

The Jews of Nineteenth Century Charleston: Ethnicity in a Port City¹

Gemma Romain
University of Southampton

Charlestonian Jews have been characterised as the pre-eminent American community of the antebellum period, composed of the most educated, refined and prosperous individuals, who were accepted politically and socially into the fabric of white middle class society. Likewise the Jewish community embraced Charlestonian culture in its entirety, fought in wars, was loyal to the nation, the state and the city and held excellent relations with white Charlestonians.²

How far is this description accurate and to what extent is the particularity of Charleston's economy and society reason for this apparent cultural concurrence? I will argue that the characteristics of the Charleston Jewish community in the antebellum period stem from a mixture of the internal dynamics of the community and from Charleston's location as an eastern seaport linking the Atlantic world to Europe, its symbolic and cultural position as the cosmopolitan capital of southern society, and the fact of its dependence on plantation slavery and on the subjugation of African-Americans.

This paper intends to provide a different reading of the Jews of Charleston – instead of focusing on the achievements of 'great men', I look at how Jews in Charleston negotiated their identities, how non-Jews viewed Jews and how Jewish life in Charleston has been represented or neglected in wider historiographical debates. I will also utilise some specific primary and published materials: mainly wills, diaries and genealogical material. An analysis of aspects of the ethnicity of the community can serve to problematise the model of the Port Jew, recently devised by Lois Dubin and conceptualised by David Sorkin.³

I am particularly interested in questions concerning the ethnicity of antebellum Charleston Jews and their relations with both the white and Black populations. It is my contention that the history of the Charleston Jew has been romanticised and been subject to 'forgetting' due to its problematic place within the conventional narrative of modern Jewish history. I will argue that the ethnicity of Charleston's Jews is multiple and includes a strong diasporic identity formulated through the Jewish mercantile past with a corresponding loyal and sometimes passionate local identity.⁴

Sorkin's definition of the port Jew represented a new way of looking at the beginnings of modern Jewry. Sorkin argued that although the *maskil* [the exponent of the *Haskalah*, or the Jewish Enlightenment] and the 'court Jew' were undoubtedly representations of Jewish modernity, a third way in which the Jews gained rights and acculturated transpired through the lives of the 'port Jew'. Those who were 'merchant Jews' of Sephardi or, to a lesser extent, Italian extraction who settled in the port cities of the Mediterranean, the Atlantic seaboard and the New World.⁵ The ports where Jews settled were cities and towns built upon the importance of commerce and pragmatism and as a result mercantile Jews often gained privileges and rights that Jews elsewhere did not have.⁶

It is my opinion that a port Jewish identity cannot be seen in purely mercantile terms – the port Jewish society was one surrounded by the merchant Jews but also the Jewish community in general, including Jews who worked in related industries and Jews who were associated with mercantile Jews. Additionally, not all Port Jews were wealthy or necessarily religiously lax. The particular dynamics of each individual port needs to be considered. In terms of the example of the Charlestonian Port Jew, the process of acculturation needs to be addressed not only in terms of customs and interaction with the non-Jewish world but also of ethnicity.

There have been a series of marginalities and historical amnesia within the historiography pertinent to Charleston Jewry. The grand narrative of Jewish modernity is an Eurocentric and Ashkenazified narrative of Jews 'entering' the modern world, developing a Jewish Enlightenment or *Haskalah* and eventually achieving emancipation. Modern Sephardi history has been characterised as an anomaly and a romantic but insignificant factor in Jews gaining rights and becoming acculturated. When Sephardi history was described it was done so in nostalgic terms focusing on what were considered important, noble great men. Yet a more inclusive and de-romanticised Sephardi history is essential in any understanding of how Jews came to

modernity.

Historians have separated the American Jewish experience in the form of three stages, using ethnicity as the index of categorisation: firstly the Sephardi era, secondly the German, and lastly the Eastern European. The early era of the Sephardim has been romanticised to a large degree. Sephardi settlers were seen as noble, adventurous, acculturated and respected by their Christian neighbours. Early American Jewish historiography was also notable in another respect – by its claim that when Jews landed on the shores of America they had entered the Promised Land – a land free from anti-Semitism.⁷

Considering Charleston's place in the early American Jewish experience, the historiography of the community has been surprisingly slow to develop.⁸ There are various explanations for this absence. Compared to the large-scale migrations of the late nineteenth century, the Southern Jewish community was seen as comparatively unimportant in the American Jewish narrative. Additionally, Southern Jewry's loyalty to the customs of the South was considered an embarrassment. Moreover, Charleston's community was seen as only important in its heyday of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century – particularly when describing the Sephardi period of American history. Thereafter as the conventions of the three-stage historiography deemed the early nineteenth century the era of the German Jew, no major attention was given to the progression in time of the earlier communities.

In the early part of the twentieth century, the main historical attention on individual antebellum Southern Jewish communities came from local historians, genealogists and commemorative community publications. In a similar vein to early historical works, community publications have stressed the tolerance of America and particularly of the South, the way in which the community excelled financially and socially, and how the community fitted in with all aspects of Southern life, including slavery [a subject I will explore later in the article].⁹

In recent decades there has been a new school of historians assessing the community in different ways.¹⁰ The Southern Jewish Historical Society has done much to promote diverse histories of Southern Jews, as has the recent work of Dale Rosengarten and Harlan Greene of the Jewish Heritage Collection at the College of Charleston.¹¹ An important development in Charlestonian historiography was James William Hagy's 1993 publication documenting the history of the Jewish community in the colonial and antebellum periods. Hagy was the first historian to write a history of the community without turning to the 'great man' brand of history.

