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Privilege and Prejudice: An NEH Summer in Charleston

By Jan Davidson

In June, 2010 I went to Savannah as a part of an National Endowment for the Humanities funded [Summer Seminar](#) program. These programs are designed for College professors, and give the attendees a chance to delve into a particular subject area in depth. In my first foray into NEH funded professional development, I spent a month at the [Georgia Historical Society](#) with a great bunch of scholars, talking about the Civil War and memory. I can, without hyperbole, say that this seminar changed the way I look at the world around me. I came to see the legacies of slavery all around me in the urbane and urban city of Savannah. I came home and looked at Wilmington, North Carolina with a deepened understanding of how the scars of the Civil War and slavery hide in plain sight.



Mural, Charleston, South Carolina, photograph by author, 2019

In June of 2019, I was fortunate enough to attend a Second NEH summer program. This one was housed at the [College of Charleston](#), and was titled Privilege and Prejudice: Jewish History in the American South. I spent two weeks with 25 scholars, examining the history of the South by exploring the roles of Jewish people in Southern stories.



Summer Institute group photo, College of Charleston

As the summer draws to a close, I thought I'd post a few reflections on the experience.

When I read the Institute's description, I thought that there was a lot of potential to compare Charleston and Wilmington. Like Charleston, the port city of Wilmington has a longstanding Jewish population, dating back to the 18th century. I thought that attending "Privilege and Prejudice: Jewish History in the American South" would help me better understand where Wilmington's Jewish history fits into broader historical context.



Wilmington's Temple of Israel, dedicated in 1876.

So with that in mind, let's look at the life of prominent Jewish merchant Solomon Bear as a way to reflect on what looking at the region's Jewish history might tell us about race and place. Solomon Bear, and his brothers Samuel and Marcus, came to Wilmington from Germany in the early 1850s. The brothers initially went into business together, as dry goods merchants. Like many immigrants to the U.S., the Bear engaged in what we call chain migration - where family members followed one another to a specific place, using the bonds of family to help make a new life in their new homelands. So in this sense, their story fits into a broader narrative of white people coming to the U.S. to try to make good.

Barry Mrs. M. S. r Third bt Chesnut and Mulberry
 Barry John D., r Third bt Chesnut and Mulberry
 Barry Michael, r Front bt Red Cross and Campbell
 Barry Horace M., Commission Merchant and Agent N. Y. and
 Wilmington Line of Steamers, cor N. Water and Chesnut, r
 Fifth bt Princess and Chesnut
 Barry Robert P., with Horace M. Barry, r with same
 Barr William H., Clerk Kidder & Martin's Mill, r same
 Barrickman Charles W., Clerk, John Bishop, bds same
 Bartleson Samuel A., of Hanberry and Bartleson, bds Rock
 Spring Hotel
 Barlow Joseph L., Grocery and Cart House, cor Seventh and
 Market, r Market bt Seventh Eighth
 Bates Benjamin G., Commander Steamer Waccamaw
 Bates Benjamin H., Messenger Southern Express Co
 Bate Mrs. R., r Fifth bt Walnut and Red Cross
 Bauman John G., of Tienken & Bauman, r cor Fifth and Dock
 Bauman John C., bds John G Bauman
 Bauman John, Shoemaker, Princess bt Front and Water, r
 Second bt Mulberry and Walnut
 Beaufort Mrs. Mary, Wid. r Sixth bt Dock and Orange
 Bear Sol & Bros., Dry Goods and Clothing 19 Market
 Bear Sol, of Sol Bear & Bros., r N. Front bt Mulberry and Walnut
 Bear Samuel, of Sol Bear & Bros., bds Sol Bear
 Bear Marcus, of Sol Bear & Bros., bds Sol Bear
 Bear Henry, Clerk, Sol Bear & Bros., bds Sol Bear
 Bear Meyer, Dry Goods and Clothing, 209 N. Water r Dock
 bt Front and Second
 Bear Simon, Dry Goods & Clothing, 219 N. Water, bds Sol Bear
 Beal Cadmus H., Machinist, Hart and Bailey, bds John D. Love
 Beal A., Blacksmith, S. Burt r, Market bt Eighth and Ninth
 Beck Thomas W., W. & M. R. R. r cor Sixth and Red Cross
 Beery Benjamin W., of Cassidey and Beery, r cor Second and
 Nun

1867 City Directory listing Solomon Bear and Samuel, Marcus, Henry and Simon Bear, all of whom live with Solomon.

But Solomon and his brothers did not go to New York, a city that so many people associate with American Jewish culture and history. They came to Wilmington, a Southern port city, during a time of great sectional tensions. One of the questions we talked about a lot at the seminar was how Jews fit into the racial hierarchy in the South, and what sorts of relationships Jewish members of antebellum society had with slavery. Overall, the seminar's answer was that many Jewish Southerners were imbricated in the slave system, benefited from claiming whiteness, and many were slaveholders. When Solomon Bear came to the Wilmington in the 1850s, New Hanover County was a slave society. While Mr. Bear was not an enslaver - according to the slave census of 1860 at least -- he did have financial success in the South. Solomon Bear lived the life of a well-to-do white southerner. He was worth \$18,000 in 1860 and twice that much by 1870. He fought for the Confederacy, survived the war, and thrived.

