

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Jewish Occupational Attainment in the Antebellum USA: Filling a Gap in the Literature

Barry R. Chiswick  and RaeAnn H. Robinson 

Department of Economics, George Washington University, Washington, DC, USA

Corresponding author: RaeAnn H. Robinson; Email: rhallenga@gwu.edu

(Received 20 April 2024; revised 22 November 2024; accepted 11 March 2025)

Abstract

This article is concerned with analyzing the occupational attainment of American Jewish men compared to other free men in the mid-19th century to help fill a gap in the literature on Jewish achievement. It does this by using the full count (100 percent) microdata file from the 1850 Census of Population, the first census to ask about the occupation of free men. Independent lists of surnames are used to identify men with a higher probability of being Jewish. These men were more likely than others to be managers, salesmen, and craft workers, and were less likely to be farmers and laborers. The Jewish men have a higher occupational income score on average. In the multiple regression analysis, it is found that among Jewish and other free men, occupational income scores increase with age (up to about age 43 for all men), literacy, being married, having fewer children, being native-born, living in the South, and living in an urban area. Even after controlling for these variables that impact the occupational income score, Jews have a significantly higher score, which is equivalent to about the size of the positive effect of being married. Similar patterns are found using the Duncan Socioeconomic Index. This higher occupational status is consistent with patterns found elsewhere for American Jews in the eighteenth century and throughout the twentieth century.

Keywords: Jews; occupational status; occupational income score; Duncan socioeconomic index; 1850 Census of Population

But it is time we got to know the history of the weekday Jews . . .

[and] the history of Jewish working life.

–Ignacy Schipper, 1911, a Polish Jewish historian, quoted in Kobrin (2012: 2)

Introduction

The period leading up to the 1850 Census of Population was transitional for the American economy. In the previous two decades, the US economy was experiencing its own Industrial Revolution, with substantial growth in manufacturing, and expansion of agricultural lands. Factories established in the Northeast could take advantage of expanding cotton production in the South, grown on plantations using slave labor, as well as on smaller farms. The manufacture of cheap consumer goods in the Northeast expanded. Railroad mileage grew ninefold, from about 1,000 miles in 1835 to 9,000 miles in 1850, connecting areas year-round that could not be served otherwise or by existing water-based transportation networks (Carter et al. 2006: 874). This facilitated the movement of free labor in the increasingly mechanized and export-oriented agriculture into what we now call the Midwest. Railroads, agricultural equipment, new factories, and housing all increased the demand for iron. As a result of the Mexican-American War (1846), the US acquired vast new territories in the West, including California, where the discovery of gold in 1848 stimulated in-migration and statehood in 1850.

The US in 1850 was also in the early stages of a rapid transformation of the American population. Immigration had accelerated in the 1830s and particularly in the 1840s (see Table 1), especially from Ireland (due to famine) and Central Europe (due to political turmoil). The American Jewish population grew from an estimated 2,000 or 2,500 in 1800 to between 50,000 and 100,000 people in 1850 (Table 2).¹ Jews immigrating to the US during this period came primarily from Central Europe, in particular the German-speaking states, and are often referred to as German Jews. Most of the “German” Jewish immigrants in this period were lower middle-class workers from Bavaria, Western Prussia, Posen, and Alsace (Sarna 2004: 64). For these Jews and other immigrants, the US economy provided ample employment opportunities in both production and trade, including retail trade.

Economic growth and development of the 1830s and 1840s were not uniform across the country. It was concentrated in the industrializing Northeast and free-labor agriculture in the Midwest, while the South focused on the Westward expansion of plantation-produced cotton and sugar cane. It was in this economy that the native Jewish population (most of whom were descendants of Colonial Jews) and the German-Jewish immigrants integrated, bringing their own skills and adaptability. As will be shown below, the Jews participated in the economy of 1850 primarily as merchants, salesmen, and craftsmen, and much less than non-Jews as farmers and laborers.

This article is the first systematic nationwide microdata analysis for the nineteenth century of the determinants of the occupational status for free men in general, and the relative occupational achievement of American Jewish men.² It thus

¹Sarna (2004: 375) put the Jewish population in 1850 at 50,000, or 0.2 percent of the total US population. De Bow (1854: 134, Table 137) reports that of the 38,183 “churches” enumerated in 1850, 37 were Jewish – that is, 0.1 percent.