Jews in both the Caribbean and Charleston have been under scrutiny recently as a result of the views of some Afrocentrists such as Tony Martin and particularly an anti-Semitic publication by the Nation of Islam arguing that the Jews were responsible for the existence and maintenance of slavery in the Americas and of the slave trade. As a result of this publication there has been a resurgence of interest in the communities in these areas.¹² The polemical and racist nature of publications such as the Nation of Islam's does not mean that the history of Jews in the South and Jewish attitudes towards slavery should as a result be ignored or seen as unimportant in the overall construction of a Southern Jewish identity. Many historians have approached the subject of Black-Jewish relations in pre-civil war society in a somewhat apologetic manner and have not given life to the voices of the slave.¹³ Jonathan Schorsch is right to argue that too much historiography on the subject results in defensive comparisons that remove 'historical agency from the Jews in question and, together with the continual resorting to quantification, shirks the crucial and [to his mind] far more interesting matter of actual relations between Jews and blacks.'¹⁴

Most of the literature on Black-Jewish everyday relations has focused on the interaction between the groups in the North, between Jews who migrated to America at the turn of the nineteenth century and African-Americans who lived in New York and who migrated from the South to the North.¹⁵ Historians looking at the Jews of the South are now beginning to explore relations between Blacks and Jews instead of always solely focusing on white Christian and Jewish relations. Additionally, those looking at Black-Jewish relations now examine how both communities viewed one another rather than purely on how Jews viewed Blacks.¹⁶ The focus on issues of ethnicity and race, as carried out by Schorsch with regard to the colonial Caribbean, serves to reveal the complexities of the port Jew model and suggests that Jews partly 'entered modernity' in the Atlantic world as a result of fitting into or desiring to fit into the emerging notions of whiteness.

I will now analyse general themes within the experiences of the Charleston Jewish community, identifying some of the ways in which Jews in Charleston interacted with others and how they created and shaped their ethnicity. Although the Charleston Jewish community in this period was increasingly diverse, general themes regarding ethnicity can be ascertained. The examples given in this paper highlight that whilst Jews were largely accepted into Charleston society, at times of crisis they were deemed inferior and traditional anti-Semitic stereotypes emerged within the public arena. Nevertheless, Jews in Charleston were active agents and did not have their identity determined or involve themselves in Charleston life solely through fear of persecution.¹⁷

Charleston was a pinnacle of the British colonial and mercantile world and continued to exert economic importance until the 1820s. The port town first came into existence in 1670 as Charles Town and from the start had a 'liberal' constitution based on Lockean principles, where there was freedom of religion to 'dissenters'. Charles Town became a mercantile trading centre attracting a multitude of different nationalities to its shores including French Huguenots, Dutch, English, Scottish, and Sephardi Jews.¹⁸ From the 1730s Charles Town's economy began to grow, exporting goods from the hinterland and the low country, firstly deerskins and later rice and indigo and eventually sea island cotton, the latter which developed in the post-revolutionary era of Charleston.¹⁹ Charleston's economy was established upon the African slave trade and plantation slavery. Charleston maintained a society based on a system of strict racialised and aristocratic principles. The right to vote was given to white, male property owners. The federal census in 1790 showed that Charleston Country had a population of 11,801 whites and 34,846 Blacks. The ratio within the city was 8,831 African-Americans to 8,089 whites.²⁰

There were Jews in Charleston from the beginning of the colony's establishment although the community did not properly emerge until the mid-eighteenth century. Jews settling in Charleston were from a multitude of countries and as they were involved or connected with the mercantile trade a large number of them were from London and the Caribbean, as well as Germany and Poland.²¹ By the late eighteenth century Ashkenazi Jews outnumbered Sephardim. By 1820 Charleston had the biggest Jewish population in the whole of the country – 800, with New York in second place.²² Charleston's Jewish community also became notable for creating the first American reform movement, as well as for its prominent Jewish figures such as the statesman Judah P. Benjamin.

One of the most important aspects of Jewish ethnicity in Charleston was their diasporic identity. They belonged to a larger migratory movement and were part of what can be described as a Port Jewish diaspora. A large proportion of them were Sephardi Jews whose ancestors were conversos who had to flee Spanish and Portuguese expulsions. These Jews settled in various ports around the world as they were given more freedom and often equality in these areas. Whole families would often migrate and would usually maintain links with family members and associates from the areas they had left and other port areas. Jews who came to Charleston retained links with Jews in the Caribbean, Europe, the Southern hinterland and other port cities such as New Orleans, New York and Philadelphia. While settling in the ports, these Jews would often move from one port to another and would have resided in several ports during a lifetime. Although this cultural fluidity was not as great in nineteenth century Charleston, it was still certainly a feature of the port Jewish experience. The Cohen-D'Azevedo family represent one of the many families exhibiting this diasporic network during the nineteenth century. The Haham Moses Cohen-D'Azevedo was born in Holland in 1720 and died in London in 1784. His children and grandchildren lived in among other places, London, Charleston, Philadelphia, St. Kitts, Barbados, Martinique and Surinam.²³

During the antebellum period Jews found employment in all sectors of society. However, Jews were still primarily involved in mercantile trade or in merchant related employment such as storekeeping.²⁴ As Jacob Rader Marcus observed, the new Jewish merchants had much in common with the earlier mercantile Jews, selling at retail and wholesale and occasionally carrying out imports and exports. The main change was that now they focused on domestic trade.²⁵ Jewish women played an important role in the economy, often working as shopkeepers. Many women in this period became sole traders – and thus if they were married their husbands had no right to interfere with their business practices and no right to take any of their profits. Previous to James Hagy's work, most analyses of Charlestonian Jewish women centred on those who extolled 'feminine virtue' such as Penina Moise and subsequently women's roles in the economy have been ignored.²⁶

Charleston's Jewish community was supplemented throughout the nineteenth century with Jews from Germany and later from Eastern Europe. There appears to have been less antipathy between the German and Sephardi Jews than that which occurred between the established Jewish community and Eastern European Jews. The early Ashkenazi settlers 'intermarried' with Sephardim and joined the Sephardi oriented synagogue, Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim.²⁷ Unlike the Sephardi synagogues in the 'mother country' communities of London and Amsterdam, there existed no *ascamot* disqualifying Ashkenazim from joining in with the communal and religious life of the Sephardi Jews.²⁸

