

Opinions

Synagogue's story at the White House

by **Laura Apelbaum**
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Who could imagine that research inquiry from long ago would become the subject of the president's recent remarks at the White House?

That's exactly what happened last week, when President Barack Obama spoke about an incident involving two of his predecessors — Presidents Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant.

The president told the story of then-General Grant's infamous 1862 General Orders No. 11. Blaming Jewish traders for the black-market sale of cotton, Grant expelled "Jews as a class" from the areas under his control in what was known as the Department of Tennessee. In response, several B'nai B'rith chapters sent protest letters and delegations to seek President Lincoln's intercession. Lincoln penned his rescission of Grant's order on the back of the envelope containing a Missouri chapter's letter.

Years later, the Jewish community divided about whether to support Grant's presidential bid. As president, Grant amassed a solid record on Jewish issues. Perhaps his most symbolic act of contrition was attending the dedication of Adas Israel's first synagogue building on June 9, 1876 — making him the first sitting president to attend a synagogue service. That synagogue building, Washington's oldest, has become the Jewish Historical Society's Lillian & Albert Small Jewish Museum at Third and G Streets, N.W.

On a daily basis, we recount this painful incident to visitors and students who are mostly hearing about it for the first time. We are constantly researching more about the cir-

cumstances and aftermath of Grant's order.

When I became director of the society in 1994, I called Dr. John Y. Simon, editor of the Ulysses S. Grant papers, to ask if he knew of any documents relating to Grant's synagogue visit. That's how I first learned that Grant's papers housed at the Library of Congress include an original receipt for the president's \$10 donation to the synagogue's building fund, written in the fluid script of the congregation's secretary. Not only had the president attended the three hour Orthodox service, but he apparently understood the customs of Jewish philanthropy.

When we learned that the Library of Congress was mounting a comprehensive exhibition about Jewish American history in 2004, we alerted its curators to the existence of the receipt in their repository. They included it in their exhibit, *From Haven to Home* — right next to the envelope containing Lincoln's rescission. The document also appeared in our major exhibition and book, *Jewish Washington*.

I have proudly served on the National Coordinating Committee for Jewish American Heritage Month (JAHM) since its inception in 2006. So when I met the new national coordinator for JAHM, Jennifer Mooney, I suggested that Grant's order and Lincoln's revocation might make an appropriate theme for this year's celebration. This is, after all, the 150th anniversary of what Grant later regretfully described as "that obnoxious order."

The story of Orders No. 11 was front and center at the White House's May 30 reception celebrating Jewish American Heritage Month.

Upon entering the White House, I spotted Peggy Pearlstein, head of the Library of Congress's Hebraic Section and

past president of the society, standing watch over a case of precious documents. These included the Missouri B'nai B'rith chapter's letter of complaint, that letter's envelope with Lincoln's revocation instructions, and Adas Israel's receipt thanking Grant for his donation.

Upstairs in the East Room, as members of Congress and dignitaries gathered, President Obama spoke about this little-known chapter in American history. He described each of the documents and called on us to remain vigilant against anti-Semitism and prejudice in our country today. He particularly noted Grant's attendance at Adas Israel.

What a wonderful validation of our work at the JHSGW and museum. We work to uncover, tell and educate our community and the greater public about lesser-known chapters in American Jewish history. We are proud that our message is receiving national attention and that our role on the national stage is bringing these stories to the fore.

As a community, we should be proud of ongoing work to protect and preserve our historic synagogue — the one whose dedication Grant attended. After all, it has such a powerful story to tell.

To learn more about Grant's visit to Adas Israel synagogue — today the Lillian & Albert Small Jewish Museum — visit www.jhsgw.org. Also, read Jonathan Sarna's new book, When General Gant Expelled the Jews, and Gary Zola's forthcoming 'He Was Like One of Us': Abraham Lincoln and American Jewry-A Documentary History, to be published September 2013.

Laura Cohen Apelbaum has served as executive director of the Jewish Historical Society of Greater Washington and its Lillian & Albert Small Jewish Museum since 1994.