

## Through the Years

As the New Year approaches, the Trustees and staff of the Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives would like to wish you all a **very happy, healthy and peaceful New Year!** We invite you to visit our museum to learn more about the history of the Richmond Jewish community. Our mission is to collect, preserve and exhibit materials related to Jewish history and culture, with particular emphasis on Richmond, Virginia.

Recently, the Congregation opened a time capsule that had been embedded in the cornerstone of its education building for sixty-two years. In it, they discovered eight items: a mezuzah; a program and photograph documenting the laying of the cornerstone; two other programs; and three booklets published in the 1940s and 1950s.

If you were at the opening ceremony what probably struck you was the ordinariness of the capsule's contents. Remember however, that in 1957 the clergy and congregation took the opportunity to speak directly to the future. Why did they choose these eight items? What was special about the booklet, *Through the Years: A Study of the Richmond Jewish Community, 1654-1954*? The booklet implores us to follow the example of our ancestors and, as American Jews, to continue to make our community a better place.

*Through the Years* was written by Marilyn Greenberg (Mikki Evens) under the auspices of the Richmond Jewish Community Council. Its purpose was to tell the story of Richmond's Jewish community from its inception, through 1954, the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Judaism in America. The booklet highlights the accomplishments, contributions and aspirations of individual Jews, including Isaiah Issacs.

The first permanent Jewish resident of Richmond was said to be Isaiah Isaacs, who first appears in the public record in 1769. In the early 1780s, Isaacs entered into a business and real estate partnership with Jacob I. Cohen and the two men operated a tavern, the Bird in Hand, at the foot of Church Hill. Over the next 10 years, they acquired property in Richmond. Isaacs acquired additional property in Richmond, Henrico, Powhatan, Louisa, Norfolk and Albemarle. He was prominent in public affairs and ran for office in 1785, seeking a seat on the twelve-member Common Hall (or city council). He lost his first race, but three years later ran again and this time was elected. In the 1790s, Isaacs served as a member of the grand jury.

Isaacs was listed as one of the founding members of K. K. Beth Shalome in 1789, and two years later deeded land for the first Jewish cemetery in Richmond, the Franklin Street Burying Ground. He married twice and had four children.

A copy of his will, written in 1803, includes the following passage:

"It is my will that my children may be so educated as to make them useful citizens . . . My executors are to place my children in the families of respectable Jews to the end that they may be brought into the religion of their forefathers. Being of the opinion that all men are by nature equally free and being possessed of some of those beings who are unfortunate doomed to slavery, as to them I must enjoin my executors a strict observance of the following clause in my will. My slaves hereafter named are to be and hereby are manumitted and made free so that after the different periods hereby mentioned they enjoy all the privileges and immunities of freed people."

Twenty years after the dedication of the education building, and forty-two years before the opening of the time capsule, the Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives was established to preserve “rich material . . . for the study of man’s devotion to ideals and the fruits of this devotion.” In doing so, the museum promotes the “consciousness of history,” which entails “not only the study of the past, but also the study of the present and the prospects for the future.”

As you approach the New Year, consider how you will make a difference in your life and the lives of our community. *Chag Sameach!* We look forward to your visit to the Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives, which is open Sunday through Thursday from 10:00 to 3:00.