

# Jews in the Early Growth of New York City's Men's Clothing Trade

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No industry in America has been more closely associated with Jewish enterprise than the garment industry, especially in New York. Though the manufacture and merchandising of women's clothing have perhaps received greater attention, the production of men's apparel, too, has had an important role in American Jewish economic endeavor. It is, however, a curious fact that Jews evinced relatively little interest or involvement in the industry during its period of initial development.

By 1861 New York City had attained the distinction of being the leading center for the production and distribution of men's garments. Its output of both ready- and custom-made apparel was valued at \$17,011,370, a figure equalled by no other urban area in the United States.<sup>1</sup> New York's leadership arose from a host of causes which we can touch upon here only very briefly.<sup>2</sup> In the first place, New York City was so located that geographically and commercially all streams of traffic converged at its doorstep. It could not help but find itself in a better position than any other urban area in the United States to supply a growing national demand for clothing. Raw material and an abundant labor force were assured to it from the Old World, while unindustrialized and underdeveloped areas of the New World — the South and the West — looked to it for a supply of ready-made clothing. Its merchants took every advantage of the city's commercial supremacy and intensified its attractiveness in every conceivable way. No effort was spared in luring the country buyer to the metropolis. Abundant advertising,

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<sup>1</sup> *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Manufactures*, p. 380.

<sup>2</sup> The following is a brief summary of my unpublished dissertation, "The New York City Men's Clothing Trade, 1800-1861" (University of Pennsylvania, February, 1959).

an attractive credit policy, well-regulated auctions, huge displays, vigorous promotions of fashions — all these devices forced merchants to turn to New York rather than to other clothing centers.

Every advantage was taken of the great need for clothing in the unindustrialized areas of the United States. New Orleans, Charleston, Savannah, St. Louis, Chicago, and San Francisco, as well as others, sheltered representatives and retail outlets of New York firms. No American city seemed beyond the reach of the New York clothing merchant, and to each his invoices were shipped with a clock-like regularity. The productive machinery of the New York clothier proved able to meet every test which an increasing national demand placed upon it. Custom tailor shops and wholesale plants were systematically managed, and mechanization took every advantage of the technological advances of the age. The popularity as well as the prosperity of New York's clothing industry were further enhanced by its retail trade, which fed upon an urban population growing with greater rapidity than any other city in the United States. By 1861, consequently, the clothing trade had emerged as one of the outstanding factors in New York City's economic life.

#### JERUSALEM ON CHATHAM STREET

Considering the close association which American Jews were to have with the apparel trade in post-Civil War America, it is rather strange to note that Jews played no outstanding role in the industry's origins. The leading clothing houses of New York were not partnerships of immigrant Jews, but of second- and third-generation Gentile Americans. Names like C. T. Longstreet & Co., Daniel Devlin & Co., Brooks Brothers, James Wilde, Jr., and Lewis, Chatterton & Co., to mention but a few, speak for themselves.<sup>3</sup>

There were, of course, Jews in the clothing trade, but their houses were not the impressive five-story structures on lower Broadway or the Bowery. On the contrary, if Jewish names were sought in the local mercantile directories, they were more likely

<sup>3</sup> Edwin T. Freedley, *Leading Pursuits and Leading Men* (Philadelphia, 1856), pp. 130-34.

to be found along more modest thoroughfares like Chatham Street. The bearers of those names, moreover, were engaged in such unspectacular pursuits as renovating, retailing, and wholesaling secondhand clothing and cheaply made garments, better known as "slops."

Chatham Street and its products, it should be recalled, acquired a national reputation in the years preceding the Civil War. Although the Census of 1860 tried to de-emphasize the fact that here people were "compelled to wear the cast-off clothing of another, as in countries where the poor are more numerous," city directories and newspaper advertisements indicate that even at that late date the trade in discarded garments was booming. A glance at a few New York business directories shows that thirty-eight dealers in second-hand clothing were listed for 1845, eighty-three for 1855, fifty-four for 1857, and 100 by 1863.<sup>4</sup>

In an age when the price for men's apparel was relatively high, one need not have been surprised to find secondhand clothing so popular. One authority went so far as to state that in the years "prior to the Civil War, the trade in second hand clothing was perhaps more important than that in ready made." Some idea of the inexpensiveness of second hand, damaged, and discarded clothing is afforded even by a rapid survey of the retail prices which were occasionally listed. In 1849 dress coats were sold for \$2.00, pants for \$1.00, fancy silk and linen vests at 50 cents each. Secondhand dealers such as George Levie in 1849 were among the first to feature a complete "suit" consisting of pants, vest, and coat — all for the price of \$5.00!<sup>5</sup>

The trade in secondhand clothing was, nevertheless, not considered a very attractive pursuit. Its control, not surprisingly, was left largely in the hands of newcomers to New York, many of whom were Jews. An observer from the South commented in 1851

<sup>4</sup> *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860. Manufactures*, p. LXIV; Charles R. Rode, *Rode's New York Business Directory, 1853-1854* (New York, 1854), p. 36; H. M. Wilson, *Wilson's Business Directory of 1856-1857* (New York, 1857), pp. 106-7; J. N. Trow, *Business Directory of New York City, 1862-1863* (New York, 1863), pp. 102-3.

