

## Privilege and Prejudice: Jewish History in the American South OR What I Did On My Summer Vacation

About the Archives

By Cat. Eskin

I suppose I already knew that I was a lucky person. Accidents of birth, family and physical health notwithstanding, I have been blessed with an amazing husband, loving children (who are, of course, above average) and a supportive academic and Jewish community. I have had the honor of founding and building a synagogue archive. Still, I have been sadly under-informed about the context of the Jewish history I am recording. That situation may not be completely rectified, but I am well on my way.

This spring I applied for a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Institute taking place at the College of Charleston (CofC) centered on the ways Jews were both insiders (white) and outsiders (not Christian) in the American South. I was lucky enough to be accepted. The schedule was packed with walking tours, field trips (Kahol Kadosh/Beth Elohim or [KKBE](#), the brand new [Reconstruction National Monument](#) in Beaufort, SC—Michael Allen, at right, talks to the group at the synagogue in Beaufort—and more), lectures (from Jewish history luminaries like Jonathan Sarna and Jenna Weissman Joselit), thought-provoking discussions with the wide array of participants who converged on Charleston from around the country (we had two people from the Dakotas!), and did I mention the food? The generous program was an opportunity for me to read the seminal texts in the field and to consider a wealth of traditional and non-traditional materials. We considered the experience of Jews from the colonial period to the present day through a kaleidoscope of academic, cultural and personal lenses.



I applied to the program in order to bolster my historic knowledge and give me more confidence as I teach the topic. I already had experience teaching courses in creative non-fiction that recorded the voices of the Jews of Lakeland; those courses used the Southern Jewish experience as both a means of creative expression and a service learning opportunity. I tried to situate the oral histories which the students recorded by providing a taste of American Jewish history and (admittedly) surface-level theological information. The courses I taught were always, foremost, advanced-level writing courses. For Fall 2019, I wanted to impact more students and do so sooner in their academic careers. The result is a course called “Writing About Southern Jewish History.” For the first-year, service-learning course, students will create on-line exhibits using ArcGIS software ([StoryMaps](#)) as they conduct primary research into the Lakeland/Polk County Jewish community.

I am not new to the spatial approach. At the National Humanities Center program I attended in 2016, I gained a theoretical grounding in Spatial Humanities (an intellectual movement that places emphasis on place and space in social science and the humanities, linking quantitative studies and other studies of society) that I turned into a literature-related assignment for my students. I attended the month-long seminar hoping to use what I learned for the Temple Emanuel Archive (TEA), but found that I just did not gain the technical know-how necessary to fully explore the ArcGIS tools. As if the directors of the NEH Institute had designed the program for me, I learned that [Dr. Marni Davis](#) (a professor of History at Georgia State University) would be conducting a workshop on using ArcGIS software with students! (See image, at right, of participants looking over a Sanborn Map and City Directories during the workshop.) Her expertise, and the other illuminating forays into the growing electronic accessibility of documents, images and ephemera gave me the tools I needed to create a course that would help my students grow.



I am lucky, too, for the generosity of spirit among the participants of the Institute and its directors (see the picture of me and my apartment-mates, Erica Andrus, left, a religion professor in Vermont and Elizabeth Johnson, right, a history PhD candidate from



Tennessee). Enjoying a delicious dinner on King Street in Charleston could suddenly become an engaging tutorial in how to use your city as a classroom (shout out to [Dale Rosengarten](#), Curator of Special Collections at CofC and Instructor Extraordinaire). Coffee with Jenna Weissman Joselit and [Amy Milligan](#) introduced me to the ways that social media and simple on-line tools could allow my students to make their own discoveries in a safe environment. I continue to marvel at the way my colleagues went out of their way to help me understand complex points of history or theology, challenged directors and participants to reconsider entrenched attitudes and unconscious biases, and generally insisted that my experience be genuine and unique. I am using readings with my students that were provided by the Institute and a few suggested by colleagues. As a veteran teacher, I seldom have the opportunity to hear from others about teaching undergraduates. Student audiences change over time; means of instruction shift. Keeping up with the “latest” in teaching is not the benefit I gained from my NEH experience. Instead, I gained colleagues—young and not-so young—who patiently and expertly shared their know-how and their innovations. I only hope that the class I am planning will do them justice. I believe it will.