Antebellum Jews also maintained trans-national religious networks and these diasporic links were a crucial factor in the shaping of their ethnicity. These networks were formed between Jews living in Charleston and Jews living in other specifically maritime, or port Jewish, societies. Trustees of the Coming Street cemetery, the oldest Jewish cemetery in Charleston, included Jews from Charleston, London, Jamaica, Barbados, New York, Newport and Savannah.²⁹ Most significantly, the community often appealed to London for its ministers. For example, in 1805 the leaders of the London Sephardi synagogue Bevis Marks sent Benjamin, the son of Haham Moses Cohen-D'Azevedo to Charleston to become the new minister of Beth Elohim. However, the congregation were not happy with their new minister and sent him back to London.³⁰

This cosmopolitanism did not conflict with the protocols of Charleston society. Unlike previous historiographical assumptions of the South as a uniform, homogeneous society, Charleston was, at least up to the early nineteenth century, very much influenced by intellectual and cultural trends in other parts of the world and because of her position as a port, different ideas and people were always re-shaping Charleston society. The different ideas however were not often liberal. Charleston was ethnically diverse throughout the colonial and antebellum periods. The ethnic diversity of societies set up in Charleston to help the poor exemplify this. According to George C. Rogers, pre-revolutionary Charles Town was hospitable to all who were 'enterprising'.³¹ This obviously only applied to the white inhabitants of the city. Charleston's Jewish community was not therefore alone in establishing societies designed specifically to aid its own members.

The cosmopolitanism of the port meant that Jews from diverse backgrounds were accepted into society so long as they fitted into the strict racial hierarchy of the city. Cosmopolitanism relied on strict religious principle. Judaism was generally seen in a much favourable light than in many parts of the world, partly through the Charlestonian belief in the centrality of religion to morality, whatever the religion might be. Thus religious Jews were generally accepted more than secular Jews, who were frowned upon. The religious environment of Charleston contributed in part to a port Jewish identity that was far from being religiously lax. The synagogue served to integrate Jews into the community and achieve social respectability.

Although most Jews did not generally socialise with non-Jews, there appears to have been mutual respect and co-operation between Jews and white non-Jews. For example, in 1847 the Hebrew Benevolent Society held a benefit ball to raise funds. The Saint Andrews Society donated its hall for use and many non-Jews attended the ball.³²

It has been presumed that as Jews were involved in trade and storekeeping, the planter elites wholeheartedly accepted them; they performed the function of the middle-man and carried out the activities the planters thought were below them.³³ Apart from the problems of the middle-man theory, it is also circumspect to conclude that cordial relations existed as a result of Jews carrying out trade and financial occupations.³⁴ As Gregory Allen Grebb has argued, 'planter antagonism had an ethnic component', that when talking about merchants 'the label "Jew" came to be used with almost the same meaning and opprobrium as that of "Yankee."' Grebb found little evidence of anti-Semitism among planters, but argued that they almost certainly looked down upon those engaged in trade.³⁵

Anti-Semitic views expressed about Jews in the economy mainly occur from visitors to Charleston. For example, in their diary one New England visitor commented when visiting King Street:

"I've not a nod & a smile for every blackguard that comes in with a four pence in his hand. I would think my own Father an accomplish'd knave if he had been any time, & made money in the dry goods line in King St. They are all jews or worse than jews. Yankees for a Yankee can jew a jew directly."³⁶

This use of the word 'jew' as a verb denoting shady practice became common currency in the antebellum period.

John C. Calhoun [who was a Senator from South Carolina and also a Vice President of the United States] expressed similar opinions, claiming that the Jews were 'notoriously a race of brokers, bankers, and merchants.'³⁷ However, in general the term merchant signified prestige and power. Many Jewish shopkeepers would call themselves merchants because it enabled them to get onto a higher rung on the social ladder. Wealthy shipping merchants achieved considerable power within Charleston society and this included Jewish merchants and businessmen. An examination of Jewish marriage notices appearing in the Charleston newspapers reveals that with one exception the groom's occupation is only mentioned when he was a merchant.³⁸

The Jewish economist and newspaper editor, Jacob N. Cardozo recollected on good relations between planters and merchants. In his reminiscences of Charleston, published in 1866 he argued 'there was a geniality in this intercourse that rendered it highly attractive. The mercantile and planting classes were on the best terms. The Sea Island and Rice planter were often found at the table of the merchant, and this hospitality was reciprocated.'³⁹ As with all memories there is probably an element of romanticism at play in this recollection. However, the great merchants gained status and entered Charleston's elite society. Although it certainly was the case that merchants were in the main not part of the highest echelons of Charleston society, perhaps we should be far more analytical in our assumptions that trade was always neglected or frowned upon in the antebellum period.

Apart from the economic sphere, how can we define the level of interaction between the communities? The remaining part of this article focuses on some of the ways in which Jews and non-Jews interacted with each other and how this interaction affected the way in which they constructed their identity. Ethnicity is not just reactive. In other words it is not solely to do with being either accepted or rejected by the dominant society. It is, as Werner Sollors argues, about consent and descent.⁴⁰ The ethnic group themselves are active agents in the construction of their identity, including their racialised identity.

