

# Charleston Mercury

THE PAPERZINE WITH A COSMOPOLITAN ATTITUDE

## Deep Colonial roots for Coming Street Cemetery



By Randi Serrins

You probably drive by it all the time and don't even know it exists. Bounded by Morris Street on the south, Cannon Street on the north, Coming Street on the east and Felix Street on the west is Coming Street Cemetery, the pre-Revolutionary War, historic cemetery of Congregation Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, Charleston's Reform Jewish synagogue.

KKBE, located downtown on Hasell Street, was founded as a Sephardic Orthodox congregation in 1749. Prominent members of the early congregation, the DaCosta family, purchased the land on Coming Street in 1754 as their family's private burial ground. In 1764, they sold it to KKBE for £70 British sterling.

Coming Street Cemetery, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, is the oldest and largest colonial Jewish cemetery in the South. The cemetery, which occupies almost an acre of land, has about 500 graves, and approximately 800 souls are buried here. Here lie the remains of many notable Jews of a community that, during the antebellum period, had become the largest, most cultured and wealthiest Jewish community in America.

Along with many who contributed their talents and modest fortunes to the development of our state, there are a number of notable figures buried in Coming Street Cemetery:

- 11 members who fought in the American Revolution

- Six soldiers of the War of 1812

- Two soldiers of the Seminole Wars in Florida

- 23 Confederate soldiers, eight of whom died for the Confederate Cause

- Four of the 11 founders of the Supreme Council of Scottish Rite Masonry in 1801

- Dr. Columbus DaVega, who designed and built a floating hospital ship that was stationed in Charleston Harbor and used during the Confederacy. He was also an innovator in patient care at the Medical College of South Carolina (which later became MUSC)

- Michael Lazarus, who opened the Savannah River to steam navigation in 1826 -Joshua Lazarus, who introduced gas lighting to Charleston in 1848

The cemetery is divided into three sections. What is known as “Section A” is the original Congregational cemetery and dates from 1764. Then, in 1841, “Section B” was developed by a newly-formed congregation in Charleston, Shearith Israel. A number of congregants of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim were unhappy with the ritual reforms taking place at KKBE, among them the installation of an organ. The organ represented a radical innovation in the synagogue. They broke away and built their own synagogue on Wentworth Street (the building no longer exists). A 12-foot brick wall was erected to separate the two sections of the cemetery. The wall was dismantled in 1886 and is presently knee high.

As far as “Section C” is concerned, this is completely the Lopez family plot. David Lopez, Jr., purchased it in 1843 as his family’s burial ground. David, as a member of Shearith Israel, could not bury his wife, Catherine Hinton Lopez, in the Shearith Israel cemetery since she was not Jewish (only Jews are buried at the cemetery). A handsome wrought iron fence and gate with the words, “David Lopez,” separate the Lopez plot from Shearith Israel’s burial ground.

Currently, there are only a few family plots at the Coming Street Cemetery. Present burials take place in KKBE’s Huguenin Avenue Cemetery, established in 1887. We owe much of our knowledge about the Coming Street Cemetery to Solomon Breibart, our historian and teacher who was buried here in 2009.

For a tour of the cemetery, which is gated and locked, please call the KKBE Temple office at (843) 723-1090.