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Privilege and Prejudice: Jewish History in the American South
National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute
Institute Final Project – Research Findings and Deliverables

Doing Honor to Yourselves:

Public Commemoration of Francis Salvador and the Defense of Jewish Americanism in a
Changing South

Project Overview:

The NEH Seminar gave me a more thorough grounding in the history of the American South and of the trajectories of the Jewish Southern experience as specific aspects of broader historical dynamics. The information I gained from the seminar informed and framed my research on the memorialization of Francis Salvador as an exercise in understanding the dual dynamics of privilege and prejudice as informing the commemorative actions of South Carolinian Jews. Although initially planned as a more superficial examination into Jewish historical memory in the South Carolina Upcountry, my seminar research project quickly turned into a deeper examination into the life of Jewish-identified patriot Francis Salvador and the ways in which Salvador is or is not commemorated at sites across the state of South Carolina. The project ultimately will allow reflection on the purposes that this “resurrected” historical figure served for the Jewish community and for a broader region at critical historical junctures. In particular, an examination into the life of Francis Salvador highlights the roles of both memory and silence as Jewish communities sought to demonstrate citizenship and belonging in a tumultuous postwar South.

Initial findings:

Francis Salvador is at once a frequently mentioned but notably under-researched figure in early Jewish America. Few academically researched biographies of Salvador have been published, and most of those works are outdated in their methodology and limited in their approach. Salvador’s basic biography is sufficiently compelling to attract public attention, but he is so poorly documented as to allow his figure to serve as a mirror for ensuing generations, reflecting more of their own desired image than any sort of portrait of Salvador himself. The multiple physical representations of Salvador are testament to this phenomenon, as no portrait of Salvador rendered during his life appears to have survived. The malleability of Salvador’s image is particularly evidenced in the efforts by the Jewish communities of South Carolina, both in Charleston and in Greenwood, to lay claim to Salvador as one of their own. In doing so, these communities sought to tie their own experiences in a local milieu to an American primordialism.

The ways in which Salvador was remembered by these communities are as informative as the memories themselves. Asserting Salvador's Revolutionary War service and death served as a means for the Jewish community of Charleston to reinforce a sense of historical belonging and to lay claim to a long and distinct history of integration of Sephardic Jews within the highest levels of South Carolina society. This argument gained significance in the postwar decades of the fifties, sixties and seventies, during a period in which many local Jews sought to differentiate between themselves and their northern counterparts and also to reaffirm their participation in white spaces of privilege. This period saw an overwhelming upswing in memorialization of Salvador as a Revolutionary War hero, culminating in an attempt to re-brand him as the "Southern Paul Revere" and the "Jewish Paul Revere." Interestingly, this same increase in commemorative activities highlighted Salvador's extremely brief military role which culminated in his scalping and death in the Battle of Seneca Town on the South Carolina frontier. The same narratives are striking in neglecting Salvador's role in the South Carolina Provincial Congress, in which he served with distinction and was likely the first Jewish person elected to public office in the future United States. In the Upcountry, Salvador was commemorated as a local hero by the small Jewish community of Greenwood, SC, which was established roughly in the area of a much earlier Jewish history during the colonial period. Salvador provided this community with a sense of belonging during a period in which smaller Jewish communities in the upcountry struggled to maintain community, identity and population. Both communities celebrated Salvador's local ties as part of their public commemorative efforts, despite the fact that there is no evidence that he ever lived in Charleston and there is no specific location in the Greenwood area directly identifiable with Salvador, whose entire American tenure lasted approximately 36 months before his death.

In all cases, public commemoration of Salvador skirted more challenging topics, such as his complicated ties to his own family, his apparent reluctance to associate with fellow Jews in South Carolina, and even the role Salvador played in issuing South Carolina's currency as a means of asserting independence. The downplaying of Salvador's unique legislative position enabled would-be memorialists to avoid discussion of the fact that, at the time, Salvador's inclusion in the provincial council was made all the more exceptional by the fact that contemporary law did not permit Jews to serve in public office. This apparent oversight offers insight into the insecurities of the would-be memorialists; to mention that Jews were forbidden from serving in public office would be to acknowledge that even while in a position of relative privilege, South Carolina Jews only skirted around the edges of full acceptance. Such an admission by those engaged in public commemoration of Salvador would, in fact, undermine the very objective of their efforts – to present Salvador as evidence that Jews had always been loyal supporters of South Carolina and its social values. At the same time, the placement of memorials to Salvador in public spaces associated with privilege – notably amid other Revolutionary and Civil War monuments in Charleston's Washington Park – reinforces the capacity of local Jewish communities to physically situate themselves in spaces coded as white and even elite.

Key applications/deliverables:

1. **Public Exhibition:** Salvador and his public commemoration form a compelling narrative that is complemented by a wide collection of material cultural artifacts. While the exhibit, highlighting both the life and legend of Francis Salvador, is still in its initial planning stages, it is likely to be displayed at both Clemson University, the site of Salvador's death, and at College of Charleston, which holds the bulk of archival sources related to Salvador. This exhibit will provide visitors with an entre into Jewish rural experiences during the late 18th century as well as a sense of the degree to which twentieth century Jewish communities actively worked to reshape public memory to include Jewish claims to a long American heritage and to the spaces and trappings of privilege. It will attract wide circles of interest, including Jewish military historians, connoisseurs of Jewish kitsch, genealogists, and those with interest in local histories.
2. **Publication:** This research and the core of background information gained from participation in the broader NEH seminar will lead to the publication of multiple works. I intend to complete a biographical sketch of Salvador's life, the first academic examination in over a century of an oft-mentioned but little-understood figure. A second article will use Salvador's biography as a jumping-off place to discuss the ways in which Salvador was remembered by American Jews in general and South Carolina Jews in particular. It will discuss many of the themes mentioned in the "Initial Findings" section, as well as reflecting upon interest in Salvador generated in the founding years of the American Jewish Historical Society and the striking lack of mention of Salvador's role in non-Jewish commemorations of Revolution-era South Carolina. The Ninety-Six National Historic Site does not reflect upon Salvador, the largest local landowner, as part of the story of the region in the colonial period. This omission is conspicuously striking given the Greenwood historical marker, situated in close proximity, as well as the size of the 100,000 acre tract of Ninety-Six District that was known locally as Jew's Land [sic] until the twentieth century. Clemson University Press has expressed initial interest in the project as a possible monograph that would consider Salvador's legacy as a little-known facet of local historical interest.
3. **Education:** The Salvador project will serve as the anchor of a more expansive examination of Jewish life in proximity to Clemson, SC. This project will combine the efforts of graduate students within the Clemson History Department as well as an initiative within the University Historian's office to tell a broad narrative about the area that would become Clemson and its environs. Improved education regarding confessional diversity in the upcountry as well as the colonial-era power struggles between the colonists and the Cherokee in the most remote region of South Carolina will generate more nuanced understandings of the history of Clemson and the upcountry.