

An Incomplete History of Jews in Dubuque, Iowa

Alan Garfield, Spiritual Leader
Temple Beth El, Dubuque, Iowa
September 11, 2024

I am frequently asked about the history of Temple Beth El and about Jews in Dubuque, Iowa, in general. Unfortunately, we have no records at the Temple. But thanks to many sources including Loras College, Iowa Jewish Historical Society in Des Moines, and various key individuals including Ellie Landau, Cindy Pearce, and Karen Pritikin, we can piece some of our history together. I'm happy to present it to you here, in an admittedly unfinished state. This pdf paper is divided into 4 sections.

History of the Jewish Community
Jewish Contribution to Dubuque, Iowa
Challenges Jewish Settlers Faced
It's a Mitzvah – the First Jewish Wedding in Dubuque
Jewish Landmarks in Dubuque

1. History of the Jewish Community

The Jewish community in Dubuque, Iowa, has a long history dating back to the early 19th century. Alexander Levi, considered the first Jewish settler in Iowa, arrived in Dubuque in 1833 and established a grocery store. He became the first naturalized citizen in Iowa in 1837[1][3]. Over the years, other Jewish settlers, including Joseph Newmark and C.W. Schreiber, contributed to the community by opening businesses and participating in civic life[1].

By 1857, an informal Jewish worship community had formed, and the first congregation, Bnei Jeshrun, was established in 1862. This congregation later became known as B'nei Abraham. Another congregation, Knesses Israel, was established to serve new immigrants from Eastern Europe[1][2].

In the 2020 census, the Jewish population in Iowa was approximately 5,475[3]. In Dubuque specifically, about 0.1% of the population identified as Jewish (that would be 20)[5]. The city continues to have a Jewish presence, with Temple Beth El serving the community[1].

Sources

[1] JEWISH COMMUNITY - Encyclopedia

Dubuque https://www.encyclopediadubuque.org/index.php/JEWISH_COMMUNITY

[2] Dubuque County Jewish Pioneers <https://iagenweb.org/dubuque/religious/Jewish.htm>

[3] Iowa Jewish History <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/iowa-jewish-history>

[4] Dubuque, Iowa - Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dubuque,_Iowa

[5] Dubuque, IA Religion - BestPlaces <https://www.bestplaces.net/religion/city/iowa/dubuque>

[6] [PDF] Celebrating the Jewish Community in Iowa <https://history.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/dca-dol-celebrate-ijhs-intro.pdf>

[7] A brief history of Judaism in Iowa - Little Village Magazine <https://littlevillagemag.com/a-brief-history-of-judaism-in-iowa/>

[8] Temple Beth El | Dubuque, Iowa <https://templebe.org/>

2. Jewish contribution to Dubuque, Iowa

The Jewish community has significantly contributed to the cultural, social, and economic fabric of Dubuque, Iowa, since the early 19th century. The first Jewish settler, Alexander Levi, arrived in Dubuque in 1833 and became a prominent figure, helping to develop local industries and serving as justice of the peace[3][4].

Jewish settlers in Dubuque have been involved in various businesses, including retail and medical practices, contributing to the city's economic growth. For instance, Joseph Newmark opened a store in 1842, and Dr. S. Lesser became Iowa's first Jewish physician in 1855[3].

The Jewish community also established religious and cultural institutions, such as the B'nei Abraham congregation in 1857 and later Temple Beth El, which continues to serve as the center for spiritual growth and cultural enrichment for Jews in the tri-state area[1][3].

Overall, the Jewish community in Dubuque has played a vital role in shaping the city's history and continues to contribute to its diversity and cultural richness[2][3]. Since 2010, Temple Beth El has been an active participant (in founding and in planning) in the interfaith group known as Children of Abraham. See <http://cofabraham.org>.

Sources

[1] Temple Beth El <https://templebe.org/>

[2] Dubuque County Jewish Pioneers <https://iagenweb.org/dubuque/religious/Jewish.htm>

[3] JEWISH COMMUNITY - Encyclopedia

Dubuque https://www.encyclopediaidubuque.org/index.php/JEWISH_COMMUNITY

[4] Iowa Jewish History <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/iowa-jewish-history>

[5] [PDF] Iowa Jewish Heritage: An Annotated Bibliography <https://pubs.lib.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/article/7773/galley/116494/view/>

[6] Dubuque, Iowa - Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dubuque,_Iowa

[7] [PDF] Iowa and the Creation of American Judaism, 1855–1877 <https://pubs.lib.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/article/8997/galley/117664/view/>

[8] [PDF] Celebrating the Jewish Community in Iowa <https://history.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/dca-dol-celebrate-ijhs-intro.pdf>

3. Challenges Early Jewish Settlers Faced

Jewish settlers in Dubuque, Iowa, faced several challenges as they established their community in the 19th century. One significant challenge was the limited number of Jewish residents, which made it difficult to maintain religious and cultural traditions. For example, Joseph Newmark, who opened a store in Dubuque in 1842, eventually left the city due to the scarcity of fellow Jewish settlers and moved west to help establish the Jewish community in Los Angeles[3].

