

This is the time of year when New Bern becomes fascinated by its past. Last week it was Ghost Walk, with hundreds of people walking through the streets of our fair city in search of ghosts and spirits from our past. This weekend of course brings Halloween, when our fascination with the spirit world comes to the fore.

We all know that Halloween is not a Jewish holiday, and as such it would not normally be the subject of a Dvar Torah. And truth be told I will not really be speaking about Halloween per say tonight. However the fascination with spirits and ghosts at this time of year, combined with the publication of a new volume of New Bern history by the Historical Society reminded me that our city was blessed for many years with a thriving community of Jewish merchants located on the 200 block of Middle Street, between Front and Pollock Streets, back in the days when downtown New Bern was the retail center for our entire eastern region including Jones and Carteret Counties.

Today these businesses no longer exist, but if you walk down the 200 block of Middle Street you will be walking, dining and shopping among the spirits of a Jewish community now long gone, but emblazed in the history of our city and certainly of our own Temple B'nai Sholem. Many of these names are memorialized on the plaques along the rear wall of our sanctuary. Others are names you may or may have heard about. Regardless, all are still with us in spirit, and it was their support of our community and temple that permits us the opportunity to come and worship tonight. So together, before we conclude our Shabbat worship with our Memorial Service and Mourner's Prayer, let's take a short walk on Middle Street, and recall those members of our community who made such an important economic contribution to the growth and development of New Bern.

Have you ever dined at Captain Ratty's? I am sure most of us have, at one time or another, been in this business which spans three store fronts. Believe it or not these buildings were not always a restaurant. One of them, the building at 204, was once home to Phillip and later sons Ellis and Louis Howard. Right around the turn of the 20th century Phillip established a dry goods business there as the American Stock Company. Later it became just Phillip Howard, and over many years it transitioned so that by the end of WW2 it was known as a men's clothing store. When the sons joined Phillip the names simply became Howard's. Howard's ceased operations in 1961 when Ellis retired. Until that time fish were never served at 204 Middle Street. You may note that this very podium was donated to us by the Howard family in 2008.

Let's continue our journey with a stop at 208, currently home to Nauti Paws. This store now specializes in treats for our canine friends, all of whom are welcome inside the store. But I am not sure if dogs were welcomed inside when Louis or Muriel Steinberg were there operating the Central News and Card Shop. Theirs was the last of the Jewish owned businesses to locate to Middle Street and the last to close. The Steinberg's came to NB from Buffalo, no doubt in a search for sunshine and warmer temperatures.

Sam Lipman and Sons. A name with character and gravitas for sure. This fine establishment, at 210-214, grew from a dry goods store to become the major department store known as New Bern's Biggest and Best department store. Sam Lipman himself would have been there from their opening in

1900 to 1946, and sons Harry and Adolph, along with Joe and Ida Kline ran the show until the store closed in 1963. Now the combined stores at these addresses include Fraziers and Snap Dragon.

Let's make a few more stops on the east side of Middle Street before we cross at the Pollock Street corner.

The Suskinds, Mark and sons Raymond and Leon, made 220 their business home from 1919 to 1978. Theirs was one of the oldest retail establishments in New Bern. Mark opened the store in 1919 after he arrived in the U.S. from Lithuania via Baltimore. Initially they sold men's and women's clothing. Later it was strictly a men's clothing store. The sons joined their dad by 1926 and subsequently the business was called Suskind's. Mark passed away in 1936. Suskind's closed its doors following Raymond's death in 1978. The business in that location is now the Boathouse.

Surf, Wind and Fire at # 230 is a fun store to visit. It might be my personal favorite of those along Middle Street. I'm not so sure I would have enjoyed browsing at the Parisian nearly as much, with no disrespect to Ken and Lucille Zacks. You see the Parisian was a well-known women's clothing store. Lucille was known as the arbiter of style of women's clothing in New Bern, and the business had a loyal following among the more affluent women in town. Ken died in 1975 and the Parisian was sold outside of the family in 1980. Originally the Parisian was founded by Ben Karpf, who operated the store from the late 1920s until the Zacks took over operation in late 1943.

