

Temple Israel Foundation

The Temple Israel Foundation is dedicated to the memory of Leadville's Jewish pioneers and was incorporated in 1987 "to acquire, historically rehabilitate, and maintain" the synagogue and cemetery.

An electrical fire in 2006 prompted the synagogue's full restoration, which was supported by private contributions and four grants from the Colorado State Historical Fund. The restoration project was complete in 2008. In 2012, the Foundation hired a curator to create its permanent exhibition, to provide tours, and to keep the building open to the public during summer hours.

While regular services are no longer held in the synagogue, the building does get occasional use for special events, such as Shabbat services in relation to the annual cemetery cleanup.

Besides summer hours, the synagogue is available for tours year-round by appointment.

www.jewishleadville.org



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Frontier Jewish Leadville

Permanent exhibition created in 2012



Temple Israel

Frontier Synagogue & Museum

www.jewishleadville.org

<p>To schedule a tour, reserve the synagogue for special events, make genealogical inquiries, or to make a contribution, please contact us.</p>	<p>Temple Israel Foundation 208 West 8th Street Leadville, Colorado 80461 Office: 719.486.3625 Mobile: 303.709.7050 longled@longled.cnc.net</p>
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“Frontier Jewish Leadville” opened in September 2012. The exhibition features over 50 artifacts and is housed in the Temple Israel Synagogue and Museum.

Special thanks to the staff at the Denver Public Library and the Colorado Mountain History Collection at the Lake County Public Library for their patience and research assistance. The Temple Israel Foundation is grateful to its donors who helped make the exhibition possible, and most particularly to the anonymous donors without whose support this entire enterprise would not have been possible.



Temple Israel as it looked in 2014.
The oldest synagogue west of the Mississippi River!

Sources

Primary Sources

- Historic Leadville newspapers, Lake County Public Library
- Leadville city directories, Lake County Public Library
- United States census data

Secondary Sources

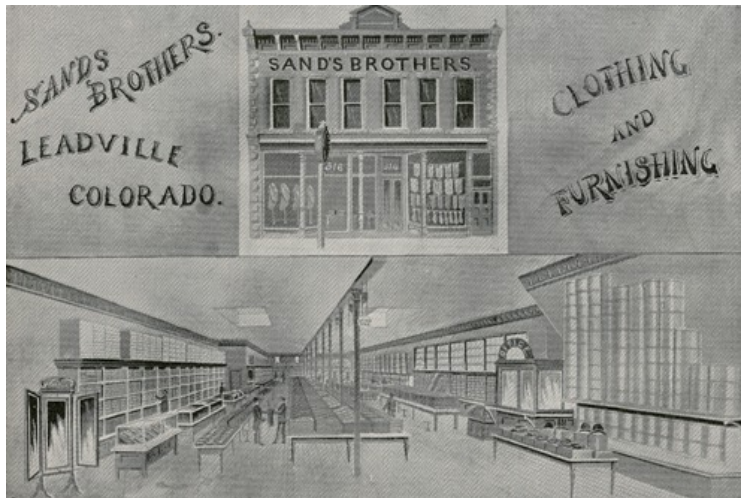
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- Goodstein, Phil (1992), *Exploring Jewish Colorado*
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Prominent Merchants

Among the important dry goods and clothier shops that were Jewish-owned, Monheimer Brothers was perhaps one of the most successful. J. H. Monheimer was appointed county commissioner in 1883 and in 1884 was elected president of the Temple Israel building committee. He later handled the estate of a well-known madam after her death.

David May is probably Leadville's best-known pioneer dry goods merchant. After getting his start in 1877 selling Levi's and long underwear out of a crude canvas covered shack, he moved up the street to much better accommodations at 318 Harrison Avenue where there is now a May Company monument. May relocated to Denver in 1888 and eventually to St. Louis, MO where the company maintained headquarters until merging with Federated Department Stores in 2005.

In June 1896 workers went on strike when mine owners rejected miners' requests for an 8-hour workday at \$3/day. A week after the strike began the miners visited all prominent Leadville merchants with a petition of support. Among Jewish merchants signing the petition were Sam Berry (clothier), Ed Jackson (tailor), and the Sands brothers (clothiers). Support for the miners seems to have waned in the face of violent clashes between strikers and the National Guard later that summer. Idle mines meant no cash flow to support businesses, which likely explains diminished merchant support of the miners' strike.



An advertising card for Sand's [should be Sands] Brothers. Image courtesy of the Denver Public Library

Why Leadville?

