

Notes and Documents on the 1862 Expulsion of Jews from Thomasville, Georgia

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On August 30, 1862, a group of prominent citizens met at the courthouse square in Thomasville, Georgia. The scent of hysteria hung heavy in the warm Saturday morning air. These people were uncertain whether their slaves, by whom they were outnumbered two-to-one, would remain docile or would rebel in the event the area came under Union attack. The prospects of such an attack were both real and imminent to the citizens of Thomasville, for Union armies were then active on the Florida coast. It seemed reasonable to expect them to direct their energies against Thomasville which was the railhead of the Atlantic & Gulf Railroad that connected Savannah with inland Georgia. Yet, because both the Georgia and Confederate governments had not constructed adequate defenses against such a threat, there was little the local citizenry could do except anxiously wait for events to run their natural course.

As a dangerous complement to this threat from without were the forboding economic pressures apparently being generated within the community. Unable to realize that rapidly rising prices and an increasing scarcity of commodities were the result of both the Federal naval blockade and an inadequate industrial base, the citizens of Thomas County easily succumbed to the explanation that there were traitorous and avaricious individuals whose thirst

for profit threatened the well-being of the community. It was, however, the appearance of worthless counterfeit money that created an atmosphere of crisis and roused the people to action.

If the citizens of Thomasville were frustrated by a sense of helplessness to influence military action to the south or affect the naval blockade or deal with regional economic institutions, they could at least convince themselves that they were still masters of their own destiny by taking necessary action against speculators and counterfeiters.

They decided that the three resident Jewish families and the itinerant Jewish peddlers were responsible for their economic plight. The Jews were used as the scapegoats for a number of reasons. First, they had no influence in the community. Therefore, it was politically safer to let them bear the blame rather than accuse one of the local non-Jewish residents and threaten the social unity. Secondly, the stereotype of the unscrupulous Jewish merchant was deeply rooted in the Southern cultural psyche. The ability to deflect guilt from one of their own to these "outsiders" was facilitated by the ease with which the people accepted the proposition that the Jews would by nature engage in "extortions of trade" through illicit speculation and profiteering. Thirdly, the Jews, as aliens, possessed no "feeling common with the Confederacy." Certainly, it was not difficult to call their patriotism into question, for none had volunteered for regular military service or had joined a local militia defense unit. And finally, it had been commonly accepted that the passing of the counterfeit money was being accomplished by itinerant traders. The only such individuals with whom the Thomasville natives had continuous contact were Jewish peddlers. Therefore, they concluded that by eliminating the presence of the Jewish peddlers they would adequately solve their counterfeit money problem.

The citizens of Thomasville who met that summer Saturday were determined to show no quarter to extortioners who would through "exorbitant and ruinous price" and without conscience reduce families to "intolerable want." They passed a series of resolutions by which the resident Jews were given ten days notice of expulsion, Jewish peddlers were prohibited from entering Thomas County, and a Committee of Public Safety was appointed with the responsibility of enforcing the resolutions. Upon agreeing that the

proceeding would be published in the Thomasville *Weekly Times*, the meeting adjourned. Its participants returned to their homes confident that the passage of the resolutions had exorcised the threatening evils.

The issue, however, did not stop at the boundaries of Thomas County, for the restlessness displayed in Thomasville was not unique in Georgia. Indeed, the entire state was in the grip of both an inflationary surge and a counterfeit money panic. Therefore, it was not surprising that the actions in Thomasville struck sympathetic chords elsewhere.

On September 8th, in Macon, great pains had been taken to explain that a meeting of local merchants convened to deal with inflated prices was not an accusation of practices of local Jewish merchants. Yet, on September 10th, the *Macon Journal and Messenger* reprinted from the Thomasville *Weekly Times* the proceedings of the Thomasville meeting because as the editor explained, in an accompanying comment, it was "well worthy of attention—and perhaps, of action." The *Savannah Daily Morning News*, in turn, reprinted on the front page of its September 12th issue the article as it appeared in the *Journal and Messenger* (Document No. 1).

