

Tucson's Jewish Pioneers

Tucson's Jewish Heritage

At the same time Christopher Columbus was “discovering America” in 1492, Spain expelled all Jews who wouldn't convert to Catholicism. During the 16th century some of these Jews fled to Mexico, but when the “Inquisition” crossed the Atlantic to Spanish Mexico, outlawing the Jewish faith there, Jews who wanted to continue their religious practices had to do so in secret as so-called “crypto-Jews.” Over generations, some Jews fled north to frontier Spanish settlements in south Texas and New Mexico. According to Jewish historian Harriet Rochlin, even after Spanish rule ended in 1821, Jews (along with other non-Catholics) in the Mexican West “were denied landownership, citizenship and public worship” and “treated with suspicion.”

With American rule after the Mexican War in 1848 and the Gadsden Purchase in 1854, came religious freedom and legal equality for Jews. As historian Rochlin wrote, “Finding possibilities and access unlimited, they [Jews] summoned relatives and friends to join them, first in gold-rush California, then elsewhere on the erupting frontier.”

With the end of the Civil War in 1865 and the transfer of the Arizona territorial capital from Prescott to Tucson in 1867, business opportunities in Tucson abounded.

The Jewish Virtual Library summarizes the beginning of Jewish heritage in Tucson: “At first there were relatively few people, Jews and gentiles, in the community, but some Jews came because of merchandising opportunities. Some opened general stores, others acquired Indian trading licenses, and some also served as contractors for the U.S. Army. The settlement in the 19th century consisted mostly of young men out to seek their fortunes. ... The total Jewish population of Arizona in the 1880s was estimated at about 50 people, so the numbers in Tucson must have been fewer. [The population of Tucson in 1880 was about 7,000.] A number of men from the city's pioneer Jewish families ... could be found in elected political positions: on the school board, on the county Board of Supervisors, and even as mayor.”

Jews in territorial Tucson were also miners, bankers, and prominent in the entertainment business.

Jewish family businesses were common in Tucson. In 1878 for example, as Tucson merchandising historian Bettina Lyons observed, of the ten general stores operating in downtown Tucson, “six were owned by first generation German Jews, all related to one another by either blood or marriage.”

There were virtually no single Jewish women in early territorial Arizona, so Tucson's pioneering Jewish men often had to travel “back” East or to the West Coast to meet and marry Jewish women.

There were no rabbi's in Arizona until the 1900s, so lay leaders took on the responsibility of presiding at Jewish religious ceremonies.

With the coming of the railroad in 1880 and the amassing of financial resources in fewer hands, opportunities for individual entrepreneurs declined. The Jewish Virtual Library says of Tucson, “Many of

the original Jewish settlers fled to other parts of the West or the nation in the late 1880s and 1890s when an economic depression hit the Arizona territory.

Influential Jewish Pioneers

Brothers **Philip Drachman (1833-1889)** and **Samuel Drachman (1837-1911)** were among the earliest Jews to settle in Tucson, became successful businessmen, and helped keep Judaism alive in the desert southwest. The brothers were born in Russian-occupied Poland and immigrated to New York City in 1852. Philip immediately headed west where he lived first in California and then the Yuma area, exploring farming, stock raising, and merchandising. By the mid-1860s Philip had established general stores in Yuma and Prescott with his partner Isaac Goldberg, and by 1866 had settled in Tucson and entered the retail business. Meanwhile, Samuel had gone from New York City to Charleston, South Carolina and later fought for the Confederate Army during the Civil War. At the invitation of Philip, Samuel came to Tucson in 1867, where he worked for his brother at the Drachman-Goldberg general store until 1873, when he established his own business as a government contractor carrying supplies and mail. Both Drachman brothers successfully sought out Jewish wives, Philip traveling to New York and Samuel to California.

Besides merchandising, Philip Drachman bought and sold real estate, operated an extensive freighting business between Tucson and Yuma, opened a saloon, and purchased a cigar store - often operating more than one business at a time. Philip also represented Pima County in the 4th Territorial Legislature before his death in Tucson from pneumonia. One of Philip's sons, Mose Drachman, became a prominent Tucson businessman in the early 1900s. Another of Philip's sons, Emanuel, was the father of Roy Drachman, one of Tucson's key developers and civic leaders in the mid and late 1900s.

