From Peddlers, to Shopkeepers, to Professionals:

A History of the Jewish Community in Cheshire County
Introduction

Hayman Cohen arrived in Keene in 1888, soon after he immigrated to this country from Lithuania. He was one of the first Jews to settle in Keene. Cohen became a peddler in this city so that he would have the independence of working for himself. He soon saved some capital and opened a retail business.

Cohen was one of 2½ million Jews who immigrated to the United States from the 1880s to the 1920s seeking economic opportunity and freedom from persecution. Most of these immigrants settled in large American cities, but Cohen led the way for numerous other Jews who came to Keene to live over the next three decades.

It was very important for these people to maintain and practice their religious beliefs. They began holding services soon after they arrived in Keene and in 1916 formally incorporated as Congregation Ahavas Achim, one of the first synagogues in the state. Keene’s Congregation Ahavas Achim has been the religious focal point for the region’s Jewish community for 100 years.

The Aliber family of Keene, NH. Courtesy of Aaron Lipsky.
Introduction

One of the chief reasons that these people immigrated to the United States was for better opportunities for themselves and their families. They realized that education was essential to the future success of their children. The pattern that resulted from these beliefs was that Jewish settlers who worked as peddlers and junk dealers soon opened retail shops, and their children often went on to college and undertook professional careers.

This exhibit was developed in 2017 by the Historical Society of Cheshire County in Keene, NH, in collaboration with Congregation Ahavas Achim on the 100th anniversary of the synagogue. It illustrates how the region’s Jewish immigrants adapted to life in the region and how they, in turn, impacted the region. It also discusses how they strived to maintain their customs and religious practices in their new country.
Jewish Immigration to America

Jews began to immigrate to America as early as 1654 when Sephardic Jews of Spanish and Portuguese origin began to arrive in small numbers. They were soon followed by Ashkenazin Jews from other areas of Europe.

The second wave of immigration involved German Jews who began to come to this country in significant numbers in the 1840s. They left Germany to escape persecution, restrictive laws and economic hardship, coming to the United States seeking economic and social opportunity. Some 250,000 German-speaking Jews arrived in this country prior to World War I.
Jewish Immigration to America

The largest wave of Jewish immigration took place between 1880 and 1924 when 2½ million Jews immigrated to the United States seeking economic opportunity and freedom from extreme persecution. The vast majority of these immigrants came from Russia, Austria-Hungary and Romania.

This was where Keene and Cheshire County entered the story. Most of these immigrants settled in large American cities. Only a small percentage settled in small communities like Keene. A few Jewish families arrived in the city and took up residence here in the late 1800s, thereby initiating Keene’s Jewish community.
Keene’s Early Jews

Hayman Cohen was one of the city’s first Jewish residents. Born in Lithuania in 1872, the 16-year-old arrived in the United States during the early months of 1888. His first job here was that of apprentice pocketbook maker on New York’s East Side. After a few months Cohen decided that he wanted to work for himself. He came to Keene and sold household wares from house to house across southern New Hampshire and Vermont, carrying his stock in a pack on his back.

Cohen was soon joined in Keene by other Jewish families. The Finkelstein family arrived in about 1890, followed by the Levine and Tatelman families a decade later.
Several of these men worked as peddlers, as did Hayman Cohen. Samuel Finkelstein opened a dry goods and clothing store, however, and Levine family members were cobblers who opened a shoe store on Main Street.

These early families remained very faithful to their religion and maintained their Jewish practices. Samuel Finkelstein’s home in Keene was the location of the first Jewish religious services held in Cheshire County. The Finkelstein home was also a welcome haven for other Jewish families who immigrated to the city. Samuel and his wife Julia offered guidance and support to others who settled in the area.

Above: 1902 Naturalization record for Morris Lis, junk dealer, Keene.

Below: 1905 advertisement for S. Finkelstein Clothing Store, Keene.
Photograph of Jewish peddler Abraham Oberfelder in East Westmoreland Village, c.1900. Courtesy Historical Society of Cheshire County
Peddlers

Many Jewish immigrants to the region made the decision to work for themselves. This allowed more financial and social freedom, but it also meant tight budgets for some families until their businesses became established.