It is fair to say that most Jews in antebellum Charleston saw themselves as white and that likewise they were treated in the main as equal white citizens, at least in the public sphere. Their ethnicity was composed of various nationalities but was, in a similar vein to the Jews of Savannah, generally solidified through a middle class identity.⁴¹ The 'higher' echelons of Charleston society were characterised by family lineage and genealogy. Wealth was not the indicator of social standing, instead how long a person's family had lived in Charleston and whether they had prominent individuals in their lineage was the mainstay.⁴² Jews who had 'noble' ancestors would join societies such as the *Daughters of the American Revolution* and as Sephardim were [or at least were recognised as] the earliest settlers some Ashkenazi Jews changed their names to Sephardi names, usually those names of prominent families.⁴³ This last point is particularly interesting, as many theorists have believed it was generally Ashkenazi Jews who were considered white but here we have a case of the Ashkenazim trying to be Sephardim in order to be more accepted within a society with its social structure based upon longevity.

How can one define whiteness as a concept specifically useful when speaking of an antebellum society? Can one adopt the theories of post-colonial and ethnicity scholars to talk of hybridity and fluidity in a society where the racial categories employed were designed specifically not to foster the blurring of boundaries? The concept of whiteness is still being debated by theorists and has only been analysed recently by those concerned with ethnicity, primarily by Richard Dyer. Dyer states 'as long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people.'⁴⁴ The literature concerning Jews and ethnicity has mainly examined the way in which Jews were constructed as Black in the nineteenth century and how they 'became' white in the mid-twentieth century. In terms of American historiography, less attempts have been made to examine how and if Jews became white in the early and antebellum periods. It is my view that 'whiteness' has multiple meanings, concerns power relations and has often been defined as Anglo-Saxon.

Although Jews in Charleston were accepted as equal, their racial identity was not fixed in the public imagination. They were designated as white in the political arena, but general attitudes were more ambivalent on how white the Jews really were. As Rogoff argues 'Jews were accepted as white, but their precise racial place was not fixed.'⁴⁵ However, in the antebellum period any views about Jews and their 'indeterminate' racial place did not negatively impinge on the Jews' lives in any overt way.⁴⁶ In terms of racial identity, theories of natural law were growing in prominence. In the nineteenth century racial theorists discussed Jews because they were seen as a pure and undiluted race, which could act as a test case to see how and why physical features changed or remained over time and place. For example, in 1850 the racial theorist Josiah Nott gave a lecture in Charleston in which he referred to the Jews and how their physical features always remained the same even if their skin colour was variable.⁴⁷ Race theories were not popular with everyone at that time, but they certainly had currency in a region whose fabric of society relied on the belief in the difference of races.⁴⁸

Although it is difficult to assess how everyday non-Jewish Charlestonians viewed Jews, in terms of the private sphere people sometimes referred to Jews in their diaries. Most of these diaries were written during the Civil War where there had been an increase in anti-Semitism particularly in the North but also in the South, where Jews were stereotyped as exploiting the bad economic situation. The Charlestonian Emma Holmes mentions Jews solely in a hostile and anti-Semitic manner. Her diary is conspicuous by its apparent honesty. Throughout the diary she makes unpleasant remarks about a whole range of acquaintances. During the war she made reference to her dislike of Jews and alluded to her view of underhand Jewish economic activities. She mentioned Jews two more times in her diary. Both thoughts concerned her views on miscegenation and she obviously distinguished Jews from Blacks in her use of the term. On July 9, 1864 she recorded 'Having for fellow passengers in the omnibus, two Jewish youths & their two Negro female servants, one a respectable old "mauma" but the other girl with whom they seemed on the most familiar & intimate terms, I thought *miscegenation* had already commenced. Disgusting.' And again on August 15, 1865 she recorded 'two of the Brownfields' former negroes have married Yankees. One a light colored mustee had property left her by some white man whose mistress she had been. She says she passed herself off for a Spaniard, & Mercier Green violated the sanctity of Grace Church by performing the ceremony. The other, a man, went north & married a Jewess. The idea is too revolting.'⁴⁹

Other white Charlestonians acknowledged what they viewed as Jews' racial difference but viewed their racial characteristics on a par with their own. In her war time diary Mary Chesnut made frequent reference to her Jewish friends, whom she termed beautiful Jewesses, and singled out their Jewishness as something to praise. She wrote 'the beautiful Jewess, Rachel Lyons, was here to-day. She flattered Paul Hayne audaciously, and he threw back the ball.'⁵⁰ She saw Jewishness as a distinct racial identity and within her diary also wrote of the beauty of the 'typical' Anglo-Saxon. She stated, 'To-day I saw the Rowena to this Rebecca, when Mrs. Edward Barnwell called. She is the purest type of Anglo-Saxon - exquisitely beautiful, cold, quiet, calm, lady-like, fair as a lily, with the blackest and longest eyelashes, and her eyes so light in color some one said "they were the hue of cologne and water."⁵¹

Intermarriage between Jews and non-Jewish whites did occur in Charleston and in the early years this seems to have happened often, in comparison to later in the period. Robert Rosen has documented an interesting occurrence of a relationship between a Jew and a non-Jew within 'high society.' The poet Henry Timrod became fixated upon Rachel Lyons, someone who he claimed was 'rapidly conquering [his] old prejudices against the Hebrew.' Although he was apparently concerned about having a close relationship with a Jewish woman he still wrote a poem about her and had it published in the *Charleston Daily Courier* and in other Southern newspapers.⁵² Timrod's poem indicates that Jews were seen as exotic and alien – he sees her as having the lids of Eastern eyes and being the noblest woman of her race.

Jews were largely accepted into Charleston society and were accepting of the cultural norms they found within Charleston including slavery. Jews played no major role in the transportation of slaves but they owned slaves on an almost par with non-Jews. In 1830, 87% of the white households and 83% of Jewish households had slaves.⁵³

Although problematised by David Brion Davis, some scholars have found it surprising that some Jews could forget their historical experience of slavery in Egypt to either support or not oppose slavery.⁵⁴ Others have argued that one should not expect Jews to act any differently from any other group in society – certainly it would be naïve to expect that one minority will necessarily identify with another [although this has occurred in many cases between Blacks and Jews].