Migration patterns

From 1850 to the 1920s, the Jewish population in the western United States grew from a tiny few to about 300,000 people (Kahn 2002: 13). Jews migrated to the West and to Leadville, CO for many of the same reasons other people did—to improve their social and economic status, to find adventure, and to reinvent themselves. Leadville's mining economy exploded in the late 1870s, resulting in an influx of migrants to the small mountain town. The discovery of silver caused Leadville's population to grow to approximately 30,000 residents. About 300 were Jews.

As Europe industrialized in the 19th century and some countries became increasingly repressive, many Jews emigrated for more hospitable places. In Europe it was common for Jews to be employed as seamstresses, tailors, and peddlers—work that was becoming obsolete in the new industrialized world. The United States and the western U.S. in particular proved ideal places to engage in traditional Jewish occupations. In the U.S. one could rise from itinerant peddler to merchant in a single generation. While the image of the Jewish merchant has become stereotypical, many Jews found that the role of merchant in the American West provided families with economic stability and opportunities for civic leadership. During the California Gold Rush of the 1850s many Jewish merchants there rose to social and economic prominence.

Patterns for establishing communal and financial stability can be found in many Old West towns of the 1800s. Typically one family member was sent ahead to a small town to initiate a business outpost. Cousins, brothers, and other male relatives would later join them to help run the establishment. It was not uncommon for these men eventually to marry the female relatives of their business partners. There are several examples in Leadville of Jews establishing community and commerce in this fashion, including the department store mogul David May.

Notable Leadville Figures

David May was born in 1848 in Kaiserslautern, Rhineland, and came to the United States via New York when he was fifteen to work with an uncle in Cincinnati. He eventually ran his own dry goods business in Hartford, Indiana, which he sold in 1872 and used the profits to migrate to Manitou Springs, CO (Goodstein 1992: 127). Five years later May moved to Leadville where he returned to the dry goods business after an unsuccessful attempt at mining. In 1879 he entered into a business partnership with Moses Shoenberg at 318 Harrison Avenue. The following year he married Moses' sister, Rosa.

Newspaper articles from Leadville's boom days describe formal and informal social gatherings. The columns suggest that the Jewish community was tightly knit with families intermarrying, socializing, and going into business together. One notable exception was Benjamin Guggenheim, who lived in Leadville 1883-88 while serving as bookkeeper for his father's wildly lucrative A.Y. and Minnie mines. Benjamin's name does not appear in any of the social pages during his Leadville stay save for one mention in 1887 as "the most eligible man on the matrimonial bulletin" (August 3, 1887, Leadville Daily and Evening Chronicle). By 1888 Benjamin Guggenheim would be a millionaire.

Boom Days

Within Leadville, Jewish businesses proliferated in the commercial district around Harrison Avenue where they provided goods and services to the miners. In addition to selling dry goods and mining supplies, commerce in wholesale liquor and tobacco provided some of Leadville's most prominent Jews with a comfortable standard of living.

Though Jewish Leadville represented only a small percentage of the town's total population in the 1880s, people became active in the community at large while creating their own organizations and religious community. The construction of a synagogue in a Western boomtown such as Leadville symbolized Jewish prosperity and a settled, rather than transient, presence.

From Boom to Bust

When Leadville's silver mining boom turned to bust after the U.S. government's 1893 switch from the bi-metallic (silver and gold) standard to gold, many who had settled in the "Cloud City" sought their fortunes elsewhere. Among those leaving Leadville for more moderate climates and better opportunities was the town's Jewish population, largely depleted by the time World War I began.

Merchants and Tailors

Providing Goods and Services

Although gold initially brought people to the Leadville area in 1860, it was silver mined in the mid-1870s that caused the city to grow rapidly. By 1877, a massive influx of people sought to get rich quick through mining or a mining-related industry. As with the California Gold Rush of the 1850s, the Jews who came to Leadville principally became involved in providing goods and services to miners.

Many of the 19th century European Jews who immigrated to the United States belonged to a tradition of tailoring and peddling. People in these and other trades found that the United States and especially the West presented less anti-Semitism and more opportunities for economic advancement (Kahn 2002: 14). Within Leadville many of these businesses were concentrated on the east and west sides of Harrison Avenue's 300 block.



An 1887 artist's rendering of Harrison Avenue's 100 block. Several Jewish-owned businesses are visible including the Shoenberg-owned Cheap Joe's, M. Mankuss' tailoring shop, and Ben Loeb's Concert Hall. Image courtesy of the Denver Public Library.

In 1889 Loeb organized a vaudeville event held at City Hall. Favorite performers included the legless singer and dancer, James E. Black, and the human corkscrew, Ronalzo (February 22, 1889 Leadville Daily and Evening Chronicle). Perhaps no one was more closely associated with merry-making in Leadville than Ben Loeb. The German born pioneer initially came to Colorado from Texas in the early 1880s to work as a solicitor for the Baer brothers. Upon his arrival, however, he decided he did not “like the work” and was better suited to being a bartender instead. He quickly rose from bartender to business owner.