Additionally, the Jewish settlers had to navigate a predominantly Christian social environment. An early incident involved a Jewish merchant from Alsace who married a prominent non-Jewish woman, which was a significant social event at the time and highlighted the challenges of integrating into the broader society[1].

Despite these challenges, the Jewish community in Dubuque managed to establish religious institutions, such as the B'nei Abraham congregation in 1857, and participated in civic life, contributing to the city's diversity and development[3].

Sources

[1] Dubuque County Jewish Pioneers <https://iagenweb.org/dubuque/religious/Jewish.htm>

[2] Dubuque, Iowa - Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dubuque,_Iowa

[3] JEWISH COMMUNITY - Encyclopedia

Dubuque https://www.encyclopediadubuque.org/index.php/JEWISH_COMMUNITY

[4] Iowa Jewish History <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/iowa-jewish-history>

[5] History | Dubuque, IA - Official Website <https://www.cityofdubuque.org/1060/History>

[6] Temple Beth El <https://templebe.org/>

[7] The Annals of Iowa <https://pubs.lib.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/article/8997/galley/117664/view/>

[8] [PDF] Iowa Jewish Heritage: An Annotated Bibliography <https://pubs.lib.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/article/7773/galley/116494/view/>

4. It's a Mitzvah – the First Jewish Wedding in Dubuque

The first Jewish marriage in Iowa, which took place in Dubuque around 1843, was significant for several reasons. This marriage involved a Jewish merchant from Alsace and a prominent non-Jewish woman (who it seems was respected in society and active in church circles). The union was notable not only because it was the first known marriage of a Jew in Iowa, but also because it represented a blending of cultures and religions at a time when such unions were uncommon.

The marriage was a major social event and was widely discussed in the community for months. It highlighted the integration and acceptance of Jewish settlers within the broader social fabric of Dubuque, despite the challenges of maintaining their cultural and religious identity in a predominantly Christian environment. This event underscored the evolving social dynamics and the increasing acceptance of diversity in the region during the mid-19th century[4].

Sources

- [1] [PDF] Iowa and the Creation of American Judaism, 1855–1877 <https://pubs.lib.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/article/8997/galley/117664/view/>
- [2] Iowa Jewish History <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/iowa-jewish-history>
- [3] JEWISH COMMUNITY https://www.encyclopediadubuque.org/index.php/JEWISH_COMMUNITY
- [4] Dubuque County Jewish Pioneers <https://iagenweb.org/dubuque/religious/Jewish.htm>
- [5] Alexander Levi – Dubuque's Man Of Firsts. - Our Iowa Heritage <https://ouriowaheritage.com/our-iowa-heritage-alexander-levi/>
- [6] A brief history of Judaism in Iowa - Little Village Magazine <https://littlevillagemag.com/a-brief-history-of-judaism-in-iowa/>
- [7] [PDF] Celebrating the Jewish Community in Iowa <https://history.iowa.gov/sites/default/files/dca-dol-celebrate-ijhs-intro.pdf>
- [8] [PDF] Iowa Jewish Heritage: An Annotated Bibliography <https://pubs.lib.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/article/7773/galley/116494/view/>

5. Jewish Landmarks in Dubuque

Dubuque has/had several notable historical sites related to its Jewish community. One significant landmark still in use today is Temple Beth El, which was established with the support of B'nai B'rith Dubuque Lodge 1029. This temple, dedicated in 1939, continues to serve as a central place of worship and community gathering for the Jewish population in Dubuque[1].

Another important historical site is the Jewish cemetery, which was initially part of a six-acre land donation by Alexander Levi. This cemetery later became part of Dubuque's Linwood Cemetery, marking the early presence and contributions of the Jewish community in the city[3].

Additionally, the former site of the B'nai Jeshrun congregation, established by Alexander Levi in 1856, is part of Dubuque's Jewish heritage. Although the original building no longer exists, it did represent the early organized Jewish religious life in the area[3]. These sites collectively highlight the historical significance and contributions of the Jewish community in Dubuque.

Sources

- [1] JEWISH COMMUNITY - Encyclopedia Dubuque https://www.encyclopediadubuque.org/index.php/JEWISH_COMMUNITY
- [2] Dubuque County Jewish Pioneers <https://iagenweb.org/dubuque/religious/Jewish.htm>
- [3] Alexander Levi – Dubuque's Man Of Firsts. <https://ouriowaheritage.com/our-iowa-heritage-alexander-levi/>
- [4] Dubuque, Iowa - Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dubuque,_Iowa
- [5] Iowa Jewish History <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/iowa-jewish-history>
- [6] Historic Preservation | Dubuque, IA - Official Website <https://www.cityofdubuque.org/331/Historic-Preservation>
- [7] Jewish American Heritage Month - National Register of Historic Places. <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/jewish-american-heritage-month.htm>

[8] Alexander Levi: Earliest Pioneer Jewish Merchant and Miner of Dubuque, Iowa <https://www.jmaw.org/levi-jewish-iowa/>