

# Jewish History and Settlement Patterns in Massachusetts

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Most immigrants leave their homes for another place not for political reasons but for economic ones. Although our ancestors sometimes claimed a political motive, Jews coming to America—from Colonial times to the present—generally came for economic opportunity, and this can be seen as well in the pattern of Jewish settlement in Massachusetts.

Boston was the last of the major cities in this country's early history that attracted Jews. Many sources say this was because they were not welcome there, but while this may have had a grain of truth, the primary reason falls to lack of economic opportunity. According to at least one historian, Boston was religiously intolerant and had a declining economy following the Revolutionary War.<sup>1</sup>

Solomon Franco, reputedly the “first” Jew to come to Boston in 1649, soon returned to Europe. He was unable to sell his goods and therefore support himself. A small number of Jews followed with similar results.<sup>2</sup>

The next noted Jew to arrive in Boston, Judas Monas, was a dry goods merchant and teacher of Hebrew at the Spanish-Portuguese synagogue in New York. He came to Harvard College and served as a Hebrew language instructor for 40 years. In 1735, he persuaded the college to publish the *Grammar of the Hebrew Language*. However, to maintain his post, he had to convert to Christianity, which he apparently did willingly, although criticized by other Jews.<sup>3</sup>

Another solitary Jew took a different path, being well known for his Judaism and acting publicly in the name of his Jewish principles. Moses Michael Hays, born to Dutch immigrants, learned the shipping and retail business from his father.<sup>4</sup> Around 1776, he moved to Boston and opened a shipping office. The Colonies' rupture with England devastated Boston's economy, and Hays set out to help form a stable economy. He began to build clipper ships for trade in the East and was one of a small group who received the first bank charter in the new nation. He also helped to found the national insurance industry in Boston, and with his friend, Paul Revere, established the Masonic movement of which he was the only Jewish member. Finally, he helped raise his late

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<sup>1</sup> Fein, Isaac M. *Boston-Where It All Began: An Historical Perspective of the Boston Jewish Community*. 1976.

<sup>2</sup> Talk by Ellen Smith, historian and curator at Brandeis University, at the Jewish Genealogical Society of Greater Boston and co-author of *The Jews of Boston*, June 11, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Chapter 1, *Moses Michael Hays “A Most Valuable Citizen,”*  
<http://www.ajhs.org/publications/chapters/chapter.cfm?documentID=186>.

sister's children, Abraham, Judah and Rebecca Touro. It was through Moses' tutelage that Abraham and Judah became successful merchants. Hays' descendants had a direct hand in the formation of the Boston Athenaeum and the Massachusetts General Hospital.<sup>5</sup>

There were other less prominent Jews in the later Colonial period who, having a knack for merchandising, fanned out to the thinly settled rural areas. Many New England Jews served in the Revolutionary War. Boston became a busy commercial center by 1840s mainly due to its fleet of swift clipper ships. It was fast becoming a manufacturing and distribution center.<sup>6</sup>

A business panic in 1850 saw many Jews leave Boston and travel northward to Maine where business was prospering. The Spitzes, one of the founding families of the first Jewish synagogue, moved to Maine, but returned to Boston by 1856-57.<sup>7</sup>

While other Jews came and went, it was not until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century that Boston had a permanent Jewish community. Waves of German Jews came first, followed by Russian Jews beginning in the 1880s. Some of the earliest Jews settled in Boston's North End.<sup>7</sup> Later Jews lived in West End near Massachusetts General Hospital and the upscale South End (from Wang Center down to Massachusetts Avenue and roughly east of Columbus Avenue). This was newly formed land from tidal marshes filled during the period from 1830s to 1870s. Smith noted that, unlike other immigrant groups, whose men came ahead and ostensibly planned to go back, Jews came in families, men and women in equal numbers, with the intention to settle permanently. Having an entrepreneurial culture and an ethic of self-support, they became financially secure more quickly than the other immigrant groups. Their initial focus was the textile industry, where they made fabric for Union uniforms during the Civil War.<sup>8</sup>

The North, West and South Ends of Boston, together with Chelsea were the important Jewish immigrant neighborhoods of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>9</sup> At first, Orthodox Jews had difficulty competing in business because they did not work on the Sabbath and the Blue Laws prohibited work on Sunday. Many of these religious Jews, throughout the state, chose to be peddlers so they did not have to work on the Sabbath. Only later, when Jews became more settled and able to establish their independent businesses, did they conform to working on Saturdays.

In the 1840s, this community numbered 400 to 500 persons and established Boston's first Jewish cemetery and synagogue. The first synagogue building, Ohabei Shalom, opened in 1854 across from the Wang Center. In 1854, a dispute between Polish and German members, coupled with a bequest from Judah Touro, led to the formation of a second congregation that became Temple Israel. By the 1870s, both of these congregations were well established and had moved from the old South End to Upper Roxbury. Shortly thereafter, the huge wave of immigration from Eastern Europe began, resulting in a

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Ehrenfried, Albert. *A Chronicle of Boston Jewry: From Colonial Settlement Until 1900*. 1963.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Weider, Arnold A. *The Early Jewish Community of Boston's North End*. Brandeis University, 1962.