²Ferrie (1999) used passenger ship records in the 1840s and microdata from the 1850 and 1860 censuses in selected counties to create matching records (longitudinal data) to study the mobility (economic and geographic) of the British, Irish, and German male immigrants compared to native-born White men. Ferrie (1999: 195) concluded that while all of the immigrant groups experienced extensive economic mobility, “the

Table 1. Admission of permanent resident aliens by country of birth, by decade, 1820–1849 (in thousands)

	1820–29	1830–39	1840–49
Total	128.5	538.4	1427.3
Europe	99.6	422.9	1369.4
Germany	5.8	124.7	385.4
Ireland	51.6	170.7	656.2
England, Scotland, and Wales	26.3	74.4	218.6
Russia	0.1	0.3	0.5

Source: US Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics 2014: Table 2.

Note: No data prior to 1820. Rounded to nearest hundred. Germany refers to German-speaking states. Russia refers to Russian Empire, including Russian occupied Poland. Land arrivals not completely enumerated in these years.

Table 2. Estimated Jewish Population of the United States, 1776–1900

Year	Jewish population
1776	1000–2500
1800	2000–2500
1820	2650–5000
1830	4000–6000
1840	15,000
1850	50,000–100,000
1860	150,000–200,000
1870	200,000
1880	230,000–280,000
1890	400,000–475,000
1900	937,800–1,058,135

Source: Jewish Virtual Library [n.d.](#)

Note: Estimated number of persons born to Jewish parents or of Jewish parentage or converted to Judaism.

Irish fared considerably worse than the British or Germans who arrived over the 1840s.”

See also Anbinder et al. (2019) for a longitudinal analysis of Irish Famine immigrants’ economic mobility in New York, which is attributed largely to favorable selectivity in who among the Irish emigrated to New York, a reliance on networks for housing and employment opportunities, and a higher savings rate even among unskilled laborers. They conclude that “their hard work and thrift, entrepreneurial skills and networking ingenuity enabled them to survive, and in many cases thrive, in New York and beyond” (Anbinder et al. 2019: 1629).

For the first systematic microdata analysis of the determinants of the occupational status of free women in the antebellum period, see Chiswick and Robinson (2023).

While these three studies included Jews in their data, they did not seek to identify Jews.

provides insights into the determinants of success in the American labor market in the antebellum period among free men in general, with a focus on the relative attainment of American Jews, a small but growing minority group. It also offers a methodological advance by applying the distinctive surname technique for identifying men with a higher probability of being Jewish. This methodology can be applied to other racial, ethnic, and religious minority groups in the American population and in other times and places.

In this article, the statistical analysis of the relative occupational status of American Jewish men is focused on 1850. It thus fills a gap in the literature on the comparative occupational attainment of American Jews between the Colonial period and the twentieth century. Using qualitative data from diaries, autobiographies, and public records, Marcus (1970: Chapter 27) found that Colonial American Jews had more favorable occupational attainment than other free men, primarily working in retail and small-scale international trade, but were generally not found among the higher status merchants and plantation owners or farmers.³ Using comprehensive studies of the primarily Eastern European and Russian Jewish immigrants who arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and their US-born descendants, Chiswick (2020) showed that they were also consistently very successful in the US labor market.⁴ The twentieth century analyses indicate that the American Jews, whether native-born or foreign-born, achieved higher levels of occupational status and earnings (or income) compared to the non-Jewish White men, both overall and when other measured variables that influence labor market achievement are held constant. This was found regardless of the methodology used for identifying Jews and across all of the decades of the twentieth century.

While the industry-based studies of the achievement of American Jews in the nineteenth century have been very important, there is a largely century-long gap (from the Declaration of Independence in 1776 to the beginning of mass immigration in the 1880s from Eastern Europe and Russia) for the overall economic and occupational status of ordinary American Jews compared to other free men. This article partially fills this gap by analyzing the occupational status of American Jewish men in 1850, the middle of the nineteenth century. It does this through the analysis of data that have only recently become available – that is, the transcription as microdata of the information recorded by the enumerators of the 1850 Census of Population.

