



Yes, Minnie, there was life in Orlando before Walt Disney and his vast theme park arrived. In fact, the Jewish community of central Florida long predates any famous mouse who has since taken up residence.

Until the arrival of Europeans in 1536, the region was populated by the Creek and other Native American tribes. Aaron Jernigan, the first permanent settler, was a cattleman who acquired land in the area as part of the 1842 Armed Occupation Act and who originally lent the town his surname. Legend has it that the town became known as Orlando after a soldier named Orlando Reeves died in 1835 during the Second Seminole War. More recent historians have cast doubt on this story, arguing that it's more likely named after an early cattle rancher named Orlando Rees.

The first Jews known to live in Orlando arrived after the Civil War. In 1873, Jacob Raphael Cohen came to Orlando—it's not clear where he came from—and became active in municipal government, helping to draft the city's charter in 1875 and serving two terms as alderman. A Jewish merchant named A.H. Birnbaum also served as alderman and as a member of Orlando's fire department.

The Orlando area's first Jewish residents largely made their living in agricultural businesses and in trade. Henry Benedict, an immigrant from Germany, settled in Orlando around 1890 and got started in pineapple packing and eventually became a major play-

er in the development of the downtown area. Other Jewish Floridians worked in the dairy and citrus industries. In the early part of the 20th century, Moses Levy—originally from Pittsburgh—bought 24 acres of groves in the area. In addition to producing oranges, the grove also served as a gathering place for prayer services. “On Friday, before Shabbat, they'd hitch up their horses and spend the night, and the small community would gather on that farm,” says local historian Roz Fuchs Schwartz. High holidays were also celebrated at the orange grove. Community members contributed in other ways, too; dairy farmer Peter Wittenstein, for example, moonlighted

as the kosher butcher and mohel.

The community soon outgrew the Levys' orange groves, and Orlando's first synagogue, Ohev Shalom, was officially chartered in 1918, marking the beginning of Jewish institutional life in the region. Its first location was at the corner of Central and Terry Streets. A few years later, the congregation moved to its second home, at the corner of Church Street and Eola Drive. (The site is now home to a condominium building.) Nearly 100 years later, Congregation Ohev Shalom—now a Conservative synagogue located in nearby suburban Maitland—remains one of the largest synagogues in central Florida.

Lured by the warm weather, Jewish families continued to move to Orlando throughout the 20th century. Other synagogues were chartered, and a Jewish community council, Jewish Family Service and a summer camp were established. Gene Starn started *The Heritage Central Florida Jewish News* in 1976, now *Heritage Florida Jewish News*.

The course of Orlando history changed in 1971, when Walt Disney World opened after four years of construction. Although the company was—and remains—based in southern California, its East Coast outpost has become the heart of Orlando's tourist industry. Rumors have long persisted about Walt Disney's alleged anti-Semitism, fueled mostly by his support of the anti-Communist and anti-Semitic Motion Picture Alliance for the Preservation of American Ideals and





A wedding at the Moses Levy orange groves in 1917

his welcoming of German Nazi-propaganda filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl to California to show her work. Yet, Jews have long worked for the Disney corporation. This includes actors, musicians, writers, cartoonists and from 1984 until 2005, chief executive Michael Eisner. Today, Disney World remains one of the Orlando area's largest businesses, with some 58,000 employees.

Today, the Orlando area's Jewish community—estimated at 19,000—is thriving across four counties and in nearby cities such as Kissimmee, Winter Park and Sanford. The Roth Family Jewish Community

Center in Maitland shares a campus with The Holocaust Memorial Resource and Education Center of Florida and the K-8 Jewish Academy of Orlando. A second JCC built in 2009 at the Jack and Lee Rosen Southwest Orlando Campus—funded by Harris Rosen, the founder of Rosen Hotels & Resorts and an Orlando resident since around 1968—runs a preschool and outreach programs for young Jewish families. Orlando is also home to the University of Central Florida, which has one of the highest populations of Jewish students among public universities, with more than 6,000 Jewish attendees.

Residents can shop at kosher bakeries and dine at kosher restaurants—including a New York-style deli in Maitland—and worship at nearly 30 synagogues of various denominations in the greater Orlando area. “Young people, young singles, young marrieds are moving to downtown Orlando now,” says Olga Yorish, executive director of the Jewish Federation of Greater Orlando. “We see an influx of young, educated college grads who come to Orlando for jobs. They’re looking for connections, they’re looking to marry other young Jewish singles. Once they get married and settle here, they want to connect to the community. That’s a very important part of what we do here.” Harris Rosen says a lot has changed. Now, after his 40-plus years living in Orlando, “the Jewish community is more easily recognized and identified as a Jewish community.”—*Sala Levin*

IMPORTANT SITES

Theatre South at JCC

Theatre South is the JCC's resident Theatre Company. This unique arts center offers classes and workshops for all ages along with theatrical presentations.

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