

# Celebrating the Jewish Community in Iowa



Iowa Jewish Historical Society

## When did the Jewish people first come to Iowa?

The Jewish people have been immigrating to Iowa since the 1830s when Iowa was still a part of the Wisconsin Territory. Jewish people are still migrating to Iowa today from Europe, as well as from other locations around the United States. The first recorded Jewish settler in Iowa was Alexander Levi, a merchant from France who settled in Dubuque in 1833 when he was only 24. In 1837, Levi traveled down the Mississippi River to St. Louis with several other foreign-born residents and became the first naturalized citizen of the future territory and state of Iowa. A grocer, miner, mine provisioner and successful department store owner, Levi founded the first two Jewish congregations in the city, served a term as Justice of the Peace, and was one of Dubuque's leading citizens for 60 years. William Krause, the first Jewish settler in Des Moines, arrived with his wife in 1846, when the city was still known as Raccoon Forks. Krause opened the first store in Des Moines, was one of the incorporators of the city, helped found the city's first public school, and was a leading figure in having the State Capitol move from Iowa City to Des Moines.



A. Levi  
FOUNDED 1833 (1833-1912)

## What are the national origins of Jews who settled in Iowa?

### 1840s to the 1880s

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Most of Iowa's Jewish immigrants came from Eastern Europe — Russia, Poland and the Baltic nations. In addition to the languages of those countries, they spoke Yiddish, a separate dialect of German intermixed with Hebrew. For the most part, these immigrants observed the traditional practices and rituals of Orthodox Judaism that had flourished for many centuries in Europe.

### 1930s through the 1950s

Other Jewish immigrants came to Iowa as a result of the Nazi Party's rise to power in Germany and their expansion into adjoining countries. During the late 1930s, some Jews were able to escape to Iowa before the outbreak of World War II. Other Jews came to Iowa as Holocaust survivors in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

### 1980s and 1990s

Iowa's most recent Jewish immigrants are from Russia. As the Cold War came to an end in the 1980s, Russian Jews were allowed to emigrate to other countries. Many chose to settle in Iowa, continuing a pattern of migration that began more than 160 years ago.

## Why did Jews leave Europe and settle on the Iowa prairies?

During the 1800s, Jewish people, as well as non-Jewish people, left Europe to settle in Iowa, primarily for economic reasons. The practice of primogeniture (inheritance by the oldest son) caused younger siblings to seek their fortunes elsewhere. Women also were restricted in the work they could perform for wages. Famines plagued many parts of Europe. Jews in 19th-century Europe also experienced a number of anti-Semitic policies that placed legal restrictions on where they could live or which economic pursuits they could follow. Vicious pogroms (anti-Jewish riots and murderous assaults) resulted in their homes and synagogues being destroyed.

The Nazis took anti-Semitism to new extremes in Europe. Many Jewish people fled as their home countries exploded into the unimaginable atrocities of the Holocaust. Post-World War II constraints on all formal religions in Russia and its satellites made the practice of Judaism difficult there, if not impossible. The United States, on the other hand, was a young country in the 19th century with opportunities for immigrants to participate in expanding business and commercial activities. Jewish immigrants found these opportunities in Iowa, though many moved on west with the advancing frontier. Jewish people, as well as non-Jewish people, are still attracted to Iowa to find jobs, make a living and raise their families. And today, as in the last century, Jewish people in Iowa are the beneficiaries of religious freedom that is perhaps unparalleled in any other country.



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## Where Do Jews Live in Iowa?

From the 1830s to the present day, Jewish people have inhabited more than 100 cities and towns across Iowa, raising families and running successful businesses. All brought with them their customs and beliefs while adapting to new lives in Iowa. The first organized Jewish community was formed at Keokuk in 1855 in the home of S. Gerstele under the name of the Benevolent Children of Israel. In 1877, it erected Iowa's first synagogue.

Other Jewish communities grew up in Dubuque and Burlington in 1857 and in Davenport in 1861. There was a handful of Jewish people in Sioux City on the banks of the Missouri River in the 1860s, but no congregation was formed until 1884. The Council Bluffs community dates from the late 1870s and that in Ottumwa from 1876. Davenport's Temple Emanuel is the oldest existing congregation (the one in Keokuk went out of existence in the 1920s). Des Moines' pioneer congregation, B'nai Jeshurun, was founded in 1870 and erected the state's second synagogue in 1878. Des Moines remains the largest center of Jewish life in Iowa. Sioux City, which was at one-time Iowa's second largest Jewish community, now numbers only 300.

Text and information panels are courtesy of the [Iowa Jewish Historical Society](#).

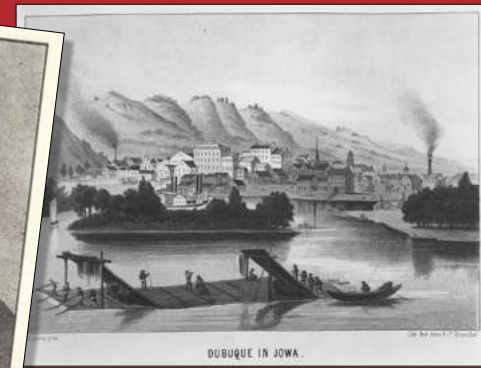
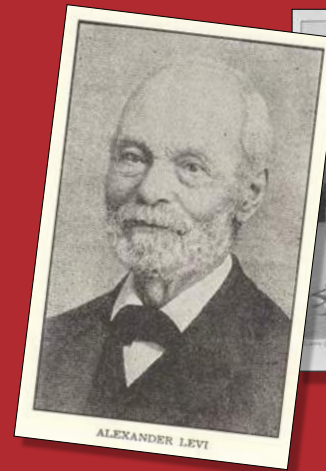
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A grocer, miner, mine provisioner and successful department store owner, Levi founded the first two Jewish congregations in the city, served a term as Justice of the Peace, and was one of Dubuque's leading citizens for 60 years.