The appearance of the Thomasville resolutions in the *Daily Morning News*, along with the supporting editorial comments, shortly after the arrival in Savannah of the expelled Jews, led the German Jewish community of Savannah to meet in protest on the evening of September 13th. They denounced both the slander and persecution of their fellow-Jews by the citizens of Thomasville and the apparent sympathy displayed by the *Daily Morning News*. The influence of these Jews in Savannah was too great to ignore. Consequently, the proceedings of the meeting appeared in the September 16th issue of the *Daily Morning News* accompanied by a defense of the editor, W.T. Thompson, that reprinting the article as it appeared in the *Journal & Messenger* constituted good journalism, not participation "in the wrong" (Document No. 2). Many Jews, however, were quick to notice that while it was true the editor of the *Daily Morning News* had not himself written an endorsement of the Thomasville resolutions, neither had he applied himself to a written condemnation. The Jews were suspicious that his silence bespoke his sympathies which he allowed the Macon editorial comments to express.

The controversy continued with the appearance of a letter to the editor in the September 17th issue of the *Savannah Republican*. The thirty German Jews of the Tattnall Guards, Company C, 1st Georgia Volunteer Infantry Regiment, wrote a forcible letter in which they registered their "earnest and indignant protest" against the Thomasville resolutions (Document No. 3). Three days later, on September 20th, the *Savannah Republican* printed the proceedings of a protest meeting of the German Jews in the 32nd Georgia Volunteer Infantry Regiment which had been convened on September 16th. The meeting had been called by Charles Wessolowsky at which he denounced the Thomasville resolutions as "unbecoming and unworthy of gentlemen" and secured the passage of a series of condemning resolutions similar to those earlier passed in Savannah (Document No. 4).

Though the controversy died out quickly as the Confederate government took steps against the counterfeiter and provided for the defense of South Georgia, the town of Thomasville would continue to bear the stigma of anti-Semitism well into the 20th century. In many of the surrounding towns Jewish communities would be founded or revitalized by many of the Jews who were not afraid to publicly defend their fellow-Jews: M. D. Gortatowsky and Charles Wessolowsky in Albany, Georgia; George Ehrlich in Valdosta, Georgia; Abraham Ehrlich in Bainbridge, Georgia. Their memories of the Thomasville incident would die hard.

DOCUMENT NO. 1: *Savannah Daily Morning News*,
September 12, 1862
(From the Macon Messenger)
Unlocated Traders

Below are the proceedings of a meeting in Thomasville, of a peculiar character, and well worthy of attention—and, perhaps, of action in other communities, where the same circumstances exist. Let the subject be duly considered, in the minds of everyone, of the evils that have already occurred, and may continue to occur, through those who have no abiding interest or fraternity with us—whose sole object is to pocket every dollar that can be made by the most unlimited extortion. The *itinerancy* of all between certain ages relieves them from the burden of the war, both in money or ser-

vice—and when all that can be plundered from any community, through the introduction of counterfeit currency or otherwise, is secured, they are gone to parts unknown. To this class, our resident community, which bears the burdens of the war, should give their attention—perhaps bestow their action.

It now becomes us well to know with whom we are dealing—and that it should be with these only who are located and freeholders in the community in which they traffic. None others are wanted here, now or hereafter, who are not identified, in the strictest sense, with the permanent interests of our soil and institutions.

At a meeting of the citizens of Thomasville and Thomas county, held at the Court House, in Thomasville, on Saturday, August 30, W. G. Ponder, Esq., was called to the Chair, and T. J. Wombwell requested to act as Secretary. The Chairman, upon taking his seat, called upon Colonel J. L. Seward to explain the object of the meeting, which was done in a few pertinent remarks.

On motion of James H. Hays, a committee of five was appointed to draft suitable resolutions to present to the meeting, whereupon the Chairman appointed the following gentlemen, viz. —James H. Hays, James L. Seward, John Hurst, John G. Dekle and Wm. Knapp.