Like his brother, Samuel Drachman also engaged in multiple businesses, including a cigar store, agent for principal lottery companies, insurance agent, and railroad ticket broker. Samuel also served in the Arizona's 8th Territorial Legislature and was heavily involved in the development of Tucson's school system. During his entire life in Tucson, Samuel Drachman served as lay leader to Tucson's Jews, often presiding at local religious ceremonies, especially weddings.

Brothers **Louis Zeckendorf (1838-1937)** and **William Zeckendorf (1842-1906)**, together with their nephew Albert Steinfeld, established one of the most successful and longest lasting merchandising businesses in Tucson. Louis and William were born in Germany, along with their older brother, Aaron. By 1856 the three brothers were merchants and army provisioners in New Mexico. In 1866, Aaron and Louis decided to open a new store in Tucson with younger brother William in charge, older brother Aaron to manage their New Mexico business, and Louis to move to New York City to purchase goods for the Zeckendorf enterprises. The Tucson store opened with Philip Drachman as temporary manager. When William arrived in 1867 he struggled in managing the store, preferring to gamble and participate in self-serving promotions and spectacles. In 1870 Aaron Zeckendorf closed the New Mexico business to concentrate Zeckendorf efforts in Tucson. When Aaron died unexpectedly in 1872, Louis Zeckendorf took over as head of the family business and although visiting Tucson frequently, brought in his 17-year-

old nephew Albert Steinfeld to help him make a better go of the sole remaining Zeckendorf brothers operation.

Meanwhile, William pursued other interests; on his second try in 1875 William was elected as a member of the 8th Arizona Territorial Legislature. Also in 1875 William married the daughter of a successful New York City clothing merchant. As Zeckendorf biographer Lyons says, by this time “William Zeckendorf was considered one of Tucson’s ‘upstanding citizens.’” He and his wife were popular and entertained often in Tucson.

In 1878 William resigned from the family enterprise and opened a store of his own that thrived for a while but suffered due to overextended credit and competition from inexpensive goods arriving by rail after 1880. While his business struggled, William invested heavily in mining in Pima and Santa Cruz counties, and devoted much of his time to managing Arizona’s Democratic Party. William’s business finally failed in 1883, later reopened on a less grand scale, but closed for good in 1891 when, with his mine speculations failing, William sold off his entire stock and joined his family in New York City, where he lived for the rest of his life.

Albert Steinfeld took over as managing general partner of L. Zeckendorf & Co. in 1878 when William resigned. Except for occasional visits, Louis Zeckendorf was able to remain in New York City. Steinfeld survived the coming of the railroad, actually grew the business (with the help of financial advisor Charles M. Strauss, another German Jew), and in 1904 bought out Louis Zeckendorf to become sole owner. Steinfeld turned Albert Steinfeld & Company into the largest, most elegant, and most successful department store in the territory – and which thrived in Tucson until the 1980s.

Jacob S. Mansfeld (1832-1894) founded Tucson’s first bookstore and the first public library, and was instrumental in getting the University of Arizona started. Mansfeld was born in Pasewalk, Germany, came to America in 1856, and worked in bookstores in San Francisco, California; Virginia City, Nevada; and White Pine, Nevada before arriving in Tucson in 1869. Mansfeld opened the Pioneer News Depot and Bookstore, selling newspapers from New York City, magazines, and books. The shop also sold stationery and other writing materials. In 1871 Mansfeld established the first public library in town, loaning books from his store.

In 1878 Mansfeld found and married a Jewish woman in New York City. One of their four children, Monte (changed name to Mansfield), became a prominent Tucson auto dealer and civic leader in the 20th century.

Mansfeld helped draft the first charter for the City of Tucson as a member of the county Board of Supervisors from 1885-1886. In 1886, as one of four original regents for a proposed territorial university, he successfully raised money, found a site, and secured land to build the University of Arizona. Mansfeld was also a school board member from 1888-1891.

Brothers **Lionel Jacobs (1840-1922)** and **Barron Jacobs (1846-1936)** were successful Tucson merchants and started the first bank in town. The brothers were sons of a Polish Jew who migrated with his family to San Francisco, California in 1851. The brothers clerked there in the family clothing and dry goods

store until 1867, when their father sent them to Tucson to open a new store. The brothers rented an empty building from established merchant and Mexican immigrant Leopoldo Carrillo and launched a small mercantile firm. The business was supplied from San Francisco by the brothers' father via a challenging logistics path over water and land – the final leg on freight wagons from Yuma. The Jacobs' merchandising business grew and prospered through the 1870s.

