfare of the Jewish community and took care of the poor, the sick, the stranger, the widow, and the orphan. Monies were also sent regularly to the Holy Land and to other Jewish communities in need. The distribution of matzah [unleavened bread] for Passover was handled by the synagogue. Burials and the upkeep of the cemetery were also the responsibility of the synagogue.

Each synagogue made its own rules for its government and was autonomous in its powers and responsibilities. As immigration increased, the shortage of rabbis grew more acute, and lay leaders frequently had to direct both the religious and secular activities of the synagogue. Prior to the Civil War, all rabbis in America were educated in Europe. Not until the establishment of Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati in 1875 under the aegis of Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise was there an American institution to train men for the rabbinate.

One of the first acts of the B'nai Israel members in 1825 was the solicitation of funds to aid in the construction of a synagogue. Donations were received from Jews in all parts of America and England and from many Cincinnati Christians. In 1829 the congregation purchased a lot on the east side of Broadway between Fifth and Sixth Streets. The cornerstone was laid in 1835, and the first synagogue west of the Allegheny Mountains was dedicated on September 9, 1836. The stucco building measured sixty feet by thirty-three feet and had a twelve-foot dome with four columns across the front. A local newspaper welcomed the new congregation with the following notice:

...it is gratifying to see a society which embraces many orderly and upright citizens, successful in obtaining an edifice, where, on their Sabbath, they may assemble for religious worship. An event like this, in which a people...laboring under civil and religious disabilities, over the greater part of Europe, are permitted to enjoy all the rights of citizens, and to worship according to the dictates of their conscience, presents a fine commentary upon the freedom and liberality of our political institutions. 3

An increase in membership necessitated the construction in 1852 of a new sanctuary, located at Broadway and Sixth Streets. By 1860, two hundred families had joined B'nai Israel, and even more spacious quarters became essential. A new and elaborate edifice was constructed on Eighth and Mound Streets and consecrated in 1869. The historical descendants of the first Jewish congregation west of the Alleghenies continue to worship together today at the Rockdale
Temple on Ridge Road.

As early as 1839 several German Jews left the B’nai Israel congregation and formed their own society, calling it the Holy Congregation of B’nai Jeshurun [Sons of Jeshurun], incorporated by the State of Ohio in 1842. Their house of prayer, located on Lodge Street, was considered to be one of the most beautiful in the United States. Its dedication on September 22, 1848, was marked by a procession of 300 people, accompanied by a band, marching from their rented rooms to the new sanctuary. These quarters were replaced in 1866 by the ornate splendor of the Plum Street Synagogue. Three rabbis held the pulpit of B’nai Jeshurun for short terms before Isaac Mayer Wise was invited to come from Albany, New York, to assume spiritual leadership in 1854. For the next year, Rabbi Wise led both the congregations of B’nai Jeshurun and B’nai Israel. In 1855 he was succeeded at B’nai Israel by his friend, Rabbi Max Lilienthal, who assumed the full-time spiritual leadership of that congregation. Rabbi Lilienthal came to Cincinnati from New York, although he was born and educated in Germany. The two scholars respected each other and worked harmoniously together for more than twenty-five years.

Under Rabbi Wise’s guidance, B’nai Jeshurun became the larger congregation, with more than 224 families in 1860. Rabbi Wise led his flock until his death in 1901. The historical descendant of B’nai Jeshurun is the Wise Temple located on Reading Road.

The members of B’nai Jeshurun soon became divided over the issue of ritual — whether to adopt some changes or to retain the old tradition. All synagogue services in Cincinnati were conducted in the orthodox tradition prior to the arrival of Rabbis Wise and Lilienthal who brought the reform movement with them.

The call for modernization of the traditional synagogue worship, known as the reform movement, had begun early in the nineteenth century in Germany. The replacement of Hebrew with German as the basic language of liturgy, the delivering of sermons in German, the introduction of an organ and choir, the replacement of the traditional Bar Mitzvah for boys with the confirmation of boys and girls, and the mixed seating of men and women were some of the innovations of the reform movement. Other reforms were the shortening of services, the observance of most holidays for only one day in place of the traditional two days, the institution of Sunday worship, and the practice of worshipping with uncovered heads and without the prescribed prayershawls. The reform movement in Germany had caused division within the Jewish communities in Europe; it had a similar effect in America. Charleston, South Carolina, had the first American society of reform Israelites, established in 1824 and patterned after the changes initiated in Germany. Others followed with variations.

