Galveston Project Symposium keynote address presented by Dr. Stuart Rockoff

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This talk is a bit of a challenge since you will be spending all day hearing about the Galveston Project, and I think my job is to highlight some key issues and themes surrounding the project, that have already been mentioned (or will be mentioned) by other speakers today. Suzy did a wonderful job last evening of giving the basic story of the Galveston immigration plan, so I’m not going to go into great detail about how it worked. What I want to do is to show how the project was conceived within the context of growing anti-Semitism and nativism that sought to limit Jewish immigration, and describe how this prejudice shaped the operation of the project.

The Galveston Project was created and funded by Jacob Schiff, a famous American financier and philanthropist. Schiff, who was deeply angered over the treatment of Jews in Tsarist Russia, was adamant that America’s ports of immigration be open to Russian Jews seeking to escape violence and oppression. By the early 20th century, there were growing efforts to restrict and control European immigration, which was transforming cities in the northeast. At the time, there were no limits on European immigration to the United States. Jewish immigrants from Russia and other parts of Eastern Europe flooded into Ellis Island, most of whom settled in New York. In 1920, 45% of Jews in America lived in New York City (meaning the five boroughs, not including New Jersey or Long Island.). Over one-quarter of all New Yorkers in 1920 were Jewish. This remarkable concentration worried Jewish leaders like Schiff as restrictionists often pointed toward immigrant enclaves, or ghettos as they called them, as evidence of the harmful effects of immigration. The Jewish ghetto on the Lower East Side of Manhattan was depicted as overcrowded, dirty, and disease-ridden. Further, Schiff worried that such neighborhoods acted as a barrier to Americanization, as Jewish immigrants could maintain
their distinct language, dress, and traditions. Schiff firmly believed that Jews needed to be more evenly distributed across the country, to lower their visibility, so they might more easily assimilate into American life without arousing nativist opposition. Schiff wrote that the project would plant “a seed for so large a properly distributed Jewish population in the United States that the questions and problems which at this time are a cause of such great anxiety to us will find in time their natural solution.” The Jewish Herald, Houston’s Jewish newspaper, expressed its support for the project, writing that “it will keep open the avenues of hope and liberty for our oppressed people in other lands.” This was the essential idea behind the Galveston Plan.

Now, redistribution was not a new concept. The Baron de Hirsch Fund was established in 1891, and among its work was a program to help Jewish immigrants settle throughout the United States. Jacob Schiff was the original vice president of its board. Ten years later, the Industrial Removal Office, or IRO, was founded to help resettle immigrants across the country; the IRO created local committees in numerous cities to help find these immigrants jobs. The typical IRO-client was a poor Jewish immigrant who was having a hard time finding a job in New York, and wanted to be sent somewhere else where a job would be waiting for them. In fact the Galveston Project was a branch of the IRO; David Bressler, who was general manager of the IRO, also oversaw the Galveston Plan. Schiff thought the IRO was insufficient because most Jews who settled in New York wanted to stay there. To have a real impact on Jewish settlement patterns, Schiff believed that these immigrants had to be redistributed before they arrived. Thus, the idea to use Galveston as the port of entry.

The Galveston Project, how it was conceived and how it operated, cannot be fully understood without placing it within the context of the anti-Semitism and nativism of the time. Anti-Semitism had long existed in the United States, though it gained new prominence during
the nativist response to the large wave of so-called “new immigrants” arriving from Eastern and southern Europe in the early 20th century. The increasing visibility of Jewish immigrants in America led to anti-Semitic concerns about their effect on America. Edward A. Ross, the prominent Progressive reformer and sociologist at the University of Wisconsin, wrote about the dangers to America posed by the supposedly inferior immigrants arriving in the early 20th century. He singled out Jews, claiming that “the Hebrews are the polar opposite of our pioneer breed. Not only are they undersized and weak-muscled, but they shun bodily activity and are exceedingly sensitive to pain.” (I’m not sure this conclusion was based on a scientific study measuring pain sensitivity!). Jews, Ross argued, with their amoral guile, would take advantage of native-born Americans. He accused “Hebrew money” of pushing unrestricted immigration, writing that “the literature that proves the blessings of immigration to all classes in America emanates from subtle Hebrew brains.”