Hayman Cohen came to Keene in the 1880s to work for himself after trying his hand as a pocketbook maker in New York City. He became a peddler when he arrived in Keene, carrying household goods in a large pack on his back to sell throughout southern New Hampshire and Vermont. Several other Jewish peddlers took up the same occupation, including members of the Lis, Crocker, Aliber, and Levine families. Several Jewish peddlers soon traveled routes from Keene, selling household supplies, rags, paper, and a variety of other products. Their long trade routes into the countryside meant that farm and village families could acquire supplies that they needed without taking an entire day to travel to the shops in Keene. Still other immigrants became junk dealers, including Casper and Myer Finkelstein and the Tatelman brothers.
Some of the peddlers and junk dealers opened their own shops as soon as they had saved sufficient capital to do so, while some Jewish immigrants opened retail stores when they first arrived in Keene. Chief among these undertakings were clothing stores and food markets. In 1900 only 20 percent of American Jews worked in trade, but that changed dramatically over the next generation. By 1934 more than 50 percent were involved in commerce.

The Levine family worked as cobblers and opened a shoe store. Samuel Finkelstein opened a dry goods and clothing store on West Street before 1910. The published Keene city directories tell us that Joseph Myers operated a machine and metal company and Aaron Aliber was proprietor of Cheshire Clothing Co. Abraham Quint operated a dry goods store on Central Square and Louis Cohen opened a meat market on Marlboro Street.
Shopkeepers

Other families who followed in the late 1910s and 1920s included the Lichman family, who operated a grocery store, Morris Medvidofsky, a tailor, and the Cohen brothers who opened a women’s shop on Main Street.

Other shopkeepers included Michael Lis, grocer, Samuel Borofsky, clothing store owner, and Harry Crocker, grocer. Harry Kharfen established a manufacturing firm, the Kafelt Manufacturing Co. on Washington Street, where he produced manicure implements.

Above: Cohen’s Market & Levine’s Clothing Store closed for Jewish holidays, Keene, NH, mid-20th century.

Below: Grocer Mike Lis at Mike’s Mart, 499 Washington Street, c.1940.
Professionals

Several of Keene’s peddlers became shopkeepers when they used their savings to open stores in the city and beyond. Many of their children and grandchildren, in turn became professionals, meaning that they entered callings requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation. These fields included medicine, law, literature, science, economics, entertainment, and other areas of specialty.

Atomic scientist Ralph Livingston was an early example of this. Jacob Lichman, historian, and Robert Aliber, economist, also became authors in those fields. Rosie Crocker was a nurse and founder of a nursing program. James Lipsky and Oscar Crocker became physicians.

Among the numerous attorneys originating from Keene’s Jewish immigrant families were Edward and Maurice Quint, Harry Lichman, Aaron Aliber Lipsky, and Jeffrey Crocker, who also served as board chair of the Jewish Federation of New Hampshire.
Early Worship Locations

In the late 1880s a group of Jewish peddlers began holding services every Saturday morning in a clothing store on Keene’s Central Square. This is the first record of Jewish services taking place in Cheshire County. Services were also held in the home of Samuel Finkelstein on Ellis Court, where the Torah was also kept. The services were probably conducted by Finkelstein or other local Jewish residents.

In 1907 a Reverend Novich began traveling from Boston to Keene to fulfill rabbinical duties. The reverend led services upstairs in the business block at 45 Main Street, above Alex Bruder’s bakery. A cheder (classroom for children) was also located on the second floor. High Holy Day services were held in the building’s third floor ballroom.
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Services were moved back to Central Square a few years later and were held above Lord’s candy store in the Salvation Army Hall on the third floor of Clarke’s Block. By the 1920s the congregation met in St. John’s Hall on the top floor of St. John’s Block on the corner of West and Main Streets. The Keene congregation continued its local odyssey with a move to a former residence on Winter Street where it met from 1943 to 1947.
Founding a Synagogue

The first synagogues in New Hampshire came into being about 1890. Members of these synagogues first met in private homes, later in rented halls, and still later in their own buildings. In 1899, synagogues began to acquire formal charters as religious organizations from the State of New Hampshire.