Some Jews in Charleston mentioned slaves in their wills and thus these documents are an important source in assessing the way in which Jews accepted slavery. Hagy has calculated that 'at least 58 slaves belonging to Jews changed hands between 1761 and 1823', either 'as gifts, as bequests in wills, or when estates were settled.'⁵⁵ Slaves were talked about as property and were mentioned in the same context as talking about household belongings. For example, in Israel Joseph's 1798 will he gave his wife, Mariam Joseph, money, jewellery, household objects and also the use and benefit 'of my Negro Wench Molly, her Child and future Issue for and during the term of her natural life.'⁵⁶

Some well-known Jews, such as Jacob Cardozo, publicly defended slavery. In his *Reminiscences* he expressed the belief that, 'there was a species of patriarchal relation in the mode of life when surrounded by his household slaves, in that reciprocity of protection and obedience that exists between master and servant, when the child of the former becomes the playmate and companion of the latter, mingling their pastimes, and when sickness and old age required that attention which are due to imbecility and infirmity.'⁵⁷ Many white antebellum Southerners characterised slavery in this paternalistic and romanticised way.

It is hard to reach any conclusion on the other interactions between Blacks and Jews in the antebellum period. As many Jews were shopkeepers, day-to-day interaction occurred between Blacks and Jews when slaves purchased goods from Jewish owned stores. When Jews occasionally sold their goods to Blacks on Sundays there was anti-Semitism directed at the community. Jews were reminded that they were in a 'Christian land' and should respect the Lord's Day.

In terms of religion there was little interaction. In Beth Elohim's 1820 constitution, proselytes who were 'people of color' were barred from becoming members. There is evidence of one Black person who was allowed to attend the synagogue and was well respected by members of Beth Elohim, Billy Simmons. Simmons was a Black Jew who was well known in Charleston and is the only Black Jew documented in the antebellum South.⁵⁸

One antebellum Jew, David Brandon wrote about his friendship with a Black person. Brandon's 1831 will stated 'I recommend my faithful Servant and friend Juellit or Julien free negro, to my Dear Rachel and W. C. Lambert my friend & request them to take him under their protection to treat him as well as they would do me and to give him Such portion of my Cloths as they will think necessary useful to him and never to forsake him being the best friend I ever had.'⁵⁹ Bertram Korn uses wills of this nature as evidence that some Southern Jews were sensitive to Black people and did not necessarily view them as cattle or merchandise.⁶⁰

Another main interaction on a personal level occurred between Jewish men and Black women. Similar to the Caribbean, Southerners often had Black 'concubines'. This practice was common and common knowledge but was not talked of in 'polite' company. Often slaves were raped and abused by men. It was in the latter part of the nineteenth century when slavery as an institution was being challenged that 'racial mixing' was fiercely contested. Sometimes Blacks and whites would cohabit in the form of a marriage.

It is difficult to explore this subject in any thorough way due to the often hidden nature of inter-racial relationships in the antebellum South. There is evidence of Black and Jewish relationships in antebellum Charleston. Often wills give clues as to these relations. However, these wills never explicitly declare relationships of this kind. For example, in his will Samuel Jones gave much of his personal belongings to 'his Negro woman' Jenny and her son Emanuel. The first person he referred to in his will was Jenny, he left her the majority of his property and referred to Jenny and Emanuel more than any other people in his will. It is

likely that Samuel Jones and Jenny were involved in a relationship and that Emanuel was Samuel's son.⁶¹ His will states:

'If I should not emancipate My Negro Woman Jenny, and her Son Emanuel during My life time, it is my desire that my Executors Do, emancipate My Negro Woman Jenny, and her Son Emanuel, and give to Jenny My Bed Sheets, Bedstead, Blankets, Tables, Pots, Plates, Chairs, Looking Glass, allowing to Nanny, such part of them as she may stand in need of and also to Benjamin. Ä To My Negro Woman Jenny two hundred Dollars To My Mullatto Woman Nanny One hundred and fifty Dollars. Ä My Lot up King Street, which is let on Leases, I leave to Nanny and Jenny, during their lives, the income of the same, after the Taxes are Paid, to Jenny I leave of the income of the Leases One hundred Dollars Pr. Year to be paid to her Quarterly To my Mulatto Woman Nanny Ben, Nathan, David, and Emanuel I leave three hundred Dollars, to be equally divided amongst them, and to be Paid Quarterly If in case of the Death of Either Jenny or Nanny their respective incomes to be divided equally amongst their Children Ä And it is my further desire not to drive Jenny and her Children out of my House in King Street, untill they have time to Procure a Place for their abode. Ä'⁶²

Another interesting case of Black-Jewish interaction in the antebellum period concerns the Cardozo family. As previously mentioned, either Jacob Nunez Cardozo or Isaac Cardozo Ä although probably the latter Ä and Lydia Williams, a mixed African and Native American woman, had a relationship and had three sons Ä Henry, Francis Lewis [the famous Black Reconstruction leader], and Thomas. As with most interracial relationships in this period, the actual record of their relationship and the history and personal details of Lydia Williams are obscured. Earl Lewis has argued that Isaac was involved in the lives of his partner and sons until his death in 1855.⁶³

To conclude, within this article I have attempted to demonstrate some of the ways in which Jews in Charleston shaped their ethnic identity. Jewish identity in Charleston was very much constructed as a result of the Port Jewish diaspora Ä religious, family and economic ties between Charleston Jews and communities in places such as London, Germany, and the Caribbean were still strong in the antebellum period. In conjunction with this diasporic identity, Charlestonian Jews also held a strong local identity. They principally identified with the emerging notions of whiteness and adopted as part of their identity the norms of antebellum Charleston Ä respect for ancestry and genealogy, Southern loyalty, and an acceptance of slavery. Similarly, Jews were for the most part accepted into white society. However, despite its religious cosmopolitanism Charlestonian society was certainly not immune from anti-Semitism and Jews were, at least in the private sphere, often singled out as racially different.