At the time, a slew of racial scientists looked at the immigration question from an explicitly racial perspective, perceiving Jews to be inferior to native-born Americans of northern European stock. People like Charles Benedict Davenport, Clinton Stoddard Burr, and Madison Grant, among others, argued that Jewish immigrants were racially inferior, focusing on characteristics like head shape, height, and skin complexion. According to these writers, immigration restriction was the only way to prevent the racial deterioration of America.

Such opinions against Jewish immigration were not confined to academics. Perhaps the most influential and persistent advocate of immigration restriction for racial reasons was George Horace Lorimer, editor of the popular magazine, The Saturday Evening Post, who wrote many editorials about the dangers of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, including Jews. Lorimer wrote that people “see the Negro problem; but they fail to grasp the Russian problem.
They do not understand that many of these alien peoples are temperamentally and racially unfit for easy assimilation.” Lorimer’s editorials, along with anti-immigration articles by staff writer Kenneth Roberts were published in a magazine that had a weekly circulation of over 2 million and played a significant role in arousing support for racially-based immigration restriction.

This notion of Jews as a separate race concerned many American Jewish leaders. In 1899, the United States government began to classify incoming Jewish immigrants racially, labeling them as “Hebrews” instead of as Russians, or Germans, etc. While this decision was a great boon to later historians (who now had accurate Jewish immigration figures), it upset many in the American Jewish community. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the leading lay association of American Reform Judaism, passed a resolution against this racial classification at its 1903 meeting, proclaiming that Russian Jews should be classified the same as Russian gentiles since Jews were only a religious community. The chairman of the UAHC, Simon Wolf, was especially active in seeking to end the racial classification of Jewish immigrants. In a letter to the Secretary of Labor and Commerce, Wolf asked why other Russian immigrants were not classified as Russian Orthodox, or whatever their religion was. In 1909, Wolf and Julian Mack of the American Jewish Committee testified before a congressional commission that was studying immigration laws, asserting that Jews should be classified by their country of birth rather than as members of a Hebrew race. Wolf’s central concern was that a racial classification of Jews would lead to anti-Semitism. In a sense, Wolf hoped to make the large number of Jewish immigrants statistically invisible so they could not be singled out for discrimination or restriction.

Throughout the early 20th century, immigration was a hot-button political issue. Proponents of restriction won passage of the 1907 immigration act, which had a significant
impact on the Galveston Project. The law prohibited certain people from admittance, including “idiots, imbeciles, feeble-minded persons and epileptics; paupers and persons likely to become a public charge.” (explain public charge) The law also excluded “persons coming to perform manual labor under contract made abroad” or those who had been “induced or solicited to migrate to this country by offer or promises of employment.” The Galveston Project recruited participants in Russia, encouraging them to choose Galveston as their port of arrival, and strongly suggested that they would be given jobs after they came. After docking in Galveston, immigrants were sent to a city of the project’s choosing (the railroad fare to be paid by the project), where a local agent found them jobs. To be kind, the Galveston Plan came pretty close to violating the law, so its proponents had to walk a fine line. In fact, Benjamin Cable, the acting secretary of commerce and labor, believed that the Galveston Plan was illegal, and urged the immigration officials at Galveston to enforce the law strictly.

