

BENJAMIN HIRSCH LEVY
(1850-1927)

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ABSTRACT

It is rare in local history that a man and a business become synonymous and create a lasting presence in the community, but much is the case of Benjamin Hirsch Levy. He truly embodied the determined immigrant spirit which helped make Savannah a prosperous town in the nineteenth century.

Levy began his notable retail as an apprentice to a local merchant and within a few years managed to open his own store and start making a name for himself in the business world, as well as, in the community. Mr. Levy's fair and sensible business ethics which influenced his store carried over into his private life. Although the store that bore his name for over a century is no longer in business, Savannah still possesses evidence of B. H. Levy's strong sense of family and civic accomplishments.

PERSONAL HISTORY

Benjamin H. Levy was born on November 7, 1850 near the village of Trimbach, Alsace.¹ His parents, Benjamin and Therese Hirsch Levy were farmers.² At the age of seventeen Benjamin decided to leave home and go to America. This may have been because of romantic tales told by travelers³ or it may have been an effort to avoid the German draft.⁴ (In the 1860s Alsace was still considered a province of France, but was in conflict with the German Empire. Although the war of 1870 would prove the Germans victorious, many Alsacens did not want to pledge their allegiance to that country.)⁵

Benjamin sailed from Havre, France on the sidewheel steamer "Fulton".⁶ Eleven days later, on August 15, 1867, he arrived at Ellis Island in New York.⁷ He secured directions and train passage south as a result of a letter introducing him to Krauss & Felner (wholesale shoe dealers in Savannah).⁸

When Levy arrived in Savannah he sought employment with the Freidenburg Bros. Store on Barnard and York streets. He was turned away because he did not speak English. He then went out into the countryside as a salesman and learned the language as he developed a loyal following of customers. After six months Levy returned to Savannah and worked in Julius Perlinski's store on (what is now) Oglethorpe Avenue. Two years later, at the age of twenty-one, he opened his own store.⁹

On March 1, 1876 Benjamin Levy married Rebecca Dryfus in Savannah.¹⁰ Her mother, Henrietta Levy Dryfus was a native of Alsace. Her father, Emanuel Dryfus, listed his birthplace as France.¹¹ It is not clear when the family came to America, but

Rebecca was born in Brookhaven, Mississippi in 1857.¹² They moved to Savannah shortly after the Civil War.¹³ The 1880 Federal Census listed Dryfus as connected with a clothing store. It also listed three of his four sons as being in retail. The 1886 Savannah City Directory listed Emanuel Dryfus as a clerk with “H. Dryfus—clothing”. Mrs. Henrietta Dryfus was listed as being in “clothing.”¹⁴

The first child born of the marriage was a son named Charles, but he died in 1877 at the age of 10 months. A stillborn male followed in 1878. Moses Levy was born in 1879, but died at the age of six.¹⁵ Arthur (the only surviving son) was born in 1882. Stella (born 1892) and Lucille (born 1890) were outlived by both of their parents.¹⁶ Clarice (born 1892) outlived here father and was mentioned in his will.¹⁷

Henry Levy (B. H.’s younger brother arrived in America in 1875 and worked as a clerk for this brother until he was made a partner in 1878.¹⁸ He married Leonie Dryfus (Rebecca’s younger sister and the marriage produced three children.¹⁹ Both Levy brothers lived with Emanuel and Henrietta Dryfus early in their marriages and B. H. Levy & bro. Provided employment for three Dryfus sons.²⁰

BUSINESS CAREER

B. H. Levy's interest in retailing began when, as a boy, he worked in his uncle's store in Alsace.¹ He continued his career in America and opened his own store on August 26, 1871.² "B. H. Levy, General Merchandise" was located on the corner of Bryan and Jefferson Streets.³ Business was good and more space was soon needed. Three months after the initial opening, the store was moved two doors west to a slightly larger building and a second salesman was added.⁴

In 1874 the business found a new home at the corner of Congress and Jefferson Streets. This store measured sixty by sixty feet. The business stayed at this address for eleven years. It was while the store was at this location, in 1875, that Henry Levy came to work for his brother as a clerk. Three years later the name of the firm was changed to "B. H. Levy & Bro."⁵ It was also at this location, in 1876, that the business suffered a temporary setback. It was closed from September 1 to November 15 because of the Yellow Fever epidemic.⁶ Beginning in 1885 the store was housed for the next ten years in a three-story building on Congress Street across from the market.⁷

In 1895 the firm leased a building at 5 and 7 Broughton Street, West from the Meinhard Brothers and Co.. It measured sixty by ninety feet and had three stories and a basement. The group of fifty employees included salesmen, bookkeepers, and department heads.⁸ A grand opening celebration was held on September 30th from five to ten p.m. The store was decorated with an abundance of flowers and potted palms. Visitors browsed while an orchestra played; but no merchandise was sold. The ladies were given a silver backed souvenir brush and the men received a comb.⁹

In 1904 Arthur Levy (B. H. 's son) and Sidney Levy (Henry's son) joined the firm and the name was changed to "B. H. Levy, Bro. & Co."¹⁰ As the name of the store changed, so did the stock. B. H. Levy & Bro. Traditionally sold men's furnishings, but in 1900 a women's department was added and a men's shoe area and children's section followed later.¹¹ Advertising styles changed in order to attract a more affluent customer to the new merchandise.

