

Southern New Jersey  
**SYNAGOGUES**

A SOCIAL HISTORY

HIGHLIGHTED  
BY  
STORIES  
OF JEWISH LIFE  
FROM THE  
1880'S - 1980'S

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## Introduction to the Jewish Farmer's Congregations

The era of the Jewish Farmer and his synagogue traces back over 100 years ago. Jewish farm colonies were settled in the wilderness and swamps of Southern New Jersey for a purpose. The adaptation of the Russian Jew as a tiller of the soil was met with many struggles as they fled Russia in the early 1880's.

Initially, the soil failed but the Jewish soul flourished in the swamps. This was home and industry was tried as an alternative to letting the off-season being wasted. The advent of industry was not brought to this region to supplement the Jewish Farmer's livelihood but in most cases was his only means of survival! In these communities, the synagogue served many functions and was similar in ritual to the ones they left behind in Russia.

Organizations lent a hand in starting these farm colonies and synagogues. Other settlements started in the late 1880's and 1890's were created as land schemes. Some areas were developed as a way to gather cheap labor with farming as a side job. The age of the Industrial Revolution would affect Jews.

New Jewish settlements and colonies would begin in the early 1890's with the help of World Jewish Philanthropists as the benefactor. New settlements would mean new synagogues.

By the late 1890's, a history of success and failure in the wilderness in the swamps of Southern New Jersey would be recorded. A new agenda for the immigrant settlements was about to occur. Group settlements were tried but at a high cost of money and materials. Individual settlements for various reasons were also initiated but most failed.

To support the community in its farming endeavors was to support and maintain the center of Jewish life in terms of social and religious affairs. A new agency developed here in America in the year 1900. The establishment of this agency was a prime helper in fostering this idea of Jewish farm settlement. This agency was known as the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society. This agency succeeded the Baron De Hirsch Fund. Within seven years, the organization was renamed the Jewish Agricultural Society or J.A.S.. Donations and mortgages plus loans were provided as a good basis for a firm foundation of Jewish life in the countryside.

New farm communities were founded with the help of the J.A.S in the first decade of the 20th Century. Synagogues were built in part with aid and donations of the J.A.S and Jewish farms sprung up nearby as a result.

Commercialization of the farm set in during the early 1910's. Families that went to live in the big cities would return to the farm for pleasure and relaxation in a Jewish setting. This idea caught on with relatives. Meals and lodgings were offered for extended periods of time. This trend in turn led to new business. Communities grew and Jews bought farms to work and cater to the people who came to stay on the farm in various seasons. This was the start of the Pleasurnik Era. This period of time was especially prolific during the early 1910's, 1920's and 1930's. Jewish congregations were formed where Jewish families set up Pleasurnik havens. Throughout the Greater Delaware Valley this phenomenon was being spelled out in ever greater numbers especially after the First World War ended.

The Jewish Farmer did not always settle in an established Jewish settlement. Jews bought farms and started this trade where Jews were not even heard of least the native population seen one. Resorts and hotels even materialized at the height of this expansion into the countryside. Jewish people came to the farms as families, elderly couples or singles. The Jews not only came to the farms for vacations but also to spend Jewish holidays or Yonativim with their loved ones. Sunday drives into the countryside gained in popularity as the new Americans learned that automobiles meant freedom! Sunday dinners were a traditional feast for these new immigrants. Of course the food was all served in a Kosher manner!

This era gave way to the newly arriving immigrant of the late 1920's and 1930's. Before World War Two, German immigrants who were Jews would come to America as over 100 years earlier but for different reasons. The German Jews who arrived a century earlier in the 1830's did so to express freedom outside of a Ghetto. This was a more relaxed period of the German States towards minorities. Those Jews from Bavaria and other German states came for adventure in a free society such as America had to offer. Whereas German Jews of the 20th Century left Europe because their freedom to be a Jew was being severely limited! In the 1930's, many Religious German Jews came to Southern New Jersey to breathe its free air and practice being a Jew without fear or reprisal.

These Jews joined the general Jewish institutions, such as the synagogues in use at the time. During the war and as more Jews joined their ranks, religious minyans in homes were started and services were conducted into the 1950's or until a suitable building could be built.

After the War ended, Southern New Jersey received many Displaced Jewish families. This was the late 1940's and soon the Polish Jews began arriving to settle in the countryside. This area blossomed as a new center of Yiddishkeit. This included Jewish culture and Religious life. The Jewish Poultry Belt of Cumberland County spilled into Atlantic, Salem, Cape May and Gloucester Counties.

The Holocaust survivor by the 1950's would create new communities in Southern New Jersey. Poultry farming was their livelihoods. Only one generation ago, there was limited success in the raising of poultry on Jewish farms. The Agricultural School in Woodbine, New Jersey was instrumental in developing poultry husbandry on a commercial basis. Science added a new dimension to farming and the next generation of Jewish immigrants would benefit.

These immigrants would become the new Jewish Farmer and the center of their life revolved around the synagogue.

