

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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family that included extensive family trees. The earliest items that he gave me for the *MOSAIC* project included a detailed front-page Live Oak newspaper article about the 1916 brit milah of Joel Fleet, a son of Sam and Minnie. The 1940 ketubah of Joel and Margaret Fleet and many family photos were donated to the collection of the museum. Thus I have known of the Fleet family for four decades. But not until this book did I grasp the durability and tenacity of its patriarch.

As a cultural anthropologist focusing on Florida Jewish communal history, I wish that Novey had supplied his readers with a family tree, so that they could identify more fully the recipients of the letters and their relationship to Sam. One grandchild of Minnie and Sam is Adele Fleet Bacow, the wife of Lawrence “Larry” Bacow, who became the twenty-ninth president of Harvard University. I was amused to read Sam’s birthday letter to Larry, enclosing five dollars, a sum that the patriarch sent annually to all of his grandchildren and great-grandchildren as well as their spouses. The grandchildren reciprocated with correspondence that paid tribute to Sam’s estimable character and charming personality. *The Life and Letters of Samuel Ellsworth Fleet* thus constitutes a glowing contribution to the family records that enhance southern Jewish historiography.

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**Most Fortunate Unfortunates: The Jewish Orphans’ Home of New Orleans.**

By Marlene Trestman. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2023. 336 pages.

**M**arlene Trestman approaches her subject with passionate interest born of her own experience. As related in the preface to her study of the Jewish Orphans’ Home of New Orleans (hereafter referred to as the Home), she lost both of her parents by age eleven and was placed with a loving foster family. She attended day camp and ballet classes at the Jewish Community Center that was housed in the Home’s former building. The author also attended the Isidore Newman School that the Home had established. Acknowledging her personal connection to the Home and its

history, Trestman celebrates its accomplishments, but she does not shy away from its shortcomings. Hers is the first complete history of this influential institution.

Trestman's comprehensive and engaging study is enhanced by photographs and the recollections of Home alumni. Her book chronicles the development of the Home against the backdrop of American and Jewish history, conditions in the city of New Orleans, and the evolution of theory and practice in the dependent childcare field. In many respects, the Home's story resembles those of other American—and specifically American Jewish—orphans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Trestman also highlights some unique features of the Home, expanding knowledge of the history of both child welfare and southern Jewry. Her study addresses issues of race, class, and gender as they factor in the Home's story.

The association that created the Jewish Orphans' Home of New Orleans was formed in March 1855 in response to the recurring yellow fever epidemics in the city. New Orleans was a propitious site for such an institution. There Ursuline nuns founded the first orphanage in what became the United States as early as 1726. Other Christian groups established childcare institutions in the city, which boasted a number of Jewish charitable societies. The Home was not the first Jewish orphanage in the country. The South Carolina Hebrew Orphan Society had been formed in 1801 to place Jewish orphans in private homes, and the Jewish Foster Home of Philadelphia was established in 1855, six months before the New Orleans institution was built. However, the New Orleans Home was the first American Jewish orphanage to have its own building. The Home's founders and early leaders—including Gershom Kursheedt, James Gutheim, Meyer Simpson, and Joseph Marks—were prominent members of the city's Jewish community.

From its founding through its closing in 1946, the Home cared for a total of 1,623 full and half orphans, as well as twenty-four adult women, mostly widows. After 1924 the admission policy expanded to include any child "without adequate means of support" or "proper care or supervision" (188). Although half of the Home's residents were between the ages of five and ten, the New Orleans directors were unusual in accepting children under age two. Dues paid by association members and voluntary donations funded the orphanage. Beginning in 1875, District Grand

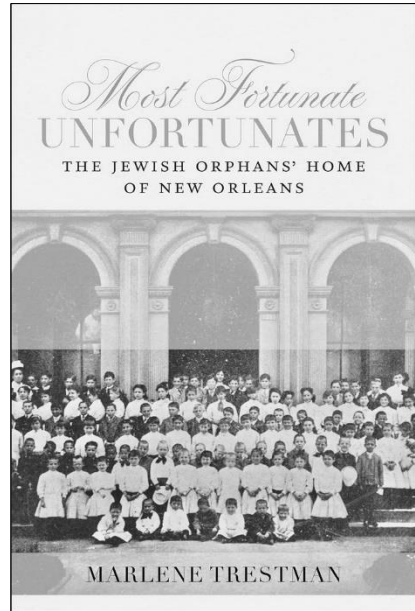
Lodge #7 of the International Order of B'nai B'rith also made annual contributions. A regional institution, the orphanage served seven mid-South states -- Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, Tennessee, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. Compared to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum of New York and the Cleveland Jewish Orphan Asylum, for instance, the New Orleans Home was small. Its largest enrollment was 173 in 1915.

