Celebrating the Jewish Community in Iowa

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.

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

1840s to the 1880s
Most of Iowa's Jewish immigrants came from Western Europe — Germany, France and Austria. They spoke German or French and followed the practices of Reform Judaism, a liberal movement that originated in Europe at the beginning of the 1800s.

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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 pogrums (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.
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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"...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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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.