

Report on NEH Institute “Privilege and Prejudice: Jewish History in the American South”

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My name is David Weinfeld and I am a visiting assistant professor of religious studies at the Harry Lyons Chair in Judaic Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia. In late spring 2019, I spent two weeks in Charleston, South Carolina as a participant in the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Institute “Privilege and Prejudice: Jewish History in the American South.” My experience has inspired me towards two new research projects and to develop new teaching methods at VCU and new projects in public history for the broader Richmond community.

As part of the Institute, participants were encouraged to search the archival collections of the Pearlstine/Lipov Center for Southern Jewish Culture at the College of Charleston’s Addlestone Library, to find for material to use for future projects. My initial goal was to begin research on a project on Southern Jewish intellectuals. This led me to the papers of Jacob S. Raisin, who had been a rabbi in Port Gibson, Mississippi, before leading Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim (KKBE), the Reform Temple in Charleston from 1915-1944. His brother Max Raisin had also been a rabbi for several years in Meridian, Mississippi before moving to Brooklyn and eventually Patterson, NJ. Jacob Raisin’s papers contained extremely interesting correspondence and a lengthy diary, revealing his thoughts on issues concerning Reform Judaism, race, and many other topics. It would take many days to fully explore the material. I plan to apply for a fellowship from the Pearlstine/Lipov Center in the future to continue research on this project.

The second scholarly project came to after I left Charleston, but was also directly inspired by it. In the first days of the Institute, we listened to brilliant lectures from Jonathan Sarna, distinguished scholar of American Jewish history at Brandeis University. In discussing Charleston as a “port city,” where Jewish merchants played a pivotal role in trans-Atlantic trade, Sarna noted, that in the colonial period, Charleston Jews may have had stronger ties with Jews in Kingston, Jamaica than they did with their co-religionists in New York. This led me to think of the notion of the “the Atlantic Jew” as a distinct identity.

Further research led me to a 2006 article by Arthur Kiron titled “An Atlantic Jewish Republic of Letters?” Kiron posited the existence of an English-language Jewish intellectual network in the 19th century. His research focused on the 1840s, and especially on Jewish journalism in three cities: London, Kingston, and Philadelphia. Inspired by Sarna’s insight and Kiron’s article, I developed an idea for an even larger scholarly project, one that would expand the Atlantic Jewish Republic of Letters temporally and geographically. I would look at source from 1790 to 1860, a go beyond Kiron’s three cities to include New York, Montreal, and crucially, the American South, including Charleston, Richmond, Savannah, and New Orleans. While Kiron did not examine the content of his texts in any depth, I would focus on what Atlantic Jews, both men and women, were saying about slavery and race, religious reform, trade and commerce, national and international politics, and the role of women in Judaism. The goal would be to see to what extent this intellectual network led to the development of a regional but transnational Jewish identity.

Finally, my trip to Charleston inspired me to develop new teaching methods and public history initiatives. I am slated to teach a new course, "The History of the Jews of Richmond," this spring. I will take students to local archives that have material on Richmond Jewish history. I plan to lead the students in an oral history project, interviewing elderly members of local congregations who grew up in Richmond, and can communicate what life was like for them from the 1940s to the 1960s. We can also attempt to build a Richmond Jewish history archive from any material they are willing to donate. Last, I hope to use digital humanities techniques I learned on the NEH Institute to map out Jewish Richmond.

In Charleston, we looked at old city directories, particularly one from 1910, to find the Jewish owned stores. Then we plotted the location of these stores on a map, to show the preponderance of these stores in certain neighborhoods. And then we embarked on walking tours, where we saw remnants of the old Jewish stores, signs long faded, but still evidence of the once thriving Jewish community. This was a new generation of Jews, not ones who came in the colonial or antebellum period, but in the late 19th and early 20th century, largely from eastern Europe, unlike the Sephardic or German Jews that preceded them. This powerful experience led me to realize that one could certainly do something similar for Richmond, whose Jewish history mimics Charleston's in this regard.

Hopefully these projects will extend beyond this spring semester to and future incarnations of this course on the History of the Jews of Richmond. I hope for this and the aforementioned projects to educate and inspire students and community members for years to come.