

## **IMMIGRANT JEWISH FARMS**

Delaware's first Jewish farmers, Isaac and Ida Beinoff, settled here in 1897. Like those to follow, they were recent immigrants fleeing poverty and oppression in their native Russia. Between 1912 and 1929, the Jewish Agriculture Society, based in New York City, provided loans to the Beinoffs and other Jewish farmers who moved to Kent County as part of a national "back-to-soil" movement. After World War II, the Jewish farmers remaining in the area contributed to the organization of the Jewish community in southern Delaware and the establishment of the first synagogue in Dover.

**KC-58**

**LOCATION:** *West of Viola*

# Jews find Sussex roots

Today's Jewish community can trace its beginnings to families who settled in the townstate despite prejudice and deed restrictions.

By RHONDA B. GRAHAM  
Staff reporter

In the early 20th century, Bertha Ableman was an active member of the women's auxiliary at Millsboro's Methodist church.

But when members invited her family to dinner on a Friday, they included a set of candlesticks and matches with the table setting so they could observe the Jewish sabbath.

"They knew that when the sun went down, that was her practice," Bernard "Nardy" Ableman says about his mother.

Tonight, the Wilmington attorney will share these and other stories of his family's assimilation in Sussex County as early as 1888, when his grandfather began peddling spectacles to farmers.

His audience will be a new group of Jewish immigrants — transplants from northern Delaware, resort retirees and young families — who make up the Seaside Jewish Community Group. With a mailing list of more than 300 and attendance at monthly gatherings exceeding 100, the Seaside group is the largest number of Jewish residents the county has ever recorded.



Bernard Ableman

"There have been Jews in Sussex County off and on since the 1700s, but this is the first time in history that there are enough people who make up a critical mass," said Charles Salkin, a Conservative Jew who researches Jewish history in Kent and Sussex counties.

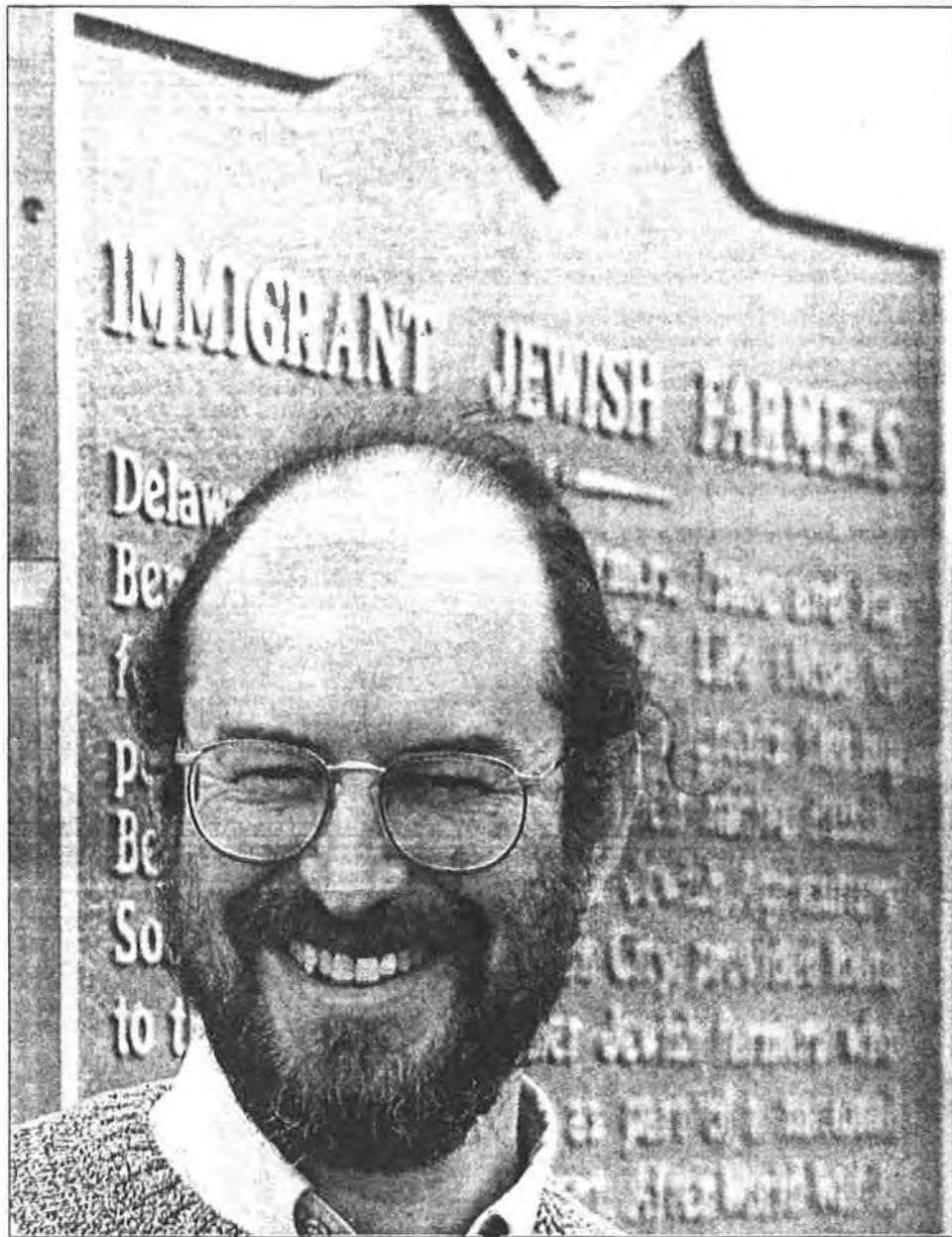
Information has been scanty. Salkin scanned phone directories, census records and community histories, often deciphering possible connections by the sound of a name.

