When Hannah Wood was growing up as the daughter of a cotton broker in the 1920s and ’30s in the Mississippi River town of St. Francisville, La., a number of Jews lived right on her street. That would be Leonard Street, just off Ferdinand. “There was us, the Rosen-thals,” she says in a soft Louisiana drawl. “There were Leopolds, Teiches, some Levis, some Manns, the Schlesingers.” But by the early 1920s, the synagogue in St. Francisville had already been turned into a Presbyterian church, and during the intervening decades the few remaining Jews either assimilated entirely, died, or moved away. Now Wood, 84, says that she is “the last person who claims to be Jewish in this town.” She admits she’s an odd sort of Jew, the daughter of a mixed marriage who, “though my father was very, very Jewish,” was raised Catholic. But for nearly half a century she has voluntarily cared for Hebrew Rest, the shade-dappled little Jewish cemetery enclosed by an iron fence at the edge of town.

We think of American Jews as refugees from mid-19th-century Germany or turn-of-the-century Eastern Europe, landing in New York Harbor and settling in the inner cities mainly of the Northeast. Yet in smaller numbers Jews began filtering into the agrarian South as early as the 17th century. They started as itinerant peddlers and within a generation or two became established merchants. More recently the story of most southern Jewish communities duplicates that of St. Francisville, leaving many towns with no Jewish population whatsoever. Wood and the others who remain compose a confederacy of elders holding on to traces of their Jewishness: a few artifacts and customs of their religion and history and fading memories. Their quest to preserve runs against the larger southern culture’s pressures on outsiders to assimilate and against southern Jews’ historical tendency to acquiesce in that process.

Since its founding in Utica, Miss., in 1986, the Museum of the Southern Jewish Experience has helped Jews of the Deep South preserve their heritage. Its records confirm that in dozens of towns up and down the Mississippi River, a once-thriving Jewish presence has declined or disappeared altogether. The population of Jews in Mississippi dwindled from 4,600 in 1937 to 1,400 in 1995; in Arkansas there were only 1,700 Jews compared with 6,500 in 1937, and the num-
to blend in. Most adopted Reform Judaism, which was spawned in 1873 in Cincinnati to Americanize and liberalize Jews from eastern Europe. An effect was to accelerate assimilation.

Along trade routes, and opened what household goods and other wares to the rest of America to the cities and the suburbs. The first major migration arrived in New Orleans between 1800 and 1840; it consisted mainly of rural German shopkeepers and salesmen fleeing Prussian draft policies. Many men fleeing Prussian draft policies. Many farmers. In time, the peddlers settled down, often in river towns along trade routes, and opened what were called (apparently without insult) Jew stores, creating a new mercantile class in the South. Many became wealthy, some prominent, and in an effort to gain acceptance, almost all assumed a low religious profile and assimilated to a far greater degree than Jews in other regions of the country. In part because they never amounted to more than five percent of a town’s population, immigrant Jews in the South did not form a cohesive culture of their own but worked hard to maintain a profile and assimilate to a far greater extent than Jews in other regions of the country. In part because they never amounted to more than five percent of a town’s population, immigrant Jews in the South did not form a cohesive culture of their own but worked hard to maintain a profile and assimilate to a far greater extent than Jews in other regions of the country. In part because they never amounted to more than five percent of a town’s population, immigrant Jews in the South did not form a cohesive culture of their own but worked hard to maintain a profile and assimilate to a far greater extent than Jews in other regions of the country. 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In part because they never amounted to more than five percent of a town’s population, immigrant Jews in the South did not form a cohesive culture of their own but worked hard.
The South had a larger number of Jewish commissioned officers than the Union, says historian Greenberg. They were almost universally accepted as long as they acceded to the South’s prevailing views about race. Abolitionism was not, he says, a southern Jewish environment, you know your friends accept you, but in some Jewish families were among those who promoted a cosmopolitan profile, tending to keep their contributions to hospitals and to religious organizations anonymous. One town of fewer than 2,000 situated on a bayou about 27 miles south of Vicksburg, the Gemiluth Chassed Synagogue, a red-brick building, Moorish with a Byzantine dome and an arched doorway and with in its attic a room for a turn on the Sabbath, when observant Jews are proscribed from working or using modern conveniences.) The other tour takes south from Jackson to New Orleans.

Hart’s family has lived in Mississippi for more than a century. His great-grandfather, Isaac Hart, arrived in New Orleans from Jamaica, settled in Woodville, Miss., in 1864, became a merchant, and lived there until his death in 1905. Macy grew up working in a department store in Winona, Miss., owned by his maternal grandfather, who arrived with the first wave of immigrants from Eastern Europe. The number of Jewish families in Winona had shrunk from about 40 during his mother’s childhood to one when he was a boy. Now 52, Hart remembers that his family had become at least as southern as they were Jewish and were fully accepted by their community. They didn’t know Hebrew, didn’t speak Yiddish, didn’t wear skullcaps, and did work on the Sabbath, the day the farmers came to town. But to assure that their children retained a Jewish identity, Hart’s parents spent their only day off driving their four offspring to Jewish Sunday school, first 30 miles to Greenwood, and then to Cleveland, 40 miles from home.