Deportation rates at Galveston soared in comparison to those at other ports of immigration. An arriving immigrant was six times as likely to be deported from Galveston as from Philadelphia; four times as likely as someone arriving at Ellis Island. Now this higher rate of deportation was true for all Galveston immigrants, not just Jews, but Jews were still deported disproportionately. During the first 9 months of 1913, 41% of the 6,000 immigrants arriving at Galveston were Jewish, yet they constituted over 60% of deportations. Keep in mind that Galveston Project Jews had to pass through a special screening process in Europe that was designed to weed out those who would have trouble being admitted. Thus, Jews arriving in Galveston, at least theoretically, were different from the general wave of Jewish immigration coming into New York; the Galveston Jews were hand selected.
Clearly, the examination process was tougher in Galveston. In fact, there were several cases in which Jewish immigrants denied entry at Galveston, returned to Germany, where they boarded another ship heading to New York and were admitted at Ellis Island. One possible explanation for this is the smaller number of immigrants coming through Galveston meant the doctors and officials had more time to examine these arrivals, more time to find problems with them. Another, more likely explanation, was that the particular officials themselves, responding to government pressure, felt compelled to strictly enforce America’s immigration laws. Deportations jumped in 1910 when a new inspection team was stationed at Galveston.

Why were these immigrants deported? There were several reasons why immigrants could be denied entry. Arriving Galveston immigrants had to prove to the officials that they were not induced to come by the promise of a job, that they had paid their own fare (which they had), and that they were not likely to become a charity case. There was a contradiction here: an immigrant had to prove that he would be able to support himself and not become a charity case, yet he couldn’t claim that he had a guaranteed job. Officials expected arriving immigrants to have some cash with them so they could support themselves until they found work. The Galveston Project recommended that immigrants arrive with at least $25; if one had less, they could be sent to a deportation hearing.

While the public charge and contract labor restrictions were difficult hurdles for arriving immigrants to clear, perhaps the most significant issue was their physical condition. At various times during the Galveston Project, medical examiners deported a disproportionate number of Jewish immigrants for physical maladies. Of course, serious diseases, like tuberculosis, and even an eye infection called trachoma could get one deported. But even things like “a slight hernia” could get one sent back; hernia deportations spiked in 1913, as if all of a sudden
European Jews were suffering a hernia epidemic! This spike led the government to look into what was going on. According to a report issued by the Galveston officials, Jews were much more likely to be deported from Galveston for medical reasons than other immigrants. 80% of those deported for valvular heart disease and arterio-sclerosis, and 85% of those deported for hernias, were Jews.

But one could be free of physical ailments and still be deported for medical reasons. In many cases, the officials relied on whether the person in question was “of a good physical appearance.” In June of 1910, government officials decided to deport 82 of the 280 Jews who arrived on one ship. The most common reason for these deportations was “poor physique” which would prevent the immigrant from being able to work to support himself. 90% of those deported from Galveston for “poor physique” were Jewish. One of the men scheduled for deportation was Isucher Handelman, who was listed as having a “flat chest and poor muscular development.” Examiner reports often commented on the muscles of the immigrants. The exact same diagnosis was given to Srul Resnick, who only had $8.50 with him when he arrived. Port officials concluded that Resnick was likely to become a public charge because of his weak physical condition and lack of money.

Arriving immigrants who seemed suspect, were sent to a Board of Special Inquiry, which would interview and examine them more intensively. It was this board that voted on whether to send the person back to Europe. One’s physical appearance was a crucial factor. In one case, the Board of Special Inquiry ruled to allow in two Jewish immigrants, a husband and wife, who had little money because “these aliens present a different appearance from the average Russian Hebrew immigrant: they are dressed cleanly, they have the appearance of strong, healthy, well-to-do middle class.” Of course, money was also important. In one case, Josef Sochnowski, his
wife, and three children were detained. The medical examiner concluded that Josef had a hernia and was senile. But since he brought $1000 with him (an enormous sum of money at the time), they allowed him in, though one examination board member dissented.

Now what’s going on here? There was no explicit law denying immigration to those who had a poor physique or who did not have big enough muscles. In fact, a lawyer defending immigrants’ appeals after a deportation hearing made some very good points that seemed to be lost on immigration officials: “the long trip, often begun months previously in Russia, is likely to cause him to present a deceptive appearance of physical defect.” After all, they had just endured a 24-day boat trip, traveling steerage on an often inferior ocean liner. Imagine a 24-day flight in coach on a discount airline. Also, keep in mind that many of these immigrants kept kosher, and often had a hard time finding a lot of kosher food on the journey. It’s no wonder that they looked weak and emaciated when they got off the boat.