Dubuque, Iowa, 1857, courtesy of the Library of Congress



Des Moines, Iowa 1868 courtesy of the Library of Congress

**Isaac Krause**, the first Jewish settler in Des Moines, arrived with his wife in 1846, when the city was still known as Raccoon Forks. Krause opened the first store in Des Moines, was one of the incorporators of the city, helped found the city's first public school, and was a leading figure in having the state capital move from Iowa City to Des Moines.

*"...the incidents of the early days are still fresh in my mind. When I first stepped upon the soil of the city it was called Raccoon Forks, and I don't think we could have counted more than fifteen or twenty inhabitants."*

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Laver cup, used for the ritual washing of hands, brought from Kovno, Russia in the 1850s by the grandparents of Dr. Harry Elmets of Des Moines.



Hebrew school at Adas Yeshurun (Orthodox), Sioux City, Iowa, c.1908

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Celia Bernstein Robinow Citizenship Certificate. Celia immigrated with her parents from Kapula, Russia to Iowa in 1902.

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Adas Yeshurun, 1954. Adas Yeshurun operated from 1899 to 1955. It was one of about seven Orthodox synagogues in Sioux City through the early to mid-20th century. It closed in 1955 when the last five Orthodox synagogues merged into the United Orthodox Synagogue. Photo courtesy of Sioux City Public Museum



Rose, Jacob, and Esther Szneler boarding U.S. Army Transport Ship General Langfille from Germany to the United States on March 19, 1950. Rose and Jacob were Holocaust survivors who met at the Bergen-Belsen Displaced Persons camp where their daughter, Esther, was born.



Steffy Bressler escaped Nazi-occupied Vienna in 1939 with her husband Ernst and settled in Des Moines. Her parents and brother were all murdered in the Holocaust.

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Rabbi Marshall Berg of Des Moines conducting a model Passover Seder for newly arrived immigrants from the former Soviet Union in the 1990s

# Why did Jews leave Europe and settle on the Iowa prairies?

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Jews in 19th-century Europe also experienced a number of anti-Semitic policies that placed legal restrictions on where they could live or which economic pursuits they could follow. Vicious pogroms (anti-Jewish riots and murderous assaults) resulted in their homes and synagogues being destroyed. The Nazis took anti-Semitism to new extremes in Europe. Many Jews fled as their home countries exploded into the unimagined atrocities of the Holocaust. □

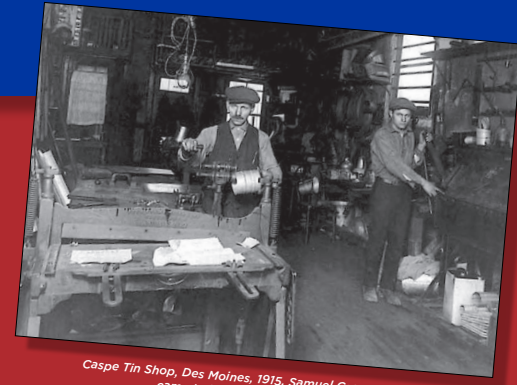
Post-World War II □ constraints on all □ formal religions in □ Russia and its satellites made the practice of Judaism difficult, if not impossible, there.



Children of Israel Synagogue, Des Moines c.1887. It was the first Orthodox synagogue in Des Moines, founded by eastern Europeans on the eastside of Des Moines. This building later burned and a new one was constructed in 1911.



Mt. Sinai, Reform synagogue in Sioux City, IA c. 1939. Mt. Sinai was organized in 1895. They built a new building in 1955 and the newly formed United Orthodox Synagogue moved into this structure the same year. (Photo courtesy of Sioux City Public Museum)



Caspe Tin Shop, Des Moines, 1915. Samuel Caspe, pictured, came to Iowa in 1906 from Russia.

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Interior of Fishel's Deli. David Fishel, pictured in center, was a Holocaust survivor who came to Des Moines in the 1950's where he opened a deli.



Davidson's Furniture in Des Moines was one of many Jewish owned businesses in the state.

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## Did You Know?

*Temple Emanuel in Davenport, organized by German immigrants in 1861, is the oldest continuously active Jewish congregation in the State of Iowa.*



*In 1857, Godfrey Hattenback, the first Jewish settler, arrived in Sioux City. (Courtesy of Sioux City Public Museum)*



*Drawing of B'nai Israel in Keokuk. Dedicated in 1877 it was the first permanent Jewish house of worship in Iowa.*



*Purim carnival, Cedar Rapids. Unknown date. Purim is a Jewish holiday held in spring to commemorate the defeat of Haman's plot to massacre the Jews as recorded in the book of Esther. The first Jewish organization in Cedar Rapids, Eben Israel Cemetery Association, was organized in 1895.*



*Exterior view of Beth El Synagogue in Fort Dodge, IA c.2000. Jewish settlers began arriving around the turn of the 1900s. In 2000 community numbers had dwindled and the building was sold to another church. Similar stories occurred from the 1980s to now in communities like Centerville, Oskaloosa, Muscatine, and Marshalltown.*



*Temple B'nai Jeshurun in Des Moines, c.1887. Temple B'nai Jeshurun was organized by mostly German immigrants in 1873.*



*Early photo of Council Bluffs -date unknown.*



*B'nai Israel in Council Bluffs today.*