The Committee, after having retired, reported the following preamble and resolutions, which, after a discussion of the matter by Col. Seward, were unanimously adopted:

Whereas, there are a number of German Jews traveling to and fro in this part of the State and circumstances induce the belief that they are putting in circulation spurious Confederate currency, and buying, from the producers their produce with this worthless currency; And whereas, there are a class of German Jews, located among us, engaged in extortions in trade, and in seeming complicity with the itinerant German Jews; And whereas, they are engaged in buying up in particular localities articles of prime necessity, thereby producing a scarcity, and transferring such articles to other localities and demanding exorbitant and ruinous prices, by which the families of soldiers are likely to suffer, and be reduced to intolerable want; And whereas, these evils should be suppressed, it devolves upon every good citizen to aid in arresting these evils; And whereas, we are satisfied that the demand for troops in the United States is forcing a large number of Germans south, on the

Confederate Government, who have no feeling common with the Confederacy, and it becomes imperative upon us to prevent them from coming among us:

Be it therefore Resolved, That we allow no German Jews to settle among us.

Resolved, That the German Jews, traders and merchants among us, are doing great mischief to our people by their repeated acts of oppression and deception in dealing with unsuspecting citizens. We are of opinion that upon ten days notice, they are requested to leave, and that the Chairman give them notice thereof; and if they do not leave then, that we assemble and take such steps in the premises as may be deemed advisable.

Resolved, That a Committee of Vigilance of ten be appointed in the town of Thomasville, to take charge of, and examine all German Jews that may be found hereafter in this town, to see that they leave here.

Resolved, That the clerk of this meeting keep a list wherein all good citizens who agree with us may enroll their names, and who shall be members of what shall be denominated a Committee of Public Safety, to act in concert with this meeting.

Resolved, That we hereby pledge ourselves jointly and severally, to sustain the action of this and all other meetings, intended to accomplish the objects hereinbefore expressed.

Resolved, That the Committee of Vigilance inquire into the mode and manner of dealing by the local German Jews, and when they ascertain any acts of extortion, issue of spurious currency or any other act detrimental to the public interest and injurious to the families of soldiers, that then they notify said party to leave upon ten days notice.

The Chairman appointed the following persons as the Vigilance Committee: J. H. Hays, H. McLendon, Dr. T. B. Little, W. F. Sandford, T. J. McBain, A. P. Wright, W. P. Flanigan, John A. Lane, John Ivey, and Sheldon Swift.

On motion, *Resolved*, That it is the sense of this meeting that the express messengers, baggage men, brakesmen, and train bands, now running on the Savannah, Albany and Gulf Railroad, nearly all of whom are foreigners, are unworthy of the places they occupy, a disgrace to the road on which they are employed, and a nuisance which should be removed.

Resolved, That the proceedings of this meeting be published in the Thomasville *Weekly Times*.

On motion, adjourned.

W. G. Ponder, Chairman

T. J. Wombwell, Sec'y.

DOCUMENT NO. 2: Savannah Daily Morning News,
September 9, 1862
THE CITIZENS OF THOMAS COUNTY
AND THE GERMAN JEWS

Having published the proceedings of a meeting of a portion of the citizens of Thomas county, we give place to the following action of the German Jews of this city in response to the Thomas County meeting, and in vindication of their people from the charges set forth in the preamble and resolutions adopted at that meeting.

MEETING OF THE GERMAN JEWS
Savannah, September 13, 1862

At a meeting of the German Jews of this city, held this evening, Mr. M. Loewenthal was called to the Chair, and Mr. A. L. Grabfelder requested to act as Secretary.

The Chairman stated the object of the meeting, when, on motion of Mr. Joseph Rosenthal, a Committee of five were appointed to draft suitable resolutions for the consideration of the meeting. The Committee consisted of Messrs. J. Rosenthal, S. Gardner, M. Selig, H. Meinhard and M. Brown.

The Committee retired, and returning, reported the following preamble and resolutions, which were unanimously adopted:

Whereas, we have read with amazement and contempt the proceedings of a meeting at Thomasville, held on the 30th August last, in which German Jews are denounced in unmeasured terms—are prohibited from visiting that village, and banishing all those now resident in that place.

This wholesale slander, persecution and denunciation of a people, many of whom are pouring out their blood on the battle fields of their country, in defence of civil and religious liberty, is at war with the spirit of the age—the letter of the constitution—and the principles of religion—and can find no parallel except in the barbarities of the inquisition

and the persecution of the dark ages. We feel that we have no remedy but in an appeal to an enlightened public opinion, and to that we do appeal.