B. H. Levy, Bro. & Co. found it's final home in 1925. The Meinhard lease had been difficult to negotiate and in 1924 the Levy firm came to terms with Stillwell Realty Company (agent for Arthur Lucas) for the property situated on the southeast corner of Abercorn and Broughton Streets.¹²

Levy had business interests other than his store. He served as a Director for the Chatham Bank¹³ and the National Bank of Savannah (located at 120 Bryan).¹⁴ He was one of the original petitioners for the incorporation of the Merchant Mechanics Land Co. (after having served as a Director of the Merchant and Mechanics Loan Assoc.) and the Savannah Savings and Loan Co.¹⁵ In 1891 he was a Director of the Southover Land and Improvement Co.¹⁶ and in 1893 he was President of the Southern Land Company.¹⁷ In 1891 he owned ten shares of the Seaboard Company valued at one hundred dollars per share.¹⁸ In 1892 he was the Director for Savannah of the company.¹⁹ Levy also served as a director of the Fire and Marine Insurance Co.²⁰, which was organized in 1887.²¹

B. H. Levy was interested in organizations that could benefit local business. On January 23, 1891 the following article appeared in the Savannah Morning News:

"...and B. H. Levy petitioned the Superior Court yesterday for incorporation under the name of "Merchants' Week Association". Its object is to provide entertainment and diversion for strangers visiting Savannah etc. Twenty years is the term of incorporation prayed for."²²

In July of that same year, Levy was elected President of the Savannah Merchant's Retail Commercial Agency. It was organized

“for the purpose of protecting merchants against dead-beats. It leads merchants in giving credit to be governed by actual facts.”²³

He was also a founding member of the Rotary Club of Savannah.²⁴ At times, Levy promoted good will and good business. In 1891 he used his store to sponsor a contest in which customers voted on the most popular mechanic in the city. The winner (Mr. W. T. Leopold received a “handsome suite of furniture.”)²⁵

B. H. Levy invested in several businesses outside the retail field. In 1889 he was the Secretary and Treasurer of the Savannah Soap Works; a soap manufacturer of soap located at the corner of Lumber and Pine.²⁶ The following article appeared in the Savannah Morning News on November 8, 1883:

“B.H. Levy & Bro. Were among the list of subscribers who have agreed to buy the property known as Oglethorpe Barracks, at a minimum price fixed by the government, as a hotel site-Each subscriber giving 1%, making a total of \$67,333.”

The above article referred to the group that was to become the Oglethorpe Hotel Co.²⁷ Levy was also connected with the Chatham County Cotton Factory Association. In 1890 he was listed as a subscriber and committee member.²⁸

CIVIC AFFILIATIONS

B. H. Levy contributed almost as much time to the well-being of the community as he did to his business. He applied the same principles to both. He was associated with many civic and benevolent organizations over the years.

Levy became a member of Temple Mickve Isreal in 1879. In 1889 he served on the committee that revised the prayer book and help change KKMI to a Reform Temple. In 1908 he made the motion that changed the start of the Saturday morning worship service to ten o'clock (instead of ten-thirty) and suggested that the length of that service not exceed one hour.¹

Levy was active in several Jewish charitable organizations. He served as the first president of the Jewish Education Alliance from 1914-1915² and bequeathed them \$200 at his death.³ He also held various posttions on the board of the Independent Order of B'Nai B'rith.⁴ In 1882 Levy served on the committee appointed by Mayor Wheaton of Savannah to help solicit aid for the persecuted Russian Jews.⁵ He helped organize fund raising events for the Hebrew Orphans' Home in Atlanta⁶ and remembered them generously in his will.⁷

Levy was a member of the Clinton Lodge, No. 54 and in 1924 was given the title "Emeritus Mason."⁸ He was also a member of the following: Free and Accepted Masons, Scottish Rite Bodies, Alee Temple (Nobles of the Mystic Shrine) and the Calanthe Lodge #26.⁹ He was a member of the Union Society and bequeathed them \$200 in his will.^{9A}

In the 1800's Savannah did not have paid firemen. The job of putting out fires was handled by volunteers of different fire companies. In 1877 B. H. Levy

was the 1st foreman of the Germania Fire Co. These men were valued in the community and were shown such courtesies as being exempted from jury duty (so that they could be ready for service; if need be). In 1876 several German societies were consolidated into one and called the Schuetzen Gesellschaft and Levy continued to be active.

Although Levy was busy with business and civic affairs, he still found time to pursue his interest in art and history. He served on the boards of the Georgia Historical Society and the Telfair Arts and Sciences.

