



Whether you're a born-and-raised Arkansan, have lived here for 30 plus years, or have recently arrived to the Natural State, this place we call home has a rich, diverse, and fascinating history.

And for the past 17 years the staff of the CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas has tried to make sure that the story of this place is documented in an accessible digital format.

This free resource has almost everything you might want to know about the 25th state. And the EOA staff are in the habit of finding the most unique of those stories to tell.



The Encyclopedia of Arkansas launched in 2006 with 700 entries and 900 pieces of media.

In 2019 we switched platforms from the original proprietary site to a newly designed WordPress site.

And then in August 2022 we undertook a further redesign of the home page, search function and user experience features.

You can stop by the EOA for tidbits like THIS DAY IN ARKANSAS HISTORY and PHOTO OF THE DAY...

As well as to see trending entries and what's been newly updated. (and here's a hint, we are updating all the time).

ALL ENTRIES

FLOOD OF 1927

7,000+ entries

Flood of 1927

AKA: Great Flood of 1927
AKA: Mississippi River Flood of 1927
AKA: 1927 Flood

The Flood of 1927 was the most destructive and costly flood in Arkansas history and one of the worst in the history of the nation. It afflicted Arkansas with a greater amount of devastation, both human and monetary, than the other affected states in the **Mississippi River** Valley. It had social and political ramifications which changed the way Arkansas, as well as the nation, viewed relief from natural disasters and the responsibility of government in aiding the victims, echoing the **Hurricane Katrina** disaster in the present day.

In largely agrarian Arkansas, the Flood of 1927 covered about 6,600 square miles, with thirty-six out of seventy-five Arkansas counties under water up to thirty feet deep in places. In Arkansas, more people were affected by the floodwaters (over 350,000), more farmland inundated (over two million acres), more Red Cross camps were needed (eighty of the 154 total), and more families received relief than any other state (41,243). In Arkansas, almost 100 people died, more than any state except Mississippi. In monetary terms, the losses in Arkansas (totaling over \$1 million in 1927 dollars for relief and recovery) surpassed any other affected state.

The Flood of 1927 had its origins both in nature and in man. In the late 1920s, technological advances kept pace with the growing economy. Heavy machinery enabled the construction of a vast system of **levees** to hold back rivers that tended to overrun their banks. Drainage projects opened up new, low-lying lands that had once been forests but had been left bare by the **timber industry**.

ENTRY

Flood of 1927

TIME PERIOD

Early Twentieth Century (1901 - 1940)

CATEGORY

Environment / Land and Resources / Natural Disasters

TYPE

Event

LESSON PLANS

1927 Flood (Grades 5-8)

Arkansas's Top Ten Events (Grades 6-12)

Hard Times (Grades 7-12)

Mucket Mania (Grades 6-12)

Rollin' on the River (Grades 5-12)

Southern Flood Blues (Grades 9-12)

more than 7,000 entries

Often compared to Wikipedia

Peer review process and edited entries

Anyone can write for the EOA, but all entries are reviewed by other scholars, fact checked, and edited for grammar and spelling.

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- **EVERY** incorporated community
 - **Government officials**
 - **Civil rights organizations from NAACP to CLOB**
 - **EVERY** military action including the smallest skirmishes
 - **Wildlife, flowers, plants**

WE HAVE ENTRIES ON ...

Every incorporated community and hundreds of unincorporated ones, and we're always seeking more

ENTRIES ON

Government officials, including those who served in Congress, Arkansas constitutional officers, individual state legislators, and even significant sheriffs, mayors, and county judges

Civil rights organizations from the national level, such as the NAACP, to the local level, such as CLOB (Council for Liberation of Blacks)

Military events from the Civil War, ranging from major battles (Pea Ridge) down to small local skirmishes; if someone in blue and someone in gray met in the woods between 1861 and 1865 we probably have an entry documenting it.

AND THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT - birds, fish, mammals but also fungi, lichens, ferns, jellyfishes

AND WE ARE ALWAYS DEVELOPING MORE...

Developing entries on every film set or filmed in Arkansas, as well as every book, television show, and even individual episodes set in the state (Search: X-Files)



Produced by a public library

230 countries

EVERY continent

Used by government agencies and officials, students, media, genealogists, historians (local and national)

Users have come from every continent (including Antarctica) and more than 230 countries.

Over 175,000 users per month



Jews have always been a tiny minority of Arkansas's population, yet their history in the state is long and deeply rooted. In the mid-nineteenth century, Jewish immigrants from Europe established communities and congregations throughout Arkansas.

Despite their small numbers, Arkansas Jews have been committed to preserving their religious traditions even as they assimilated into the culture of their town and state. In the process, Jews became an active part of the state's civic and economic life.