But immigration officials did not take these factors into consideration. In a report to the federal government, Galveston medical examiner Dr. Louis Bahrenburg suggested another reason why the deportation rate was so much higher at Galveston. He explained that the various ailments outlined in the report were all symptoms of the underlying deficiency of these immigrants. And since most of the immigrants were still of child-bearing age, they would likely have native born children who would become “mental, moral, and physical degenerates.” Dr. Bahrenburg was making an explicitly eugenic argument: that these immigrants may not be a problem themselves, but their deep-seated physical and psychological weakness would result in even worse offspring, who would threaten the country. He argued “the exclusion of such defectives is unquestionably an unavoidable measure of self-protection on the part of this country, which would otherwise by literally overwhelmed with aliens of that class.” Dr.
Bahrenburg was the official who was largely responsible for the increase in medical deportations from Galveston. Certainly, his rulings reflected a prevailing anti-Semitic stereotype, that Jews were physically weak and less able to conduct manual labor.

It’s important to keep the deportation issue in perspective: the vast majority of Galveston immigrants were admitted – the annual deportation rate was never higher than 6%, meaning that at least 94% of arriving Jewish immigrants were admitted. The rigid enforcement fluctuated, partly due to Jacob Schiff’s lobbying efforts with the government. But in the end, it was a case of relative deprivation, and risk. It was much easier to be admitted at Ellis Island or other northern ports. Due to this rise in deportations, Galveston acquired the reputation among Jews as being a more difficult port to go through. If you were deported, you were sent back to Europe; all of the substantial time and expense you had undertaken were lost. Even if the chances of deportation were low, the fact that they were much lower at other ports, meant that those northern ports were much more appealing. This, combined with the extra week the journey took, as compared to New York, made it much harder to recruit immigrants for the Galveston Plan. This reputation would help lead to the end of the project in 1914.

Another factor in this demise was the project’s focus on bringing over manual laborers. From the beginning of the program, Jacob Schiff focused on bringing manual workers to the United States. The project did not want merchants or peddlers; their highest priority was immigrants who had a skill, like carpenters, shoemakers, and tailors, etc. Next, they were willing to take unskilled laborers as long as they agreed to work with their hands once they got to America. The project also did not want Hebrew teachers or kosher butchers (shochets); they discouraged immigrants who insisted on not working on the Sabbath, since this was not feasible
for workers in many of the cities where they were being sent. Also, such people worked against a larger goal of the program, to quicken the pace of Jewish assimilation in America.

This focus on manual labor is quite interesting since so many Jewish immigrants, especially in the South and Midwest worked as peddlers or store clerks after they arrived. Jewish manual workers were quite rare in many of these cities. Focusing on such immigrants undoubtedly made the recruiters jobs much harder. So why did the project prioritize skilled manual labor? The reason is because Jews were often accused of being unproductive, economic middlemen, who did not contribute to the larger society. This sentiment was reflected by Theodore Reyman, the owner of a manufacturing company in New York, who wrote a letter to the Department of Commerce and Labor in 1910, calling for the restriction of Jewish immigrants. Reyman declared that Jews “are not workers nor pioneer settlers nor do they work on farmland, in the cities they get into trade and begin to ruin prices and drive others out.” In William Faulkner’s novel *The Sound and the Fury*, the character Jason Compson expresses this anti-Jewish sentiment: “It’s just the race. You’ll admit that they produce nothing. They follow the pioneers into a new country and sell them clothes.” Immigration restrictionists often accused Jews of being incapable or unwilling to engage in hard manual labor.

