

And now?

Jews honor early legislator's fight for them

By Frank P. L. Somerville
Religion Editor of The Sun

When Thomas Kennedy, poet and politician, began his fight in the Maryland Legislature in 1817 for a bill to give the state's 150 Jews the right to hold public office, he was vilified as an "enemy of Christianity" and a "Judas Iscariot."

But after his unstinting efforts "in virtue's service and in freedom's cause" succeeded in persuading his fellow legislators in 1826 that office-holding should not be tied to a belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ, a newspaperman of the time wrote that "at last a disgraceful part of the constitution is abolished. . . Surely we seem about to commence a new era."

In 1918, a monument was erected over Mr. Kennedy's Hagerstown grave—by the Independent Order of Brith Sholom.

Now, the state's Jewish Hall of Fame, which each year honors one living and one or two deceased Maryland Jews, has added to its rolls a gentile, an early Scottish immigrant, "a Christian gentleman and an earnest advocate of civil and religious liberty," in the words of a plaque on a wall at Sinai Hospital.

The memory of Thomas Kennedy will be honored at the Hall of Fame's annual dinner in November, along with retired Court of Appeals Judge Reuben Oppenheimer, 82, and the late Harry Greenstein, who was executive director of the Associated Jewish Charities and Welfare Fund from 1928 to 1965.

The Hall of Fame is cosponsored by the Jewish Historical Society of Maryland and



THOMAS KENNEDY
... fought for rights of Jews

the Nathan Hackerman Lodge of B'nai B'rith.

The 1826 legislation popularly known as the "Jew Bill" actually was entitled "An act to extend to the sect of people professing the Jewish religion the same privileges enjoyed by Christians."

Maryland's Act of Toleration of 1649 had been liberal indeed, considering the times. In saying that "no one within the Province professing to believe in Jesus Christ should be in any way troubled, molested or discountenanced for his or her religion in the free exercise thereof," it chipped away at old barriers between Protestants and Catholics.

Non-Christians, however, were not included.

In 1777, when the first Constitution of the state of Maryland was adopted, there was again no specific provision directed against the Jews—but neither were they granted any rights.

While the Constitution said it was the duty of every person to worship God in a manner personally acceptable, it also stipulated that a profession of faith in Christ be made by anyone desiring admission to any office of trust or profit in the state.

In 1797, two prominent Jews, Solomon Etting and his father-in-law, Barnard Gatz, were the first to petition the Maryland General Assembly for equal rights. They said they belonged to "a set of people called Jews and they are thereby deprived of many of the invaluable rights of citizenship, and [are] praying that they be placed upon the same footing with other good citizens."

In 1801 and again in 1803, such petitions were rejected.

When Thomas Kennedy, as a legislator from Washington county, took up the cause in 1817, he had never met a Jew. None lived in his part of the state.

But as a man of deep religious convictions and love of freedom, he showed no hesitation in putting his career on the line year after year in his persistent campaign to bring freedom to Maryland's small Jewish minority.

"I pray God," he wrote, "I may die before I cease to be the friend of civil and religious liberty, and a supporter of the rights of the people."