<sup>5</sup> Jesse E. Pope, *The Clothing Industry in New York* (Columbia, Missouri, 1905), pp. 6-7; *New York Herald*, Feb. 13, July 7, 1849, Sept. 8, 29, 1854.

that the clothing district in Chatham Street "is sometimes called Jerusalem, from the fact that the Jews do most, if not all the business on this street," with "a Yankee stuck in now and then by way of variety."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, most contemporary comments about pre-Civil War Chatham Street exude little more than contempt and ridicule; they display little insight into the economic function of the trade. George G. Foster's *New York in Slices*, published in 1849, is not untypical in tone. Foster wrote deprecatingly that along Chatham Street

clothing stores line the southern sidewalk, without interruption; and the coat-tails and pantaloons flop about the face of the pedestrian, like the low branches in a wood path. In front of each, from sunrise to sundown, stands the natty, blackbearded and fiercely-moustached proprietor; every now and then venturing, when a countryman passes, to tap him delicately on the arm, and invite him to look at the "magnificent assortment" of wares and wearables within. Stooping, as you enter the low, dark doorway, you find yourself in the midst of a primitive formation of rags, carefully classified into vests, coats, and pantaloons.<sup>7</sup>

A study of newspaper advertisements makes it clear, however, that Chatham Street dealers, far from merely patrolling the entrances to their shops, were busily engaged in supplying the South and the West with their discarded fashions. H. Lovett was actively engaged in 1839, for example, in purchasing secondhand clothing in New York and shipping his stock westward.<sup>8</sup>

The business in hand-me-downs was indeed a booming one. Procuring a supply of secondhand clothing was, in fact, often a more trying task than unloading it. Dealers, such as the firm of Morrison and Levy, attempted to surmount this latter obstacle by appealing to the benevolent instincts of their patrons; the firm's advertising declared that

discarded clothing are frequently put aside as useless during the summer and destroyed by moth, while the produce of the sale might be appro-

<sup>6</sup> William M. Bobo, *Glimpses of the New-York City By a South Carolinian (Who Had Nothing Else To Do)* (Charleston, 1852), pp. 115, 117.

<sup>7</sup> George G. Foster, *New York in Slices: By An Experienced Carver: Being the Original Slices Published in the N. Y. Tribune* (New York, 1849), pp. 14-15.

<sup>8</sup> *New York Herald*, Aug. 26, 1839.

priated to benevolent purposes, and the mechanic be enabled to appear respectable at prices within his means.

I. M. Dusseldorp advised those about to leave the city to sell their old clothing and travel light.<sup>9</sup>

Dealers in secondhand clothing were also important in another sense. They were among the first to establish the clothes-cleaning business on a commercial basis. Since the cleaning and repairing of clothing were important preliminaries in their task, it is not surprising that secondhand dealers became experts in these operations. Many included in their requests for discarded clothing statements of their willingness to accept orders for the cleaning and repairing of clothing. H. Lovett declared in 1840 that, at his place, men's clothing was "cleaned and repaired at shortest notice." Secondhand dealers such as George Levie and J. G. Myers performed similar services.<sup>10</sup>

#### LEVI'S AND LASSOES

A significant factor in the growth of the New York clothing trade was the fact that many of its participants did not sit in their New York countinghouses awaiting the arrival of country buyers from the South and the West; they themselves moved into Southern and Western commercial centers to establish outlets for the disposal of their New York stock. Leading Southern cotton ports — New Orleans, Charleston, and Mobile — contained representatives and retail and wholesale outlets of numerous New York clothing firms. A glance at Southern periodicals and business directories reveals once again, however, that the leading outlets — to judge at least from the sound of their names: Alfred Monroe & Co., Lewis and Hanford, Montross and Stilwell, Taylor and Hadden, Thompson and Nixon, Norris and Way — were not composed of Jewish merchants.