The 1850 Census of Population of the United States has been referred to as “the first modern census” as it listed free people individually instead of by family and for the first time collected data on the social and economic characteristics of individuals.⁵ It asked more questions of the population than any previous census,

³J. R. Marcus's 1970 seminal three volume *The Colonial American Jew: 1492–1776* is still the most comprehensive study of Jews in the Colonial period. Chapter 27 focuses on the occupations of Jews.

⁴B. R. Chiswick's 2020 *Jews at Work: Their Economic Progress in the American Labor Market* presents the only systematic empirical research using census and survey data on individuals (microdata) regarding the labor market status of American Jews compared to their non-Jewish counterparts for nearly every decade in the twentieth century.

⁵Description of the 1850 Census as the “first modern census” by Morris B. Ullman, former chief of the Historical Statistics Division, US Bureau of the Census, to the first named co-author.

including, for the first time, the occupation of free men.⁶ The Minnesota Population Center has released a full-count (100 percent sample) data set for the 1850 Census, which includes the string variables that are necessary for this study, specifically the surname of the respondent and a transcription of the detailed occupation reported in the Census by free men (Minnesota Population Center 2020).

By analyzing microdata on the relative economic status of American Jewish men at mid-nineteenth century, this article shows that on average in 1850 Jewish men had a more favorable occupational distribution (a higher occupational income score and a higher Socioeconomic Index) than other White men, both overall and when other relevant determinants of occupational status are the same. This higher status in 1850 is consistent with the greater achievement of American Jewish men observed in the previous and the following century.

The section “American Jewish occupations: Background” presents a review of American Jewish occupational attainment compared to other free men since colonial times. Important conclusions of this review are the relatively high achievements of American Jewish men in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries (both overall and other variables the same) and the relative dearth of research on their overall achievement in the nineteenth century. Jews participated in the transformation of the American economy in this century, but there is no systematic analysis of their relative occupational attainment.

The next section is “Identifying ‘Jews’ in the 1850 Census.” There is no information on religion or on typical early twentieth century Jewish identifiers (e.g., speaking a traditional Jewish language) in the 1850 Census. Another indirect technique, using Jewish surnames, is applied here, and this section explains how men with a higher probability of being Jewish can be distinguished from other free men. The occupational distribution of the men considered more likely to include Jews (which for simplicity are referred to here as Jewish men) is compared to all free men in the next section. The occupational income score (OccInc) and the Duncan Socioeconomic index (SEI) are introduced in the section “Quantitative measures of occupational status;” scores are assigned to each man based on his recorded occupation in 1850, with a higher score representing a higher occupational status.

A model is then developed and estimated using multiple regression analyses for the full count microdata from the 1850 Census in which the occupational status is hypothesized to vary with demographic and skill characteristics, as well as the Jewish identifier. These hypotheses are confirmed by empirical analysis. They also demonstrate that men identified as more likely to be Jewish have a higher occupational status than other free men, both overall and when other measured variables are the same. The article ends with a “Summary and conclusions.”

American Jewish occupations: Background

An analysis of the occupational attainment of American Jewish men in the antebellum period needs to be placed within the broader context of American Jewish economic history.

⁶The occupations of free women were not asked until the 1860 Census. The Census never inquired into the work activities of enslaved peoples (US Bureau of the Census 1979).

The Colonial period

The Jewish population of British North America in colonial times was very small. Marcus (1967: 7) estimates that there were about 250 Jews in the North American continent in 1700, which grew to about 2,500 by 1776, although other estimates put it between 2,000 and 2,500 (Jewish Virtual Library 2022). Jews were never more than one-tenth of one percent of the Colonial population. They lived predominantly in the tidewater towns of New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, Savannah, and Newport, RI.