Next we come to the story of the Coplons. Solomon and sons Charles, Harry, and Abe and wife Betty Coplon were part of the oldest Jewish-owned business in New Bern to survive into the postwar years. S. Coplon and later S. Coplon and Sons was an extremely successful department store, occupying the stores at 234-236. Solomon was among the first businessman to use newspaper advertising and modern merchandizing strategies. Ultimately Coplon and Sons expanded into other Southern cities, and the New Bern store had the reputation as one of the largest department stores south of Richmond. In the postwar years Solomon's children joined the business and in the late 1940s Bynum Smith joined as well and the name was changed to Coplon-Smith. And now to the sad part of the story. Coplon-Smith was destroyed by fire in 1974 and did not reopen. The site is now Bear Plaza. No doubt you've seen the bear statue at the entrance. There's no truth to the rumor he was designed to resemble Solomon!

Our Jewish forebears, as you may have noticed, provided us with many places to get our clothing. But what about the children? Michael and Sylvia Forstadt had that covered at 238, home to Punch and Judy Children's Clothing. Sylvia Forstadt was the sister of Lucille Zacks of the Parisian which accounts for the Forstadts locating in New Bern in 1947. They came from New York City where Michael had worked as a reporter for the NY Herald Tribune. Punch and Judy closed in 1963. The street address 238 is no longer used on Middle Street.

Finally we come to the space at 244 and 246, now home to Tom's Coins and the Black Cat. At one time this was home to the Murray and Frieda Fitterman's store the Jewel Box. They opened for business in 1946 when they relocated to New Bern. They had two different businesses, a watch and jewelry repair store at 244 and a gift shop located at 246. The Jewel Box is still fondly remembered by some for its

window displays including action model automatons, most notably one depicting Santa's Workshop of all things! These stores closed around 1980.

As we cross the street to the west side there are three more stops to make. The first is at 223 Middle Street, at Joe Lipman and sons. Our own member Elbert Lipman took over this business from his father Joseph in 1953 and operated the business until 1986. Joseph Lipman opened the store in 1916 selling home furnishings. Long known by its slogan Good Furniture for Good Homes, the space is now the place where Elvis lives. No doubt you have seen him on sunny days in front of what is now the Holiday House.

Now vacant, the store at 219 was once the Fashion Center, operated by Harry and Isabelle Vatz. They were married in 1947 while living in Fayetteville. They came to our fair town in 1950 and opened their store selling quality women's clothing. Their slogan was Your center for fine Fashions. Harry and Isabelle ran the store until retiring in 1987, when son Morris took over for a few more years. Harry was also well known in town as a speechmaker and raconteur.

If you want to spend some time experiencing the joys of Olive Oil the business at 215 is where you want to go. This same locale was home to New Bern Loan and jewelers from 1943-1979. Brothers Martin and Louis Elden and Louis' wife Ethel came to New Bern from Winston Salem and founded this business in 1943. Louis came to town following WW2 and ultimately purchased Martin's share. Louis and Ethel expanded to Havelock and Kinston before selling out in 1969.

The story of these Jewish merchants in New Bern resembles that of many other communities and harkens to a now distant era in Jewish American life that many of us still remember. Now to keep everything legal, or kosher, by way of a disclaimer, the information presented tonight was compiled by the New Bern Historical society, and this article is part of volume 22 which was published this year. I owe a big thank you to Gail Schiller, who brought this information to my attention. It should be noted that most of this information was gathered through in person interviews with many of the family members who have been mentioned tonight. This group includes our own current member Mr. Elbert Lipman.

I have observed these names on our memorial boards many times and read many of them on our Yahrzeit lists. The story of these Jewish merchants is one that is ingrained in the history of TBS. Our city, our temple, and all of us, are in a better place today thanks to the time, sweat and energy they provided. May their memories be for a blessing.