Notes

¹ This paper arises from a wider project I am undertaking at the AHRB Parkes Centre for the Study of Jewish/non-Jewish Relations, University of Southampton, UK in which I am exploring the extent to which the identity of the Jew in Charleston was shaped by their mercantile background or the general mercantile milieu of the port city and the comparability of Jews in the Caribbean, London and Charleston. I am carrying out this research as part of an AHRB Parkes Centre project called *Port Jews: Jews and non-Jews in cosmopolitan maritime trading centres, 1650-1914*, directed by Professor David Cesarani. I would like to thank the British Academy for providing me with funding in order to carry out research for this project and also the American Jewish Archives for providing a visiting Fellowship for a subsequent visit to the archives. I also wish to thank the staff at the American Jewish Archives and the Jewish Heritage Collection at the College of Charleston for the help given to me during my research visits to both archives. Additionally I am grateful to David Cesarani, Julie Gammon, Tony Kushner, Elisa Miles and Gavin Schaffer for their useful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² For example, the historian of Charleston Jewry, James Hagy maintains 'they adopted the way of life of other white southerners. Some grew rich and powerful. All deeply appreciated the economic, social, and political opportunities offered to them. Again and again, they referred to their home as "the Happy Land"; it was their New Jerusalem, New Palestine Ä the Promised Land.' James William Hagy, *This Happy Land: The Jews of Colonial and Antebellum Charleston* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993).

³ See Lois Dubin, *The Port Jews of Habsburg Trieste: Absolutist Politics and Enlightenment Culture* (Stanford University Press, 1999) and David Sorkin, 'The Port Jew: Notes Towards a Social Type', *Journal of Jewish Studies*, Volume 1, Number 1, Spring 1999, pp. 87-97. A collection of articles arising from an AHRB Parkes Centre 2001 symposium on 'Port Jews' has recently been published. See David Cesarani (ed), *Port Jews: Jewish Communities in Cosmopolitan Maritime Trading Centres, 1550-1950* (London and Portland, Or.: Frank Cass, 2002). The conference proceedings of the 2003 AHRB Parkes Centre and Kaplan Centre, University of Cape Town conference on the subject of 'Port Jews' will be published shortly.

⁴ Question I explore in the project are: How far is the Charleston Jewish identity constructed upon their experiences of living in a port and of their early history and community structures being based upon Sephardim? Did Charleston's Jews receive toleration from the Christian majority and how far can their identity be explained as a result of the particular milieu of the port, especially the Southern port? How far did Jews participate in the life of Charleston society and was the way in which they participated or the way in which they reacted to certain events due to the particularities of Charleston as a port?

⁵ Sorkin, 'The Port Jew: Notes Towards a Social Type', p. 88.

⁶ Sorkin defines the port Jew in five points: the importance of migration and commerce; the valuation of commerce Ä that Jews were given rights due to their commercial utility; their different legal status Ä unlike other Jews the port Jew was not part of an autonomous community, therefore their path to equality was not challenged by their different political status; their different experience of Judaism Ä

coming from former converso heritage they had to rediscover Judaism and did not have to develop a Haskalah as they were already integrated within the non-Jewish world; and lastly also springing from their converso background, they could be neglectful of Jewish law but still maintain their Jewish identity. *Ibid.*

⁷ The great American Jewish historian Jacob Rader Marcus was one of the few to document anti-Semitism in America and previous to Leonard Dinnerstein's 1994 *Anti-Semitism in America* there existed no book length survey on the subject. Increasingly historians are coming to deconstruct the myth of America as the Promised Land and focus on instances of anti-Semitism in America, including the colonial and antebellum periods. See, Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁸ Before 1993 there was only one full book length study of the community by Charles Reznikoff and Uriah Z. Engelman in 1950 and one analysis of the Jewish community in South Carolina by Barnett Elzas in 1905. See, Charles Reznikoff, with the collaboration of Uriah Z. Engelman, *The Jews of Charleston: A History of an American Jewish Community* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1950) and Barnett Abraham Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina, From the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (Philadelphia: PA, J.B. Lippincott, 1905). Elzas also produced several booklets and articles on notable Charlestonian Jews such as the British born indigo merchant Moses Lindo and he also carried out detailed surveys on cemetery gravestone engravings, marriage and death notices. See Barnett Abraham Elzas, *Moses Lindo: A Sketch of the Most Prominent Jew in Charleston in Provincial Days* (Charleston, S.C.: Daggett Printing Co., 1903), Barnett Abraham Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina: a Review of the article "Charleston" in col. 3, of the Jewish Encyclopaedia* (Charleston, SC: The Daggett Printing Co., 1903), Barnett Abraham Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina: a Survey of the Records at Present existing in Charleston* (Charleston, SC: The Daggett Printing Co., 1903), Barnett Abraham Elzas, *The New Jewish Cemetery of K.K. Beth Elohim at Charleston, SC* (Charleston, SC: Elzas, 1910), and Barnett Abraham Elzas, *Jewish Marriage Notices from the newspaper press of Charleston, S.C., 1775-1906* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1917). Elzas' work exemplifies the drive of earlier Southern Jewish historiography towards romanticism and Southern loyalty. He viewed South Carolinian history as from the beginning 'one long tale of glorious achievement.' Elzas, *The Jews of South Carolina: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, p. 166.

⁹ For example, the publication celebrating *One Hundred Years À Accomplishments of Southern Jewry* argued 'the Jewish race is like a strange, drab plant that can live interminably in rocky, barren ground, resisting all of nature's destructive forces, but given friendly conditions, a tolerant atmosphere and a slight degree of rooted security, it will put forth dazzling blossoms and magnificent fruits. Such was the case of these early South Carolina Jews, transplanted from all corners of a hostile world to the compassionate soil of America.' *One hundred Years: Accomplishments of Southern Jewry* (Atlanta, Ga.: Southern Newspaper Enterprises, c1934), p. 13.

