

From The Parnas:

By Mark I. Wolfson

After much anticipation, we are excited to announce the release of the new Mikveh Israel website! Of course, I encourage you to go through every part of the site in detail as you have time, but I would like to point out one new important features. In future columns, I will explore other areas of interest.

In the History & Tradition section of the site, you will see a choice for Archive/Art/Artifact. This brings you to the Mikveh Israel Online Museum. Thanks to Joel Rudewitz and Louis Kessler for gathering the information and putting up these exhibits. The current collection in the Online Museum contain over 50 items enshrined in 5 different exhibits - Historic Congregational Items, Presidential Letters, the Gratz Family Collection, the Joseph Simon Collection, and the Portrait Gallery.

Historic Congregational Items

This exhibit contains fascinating documents and artifacts of the congregation dating back to the mid 18th century. Included in this collection are Subscription Lists (pledges for donations) from the early years of the first building, Architectural Plans for the second building which was designed by the famous architect William Strickland, some important letters by Isaac Leeser, our Omer Counters (in use currently in the sanctuary), and the Myer Myers Silver Rimonin, which are the bells that adorn the top of the Torah Scrolls that were presented to the congregation at the opening of the first building in 1782.

Presidential Letter Collection

This exhibit contains images of all of the letters written to Mikveh Israel by US Presidents, beginning with the famous letter from George Washington. The next President to write to the congregation with Abraham Lincoln who acknowledged a warm and affectionate sermon delivered on his behalf by the Hazzan at the time, Sabato Morais. The next President to write a letter was William Howard Taft. We have letters from all of the Presidents since up to the current President Obama, though only the letters through Bill Clinton are displayed in this exhibit.

Gratz Family Collection

Bernard and Michael Gratz were very important people both in the formation of Mikveh Israel, and also in the formation of the United States. Both were very active patriots who participated in the activities leading up to the revolution, and then provided goods to support the continental army during the revolutionary war. Michael's son Hyman provided the inspiration and seed money to start Gratz College. He was also the treasurer of Mikveh Israel for 30 years. Perhaps the most famous in the Gratz family was Michael's daughter Rebecca, who in her 88 years was a leader and innovator and pioneer in Jewish society, founding such institutions as the Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances, the Philadelphia Orphan Society, and the Hebrew Sunday School Society.

Joseph Simon Collection

A leader of the Lancaster Jewish community, Joseph Simon was a trader and merchant, as were many of the early Jewish settlers in the Philadelphia area. He was well respected by the greater community for being honest and fair. He was also very active during the revolutionary period and a patriot and supplier of goods for the army, often in partnership

with his son-in-law, Michael Gratz, who married his daughter Miriam.

Mikveh Israel Portrait Gallery

Adorning the walls of our Social Hall, are portraits of many important members and leaders of the congregation, dating back to the first Minister of Mikveh Israel, Gershom Mendes Seixas. There are also portraits of Isaac Leeser, Sabato Morais, Michael Gratz, Hyman Gratz, Jonas Phillips, the Parnas at the opening of the first building in 1782, and Isaac Hayes, a founder of the American Medical Association.

I hope you enjoy the new web site! As you go through it, please provide feedback and comments. Remember that this will be a "living" web site, that we will be constantly improving and editing. The current version is a work in progress.