There were the Pack, Reis and Hirsh families, cannery and packing families in the Milford area — and the Greenbaum oyster packing business of Seaford, at the turn of the century.

The Buchler family of upholsters; the Sapp family, owners of a linen shop; and Yellin's Five and Dime were in the Rehoboth Beach area.

"There was a cluster of Jewish business people at the turn of the century," Salkin says, and more families came and went through the 1950s. "It would be they were there because of the [original] port or federal quarantine station for immigrants at Fort Miles" at Cape Henlopen.

Many were fleeing persecution or poverty in eastern Europe. They may have arrived by boat because the Sussex beaches were a secondary



The News Journal/GARY EMIGH

Charles Salkin says Jews have come and gone in Sussex County since the early 1900s, but the most recent influx is the first to result in a "critical mass," and let members of the community establish a local center. Earlier, they had to drive at least to Dover for religious support, and sometimes turned to local Protestant clergy.

port for immigration. Others who arrived via Philadelphia may have preferred the quiet rural climate to the teeming tenements of urban life.

At the time, the beach communities were officially deed-restricted to exclude minorities and Jews. This meant that the settlements began in the western part of the county.

Many of the resort communities such as Rehoboth Beach began as religious "camp meeting" grounds for Christian revivals.

See SUSSEX — D2

## IF YOU GO

**What:** Seaside Jewish Community Group monthly meeting  
**Time:** 8 tonight  
**Where:** All Saints Episcopal Church, 18 Olive Ave., Rehoboth Beach

47. Newspaper heiress Patricia Hearst is 44. Basketball player Charles Barkley is 35. Actor French Stewart ("3rd Rock from the Sun") is 34. Model Cindy Crawford is 32.

## IF YOU GO

### The Jewels of Lalique

**What:** Show at Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York, through April 12

**Hours:** Tuesday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Wednesday-Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 5 p.m.

**Admission:** \$5 adults, \$3 seniors and students

**Information:** (212) 849-8300

**Publication:** "The Jewels of Lalique" (Flammarion, \$50), edited by Yvonne Brunhammer, curator of the exhibition and former director of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

**Other dates:** Smithsonian International Gallery, Washington, May 15-Aug. 15; and Dallas Museum of Art, Sept. 13, 1998-Jan. 10, 1999

The exhibition focuses on the years of Lalique's most creative period as a jewel maker, the two decades from 1889 to 1909. During these years, he made ornaments that were worn on stage by Sarah Bernhardt, he exhibited with stunning success at the 1900 World's Fair in Paris and made the international art nouveau movement a popular part of wearable design.