Cincinnati’s Isaac Mayer Wise tried to bring a degree of uniformity into the new reform organizations in America. He became the architect of the American
Rabbi Max Lilienthal came to Cincinnati’s Congregation B’nai Israel in 1855. By then the congregation had moved from its original building to a new sanctuary at Broadway and Sixth Streets (below).
In 1869 the ever-increasing congregation again moved, this time to an elaborate temple at Eighth and Mound Streets. Rabbi Lilienthal remained the leader of Congregation B'hai Israel until his death in 1882.
reform movement. Wise believed that Judaism was spiritual, reaching toward peace, justice, and love, and he rejected any political or national aspect to Jewish life [Zion]. His vision of American life was that of a free, progressive, enlightened, united, and respected community. Rabbi Wise was one of the most distinguished American Jews of the nineteenth century.

The rationale behind reform was to Americanize the Jewish immigrant by giving him a modern American form of Judaism. Rabbi Wise's approach to reform was three-fold. First, he wanted to unite the Jewish congregations; secondly, he suggested that an American ritual or prayerbook be substituted for the Polish or German tradition; and finally, he desired to establish a college to train American Jews for the rabbinate. As early as 1848 he tried to form a union of American Israelite congregations, but was politely disregarded. His idea was rejected again in 1855, but ultimately the Union of American Hebrew Congregations was formed in 1873. This group established Hebrew Union College in 1875. And finally, in 1889, the Central Conference of American Rabbis was organized.

The American ritual prayerbook containing daily prayers in English and German first appeared in 1857. The second volume containing holiday prayers was published in 1866. B'nai Jeshurun was the first congregation to adopt the new prayerbook, though some members objected. The new prayerbook eliminated references to oppression and persecutions in the past, the coming of the Messiah, and the return to Zion—all concepts found in orthodox religious books. The prayerbook was vigorously attacked by both orthodox and reform adherents; one group felt that it had gone too far, while the other felt that it had not gone far enough. It is interesting to note that the American reform movement in the mid-twentieth century has reversed its position of one hundred years earlier. The references to oppression and persecution in the past, particularly the holocaust, have been reintroduced. The birth of the state of Israel in 1948 has given rise to the reaffirmation of Zion.

Five orthodox synagogues originated in the Queen City between 1846 and 1860. Some additional groups may have worshipped in private homes, but no records were kept or their minutes were lost. Adath Israel [Community of Israel] was founded in 1846. Located on Lodge Alley between Fifth and Sixth Streets, it was a place of worship for Polish and German Jews, some of whom had left B'nai Jeshurun. By 1860 it had grown to forty families. Congregation Ahabeth Achim [Brotherly Love] established its own synagogue in 1847, and a sanctuary, ministering to more than 120 families by 1860, was eventually built on Race Street between Fifteenth and Liberty Streets. Two small congregations built their synagogues on Vine Street: Shaare Shomayim [Gates of Heaven] was founded in 1850, and Beth Hamedrash [House of Prayer] was established in 1859. Sherith Israel [Remnant of Israel], an offspring of B'nai Israel, was organized in 1855. Its synagogue on Lodge Street between Sixth and Seventh Streets served 140 families at the time of its dedication in 1860.
The first Jewish cemetery west of the Alleghenies was established in Cincinnati in 1821. Although it was closed in 1849 following a cholera epidemic, the walled cemetery with its weathered tombstones, many inscribed in Hebrew, still remains on Chestnut Street.
In keeping with the Jewish tradition of charity, the members of Cincinnati's early Hebrew community cared for their needy brethren. Moses Heidelbach was one of many successful businessmen who gave money to their congregation to be lent interest-free to those in need.
Before any sanctuary was built, each synagogue purchased land for a cemetery. Land for the first Jewish cemetery west of the Alleghenies, located on Chestnut and Western Row [Central Avenue], was purchased for seventy-five dollars on November 6, 1821, from Nicholas Longworth by Joseph Jonas, David I. Johnson, Morris Moses, Moses Nathan, Abraham Jonas, and Solomon Moses. The cemetery was twice enlarged to its present size of fifty square feet, then closed in 1849 after a cholera epidemic. The first Jew to be buried there was Benjamin Lape [Leib]. He had married out of the faith and raised his children as Christians, but he wanted to be buried with Jewish rites. This cemetery, with its tombstones inscribed in both Hebrew and English, is the final resting place of nearly 100 people. It is the oldest Jewish landmark in Cincinnati and the western United States.

After the cholera epidemic of 1849, a new seventeen-acre cemetery on Montgomery Pike was acquired by B'nai Israel. The grounds were shared with B'nai Jeshurun, and in 1862 it was finally consecrated the United Jewish Cemetery, an association still in existence.