¹⁰ See Leonard Dinnerstein and Mary Dale Palsson (eds.), *Jews in the South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), Nathan N. Kaganoff and Melvin I. Urofsky, *Turn to the South: Essays on Southern Jewry* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1979) and Samuel Proctor and Louis Schmier (eds.), *Jews of the South: Selected Essays from the Southern Jewish Historical Society* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984).

¹¹ There has recently been a travelling exhibition on the Jews of South Carolina called, 'A Portion of the People: Three Hundred Years of Southern Jewish Life' and also an accompanying publication. See, Dale Rosengarten and Theodore Rosengarten (eds.), with a preface by Eli N. Evans, *A Portion of the People: Three Hundred Years of Southern Jewish Life* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press in association with McKissick Museum, 2002).

¹² Publications refuting the Nation of Islam pronouncements include: Eli Faber, *Jews, Slaves, and the Slave Trade: Setting the Record Straight* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1998) and Saul S. Friedman, *Jews and the American Slave Trade* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998).

¹³ Jonathan Schorsch's examination of Robert Cohen's work on the Jews of the early Caribbean could most certainly be applied to much of the earlier historiography on the subject of Jews in the South. Cohen's work is described as containing 'a subtext that wants things both ways: Jews had no choice but to adapt to the "environment," hence owned and used slaves, but even so, never to the extent of the main body of cruel (non-Jewish) slaveowners.' Jonathan Schorsch, 'American Jewish Historians, Colonial Jews and Blacks, and the Limits of Wissenschaft: A Critical Review', pp. 102-132, *Jewish Social Studies* Volume 6, Number 2, 2000, p. 116. In my view Jonathan Schorsch's work is exceptional and most certainly the best literature on this subject.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹⁵ For example, Emily Miller Buddick, *Blacks and Jews in Literary Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), Murray Friedman, *What Went Wrong? The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance* (New York: Free Press, 1994), Seth Forman, *Blacks in the Jewish Mind: A Crisis of Liberalism* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), and Joseph R. Washington, Jr (ed.), *Jews in Black Perspectives: A Dialogue* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1984).

¹⁶ There have also been some studies focusing on Black-Jewish relations in the reconstruction era, including the as yet unpublished thesis by Mordechai Lior, comparing the Jewish economist Jacob Nunez Cardozo and the prominent Black reconstructionist Francis Lewis Cardozo, who was the son of either Jacob or Isaac Cardozo, both pro-slavery Charlestonians. Mordechai Lior, 'Jacob Nunez Cardozo and Francis Lewis Cardozo À Jews and Blacks in 19th Century South Carolina', Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Haifa, 1992. Also, see Louis Schmier, "'For Him the 'Schwartzers' Couldn't Do Enough": A Jewish Peddler and His Black Customers Look at Each Other', *American Jewish History*, September 1983, Volume LXXIII, No. 1, pp. 39-55 and Earl Lewis, 'The Need to Remember: Three Phases in Black and Jewish Educational Relations', in Jack Salzman and Cornel West (ed.), *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁷ My understanding of ethnicity is influenced by post-colonial and cultural theorists such as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, who stress the fluidity and hybridity of identity. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London, Verso, 1993) and Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities' in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds.), *Stuart Hall, Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁸ Robert Rosen, *A Short History of Charleston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1982/92/97).

¹⁹ George C. Rogers, Jr., *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969).

²⁰ Walter J. Fraser, Jr., *Charleston! Charleston! The History of a Southern City* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1989), p. 178.

