

The New Mexico Jewish Pioneer Family project, launched by NMJHS in 2002, was designed to uncover and preserve the valuable history of pioneer Jewish families in New Mexico. It was carried out in partnership with the Department of History and the Center for Regional Studies at the University of New Mexico.

The project used a loose definition of “pioneer” to cover the period roughly from 1850 when New Mexico was a U.S. Territory to the early 1920s after New Mexico had become a state. This timeframe ensured a representative sample of Jewish settlements in almost every area of New Mexico — from the larger concentrations in Santa Fe, Las Vegas, and Albuquerque to smaller communities, such as Clayton, Taos, Carlsbad and Fort Sumner. Most of the families came from German-speaking Europe, although a few were East European immigrants, who arrived in the post-19th century era.

The project drew up a list of some two dozen families that had considerable impact on the economic, social, and political life of New Mexico. Limitations of time, money, and staff narrowed the list to thirteen studies, a few of which combined related families. A special grant made it possible to add a fourteenth family.

In most cases, volunteers who had taken a special training course interviewed descendants of pioneer families. The interviews were videotaped professionally by the staff at Avista Video Studio based in Albuquerque. In addition, the descendants provided family photos and documents, which were included in the taped interviews or copied for NMJHS files.

All of the material resides in the New Mexico Jewish Historical Collection at the State Records and Archives Center in Santa Fe, which is accessible to scholars and family members. Copies of the interviews have also been deposited at the Southwest Collection at the University of New Mexico’s Zimmerman Library.

To disseminate the information more widely, a number of scholars were enlisted to write brief histories of the families studied, based on the interviews, books, articles, and additional research. These were published in booklet form between 2005 and 2008. These attractive booklets are available for purchase from the NMJHS office at the Jewish Community Center in Albuquerque.

Preserving the fascinating and significant history of Jews in New Mexico is part of the NMJHS mission. The original project only scratched the surface. More studies are in order when resources become available to study families that were omitted in the original project and to begin examining prominent Jews who arrived in New Mexico after statehood.