

May 2008

Beth Wenger

**Author and Katz Chair in American Jewish History,
University of Pennsylvania**



Photo Courtesy of Jack L. Weinstein

[The Jewish Americans: Three Centuries of Jewish Voices in America](#)

Most JGSGP members have seen the PBS Documentary *The Jewish Americans*, which was aired in January 2008. Our speaker, Beth Wenger wrote the companion book, *The Jewish Americans: Three Centuries of Jewish Voices in America*, and was an advisor to the producers of the documentary.

Beth started her narrative talking about 23 Jews, who arrived in New Amsterdam in 1654 to find no established Jewish community. These people, like most Jews came from places where the Jewish community controlled life. These 23 Jews built a community and a culture with no restrictions imposed.

Beth wrote this book to accompany the film and wrote it to be different. It is a compendium of Jewish voices over three centuries written in a first person narrative by important Jews in all walks of life, their descendants, or scholars versed in their life stories.

Life for Jews started with the founding fathers, where the Constitutional Convention promised equal rights to everyone and the ability to practice religion in freedom. Jews had political equality, although in some States it took a while. A Jew could be President of the United States, but, in some States, could not be elected to any office.

Jewish dietary laws were an issue. In the larger communities like Philadelphia, it was easy. However, outside these larger communities, keeping the Sabbath and a kosher home was

difficult. In 1800, there were about 2,500 Jews in America, mainly in five port cities including Philadelphia. The largest of those communities was Charleston, South Carolina.

By 1850, the immigration of Jews from central Europe (mainly the German states) increased Jewish population to 200,000. This immigration changed the geography of the Jews – they spread throughout the country and many were young unmarried men. Their economic niche was as peddlers. Levi Strauss came from Bavaria in 1847 and made his way to San Francisco in 1850.

The book tells the story of Anna Solomon, a 19th century frontier woman who operated a successful store and hotel in an Arizona town that would eventually be named for her family.

The Civil War found Jews fighting Jews, where slavery was the main issue. There were Jews on both sides of this issue. After the pain of the Civil War, life did return to normalcy and by 1880 the Jewish community was stable, well established, and with many entrenched Jewish institutions.

In the period between 1880 and 1920, 2.5 million eastern European Jews immigrated to the US – this was about 25% of all the Jews in the world. In 1880, 3% of world Jewry lived in the US. By 1920, that number was 25%. Although there were many Pogroms in Russia during this period of immigration, the major reason for immigration was the deteriorating economies in eastern Europe and the economic opportunities in the US.

Established Jewish institutions such as HIAS and the National Council of Jewish Women were instrumental in accommodating this large influx of Jews, who could not speak English.

The 1890s saw a backlash against Jewish immigration with anti-Semitism on the rise. This period up through the 1920s also saw the rise of certain Jewish institutions such as Landsmanschaften, the Yiddish press, Jewish Union activism, amongst others. By 1924, when mass immigration ended with restrictive immigration laws, Jewish institutions were well established and over the next 20 years, Jews became secure economically.

In spite of more anti-Semitism – quotas on enrollment at the best Universities, workplace bias, Henry Ford, Father Coughlin, etc. – Jews were very successful. When excluded, Jews set up their own law firms, hospitals, country clubs, etc. Personalities like Hank Greenberg in baseball and Gertrude Berg as Molly Goldberg on Television helped define Jews positively.

Beth Wenger's book and the DVD of the PBS Documentary are available for purchase. See <http://www.pbs.org/jewishamericans/about/purchase.html>. Much more information is available at the PBS website at <http://www.pbs.org/jewishamericans/>.