<sup>9</sup> *New York Evening Post*, May 28, 1830, Nov. 5, 27, June 6, 1833, March 20, April 17, July 5, 1834; *New York Journal of Commerce*, Oct. 4, 1834, Feb. 15, March 19, 1835; *New York Herald*, March 8, 1845, May 28, 1850, Aug. 6, Sept. 10, 1851.

<sup>10</sup> *New York Journal of Commerce*, Feb. 11, 1828; *New York Herald*, Oct. 10, 1840, May 2, 1845, Oct. 6, 1853, July 12, 1854.

Yet Jews were not completely absent. New Orleans, the South's chief port and thus a main target for New York clothiers, featured, for instance, firms like J. L. Bach and Co., which manufactured clothing in New York under the direction of J. L. Bach and operated a wholesale and retail outlet in New Orleans under the supervision of S. Jacob and Judah Hart. The house of Gensler and Simon likewise maintained in the Southern metropolis an outlet for its New York wares.<sup>11</sup> Fifteen Camp Street housed the New Orleans Shirt Depot, the Southern outlet of a New York shirt manufactory located at 73 William Street. Its owner and manager, Isaac Hart, was for many years active in New Orleans business, as well as in synagogue and philanthropic affairs. Hart rarely lost an opportunity to remind his customers of his immense stock, which in October, 1847, for example, included 5,000 linen, 20,000 muslin, 3,000 colored, and 5,000 check and plantation shirts. He never failed to mention, moreover, that his stock was being constantly augmented by frequent arrivals from his New York manufactory as well as by European imports.<sup>12</sup>

The Midwest also attracted numerous New York clothing manufacturers. Here, too, although the leading names were not Jewish, a small number can be found. Among the New York merchants who chose St. Louis as their main base of operations was William Seligman, whose family numbered several dry goods and clothing dealers. The Seligmans had clothing outlets in the South as well. In New York City, two of William's brothers, Joseph and James, operated a large dry goods business on William Street, and were in an excellent position to provide their kinsman in St. Louis with needed supplies.<sup>13</sup> The enterprising nature of this family is reflected in the career of Joseph, who first arrived in the United States in 1838, became a cashier in a Philadelphia bank, saved his money,

<sup>11</sup> H. and A. Cohen, *Cohen's New Orleans Directory. Including Jefferson City, Carrolton, Gretna, Algiers and McDonough, for 1854* (New Orleans, 1854), pp. 255, 259-60, 267-68; *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, June 19, 1850, March 13, Feb. 2, 1853, March 3, 1854.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, Sept. 5, 1846, Aug. 24, Oct. 16, Nov. 28, 1847, March 18, 1848.

<sup>13</sup> George S. Hellman, "Joseph Seligman, American Jew," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, XLI (Sept., 1951), 31.

and subsequently moved to Greensburg, Alabama, where he opened a clothing store. A few years later Joseph Seligman established himself in New York, where he became a wholesale dealer in clothing and textiles on Church Street.<sup>14</sup>

As one looks farther West, names of New York Jewish clothiers increase in frequency — a result of the discovery of gold in California and the westward rush that followed. Indeed, it was not long after 1849 that New York clothing was being retailed and wholesaled by New York merchants themselves in quickly growing San Francisco and its surrounding mining towns.

The Seligmans, for example, lost little time in extending their interests to the West Coast, where an outlet soon flourished in San Francisco under the management of Jesse Seligman.<sup>15</sup> Many of the early pioneer clothiers, establishing themselves initially in the midst of mining camps, solicited orders for clothing at the point of greatest and most intense demand. At Marysville, California, a town which originated as a mining camp, there were, in 1851, no fewer than three dealers in clothing. The first, Joseph S. Friedman, operated a dry goods and clothing store, while the other two, J. and C. Levin, dealt in ready-made clothing. Moving to San Francisco a few years later, Friedman entered upon a long commercial career which terminated only with his death in 1885.<sup>16</sup>

Close attention to the needs of the miners is apparent also in the case of the merchant Levi Strauss. Strauss, who arrived in San Francisco from New York early in 1850, concluded before long that supplying gold miners with appropriate working apparel could prove as profitable as digging for the yellow metal itself. With two brothers in the dry goods business in New York, he could be sure of a constant flow of material. Ultimately Strauss achieved much more than the establishment of an outlet in California. He launched, in fact, an enterprise far greater than the one which he had left behind in New York. At first he traveled to Sacramento, where he scrutinized the needs of the miners and persuaded some to place

<sup>14</sup> Isaac Markens, *The Hebrews in America* (New York, 1888), pp. 141-42.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>16</sup> Earl Ramsey, *The Beginnings of Marysville* (San Francisco, 1936), pp. 1, 95, 105.