In the winter of 1915-1916 Keene’s Jewish community members applied for formal incorporation of a synagogue from the state. In January of 1916, just over 101 years ago, the state granted a charter to the “Keene Hebrew Community” and the congregation was incorporated. Only Manchester (1899), Berlin (1899), Nashua (1899), and Portsmouth (1910) received charters prior to Keene.

Former home of synagogue, Court Street, Keene, NH. 2017 renovations uncovered the star of David visible above the doorway.
Founding a Synagogue

The articles of incorporation gave the congregation the name of Ahavas Achim, which is Hebrew for “Brotherly Love.” The object of the new corporation was “the promotion of the cause of religion among the Hebrew people of Keene and vicinity.” Following a generation of services in several locations, Keene’s Jewish community now had its own synagogue. The congregation was meeting in the Salvation Army Hall on the 3rd floor of Clarke’s Block at the north end of Central Square at that time and continued to do so for a number of years.

Five members of the Jewish community in Keene applied for a charter. They were Morris Lis, Joseph Myers, Aaron Aliber, Abraham R. Quint, and Hyman Lichman. These five men and their families had all immigrated to the United States from Russia or Lithuania. They and the families of the other original members of the congregation had all retained their religious practices and customs since their arrival and had now formed their own congregation to ensure that they and their families would have a place and an organization to continue those practices into the future.
Hebrew School

From its beginning, the Keene Synagogue hired a Rabbi to teach its children Hebrew. It was almost secondary that the Rabbi would conduct Jewish services because many of the founding members were fully capable of leading the religious services themselves.

In 1907, 24-year-old Mendel Novich, a man with some rabbinical training, but not fully ordained as a Rabbi, became the Jewish community’s first Hebrew teacher when he began coming to Keene from Boston to conduct religious services and teach the children Hebrew.

By the late 1940s, the Synagogue owned its own building at 91 Court Street with its own sanctuary and classroom. Rabbi William Weiner, who lived in an apartment upstairs, acted as the religious teacher. Several days a week, students learned Hebrew at Hebrew School which was called “Cheder” (rhymes with “raider,”) meaning “room”. Additionally, Sunday School provided an opportunity to learn Biblical stories, about the Jewish Holidays, and about Jewish heroes like the Maccabees.

Above: Hebrew school (2005), courtesy Congregation Ahavas Achim
Below: 1960s Hebrew School teacher Saul Mariaschin, courtesy Congregation Ahavas Achim
Hebrew School Today

Today’s Synagogue at 84 Hastings Avenue has its modern classrooms and advanced teaching methods. The current Religious School is staffed by the rabbi and by teachers who are also members of the congregation. Sunday school begins with an innovative integrated curriculum called “Giborim: Jewish Life through Jewish Heroes.”

Students learn ethics, history, Israel, mitzvoth (commandments), and Tanakh (bible) through the lens of people – biblical and historical. Heroes come from all time periods and represent different areas of expertise.

Giborim is followed by Kehilah Time – the all school assembly held in the sanctuary and led by the rabbi, reinforcing the lessons and using song and dance to teach Jewish prayer and traditions. Then students break up into small groups to learn Hebrew reading and prayers. Students in the Religious School and recent graduates help to lead services several times during the year.
Keene Supports Jews in WWI

On January 6, 1916, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution requesting President Woodrow Wilson to issue a proclamation concerning the plight of Jews in Eastern Europe displaced the war raging in Europe. President Wilson’s proclamation designated January 27th as a day for the people of the United States to collect funds to aid the millions of suffering European Jews who had been driven from their homes without warning and were destitute of food, clothing, and shelter.

In response, Keene’s mayor, Orville E. Cain, called on citizens to join the cause by hosting a local fund drive. On January 27, 1916 young boys and girls stood around Central Square in Keene with little banks collecting money for the fund. Buttons, tags, and certificates were also sold to raise money. The local newspaper reported that the youngsters had collected $300 (equivalent to about $7,000 today).
Military Service

More than 20 Keene Jews served their country during WWII, and at least two men who served in WWI later moved to the city. Eli Court served from Haverhill, Massachusetts. He married in that town after WWI and later moved to Keene where he lived for many years. He served as New Hampshire state commander of the American Legion in 1944.