S. BEAR DEAD

Passed Away at His
Home on Fifth Street
Yesterday Morning

WORTHY CITIZEN

He Had Been Prominent in the Commercial Interests of Wilmington for Half a Century—Came to Wilmington From Germany in 1854—Served in the Confederate Army. Enlisting in April, 1861—Five Brothers Came to this City and he is the last to Pass Away.

Mr. Bear's story provides some evidence of the ways German Jews became acculturated business men, it highlights entrepreneurship, and shows how men like Solomon Bear became a part of the social life of the city of Wilmington. Bear did not, however, shed his original faith. Solomon was one of the founding members of the oldest synagogue in North Carolina, the [Temple of Israel](#). He served as president of the Temple from 1872 until his death in 1904.



The Temple of Israel's cornerstone was laid July 15, 1875, and on May 12, 1876, the temple was dedicated. Mr. Bear was president of the Temple of Israel for decades.

Looking at the city directory again shows that the city placed the Temple into equivalency with white churches (listed as "Hebrew" under the heading churches), even as Jewish organizations like [B'Nai B'Brith](#) was held separate from other organizations. Solomon Bear's life is, potentially, a way to think about how a person's Jewish identity and faith created continuity between their lives in Europe, and their lives in the U.S. in society, and how that faith may have been a potential barrier to acculturation.

JEWISH ORDERS.**Independent Order B'nai B'rith.**

North State Lodge, No 222—William Goodman, president; I L Greenwald, secretary

Order Keshar Shel Barzil.

Manhattan Lodge, No 158—Meets second and fourth Sunday in each month. Sol Bear, president; I L Greenwald, sec-treas

BENEVOLENT AND CHARITABLE ASSOCIATIONS.**Hibernian Benevolent Society.**

Meets the first Thursday in each month, hall 3d bet Princess and Chestnut. President, John W Reilly; Secretary, Frank P Donlan

Associated Charities.

(223 Princess)

President—Rev Robert Strange
Vice-President—Col Roger Moore
Treasurer—J H Boatwright
Secretary—Miss Carrie L Price

CATHERINE KENNEDY HOME.

(Corner 9th and Princess)

Under the auspices of The Ladies Benevolent Society.

President—Mrs Roger Moore
Vice-President—Mrs Phil Pearsall
Secretary—Miss Louise Harlowe
Treasurer—Mrs W R French

Hospitals.

U S Marine, 8th cor Nun—Dr C P Wertenbaker, surgeon in charge

City Hospital, 10th cor Red Cross—Charles P Bolles, physician in charge; Mrs E S Warrock, matron

CHURCHES.**Adventists.**

Second—504 s 6th Rev E E Fiske pastor

Baptist.

Brooklyn, cor 4th and Brunswick—Rev John J Payseur pastor

First, cor 5th and Market—Rev C S Blackwell pastor

Southside, cor 5th and Wooster—Pastor resigned

Catholic.

St Thomas, Dock bet 2d and 3d—Rev Father Dennen pastor

Episcopal.

St James, cor 3d and Market—Rev Robert Strange rector

St John's, cor Red Cross and 3d—Rev J Carmichael D Director

St Paul's, cor 4th and Orange—Rev M A Barber rector

Hebrew.

Temple of Israel (synagogue) cor 4th and Market—Rev Samuel Mendelsohn D D rabbi

Lutheran.

St Matthew's, 4th bet Bladen and Harnett—Rev G D Bernheim D D pastor

That said, I find myself dissatisfied with this as a story of Mr. Bear's life and as a way of understanding how Jewish people fit into the history of the South.

Comparing this story to a different one helps explain why. In 2018, I set to work trying to figure out who the boy in this picture is.



I sent the image of a boy in a tallit to a retired librarian, and asked if she knew anyone named Reitblatt, and she connected me to the Reitblatt family. Mrs. Zee Reitblatt identified the boy as her son, David, who had his bar mitzvah in 1968 at B'Nai Israel. The photo came to us in a collection of images from a local camera store. And as I looked through the photos, I saw more pictures of David in a different envelope. I recognized him in the image of him in a living room in his Boy Scout uniform.



This family's experiences of religion and leisure was literally separated in the evidence, then put together by me looking across the collection and recognizing a child. But how much richer is David's story (and Solomon's story before him) when we acknowledge that people [contain multitudes](#).

Our NEH institute had us reading a lot of history that seemed more a single snapshot than a contingent, varied set of entryways into the past. That reflects the state of the field of Southern Jewish History, more

than the realities of said history. I like to imagine that if this Institute was held again in 20 years time, we'd have a very different reading list, filled with the work of scholars like one of our Institute leaders, [Shari Rabin](#), whose [article on ritual circumcision](#) is a model for how the field could grow. As I am now more grounded in the field's history, and in the history of Jewish people in the South, I look forward to seeing a new scholarship develop. I'm sure that many of the people I was at the institute with will be driving forces in that change.

Posted by Cape Fear Museum at [12:26 PM](#)