After graduating from the University of Texas in 1970, Hart became the director of the Henry S. Jacobs Camp for Reform Jewish children in Utica, 40 miles southwest of Jackson. The idea for a museum to preserve the memory and treasures of a vibrant Jewish South came to him, he says, as the camp became “a dumping ground” for religious objects from disbanded temples. He then realized that stories of southern Jewish families were being lost because oral history was not being recorded. With the camp becoming “a lifeboat for southern Jews,” Hart says, he wanted to create a year-round program of Judaic learning. In 1986, using a $500,000 grant from the Plough Foundation, Hart oversaw the construction at the camp of a religious sanctuary with exhibition galleries and classrooms. The Oorien-

tuous, modern-style, yellow-brick building now forms the cen-
terpiece of the camp, a cluster of cottages hugging the shore of a man-made lake. Relics from nearby defunct temples furnish the light-filled sanctuary. The Majestic oak ark, a cabinet-like structure in which Torah scrolls are kept, comes from Vicksburg’s original Anshe Chesed Temple of 1868. Hart explains. The Torahs and eternal lights, signifying God’s eternal presence, says Hart, were rescued from abandoned synagogues in the Mississippi towns of Laurel, Port Gibson, and Greenwood, and in El Dorado, Ark. Old photographs on the walls include ones of the townstones in Woodville of Isaac Hart, Macy’s great-grandfa-
ters. Others show the quibly blend of southeastern and Jewishness in everyday life: A Succoth assemblage for the harvest feast is hung with cotton, soybeans, and corn husks; a cotton field can be seen through a window, background for a chal-
lah loaf on a Sabbath table.

On display throughout the museum is the exhibit “Peace to America: Discov-

ering a Southern Jewish Heritage.” Curated by Greenberg, it attracted 12,000 visitors when it was on view in downtown Jackson during the summer of 1998. The exhibit tells the story of the mid-19th-century wave of immigration to the South and includes
a Torah binder of European origin, made from an infant boy’s swaddling clothes, salvaged from a renowned emigrant’s voyage from Le Havre, France, to Hamburg, Germany, to New Orleans. From a nameless peddler’s pack comes a shoe-maker’s last and a watchmaker’s tools. Images and words explain how the immigrants settled down, an infant boy’s swaddling clothes, salvaged from a secure chest. Ò We want to recapture southern Jewish history.Ó To that end, Hart recently created the Institute of Southern Jewish Life, an organizational umbrella for the museum and for efforts in historic preservation, oral history, and genealogy. Sounding not unlike a southern evangelical pastor concerned about an untended fold, Hart says he wants the institute to provide a circuit-riding rabbi and a Jewish educator to minister to “those small little towns that have nobody to help them.” Hart and historian Greenberg agree that in casting off their past, southern Jews are following the path of other minorities, and that in abandoning small towns, Jews are part of a larger American phenomenon. New Orleans, the gateway through which most Jews who settled in the South entered the country, is also a city to which some have returned. Murray Blackman, rabbi emeritus of Temple Sinai, the city’s oldest Reform congregation, says New Orleans’ Jewish population of more than 12,000 is stable. “We are able to replace losses but haven’t grown,” he says. “A lot of our young people are going to Atlanta and Houston.” Indeed, Atlanta’s Jewish population has increased fivefold since 1971, and in Houston, Dallas, Austin, and to a lesser extent Richmond and Charlotte, the Jewish population is rising. Many young southern Jews are choosing these cities over northern or western ones, says Rabbi Blackman, because they tend to “feel more comfortable with the slower pace, the strong sense of place; it’s familiar, and there don’t seem to be any barriers to their participation in the larger community.”

The single word that most characterizes the history of southern Jews is assimilation, and, like the abandonment of small towns, assimilation has a larger context. The greatest threat to Judaism in America comes not from “those who would persecute us, but from those who would, without any malice, kill us with kindness—by assimilating us, marrying us, and merging with us out of respect, admiration, and even love,” writes Alan M. Dershowitz in The Vanishing American Jew. The declining American Jewish population, numbering about five and a half million out of roughly 262 million, makes up only two percent of the U.S. population and is expected to dip below a million by the time America celebrates its tricentennial. But in the rural American South there was probably no tenable alternative to assimilation, especially for a minority that formed about one percent of the region’s population. Beyond just wanting to get along and avoid trouble, southern Jews seemed to feel a special kinship and loyalty to their region. Perhaps it is that Jews and southerners shared a feeling of exile—for Jews a millennia-old legacy; for southerners a result of the Civil War and its agrarian economy.

Macy Hart is no exception. He has remained in Mississippi, rather than opting for New York, say, or Chicago, “by choice, not by sentence. They have more opportunities,” Hart says. “I have more challenges.” That’s the way he likes it.

“We want to recapture southern Jewish history.”