The most comprehensive analysis of the occupational attainment and distribution of Jewish men in Colonial America is to be found in Jacob R. Marcus (1970: Chapter 27), *The Colonial American Jew: 1492-1776*.⁷ Marcus analyzes the occupational status of American Jews compared to other free men based on qualitative data derived from diaries, autobiographies, and public records. He reports that relatively few of the Jews were engaged in farming, although this was the occupation of the vast majority of free men. They were mostly involved in two types of trade – retail trade, generally as small shopkeepers, and international trade, as small-scale importers of manufactured goods and exporters of primary products from farming, fishing, and forestry. Referring to the tidewater port towns and backcountry villages, Marcus writes, “The percentage of Jews in business – minuscule as it was, compared to the total number of American businessmen – was far out of proportion to the percentage of Jews in the country” (Marcus 1970, II: 550). Jews were not among the major merchants or plantation owners. Some Jews were engaged in craft occupations, especially those “that were sedentary in nature” (Marcus 1970, II: 537–40). There are no records of Jewish carpenters or blacksmiths, but rather they were in other crafts, such as silversmiths, chandlers, watchmakers, butchers, bakers, tailors, and furriers (Marcus 1970, II: 537). The Jewish craftsmen were small businessmen, typically with only one or two employees, apprentices, or laborers.

The most conspicuous occupational difference between Jews and other free people in Colonial America was their relative absence from agriculture, the primary occupation in the economy. Aside from physicians and surgeons and congregational employees, there were few professionals among the Jews (Marcus 1970, II: 540). Most Jewish professionals and craftsmen were also engaged in part-time trade. Jews were also employed as translators, given their prior exposure to Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese.

Although there are no direct data available, given their occupational distribution, we can infer that their income, on average, would have been higher than the average free American as small-scale family farming was the norm among free people. Nor were many Jews among the wealthy or aristocratic classes comprising merchants engaged in large-scale international trade or large plantations owning many slaves. Whereas most of the free population in colonial times would, using current terminology, be termed

⁷For a compelling seminal analysis as to how the rabbinic requirement that fathers teach their sons how to study the Talmud (and hence to be literate) over the centuries resulted in predominantly Jewish farmers becoming predominantly literate urban workers (as compared to their non-Jewish neighbors) long before immigration to the US, see Botticini and Eckstein (2012). Guild restrictions, that varied across time and space, limited Jewish employment in certain crafts in Europe.

poor or working class, the Jews were predominantly middle-class shopkeepers, merchants, and, to a lesser extent, craftsmen (Marcus 1970, II: xxii).

The twentieth century

With the large immigration of Eastern European and Russian Jews from the 1880s to the early 1920s, the Jewish population increased in numbers and as a share of the US population, reaching a peak of just below 4 percent in the late 1930s. Although its numbers have increased, the Jewish share of the US population declined to about 2 percent by the end of the twentieth century, due to their relatively low birthrates and small proportion among immigrants.

The most comprehensive analysis of the economic or occupational status of American Jews over the twentieth century is to be found in Chiswick (2020). This study uses quantitative data from 1890 to 2000, with a dataset for nearly every decade in between, to analyze the occupational status and, in more recent decades, the earnings of Jewish men compared to White men who are not Jewish. The Jewish identifiers vary across the datasets: sometimes a direct Jewish identifier and sometimes an indirect identifier, such as having a Yiddish mother tongue, being of Russian or Russian/Polish ancestry, or having a typical Jewish surname. For the decades during and after the mass immigration of Eastern European and Russian (Ashkenazic) Jews, from 1880 to the early 1920s, the analyses were also performed by immigrant generation, and in more recent decades also for women.

To summarize the findings, the analyses across the twentieth century demonstrate that, on average, Jewish men in the labor market attained higher levels of occupational status and earnings than non-Jewish White men (Chiswick 2020). Moreover, the higher attainment persists even after including statistical controls for schooling, labor market experience, and marital status, among other variables. As the US economy evolved, so too did the Jewish occupations. Jewish men who, in the early decades of the twentieth century, were predominantly employed as operatives, craft workers, and shopkeepers/sales clerks, by the end of the twentieth century were predominantly in the professional and technical occupations. This transition over the course of the twentieth century was faster than among their non-Jewish counterparts. These patterns may have been facilitated by Jewish men not only making greater investments in their human capital (schooling and labor market training), but also receiving higher rates of return from this skill formation (Chiswick 1988).

The nineteenth century: Industry-specific studies

With little immigration overall, and of Jews to the United States from the end of the Colonial period until the 1830s and 1840s, the Colonial-era Jews were the predominant ancestors of the native-born Jews in the US in 1850. In part due to immigration, the Jewish population increased rapidly in the two decades prior to 1850, from an estimated 5,000 in 1830 to between 50,000 and 100,000 by 1850 (Table 2). The immigrants arrived in the US at a time when the country was at the start of its transition from an agrarian economy to one more oriented toward the manufacturing of goods.