It has been a Jewish tradition to provide for their coreligionists from the cradle to the grave. Groups to aid the sick, poor, widowed, and orphaned have always existed. Burial societies and general charity organizations also existed. Although some social welfare agencies were available to all Americans in the first half of the nineteenth century, Jewish immigrants usually established their own societies, similar to those they had left behind in Europe, shortly after settling in the United States.

Charity work, an important part of the Jewish way of life, was carried on both within and independent of synagogue activities. By 1860, eighteen Jewish organizations were engaged in charitable works in Cincinnati. The first Jewish charity group in Cincinnati, founded by Solomon Menken, Jonas Levy, Morris Symmonds, Phineas Symmonds, and others in 1828, was called the Hebrew Beneficent Society [Chebrath Bikur Cholim]. It provided assistance for the sick and widowed and offered loans at low interest rates to members. After a year's membership, a participant could collect a sickness benefit for up to twelve weeks in a year; this was later extended to twenty-four weeks in a year. The advantages of the association were great, but so were the responsibilities. The Hebrew Beneficent Society, which had 200 members in 1860, was the precursor of the modern lending and loan association and insurance company.

A similar group called the Hebrew Benevolent Society [Chebrath Meshiboth Nefesh] was established in 1842 to give relief to the sick and to the poor immigrant of Jewish persuasion. Its active members included Joseph Jonas, Phineas Moses, Philip Heidelbach, David and Elias Mayer, Abraham and Joseph Abraham, and others. One hundred members sustained the work of this society in 1860.

Another early charitable organization was a ritual bath society whose
community bath house served men and women at different hours. There was also a home for widows and orphans. Three ladies’ associations aided widows and orphans or any females who needed assistance. A fourth ladies’ club made and distributed clothing to the poor. There was also a burial association to attend the sick, dying, and deceased.

The Hebrew General Relief Fund [Chebrath Gemiluth Chassadim] was a city-wide benevolent society organized in 1856 by Rabbi Max Lilienthal to aid Cincinnati Jews in distress, mostly poor new immigrants. Cincinnati Israelites also helped Jews in other communities through their synagogues. The Palestine Relief Fund collected money to aid the poor in the Holy Land and to aid in the rebuilding of a synagogue and a college in the city of Tiberias, Palestine.

Fraternal orders, a source of comfort, strength, and education to their members, filled a need for many Jewish immigrants. The dominant and most influential Jewish fraternal organization was the Independent Order of the B’nai Brith [Sons of the Covenant], established in New York City in 1843 by Henry Jones and eleven other men of German origin. With the fundamental purposes of charity, love of liberty, and the brotherhood of man, Cincinnatians dedicated their first I. O. B’nai Brith lodge on March 5, 1849. The members of this mutual aid society, most of whom were young men, were expected to “visit the sick, support the poor, protect the feeble, bury the dead, and to comfort the mourners.” Cincinnati had three B’nai Brith lodges with a total membership of 300 by 1860. The idea took root and grew rapidly around the country, with twenty-five lodges established in twelve cities, including San Francisco, St. Louis, New Orleans, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Baltimore, by 1856.

Perhaps the most important charitable organization to be established by early Cincinnati Jews was Jewish Hospital. The cholera epidemic of 1849 was the catalyst that hastened its founding. Members of B’nai Jeshurun formed a medical committee to look after the cholera victims. In June 1850, funds were collected “to furnish a house with the necessary articles” under the direction of Hyman Moses, Joseph Alexander, and M. E. Moehring.9 Jewish Hospital thus became the first Jewish hospital organized in the United States, preceding the establishment of Jewish hospitals in New York (1852) and Chicago (1868). It was the second hospital in Cincinnati, preceded only by a city hospital built in 1815 to accommodate the sick and indigent. This city hospital was known as the Commercial Hospital in 1823, then rebuilt in 1869 and called Cincinnati Hospital, and renamed Cincinnati General Hospital in 1915 when it was relocated at Burnet Avenue.

Care at Jewish Hospital probably included kosher food, a clinic for the working class, and the prevention of dissection after death without permission. Jewish Hospital Society subscribers [Chebrath Beth Cholim] paid three dollars annually to sustain the hospital. By 1858 the society had 372 members. Finances were always a problem, but supporters found a variety of ways to secure funds, by staging theatrical performances and benefit concerts and by
Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, who came to Cincinnati to lead Congregation B'nai Jeshurun in 1854, was the architect of reformed Judaism in America. In an effort to Americanize the Jewish immigrant, he instituted lasting changes in the traditional form of synagogue worship.
soliciting donations. A substantial bequest in 1854 by Judah Touro, a successful New Orleans businessman and philanthropist, enabled the society to purchase two private houses. Medical facilities were moved in 1856 to Third and Baum Streets, where they remained until 1890 when expanding services necessitated a move to Burnet Avenue, the present address of Jewish Hospital.

