

# L.A.'s Pioneering Jews

■ Jewish populations from Europe and the East Coast helped make the City the dynamic place it is today.

The Chavez Ravine Jewish Cemetery site dedication State Historical Landmark #822 Sept. 29, 1968. From left: Victor Carter, Norton B. Stern, Justin Turner and William Blumenthal.



Photos courtesy the Security Pacific Collection, Photo Archives, Los Angeles Public Library, Carolyn Cole, director; and from the photo archives of Western States Jewish History, with permission.

Los Angeles has more ethnic groups living together than any other city in the world. This article will focus on the burgeoning years of both the City's and the Jewish communal growth of the 19th century. I give thanks to the monumental work preceding me from the *Western States Jewish History* volume on the "Pioneer Jews of Los Angeles in the Nineteenth Century," edited by David W. Epstein and Gladys Sturman, to whom I am deeply indebted.

For the most part, the early Jews who arrived in California came originally from Europe to the east coast of this country. Many of the American Jews left established Jewish communities on the Eastern seaboard to participate in the ever-adventurous pursuit of the Wild West. Each individual brought his/her character and expertise that eventually made Los Angeles the mosaic of what it is today.

## Early Arrivals

The first Jew of Los Angeles, recorded in 1841, was a German, **Jacob Frankfort**. He was part of the Workman-Roland party that ventured from Santa Fe, N.M.. Records from the Los Angeles City Archives state that, "Frankfort was a tailor...who came with a firearm, which was needed on this trip." In 1851, he was "recorded in a federal census of Los Angeles that he was one of eight Jews who lived and worked in a single business building, located at the southeast corner of Los Angeles and Aliso Streets." The building was known as either Bell's or Mellus' Row. Frankfort was considered a prominent merchant.

Possibly one of the most prominent early Jewish arrivals was 36-year-old **Harris Newmark**, a wholesale merchant. In time, he was also known as a community leader. But his everlasting contribution to all Los Angelenos through the ages has been his monumental book, *Sixty Years in Southern California, 1853-1913*. This bible of early L.A. history, now in its fifth edition, is full of Newmark's commentaries and remembrances. Of everything Harris Newmark accomplished, his book has remained to this day one of the most important Western histories of all time. It is a real winner to own, and it continues to sell.

Harris Newmark and his huge family clan made a large impact on early Los Angeles around and after the 1850s. Harris arrived in Los Angeles in 1853; he was born on July 5, 1834, in what is now Saxony in eastern Germany. He was known as a Prussian Jew. The first language he learned on his way to California from the East Coast was Spanish, so as to communicate with the majority community. He then learned how to read, spell and write English from one



Harris Newmark at 34 years old, 1868.

of his relatives when he arrived in Los Angeles.

Business-wise, he was adept at groceries and dry goods. Most of his relatives worked for him. In time, real estate became his preoccupation and where he made his fortune. One interesting aspect of that venture was when he and his nephew, Kaspare Cohn, who will be found later in this article, laid out purchased land nine miles from Los Angeles in 1885; the land totaled 1,200 acres. This area became known as Newmark, Calif. The name was changed about 1912 to Montebello.

**Jacob Elias** arrived in Los Angeles in either 1851 or 1852. Along with his brothers, **Raphael** and **Israel**, they had a dry goods and clothing business. Jacob was involved in the beginning as an officer of the Hebrew Benevolent Society, founded in 1854. Elias was also responsible for writing a petition to the Common (City) Council, requesting property for a Jewish cemetery. In the 1860s, he was known to have purchased the Rancho San Rafael, a 36,000-acre property, which covers most of Glendale.

Another early arrival was **Isaac Lankershim**, born a Jew but who converted to Christianity.



Isaac Lankershim.

He maintained all his Jewish ties to family, social and business relationships. He was a major influence in California agriculture and was also involved in land development in the San Fernando Valley, where he acquired and controlled large tracts of farming land. His land investments in the Valley helped Los Angeles become a much larger empire with the expansion and development for Los Angelenos. Lankershim with his son and son-in-law, **Isaac Newton Van Nuys**, formed the San Fernando Farm Association. Isaac was born in 1819, in Bavaria, and died in 1882.