As in many other Southern states and rural regions, the Jewish population has experienced a significant decline over the past several decades, especially in small towns, though Jewish life and culture continue to flourish in Little Rock (Pulaski County) and the growing community of Bentonville (Benton County). Let's explore a little bit of this history.



NUMBER 1

Abraham and Fanny Block were the first documented Jewish family to immigrate to the state of Arkansas. Abraham Block was born in 1780 or 1781, in Schwihau, Bohemia. Around the age of twelve, Block immigrated to Richmond, Virginia. He served in the War of 1812 in the Richmond Light Infantry Blues, rising to captain. On October 2, 1811, Block married fifteen-year-old “Fanny” Isaacs. Her lineage as a colonial Sephardic Jew and Block’s Ashkenazim origins made their union somewhat of a mixed marriage. The couple eventually had fourteen children, with twelve living to adulthood. By 1825, Abraham had started a business in the Arkansas town of Washington and summoned his family west. With seven young children in tow, Fanny left for Arkansas via New Orleans in 1826. As was family custom, she and the children did not join Block in Washington until a suitable house was built in 1827. The Blocks created a regional merchant empire with businesses in Washington, Fulton (Hempstead County), and Paraclifta (Sevier County) in Arkansas, as well as in New Orleans, Louisiana, and at several stops along the railroad in Texas from Houston to Dallas. The family home in Washington has been restored and is currently a house museum in Historic Washington State Park.



NUMBER 2

Before the Civil War, many Jews arrived in Arkansas as part of a “German wave” of immigration. Most such Jews settled primarily in the large cities of the Northeast and the Midwest. But a significant minority of Jews from Germany and from Alsace-Lorraine settled in the rural South, including Arkansas. At the time of the Civil War, they had established small but growing communities in Little Rock, Fort Smith (Sebastian County), Pine Bluff (Jefferson County), DeValls Bluff (Prairie County), Van Buren (Crawford County), Jonesboro (Craighead County), and Batesville (Independence County).

One descendant of this wave of immigration was Cyrus Adler, whose picture you see here, and who will be mentioned later.



NUMBER 3

After the war, as Arkansas became increasingly tied to national trading markets, Jewish peddlers and merchants were drawn to the state. With close economic connections to Jewish wholesalers in Memphis, Tennessee; St. Louis, Missouri; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Louisville, Kentucky, these merchants fanned out across Arkansas, helping to develop isolated parts of the state. Fourteen towns in Arkansas were founded by Jews or named after early Jewish residents, including Altheimer (Jefferson County), Berger (Pulaski County), Bertig (Greene County), Felsenthal (Union County), and Goldman (Jefferson County).

Felsenthal, for example, was named after David Felsenthal, a Jew born in Bavaria (now part of Germany) in 1833. He moved to Arkansas when he was twenty years old, and four of his children later formed the Felsenthal Land and Timber Company around the beginning of the twentieth century to harvest the trees of southern Union County. They established a company town for their workers and workers' families, naming the town Felsenthal. In similar manner, the unincorporated community of Bertig in Green County was named for businessmen Adolph and Saul Bertig. It once served as the end of the Paragould Southeastern Railway and home to a profitable timber industry.



NUMBER 4

Many Jews moved to Arkansas to start businesses. One of the most prominent was Gustave (Gus) Blass was born on February 15, 1849, in Obornik, Germany, a small town north of Poznan, which is now part of Poland. At the age of sixteen, he boarded a ship bound for New York, identifying himself on the ship's manifest as a merchant. After a short stint in Memphis, Tennessee, he made his way to Little Rock (Pulaski County), where he founded the Gus Blass Dry Goods Company in 1871. This eventually became the largest department store in Arkansas, the Gus Blass Company

Blass's promotional flair took flight in the late 1800s, with the store hosting an extravagant grand-opening party each year. The event was described as a "fairyland," with dramatic lighting effects and window displays featuring elaborate wax figures (early mannequins) draped in silk and lace garments. According to the Arkansas Gazette, more than 5,000 people attended the event in 1882, each receiving a keepsake box of chocolates as a party favor. In 1898, partygoers were regaled by Kuttner's Orchestra, who played tunes such as "The Belle of New York" and John Philip Sousa's "The Bride-Elect." At the two-day event's peak, the number of guests swelled to 25, 000.

