Amherst in the World

Saxton, Martha

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The history of Jewish experience at Amherst is not exceptional. The college was not markedly restrictive, nor was it especially welcoming—at least in the earliest years, when Jewish students struggled to gain entrance to elite schools in the Northeast. What distinguishes this story are a few individuals who possessed the courage of their convictions and challenged longstanding traditions. At distinct moments over one hundred years, these men—one outsider, one insider, and one religious adviser—readied Amherst for a greater Jewish presence. The curricular changes marshaled by Alexander Meiklejohn in the 1910s, accompanied by his intellectual rigor, put Amherst on the map for Jewish students. When the dean of admission, Eugene “Bill” Wilson (class of 1929), denounced snobbery by casting his net in public schools, he transformed postwar student demographics. Years later, rabbi Yechiael Lander called upon Jewish men and women to join together in spirituality and for social justice. This story traces Jewish experience at the college and highlights two interdependent forces: trends in US history affecting the perception and treatment of Jewish people and the bold actions taken by administrators to shape Amherst College with and against these tides.

EARLY SOCIAL BOUNDARIES

Across the nation, relatively few Jewish students pursued higher education in the nineteenth century, and those who did hailed from wealthy families. They cut a cultivated figure and could mix in the club-like atmosphere of small New England schools, with their fraternities, secret societies, and sporting cultures. But they were not especially drawn to Amherst College, with its founding mission to train young men for the Christian ministry. Jewish families were not especially drawn to the town of Amherst either. The total population was five thousand in 1900, and until the First World War, the Labrovitz clan was the only Jewish household. No synagogue, no kosher butcher, and no mikveh (ritual bath). The Labrovitz family haberdashery, situated on the corner of Amity and Pleasant Streets, “rented caps, gowns, and tuxedos,” as well as “clothing geared to the tastes of male students” at State Agricultural College (later the University of Massachusetts) and Amherst Col-
Not until the closing of the century did Amherst welcome its first Jewish notables on campus.

Jacob Henry Hollander may have ambled past the Labrovitz establishment during his extended stay in the fall of 1894. Hollander studied at Johns Hopkins University, later assuming a distinguished position on its faculty. His colleague, Herbert Baxter Adams (class of 1872), professor of American and institutional history, was a classmate of Amherst College professor John Bates Clark (class of 1872). That fall term, Clark had lectured at Johns Hopkins and, in exchange, Hollander visited the Amherst campus. His five-week series of lectures received a warm reception in the Amherst Student: “The department of Political Economy is to be congratulated on having secured the service of so able an economist and teacher as Dr. J.H. Hollander.” The article declared, “He is well known among economists and has contributed many able works to the literature of Political Economy.” That he was likely the first Jewish academic to lecture at Amherst goes unremarked. Notably, Herbert Baxter Adams played a vital role in the founding of the American Jewish Historical Society in 1892. Of these efforts, Adams was eulogized as “a staunch supporter and interested participant in the Society’s work,” who showed “the keenest interest and most cordial sympathy” for the preservation of the American Jewish past. Adams taught courses on Jewish history at Johns Hopkins and described, in 1900, lecturing “to young men and young women of the Hebrew faith in the class-room of their own synagogue.” A thoroughly Amherst man, Adams broadened his intellectual scope in Baltimore and helped to bring a wider world of ideas to the Amherst campus by facilitating Hollander’s visit.2

Mortimer Loeb Schiff missed Hollander’s lectures by a few months. Though Schiff identified with the class of 1896, he only attended Amherst from 1892 to 1894. His name bespeaks the joining of two powerful German Jewish banking families from New York: the Loebs and the Schiffs. Although Schiff wanted to attend Harvard, his father chose Amherst. As a leader of the US Jewish establishment, Schiff the elder felt a smaller college would insulate his son from “the many temptations a young man is subject to with so many students around.”3 At the closing of the Gilded Age, fraternities shaped the Amherst scene, and most fraternities did not admit Jews, African Americans, or other “undesirable elements.” That Schiff easily pledged Beta Theta Pi suggests the enormous influence the Loeb Schiffs enjoyed.