Another German Jewish pioneer, **Kaspare Cohn**, nephew of Harris Newmark, arrived in Los Angeles in 1859. With Newmark he went into the hide and wool business as well as into land development, as mentioned above. Cohn left the Los Angeles area but returned in 1866. Known at one time as the wealthiest Jew in this city, he went into informal banking then formally opened Kaspare Cohn Commercial and Savings Bank. After his death, his bank became Union Bank and Trust Company.

His interests also involved philanthropy, where he established the Kaspare Cohn Hospital on Carroll Avenue in Angelino Heights, above Sunset Boulevard, in 1910. The Victorian home exists to this day. His hospital eventually became Cedars of Lebanon Hospital, and today Cedars-Sinai Hospital near the Beverly Center.



Kaspare Cohn.

## Early Communal Organizations

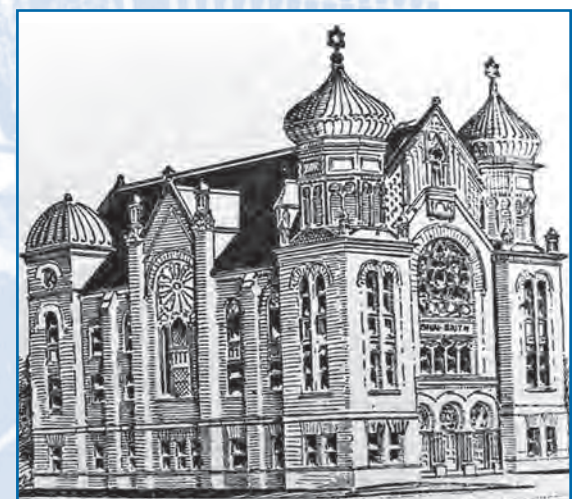
The Hebrew Benevolent Society of 1854 was the first Los Angeles philanthropic and charitable organization founded by Jewish pioneer and rabbi **Joseph Newmark**, uncle of Harris Newmark. The criterion of the organization was to care for the sick and bury the dead. Its concerns went beyond the Jewish community many times. Eventually, a women's branch was formed; in 1915 it became known as the Jewish Aid Society. Later, it became the Jewish Social Service and is now a major component of the Jewish Federation Council of Greater Los Angeles.

The Jewish Cemetery in Chavez Ravine in 1855 became a California State Historical Landmark in September 1968. This hallowed ground, the first of the Jewish community in Los Angeles, was created by the Hebrew Benevolent Society of Los Angeles. The first burial was in 1858, and by 1902 there had been 360 burials.

On July 7, 1854, at a Common (City) Council session, the minutes recorded "the fact that the mayor said that the Council might designate a piece of public land for a graveyard for those belonging to the Hebrew Church." By 1902, it became necessary for many reasons to disinter the 360 buried individuals in Chavez Ravine to a new Jewish B'nai B'rith cemetery in Whittier.

Congregation B'nai B'rith became the first synagogue in Los Angeles in 1862. The very small congregation originally had 32 charter members. Originally, this religious group met at a second floor hall on Arcadia Street. Later, it moved to Leck's Hall and the Temple Court House. **Abraham W. Edelman** was the rabbi. In 1869, there were discussions about needing a permanent home for the synagogue.

The women of the Jewish community contacted the newspapers to place advertisements. They had fundraisers to raise money. Finally, ten years later, the first synagogue became a reality. The new religious facility, Congregation B'nai B'rith, sat on Fort Street (later to become Broadway) between Second and Third streets in Los Angeles. Construction began in August 1872, and continued for 12



The Second Congregation B'nai B'rith, 1900.