Seeking to counteract this anti-Semitic stereotype, Schiff and the other leaders of the project only wanted Jews who were willing to work with their hands, who could produce tangible things, and not just profits. This emphasis was clear in the booklet issued by the project describing the process to prospective immigrants. It stated that anyone who comes through Galveston must be “WILLING AND ABLE TO DO ANY Sort OF PHYSICAL WORK.” It further explained that artisans of all kinds earned good money in America, while unskilled workers were also able to find work. It mentioned that merchants could also succeed in time, but
that all of them “must be ready TO DO PHYSICAL WORK” at first. When immigrants signed up to go to Galveston, they were asked by project officials what manual skills they had. Immigrants realized that they were more likely to be accepted by the program if they had such skills, so many claimed to be, say, a skilled shoemaker, and then found themselves in a shoe making job in America that they couldn’t do.

The Galveston project worked through local agents, who took care of arriving immigrants, and found them jobs. These agents would send periodic reports to the project officials giving updates on the job status of each immigrant. From these reports, you can see what sorts of jobs the Galveston immigrants received. True to the focus of the project, most of them were given manual labor jobs. Those who had particular skills were matched up with appropriate jobs. Of one group that was sent to Kansas City in 1909, all worked in their respective trades, which included, carpentry, tailoring, shoemaking, capmaking, and locksmithing. Each earned between $9 and $12 a week. Those who were unskilled often ended up working in factories. In Kansas City, unskilled Jews found jobs at local meat packing companies, for $6 or $7 a week. In Davenport, Iowa, Jewish immigrants worked at the John Deere factory.

If the local agent was unable to find jobs in an immigrant’s preferred trade, they were given unskilled work. When a handful of artisans were sent to Des Moines, Iowa the local agent was overwhelmed and couldn’t find appropriate jobs for all of them. He ended up getting them work at a local meat packing company. Several of the immigrants were not happy with the situation; one, who was a carpenter, wrote a letter to David Bressler, who managed the Galveston Project, complaining about having to slaughter hogs, something that was especially offensive to him as a Jew.
Indeed, there was sometimes conflict between the immigrants and local agents over the type of work available. Mendel Schulow was sent to Rock Island, Illinois in April of 1911. He refused to do unskilled manual labor, asking for a job as a store clerk or bookkeeper in a Jewish-owned store. When there was no such job forthcoming, he asked for financial help to get him started peddling. The local placement committee refused, and Schulow wrote a letter of complaint to the project leaders. The local agent, George Ellman, defended his work, arguing that jobs in Rock Island were hard to come by. He also described how difficult it was to get these Jewish immigrants to do hard manual labor, writing, “Every one of them, I have not seen it fail, comes to me, after the first day to show me how his hands got blistered, how his shirt is wet and all such things, and I have to console them and try to keep them working.” The immigrants, of course, had a different perspective on the matter, with one writing, “to work like a slave in a factory every day was not what we came here for. We could do this in Russia as well.”

These conflicts could also be political, as the radical politics of many working class Jewish immigrants clashed with the conservatism of these Midwestern cities. In Des Moines in 1908, the local agent was upset that several recent Galveston immigrants were socialists, writing that “the majority of the ones we receive are more or less permeated with Socialism and Nihilism…the first thing we had to do this fall was to break up a band which they organized here.” The radical politics of these immigrants caused some of the local funders of the resettlement project to pull their support.

This focus on manual labor also precluded a significant settlement in the South, where labor was tied up with notions of race. Indeed, from the plan’s beginning, there was an effort to bypass the South as a place for immigrant settlement. In 1906, an IRO official, likely David Bressler, wrote that the Galveston Project did not intend to settle Jews in the South since wages
were so much lower in the region due to the prevalence of low paid black workers and child labor. When working out the parameters of the project in 1907, there was a question of whether to allow Jewish farmers to come over through Galveston. The IRO official in New York claimed that homesteading land was available in North and South Dakota, but discouraged the immigrants from coming to the South, due to the climate and because “negro labor is available throughout this country, and there is always the danger that instead of doing their own farming and becoming real farmers themselves, the settlers will become mere exploiters of the negro.” Of course exploiting African Americans as a landowner was a central characteristic of the southern ruling class, and an effective way to gain social acceptance in the South.