Be it therefore resolved, That whilst we do not indiscriminately eulogize our people, yet we boldly aver that as a class, they are as honest, as true and as faithful as their persecutors and slanderers, and to this end refer to the criminal courts of the country.

Resolved, That we hold all concerned in that meeting as enemies of human liberty and freedom of conscience.

Resolved, That all newspapers giving currency to this slander and intolerance are participators in the foul wrong, and we recommend every Jew to withhold from the same his patronage and support.

Resolved, That the Savannah *Republican*, and all other papers which support civil and religious liberty and are opposed to persecution, be requested to publish the above.

On motion, the meeting adjourned.

M. Loewenthal, Chairman

A. L. Grabfelder, Sec'ry.

It is proper that we should state that the proceedings of the meeting of citizens of Thomas county were transferred to our columns from the Macon *Messenger*, as a part of the history of our peculiar times, and published as much for the information of our Jewish citizens as of any other class of our readers. The article was unaccompanied by a word of contempt or endorsement by us, as we knew nothing of the circumstances or facts which had induced the action of the people of Thomas.

In giving place to the foregoing proceedings of the meeting of German Jews, we are constrained to protest against both the erroneous assumption and proscriptive spirit of the third resolution. It is not true that an Editor of a newspaper, in giving publicity to the already published proceedings of a public meeting of his fellow-citizens, becomes a "participator in the wrong" that may be done by such meeting. As well might he be held responsible for every false telegraphic dispatch, or misstatement of facts that may find its way into his news columns. Such an assumption is simply absurd, and will be so regarded by all candid and unbiased persons. The recommendation of the resolution to which we allude, is entirely "at war with the spirit" of their preamble, and comes with a very bad grace from a meeting who are "appealing to an enlightened public opinion" against unjust "persecution." The writer of the resolutions, actuated by a less worthy motive than the vindica-

tion of his class from "slander, persecution, and denunciation" of the Thomasville meeting, must have forgot the logic of his "appeal to an intelligent public," when in the same breath he invokes against us not only unjust persecution and proscription, but an attempt to interfere with the freedom of the press.

DOCUMENT NO. 3: *The Savannah Republican*,
September 17, 1862
Editor of the *Savannah Republican*

We have read with no little surprise and amazement, mingled with a sense of the grossest injustice and wrong, the proceedings of a public meeting convened in Thomasville on the 30th of August last. The resolutions adopted by that meeting, couched as they are in the language of unqualified and indiscriminate proscription, and striking as they do at the honesty, integrity, patriotism and loyalty of an entire class of the community, betray an illiberality of sentiment, an hostility of feeling and bitterness of prejudice, strangely at variance with the precepts of religion, and which we had scarcely expected even from our worst revilers. We are always reluctant to obtrude our opinions upon the public attention, and generally seek to keep our own counsels; but in the matter under consideration, an urgent and imperative sense of duty to ourselves, and our own character as a constituent portion of a much injured and unjustly proscribed class, constrains us to enter, through the columns of your paper, our earnest and indignant protest against this unfounded and unwarrantable attack upon the resident German Jews of the Confederacy. As a people we arrogate no superior virtues and no more scrupulous rectitude for ourselves than we are willing to accord to others; neither do we claim for our kinsmen and brethren any peculiar exemption from the ordinary imperfections of human character which develop themselves in every society, but recklessly to proscribe and indiscriminately to denounce an entire class in the community, because of the unworthy conduct of comparatively a few, as plunderers and extortioners, ready to sacrifice every principle of honesty and fair dealing to the selfish, sordid instincts of greed, is an injustice so glaring, and an outrage so grievous, as to revolt the sentiments of an enlightened and generous public. Excepting to the most un-

charitable and odious decree thus cruelly fulminated against the German Jews, in at least this portion of the Confederacy, it is to that public that we confidently make our appeal, and in the name of our aspersed and slandered brethren ask to be vindicated at their hands.