orders with him. In 1853, together with his brothers in New York, he organized a wholesale jobbing and manufacturing concern known as Levi Strauss and Co. Its purchasing office having been located in New York, Strauss's new firm commenced to manufacture pants and overalls especially designed for the miner. Popularly known as "Levi's," the pants produced by the firm eventually became as characteristic of the West as the lasso and the Colt revolver.<sup>17</sup>

There were other enterprising Jews involved in the West's men's garments trade. The New York shirt manufacturers, L. A. Levy and T. E. Woolf, opened a store in San Francisco and called it the New York Shirt Depot. Prior to 1852, however, they announced that they had "relinquished the retail branch of their business" and planned from then on to concentrate on wholesale distribution to country and local dealers. Their stock, replenished regularly via New York clipper service, was periodically listed in the local newspapers. On February 12, 1852, for example, the partners received "per *Wild Pidgeon, Trade Wind and Golden Gate*, direct from their manufactory in New York an elegant assortment of shirts." In December, 1852, Levy bought Woolf's share of the business and proceeded to run both the factory in New York and the outlet at San Francisco on his own account.<sup>18</sup>

Life was far from easy in the West, and prosperity was not always assured to the clothier who extended his activities from the Eastern to the Pacific Coast. The vicissitudes of Western commerce — the bleaker side of the coin, so to speak — are evident in the experience of Alexander Mayer, a partner in a Philadelphia dry goods and clothing firm. The Mayers shipped their California stock via New York clippers and undoubtedly purchased much of their stock in New York as well. Alexander Mayer's correspondence with his uncle in the East reveals the hardships probably faced by many clothiers in the Far West. Mayer, plagued especially by the fires which periodically swept over the business district of San Francisco, was reluctant to carry extensive stock on his shelves.

<sup>17</sup> Bert H. Olson, "Levi Strauss Western Pioneer Manufacturer," *The Quarterly Historical Society of Southern California*, XXX (Sept., 1948), 209-12.

<sup>18</sup> San Francisco *Daily Alta California*, May 7, 1851, Feb. 12, April 30, Dec. 4, 1852.

"I rather make 20pr cent less and have not so much in store and go a little safe," he wrote to his uncle in March, 1851. As luck would have it, Mayer's stock suffered extensive damage in a fire the following May.<sup>19</sup> Another in June, we gather from one of his letters, must have shaken him up considerably. "Dear Uncle," he wrote, after he had surveyed the damage, "it is hard for me to write you again about my misfortune. I had on the 22nd of June a large fire . . . and I am an heavy looser again." He tried to convince his uncle that he had done everything in his power to salvage the merchandise and had even remained in the store to save all he could despite the spreading flames. It was only after repeated pleas from the firemen, he wrote, that "I thought then it is the best for me to go out . . . . Rather let them goods burne then my self, I know you dont want medo that . . . ." His losses, he added, were heavy. Although he had managed to salvage a portion of his merchandise, much of the clothing was either destroyed by the flames or stolen. "A person at home," he continued, "cannot imagin this fire's what takes place here . . . . You may really belive me since I left . . . I look ten years older. In all my days alife I have not been so down hearted as I have been for the last 6 weeks . . . ." <sup>20</sup> In one of these conflagrations, it is reported, the New York clothing dealer, Jesse Seligman, was the only merchant whose store escaped destruction.<sup>21</sup>

Fires were, of course, not the only threat to commercial success; there were also unstable prices, an unpredictable demand for clothing, and a generally erratic business climate, all of which made even more precarious the situation of the eastern merchant who settled in San Francisco.<sup>22</sup> The New York Jewish clothing merchant who dared, therefore, to venture into the new communities of the Pacific Coast encountered risks and business conditions which at times

<sup>19</sup> Albert M. Friedenberq, ed., "Letters of a California Pioneer," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society*, XXXI (1928), 144, 150-51, 169-70.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 157-58.

<sup>21</sup> Markens, p. 142.

<sup>22</sup> Friedenberq, pp. 139-43, 145-47; Frank Soule, John H. Gihon, and James Nisbet, *The Annals of San Francisco* (New York, 1854), pp. 302-3, 367, 418-19, 519-21; Hubert H. Bancroft, *History of California* (San Francisco, 1890), VII, 104-7; *San Francisco Daily Alta California*, March 9, 1852.

were truly formidable. By doing so, however, he helped the New York clothing industry establish a foothold in California as well as in other important commercial centers throughout the United States.