This argument is fascinating because the idea of encouraging Jews to farm was the same as the idea of focusing on manual laborers: it would undercut the anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews as being unproductive and solely extracting wealth from the economy. But in the South, manual labor was usually associated with African Americans. When the IRO surveyed southern cities and towns to see if they would be a good place to relocate Jewish immigrants, a respondent in Charleston, South Carolina reported “in the unskilled labor field, the Negro predominates and wages [are] low.” A man named A. Roobin of Cordele, Georgia, was confused by the IRO’s inquiries about jobs, asking “do you mean to send Jews here for labor? This is no place as the labor is done by negroes and therefore the wages are very low.” In the South, it would be hard for Jewish immigrants to gain social acceptance and assimilate into white culture while working as unskilled manual laborers.

Those Galveston Jews who were sent to the South, were less likely to work in factories. Of immigrants who came in October, 1910, those who settled in Midwestern cities in Iowa, Nebraska, and Minnesota, tended to work in factories or as skilled laborers. Of those who were
sent to San Antonio, they worked for a bank, a doctor, and a restaurant, while three worked for the A.B. Frank Company, a wholesale dry goods firm. In New Orleans, one immigrant worked as a painter at the Jewish Orphan’s Home, while two others worked for a cotton bag manufacturing company, one as a driver. In Pine Bluff, Arkansas, one immigrant worked as a tailor in a department store while the other was a barber.

Despite their best efforts, the Galveston Project did not create a significant Jewish working class in the South or the small cities of the Midwest. Many of the Galveston immigrants did not remain in the city where they were sent. In fact, immigrants moving eastward to New York was a recurring problem. In November of 1908, Rabbi Joseph Rauch of Sioux City, Iowa, wrote to the IRO complaining that “nearly every immigrant” sent to the city thus far ended up moving to New York after a few months. He wrote, “it seems that every immigrant is restless and discontented until he has “tried his luck” in New York.” The immigrants also did not remain in manual trades. When David Bressler toured the country in 1912 to check in on Galveston immigrants, he found that “quite a number were engaged in small business” and, by the way, earning good money.

So this begs the question, was the Galveston project a success? Judged on its own terms, it seems inarguable that the program was an utter failure. It was only able to divert about 10,000 Jewish immigrants, out of 805,000 Jewish immigrants who came to the U.S. during those years, or about 1.25%. It was simply a drop in the bucket. This low figure doesn’t even take into account the Galveston immigrants who ended up living in New York or other large cities with concentrated Jewish populations. Schiff’s primary goal was to prevent immigration restriction that would close off America to the oppressed Jews of Russia. But in 1921, congress passed the first general immigration restriction law, and three years later made these restrictions permanent.
with the National Origins Act, which severely limited immigration from eastern and southern Europe, including Jews. The cost of this policy became tragic in the 1930s and early 40s, when most European Jews seeking to escape Nazi persecution found America’s golden door closed to them.

But looked at from another perspective, the Galveston Project had a tremendous impact on the Jewish communities of the Southwest and Midwest. Most Galveston immigrants settled west of the Mississippi River permanently. Many were the first links in an immigration chain that continued even after the Galveston project was ended. While they were a tiny number compared to the hundreds of thousands of Jewish immigrants who settled in New York, they became a significant percentage of the small Jewish communities in the Midwest. In 1905, before the start of the project, Davenport, Iowa had 204 Jews; by 1911, 91 Galveston immigrants had been sent to Davenport. While a third of these did not stay there more than six months, the other 2/3rds did. These immigrants, many of whom later brought over family to Davenport, were part of a Jewish population boom in the town. By 1927, 690 Jews lived in Davenport. The history of the Jewish communities of Texas and in many Midwestern states could not be written without mentioning the impact of the Galveston Plan. While it did not significantly alter American Jewish immigration patterns as Jacob Schiff had hoped, it did transform the Jewish communities in small cities and towns across the country, places where Jews established businesses and built synagogues, and made Judaism an important part of mainstream religious life in America.