

Jonathan D. Sarna, “Jacob I. Cohen,” *Dictionary of Virginia Biography* 3 (Richmond: Library of Virginia, 2006), 345-347.

**COHEN, Jacob I.** (ca. 1744–9 October 1823), merchant and civic leader, was born in Oberdorf, Bavaria, and was the son of Joshua Cohen and

Peslah Cohen, whose maiden name is unknown. According to family tradition, his middle initial did not stand for anything but simply served to distinguish him from others with the same name. Cohen immigrated to America about 1773. He settled in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he received a license to trade with the Indians. Approximately three years later he moved to Charleston, South Carolina. During the American Revolution he joined a unit of Charleston militia popularly known as the Jew Company. His commander noted his courage at the Battle of Beaufort (Port Royal Island) on 3 February 1779. Claims that Cohen was captured and imprisoned on the British ship *Torbay* seem unlikely.

By 1781 Cohen was in Richmond and had formed a partnership with Isaiah Isaacs, a silversmith and fellow veteran. Together the two men, the city's earliest-known Jewish residents, engaged in a wide range of commercial activities. Cohen and Isaacs speculated in land warrants, and in December 1781 Daniel Boone contracted to survey 10,000 acres in Kentucky on their behalf.

In the spring of 1782 Cohen went to Philadelphia in order to acquire goods. There he advanced £50 to his fellow Virginian, James Madison (1751–1836), who was short on funds. Cohen applied to join Philadelphia's Congregation Mikveh Israel in March 1782 and also fell in love with the recently widowed and impoverished Esther Mordecai. She had been born Elizabeth Whitlock in England but had changed her name when she converted to Judaism before marrying Moses Mordecai, with whom she had three sons. Jewish law forbade Cohen, as a descendant of priests, from marrying a convert. Following a stormy internal debate, Mikveh Israel prohibited its *hazzan*, or reader, from conducting the marriage or even mentioning the couple's name within the synagogue. In defiance, the congregation's leading member and two other well-respected members of the Jewish community privately conducted and witnessed the wedding ceremony late in August 1782.

Cohen soon returned to Richmond and continued to prosper operating the highly successful mercantile company of Cohen and Isaacs, often known as "the Jews Store." Its customers included Edmund Randolph, governor of Vir-

ginia, and Carter Braxton, a former member of the Continental Congress. The two entrepreneurs also owned the Bird in Hand, an inn and tavern operated for a time by Cohen's stepson, Jacob Mordecai. Cohen and Isaacs successfully speculated in land and owned several slaves. The business was one of the four largest contributors to a campaign in 1785 to erect public buildings on Shockoe Hill. Cohen and Isaacs amicably dissolved their partnership in 1792, and Cohen continued in business on his own.

Active in Richmond civic life, Cohen won election to the common hall, or city council, in January 1795, and that year he also served on a committee charged with assessing which quarantined ships would be permitted to proceed up the James River to Richmond. In 1801 he became an inspector of the penitentiary. Cohen was a Freemason and served as master of his lodge from 1805 to 1806. He also joined the Silver Greys, a volunteer company that prepared to protect Richmond during the uncertainties following the British seizure of deserters from the American frigate *Chesapeake* in June 1807. As perhaps the wealthiest and most prominent member of Richmond's small Jewish community, Cohen in August 1789 helped found Kahal Kadosh Beth Shalome, Virginia's first synagogue and the sixth Jewish congregation established in the United States. He composed a special prayer for the country recited before the congregation in November 1789 on a national day of thanksgiving that George Washington had proclaimed.

Cohen's wife died on 22 August 1804, and within several years he had returned to Philadelphia, where on 3 November 1807 he married Rachel Jacobs Polack, a widow. He served as *parnas*, or president, of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia from 1810 to 1811 and later presided over its Hebrew Society for the Visitation of the Sick and Mutual Assistance. Although he had no children of his own, Cohen was close to his nephews and nieces in Baltimore. Jacob I. Cohen died in Philadelphia on 9 October 1823 and was buried in the Mikveh Israel Cemetery on Spruce Street in Philadelphia. He bequeathed much of his estate to his wife and Baltimore relatives, but he also provided money to friends as well as their widows

and children. In his will he directed that five slaves, along with their families, be freed and given \$25 each. Cohen also donated considerable sums to Jewish congregations in New York, Philadelphia, and Richmond.