Our enemies charge and accuse us with corruptly and vilely speculating upon the wants and necessities of the people in this the dark season of the nation's trial. Their resolutions substantially declare and allege that regardless of the public and private distress which pervades the country, and the suffering and destitution of families, we are heartlessly engaged in a system of chicanery, deception and overreaching—thus adding to the innumerable evils which already afflict the community, and gravely recommending the expulsion from their midst of all German Jews, both resident and transient. That there may have been individual instances of extravagant and unscrupulous extortion practiced by some unworthy members of our sect, we are not disposed to deny, but, unless we have been blind observers of the operations of trade both in this and sister communities, then there are not a few who claim to be “to the manner born,” whose avaricious propensities have for the time overcome their stricter honesty, and whose extortionate dealings have rendered them equally obnoxious to the charge of tampering with the wants and necessities of the people. But be this as it may, we have no desire or disposition to prefer any charges in this controversy, but are simply content with repelling the attacks made upon our brethren, asserting their rights, and defend them from this unqualified and wholesale denunciation. Once sanction such a precedent as these Thomasville resolutions would introduce—establish the principle that an entire class in the community, however free the great majority of them may be from all complicity with the guilty few, must *nevertheless* by an arbitrary edict be compelled to share their ignominy—and you inaugurate a system of proscription and ostracism, from which humanity shrinks back with horror, and which would speedily tend to undermine and overthrow all the foundations of society.

But not content with assailing our honesty and integrity in the matter of trade, the resolutions breathe a deeper acrimony, suspect our fidelity and impeach our devotion and loyalty to the government of our choice. They indirectly allege that our sympathies are aloof from the cause of Southern independence, and that our

hearts are indifferent to the final issue of the great struggle for separate nationality, in which these Confederate States are engaged. Wanton and reckless is this charge.

In confirmation of the patriotism and unfaltering devotion and loyalty of these men to the home of their adoption, we would point our revilers to the multitude who have already sacrificed the comforts and ease of civil life, and promptly taken their places at the windings of their country's born among the heroic defenders of the South.

Go review the mighty hosts who are struggling to achieve our independence—recount the regiments, battalions and companies who compose the noble armies of the South—and wherever, throughout the limits of our territory, you find them arrayed, there you will behold the representatives of our sect, standing side by side with the gallant sons of the soil, enduring the privations of the camp, the hardships and toils of the march, and the dangers and perils of the battle field, to win victory for our arms. This is an indisputable fact, which ought to silence forever the clamors of our revilers. Strange, indeed, that the patriotism of the German Jew should be questioned in this great warfare, when all over this Southern land, wherever the standards of the Confederacy are unfurled, he may be seen, clothed in the soldier's garb, fully armed for the conflict, and serving upon many a hard contested field, with the effusion of his life blood his devotion to the cause of Southern honor and independence. Let it not be sneeringly said that the Confederacy is (?) for the military service of these men in the compulsory operation of the conscription act long before the policy of that act was (?) our Congress, yea, with the first outbreak of this revolution, they were seen rallying under the banners of the South, and patriotically enlisting as volunteers in her armies.

But we forbear. We leave our cause, and that of our much injured countrymen, in the hands of an intelligent, just and discerning public, and subscribe ourselves members of one military company, the Tattnell Guards, who have buckled on our armor for the strife, all of us being GERMAN JEWS.

DOCUMENT NO. 4: Savannah *Republican*, September 20, 1862
Meeting in the 32d Regiment.

At a meeting of the German Jews of the 32d Regiment Georgia Volunteers, held at Battery Harrison, Sept. 16th, 1862.

Lieut. Morris Dawson was called to the Chair. and M. D. Gortatowsky requested to act as Secretary.