But such bonds offered little protection from the harassment of his classmates. Alfred Stearns (class of 1894) recalled that “his favorite pastime” in French class “was to eject Mortimer Schiff from the room.” As Schiff proceeded with his recitations, “the only serious student in the group,” Stearns and his pals would approach “their victim, pick him up in their arms, carry him to the door and deposit him outside, while Schiff, when he had had time to gather his breath, would sneak back to his place.” Other stunts included pinning Schiff’s chair and desk to the wall.4 Despite his abbreviated course of study and the goading he endured, Schiff gave generously to the college throughout his life. In the early 1900s, his gifts resulted in new squash courts, and years later, he bequeathed $50,000 to the college.5 Schiff was likely the first Jewish student to attend Amherst College. Jews became increasingly less rare on college campuses in the decades to come.
With an influx of immigrants around the turn of the century—fleeing political and religious persecution in Eastern Europe—the US Jewish community lost its sturdy bourgeois profile. It was a period when Jews marked the boundaries between upstanding wealthy members of the community and working-class greenhorns. It would take time and access to public education before the children of this immigrant generation could take their seats beside other college students, an ascent that proved difficult as institutional gatekeepers sought to limit their access. The more Jews pursued higher education the more elite schools developed “weapons to repel an invasion.” Rather than relying on the old standbys of tests and recommendations to safeguard admission, administrators increasingly looked to character: a flexible term that could mean anything from status and popularity to athleticism and leadership.

An elegant education was reserved for those who could pass for gentile in looks and comportment. A host of monikers emerged to parse these distinctions, including “professional” Jews and “chip-on-the-shoulder-Hebrews.” Most troublesome were the “greasy grinds,” who poured over their studies—in the Converse library and elsewhere—hungry for high grades and eager to show off. “You can’t expect to hang around with the scum of New York,” carped one observer of the period, “and expect to be respected.” “New York Jew” became synonymous with “obnoxiousness.” Administrators hoped to quell anxieties over such “Jewish problems” by limiting the number of Jewish students in their midst and, thereby, lessening the tensions between Jews and non-Jews. There could be no Jewish problems, they reasoned, if there were no (or very few) Jews. By the “tribal twenties,” a period marked by heightened xenophobia, Harvard, Princeton, Columbia, and Yale had openly or covertly adopted quotas to address these concerns. Restrictive quotas became the sine qua non for schools in the Northeast, where a majority of Jewish Americans lived and initially chose to apply. In this cultural crucible, it took chutzpah, or guts, for a Jewish student to choose Amherst and enter its consecrated eminence.

Philip Brisk (class of 1921) did just that. The Gardiner, Maine native earned the esteem of his classmates as a crack athlete, playing skillfully on the varsity football and baseball teams as well as some club sides. Though Brisk remained unaffiliated during his four years at Amherst, he served as vice president for his class and, in 1921, gave the class toast. Brisk took a first job coaching football at Thornton Academy in Saco, Maine, then solicited recommendations from Paul C. Phillips, professor of physical education and hygiene, and President Meiklejohn for a teaching position at Mercersburg Academy in Pennsylvania. There ensued a telling exchange, documenting the prejudice Jewish alumni faced in seeking employment, even with an Amherst diploma.

By all accounts, Brisk was well liked and well assimilated at Amherst. His Jewishness did not negatively mark him as an outsider, as evidenced by articles in the Amherst Student and his Olio blurb. During this “golden age of sport,” when Americans embraced physical culture after the war, Brisk’s profile embodied the masculine ideal. Except for his Jewishness, Brisk bore the markings of muscular (Christian) Amherst. Mercersburg headmaster
William Irvine had sent Phillips a letter in early January 1922, criticizing Amherst faculty for endorsing Brisk without noting “that he is a Hebrew.” Mercersburg was “not able to use a Hebrew young man as a regular member of our faculty,” and Irvine “felt a little sore” for not receiving “the full particulars.” Interestingly, Irvine’s letter begins by offering praise for the contributions of a Mr. Frank Glick, former football coach at Mercersburg: Glick “is one of the most skilled coaches that we have had” and “is all right in personality and character. He is, as you probably know, a Hebrew but this fact does not seem to be a handicap to him in his work.” Brisk may have received a warmer reception at Mercersburg had he applied for a coaching position. Irvine’s letter was subsequently forwarded to the president’s office, and Meiklejohn offered a terse rejoinder: “I think I need hardly say that it had not occurred to me that you would need information on that point…. I am very sorry that you were misled by what we failed to say.”

