

Jefferson County History

Madison, Indiana sits along the Ohio River. It served as one of the important cities in the early development of Indiana. Its location on the river made it one of the central shipping locations in the state. One of the largest commodities trade were pigs, earning Madison the dubious title of “Porkopolis.”¹ Despite the fact that most Jewish people do not eat pork, Madison became a place for settlement by Jews.

One of the first families to arrive was Elias and Teresa Hilpp in 1847. They had lived in New Orleans and Louisville before settling in Madison. Also in that year, Aaron Marks from German settled in Madison. He worked as a peddler before coming to Madison, so when he arrived he had enough money to open a store. In 1849, a marriage between Ernestine Wehle and Max Abeles was performed in Madison, possibly the first Jewish marriage officiated by a Rabbi in Indiana.

Adolph Brandeis came from Prague to America looking for a city to start a family business. After traveling to several cities, he decided Madison was the best place to start the family starch manufacturing business. Twenty-six members of his family left Prague to work in the family business. When the family arrived, some members opened other businesses. Samuel Brandeis opened a medical practice and Ludwig Dembitz opened a law firm.² Their strong German heritage, coupled with the fact that Madison had a large German immigrant population, allowed many of the Jews to join the social clubs, read the German newspapers, and attend the German theater.

As early as 1849, Jews in Madison came together to worship. Although they did not have a formal synagogue or congregation, many of the Jews still practiced their religion. A report from a Rabbi Isaac Leeser stated that

in 1851 the Jewish families had a schochet (ritual slaughterer), which “reveals the relatively large number of families practicing traditional Judaism...”³ In 1853 a minyan came together to form a congregation (Adas Israel). Like many other Indiana communities, before a permanent place of worship was established, the grounds for burying the dead was secured. In 1855, the congregation purchased land to be used as a cemetery (Adas Israel Cemetery). The last burial in the cemetery was in 1875. At this point, burials were made in a portion of the community cemetery, Springdale.

Also in 1855, they dedicated the synagogue on the second floor a W.M. Hoffstadt’s store, Lotz Brothers Shoe Store.⁴ Within a year, the congregation hired their first instructor, Bernard Felsenthal; Felsenthal, but he left for Chicago in 1858 after suggesting that the Orthodox service change. Felsenthal would become a leader in the Reform and Zionist movements in America. The congregation constructed a mikvah (ritual bath house) and opened a Hebrew school in the Masonic building.

The Hebrew Youths’ Society was organized in 1862. In 1868, the congregation moved to larger quarters, when they purchased the “Old Radical Methodist Church.” The years of living in the United States and the changes that had to be made in order to assimilate moved the group towards the Reform movement. By the 1870s, there is evidence that that congregation was adapting to Reform Judaism (including working on the Sabbath, purchasing an organ for the synagogue, and the adoption of the Minhag America [American tradition].)⁵ Despite these changes, many of the families kept some of the dietary restrictions of Orthodox Judaism, even supporting a kosher butcher shop in the downtown area.

The women of the community were active in fundraising for both the temple and the community. In 1883, the Ladies’ Benevolent Society was established, there was the Hagar Lodge No. 135 of B’nai B’rith.

As in other Indiana communities, Jews worked as business owners and in the clothing business. Julius Hoffstadt manufactured men's clothing and employed as many as 35 individuals. Chaim Weinbert worked as a tailor.

Despite the early community, over the next 20 years, individuals slowly began to move out of Madison.

While a few families moved into the area (Isaac Stern came in 1888 and Henry Klein came around the same time), but in general the population of Jews slowly began to decline. Most of the original settlers had died and few new families moved into the area. In 1919, the Jewish population reduced to 70 people. Rabbi Stern served as an uncompensated Rabbi for the congregation until 1923 when he moved; the synagogue closed their doors permanently after this.

Footnotes

¹ Eliazbeth Shaikun Weinberg, Hoosier Israelites on the Ohio – A History of Madison's Indiana Jews, Indiana Jewish History Publication No 27 (1991), 10.

² *Ibid.*, 25.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴ Current Events Club, Early History of Madison and Jefferson County (Madison, Indiana: Current Events Club, 1960) 83.

⁵ Weinberg, 16.