Wholesale Liquor

Some of Leadville’s most prosperous Jews worked in the wholesale liquor and tobacco business. A precedent for this line of work had been set during the 1850s California Gold Rush when Jews dominated the wholesale liquor trade in mining towns. Given pioneer Jews’ mobility and practices for incorporating friends and relatives into a business, it is possible that Leadville’s liquor wholesalers got their start via established Western connections.

Prominent families selling liquor and “segars” included the Baer Brothers, G. Janowitz & Sons, and the Schloss Brothers. Of course, liquor and cigar sales were not strictly family affairs. Adolph Schayer and Julius Wolf, for example, were close friends who came to Leadville to go into business together.



Exterior of Hyman’s Saloon, mid-1880s. Image courtesy of the Colorado Mountain History Collection at the Lake County Public Library.

Social Life in Leadville

Clubs and Organizations

There is no known record to indicate what synagogue attendance was like. It is known, however, that Leadville Jews were active in both secular Jewish organizations and non-Jewish civic affiliations such as the Knights of Pythias and the Ancient Order of United Workmen. Many of Leadville’s pioneer Jewish organizations were charitable ones. Among the earliest was the Hebrew Ladies’ Benevolent Society (est. 1879), which had about forty members and provided charitable assistance to local residents regardless of religious affiliation. The roster of names for women active in the group includes female relatives of prominent businessmen: Kahn, Schloss, and Samuels. The Society regularly held charity balls that were popular events, especially the annual Purim Ball. According to a report in the March 23, 1883 edition of the Leadville Daily Herald, Jews were not the only ones in attendance at that year’s Purim festivities; “a great many who were not Israelites” were also present “for it was a masquerade and the fun was great.”

Other organizations structuring social life included a Hebrew school (est. 1882) that held annual picnics, the Leadville chapter of B’nai B’rith (est. 1879 and forced to close in 1881 for being “neglectful of its obligations” [Breck 1960: 129]), and the Hebrew Benevolent Association of Leadville (est. 1879), which buried the dead, cared for the sick and orphaned, and provided aid to those in need.



Young women cross-dressed as men at the Grossmayer home, ca. 1910. The Grossmayers owned a dry goods store at 429 Harrison Avenue. Image courtesy of the Colorado Mountain History Collection at the Lake County Public Library.

Informal Gatherings

According to society gossip columns from late 19th century Leadville newspapers, there were numerous informal social gatherings as well. From elegant dinners to children's birthday parties, Leadville's Jewish community socialized among themselves and with the population at large. Among the amusements to be found in pioneer Leadville were the traveling circus, a mind reading event at the Tabor Opera House, lectures such as Oscar Wilde's, and concerts.

In March 1888 Mr. and Mrs. Schloss—of the successful wholesale liquor business Schloss Brothers—hosted a dinner party in their home. The Schayers, the Janowitzes, and the Baers were among those present—all competitors in the liquor business. From this one may conclude that competition in commerce was no deterrent from socializing with each other..

Amid the newspaper reports shedding light on the kinds of social and cultural events Leadville's Jews attended there are distinct reminders that the mining town remained a rowdy one. Two months after Mr. and Mrs. Schloss hosted their pleasant party, Jacob Schloss is described in the May 3, 1888 Leadville Daily and Evening Chronicle as getting into a street fight with merchant Abraham Walsh. Both men were ordered by a judge to "pay their fines like good boys."



Interior photograph of the Mathilda and Adolph Baer residence at 315 W. 8th Street, circa 1884. Photograph courtesy of Jennifer McGeorge.

Wholesale Fun

Like other western mining towns, Leadville was a place to strike it rich and have some fun. In the 1880s, opportunities were endless to spend one's newfound wealth on liquor, sex, and gambling. There were some 120 saloons, 150 gambling houses, 2 opera houses, and 35 brothels. Leadville's Jews provided services in all these areas. One popular Jewish-owned business was the saloon and gambling house, Hyman's Club Room. Notorious for its brawls, Hyman's has lived on in legend as the location of John H. "Doc" Holliday's last fracas.

Amusements

On Harrison Avenue one Jewish-owned establishment, Ben Loeb's Place, enjoyed renown throughout Colorado for its offerings as a saloon, variety theater, dance hall, and a place to hire prostitutes. Loeb's Place even served as a venue for wrestling and boxing matches. His establishment offered a "ladies' entrance" and a telephone.



Dance hall scene reprinted from Leslie's Magazine. Image courtesy of the Colorado Mountain History Collection at the Lake County Public Library.