Though athletes and well-heeled Jewish students adapted more easily at Amherst and elsewhere, the college did admit a Russian Jewish immigrant during the 1910s whose family had settled in Northampton. Son of a highly regarded Hebrew scholar and social worker from Vilna, Elhanan Hirsch Golomb (class of 1919) did not personify the Amherst Man. His Olio entry records no sports, class, or other student activities, only the provisional tolerance of his peers. Alternately deemed a “yokel” and “ouija board gone wrong,” classmates describe Golomb delivering “Palestinian monologues at great length” (likely proto-Zionist tracts) that fell on dumb ears, as “nobody can understand him.” One wonders if he and Brisk ever crossed paths, as the latter raced from one athletic field to the other. After graduation, Golomb earned a master’s degree at the University of Pennsylvania, then a PhD at Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, and rabbinical ordination at the Jewish Theological Seminary. His long teaching career included positions with the Hebrew Orphans Home in Philadelphia, Johns Hopkins University, and Baltimore Hebrew College before he retired in Israel. Golomb translated the Amherst mission of enlightening the lands—with Hebrew rather than Christian teaching—and was a forerunner in a century-long tradition of Amherst Jewish alumni becoming rabbis.

In fostering an academic and intellectual environment, his oft-memorialized “place of the mind,” Meiklejohn tempered, however subtly, the prevailing criteria for exclusion in higher education. If “education was revolution, a never-ending experiment,” then ambitious Jewish students were poised to take full advantage. This story of Jewish experience at Amherst offers a somewhat different view of the turbulent Meiklejohn era. Amid the flow of discriminatory quotas at other institutions, Amherst offered at least a partly open door, judging from statistics compiled by national Jewish organizations in the 1910s. Of primary concern to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations was outreach: discerning how many Jewish students engaged with religious life during their college years. Its report of 1916 indicates ten Jewish students from Amherst College met with “Rabbi Samuel Price” of Springfield, who also spoke with the president and dean. The Menorah Journal, a publishing arm of the Intercollegiate Menorah Society, seemed most interested in counting the heads of self-identifying Jewish students. For the 1915 to 1916 academic year, its census lists a total of fourteen Jewish students at Amherst; the following year, the number dropped to twelve students. Interestingly, the counting performed by the Bureau of Jewish Social
Research (BJSR) focused entirely on “Jewish names” in college directories. (Jewish naming and claiming has a long history, a practice known colloquially as “Jew-hooing.”) For the 1918 to 1919 academic year, the BJSR report identifies only eight Jewish students at Amherst. It is difficult to know if Brisk (son of Jacob Samuel) was counted. That a range of Jewish-identified groups began charting Jewish student enrollments in the 1910s suggests that changes were underway across the nation, as well as at Amherst.11

Jewish students did not choose Amherst because of Meiklejohn; they were increasingly choosing college, and his focus on academics rather than religious training made Amherst a more attractive school than it had been a decade earlier. Though the number of Jewish students was not especially high in these early years, the college showed increases during Meiklejohn’s tenure. In 1923, he opined: “We may not keep ourselves apart either from persons or from cultures not our own. We dare not shut our gates to fellow-citizens nor to their influence. So we must welcome boys of other stocks. And if they do not come, we must go out and bring them in.” Meiklejohn may have rattled the chains of tradition, but the bonds did not entirely break as his view of fellow citizens was not shared by all. When Otto Glaser, professor and chair of biology, sought to hire Herbert Friedman in 1926 as an instructor, he was told to consult with an influential alumnus and trustee. Accepting Jewish students was one thing; appointing Jewish faculty was another. The story, as relayed by Herman Greenberg (class of 1930), details how Frederick Woodbridge (class of 1889), dean and professor of philosophy at Columbia, reportedly “came on like a truck driver” to the suggestion and told Glaser, “Over my dead body!” Friedman was hired and taught at Amherst from 1927 to 1929, before accepting a position with the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, which he held for decades. Anti-Semitism increased in college and university settings, as well as across the nation, during the 1920s and 1930s. In 1924, president Calvin Coolidge (class of 1895) signed the Johnson-Reed Act, codifying immigration quotas based on national origins and barring entry to most southern Italians and Eastern European Jews. It was a time when Henry Ford popularized Jewish conspiracy theories, such as those detailed in The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, and circulated them widely in the Dearborn Independent. And across the airways, Father Charles Coughlin decried the rise and exploitative powers of Jewish capitalists.12