EPILOGUE

Benjamin Hirsch Levy died at the age of 77 from heart failure. I wonder how many men of his character and principles are among us in Savannah today? After many weeks of research it is this author's wish to have had more time to delve deeper into the many aspects of this man's interesting life.

This author recommends further research into Levy's interest in the Savannah Soap Co. and his hotel investments. Given additional time, I know more information could be located. There is, however, one question that has plagued me the entire time I have worked on this project. Why did B. H. Levy choose Savannah as his home in America? Given more time that answer may or may not reveal itself.

I would like to thank Mrs. B. H. Levy, Sr. for allowing me to view some of her personal papers. I would also like to thank B. H. Levy, Jr. for his time and efforts in aiding my research.

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Index to Wills and Estates

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Savannah Morning News

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ENDNOTES (PERSONAL HISTORY)

- ¹ Tombstone, Laurel Grove Cemetery, Savannah (lot 1680)
- ² Fifty Golden Years, Commemorative booklet of the fiftieth anniversary of B. H. Levy & Bro.. (Obtained from the personal papers of B. H. Levy, Jr.)
- ³ Ibid. (Pertains to the two preceding sentences)
- ⁴ B. H. Levy, Jr., telephone interview with author, May 17, 1989
- ⁵ Encyclopedia Britannica, 9th ed., s.v. "Alsace", p. 636.
- ⁶ Fifty Golden Years
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- ⁸ "One-Hundred Happy Years", Savannah Morning News, 12 Feb., 1971, 1, 1.
- ⁹ Ibid. (pertains to entire paragraph)
- ¹⁰ Index to Mariages 1873-1877 (White) Folio #155
- ¹¹ Federal Census 1880, Household #320 I Chatham County. (Pertains to the two preceding sentences).
- ¹² Tombstone, Laurel Grove Cemetery, Savannah (lot 1680)
- ¹³ Obituary for Leonie Dryfus Levy, Savannah Morning News, (Not dated – obtained from the vertical file at Georgia Historical Society)
- ¹⁴ Savannah City Directory 1886, pg. 155, col. 1.
- ¹⁵ Cemetery Records, Laurel Grove, vol. II, 1939.
- ¹⁶ Levy Family Tree (obtained from B. H. Levy, Jr.)
- ¹⁷ Index to Wills and Estates, Chatham County, File #L646
- ¹⁸ Savannah Morning News, Feb. 12, 1971, ph. 2, col. 1.
- ¹⁹ Levy family tree
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- ⁴ Supplement, Savannah Morning News, Sunday, Oct. 10, 1971, pg 4, col. 6 & 7 (pertaining to the two preceding sentences.)
- ⁵ Ibid. (pertains to the preceding sentences in paragraph.)
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- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Correspondences between B. H. Levy , Bro. & Co., Meinhard and Ferst, and Stillwell Realty, Personal papers of B. H. Levy, Jr.
- ¹³ Savannah Newspaper Digest, SMN, Jan 15, 1891, pg. 35
- ¹⁴ Savannah City Directory, 1888
- ¹⁵ Savannah newspaper Digest, pg 56, SMN, Feb. 06, 1883
- ¹⁶ Savannah Newspaper Digest, pg 52, SMN, Feb. 20, 1883
- ¹⁷ Savannah Newspaper Digest, pg. 404, July 15, 1891, SMN.
- ¹⁸ Stock Certificate #76, The Seaboard Company, Oct. 23, 1891. (Obtained fro the personal papers of B. h. Levy, Jr.)
- ¹⁹ Savannah Morning News, Jan 23, 1891, pg. 8, Col 3.
- ²⁰ Savannah Morning News, July 18, 1891, pg 8, col. 3

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- ²¹ Obituary, Savannah Morning News, July 15, 1927, ph 10, col. 6
- ²² Savannah News Digest, Feb. 1, 1891, pg. 364
- ²³ Savannah News Digest, Jan. 13, 1889, pg 14
- ²⁴ Savannah News Digest, Feb. 1, 1891, pg. 364
- ²⁵ Savannah News Digest, Nov. 8, 1883, pg. 492
- ²⁶ Savannah News Digest, Jan. 13, 1889, pg. 14
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¹ “Third to None- The Saga of Savannah Jewry, 1733-1983,” Rabbi Saul Jacob Rubin, Congregation Mickve Isreal, 1983, pgs. 208, 230, and 318

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⁴ Savannah News Digest, SMN, Dec. 27, 1878, pg. 705

⁵ Savannah news Digest, SMN, March 25, 1883, pg. 658

⁶ Savannah News Digest, SMN, Jan. 23, 1890, Pg. 182

⁷ File #L646, Probate Court, Chatham County Court House.

⁸ Letter from A. S. Cohen (Secretary, Clinton Lodge) to B. H. Levy, Dec. 20, 1924 (Obtained from personal papers of B. H. Levy, Jr.)

⁹ Obituary, Savannah Morning News, July 5, 1927, pg. 10, col. 6

^{9A} Letter of appreciation from the Union Society to Arthur Levy, File #L646, Probate Court, Chatham County Court House