The Chair then called upon Mr. C. Wessolowsky to explain the object of the meeting, who on rising, returned thanks for the honor and proceeded as follows:

Mr. Chairman and Gentlemen:—I indeed regret very much that the cause of our meeting today is based on matters which never should have occurred in such an enlightened century, and in such critical and troublesome times; but gentlemen, no doubt all of you have read the article in the *Daily News* of Friday last, headed “unlocated traders,” in which you find a meeting held in Thomasville, wherein we, as German Jews, have been calumniated and persecuted by them to such an extent as to prohibit our settling in their village, and that those residing there should leave after ten days notice, and after that period, to be forcibly driven from their homes. How you must have felt at hearing of the existence of such an unjust act at this age, I can judge for myself. As a people, willing as we were, and are, to struggle for our adopted country, to sacrifice all that is dear to us, to abandon our second home, and leave our wives and children to the care of strangers not belonging to our society, or fraternity, we, our armor buckled, enduring all toils and hardships of a camp life, ready to shed our blood for the defence of our country, now to be denounced, slandered, and accused of infidelity, and disloyalty to our country and government. I would refer the gentlemen of Thomasville to the multitude of companies now in camps, that are filled with none but German Jews and foreigners, and ask them to cast a view upon the 70 Regiments of our noble State, and see how many Jews and foreigners, and ask them to cast a view upon the 70 Regiments of our noble State, and see how many Jews and foreigners, more or less, are in each; ask them to peruse the lists of donations, and see how liberal and free-hearted the German Jews and foreigners are in behalf of aiding their adopted country.

We are accused of speculating upon the necessities and wants of a people in the gloomy hour of its nation's trial. But, gentlemen, admitting that there are a few who practice extravagance, and are guilty of the charges preferred by the gentlemen of Thomasville against us; yet, as a people, we can flatter ourself to be as honest

and true as any; and why should they condemn the whole mass for a few individuals?

Let us look at the gentlemen from Thomasville who claim nativity to Thomas county, and are entitled to citizenship of their village, and see if they themselves don't partake of this extortion. Behold them coming to market, the one with fowls and the other with eggs; ask their price, and "two dollars for a pair of chickens and seventy cents for a dozen eggs," will be the reply. Now, Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, what is the cause of those high prices? Is it the scarcity of the articles, originated by our blockaded ports? Does it take more labor, expense, and time now to raise those articles than usual? Or is it their zeal and patriotism towards their country in elevating the suffering of the sick and dying soldiers in hospitals? I, for myself, Mr. Chairman, can answer that it is neither, and only the love for money, and the knowledge that necessity compels us to buy the same, is the sole cause of this extortion! The German Jews pictured in that resolution as itinerant traders and merchants can obtain their goods only through immense troubles and hardships and enormous prices—must they not sell them with more percentage than usual, and especially when they have to pay those outrageous prices for provisions? Surely they must. Now, Mr. Chairman, if you ask the gentlemen of Thomasville who are the extortioners, they will push the whole of the crime upon the German Jews and clear their own skirts by asserting their nativity.

We therefore, gentlemen, have met today to appeal jointly, as soldiers, to an enlightened public, in the name of our brethren and kinsmen who are far off in the midst of dangers and perils of the battle field, enduring the toils and hardships of camp life, and who have not the opportunity of asking justification from the public; and I hope you will take the proper and necessary steps to provide for the same.

On motion of Mr. P. Morris, a committee of five were appointed to draft suitable resolutions for the consideration of this meeting. The committee consisted of Messrs. A. H. Wonolowsky [sic], Chas. Angel, H. Baer, H. Hopp, and Ph. Singer. The committee retired, and returning reported the following preamble and resolutions, which were unanimously adopted:

Whereas, We have read with astonishment and surprise the proceedings of a meeting held at Thomasville by its citizens, on the 30th ult.,

wherein German Jews and foreigners were denounced in unmeasurable terms—the former accused of all faults and vices of human society, and the latter even held as unfit for train hands, &c., &c.: Be it therefore

Resolved, That we esteem the members of the meeting held on that day at Thomasville with contempt, and deem the motive of the same based only upon selfishness and envy.

Resolved, That we advise all German Jews and foreigners henceforth to cut off all communication and friendly ties between them, and be separated for the future, as we deem them unworthy of the same.

Resolved, That we regard the resolutions adopted at that meeting in Thomasville as unbecoming and unworthy of gentlemen.

And be it further resolved, That the *Savannah Republican*, and all other papers in our State which are opposed to such foul slander, be requested to publish the above.

On motion the meeting adjourned.

M. Dawson, Chairman

M. D. Gortatowsky, Sec'y.