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WKU professor leads effort to preserve area's Jewish history

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When Timothy Quevillon visited Paducah's Temple Israel, he didn't expect history to be placed in his hands.

There it was: A woman handed him a large binder from her mother, who had kept temple records – one of eight filled with meticulous historical detail dating back to the 19th century.

"I was holding (a binder) in my hand, thinking, 'They have no idea the wealth of information that is included in these,'" Quevillon said. "At the same time, they're very much at risk if there is any sort of flood or fire or any sort of disaster that might befall the building. Some of these things might be lost forever."

Given that little historical attention has been paid to many small Jewish communities regionwide, Quevillon said, at that moment, he knew he needed to ensure that history would live on.

And so, Quevillon, the Jewish Heritage Fund visiting professor at Western Kentucky University, began gathering historical materials for a digital archive on Jewish history throughout the region. He's asking members of the public to contribute.

This project, the Riverlands Jewish Archive, will span Bowling Green, Henderson, Owensboro and Paducah in Kentucky; Alton, Belleville and Carbondale in Illinois; Evansville and Terre Haute in Indiana; and St. Louis and Cape Girardeau in Missouri. Key collections will come from Owensboro and Paducah.

Michael Brown, executive director of the Indiana Jewish Historical society, said that digitizing historical documents is crucial to preserve them because carbon-based copies deteriorate over time.

Quevillon plans to release the archive on Nov. 1 and expects it to be continually updated for at least several years.

"Some of these communities, they're actually dying," Quevillon said. "As time passes and these stories get lost, communities will forget about some momentous points in their own history."

For example, Quevillon said, the general public typically doesn't learn about when Gen. Ulysses S. Grant expelled Jews from Kentucky in 1862, let alone the individual communities' stories about the consequences.

There have been numerous smaller Jewish communities across the regions covered by the archive, Quevillon and Brown said separately.

Brown said there's much connectivity between Jewish families on both sides of the Ohio River – which borders or flows across six states, including Kentucky – all the way to the Wabash River. The Ohio River, he said, was an important conduit for Jewish pioneers moving up the Western frontier.

Additionally, Jewish merchants played a crucial role in developing retail sectors in cities such Terre Haute, Indiana, and Paducah, contributing to the growth of local economies, Brown said. There have also been Jewish connections between Terre Haute, Indiana, and Louisville because they have been major producers of alcoholic beverages, he said.

In Bowling Green, Quevillon said, the Jewish community has largely been centered in and around the university, and Jewish professors have donated papers to the library over the decades – records he's using.

“In a time where we are seeing massive historical revisionism and antisemitism, it's important to make sure people understand that in their own communities, there was a strong Jewish presence,” Quevillon said. “People care when (an issue) is relatable, and making sure people understand there were Jewish communities within their town is a way for them to say ... 'Maybe we should protect the Jewish population at large.' ”

As communities consolidate and shrink, as in southern Illinois, records often get consolidated, Quevillon said.

“Some smaller Jewish communities are in a state of decline or consolidation,” Brown said. “Many of these areas have a long history, going back almost 200 years.”

Although Jewish communities' record-keeping is often robust, what to do with records often falls on one person, such as someone cleaning out a synagogue, Quevillon said.

To collect them, he's driving a U-Haul to places such as Terre Haute, Indiana, to bring records back down to the WKU library, where he works with staff and interns on digitization. Then, Quevillon loads records back up to bring them to the Indiana Jewish Historical Society archive or return them to a person if they request it.

Brown added that collecting history is particularly important for marginalized and minority groups – who often aren't equally represented in other archival collections.

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