# History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives

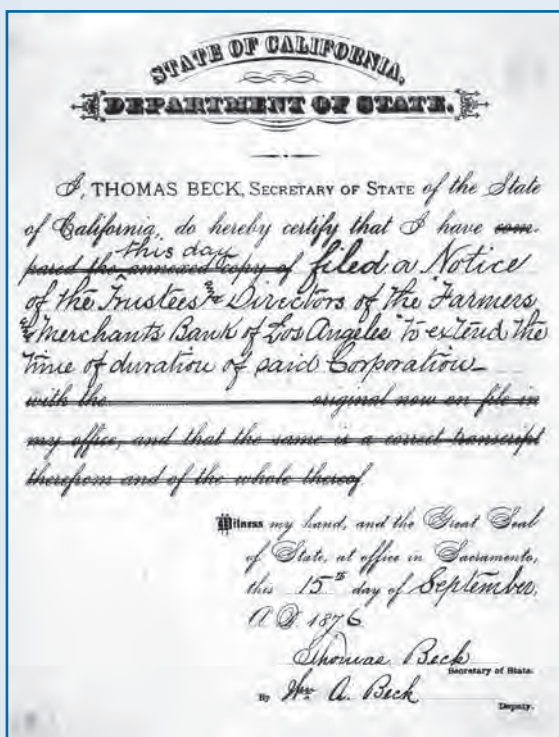


by Hynda Rudd,  
City Archivist (Retired),  
and Club Member

months. It was dedicated Aug. 8, 1873. The building was razed in 1896. A plaque may be seen on the sidewalk in front of where the synagogue once stood. Today's Wilshire Boulevard Temple is the descendant of the Congregation B'nai B'rith.



A street scene outside the Second Congregation B'nai B'rith, 1890.



Incorporation papers of the Farmers & Merchants Bank, 1876.

## Banking Business

**Isaias W. Hellman**, one of the three founders of USC, was a pioneer merchant and banker. Hellman was president and the largest stockholder of The Farmers and Merchants Bank of Los Angeles. It opened in 1868, located on the southeast corner of Main and Commercial Streets. It had paid-up capital of \$200,000, and by 1885, it had a surplus fund of \$400,000. By the time of Hellman's death in 1920, the bank's assets surpassed \$35 million. Eventually, this bank merged with Security First National Bank, and then was acquired by Bank of America. Hellman came from a very large family, much like the Newmarks. Interestingly enough, both families mingled well within the early Christian community in Los Angeles.

In 1875, a controversy arose in Los Angeles over the failure of the Temple & Workman Bank. For some reason the failure was blamed on the local Jewish community. An article on the subject was written 50 years after the controversy by a J.A. Graves and is found in volume 38 of the *Western States Jewish History* featuring *Pioneer Jews of Los Angeles in the Nineteenth Century*, page 149. Mr. Graves was a local attorney, banker and leading citizen of Los Angeles. He was also president of the Farmers & Merchants National Bank at that time, as well as being a lawyer involved in the case of the Temple & Workman case. Graves was not Jewish.

Graves, by then an elderly gentleman, received a letter

from one of Harris Newmark's relatives, requesting information about the supposed heinous crimes committed by the Jewish inhabitants of Los Angeles relating to the failure of the Temple & Workman Bank in 1875. Before sending the information, Graves decided to review his records from 52 years prior.

What he discovered was that the bank failed because neither Temple or Workman were bankers, nor did they have employees who were capable of running the bank. Graves' legal office prosecuted many suits against debtors of the bank; of the 40 cases brought before the District Court, only two were Jewish. Graves concluded: "The bank lost nothing to amount to anything through their Jewish clients." He continued "that the suits...were against American names or [other European clients], many being sheep men."

I have read other accounts, in Los Angeles as well as elsewhere, about anti-Semitism being alive and well in 19th century America. Anti-Semitism could very well be the cause of this unfortunate episode.

## Civic Leaders

One of the eight original pioneer Jews to arrive in Los Angeles was **Morris L. Goodman**, who sat on the first Common (City) Council of 1850, at the age of 31. He also served on the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors. He was born in Bavaria in 1919, becoming a naturalized American at 24. When Goodman took his oath of office on July 3, 1850, he was the only member of the original seven members of the Common (City) Council who was not a Mexican citizen prior to the American conquest and California statehood. He had lived in other parts of the country prior to coming to Los Angeles in 1849. He arrived here because he heard about the gold rush.

From the beginning of his five months in office, Goodman was involved in such movements as: (1) Finding a regular meeting place for Council to meet, and office space for the mayor and the recorder. He was appointed to serve on the committee; (2) He became a one member committee to investigate the issue of "education for the youth in Los Angeles;" (3) He moved that the Council "authorize the mayor to establish a City Police Department;" and (4) to build a bridge over the *zanja*, which crosses the street leading to the plaza. He resigned from the Council on Dec. 18, 1850. In the summer of 1858, he was elected by the Democratic Party to represent, with 25 others, the Los Angeles County at a district party convention. Goodman was elected with **Julius L. Morris** as the first Jews to sit on the County Board of Supervisors in 1860.