Another prominent Little Rock business was M. M. Cohn. The titular M. M. Cohn was originally named Kaminski or Kuhn and was born in Krakow, Poland, around 1845. He later changed his name to Mark Mathias Cohn. Cohn had lived in Cincinnati, Ohio, before moving to Arkansas and opening a store in 1874 in Arkadelphia. He relocated to Little Rock, where he opened a store at

102 Main Street. By 1883, the Little Rock business was well established, and it was written that “none occupy a more prominent position...than the establishment founded by Mr. M. M. Cohn.” The Main Street store eventually expanded, taking over five floors of the adjacent Boyle Building. A new store was built in 1967 in the University Mall on South University Avenue in Little Rock. The store was successful and was later enlarged to include a second floor. In 1973, a store was opened in McCain Mall in North Little Rock. In addition, the company purchased the Samples Department Store in El Dorado, three John Gerber Department Stores in Memphis, Tennessee, and, later, stores in Oklahoma. The Cohn company owned thirteen stores in the three states before it was sold to the Dunlap Company in Fort Worth, Texas, in 1989.

There were Jewish businesses in all corners of the state. One business leader in the far southeastern corner of the state was Sam Epstein. Epstein was born in 1875 on a farm near Riga, Latvia, in the former Russian Empire. Many Eastern European Jews fled violence and legal restrictions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Epstein himself likely arrived in New York City in May 1896. He traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, and joined an older brother, Nathan. The brothers resided in or near the Pinch District, a growing immigrant neighborhood with a significant Jewish population. By the late 1890s, the brothers had a mercantile business at Luna Landing in Chicot County. Epstein started his own business around 1900 in Lake Village, the county seat on the western edge of Lake Chicot. The Epstein store sold dry goods and integrated into the local cotton economy by supplying credit to local farmers. He helped incorporate the town of Lake Village by signing a letter of support for annexing land into the city. He was also a strong supporter of the local drainage district and levee boards.



NUMBER 5

Jewish Arkansans also contributed heavily to the development of law in Arkansas.

The most prominent Jewish person in Arkansas's legal history was Jacob Trieber. He was born in 1853 in Raschkow, Prussia. In 1866, he moved with his family to St. Louis, Missouri, and continued his schooling. Two years later, the family moved to Helena and opened a store, where Jacob clerked. In 1873, he began studying law in the evenings under former Arkansas Supreme

Court Justice Marshall L. Stephenson. Trieber rose to become the first Jew to serve as a federal judge in the United States. Serving from 1900 to 1927 as judge for the U.S. District Court, Eastern District of Arkansas, he became known in judicial circles as a "genius as lawyer and jurist." He presided over more than 1,000 cases annually, kept his docket current, and had time to serve many assignments outside his own district. He issued nationally important rulings on controversies that included antitrust cases, railroad litigation, prohibition cases, and mail fraud; some of his rulings, such as those regarding civil rights and wildlife conservation, have implications today. His broad interpretation of the constitutional guarantees of the Thirteenth Amendment, originally overturned by the post-Reconstruction U.S. Supreme Court, was validated sixty-five years later in a landmark 1968 equal opportunity case.

Oscar Fendler was born on March 22, 1909, in Blytheville. His parents had immigrated to America from Kraków, Poland, around the turn of the century and eventually settled in the community of Manila (Mississippi County), where they opened a general store. After graduating from Harvard

Law School in 1933, Fendler returned home to live with his parents in Manila and open a solo law practice in Blytheville. During those early years in practice, Fendler represented many criminal defendants pro bono. He was the only attorney in Blytheville who represented indigent African Americans caught up in the judicial system. After service in the Pacific during World War II, Fendler returned home and rebuilt his law practice. He served as president of the Arkansas Bar Association from 1962 to 1963. He was one of the organizing members of the American Bar Association's Section of General Practice, and he chaired that section in 1966–1967. He also served as a member of the Committee on Legal Aid and Indigents, together with Hillary Rodham (later Hillary Clinton). Governor Winthrop Rockefeller appointed Fendler to the Arkansas Board of Pardons and Appeals, on which he served for three years. In 1970, Rockefeller appointed Fendler as a member of a special commission to investigate explosive racial relations in Forrest City, and that commission's report to the governor was instrumental in quieting the situation.



NUMBER 6

Jewish Arkansans have also contributed greatly to the field of medicine. For example, the Leo N. Levi Hospital was founded on November 4, 1914, in Hot Springs, a project of the local Jewish community. Rabbi A. B. Rhine of the House of Israel synagogue in Hot Springs realized there was a need for a hospital to serve the many poor Jewish people who sought the unique healing benefits of the area's thermal springs. Many Jewish visitors from around the nation also came to Hot Springs to "take the waters" for their health. The local chapter of B'nai B'rith ("Children of the Covenant"), a Jewish service organization, proposed a B'nai B'rith hospital in Hot Springs at the group's 1903 regional convention. Winning support, it approached the national B'nai B'rith in 1910. The idea was received so favorably that the national organization assessed all of its members twenty-five cents each to help pay for the project, in addition to \$2,500 donated by the Hot Springs chapter.