Max Kapiloff was born in Russia in 1898. He immigrated to the United States as a teenager and enlisted in the Army to serve his new home country seven years later during WWI. He moved to Keene after the war where he built a successful poultry business.
Military Service

Twenty-three members of Congregation Ahavas Achim served in the military during WWII. This included two members of the Binder, Chorney, Crocker, and Lichman families. Furthermore, both Edward and Lawrence Kapiloff served, following in the footsteps of their father Max who had served in WWI.

These 23 men served in a variety of places and with a variety of responsibilities. Harry Lichman served in the Navy aboard the hospital ship USS Antaeus. His brother Jacob served the Army as historian for the Continental Air Command.

Keene’s Joseph Crocker served for more than three years, most of that time with the rank of sergeant serving as supply clerk for more than 200 men. Julius Chorney was awarded the Purple Heart and Bronze Star as a result of his service in the Army during the war. All of these men fought to help preserve the freedoms and opportunities that their families had found in the United States.
Keene’s Jewish Students Make an Impact

The children of Keene’s Jewish immigrants had a major impact at Keene High School from the 1920s to the 1940s. These families embraced the importance of education to the future endeavors of their children – and many of those children took full advantage of what local schools had to offer.

Florence Aliber graduated with the class of 1927. Her school involvement included working on the yearbook and the school publication the "Enterprise," as well as playing on the basketball team. She went on to serve the city of Keene on several city and synagogue boards and committees.

Harry Tatelman, class of 1931, was senior class president, played on the basketball team and was editor-in-chief of the Salmagundi. He later became a leading Hollywood producer. Harry Lichman, class of 1927, was involved in sports and his brother Jacob, class of 1930, was an honor student and a member of numerous clubs while at KHS.

Above: Keene High School graduates Priscilla Kharfan (1943) and Dorothy Aliber (1924)
Keene’s Jewish Students Make an Impact

Robert Aliber, valedictorian of the class of 1948, served as senior class president, editor of the Salmagundi, played football, and participated in numerous other KHS clubs and extracurricular activities.

Adeline Binder, Edward Kapiloff, Sidney Aliber, and Sidney Merritt, class of 1943, were involved in more than 30 KHS clubs, organizations and sports teams during their high school careers. Dozens of second or third generation Jewish students played a major role in creating and advancing the spirit and character of Keene High School during these decades. Many of these graduates went on to college. By 1957, 29 percent of Jews had completed four years of college; the number rose by 6 percent by 1980.
Keene’s Jewish Students Make an Impact

Keene High School football team, 1943, with Syd Merritt and Syd Aliber.
High School Athletics

Some of the children of the early members of Congregation Ahavas Achim received academic awards at Keene High School and participated in a variety of extra-curricular activities, and were also enthusiastic participants on the sports teams.

As early as 1916, the year Congregation Ahavas Achim received its charter, sophomore Philip Aliber, began his three-year football career on the Keene High Varsity Football Team. In 1946, in the 50th Anniversary issue of the Keene KHS “Enterprise,” Phil’s 1918 quarterback, Rus Putney, recalled “scrappy Phil Aliber at guard,” and referring to Norman Aliber’s sons Sydney and Robert, said “I guess there will always be an Aliber” on the football team.
1922, Maurice Quint received a letter for being manager of the baseball team.

1927, Florence Aliber received a varsity letter in women’s Basketball. Harry Lichman graduated after playing on the basketball and baseball squads.

1928, Lena Medvidofsky graduated after playing Tennis.

1931, Harry Tatelman graduated after four years as a star on the Basketball Team and manager of the Baseball Team.

1938, Phillip Cohen graduated after playing on the Basketball Team.

1943, Sydney Aliber graduated after a career as co-captain of the Tennis Team and on the Varsity Football Team. Sidney Merritt, a grandson of founder Samuel Finkelstein, graduated after playing on the Tennis Team.

1947, Rose Kapiloff graduated after playing on the Softball and Field Hockey Teams.

1948, Robert Aliber graduated after playing Varsity Football and JV Basketball.

