

Alexandria Times

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Hanukkah in Alexandria

Before the mid-20th century, Hanukkah was not a major holiday for most Jewish Americans. By the time it became commonly observed in the United States, Jewish congregations had been established in Alexandria for almost a century.

The word “Hanukkah,” or Chanukkah or Hannukah, did not appear in the Alexandria Gazette until the early 20th century. That is not because there was not an active Jewish community in the city.: In 1857, Alexandrians founded a Hebrew Benevolent Society to establish a Jewish burial ground.

By the early 20th century, Alexandria was home to two congregations: Beth El Hebrew Congregation, founded in 1859, and Agudas Achim, founded in 1914. Hanukkah’s absence in the newspaper record reflects the holiday’s position within the Jewish religious calendar.

The Alexandria Gazette reported on Purim balls and store closings during the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in the 1870s, but not on Hanukkah until the first decade of the 20th century. The newspaper’s first few local references in the 1910s describe the celebration as a half-holiday largely celebrated at home and not observed with synagogue services. At the



FILE PHOTO

Candles are lit in a menorah during Hanukkah to commemorate one jar of oil lasting for eight days when the Maccabees fought the Syrian Greeks in 168 B.C.E.

time, Hanukkah was largely a children’s festival.

One Gazette article from December 1919 chronicled an “interesting program given by Congregation Agudas Achim.” This account was the most in-depth coverage of local Hanukkah celebrations that appeared in the Alexandria Gazette before the mid-20th century. The synagogue’s program in-

cluded songs, recitations and lighting of the candles. Agudas Achim’s celebrations also included a raffle and a prayer book for each child.

According to legend, when the Maccabees, a small group of Jewish fighters, entered the Temple and reclaimed it from the Syrian Greeks in 168 B.C.E., they immediately relit the ner tamid – eternal light – but only

had one jar of oil. The messenger sent to secure additional oil took eight days to complete his mission. Miraculously, the single jar of oil continued to burn until his return.

The Jewish community celebrates by bringing light and warmth into their homes, communities and the world around them during the coldest, darkest time of the year for many people. Many families spend time together during these eight days eating foods prepared in oil, such as latkes and sufganiyot, lighting a menorah and playing a game of dreidel.

After World War II, the story of the Maccabee resistance and ultimate triumph over their Greek oppressors felt more relevant and resonant to Jewish Americans, contributing to Hanukkah’s rise in popularity. The holiday’s proximity to Christmas in December also helped turn Hanukkah into a more widely celebrated and commercially successful holiday.

Today, Hanukkah is widely celebrated in the United States. Here in Alexandria, local synagogues, Jewish community centers and families commemorate the event with programs, traditional foods and lightings of the menorah.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.