Biographies in Herbert T. Ezekiel and Gaston Lichtenstein, *The History of the Jews of Richmond from 1769 to 1917* (1917), 15–20; Aaron Baroway, "The Cohens of Maryland," *Maryland Historical Magazine* 18 (1923): 359–362 (with birth date of 2 Jan. 1744 from unspecified family records); Harry Simonhoff, *Jewish Notables in America, 1776–1865: Links of an Endless Chain* (1956), 107–111 (por.), and Jonathan D. Sarna, "Jacob I. Cohen and the 350th Anniversary of American Jewish Life," *Beth Ahabah Museum and Archives Generations* 11 (May 2005): 1, 3, 8, 12, 14; age thirty-five in 1782 list of Richmond inhabitants in *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United States . . . : Records of the State Enumerations: 1782 to 1785, Virginia* (1908), 115; age eighty-six on 7 June 1822 on list dictated to nephew Joshua I. Cohen, printed in Leon Hühner, "Some Additional Notes on the History of the Jews of South Carolina," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 19 (1910): 153; Myron Berman, *Richmond's Jewry, 1769–1976: Shabbat in Shockoe* (1979), 4–11 (por. on 5); Malcolm H. Stern, comp., *First American Jewish Families: 600 Genealogies, 1654–1988*, 3d ed. (1991), 32, 234; Melvin I. Urofsky, *Commonwealth and Community: The Jewish Experience in Virginia* (1997), 10–12, 14, 22, 24–26, 29, 35; *Calendar of Virginia State Papers*, 4:64, 347, 358, 439, 8:305, 9:328, 548; appointment as penitentiary inspector in American Jewish Historical Society, New York, N.Y. (photocopies in Cohen Family Papers [1794–1840], LVA); other Cohen documents printed in Jacob Rader Marcus, ed., *American Jewry: Documents, Eighteenth Century* (1959), 120–124, 144–148, 441–442; photographic collection at Jacob Rader Marcus Center, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, Ohio; Richmond City Hustings Court Wills, Inventories, and Accounts, 8:431–438; obituary in *Richmond Enquirer*, 17 Oct. 1823 (died "in the 80th year of his age," suggesting birth in 1743 or 1744), reprinted in *Norfolk American Commercial Beacon and Norfolk and Portsmouth Daily Advertiser*, 20 Oct. 1823.

JONATHAN D. SARNA

**COHEN, Zipporah Michelbacher** (13 December 1853–20 August 1944), association and civic leader, was born in Richmond and was the daughter of Maximilian Joseph Michelbacher, the first religious leader of Congregation Beth Ahabah, and his second wife, Miriam Angle Michelbacher. She was educated at her father's synagogue school and at a school for girls, probably in Richmond. On 25 February 1875 she married Samuel Cohen, director of the Cohen Company, a Richmond department store his family had founded. They had three sons before his death on 11 September 1916.

As a child she undoubtedly had assisted her mother in caring for wounded Confederate soldiers in their home, and she continued to follow her mother's example of service to the needy. In 1880 Cohen became the treasurer of the Richmond Eye, Ear, Nose and Throat Infirmary, a clinic for those who could not afford medical care. She served in that office until at least 1917 and possibly until the infirmary closed in the mid-1920s. In January 1902 Cohen joined the board of the newly formed Instructive Visiting Nurses Association, which provided financial support for the Nurses' Settlement, an organization founded by several Richmond nurses to help indigent patients. The IVNA's board consisted of representatives from Richmond's various religious denominations and through area congregations raised money for the settlement's work. Cohen represented the Jewish community on the IVNA board for forty-two years, until her death. She often served as a vice president of the board between 1906 and 1933, was treasurer from 1923 to 1924, and was a longtime member of the executive, financial, and nursing committees.

In addition to her work with the IVNA, Cohen was the longest-serving president of the Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Association (later Jewish Family Services). Her father founded the Ladies' Chebrah, a beneficial membership organization, in 1849, and by 1890 it had become an entirely charitable organization and changed its name to the Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Association. It is unclear exactly when Cohen became involved with the LHBA because its early records are incomplete, but in 1903 she served as vice president and in January 1904 was elected president, an office she held until her retirement in 1938. The association primarily helped Jewish immigrants recently arrived in Richmond, and its members provided financial assistance, fuel, medicine, and clothing to needy families. Much of the LHBA's attention focused on victims of tuberculosis, a constant and significant problem in poor immigrant communities. The association made annual contributions to the IVNA for its nurses to care for hundreds of tubercular patients identified by the LHBA's executive committee. During Cohen's presidency, the association began to expand its efforts beyond material