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The House of Jacob

As a community lives and breathes in the present day, the members of it often forget the founders who nursed it through infancy. We go to an ancient church, synagogue, or other place of worship and there is amnesia about who was there in its beginnings. Certainly the founders did not intend it to be a personal memorial, yet these are the forefathers of faith who loved God so deeply as to sacrifice much of their personal fortunes and labor to bring about a house for Him to be worshipped. In the thirteen colonies, freedom of religion was not as widespread a practice before the Revolution as it was after. When the Episcopalian church lost its status as Virginia’s state church, different Christian houses of worship began to spring up over the Old Dominion, including her best seaport – Norfolk. However, it would not be until 1859 that Norfolk would have a synagogue. 

Although there is evidence of an earlier active Jewish community, the establishment of a synagogue in Norfolk was due largely to the effort of Jacob Umstadter who helped organize the other members of the House of Jacob.

Jacob Umstadter arrived at Norfolk in 1844. A German immigrant to the United States, Jacob found Norfolk in the midst of a depression brought about by the trade embargos between Britain and the United States. Norfolk, a main port for British ships purchasing staples for their colonies in the Caribbean, suffered when the U.S. closed its ports to British ships in the 1820s. Crippled, Norfolk may have regained its status in the 1830s if not for a tariff passed in 1820, still in effect, designed to protect the sale of Louisiana sugar in the domestic market. Valiant under the strain of hard times, civic improvement was nevertheless underway. Norfolk had been recovering from being burnt during the Revolution when a series of fires destroyed large sections of the city in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. By Umstadter’s arrival in the 1840s the city was being rebuilt in brick, paving its streets with stone ballast from the ships, and after

4 William S. Forrest, Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Norfolk and Vicinity, (Philadelphia: Linsay and Blakiston, 1853) 214.
6 Historic Southern Port, 152.
7 Historic Southern Port, 128 – 30.
8 Historic Southern Port, 129.
years of decline, had built a new academy.\textsuperscript{10} Notwithstanding the hardiness of its residents, Norfolk was no longer the shipping center it once was. Although the opening of the Dismal Swamp canal saved it from total ruin, the goods from North Carolina were now headed to the northern ports. The combination of embargos and the greater navigability of steamboats made Norfolk little better than a stop along the way to Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York. Also, industrialized northern cities were now increasingly the favored destinations of European immigrants.\textsuperscript{11} Jacob Umstadter’s choice to settle in Norfolk was atypical compared to the greater immigration patterns of the time. Norfolk was not a thriving commercial center like New York and its economy in 1844 was stagnant at best.

Yet Jacob Umstadter chose to settle in the old seaport. He prospered, despite the odds, as a butcher and owner of a dry goods store. By 1848 he was able to make loans\textsuperscript{12} and purchase expensive pieces of real estate.\textsuperscript{13} Very careful regarding his legal rights, his loans, no matter how small or large, are recorded in the Norfolk deed books. Debtors to Umstadter often put up land and extensive articles of personal property as collateral. Something of a real estate investor, he bought his first piece of property located on Church Street at auction December 1848 and sold it the next year at $200 profit.\textsuperscript{14} Evidence of his good character shows through in the records of his transactions in the Norfolk deed books. In 1851 Noah Stahl, a fellow Jew, put several bonds owed to Stahl by John Doyle in trust to Umstadter and designated Umstadter to collect the interest for the education of Stahl’s daughter. Umstadter not only agrees to perform this favor, but out of generosity charges Stahl nothing for taking on the responsibility.\textsuperscript{15} This is also an indication of type of the leadership Umstadter exhibited within the Jewish community.

The 1851 Norfolk City Directory\textsuperscript{16} lists at least 18 known Jews in the area (these are later buried in the Hebrew Cemetery),\textsuperscript{17} contemporary sources refer to an additional 3 as Hebrews, and 19 names strongly suggest Hebrew origins. From the 1851 City directory and Hebrew Cemetery records, the Jewish population may have numbered at least 40 persons in the early 1850s.\textsuperscript{18} Since the City Directory lists the occupations of many of the residents, one can derive the professions of Norfolk’s estimated Jewish community. Most were tailors or clothiers (10) or dry goods merchants (9), with a few who operated in both capacities. Some were confectioners (3) or silversmiths (2). The long established Myers family were large commercial merchant shippers, of course, and a smattering of other pursuits were represented – sailors, clerks, bankers, and fortune tellers. They organized their first formal meeting on October 22, 1848, deciding to rent
two rooms as temporary worship spaces in the home of one of their members, Nathan American.19