<sup>9</sup> Sarna, Jonathan and Smith, Ellen. *The Jews of Boston*, p.76.

burgeoning Jewish population of 80,000 in Boston and 130,000 in Greater Boston by 1920.

As Jewish businesses became successfully established, Jews began to populate more upscale neighborhoods. The expansion of the streetcar lines and the displacement of residents of the 1908 Chelsea fire also contributed to an expanded Jewish population moving out from Boston's center. Roxbury and Dorchester attracted an increasing number of middle and upper middle class Jews. The leather and shoe industry attracted working class Jews to Somerville, Everett, Malden, Salem, Peabody and Lynn to the north and Brockton to the south.

In 1910 the Jewish population of various communities looked as follows: <sup>10</sup>

Lynn	4,000
Malden	5,500
Brockton	4,000
South End	8,000
East Boston	5,000
South Boston	3,000
West End	24,000

By contrast, within a decade, the Jewish population of Dorchester and Upper Roxbury had soared to 44,000.<sup>11</sup> In addition, there were 3,000 Jews living in Brookline, Brighton and Newton; 5,000 in Revere; and 1,000 in Winthrop.<sup>12</sup>

The outward migration of Jews continued in the 1920s as wealth grew and the centers of worship followed. Brookline was the new religious center by the 1930s and counted 8,000 Jews living there.<sup>13</sup> The Jewish population of Roxbury-Dorchester declined dramatically from 70,000 in 1950 to several hundred by the 1970s!<sup>14</sup> This migration was again spurred by socioeconomic reasons and the dream to have a home in the suburbs.

This upwardly mobile trend has continued to the present. For example, Sharon, a distant suburb of Boston, and formerly a popular summer resort for Jews, attracted settlement because of the availability of land and low cost housing.<sup>15</sup> By the 1950s and into the early 1960s, Jewish communities developed in Medford, Lexington, Arlington, Belmont, Watertown, Framingham, Natick, Randolph, Hull, Milton, Swampscott and Marblehead.<sup>16</sup> The Jews in these latter two communities came mostly from Chelsea, Malden, Revere, and Lynn.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p. 138.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p.139.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 154.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. 156.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 157.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

Jewish settlement in the relatively rural areas of Massachusetts had similar origins. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Worcester, Springfield, Pittsfield and Lowell all had early “Jewish pioneers” who were either peddlers or workers attracted to jobs in manufacturing and industry.

For example, in Lowell, Jews arrived from Russia and Russian-dominated lands to make a new start in industrializing America in 1870s and 1880s. They were preceded by a small number of German Jews fleeing unrest and an uncertain future in revolutionary Europe. In the beginning, they worked in the mills, but eventually they established their own businesses in support of the mill economy.<sup>18</sup> This self-employment also freed them to practice their religion on the Sabbath. As we saw in Boston, later generations of these Jews, now in the professions, moved outward into neighboring, less crowded, communities.

Similarly in Springfield, German Jews were the first to establish themselves in the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>19</sup> East European Jews who turned Springfield into a thriving Jewish community followed them. Jews were successful in peddling wares in surrounding rural areas. They were also able to create a role for themselves in the commercial and industrial sectors, similar to their experiences in Europe, supporting the agrarian workers in the area.

The Jews of Worcester had similar settlement patterns. There was a small community of Sephardic Jews in Leicester who had fled the British takeover of Newport, RI in 1776.<sup>20</sup> German Jews settled in Worcester in 1870s. By the 1910, 75% of the Jews living in the Water Street section of the city were Russian Jews.<sup>21</sup> Worcester was an important manufacturing center. Jewish-sponsored credit unions aided peddlers and small entrepreneurs to establish independent businesses.<sup>22</sup>

Jewish settlement in Massachusetts was dependent upon economic factors such as employment opportunities as well as freedom from religious persecution. The climate became positive in Boston by the mid-nineteenth century and Jewish population growth has continued to the present day.

Information about many of these Jewish settlers and their descendants can be found in synagogue and cemetery records, as well as in past issues of Jewish newspapers. Guides to these Jewish community records are provided in the following sections. Information about Jewish communal institutions and some local families is also available at the Boston office of the American Jewish Historical Society, [www.ajhsboston.org](http://www.ajhsboston.org).

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<sup>18</sup> Kolak, Shirley. *A New Beginning: The Jews of Historic Lowell, MA*. 1997.

<sup>19</sup> Gelin, James. *Starting Over: The Formation of the Jewish Community of Springfield, MA 1840-1905*.

<sup>20</sup> Feingold, Norma. *Water Street*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*