

# Passing knowledge from generation to generation



**Your Turn**  
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Guest columnist

*This cemetery, now fenced in by a high brick wall, is the oldest Jewish landmark in the western section of the country. It is well nigh half a century since the last body was laid to its final rest therein; the life of a great city ebbs and flows about it; the dead slumber on unheeding; may they rest in peace!*

– **David Philipson, “The Jewish Pioneers of the Ohio Valley,” 1900**

David Philipson was the rabbi of K.K. Bene Israel, today’s Rockdale Temple, when he described how an official Jewish community was born in Cincinnati in 1821 with the purchase of a small plot of ground at Chestnut Street and Central Avenue in today’s West End.

Like the Chestnut Street Cemetery described by Philipson, the Skirball Museum holds an important place in Cincinnati history. It is considered the oldest repository of Jewish art and artifacts in the U.S., established informally in 1875

when Hebrew Union College was founded in what is today University Heights. The museum has grown into the largest collection of Judaica between the Allegheny and Rocky Mountains.

A Portrait of Jewish Cincinnati, an exhibition now at the Skirball, tells the stories of some of the Jewish Cincinnatians whose achievements are woven into the fabric of the Queen City. Our challenge is to bring these portraits alive with colorful narratives that inform and engage audiences of all faiths.

Joseph Jonas was the first Jewish settler in Cincinnati. He is represented in this exhibition not by a formal portrait, but by a tall clock. Jonas was a watch and clock manufacturer and a silversmith with a thriving Downtown business. The 8-foot-tall clock from a local collection is a testament to his fine craftsmanship.

Readers may also know Cincinnati’s Jewish hospital was the first Jewish hospital in the country, but may not be aware Fanny and Abraham Aub sold the land for \$1 to build the third location of the hospital. Sober and understated, the portraits of the immigrants belie the philanthropic and civic contributions of this 19th century power couple.

While her husband and brother were

busy becoming the largest producers and merchandisers of whiskey in Ohio and Kentucky, Duffie Workum Freiberg founded the Jewish Foster Home on West Sixth Street in 1892 and served as its first president, was a director of United Jewish Charities, the predecessor of today’s Jewish Federation, and a trustee of the Cleveland Orphan Asylum.

A preponderance of the subjects in A Portrait of Jewish Cincinnati are immigrants or first-generation Americans. Whether merchants, physicians, attorneys, industrialists, teachers or volunteers, in almost every instance, these men and women found ways to give back, to support their secular and religious communities, making them a source of pride for all Cincinnatians.

A case in point is Milton Schloss, who began his career in the family business, E. Kahn & Sons, as an apprentice in the slaughterhouse and built the company to the pinnacle of success, eventually running a more than billion-dollar consolidated national meat company – Hillshire Farms and the Sarah Lee Meat Group. In the years leading up to World War II, Schloss sponsored several German Jews to immigrate to Cincinnati and provided employment for them at Kahn’s. He

served his country in World War II, liberating a German concentration camp and earning a Bronze Star Medal. Later, he taught at the University of Cincinnati School of Business and supported local Jewish organizations, most notably the Jewish Community Center.

The Hebrew phrase *l’dor vador* means “from generation to generation.” This phrase is uttered during the ceremonies of bar and bat mitzvah, when Jewish 12- and 13-year-old children symbolically enter into Jewish adulthood, and the Torah scroll, the Five Books of Moses, is handed from grandparents to parents to child. This powerful physical transfer represents the passing of knowledge, values, collective memory, generational wisdom, and the stories of our forefathers and foremothers.

It is my hope that A Portrait of Jewish Cincinnati encourages all of us to consider the contributions of the generations who came before us, and perhaps what we ourselves hope to pass from generation to generation.

*Abby Schwartz is director of the Skirball Museum.*

*This is one in a series of columns that will appear during the yearlong Jewish Cincinnati Bicentennial celebration.*