Doctors Abraham Bettman and David S. Gans were early Jewish physicians in Cincinnati. Dr. Bettman, a long-time Cincinnati resident whose skill and learning were known throughout the state, began his medical practice in 1846. He was the first attending physician at Jewish Hospital and he looked after the poor free of charge under the auspices of several benevolent societies and synagogues. He was a public leader who ministered to many charities in the Queen City and influenced the adoption of numerous sanitary improvements in the city.9 David S. Gans, a native of Hanover, Germany, graduated from the University of Gottingen and came to the United States in 1835. A cultured man, he was highly regarded in his profession and contributed to medical literature and organizations.10

Education has always been a primary concern of Jewish parents. It was considered the obligation of parents to teach their children the tenets of Judaism; even the orphan was to receive instruction at the expense of the community. In Europe, religious instruction began in the home and was formalized in a religious school at an early age, sometimes as early as four or five. Education was highly esteemed and was recognized as the ladder to social and economic improvement.

Jewish education in America was not organized until about 1838 when Sunday Schools first appeared. After-school programs did not arise until the post-bellum period. Rebecca Gratz, a Philadelphia philanthropist and social worker, and Rabbi Isaac Leeser, the minister of congregation Mikveh Israel of Philadelphia (one of six synagogues established in America before the War of Independence), founded the first free Jewish Sunday School in the United States in 1838. Rabbi Leeser wrote two children’s religious textbooks and encouraged the establishment of Sunday Schools and day schools throughout the country.11

Public schools in the Queen City in the 1830’s and 1840’s left much to be desired. Attendance was erratic, there were not enough teachers, and public support and commitment were minimal. It was therefore not surprising that once the B’nai Israel synagogue was erected in 1836 the congregants were anxious to establish a school where a better education could be provided for their children. Yet many difficulties had to be overcome due to inexperience, lack of funds, and lack of trained personnel, and early attempts at Jewish education in Cincinnati were not very successful.

Congregation B’nai Israel first held Hebrew classes in the basement of its
building. In 1838 Reverend Hart Judah presided as the superintendent of the first school. Louisa Symmonds, wife of a prominent member, initiated a Sunday School in 1842, but it failed after three years. A formal Hebrew and English studies school was undertaken by Rabbi James K. Gutehm from 1846 until 1849, when Rabbi Gutehm’s departure to a congregation in New Orleans and the cholera epidemic interrupted the school program. In 1854 a more concentrated, day-long Hebrew, German, and English program was created called Noyoth [beautiful dwelling place] Institute. Rabbi Lilienthal headed this program from his arrival in 1855 until the Noyoth Institute closed its doors in 1865.

B’nai Jeshurun also organized a religious and secular program called Talmud Yelodim [Education of Children]. It was established in December 1848 with Henry Mack as its devoted and enthusiastic leader. Besides the religious subjects of Hebrew, Bible, Hebrew grammar, and literature, the curriculum included history, mathematics, general science, English, German, and geography. New subjects added in 1858 were calligraphy, drawing, needlepoint, music, and speech.

Rabbi Wise carried on the Talmud Yelodim when he came to Cincinnati in 1854. A banquet was held each year to make up the deficit in school expenditures. The bequest of Judah Touro in 1854 enabled the congregation to construct a modest three and one-half story school building adjacent to the Lodge Street synagogue. The school had six light and airy rooms, measuring twenty feet by thirty feet, with eight windows in each room, and equipped with benches, desks, and blackboards. The Hebrew High School instructional program, begun in 1857, met in the evenings and on weekends in order not to interfere with the public high school.

As public schools in Cincinnati began to improve in the 1850’s, they attracted more Jewish children. In 1860, 1,030 Jewish children were enrolled in the public schools while only 237 were attending Jewish Day Schools. Financial strain and indebtedness caused the Talmud Yelodim to cease operation in 1868. A hoped-for merger between the two Hebrew day schools never materialized. Instruction in religion and associated subjects in the two big synagogues was subsequently relegated to Saturday and Sunday mornings.

