

New Orleans Jews shaped local history

January 22, 2018 4:15 PM Fran Simon

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Jews in New Orleans have shaped the commerce, culture and philanthropy of the city during nearly the entirety of its 300 years of existence. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Cathy Cahn Kahn Kahn had a banner year in 2017. Born Cathy Cahn and married for many years to the late Fred Kahn, at age 87, she married an old friend, 92-year-old Charlie Kahn (E '45) and finished her work on the archives of the Jewish community of Greater New Orleans.

The archives for Congregation Gates of Prayer, Temple Sinai, Touro Synagogue, Chevra Thilim, Jewish Family Service, Jewish Federation, Federation of Jewish Sisterhoods, National Council of Jewish Women and more are housed in the [Louisiana Research Collection](#) of the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library.

The records are a treasure trove of stories about Jewish lives that have contributed and continue to enrich the culture of New Orleans.

Since the mid-1700s, Jews have fundamentally shaped New Orleans. The city wouldn't be the same without its Jewish community, says Kahn, who co-wrote *Images of America: The Jewish Community of New Orleans*. "We have assimilated into the general New Orleans community. We live on any block in the city. We are part and parcel of New Orleans."

To Kahn, one word that boils down the Jewish community—like a restorative bowl of matzo ball soup—is connections.

A hallmark of the Jewish community's impact on the city has always been its philanthropy, with Jewish individuals and collective groups funding the arts (notably the New Orleans Museum of Art), health care (the likes of Touro Infirmary), education (from preschools and primary schools to Delgado Community College and Tulane University), and religious institutions (such as Touro Synagogue).

"What makes our funds available is that from the beginning we were excluded from pouring out hundreds of thousands of dollars every year on Carnival and debutante debuts," Kahn says. Her father used to call the coterie of well-to-do and liberal-minded women who got things done in the city "Pinks in minks." Now, the Carnival groups Krewe du Jieus and Krewe of Meshuganah goodheartedly satirize the traditional krewes. Only in New Orleans would you find Jews who celebrate both Mardi Gras and Purim with gusto.

Editor's note: This story was originally published in the [December 2017 issue of Tulane magazine](#). Continue to [full article](#).

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