For their part, Jewish students found Amherst a lonely and isolating place during the interwar years. Fraternities shaped life outside the classroom, including where students studied, dined, and slept. With national charters barring membership to Jews, African Americans, and other nonwhite and non-Christian students, local members did little to challenge norms of exclusion. And despite the proliferation of Jewish fraternities across the country in the 1930s, no chapters ever appeared on the Amherst campus. To address this deficiency, a group of students—Jewish and non-Jewish—formed the Lord Jeffrey Amherst Club (or the Lord Jeff Club) in 1935. Conceived as a “non-selective, democratic social organization,” the club offered unaffiliated students “equal opportunity to the intellectual and social facilities” on campus, free from discrimination based on “race, creed, personality clashes, or economic barriers.” The group was lauded by faculty for its dedication to democratic principles, commitment to Amherst’s educational mission, and loyalty to the college community. Its social justice ethos suggests how deeply students felt excluded by
their peers. Alumni recalled the sting of social rejection for decades. Stanley Marcus, of the Neiman-Marcus department store, attended Amherst from 1921 to 1922 and described his status after freshman rushing, “a member of a group of six ‘barbarians’ including two other Jews, one Chinese, and two blacks,” highlighting the “discriminatory social system” that compelled him to transfer to Harvard. It took fifty years for members of the Amherst class of 1936 to offer a formal apology to their Jewish peers.13

E. Ernest Goldstein (class of 1939), a founding member of the Lord Jeff Club, also experienced social exclusion. He recounted that Amherst “provided the sole, and unforgivable, experience in my life of being treated as a second-class citizen, thereby providing my incentive to combat prejudice and discrimination.” Before embarking on an exemplary career dedicated to just those pursuits, and shortly after graduation, Goldstein wrote to then-professor Charles Cole (class of 1927) to ask about Jewish acceptance to Amherst. Cole’s reply, dated January 12, 1940, outlines an informal policy of limiting the number of Jewish students. “The whole matter seems to be shrouded in a good deal of mystery,” Cole concedes. “I think it is a college policy to admit about 8 or 9 a year. . . . But I think that if one of the eight or nine admitted fails to turn up his place is filled sometimes with a non-Jewish boy—which if you admitted only very top-notch men apt to go off to Harvard, Yale, etc. might serve in some years to cut the number well below 8 or 9.” Bright and ambitious young men sought this shining college on a hill. But as intellectual doors opened to them, social doors closed. This was true for most students, but not all. Robert M. Morgenthau (class of 1941), who pledged Alpha Delta Phi, was certainly an exception. And in 1941, Eustace Seligman (class of 1910) began his long tenure on the board of trustees, earning high praise for his good offices.14

TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE POSTWAR ERA

Whereas the college brooked social discrimination in the decade leading up to the war, the Holocaust made casual anti-Semitism untenable in its aftermath. The Amherst campus felt different when it resumed operations in the fall of 1946. The GI Bill brought an older set of students to the quad, with altered perspectives on college and life. Fraternities had been put on notice: be inclusive or risk extinction. The institution of 100 percent rushing meant every student who wanted to join a fraternity could do so. Hierarchies still separated the highly sought-after students from the unenviable “leftovers,” but no students could be roundly excluded. Though it would take years to reach full compliance, the rule symbolized a “progressive step forward.” For Jewish students, social opportunities could extend beyond the Lord Jeff Club. Neighboring schools such as Wesleyan and Williams struggled to integrate or reform their fraternity systems well into the 1950s.15