As long as Cincinnati public schools were inadequate, some Jewish parents were willing to support a Hebrew Day School. But such a program never enjoyed widespread popularity. It may have included ten to fifteen per cent of the school-age Jewish children. The improved Cincinnati public school system won the support of Jewish parents, and this proved to be the downfall of the Jewish Day School. By the post-bellum period, formal religious education played a secondary role and was then directed toward the Sabbath School. There is no record of religious education given in the orthodox synagogues, nor is it possible to estimate to what degree religious instruction was carried on in the home. In sum, however, it must be said that Jewish attempts at higher education before the Civil War failed.
The Israelite, the first Jewish newspaper west of the Alleghenies, was the vehicle by which Rabbi Wise disseminated his reform ideas to readers in Cincinnati and throughout the nation. Rabbi Wise edited the weekly Israelite from 1854 until his death in 1900.

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THE CONVERT.

Chapter 1.

At the eastern end of the Eger valley in Bohemia, and on the right bank of the river of the same name, a rock rises almost perpendicularly, forming the basis of the high plain, on which the old town of Königsberg proudly rests. The steeples of its churches are visible far beyond the Eger valley to the mountainous region, forming the boundary between Bohemia, Saxony and Bavaria. At the western end of Königsberg, perpendicularly above the Eger river, a few streets are located, which are inhabited by Jews, whose predecessors sought refuge in that solitary corner of Germany, when the crusaders made havoc among their brethren.

answer, but the most painful emotions manifested themselves upon his troubled countenance. Rachel, however, who had stood motionless behind her mother, now spoke to her, praying her not to forget that two more children besides the one whose loss she was lamenting, loved her dearly, and were desirous to see her happy and submit piously to the incomprehensible decrees of Providence. Her voice trembled, she could speak no farther, and covering her eyes with a lily-white hand she stood again as a statue behind her mother.

Father Isaac was done praying, and sat down silently at the side of his coffin. He had just opened his lips to speak, when the door was slowly opened and I lay nourished and brought up children and they have rebelled against me." were his voice failed, but after a short pause he continued, "Your eldest son, an angry pupil whom we have brought up in ways of righteousness and piety, and who was fondly loved by all and each of us, has forsaken the ways of the Lord, as undone his aged parents, and has abandoned his nation, and has no longer part and possession in Israel, but you and I are innocent, our hands have no shed the innocent blood, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob will have mercy on you, and bless you with strength, bear piously this misfortune, and he will dry up your tears." The
Cultural interests in the form of music, reading, and recreational clubs existed in the early Cincinnati Jewish community. Music was always an integral part of Jewish life. There was music in the home, in prayers at the synagogue, at festive occasions like weddings, and at recreational clubs. Both congregations B’nai Israel and B’nai Jeshurun had choirs which enhanced the service. And, from the number of advertisements in the Israelite, it is clear that music lessons were popular.17

Many Israelites patronized concerts, theaters, and museums. In 1859 Samuel N. Pike, a successful Jewish businessman, built Pike’s Opera House, a theater which was patronized by all citizens of the Queen City.18 Henry Mosler, a Jew, was a portrait painter who spent his childhood in Cincinnati before moving to Europe. The renowned sculptor Moses Ezekiel, also a Jew, lived in Cincinnati from 1864 to 1869 before he too left for Europe. He is known for his busts of George Washington, Robert E. Lee, Franz Liszt, and others.

Many of the early Jewish settlers in Cincinnati were literate in Hebrew, English, and German. They read periodicals, books, and newspapers in all three languages. The first Jewish periodical in the United States was a monthly established in Philadelphia in 1843 entitled The Occident and American Jewish Advocate. It was written and edited for twenty-five years by Isaac Leeser, a self-taught layman from Prussia. He promoted enlightened conservative Judaism, believed in preserving the traditional synagogue service, and strongly opposed the reform ideas of Isaac Wise and others. This literary journal, which contained news of national and international Jewish life, published several articles by prominent Cincinnatians, such as Joseph Jonas, watchmaker and community leader; Samuel Bruel, hatter and amateur journalist; and Rabbis Wise and Lilienthal. Other Jewish journals were also read in the community.

By 1859 Cincinnati supported a total of fifty-three dailies, weeklies, monthlies, and other journals in English and German.19 The Israelite, published in English, and Die Deborah, written in German, were the two most influential Jewish newspapers in Cincinnati in the mid-nineteenth century. The Israelite was first issued on July 15, 1854, with Rabbi Wise as editor, a position he maintained for nearly half a century. It was the first Jewish journal west of the Alleghenies and the only existing English-language Jewish weekly at that time. For immigrants who preferred the German language, Wise began to publish Die Deborah the following year. Judging from its name, he hoped that it would appeal to women.

