

# **A TRAVEL GUIDE FOR THE WANDERING JEW**

**United States Third Edition**



By Susan Lieberman

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Cover photo: Beth Hamedrash Hagadol,  
Manhattan, Lower Eastside, NYC, NY

ISBN-978-0-9679808-2-9

### A Short History

The history of Jews in America really begins with the Spanish Inquisition and the voyage of Christopher Columbus. It was Don Isaac Abravanel, a Jew and Luis de Santangel whose grandfather was a Jew who converted to Christianity under pressure of persecution, who funded Columbus' voyage of discovery. A Jew prepared the charts that Columbus relied upon, A Jew compiled his almanacs and astronomical tables. The physician on his flag ship was also Jewish. Some have thought that Columbus was also Jewish, however he was not.

Santangel made substantial contributions toward the hiring of ships that enabled Jews to leave when they were expelled en mass from Spain. Most of these Jews sought refuge in Holland. Eventually some ventured across the Atlantic to the Dutch West Indies and to Brazil which was controlled by the Dutch. When the Portuguese took control of Brazil, once again Jews faced death or expulsion.

Again the Jews fled looking for a place free of persecution. Most headed for the Caribbean, but one unfortunate group was captured by some Spanish pirates, had their belongings stolen and were left stranded on an island. They were rescued by a French captain of a galleon on its way to Montreal. The captain dropped these twenty-three penniless Jews in New Amsterdam. Again they were met with anti-Semitism; this time in the form of the governor, Peter Stuyvesant. He wanted them out but the West India Company which owned the colony said they could stay.

For ten years, Jews struggled to gain rights of full citizenship in the colony. When the British took over in 1664, some of these hard won rights had to be fought for again. The second place of Jewish settlement was in Newport, Rhode Island, whose founder, Roger Williams, championed freedom of conscience and the rights of Jews and Indians. In 1732, ninety poor Sephardic Jews were sent to Georgia by wealthy London Jews. This time it was English Officials that did not want them there. James Oglethorpe, however, refused to send them back. These people had come from a Mediterranean climate and knew what crops to cultivate. Also among this group was a physician who helped save the colony from a Yellow Fever epidemic. These early Jews numbered only about 2500 on the eve of the Revolution (about one tenth of one percent of the population). Jews in successive generations would also know persecution and would look to America for refuge.

Before the Revolution, the Jews that came were Sephardim. Many of these Jews intermarried and assimilated into the larger culture. In the early nineteenth century, Jews from Germany and Central Europe came to America. They too assimilated. They adopted the ways of Reform Judaism, which allowed them to blend into American society. When the large wave of immigration (1880-1920) brought large numbers of Jews from Eastern Europe, tension grew between the successful German Jews and

#### 4

this new group who practiced Orthodoxy and stood out from the rest of society. This animosity grew and was especially strong in the Mid-West. It was not until WWII, that the Jewish community realized that they had to get along and work together despite their differences. The German Jews, especially those in New York, did what ever they could to get the Eastern European Jews to settle in places other than New York. Vast sums of money were spent to accomplish that goal. Farming colonies were set up in many places including Woodbine, NJ and Devils Lake, ND. and they convinced the government to set up Galveston, TX as another immigration port of entry. While these endeavors had only limited success, they did give Jews an influence throughout the country that is greater than their numbers warrant.

It has been more than 350 years since America first became a place of refuge from persecution for Jews. Prejudice is no stranger to these shores, but the government has never sanctioned it. Opportunities have always existed here. Jews entered occupations that were denied them in other countries. Some of the contributions they made to this society are surprising. One thing is certain, for a group of people who have never been more than three percent of the population, their influence is great.

This is a vast country and no matter where you go, you are sure to find a Jew or two, even in the smallest whistle stop. There are places such as Natchez, Mississippi or Muskogee, Oklahoma which once had thriving Jewish communities and beautiful synagogues; the synagogues are still beautiful but there are only a few elderly Jews left to pray in them. To travel to these places put a sadness in one's heart, thinking Jews must be dying out. Then there is Bentonville, Arkansas, located in the heart of the fundamentalist Christian Bible Belt, which has given birth to a new and growing Jewish community and assurance that American Jewry will continue to influence the history of America.

## Pennsylvania

Jewish settlement in Pennsylvania dates back to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. In 1737, Nathan and Isaac Levy, members of a prominent New York family, arrived in Philadelphia. The 1740's established Jewish communal life. Nathan Levy purchased land for burials and religious services were held. Jews were able to play important roles in colonial life because of the liberal influence of the dominant Quakers.