#### BEFORE THE DAWN

The rapid growth of New York City's population meant, of course, an enormous expansion of its retail market for clothing. This factor, coupled with another — that New York City was emerging as a center of fashions<sup>23</sup> — directed the New York merchant down still another avenue of prosperity. Yet Jewish names were almost completely absent among the fashionable urban retailers. Although immigrant retailers of custom- and ready-made garments were numerous in the growing metropolis, they were generally, as they proudly announced in their advertisements, immigrants from England and France whose names betrayed no evidence of Jewish origin.<sup>24</sup>

The leading fashion publications of the day, magazines like *Le Miroir du Beau Monde*, *The Quarterly Reports of London and Paris Fashions*, and the popular *Mirror of Fashion*, were likewise not in Jewish hands.<sup>25</sup> As was suggested earlier in these pages, it was not in the elegantly fashionable retail trade that the New York Jewish clothier left his mark during this early period, but in the considerably less *raffiné* secondhand clothing trade.

It was not otherwise in the realm of technology; here, too, Jewish innovators were rare. A bibliography of works dealing with the cutting and drafting of men's clothing and published in 1850 contains no recognizably Jewish names.<sup>26</sup> Among the pre-Civil War

<sup>23</sup> Freeman Hunt, ed., *The Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review*, XXXVII (Aug., 1857), 261; *Annual Report of the Chamber of Commerce of the State of New York for 1857* (New York, 1859), p. 39; *The Mirror of Fashion* (Dec., 1854), p. 152.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, advertisements in the *New York Evening Post*, Oct. 30, 1807, June 16, 1820, May 9, 1825; *New York Herald*, June 7, 1836, May 15, 1842, April 18, 1846.

<sup>25</sup> *New York Atlas or Literary, Historical and Commercial Reporter*, June 20, 1829; *New York Evening Post*, July 2, 1834.

<sup>26</sup> W. E. Walker, *The Tailor's Philosophy* (London, 1850), pp. 7-9.

inventors and promoters of the sewing machine, moreover, not even one Jewish name is to be found.<sup>27</sup>

In the realm of labor, too, during this ante-bellum period, Jews were inconspicuous. This was true despite the fact that immigrant labor played an enormously important role in the growth of the clothing trade. In 1836, some 10,000 women in New York City were dependent upon the needle for their support. The United States Census Report for 1860 estimated that as many as 21,568 people were employed in the New York City clothing trade.<sup>28</sup> Large numbers of these workers were, of course, immigrants, drawn almost directly from New York's port of entry into some branch of the clothing trade.<sup>29</sup>

German and Irish immigrants constituted the principal source of labor for the New York manufacturers. The large house of Hanford and Brother claimed that its "male employees are principally German and Irish — few Americans being employed in it, except as cutters." This statement was applicable to most large houses in the city.<sup>30</sup> Although native labor was initially characteristic of the industry, the numerous sewing women employed in the city having been mostly American-born, the heavy immigration of the 1840's introduced many changes. By the end of our period, immigrant women — Irish, for the most part — had assumed a dominant role in cheaper-grade sewing operations.<sup>31</sup> Jews, it is clear, played at best a minor role in the labor force of the pre-Civil War clothing trade, although a number may have been included among the German tailors. Names of laborers are, unfortunately, almost impossible to obtain.

During the ante-bellum period, the day of significant Jewish involvement in New York's garment industry had not yet dawned.

<sup>27</sup> Frederick L. Lewton, "The Servant in the House: A Brief History of the Sewing Machine," *Annual Report of the Board of the Smithsonian Institution* (1930), pp. 559-83.

<sup>28</sup> *New York Herald*, May 19, 1836; *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Manufactures*, pp. LX, LXIV-LXV.

<sup>29</sup> *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*, L (March, 1864), 235; Robert Earnst, *Immigrant Life in New York City, 1825-1863* (New York, 1949), pp. 92, 215, 217.

<sup>30</sup> *Eighth Census of the United States, 1860, Manufactures*, p. LXIV; Freedley, p. 127.

<sup>31</sup> Earnst, p. 93.

A study of the period indicates that Jews were still far from becoming a notable factor in the trade. Nevertheless, even at that early time, there were some signs to presage the role which they would assume in the future. Although few were to be found, either in the fashionable retail trade or among the managers of the larger wholesale houses, Jews had established a foothold on the strategic fringes of the trade. Already active in the secondhand clothing business, an industry of far greater importance then than now, they were, as we have intimated, among the pioneers who promoted the clothing markets of the still largely undeveloped South and West.

That these last-named regions evolved from mere outposts of the clothing trade into territories of substantial concern for the industry was due, in no small part, to venturesome Jewish merchants. People like the Seligmans, the Strausses, and the Mayers, willing to brave the perils of distant and insecure markets, were already prophetic of the prominence that future Jewish generations would achieve in the history of America's clothing industry.

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