**Maurice Kremer** was the City Clerk from 1869-76. He was a French Jew born in Lorraine, France. His experience in record-keeping came from his country's background as the second oldest state archival institution dating back to the end of the French Revolution. In the California's City Charter for Los Angeles in 1878, responsibilities of the City Clerk were to secure the safekeeping of the records, maps and archives of the City. Kremer initiated the first of five different sets of indexes from 1850-76. He spoke four languages: English, German, French and Spanish. He was often called upon to be an interpreter. He also held many civic duties: County Treasurer; School Trustee; President of the Board of Education; and County Tax Collector.



Maurice Kremer.

**Emil Harris** was the only Jewish Chief of Police in the City. His tenure was for one year, from 1877-78, common in that era. He was born in Prussia and migrated to Los Angeles in 1869. He helped create the City's first volunteer fire department in Buffum's Saloon. He began on a six-per-



Sheriff Emil Harris.

son police department, where he almost immediately became chief deputy. He became chief after his leadership in the 1871 Chinese massacre. He was also considered a detective. His conduct during the capture of the horse thief Tiburcio Vasquez in 1874, at the present site of the intersection of Santa Monica Boulevard and Kings Row, helped reconfirm the decision to make him the Chief of Police.

**Bernard Cohn** was a Jewish "wannabe Mayor," who in 1878 held the position for one month upon the death of Mayor Fredrick A. MacDougall on Nov. 16, 1878. Cohn, a respected Councilman at the time, was elected Mayor *pro tem* to fill the vacancy. The night of the Mayor's death, a meeting of the People's Party convention met and elected Bernard Cohn as their candidate for mayor. At the same time, The Workingmen's Party candidate for mayor was James R. Toberman.

Both men had numerous editorials written about them, both pro and con. It appeared that anti-Semitism may have reared its ugly head again. Such comments as "a writer list[ing] a number of Jews whose positions of influence, in his opinion, gave Los Angeles Jewry too much power." In the end, Toberman had 860 votes and Cohn 562. This was the second time Toberman became mayor within the decade. Cohn ran again for Council and won. In 1882, he ran again for mayor. He came in third to Cameron E. Thom, who became the mayor. When Bernard Cohn died in 1889, "there was an outpouring of regard and appreciation expressed for his civic and political contributions to the life of the City."

**Herman Silver** came to Los Angeles as neither a pioneer, pauper nor transient looking for gold in "them thar hills." By the time he arrived around 1885, not much was known about Herman in Los Angeles, with the exception of his involvement in the local Jewish community. But that is not to say that he became an attorney and a supporter of Abe Lincoln in Illinois, and became Assayer of the Mint in Colorado, courtesy of Ulysses S. Grant, prior to his moving to Los Angeles. Herman arrived in America from near Hamburg, Germany, when he was 18. According to others, he arrived around 1848, and most likely came here because of problems with his health.



Herman Silver.

Herman's political life in Los Angeles began in 1896, when he ran for the Common (City) Councilman from the Fourth Ward (wards were used by the Common [City] Council from 1870-1909). Silver was then 67 years old. He was then voted in as president of the Council. During his second term (terms in that era were for two years), water issues were moving from private companies to that of City responsibility. A Water Commission became a Council responsibility. The Water Commission had seven members. Herman was then chosen to be its first president.

He decided to run for mayor instead of another Council term. He ran against Meredith "Pinky" Snyder, who won the election. Newspaper accounts were that Herman was too old, and were insinuations that anti-Semitism had once again raised its unfortunate head. In turn the mayor, now in charge of Commissions, then limited the Water Commission to five members, and Herman Silver was not reappointed. Upon Herman's retirement from that Board, the Chamber of Commerce and the Merchants and Manufacturers Association gave resolutions in his honor. It was this type of recognition that brought the new Board to name a reservoir in Los Angeles the Herman Silver Lake. This action was the precursor to Silverlake.