Lionel and Baron were active in Tucson social life and civic affairs. They helped form the Tucson Literary Society in 1873. Lionel found a Jewish wife in San Francisco and Baron in New York City. Lionel was appointed to the Pima County Board of Supervisors in 1871, was elected to the 7th Territorial Legislature, was Treasurer of the Territorial Legislature in 1873, and also served on the Tucson City Council. Baron also served as Treasurer of the Territorial Legislature.

Starting in the 1870s, more and more of the Jacobs brothers business involved handling money. In 1871 they established a loan business in the store. The next move was to start a money exchange operation, where gold coin from San Francisco was exchanged for paper money in Tucson. By 1879 the exchange enterprise was so profitable that the brothers organized the Pima County Bank, the first banking institution in Tucson. Over the years, through a series of mergers and consolidations, the Pima County Bank eventually became Valley National Bank, controlled and directed by the Jacobs' family until 1935.

Alex Levin (1834-1891) was Tucson's first pioneer in the entertainment business. Levin was born a Jew in Germany and made his way to Tucson in 1869 where he started the Pioneer Brewery. He soon purchased Wheat's Saloon, arranging for music and dancing, and in 1870 took over the Hodges Hotel. Over the next decade Levin turned his brewery grounds into a three-acre park (at the corner of today's Granada and Congress), adding a dance hall, restaurant, an opera house that seated 2,000 people, a shooting gallery, archery range, an icehouse, a bath house, riding stables, and a bowling alley. Levin's Park was very popular and in its heyday, into the 1880s, it was the location of every important and communal event in Tucson – until the much larger Carrillo Gardens opened in 1885 and Levin's Park declined.

In 1884 Alex Levin was a Tucson City Councilman.

Unlike many Jewish men, Levin married a Mexican, from a prominent family in Sonora, and adopted his wife's Catholic faith. Levin family descendants include internationally known singers Luisa Espinel and Linda Ronstadt.

Charles M. Strauss (1840-1892) was Tucson's first Jewish mayor and an early proponent of the University of Arizona. Strauss was born into a Jewish family in New York City, studied finance, and worked in Boston, Tennessee, and Ohio, finding a Jewish wife in Memphis, Tennessee in 1868. The Strauss family came to Tucson in 1880, seeking a beneficial climate. Strauss worked for Albert Steinfeld as business manager of the Zeckendorf general store, improving the store's accounting and stocking procedures. Almost immediately, Strauss found himself on Tucson's school board, joined Tucson's new Volunteer Fire Department in 1882, and was elected Tucson's mayor in 1883, but resigned in 1884 when a political dispute arose. During his abbreviated term, he did much to transform the appearance of Tucson, shepherding the construction of a city hall, a firehouse, an infirmary, a stand-alone library, a

building and loan association, and graded roads. Strauss and his wife became extremely active in Tucson's social activities; their home became a center for culture including literary and music programs. In 1886 Strauss was elected territorial superintendent of public instruction. Perhaps his greatest achievement to Tucson's legacy was his work in 1886 with fellow Jew Jacob Mansfeld to sell bonds to buy land and start construction of the University of Arizona.

Sources: American Jewish Historical Society; *Arizona Daily Star*; *A History of the Jews in New Mexico* (Henry J. Tobias, 1990); Jewish Museum of the American West; Jewish Virtual Library: Tucson; *Jews on the Western Frontier: An Overview* (Harriet and Fred Rochlin, 1985); *Pioneer Jews: A New Life in the Far West* (Harriet and Fred Rochlin, 2000); New Mexico Jewish Historical Society: Crypto-Jews; Southwest Jewish Archives: Arizona Jewish Pioneers; *Tucson Citizen*; Tucson Territorial Pioneer Project (2008); *Zeckendorfs and Steinfelds: Merchant Princes of the American Southwest* (Bettina O'Neil Lyons, 2008); *Tucson – The Life and Times of an American City* (C. L. Sonnichsen, 1987).



*L. Zeckendorf & Co. at Tucson's Main and Pennington Street, ca. 1880. Albert Steinfeld, with hand on hip, is standing in front row (center) below wall lantern.
(Courtesy of Bettina Lyons)*