We know of no comprehensive quantitative study of the labor market success of Jewish men compared to other White men that covers the nineteenth century or even a particular point in that period. There are, however, several studies of Jews, sometimes in comparison to others, that focus on particular industries in the economy, such as peddling, merchant lending, and the garment industry. Although these studies of the nineteenth century provide important insights regarding the specific industries and the role of Jewish workers and entrepreneurs in them, they are missing the broad perspective of the role played by Jews in the labor force overall and, in particular, their occupational status compared to that of others. They do not provide a broad “history of Jewish working life.”

On-the-road peddling

In the predominantly rural society of nineteenth-century America, in which the majority of the population was dispersed around the countryside, scattered with small market towns, peddlers were a common source of retail trade, such that they have earned a place in popular culture.⁸ On-the-road peddlers traversed the countryside with their wares on their backs, or with packhorses, or with wagons to sell household goods and minor “luxuries” primarily to rural farm families, as described in the engaging qualitative history *Roads Taken* (2015) by Hasia Diner. Their customers were typically housewives from poor, often marginalized families (poor farmers, immigrants, Native Americans, slaves, or former slaves). The Jewish peddlers were themselves typically marginalized people: young, unmarried, recent immigrant, German-speaking males with few if any assets other than their own initiative, enterprise, and ability to quickly learn and adapt to the language and customs of their new country.

Among the Jewish peddlers in the nineteenth century were those who engaged in the “Indian trade” – that is, selling manufactured goods to Native Americans (American Indians on the Great Plains, the Southwest, and the Pacific Northwest) and buying from them Indian-made products, including artifacts and handicrafts. Among the latter were the “Indian curios,” that is, Indian-made objects that were sold to individual collectors and to museums in the US and elsewhere for displays of American Indian life (Koffman 2012).

Few remained as peddlers for long. Uselding (1975: 62–63) comments that “especially in the case of Jewish immigrants from Germany, peddling was a ‘start in life’ and a means of acquiring sufficient capital to move upward in the mercantile world . . .” Peddling served “as a training ground for entrepreneurs, especially those in mercantile pursuits . . .” and “for those whose careers were to move along other than strictly mercantile lines.” Diner (2015) also emphasizes that on-the-road peddling was a short-term occupation for Jewish immigrants. After a few years, the Jewish peddlers often opened their own retail establishment in an economically developing village or town, sometimes expanding into what became a department store, and a few became major department store magnates (Diner 2015). Some

⁸A Jewish on-the-road peddler was the protagonist in John Reese’s western novel, *Sure Shot Shapiro* (1968). “Sure Shot” (every westerner needed a nickname) was a peddler in the wild west, who received his supplies from his merchant brother in St. Louis who also supplied other peddlers, who in turn received his imported goods from a third brother in New York who was a prosperous importer-exporter.

opened repair shops to fix watches and other household goods sold by peddlers, while others opened small factories to manufacture the items they had previously sold. Still others who carried photographic equipment with them on their routes opened photography studios in towns.

Peddling was a physically difficult and lonely occupation. Long separation from family and community was only part of the problem. Regarding Jewish peddlers in the 1840s and 1850s, Friedman (1954: 4) wrote, “Peddling was a hard life and only too often fraught with danger and failure.” Goodman (1951: 81–111) reports on the frustrations of a German Jewish peddler in the antebellum period. Diner (2015: 73–78) comments that although Jewish women were seldom on-the-road peddlers, they did play an important role in the peddling industry. They minded the family-operated store when their husbands were peddling or went to larger cities to buy goods to re-supply the store. Moreover, at home they repaired items, including clothing, that were then resold. They also often ran formal or informal boarding houses for itinerant peddlers.

The Jewish peddlers were not at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, although they might appear to be, because they were investing in skills, including English language and American culture knowledge, and acquiring resources needed to advance economically in their new country.⁹ An emphasis throughout Diner’s (2015) study is on the upward economic and social advancement of those who started out as Jewish peddlers in the US and the other countries in which they settled. Jewish on-the-road peddling was a new immigrant transition phase, as is illustrated through the many industry studies of nineteenth-century American Jews that describe the role of peddling in their subsequent success.