No worship service would be complete without the Torah, so Aaron Goldsmith, a dry goods merchant and clothier, was commissioned to obtain scrolls from Baltimore. Little less than a year later, on October 7, 1849, they elected Goldsmith their first president. Although Goldsmith was president, Norfolk’s Jewish community adopted the name “Chevra B’ni Jaacov” – House of Jacob – in honor of Umstadter who had done so much to organize them and whom they elected to be their first Cantor.20 By December 17, 1852 the *Richmond Whig* records Umstadter’s petition to “incorporate a school for teaching the Hebrew and German languages.”21 In less than ten years after arriving in Norfolk, Umstadter was clearly an organizing member of the local Jewish community.

By 1857 Jacob Umstadter had conducted several real estate transactions and become a prominent businessman. The *Southern Argus* noted:

“The large building just south of Odd Fellow’s Hall, belonging to Rabbi Umstadter, has been greatly enlarged by an addition in the rear…Mr. U has manifested much enterprise and good taste in building, repairing, and improving property, especially on Church Street, between Main and Cove…”22

Not unsurprisingly this area was known to have a concentration of dry goods stores, tailors, and confectioners.23 It is possible that this section could have formed a Jewish business district – according to the 1851 directory, Goldsmith, Sarlouis, Mrs. M. Mayers, B. Israel (and partner Moses Jacob) owned dry goods stores within a few blocks of each other on Church St.24 In addition, Norfolk deed records show that Umstadter had been conveyed property by John Baumgarten (1856) and Moses Ottenheimer (1858), very likely Jews, who owned a dry goods business on 66 Church St.25 Also along Church St., Oppenheimer, the Reader for the congregation (1859),26 was a vendor of fruit, toys, and candy in 1851. Other Jewish confectioners along Church St. in 1851 were Alexander Saunders and Nathan American.27 As a leader in the Jewish community, it would not have been unusual for Umstadter to concentrate on improving this area. Another glimpse

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24 Norfolk City Directory 1851.
27 Norfolk City Directory 1851.
at Umstadter’s character shows through in his 1858 exchange with Ottenheimer. Ottenheimer had deeded some personal property in 66 Church St. to Umstadter on May 10, 1858 in order to pay debts which Ottenheimer had incurred. On May 11, 1858 Jacob Umstadter re-loans to Ottenheimer “the household and kitchen furniture...to hold at my will and pleasure and to be returned and repossessed by me when I think proper ...” Essentially, though Ottenheimer was forced to sell his property to pay off debts, Umstadter allows him to keep indefinitely necessities that would have otherwise made life very difficult for Ottenheimer.

September of 1858 saw an increase of general interest in the Jewish community. In the articles of the Argus regarding the Jewish contingent of the City, the tone is generally one of respectful curiosity and informational interest – there is no hint of anti-Semitism so prevalent elsewhere. The Southern Argus announced Rosh Hashannah, the first day of the Jewish New Year, and the Day of Atonement in addition to detailing Jewish practices in observing these holidays. Thirteen days later the Argus reported the formation of a Hebrew military contingent in which 30 had already enrolled. By the end of October, 40 had joined the Israelite Guard with Umstadter as their captain. The Congregation had moved worship services from Nathan American’s home to the Odd Fellows Hall on Wolfe St. in May of 1853, the first floor of which was their temporary synagogue until the building burned (possibly by an arsonist) on February 18, 1859. With the destruction of the Odd Fellows Hall, the Congregation decided that it was time for them to establish a home of their own. On March 3, 1859 Umstadter sold to the House of Jacob (incorporated March 23, 1853) a parcel of land on Cumberland St. for the purpose of building a synagogue. It is not certain where the Jewish community celebrated Passover that year, perhaps at a location on Water Street. The Argus noted that Bernard Kayton had sent unleavened bread to the staff of the paper in commemoration of the holiday. The Jewish community was not long without a home, for the new synagogue was erected by the end of that year.
Along with general interest, there must have been some confusion about the congregation itself. The 1859 directory lists “Rev. Isaac Campe”\(^{42}\) as the pastor of the House of Jacob, though several *Argus* articles refer to Umstadter also as rabbi.\(^{43}\) Very likely though both served in that capacity neither were ordained rabbis, giving motivation for an article appearing in the *Argus* on October 6, 1859 clarifying that there were no rabbis in Norfolk and religious services held in synagogues were conducted by a Reader.\(^{44}\) According to the same source there were at least 35 members of the congregation at the time. Strangely, the article also claims that the congregation was founded in 1858,\(^{45}\) though evidence suggests that the foundation was much earlier.

