

Hi RG,

A group of Sephardic Jews initially arrived in Georgia in 1733 in Savannah (then Yamacraw Bluff). They came 5 months after the initial arrival of James Edward Oglethorpe who was settling Georgia for the British Crown.

When Oglethorpe saw "Jews" arrive he initially was unsure of their "welcome" to this new colony. In checking with his bylaws, he noted that Georgia was closed to "Papists" (Catholics) and "barristers" (attorneys) - therefore, the new colony welcomed them. In fact, a Dr. Nunez is said to have saved the small colony when an "infection" overtook the colony. Nunez Georgia is named for him.

Then, during what was called The Queen Anne War (or the War of Jenkins Ear), the Spanish had become well entrenched in St. Augustine (Florida) - and - the Sephardic Jews feared reprisal as the Inquisition was still going on. At that time, many Sephardic Jews left for Charleston. However, General Oglethorpe intervened and formed a buffer zone between St. Augustine and Savannah. This buffer zone was known as Darien Georgia. Darien was settled by a group of very rugged Scottish Highlanders. Most of the Sephardic Jews then returned to Savannah feeling much safer.

In any case, in Modern Times. Sephardic Jews came to areas around the turn of the century to cities that had been settled by Greek Orthodox. My Grandfather, Victor Behar (1875-1955 - Born Istanbul - Galata), settled in Atlanta initially in 1903 (on his way to the Louisiana Exposition in St. Louis). This exhibition was to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase

He was invited to Atlanta by some of his Greek Orthodox friends. The Greek Orthodox communities in the United States also have large Sephardic communities (i.e., Atlanta, Montgomery, Seattle, Los Angeles, etc.). The Greeks thought that the arrival of non-english speaking Jews would take the "heat" off of them. Conversely, the Sephardic arrivals thought that the "Blacks" would take the "heat" off of them. They were all correct to a degree.

In any case, Victor Behar left Atlanta only to return in 1911. At that time there was a small Sephardic community. Instead of "peace and tranquility" among them, they were literally at war over Sephardic Customs. Atlanta was settled by Sephardic Jews from Turkey and from Rhodes. Therefore, they even split up and formed two synagogues. Later, they finally came to their senses and the two groups re-united and formed Congregation Or Ve Shalom.

Atlanta still has a thriving Sephardic populace. Each year there is a major event - The Sephardic Bazaar held at Congregation Or Ve Shalom. Literally thousands of Jews and non-Jews look forward to celebrating Sephardim as well as purchasing the finest Sephardic cooking anywhere.

I hope that this small overview of Sephardic Jews of Georgia (Savannah and Atlanta) answered your question about Southern Jewry.

Finally, many local Sephardic Jews are really "good old boys". We are, for the most part, very southern (i.e., Driving Miss Daisy). We have always blended very well with the Christian community as well as the German Jewish community (arrived Atlanta - a/k/a Terminus - then - Marthasville initially 1837) and the Russian Jewish community (arrived initially 1885).

I myself have hunted with members of the KKK (boar hunting in the mountains of Tennessee). When I was young, I even catered the KKK annual picnics held at Stone Mountain Georgia (formerly owned by the KKK - Venable Family). In fact, when I asked the Grand Dragon of the KKK if he knew that his picnic was being catered by Jews - he answered, in a rather rough tone that one of his closest friends was Mr. Julius Levitt and his fathers best friend was Mr. A.J. Levitt - strange bedfellows!

There are books on Southern Sephardics....the most noted on Atlanta was written in the 1970's by Solomon Beton.

Best Regards,

Victor Barocas