The cotton economy

While the cotton economy may seem synonymous with slave culture and wealthy, White Southern society, it was also the setting of one of the early forms of American Jewish entrepreneurship, a quality that has contributed to the economic success of American Jews through the twentieth century. One notable study of the evolution of nineteenth-century Jewish peddlers into settled merchants is Michael Cohen’s *Cotton Capitalism: American Jewish Entrepreneurship in the Reconstruction Era* (2017).¹⁰ Along the Mississippi River and its tributaries in Louisiana and Mississippi, in the antebellum period, Jewish peddlers started setting up small shops, primarily selling dry goods, seeds, and farm equipment in rural areas and small towns. As cash was scarce, they would sell to neighboring farmers on credit, with repayment made after the harvest, often in the form of bales of cotton. These merchants would buy their supplies from wholesalers, often also Jewish, on credit, to be repaid when they received payments from the farmers. This evolved into an efficient exchange system based on credit.

Because Jews faced discrimination in access to the more formal credit markets, Jewish merchants relied on networks of Jewish relatives, friends, and partners for this revolving credit system to function efficiently (Cohen 2017). These networks,

⁹Some peddlers of diverse origins did very well financially. See, for example, Anbinder, et al. (2022) on successful Irish immigrants in New York.

¹⁰For another study of Jews evolving from peddlers to entrepreneurs in the South, see Vecchio (2024).

based on mutual trust and personal relationships, provided private information about credit-worthiness, thereby reducing the risks of extending credit. These networks also served as informal insurance systems against adverse business circumstances.

As a result, these merchants became active in both local finance and the cotton market as they increasingly served as middlemen in the cotton trade. The latter was facilitated by their mercantile contacts, which provided them with information on the fluctuating market price of cotton. This system, which started in the antebellum period, grew in the postbellum era for about two decades, after which it declined due to increased efficiency in credit markets and information networks, and the decline in the price of cotton.

The garment industry

Another important industry for nineteenth-century Jews was the garment industry. Jews were heavily involved in the industry, from collecting, patching, repairing, and reselling rags and other discarded fabrics in the early nineteenth century to the modern industrial production, distribution, and sale of garments in the late nineteenth century. This is studied in Adam D. Mendelsohn's *The Rag Race* (2015), a historical analysis of the production of clothing primarily in New York and London, two major cities of Jewish life and the garment industry.¹¹

The Civil War had a profound effect on Jewish participation in the garment industry (Mendelsohn 2015: Chapter 7). The sudden onset of the war resulted in a sharply increased demand for ready-made military uniforms. Jews, among others, expanded the production of ready-to-wear clothes with the contracts they won to manufacture military uniforms for both sides during the Civil War. Mendelsohn (2015: 182) writes that "... the most significant legacy of the war for Jews was in the dramatic broadening of Jewish production of ready-made clothing" for the military. Prior to the Civil War, the ready-made clothing industry was small and dominated by non-Jewish firms, but by the war's end, "Jews found themselves in a commanding position in several key sectors of the garment industry. Without the Civil War, the ready-made clothing industry might have remained the preserve of non-Jewish firms" (Mendelsohn 2015: 182).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jews worked in all of the roles in this industry, from entrepreneurs/proprietors, designers, sewers and pressers, office staff, laborers, to salespeople. The industry also employed many young women before marriage, whether migrants from rural areas to the factory towns or new immigrants to this country. As the industry expanded and evolved, so too did the functions of Jews, with a decline in their role as production workers and their increasing importance in the growing professional occupations related to the garment industry. Mendelsohn closes *The Rag Race* with the classic question: Did the Jews make the garment industry, or did the garment industry make the Jews? He argues compellingly that both are correct.

¹¹See also Godley (2001) on Jewish entrepreneurs in the garment industry in New York and London in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Jewish entrepreneurs

The sectors that Jews entered as entrepreneurs in the nineteenth century had several common traits.¹² They were heavily focused, at least in their origins, on retail trade. There were low capital requirements for entry. There were few, if any, “economies of scale,” so that small firms could thrive. There was little government regulation to inhibit or limit Jewish entry. As a result, entry of new firms in niche activities was easy, as was reentry after initial and subsequent business failures. There was little or no social esteem associated with these industries, which did not deter the already socially marginalized Jewish entrepreneurs. As a result, there was less interest in entering these sectors on the part of the better capital-endowed, socially secure segments of society.