Changes in fraternity customs at Amherst prompted the questioning of other traditions, such as mandatory chapel. For decades, the only two requirements—outside of coursework—were compulsory chapel and athletics. Edward “Doc” Hitchcock (class of 1849), professor of physical education and hygiene, had advocated the interdependence of mind, body, and spirit, echoing other New England reformers, such as Sylvester Gra-
ham and William Alcott. Hitchcock believed his program, the “Amherst Plan” of calisthenics, strength training, and hygiene courses, would preserve the health of the student body. His influence extended well into the twentieth century, as academics, athletics, and chapel shaped student experience. In the 1950s, students enjoyed the competition of Chapel Dash, whereby contenders tried to see how late they could leave Valentine Dining Hall and still make it to chapel on time. More subversive was Chapel Flashing, described as “arriving a bit early to check in at the door, walking around to the other door, waiting until the monitor there seemed preoccupied, and then quickly exiting.” Such playful expressions were countered with protests over requirements to attend religious services. Ultimately, a compromise was reached: secular assemblies would be held in addition to religious services, and students could attend two chapel meetings of their choice. Clearly, the culture and composition of Amherst was changing from its nineteenth-century roots, training poor but talented men for the ministry.16

Bill Wilson sparked many of these changes. The conscientious objector, Quaker, and “former boatman, who understood the currents of the times” accepted the offer to serve as dean of admission with one condition: “no race, creed, or color restrictions of any sort.” Charles Cole, who had sympathized with Jewish students in the past and assumed the presidency after the war, guaranteed no interference. Wilson’s view of admissions was practical as well as principled: “There are very able, interesting Jewish students around this country, and if they’re going to be excluded from some places,” he reasoned, “this would be a good field to fish in.” The skilled angler adjusted his cast, visiting public schools in New York and establishing a professional relationship with Abraham Lass, principal of Abraham Lincoln High School in Brooklyn. They partnered in 1965, to write the College Student’s Handbook, and created new pathways for bright public school students. Wilson took Meiklejohn’s aspiration seriously: if students did not come to Amherst, then Amherst must seek them out. To this end, Wilson used all tools available to achieve a diverse class. Admissions photographs had been weaponized for decades to exclude students, especially at small colleges. Wilson saw things differently. Anecdotally, he claimed he could not knowingly accept a wide range of students without being able to see them. His continued use of admissions photographs landed him in hot water in the late 1950s, when the Massachusetts Commission against Discrimination threatened to sue the college for defying the 1949 Fair Educational Practices Act. A January 1958 editorial in the Student outlines Wilson’s broadminded position, accompanied by a cartoon depicting an applicant with a bag over his head. Wilson relented, foregoing photographs, and maintained his commitment to selecting a balanced class and working with alternative feeder schools.17

Wilson’s approach was part art, part science. The art, as many alumni recall, included his deft use of personal interviews to gauge an applicant’s potential. Skeptical of test scores as an index of aptitude, Wilson met with students one-on-one and often extended offers before candidates left campus. From his first year in office, this “dean of deans” compiled data on entering classes to share with prospective students, their families, and school counselors. The “Annual Report to Headmasters and Principals” included occupational intentions, prior school activities, a breakdown of public and private schools represented, and, for a number of years in the 1950s, religious “distribution.” In 1954, Wilson reported
the group included sixty-three Jewish students among the 306 admitted, likely one of the largest-percentage Jewish classes in college history.

So many alumni of the postwar era offer a similar refrain: Dean Gene changed my life. Martin Seham (class of 1954) recalled “a wonderful, insightful man who addressed every boy as a man and every man as a friend.” He was known to take a young man under his wing, steering him to a favorite fishing hole where they could discuss life or not talk at all. Wilson inaugurated the Green Dean position, offering a recent graduate the opportunity to learn the practice of counseling students and selecting a class. Robert Ward (class of 1957) was one such student, who eventually chose a career in education. Years later, after the memorial service for Cole, Ward described Wilson’s contributions to Amherst: “Prejudices that had once been operative were shelved and even Jews and rough-edged Catholics were judged on some equal basis. And a guy named Eugene S. Wilson brought that change about.” With Cole’s blessing, Wilson upended traditions and profoundly changed Amherst College—many say for the better and for the future. And he did so with grace and a wonderful sense of humor.