The majority of Jews supported the Revolution. At least nine Jewish merchants signed the Non-Importation Resolutions against British goods in 1765, designed to protest the Stamp Act. Mikveh Israel's first rabbi, Gershom Mendes Seixas was a leading revolutionary patriot. Haym Salomon lent money without interest to members of the Continental Congress to help the war effort. After the war, he worked for Jewish political rights, arguing against the New Testament oath required of all public officials in Pennsylvania. Unfortunately, Salomon died before he could succeed in this task. Jonas Phillips, another Jew, took up the cause and in 1790 succeeded in having the law changed.

Mikveh Israel was Philadelphia's first and only congregation, Jews both Ashkenazim and Sephardim worshiped together. In 1802, however, German Jews broke away to form Rodeph Shalom, thus making Philadelphia the first city in the Western Hemisphere to house both Sephardim and Ashkenazim congregations. By 1830 the Jewish population had grown to 1,000 and at the time of the Civil War there were 8,000 Jews in the city. The great number being from Germany. They found themselves as welcome as their predecessors.

When war broke out, Jews and non-Jews mixed well in the Pennsylvania regiments, they mostly had a common German background. By 1880, the preponderance of German Jews made Philadelphia's Jewish community a fairly homogeneous one of 12,000. Well integrated into community life, German Jews viewed later Jewish arrivals as embarrassingly backward. The 1880's saw great waves of Eastern European come to cities such as Philadelphia; they worked in sweatshops and cigar factories and established their own synagogues. They also prospered.

Pennsylvania has a population of over 600,000 Jews.

### Allentown

For information contact the Jewish Federation, 610-821-5500

**Eruv** Info line: 610-776-8672 and then press "4"

**Mikvah**, 2715 Tilghman St.

Make an appointment 48 hours in advance, 610-776-7948 (voicemail)

### Synagogues

**Temple Beth El (C)** 1702 Hamilton Street, ☎610-435-3521

Daily minyan is at 7:45AM Friday evening services are at 7:30; Shabbat morning services are at 9. Some hospitality may be available.

## Pennsylvania 81

**Congregation Keneseth Israel (R)** 2227 Chew Street, 610-435-9074  
Call for service schedule. [www.kiallentown.org](http://www.kiallentown.org)

**Congregation Sons of Israel (O)** 2715 Tilghman St. 610-433-6089  
Morning minyans are at 6:45 and at 8:30 on Sunday and legal holidays. Evening minyans are 10 minutes before sunset. Shabbat morning services are at 9. Home hospitality is available. [www.sonsofisrael.net](http://www.sonsofisrael.net)

### Hotels

**Crowne Plaza** 904 Hamilton Mall, 610-433-2221

In walking distance to Beth El

The following are in walking distance to Sons of Israel.

**Holiday Inn Express**, 3620 Hamilton Blvd. ☎610-437-9255

**Howard Johnson**, 3220 Hamilton Blvd. 610-439-4000

### Altoona

**Congregation Agudath Achim (C)** 1306 17<sup>th</sup> Street, 814-944-5317

This synagogue is located near the famous Horseshoe Curve of the Pennsylvania Railroad. Daily minyans are at 8 AM and 5:30 PM. except Wednesdays. Shabbat services are Friday at 5:30 p.m., but sometimes at 7:30 p.m. Shabbat morning services are at 9:30. Some home hospitality is available. [www.agudathachim.com](http://www.agudathachim.com)

**Temple Beth Israel (R)** 3004 Union Ave. 814-942-0057

Small congregation, call for information

### Erie

For information contact the Jewish Federation, 814-455-4474

**Temple Anshe Hesed (R)** 930 Liberty Street, 814-454-2426

Founded in 1862, this is among the oldest Reform congregations in Pennsylvania. Shabbat services are Friday at 8 p.m. Shabbat morning services are at 10, September through May. This is a warm and friendly congregation that always welcomes visitors. [www.anshehesed.org](http://www.anshehesed.org)

**Congregation Brith Shalom (C)** 3207 State Street, 814-454-2431

Founded in 1897, this is a warm congregation with communal participatory services that are child friendly. Morning minyans are Sunday at 9 followed by a breakfast and Thursday at 8. Shabbat services are Friday at 7:30 PM (only during school year) and Saturday at 9:15 AM. Some home hospitality may be available.

### Hotel

**Avalon Hotel**, 16 West 10<sup>th</sup> Street, 814-459-2220

In walking distance to Anshe Hesed [www.avalonerie.com](http://www.avalonerie.com)

**Downtown Erie Hotel**, 18 West 18th Street 814-456-2961

In walking distance to Brit Shalom.