Identifying “Jews” in the 1850 Census

The first requirement for an analysis of the occupational achievements of American Jewish men using census data is the identification of Jews. The US decennial census has never included a question on a respondent’s religion.¹³ Moreover, many other publicly and privately collected data sources do not include a question on religion. Efforts have been made to infer who is Jewish using proxy measures, including whether the respondent’s “mother tongue” is a traditionally Jewish language (Yiddish, Ladino, or Hebrew), or ancestry (i.e., Russian origin or parentage in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries), or if they have a distinctive Jewish surname. There was no question on languages spoken or known by the respondent in the 1850 Census, nor was there a question on ethnicity or ancestry. There was a question on the country of birth. While most immigrants to the US in the decades before 1850 were from the British Isles, many were also from the various German-speaking states of Central Europe, although most immigrants from these lands were not Jewish. There were few recorded immigrants to the US in these decades from Eastern Europe, Russia, or other areas (Table 1).

(a) Antebellum rabbis and Jewish Union army veteran surnames

For this study, variants of the distinctive Jewish name technique are used.¹⁴ Not all people with a distinctive Jewish name are Jewish or even of Jewish origin or ancestry, but they have a higher (but often unknown) *probability* of being Jewish than those who do not have a distinctive Jewish name. One list of Jewish surnames will be labeled as “Antebellum Jewish Surnames” (AJS Jews). These are men in the 1850 Census with surnames that are the same as men identified as Jews in mid-nineteenth century records.

The AJS list comes from two sources. One is the 1850 Census occupational string data, which list 32 men as having the occupation of rabbi or Jewish minister or some variant of those terms, while a 33rd is listed as a “Jew trader” (see Appendix A,

¹²In her edited conference volume, Kobrin (2012: 83) wrote: “[w]e know far too little on the spatial and occupational niches that served as the launching pads for immigrant Jews in the American economy at the turn of the twentieth century . . .”

¹³One exception is that the census enumerators in 1850 were instructed to “insert the denomination to which he belongs” for all clergymen (US Bureau of the Census 1979: 22).

¹⁴For a discussion of the pros and cons of the distinctive Jewish name technique, see Hartman and Sheskin (2013).

Supplementary material). A second source for mid-nineteenth century Jewish surnames comes from Union Civil War Veteran pension files. These are the surnames of Union Army veterans from the list of individuals who were likely Jewish (based on reported religion or whether they were married by a rabbi or in a synagogue) in the Union Army veteran data (Fogel 2000).¹⁵ Note that the Jewish Union Army veterans would have been from the Northern states and had predominantly German (Ashkenazic) surnames, yet about one-fifth of the Jewish population in 1850 lived in the Southern states and would not have become Union Army veterans (Rosen 2012: 6).¹⁶ Moreover, these were the surnames of men who served in the military over a decade after the 1850 Census.¹⁷

Roudiez (pers. comm., April 22, 2017), who compiled the list of Union Jews, wrote in an email: “Religion is only recorded in the Union Army data with marriage info. This can be a marriage certificate, a widow’s pension application, or the family circular (a long-form about the soldier’s family filled out in 1898 or 1912 . . .). It also allowed me to add some soldiers married by rabbis that weren’t explicitly labeled as Jewish.” The marriage records occasionally included the officiant’s name and title. Although a few Anglo-Saxon surnames were included on the list of Jews in the Union Army data, for this article individuals with these surnames, which would have been far more common among those who are not Jewish, were not included among the Union Jews.

In his study of Jewish soldiers in the Union Army during the Civil War, Mendelsohn (2022: 102) wrote that to avoid antisemitism, some Jews Americanized their name at enlistment, and some of these reverted back to their original names when demobilized. He gives the example of Simon Guggenheimer, who enlisted as Charles Brown, but we do not learn whether he retained that name after military service.¹⁸

The surnames of antebellum rabbis and Jewish Union Army veterans included in this study are referred to here as Antebellum Jewish Surnames (AJS Jews) and are reported in the Appendix, Table A-1, Supplementary material.