The Israelite, whose motto was “Let there be light,” was a newspaper of national consequence. It enjoyed a wide circulation with readers from as far away as San Francisco, Boston, and New Orleans. Local, national, and international news items as well as stories, editorials, letters, poetry, novels, philosophy, history, Biblical explanation and interpretation, book reviews, obituaries, sermons, advertisements, and customs and ceremonies for each...
holiday filled its pages. Rabbi Wise used this platform to disseminate his ideas on reform Judaism, frequently criticizing both orthodox Judaism and reform points of view which differed from his own. A major goal of the journal was to combat anti-Semitism. *The Israelite* was watchful and constant in its appeals, protests, and demands on behalf of the American Jew. In his unique way, Rabbi Wise wanted to instruct his people, to disperse prejudice, to combat indifference and ignorance, to unveil hypocrisy, and to impress divine truth upon his readers.

Rabbi Wise remained the editor of *The Israelite*, which in 1874 changed its name to the *American Israelite*, until his death in 1900. The newspaper continues to be published in Cincinnati today and is the oldest Jewish weekly journal in America. *Die Deborah* began as a weekly and later was issued as a monthly. It ceased publication in 1903.

Rabbis Wise and Lilienthal also wrote many books about Jewish history and religion. The chief publisher of Jewish books in the Queen City was Messrs. E. Bloch and Company, which later moved to New York City. In 1860, four Cincinnati bookstores dealt in both English and Hebrew literature.

Cincinnati had several Jewish men's recreational clubs which met weekly for social and intellectual stimulation. The oldest and largest, with 200 members in 1860, was called the Allemania Club, where literary, historical, and philosophical topics were discussed. The Harmonia Society, with its billiards, chess, English and foreign newspapers, debates, and theatrical productions, resembled an English gentleman's club. The Phoenix Club was founded in 1856 to provide all entertainment in the German language. Many German Jews supported the German theater as well as their recreational clubs.

Adah Isaacs Menken, the gifted and accomplished daughter-in-law of Solomon Menken, one of Cincinnati's earliest Jewish settlers, was probably the most fascinating, talented, and colorful woman to arrive in Cincinnati's Jewish cultural community before the Civil War. She was a New Orleans-born Jewess who had command of at least six languages, and could sing, dance, paint, and sculpt as well. While in Texas in 1856, she met and eloped with Alexander Isaac Menken, musician son of a wealthy Cincinnati Jewish family. They first lived in New Orleans, where she went on stage professionally. After the panic in 1857 they returned to Cincinnati to live.

In the Queen City, Adah wrote poetry, and many of her poems appeared regularly in *The Israelite* from September 25, 1857, to April 22, 1859. The theme in several of her works called upon Jews to help their suffering brethren. She frequently performed for recreational clubs in Cincinnati, such as the Allemania, and was widely acclaimed.

Adah believed herself divorced from Alexander Menken and in 1859 set out for an acting career in New York. From there she went on to London and Paris where she became a celebrity and dazzled the literary elite in Europe and America. Her meteoric career was short-lived, however. She died of
The Allemania Club, the largest of Cincinnati's many Jewish recreational clubs, was often used as a forum for discussion of literary, historical, and philosophical topics. Adah Isaacs Menken, a gifted young poetess married to a Cincinnatian, often read her works to members of the society.
Henry Mosler was a Cincinnati Jew who first gained fame as an artist for Harper's Weekly during the Civil War, then later achieved renown as a painter in Europe. He returned to Cincinnati to paint some of its prominent citizens. His Return of the Shrimp Fishers is one of seven Mosler paintings in the Cincinnati Art Museum.
tuberculosis at the age of thirty-three, attended by a rabbi. Adah Isaacs Menken, a brilliant and beautiful Jewess, remained devoted to her faith throughout her unconventional life.

The economic pursuits of the early Cincinnati Jewish community were at first limited. Since many of the immigrants had come from an urban setting where they had suffered the economic disabilities of not being permitted to own land or to become farmers, they had been excluded from certain skills and were ill prepared for a variety of occupations in the new country. Therefore, they had to resort to the same kinds of employment that they had experienced in the past. Most became peddlers, small shopkeepers, and tailors until a better job came along.

Many Jews took up peddling because they were unskilled, didn’t speak English, and didn’t know what else they could do. Country traders carried from forty to 150 pounds of dry goods and clothing on their backs and walked as much as twenty-five miles in a day. It was a footsore and miserable nomadic existence. Abraham Kohn, a Jewish peddler, wrote in his diary,

*It is hard, very hard indeed, to make a living this way. Sweat runs down my body in great drops and my back seems to be breaking, but I cannot stop; I must go on and on, however far my way lies.*

Like many Jewish peddlers, he was frequently discouraged by poor business and depressed because he could not observe the Sabbath.