# Sussex: Jewish presence grows

## FROM PAGE D1

"So the early attraction was for Christian religious purpose. That would not be a discriminatory reason, but later on, other areas had deed restrictions," Salkin says.

The Seaside Community also is relying on recollections of non-Jews, like Elizabeth Dick Thoroughgood, a descendant of the Dick family, one of Rehoboth Beach's earliest families. By the time she graduated from high school in 1938, there was a smattering of Jewish families who had become business leaders just before the Depression.

One of the most enterprising was Harry Rapkin, who is buried in a Jewish cemetery in North Wilmington.

"He ran the Wagon Wheel, which was a night spot after Prohibition," Thoroughgood said. "He came here in the late '30s and it was one of the places that functioned during the war."

Among the most prominent and still recognizable names is the Ableman family. They operated a popular dry goods department store in Millsboro for nearly 100 years. It closed in 1979 and the fixtures were donated to the Delaware Agricultural Museum in Dover.

"When my grandfather opened

their store there were a lot of people concerned about whether they wanted to deal with a 'foreigner,'" Ableman says.

"Foreigner" became a euphemism for Jews, other minority groups and non-natives, who were viewed with wariness.

The suspicion in some cases was mutual. While Abel Ableman conceived his children in Sussex County, he insisted that his wife be sent to Philadelphia for their delivery.

"My grandfather did not trust the midwives," Ableman says. "He didn't think they knew their medicine well enough. They did not have enough medical supervision for him."

The irony of Bertha Ableman's participation in a Methodist church has a modern-day equivalent. Seaside Community holds its monthly meetings in the parish hall of All Saints Episcopal parish, founded by Thoroughgood's great-grandparents in 1891.

The family has enjoyed a long history of religious fraternization with Protestants, beginning with the family patriarch. On Sept. 20, 1897, a St. Mark's Episcopal Church priest wrote in his diary:

"Rabbi Rautch came down to circumcise a child at Abel Ableman's this noon. Many went to see

the ceremony. I called at the rabbi's after supper. He sang many selections for me."

Bertha Ableman, who died in 1980, relied on a Methodist preacher to help her family in the absence of a permanent rabbi.

"There was a Methodist pastor, Omar Jones. If we became ill, he would pay a visit to the house and say hello and a prayer," Ableman says.

But Bertha and her husband, Benjamin, insisted that their sons be bar mitzvahed, sending their oldest son, Percival, to Wilmington once a week for a year to study for the spiritual rite-of-passage ceremony for 13-year-old Jewish boys.

The father and son would rise at 3 a.m. for the six-hour auto trip on dirt roads to Beth Shalom synagogue in Wilmington.

Eleven years later, a Jewish man in Milford who was knowledgeable about Hebrew tutored "Nardy." But the first synagogue below the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal had yet to be completed in Dover. So the family traveled to Wilmington once again for the ceremony.

"They were careful to make sure that everyone knew that they were Jewish," Ableman said.

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# Descendants mark a nearly forgotten chapter of state history

## Del.'s Russian Jews remembered

By J.L. MILLER  
Dover Bureau reporter

VIOLA — For the first time in a half-century, the Hebrew words of an ancient Jewish prayer were lifted heavenward at a Viola farm as a small group gathered on the front lawn Thursday morning.

"Praise be the Lord our God, who has given us life, sustained us and brought us to this joyous occasion."

About 35 people came to the farm of Olin M. and Irene D. Kersey to dedicate a state historical marker that commemorates the centennial of a nearly forgotten episode of Delaware history: the settlement of Jewish farmers in Kent County.

While the settlers are long dead and most of their descendants have moved away, memories of a bygone era came to life as descendants of Isaac and Ida Benioff celebrated their ancestors' unique contribution to the history of Delaware and the Jewish community.

"I heard the stories of Delaware all my life," said Edythe Bloom, who traveled from West Hartford, Conn., for the ceremony.

"The air is full of shades of people who are gone. I could cry for them," said the 76-year-old grandchild of Isaac and Ida Benioff, her voice thick with emotion.

The story of the Jewish farmers of Kent County was unearthed by Charles A. Salkin, who came across a one-paragraph reference to the settlers in a history book about 10 years ago.