In addition to organizing the Jewish community, founding the House of Jacob, and becoming a prominent businessman, Jacob Umstadter was apparently well loved by the people of Norfolk. The records indicate that he had been given guardianship of at least three children not his own – especially to look after their financial affairs.\(^{46}\) When robbed of some coats in which there were important papers, he offers that the thief could keep the coats if he would only return the important papers left in the pockets by post – or if the coats were not enough, the thief could receive additional compensation for the return of the papers.\(^{47}\) At the marriage of his daughter Henrietta to S.W. Seldner on February 29, 1860, purportedly 2,000 guests arrived, including Mayor Ferguson who delivered a toast to the couple. The crowd was so large that the wedding had to be moved to the Opera House at the last minute. In addition to the guests inside the Opera House, another 500 were outside, mainly African-Americans. Though some of the guests were certainly motivated merely by curiosity or a free meal, the overwhelming number gives some indication of the regard that the people held for Umstadter, for far fewer would appear if he had been held in less esteem. Interestingly, Umstadter was the officiating “rabbi” for his daughter’s wedding and his speech was recorded in the *Argus*.\(^{48}\) The account was touching: “…the feelings of the father overcame the stern Rabbi several times during the delivery of the lecture…”\(^{49}\) “Rabbi” Obendorfer is recorded as also bestowing a blessing, the 1859 article in the *Argus* apparently not having effectively clarified the possessors of rabbinic ordination. Umstadter would always remain, however, a bulwark of orthodox belief. In the 1870s, when younger members of Ohef Sholom (the name that the House of Jacob adopted at the end of the Civil War)


\(^{43}\) “Adroit Robbery.” *(Norfolk, VA) The Southern Argus.* Vol. 11, No. 203. 02 September 1858 and

“Grand Hebrew Wedding.” *(Norfolk, VA) The Southern Argus.* Vol. 15, No. 51. 01 March 1860 and


\(^{46}\) City of Norfolk Court Deed Book 33, 1851 - 1852. Umstadter, Jacob & Stahl. Page 27 and

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\(^{47}\) “Adroit Robbery.” *(Norfolk, VA) The Southern Argus.* Vol. 11, No. 203. 02 September 1858.

\(^{48}\) “Lecture of Rabbi Umstadter at the Nuptial Ceremonies.” *(Norfolk, VA) The Southern Argus.* Vol. 15, No. 52. 02 March 1860.

\(^{49}\) “Grand Hebrew Wedding.” *(Norfolk, VA) The Southern Argus.* Vol. 15, No. 51. 01 March 1860.
introduced Reform practice, Umstadter and others formed Beth El as a haven for orthodox Jewish worship.\(^5\)

It was largely to the effort of Jacob Umstadter’s faith and organizational efforts that Norfolk’s first synagogue was established. He arrived in a town which was still suffering from a depression due to the legislative restrictions on trade. Yet Umstadter prospered, his generosity of character often shown in his transactions recorded in the Norfolk deed books. The congregation adopted the name “House of Jacob” in his honor and he was the organizer behind its incorporation in 1853. Later, when their temporary worship space within the Odd Fellows Hall was lost, Umstadter sold to the House of Jacob land on Church St. for the building of a synagogue. Not only a leader in the religious life of the Jewish community, Umstadter seemed to have been a leader in its secular life as well. He was noted to have improved property along Church St., a section that may have been a Jewish business district. He was captain of the Hebrew military contingent just two years prior to the Civil War. Umstader seems have been beloved by the people of Norfolk, Jew and gentile alike – nearly 2,500 attend his daughter’s wedding in 1860. Even after the Civil War, when Ohef Sholom (formerly House of Jacob) adopted Reform practices, Umstadter’s love of the orthodox faith led him and others to found Beth El as a haven for orthodox Jewish worship. Though no public monuments stand for Umstader – the witnesses of his faith are the two temples which stand today – Ohef Sholom and Beth El.

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