Religious Practice

As early as 1879, Leadville's Jewish population had grown sufficiently to warrant holding Rosh Hashanah services in the Shoenberg Opera House on Chestnut Street. Yet a permanent place of worship was not constructed until 1884. In August of that year, the Congregation Israel decided to build a synagogue on the land given to it by H.A.W. Tabor, the "Silver Baron." Over the next 33 days the new synagogue was constructed for \$4,000. On September 19, 1884, Rabbi Morris Sachs of Cincinnati, OH dedicated the building. The event coincided with Rosh Hashanah 5644, which certainly added to the congregation's anticipation of a sweet new year in Leadville.

Although Rabbi Sachs was present to dedicate the building, no rabbi ever lived in Leadville to lead at the new Reform synagogue. Lay members planned and conducted services, which eventually led to some disagreement. The congregation's orthodox members split off in 1892 to form Kneseth Israel. The orthodox congregation met in the homes of its members until 1893 when it purchased a former Presbyterian church at 119 West Fifth Street. That building has since been demolished. Meanwhile Temple Israel offered worship services and sponsored cultural events such as concerts and balls.



This previous Presbyterian church at 119 West Fifth Street became an Orthodox Synagogue for Kneseth Israel in 1893. The building was torn down in 1937 to build a lodge for the Leadville chapter of Elks.

The Hebrew Cemetery

In 1880 the Hebrew Benevolent Association established the Hebrew Cemetery in the southwest corner of Leadville's Evergreen Cemetery. Most likely this was done in response to Gustave "Fred" Jelenko's passing. When mining declined in 1893, the Jewish population began to leave Leadville and interment at the cemetery dwindled. There are 132 graves identified as being from the pioneer era. About a quarter of the graves are those of infants, a sad testament to the harsh challenges Leadville's early residents faced. The burial locations of 12 people have been lost and only 59 original markers remain in the cemetery.

The 20th and 21st Centuries

Minette Miller (1894-1981) was the last "old time" Jewish Leadville native to be buried in the cemetery, alongside her parents. Her mother, Minnie Betsie Miller (1868-1934), ran the M.B. Miller Clothing Company while her father, Nathan Harris Miller (1862-1934), was a prospector and spiritual leader at the Orthodox Congregation Kneseth Israel.

With the town's declining Jewish population in the post-boom era, the Hebrew Cemetery fell into disrepair. In June 1993 the Temple Israel Foundation acquired title to the cemetery ending a long period of neglect. Since 1994 B'nai B'rith Denver has led annual volunteer efforts to clear overgrowth, build a fence, and erect an entryway arch and a monument. The cemetery has since been re-consecrated and began holding Jewish burials again in 2001. By 2004 missing grave markers had been replaced.



The Hebrew Cemetery was established in 1880 in the southwest corner of the Hebrew Cemetery.

Temple Israel Building Timeline

- 1884** Land for Synagogue donated by Horace A. W. Tabor to David May, president of the Congregation Israel.
- 1884** Synagogue built and dedicated on September xx, 1884.
- 1884-circa 1905** The synagogue is in active, regular use.
- 1912** Last recorded event, a wedding, at Temple Israel.
- Circa 1914-1937** The synagogue sits shuttered and unused.
- 1937** Steve Malin purchases and converts the synagogue into a single-family residence. He lives with his family in the rear while running a radiator repair shop in the front.
- World War II** The front portion of the building functions as a dormitory for local miners.
- 1955** St. George Episcopal Church across the street acquires the building and uses the building as a vicarage.
- 1966** Ownership of the building changes again (and several more times), and it is converted into a four-unit apartment complex.

1966 to 2006 The building continues use as rental apartments.

1987 The Temple Israel Foundation incorporates "to acquire, historically rehabilitate, and maintain" the Temple Israel building and to research Leadville's Jewish history.



1894

- October 1992** The Foundation purchases the Temple Israel building.
- June 18, 1993** The District Court awards the Foundation title to Leadville's Hebrew Cemetery, rejoining parcels originally held by the Congregation Israel.
- 1993-present** Restoration and maintenance of the Hebrew Cemetery and the Temple Israel building remain under the Foundation's purview.
- 2001** Thanks to contributions from private donors and the Colorado State Historical Fund (CSHF), the front façade is restored.
- 2006** An electrical fire damages the building, rendering it uninhabitable.
- 2007** Interior restoration work begins with support from additional CSHF grants and private donations. The work crew examines original remaining painted plasterwork and refers to 1884 newspaper descriptions and an 1895 photograph to replicate the 1884 interior.
- 2008** Interior restoration is complete.
- 2009** The Temple Israel building returned to its former look as a synagogue and can be used for special events.
- 2012-Present** A museum is created within the building with permanent exhibits that document Leadville's frontier Jewish history.



1964