1949, Jack Tenofsky, a future Congregation Ahavas Achim President and Shem Tov award recipient, graduated after playing on the JV Basketball Team.
Kosher Food

Food is an important element in Jewish culture. In Jewish tradition, there are a number of dietary laws governing what can be eaten and how food should be prepared. These laws are, collectively called “Kashrut.” Food that meets the requirements of Kashrut is deemed “kosher” which means “proper.” Food that is forbidden to eat according to Jewish law is deemed “treyf” or, in modern American parlance, “unkosher.” Jews who adhere to the laws of kashrut are said to “keep kosher.” Many of the rules concerning kashrut are based on passages from the Jewish Bible, and they have been refined and revised through rabbinic additions and explanations.

Most of the rules of kashrut concern eating meat. The meat of certain animals is never kosher, including that of the pig, birds of prey, reptiles, amphibians, worms and insects, and all shellfish. Fish are kosher if they have fins and scales. Mammals that chew their cud and have split hooves (like cows, sheep, and goats) are kosher and can be eaten. Animals (but not fish) need to be slaughtered in a specific procedure by a trained kosher butcher called a schochet if the meat is to be eaten.
Kosher Food

In addition to restrictions on which animals can be eaten, a major feature of kashrut is the separation of milk and meat. A kosher meal never has both meat and dairy – it’s always one or the other. Separate plates, utensils, and cooking vessels and implements are used to prepare milk and meat dishes. The meat category includes both kosher mammals and poultry, but not fish. The milk category includes the milk of any kosher animal and anything that is made from that milk or cream: cheese, yogurt, whipped cream, any desserts with milk products in them.

Foods that are neither meat nor milk are called pareve – which means “neutral.” The pareve category includes all fruits, vegetables, and grains, as well as eggs and kosher fish. Pareve foods can be served with either meat or milk meals and can be cooked in the pots and served on the plates of the meal being served – milk or meat. Most beverages are also parve.
The 21st Century Synagogue

From a small group of peddlers and their families, the synagogue community has grown to around 100 households. Congregants come from a variety of Jewish backgrounds and ethnicities and have diverse interests. The congregation includes members living in several counties in New Hampshire as well as in neighboring Vermont. This diverse group of Jews engages in a wide variety of synagogue activities, both religious and cultural.

Over the past one hundred years, Congregation Ahavas Achim has been affiliated with four major branches of Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and now Reconstructionist. Current members grew up in different branches of Judaism as well, and religious services are held in a variety of styles to meet different members’ preferences.

“Today, as our congregation bursts and bustles at the seams with energy and activities, frequently finding ourselves ‘short of space’-- one imagines a founding member shaking his head in wonder. Who among us could have imagined a time when this building would be overflowing with people and activities?”

~Rabbi Yael Lavi-Romer, 2000
The 21st Century Synagogue

Ongoing events at Ahavas Achim include worship services, religious school for children, and adult education. Services are held every Shabbat (Sabbath) and also once during the week, as well as during holidays and other special events. Religious School for children is held on Sunday mornings and adult education throughout the year focuses on a whole range of Jewish topics.

Jewish holidays occur throughout the year and are celebrated with spirit and song at Ahavas Achim. In the fall, the High Holidays – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – are a chance for inner reflection and communal atonement. In the winter, candle lighting and latkes mark the congregational celebration of Chanukah. Spring brings the raucous fun of Purim; the commemoration of the Exodus at Passover; and a cheesecake competition and all night study session on Shavuot. In the summer, Ahavas Achim gathers on Tisha B’Av, the mournful holiday to remember the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Throughout the year, holiday celebrations and worship services are among the congregation’s best attended events.
Lifecycle events are a major communal draw in Jewish communities, including Congregation Ahavas Achim. Members gather for significant events in one another’s lives. The birth of a child or grandchild is celebrated with great joy. The congregation joins with family and friends when one of the children celebrates bar or bat mitzvah. Weddings held at Ahavas Achim are joyful affairs filled with tradition and song. And the congregation comes together to support one another in times of illness and death.

So much has changed in 100 years of Ahavas Achim. Where once a few peddlers gathered to hold religious services weekly there is now an active, vibrant, diverse community with services and other events throughout the year. Still, the overwhelming sense of community and belonging has remained constant for a century. As Aly Shuman wrote in 2016, “The synagogue feels warm, beautiful, accepting, and informal, yet undeniably sacred.”

Photo courtesy Congregation Ahavas Achim