"I was convinced it was an error," said Salkin, director of the state Division of Parks and Recreation.

On a whim, Salkin began looking for Jewish names in old Kent County land records. "First I found one, and then another and another," he said.

The first to arrive were the Benioffs, who like countless other Russian Jews fled their homeland to escape violence and oppression. They bought the farm in the winter of 1897, leaving New York City in hopes that the country air would help daughter Sarah, who most likely had tuberculosis.

Sarah died, but the Benioffs put down roots in the soil of central Kent County. They soon were joined by Ida Benioff's sister and brother-in-law, who bought a farm nearby in 1900.

But the Jewish influx didn't gather steam until the founding of the Jewish Agricultural Society, which provided second mortgages and financial aid to Jews seeking to leave the city.

Between 1913 and 1929, 21 Jewish families settled on farms in



Michael Benioff and his wife, Marianne, look over a new historic marker near Viola honoring his grandfather, believed to be the first Jew to settle a farm in Kent County — in 1897.

Kent County, Salkin learned. Another family settled in Sussex County, and another near Newark.

But the Jewish settlement proved short-lived. "They didn't know anything about farming, they bought poor soils, they were unhappy and isolated, and most of the farms failed," Salkin said.

Isaac Benioff, a farmer by happenstance but a furrier by trade, returned to New York every winter to sell furs to keep the farm afloat. The family moved to Allentown, Pa., in 1919, where they established a fur business that closed only recently.

Isaac Benioff died in 1936, but the farm remained in the family until its purchase in 1945 by the Kerseys.

Grandson Michael Benioff of Allentown remembered visiting the farm as a child and cherishes memories of his grandmother, who died in the mid-1950s. He said he was taken aback by the number of people attending Thursday's ceremony and the depth of the emotions expressed.

For Bloom, who often visited the farm in her youth, it was like coming home.

"I could be buried here," she said. "If I call anything my root, it's the farm."



Charles A. Salkin, director of the state Division of Parks and Recreation, explains how he came across the story of the first Jewish farmers of Kent County.

## Kersey Farm takes state tree title

### Home to Delaware's biggest mulberry

From the Dover Bureau

VIOLA — A 44-foot-tall white mulberry tree was certified Thursday as the biggest of its kind in Delaware, easily dethroning the previous champion.

The new champion, whose trunk is 13 feet, 7 inches around, is on the Viola farm of Olin and Irene Kersey, behind their house on Kersey Road.

The tree previously listed as

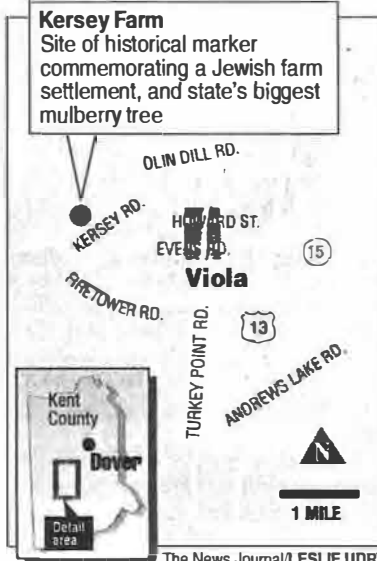
champion, near Cowgills Corner east of Dover, is a little more than 9 feet in circumference.

Division of Parks and Recreation official Timothy Kaden spotted the tree Thursday as officials prepared to dedicate a historical marker on Kersey Road. The marker commemorates the centennial of a Jewish farm settlement in the Viola area.

"I measured it no more than a half-hour before the crowd arrived," said Kaden, who coordinated the state's "Big Tree List" before moving from the Agriculture Department to DNREC.

The Kersey tree is an estimated 125 to 150 years old. White mulberry trees, which are not native to the United States, were planted in Delaware in the 19th century in hopes of building a silkworm industry here. That idea failed.

While the Kersey tree easily won the Delaware crown, it is dwarfed by two trees that are competing for the national title. A white mulberry in Leavenworth, Kan., is 23 feet around and 55 feet tall, while another in Holt County, Mo., is almost 22½ feet around and 61 feet tall.



The News Journal/LESLIE UDRY