Peddling was not limited to the countryside. In the city a man might sell notions, cigars, stationery, or jewelry from his pack. One in four Jews in Cincinnati was employed as a peddler in 1850, but by 1860 the number had decreased to about one in six.

Rabbi Wise studied the varieties of traders and classified them in the following manner. A young, recent arrival who knew no English was the “basket peddler.” Once the chap had acquired some knowledge of the language he was called a “custom peddler.” A “peddler” was a man who carried a heavy pack on his back with the hopes of one day becoming a storekeeper. A trader who possessed a horse and wagon was considered a “wagon baron,” while a man who carried a satchel full of watches, rings, and jewels was referred to as a “jewel count.” But a man who owned a store had reached the top and was known as a “store prince.”

There was no dishonor in being a peddler, but it would have been a shame to remain one throughout one’s life. Few did. After a year or two of peddling it was not uncommon for the immigrant to open a small shop where he sold dry goods or clothing. In Cincinnati, nine Jewish men were engaged in retail sales in the 1830’s, and by 1860 more than 600 Jews were in the retail merchandising trade.
As a Jewish immigrant progressed up the economic ladder, he advanced from a “basket peddler” with a heavy pack on his back to a “wagon baron” with a horse and wagon and finally, if he was very successful, he became a “store prince,” the owner of his own dry goods store.
Not every peddler became a rich man, and the small retail store owner took many risks in business, but for those who succeeded the rewards were great. Two who did succeed were Philip Heidelbach, who settled in Cincinnati in 1837, and another peddler, Jacob Seasongood, who became his partner. They first went into the retail clothing business and in 1842 into the wholesale clothing business. Philip Heidelbach was one of the first trustees of the Cincinnati Southern Railroad. He was president of the School Board of B’nai Israel for several years and was active in the Hebrew Benevolent Society. Jacob Seasongood went into banking and served as an officer of B’nai Israel, a director of the Jewish Hospital, and as director of the Hebrew Benevolent Association for many years.

During the nineteenth century the men’s clothing industry was an important factor in the industrial life of Cincinnati. In 1859 the clothing industry provided work for more people in the Queen City than any other industry. It had grown from 86 factories in 1841 to 134 factories producing goods valued at fifteen million dollars in 1859. The number of workers in the clothing industry increased from 813 to 14,580 in those twenty years. Cincinnati then possessed the largest market for ready-made men’s clothing in the United States. Approximately one-fourth of the Jews in Cincinnati were consistently associated with the clothing trades in the nineteenth century.

By 1860 Cincinnati Jews were involved in over 100 occupations. They were servants, laborers, seamstresses, shoemakers, bookkeepers, cigar makers, livestock dealers, secondhand dealers, furnituremakers, carpenters, brushmakers, butchers, physicians, teachers, and even insurance agents. Eight different families managed hotels or boarding houses in the eastern and western parts of the city.

There is no doubt that the Jewish community was well integrated into the economic life of the Queen City. Most Israelites began their careers at the bottom of the economic structure and worked their way up. Many had prospered over the years and became influential and affluent members of the Cincinnati community. Cincinnati profited from their achievements. From the very beginning Cincinnati Jews enjoyed the respect and friendship of the entire community. They were free to reside in any area of the city, though most chose to live in the center of town.

Jews were anxious to participate in public life and were concerned about the well-being of their city. Many belonged to Cincinnati’s volunteer fireman program, which had about 700 volunteer firemen who formed more than twelve fire companies by 1841. Early Jewish volunteer firemen were Joseph Jonas, who was an assistant director of the Cincinnati Fire Guards No. 1 in 1836-37; Cauffman Oppenheimer, a German-born clerk; Isaac Wolf, a Bavarian clerk; Joseph Alexander, a Prussian-born clothing merchant; and Charles B. Frank, a wool dealer from Germany.

Prior to his arrival in the United States, the Jewish immigrant had little
Moses Ezekiel, a renowned sculptor, lived in Cincinnati at various times during his life. He is pictured in 1899 completing a bust of Isaac Mayer Wise.
interaction with the non-Jewish community. He inherently distrusted the European state since he had frequently suffered social, economic, and political hardship at its hands. In America it was different, for once the struggle to make a living was overcome, some Israelites ventured into politics and community service.