One of the foremost figures at Levi Hospital was Regina Kaplan, who had trained as a nurse and took the reins as administrator at Levi in 1916. She soon established the Leo Levi School of Nursing as part of the hospital in order to train future nurses and provide a low-cost source of hospital staff. Kaplan was a member of the American College of Hospital Administrators and served in numerous national posts, including chairing the National Rehabilitation Association in the State Hospitals in 1928. She was vice president of the American Hospital Association in 1945–1946, served as president of the Mid-West Hospital Association, presented papers for the American College of Surgeons, and continued serving the Garland County chapter of the American Red Cross as executive secretary through 1945. She was president of the Arkansas Hospital Association (1947–1948) and served on the advisory board of hospitals for the Arkansas

State Board of Health from 1949 to 1953. In 1944, she was honored by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt with brunch at the White House for her many contributions to nursing. In Washington DC, Kaplan also gave a speech on healthcare before Congress.



NUMBER 7

The field of education has also been enriched by a number of Jewish Arkansans. Two of the most notable have been Cyrus Adler and Irene Rosenzweig.

Cyrus Adler who was born in Van Buren on September 13, 1863, the third of four children of Samuel and Sarah (Sulzberger) Adler. His father worked as a merchant and manager of a nearby cotton plantation. Shortly after Adler's birth, the Adler family fled the Civil War conditions in Arkansas and relocated first to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and later to New York. In 1887, he received a PhD from Johns Hopkins University, where he specialized in Assyriology. He was the first person to receive such a degree in the United States and taught in the Department of Semitics at Johns Hopkins until 1893. Throughout his life, Adler founded or was instrumental in the founding of the Jewish Publication Society of America (1888), the American Jewish Historical Society (1892), the American Jewish Council (1906), the United Synagogue of America (1913), and the Jewish Welfare Board (1917). Adler served as acting president of the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1917 and, although he was not an ordained rabbi, assumed the full presidency in 1924.

Irene Rosenzweig was born in Pine Bluff in 1903. Her father had emigrated from Lithuania in 1889 and opened the Good Luck Store, later Rosenzweig's Department Store, in Pine Bluff, which was Pine Bluff's largest mercantile and farm supply store. Rosenzweig graduated first in her class at Pine Bluff High School in 1920. She subsequently earned an undergraduate degree in classical studies at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, where she received honors. Rosenzweig

undertook a doctoral degree at Bryn Mawr in Pennsylvania. Rosenzweig received the 1930 Prix de Rome Fellowship in Classical Studies and Archaeology from the American Academy in Rome. During her time as a fellow in Rome, she advanced research for her dissertation, which was published as *Ritual and Cults of Pre-Roman Iguvium: With an Appendix Giving the Text of Iguvine Tablets* in 1937. She later taught Latin at the Madeira school, a private preparatory school for girls, in Greenway, Virginia. She remained active with the American Academy in Rome and was fluent in French, German, Spanish, Latin, and Greek. After her teaching career, she returned to Pine Bluff and was a benefactor for local charities.



NUMBER 8

Jews have long participated in the various civil rights movements in the United States. Probably the foremost Jewish figure in Arkansas history, Rabbi Ira Sanders, was most well known for his work on civil rights. In September 1926, at age thirty-two, Rabbi Sanders came to Little Rock (Pulaski County) as leader of the state's largest Reform Jewish congregation, B'nai Israel. He was elected as president of the Central Council of Social Agencies in 1927, which served under the auspices of the Little Rock Community Fund. In February 1927, he initiated and headed the Little Rock School of Social Work. He was founder and president of the Arkansas Human Betterment League, the Urban League of Greater Little Rock, and the Arkansas Lighthouse for the Blind. He was one of the founders and first president of the Greater Little Rock Library Association and served on its board for forty-one years. Rabbi Sanders first encountered the South's "Jim Crow" laws just three weeks after coming to Little Rock, when he caught a city bus and observed the seating arrangements—blacks in back, with whites up front. From that time forward until his death, he worked toward improving race relations. He was outspoken in favor of the desegregation of Central High School (formerly Little Rock High School) in 1957. He joined fourteen others who appeared before the state legislature in February, urging compliance regarding the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* school desegregation decision.



NUMBER 9

The Jewish population of Arkansas has never been very large, making the community all the more fragile. In the Delta region of eastern Arkansas, multiple temples have been shuttered, reflecting the broader loss of population. However, the growth of business in northwestern Arkansas has resulted in a new wave of Jewish immigration into the state. Like those who came before them, many of these new residents will no doubt make their mark.

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THE
ENCYCLOPEDIA
OF ARKANSAS



QUESTIONS



This is just the tip of the iceberg. The CALS Encyclopedia of Arkansas is a rabbit hole I encourage you to jump down. No matter what you are interested in, Arkansas has it--and the EOA is where you can start looking.