Across the country, and at Amherst, opportunities also expanded for Jewish faculty in these years. The town’s leafy pathways welcomed the legendary city walker Alfred Kazin, who taught for several years in the American studies department. Lauded for his “unorthodox teaching style,” students appreciated his focus on “the feeling you get from a book,” which resulted in “everybody really reading.” Looking back on his years at Amherst, Kazin described rambles down “a long, long street: you just get out and start walking and trust to luck. . . . Just one long street up and down, for miles it goes, and always named Pleasant.” Other notable Americanists and wordsmiths followed. Leo Marx joined the English department in 1958, later welcoming Allen Guttmann, also from Minnesota, to the faculty, and inviting Tillie Olsen to teach for a year. She developed a revolutionary women’s literature curriculum and radicalized a number of faculty wives. Remembered as “the toughest scientific mind in the room,” Joseph Epstein commenced a long and celebrated career in the philosophy department in 1952. Much as students of the era described the 1950s as “assimilationist times,” an ever-enlarging Jewish faculty helped pave the way for changes on campus in the decades to come. By the late 1960s, sociologists Jan Dizard and Norman Birnbaum took forceful political positions in their work and on campus, just as students Marshall Bloom and Ted Rosengarten (both class of 1966) fought prejudice and worked for social justice.

HILLEL AND SPIRITUAL CONNECTIONS

Whereas only a small portion of US Jewish students entered college at the turn of the twentieth century, by the late 1970s, one sociologist estimated “80–90% of Jewish youth” were pursuing higher education. As US Jews achieved social mobility and faced significantly less discrimination, communal leaders questioned how such openness affected Jewish faith and religious practice. Once young people left the structure and expectations of home life, would they continue to identify and worship as Jews? These worries were not
new. A primary goal of B’nai B’rith Hillel, a college student organization founded in the 1920s at the University of Illinois, was to inculcate basic Jewish values in young men and women during “the most plastic period of their development.” As these students readied for leadership positions after college, Hillel hoped to inspire them to become “leaders of their Jewish communities” as well. Student self-governance offered practical skills, but more importantly it taught students “to become serving Jews.” The proliferation of Hillel chapters across the country corresponded with the growth of Jewish Greek culture, offering spiritual, intellectual, and social camaraderie for a growing number of Jewish college students.

Hillel came to Amherst, perhaps surprisingly, in the midst of World War II. Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg arrived in 1943, ready to serve Jewish students in the valley. With few men on campus, save for those in residence for military training, there was little work, and Hertzberg left after one year. The next two decades were relatively quiet, with some students not recalling the presence of any Jewish adviser or activities on campus. Rabbi Louis Ruchames chartered Hillel through the 1950s, when Jewish students primarily sought to blend in with their peers. His scholarly temperament eventually drew him to academic work in the history department at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

As a student organization on campus, Hillel came alive when rabbi Yechiael Lander assumed leadership in 1967, bringing an ambitious vision to his work, “engaging Jewish students in worship, learning, and social activism.” Lander encouraged students to conduct religious services, schedule events, and shape Jewish involvement on campus. In an annual program report from 1977 to 1978, Lander highlighted student volunteers tutoring Russian Jews in Springfield, as well as “speeches, public vigils, and a good deal of letter writing” on behalf of Soviet Jewry. As Jews across the country had moved decidedly into the mainstream, Hillel offered a Jewish framework to engage meaningfully with members of the community: Hillel students shined a Jewish light on the world.

Most beloved and fondly remembered by alumni of the 1980s and 1990s were cooking meals together on Friday nights and welcoming the Sabbath bride. “Roommates, friends, boyfriends, and strangers” gathered to enjoy dinners of “Kraft macaroni,” pulled together on shoestring budgets and prepared in the Garman House kitchen. For many, Friday night meals exemplified “Jews doing Jewish with other Jews.” Non-Jews joined as well. Here was an opportunity to shape the contours of Jewish experience at Amherst and create a “secular synagogue.” Jewish education enlivened the mind, weekly and holiday worship bolstered the spirit, and Sabbath meal preparation sustained the social body. The group eventually outgrew Garman Lounge, and members sought a permanent site for Jewish congregation on campus.