Like other American orphanages in the nineteenth century, the Home had a regimented atmosphere in its early decades. Children were summoned to meals and other activities

by a clanging bell, slept in barracks-style dormitories, and ate at long tables. However, the Home's small size softened some of these features, allowing for more individual attention.

In the early twentieth century, childcare experts began to criticize institutional settings. Increasingly, they advocated for home care for dependent children, either with their families (subsidized by mothers' pensions) or in foster homes. Orphanage directors experienced mounting pressure to make their institutions as home-like as possible. They were encouraged to nurture children's individuality, to provide more social and recreational activities, and to promote their wards' greater integration into the larger community. The New Orleans Home's board and staff responded by introducing smaller bedrooms to replace the dormitories and family-style dining. Youngsters attended synagogues and enjoyed clubs, team sports, musical instruction and performances, overnight summer camp experiences, birthday celebrations, and more visiting opportunities with parents and relatives.

Like many other American Jewish orphanages, the Home's religious program reflected Reform Jewish practice as favored by the founders. Despite a bylaw that required adherence to Jewish dietary laws, the orphanage served shrimp and ham to its young charges by the early



twentieth century, and the children enjoyed both Passover matzo and Easter eggs. After 1880, when more eastern European immigrant children gained admittance to the Home, they received the same Reform-style religious training, which sometimes distanced them from their more observant immigrant parents.

Some aspects of the Home's history distinguish it from the experience of other American Jewish orphanages and enrich our understanding of the New Orleans Jewish community. At least fourteen of the Home's thirty founders owned slaves, including children. Trestman describes this situation as "moral dissonance" (17) with their support for the home. Other founders, even if they did not own slaves, profited from slavery in some way because it was intertwined with the city's economy. During the bitter Civil War years, the Home's leaders provided food and clothing to Confederate troops. Four of the leaders (including Rabbi Gutheim and his family) were expelled from the city because they refused to swear allegiance to the United States, as the occupying Union forces required in September 1862. The Home later hired Black staff members as housekeepers, custodians, cooks and, most commonly, nursery workers for its youngest children. As Trestman notes, middle- and upper-class white families in New Orleans often employed Black women as caregivers for young children at the time. She comments that "while segregationist laws and societal norms precluded public interactions between the races . . . close relationships between Black staff and white children flourished in the Home's private spaces" (182).

Moreover, unlike some other nineteenth-century general and Jewish orphanages, women were not among the founders of the New Orleans Home and did not have decision-making authority in the early years. They donated funds to the institution and served as paid matrons and teachers, and also as volunteer "honorary matrons" who helped supervise the matrons. Only in 1914 were women finally accepted as voting members of the Home's association and as members of its board.

The New Orleans Home experienced its share of challenges and accomplishments. In 1865, an Orleans Parish Grand Jury report deemed the orphanage to be dirty and "badly managed" (57). A serious episode occurred in 1886, when a superintendent was fired after an accusation of sexual assault of a fifteen-year-old female ward. Yet Trestman notes that the Home's leaders and staff were generally devoted to the children they

served. The institution always provided quality medical and dental care. As early as 1883, the directors introduced a kindergarten soon after that educational innovation arrived in New Orleans. And in 1904, the Home created the Isidore Newman School, a unique coeducational, nondenominational school that served Home wards as well as children from the general community. The school originally offered manual training along with regular subjects and later evolved into a premier private college preparatory school that still exists.

Trestman notes that the Home's directors were slower than their counterparts in other Jewish childcare institutions around the country to recognize noninstitutional care as the wave of the future. She points out that their preference for institutional over foster care typified New Orleans institutions at the time. But by the 1940s, the Home's enrollment declined sharply due to new governmental programs that provided support to impoverished families, consistent with expert advice. The financial difficulties of maintaining an aging building with a dwindling resident population, as well as the death of the long-time superintendent Harry Ginsburg, forced the Home to close its doors in 1946. In its place, the Jewish Children's Regional Service (JCRS) was created to support dependent children and their families, referring only those with particular emotional or behavioral needs to institutions. Today, the JCRS serves at-risk, dependent, and financially challenged Jewish children and families in Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee.

Many alumni had fond memories of growing up in the orphanage and believed that the Home provided them excellent care. According to Trestman, while some alumni "expressed sadness or bitterness about a policy or practice, such as the regimented schedule and discipline, . . . the vast majority . . . expressed gratitude for the care and opportunities the Home provided and the strong bonds they forged with fellow residents and staff" (3). Quite a few alumni went on to higher education and to illustrious careers in various fields. Trestman takes the title of her book from alumnus Louis Peters, who declared in 1980: "Fortunate unfortunates. That's what we were—we kids who were raised in the Jewish Children's Home in New Orleans."

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