- ²¹ According to the thorough research carried out by Hagy, of 3,083 Jews believed to have lived in Charleston before the Civil War, the place of birth for 1,517 has been recorded. Most Jews À 869 À were born in South Carolina. 548 were listed as being born in Charleston. Jews from across the Atlantic came predominantly from Germany and England, although 17% were from Poland À thus from the start they were not all Sephardi Jews even if they were Port Jews. Hagy, *This Happy Land*, pp. 11-12.
- ²² *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
- ²³ Malcolm H. Stern, *First American Jewish families: 600 Genealogies: 1654 À 1988* (Baltimore, Md.: Ottenheimer, 1991), p. 51.
- ²⁴ Of the Jews listed in the 1790 City directory [which would not include the poor] 50% were shopkeepers, 8% vendue masters, 8% brokers and 6% merchants. Hagy reports that these proportions remained the same until the 1820s. Hagy, *This Happy Land*, pp. 190-1.
- ²⁵ Jacob Rader Marcus, *United States Jewry, 1776-1985*, Volume I (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), pp. 147-148.
- ²⁶ James W. Hagy, Not Subject to his control: Jewish Women as Free Traders in South Carolina, 1766-1827 À American Jewish Archives, Histories file. Studies of Jewish women during this period of American history are rapidly increasing within American Jewish historiography. For example, see Pamela S. Nadell and Jonathan D. Sarna (eds.), *Women and American Judaism: Historical Perspectives* (Hanover and London: Brandeis University Press/ University Press of New England, 2001).
- ²⁷ There is evidence that the early community had two synagogues À one German and one Portuguese. Elzas was aware that two groups might have existed but thought it 'improbable' because he knew of no discord between Portuguese and German Jews before 1800. See Solomon Breibart, Two Jewish Congregations in Charleston, S.C. before 1791: A New Conclusion, *American Jewish History*, Volume LXIX, Number 3, March 1980, pp. 360-363.
- ²⁸ Alan D. Corrp, 'The Sephardim of the United States of America', pp. 389-430 in Richard Barnet and Waller Schwab, *The Western Sephardim: The Sephardi Heritage*, Volume II (Northants: Gibraltar Books, Ltd, 1989), pp. 394-395.
- ²⁹ Elzas, *Old Jewish Cemeteries*, p. 3.
- ³⁰ Corrp, 'The Sephardim of the United States of America', p. 401.
- ³¹ For example, societies established in the colonial period include *The St. Andrew's Society*¹⁷²⁹, *the St. George's society*¹⁷³³, *The German Friendly Society*¹⁷⁶⁶, *the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick*¹⁷⁴⁴, and *the Hebrew Orphan Society*¹⁷⁹¹. Rogers, *Charleston in the Age of the Pinckneys*, p. 5.
- ³² Hagy, *This Happy Land*, p. 44.
- ³³ Barbara Mann has argued 'a unique situation had evolved in Charleston. The planters, being neither inclined towards nor talented in any commercial or financial calling, had allowed the functions of the economic sector to devolve upon its middle stratum of Jews. This was particularly true as it touched on international (or intra-national) contact with the abhorred capitalists.' Barbara Mann, 'Jews in a Place called Charles Town', Senior Thesis of Barbara Mann, University of Toledo, 1982, American Jewish Archives, pp. 50-51.
- ³⁴ For an analysis of the middle-man theory and its problems, see Walter Zenner, 'Middlemen Minorities', pp. 179-186 in John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds.), *Ethnicity* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996).
- ³⁵ Gregory Allen Greb, *Charleston, South Carolina, Merchants, 1815-1860: Urban Leadership in the Antebellum South*, PhD Dissertation, University of California, San Diego, UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1978, p. 8.
- ³⁶ W. Thacher Diary, July 14, 1816 À December 31, 1818, entry of October 25, 1818. As cited in *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ Leonard Rogoff, 'Is the Jew White? The Racial Place of the Southern Jew,' pp. 195-230, *American Jewish History*, Volume 85, Number 3, 1997, p. 201.
- ³⁸ Elzas, *Jewish Marriage Notices from the newspaper press of Charleston, S.C., 1775-1906*.
- ³⁹ J.N. Cardozo, *Reminiscences of Charleston* (Charleston: Joseph Walker, 1866), p. 9.
- ⁴⁰ See Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) and Mark I. Greenberg, 'Creating Ethnic, Class, and Southern Identity in Nineteenth Century America: The Jews of Savannah, Georgia, 1830-1880', PhD Thesis, University of Florida, 1997.
- ⁴¹ Greenberg, 'Creating Ethnic, Class, and Southern Identity.'
- ⁴² Don Doyle, *Leadership and Decline in Postwar Charleston, 1865-1910*, pp. 96-7.
- ⁴³ Conversation with Dale Rosengarten, September 2002.
- ⁴⁴ Richard Dyer, *White* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 1.
- ⁴⁵ Rogoff, 'Is the Jew White?', p. 195.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.201.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 200.
- ⁴⁸ For an analysis of the way in which Jews were posited as racially Black during the nineteenth century, see Sander Gilman, *The Jew's Body* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991).
- ⁴⁹ John F. Marszalek (edited, with an introduction and notes), *The Diary of Miss Emma Holmes, 1861-1866* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), pp. 359-360 and p. 466.
- ⁵⁰ Isabella D. Martin and Myrta Lockett Avery (eds.), *A Diary from Dixie/ as written by Mary Boykin Chesnut, Wife of James Chesnut, Jr., United States Senator from South Carolina, 1859-1861, and Afterward an Aide to Jefferson Davis and a Brigadier-General in the Confederate Army* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905) p. 208. This work is an electronic version of the diary and is the property of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

[51](#) *Ibid.*

[52](#) Robert N. Rosen, *The Jewish Confederates* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 237-8.

[53](#) Hagy, *This Happy Land*, p. 92.

[54](#) For example, Stephen J. Whitfield wondered 'whether they skipped the passages in the Passover *Haggadah* which extol freedom after the torment of Egyptian bondage.' Stephen J. Whitfield, 'Commercial Passions: The Southern Jew as Businessman', pp. 342-357, *American Jewish History*, Volume 71, Number 3, March 1982, p. 352.

[55](#) Hagy, *This Happy Land*, pp. 98-99.

[56](#) Will of Israel Joseph, American Jewish Archives, Wills file.

[57](#) Cardozo, *Reminiscences*, p. 8.

[58](#) Ralph Melnick, 'Billy Simons: The Black Jew of Charleston', *American Jewish Archives*, April 1980, Volume XXXII, No. 1, pp. 3-8.

[59](#) Will of D. Brandon, American Jewish Archives, Wills file.

[60](#) Bertram W. Korn, 'Jews and Negro Slavery in the Old South, 1789-1865' in Abraham J. Karp (ed.), *The Jewish Experience in America: Selected Studies from the Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* (Waltham, Mass.: American Jewish Historical Society, 1969), p. 187.

[61](#) James Hagy also believes that Samuel Jones and Jenny may have been in a relationship. See, Hagy, *This Happy Land*, p. 100.

[62](#) Will of Samuel Jones À American Jewish Archives, Wills file.

[63](#) Lewis, 'The Need to Remember', pp. 236-237. I wish to pursue this subject further in my work and focus particularly on how Black people [slaves and 'free persons of color'] themselves recollected on their interactions with Jews.

Copyright Statement

Copyright: © 2003 by the American Historical Association. Compiled by Debbie Ann Doyle and Brandon Schneider. Format by Chris Hale.

Ethnic geography map of New Orleans showing generalized distributions of ethnic and racial groups in the city, c. 1850 to c. 1910. Adapted from Richard Campanella, *Geographies of New Orleans: Urban Fabrics before the Storm* (Lafayette, 2006), 193-370. In a few years, thousands of the city's poorest African Americans had become intensely consolidated into a dozen housing developments. "The Projects"—about ten complexes, scattered throughout the city—furthered the paradoxical de facto segregation of residential settlement patterns of black and white New Orleanians, even as they mingled in newly integrated schools, offices, and lunch counters.