With confidence and determination, board members advocated for a designated Jewish space. The October 1994 proposal highlighted Hillel’s growth as one of the largest student organizations, with over two hundred and fifty members, and its rich programming, which created “a more diverse and intellectually stimulating environment for the entire Amherst community.” To support and sustain this work, Hillel needed a kosher kitchen, Jewish sanctuary, and room enough for offices and meeting areas. Beyond such practical needs, a Jewish space would bolster recruitment: “Faced with the choice between Amherst” and
other schools, “Jewish students may choose to attend a school where there is a visible commitment to the sustenance of Jewish life.” Students envisioned a Jewish site in the center of campus, easily accessible for all members of the community. After a lengthy process, whereby administrators and students voiced competing interests, the quest for a Jewish-specific site ended with the establishment, in 1998, of the Cadigan Center for Religious Life, a multifaith center located in the hinterlands of Woodside Avenue and faculty housing.23

This was also the era of coeducation, which engendered a new set of pressures, as Jewish women navigated longstanding (and unspoken) college traditions within a Christian and male institution. For some in the early 1980s, their experiences intersected with “the last years of the fraternities,” which extended membership to women. Some experienced gender as the salient category of difference, as they were “focused on being equals in the classroom and on the sports fields” with their male peers. Athletics did not always offer a level playing field, however. One Jewish student recalls a crushing choice: observing a high holy day or taking the annual photo with the rest of her squad. Students and visitors to campus can scan the walls of LeFrak Gymnasium to find a picture of the 1984 women’s volleyball team holding a teddy bear and sign with the name of their missing teammate.24

Today, Amherst is one of the most diverse liberal arts colleges in the nation, a legacy of president Anthony Marx (2003 to 2011). Jewish students contribute to this diversity, as they have for decades. Except now students on campus identify as Asian Jewish, black Jewish, and much else. Their Jewishness may seem different from their Amherst forebears. But like the Jewish classes beginning in the 1950s, these students are changing the college and its culture: they embody transformations in twenty-first century US Jewish experience. Over the last hundred years, a few key figures had the courage to effect reforms demanded by the times and to push for institutional change. The Amherst mission will continue to evolve in this century, with new students—Jews among them—enlightening and serving a wider world.

Author’s Note

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Notes


3. Qtd. in Naomi W. Cohen, Jacob H. Schiff: A Study in American Jewish Leadership (Hanover, MA, and London: Brandeis University Press/New England University Press, 1999), 4. By the 1890s, New York alumni played an important role in the direction of the college. This coterie of bankers and others may have influenced Jacob Schiff’s decision to send Mortimer to Amherst; see Richard Teichgraeber III’s chapter in this volume.


5. Amherst Graduates’ Quarterly 5, no. 17 (November 1915): 160; American Jewish Year Book 8 (1906–1907), 211; Mortimer Schiff, Biographical File, Amherst College Archives, Amherst, MA. On Schiff’s financial contributions to the college, see Stanley King, A History of the Endowment of Amherst College (Amherst, MA: Amherst College, 1950) and “The Consecrated Eminence”: The Story of the Campus and Buildings of Amherst College (Amherst, MA: Amherst College, 1951).


8. Jesse Levitin, “Jews and Athletic Culture at Amherst College at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century” (Jews at Amherst seminar essay, Amherst College, Amherst, MA, May 2018), 9–10. Philip Brisk, Biographical File, Amherst College Archives, Amherst College, Amherst, MA; Delancey King, “Muscular Amherst: The Experience of Jewish Student Athletes during the Golden Age of Sport” (Jews at Amherst seminar essay, Amherst College, Amherst, MA, May 2017), Meiklejohn Collection, Box 7, Folder 1, Amherst College Archives, Amherst College, Amherst, MA.

9. For a discussion of the Amherst man, see Debby Applegate’s chapter in this volume.


24. Jody Shapiro (class of 1983), email communication to author, December 16, 2016; Deb Vogel Kenney (class of 1982), email communication to author, December 20, 2016; Sharyn Stein (class of 1986), email communication to author, December 31, 2016. Also see Martha Saxton’s chapter in this volume.