The Whig State Convention in Columbus in 1840 had three delegates from Cincinnati's First Ward who were of the Jewish faith: Morris Moses, the brother-in-law of Joseph Jonas; Dr. David Gans, a German-born physician; and Lewis Einstein, a partner in a wholesale importing dry goods firm. At the same convention, representing the Third Ward, was Henry Hart, a native of England who had come to Cincinnati in 1829. He had worked as a clerk and by 1840 owned a clothing store. All these men had achieved a degree of success in their economic pursuits.  

Another early Jew who attained prominence in Cincinnati was Joseph Abraham, who came from England in the 1830's and was a successful merchant. He later studied law with Judge Bellamy Storer and became the first Jewish lawyer in Cincinnati. He remained in the legal profession and contributed to the public improvement of Cincinnati.  

Other Israelites who participated extensively in the early civic life of the city included Samuel Bloom, who was a constable in 1858 and a policeman in 1859; Edgar M. Johnson, a well-respected lawyer who was elected city prosecuting attorney in 1859; his brother Frederick, who served as a Justice of the Peace for many years; and Henry Mack, who was elected to the City Council in 1859 and 1861. During his terms in office, Mack, who had emigrated from Bavaria in 1841, proposed legislation to improve the quality of Cincinnati life. He introduced a bill granting the franchise for the first city railroad and influenced the city government to move toward the construction of a substantial sewer system. Henry Mack was also a trustee of the Cincinnati Southern Railroad and was on the Cincinnati Board of Education for fourteen years. He led an equally distinguished career in Jewish affairs. He founded the Talmud Yelodim [Hebrew Day School of B'nai Jeshurun], served as a trustee, secretary, and president of B'nai Jeshurun, and was active in Hebrew Union College and B'nai Brith activities.

Joseph Jonas, the first permanent Jewish settler in Cincinnati, was prominent in civic and political circles as well as religious circles. He too held elective office, serving one term in the Ohio State Legislature in 1860-61. This early Jewish leader, around whom the whole Hebrew community of Cincinnati first gathered, died at the home of one of his daughters in Mobile, Alabama, in 1869.

In all areas of community life—civic, economic, cultural, and most importantly religious—the early Jews in Cincinnati made substantial contributions to their city. Their many accomplishments paved the way for even greater achievements in the last half of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century.
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(2) I. J. Benjamin, Three Years in America 1859-1862 (Philadelphia, 1956), I, 308-309.


(5) Benjamin, op. cit., 311-312. Benjamin briefly listed the organizations and the information he learned about each when he visited Cincinnati in 1860.

(6) “Beneficent Society Minute Books 1838-1889,” MSS, American Jewish Archives, Box 829, Aug. 8, 1841, p. 25.


(8) Occident, Aug. 1850, p. 259.

(9) Occident, April 1847, p. 60; Charles F. Goss, Cincinnati, the Queen City (Cincinnati, 1912), II, 313; Charles T. Greve, Centennial History of Cincinnati and Representative Citizens (Chicago, 1904), II, 331-332.

(10) Otto Juettner, Daniel Drake and His Followers (Cincinnati, 1909), 101.


(12) James G. Heller, As Yesterday When It is Past (Cincinnati, 1942), 42-48.

(13) “Talmud Yelodim Institute Board of Trustees (Cincinnati, Ohio) Minute Book 1849-1870,” MSS, American Jewish Archives, Box 1630, March 6, 1854.

(14) Israelite, Aug. 1855, p. 60.


(18) Goss, op. cit., II, 18.


(20) May, op. cit., 195, 197, 199, 201, 205.

(21) Israelite, Aug. 10, 1855, p. 36.

(22) Israelite, May 8, 1859, p. 351.


(27) Richard Smith, “A Review of the Trade Commerce and Manufacture of Cincinnati,” Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce Reports 1848-1859 (Cincinnati, 1851), 14-16. The figures for 1859 were taken from Cist, op. cit., 240-344.

(28) Cist, op. cit., 256. Of the twenty-four Jewish butchers in 1860, six were members of the Kahn family, but not related to the E. Kahn who established the well-known meat-packing firm in 1883. Isaac Schiff
[Schieff], was one of twenty-three Jewish shoemakers in 1860. Descendants of the Schiff family are still associated with the shoe business today.

(29) Charles Cist, *Cincinnati in 1841* (Cincinnati, 1841), 291; *History of the Cincinnati Fire Department* (Cincinnati, 1895), 93.


(33) *Cincinnati Directory 1858-59* (Cincinnati, 1859).

(34) Greve, *op. cit.*, I, 940.