(b) Twentieth century Jewish surnames

Another Jewish identifier, to be referred to as Distinctive Jewish Names (DJN Jews), are names from a late twentieth century list of distinctively Jewish surnames compiled by Ira Sheskin (1998) (see also Hartman and Sheskin 2013). Based on several studies of distinctive Jewish names, “the list of 35 names . . . are held by 11–15 percent of Jews, with about 90 percent of individuals with these surnames being Jewish,” although the exact proportions vary over time and locale (see Himmelfarb et al. 1983; see also Chiswick 2020: 175, Hartman and Sheskin 2013, Kohs and Blumenthal 1942, and Sheskin 1998). The “DJN Jews” surnames are reported in the Appendix, Table A-1, Supplementary material.

¹⁵Some of the men married by a rabbi or in a synagogue may not themselves have been Jewish but married a Jewish woman.

¹⁶Of the 37 Jewish “churches” identified in 1850, eight (22 percent) were located in the South (De Bow 1854, Table 137: 134).

¹⁷Mendelsohn (2022: 45–69) implies that the less successful among the Northern Jews were more likely to join the Union army, attracted, in part, by signing bonuses.

¹⁸There is nobody enumerated as Simon Guggenheimer in the string data for the full 1850 Census data.

While there is some overlap in the list of surnames of AJS Jews and DJN Jews, the overlap is far from complete (Table A-1). The surnames on both lists are Cohen, Jacobs, Kohn, Levin, and Rosenthal, three of which relate to ancient Jewish religious functions. Those on the joint list would have an even higher probability of being Jewish. In the full count 1850 census, for the observations used in the statistical analysis, there are 14,529 AJS Jews and 7,013 DJN Jews, with 2,954 men whose names appeared on both lists.¹⁹ In the statistical analysis, three Jewish groups are considered: those only on the AJS list, those only on the DJN list, and those on both lists.

(c) Biases in using Distinctive Jewish Names

The objective of this study is not to estimate the number of Jews, but to ascertain the occupational status of men with a higher probability of being Jewish compared to others. It is important to acknowledge two types of errors in the procedure used here. One is that Jews with surnames not on these lists are not identified as Jews. The majority of Jews in the US at that time (or even currently) may therefore be missed. Yet, there is no statistical bias in our findings on the relative occupational status among Jews if the demographic and occupational characteristics of Jews are independent of their surname.

Some mid-nineteenth century Jews may have Americanized their surnames to enhance their economic and social positions. By relying on distinctive Jewish names, this practice would tend to decrease apparent Jewish achievement. However, in her study of Jewish name changing, Fermaglich (2018: 184) indicates that it was more common in the twentieth century than earlier and writes: “Name changing was an important part of class mobility in the mid- twentieth century – not a requirement but a significant aid, especially for Jews . . . who wanted to join a profession or live in a middle-class neighborhood that incorporated significant numbers of non-Jews.”

Including unidentified Jews among the non-Jews would tend to lower the measured difference if the Jews are more successful. This bias would be trivial, however, given that it is estimated that in 1850 Jews were only about 0.2 percent (two in a thousand) of the population. Indeed, the underestimate of the Jewish success would be even greater if Jews who are not identified as such due to adopting non-Jewish names are more successful in the labor market than identified Jews, as name-changers are subject to less discrimination.²⁰

The second potential bias is including among Jews the non-Jews who have a surname on the “Jewish” lists. Again, let us assume that among non-Jews there is no relation between surname and economic and occupational status. If that is the case, then our procedure would again tend to decrease any differences observed between men identified as Jews and those not identified as Jewish by including some who are not Jewish among those identified as Jews.

Both types of errors indicate that the measured difference in occupational status between Jews and others would be smaller than the true but, of course, unknown

¹⁹Approximately 0.27 percent of free men age 16–60 with an occupation are categorized as only AJS Jews, 0.13 percent as only DJN Jews, 0.06 percent as both DJN and AJS Jews, and 0.35 percent as either DJN or AJS or both (that is, Jewish men, for the purposes of this study).

²⁰Fermaglich (2018) reports that most changes in surnames among Jews did not occur at immigration or ports of entry, but some time thereafter.

difference. Recall, however, that the objective is not to identify particular individuals in the 1850 Census who are either Jewish or non-Jewish. Rather, we are identifying a group that has a higher probability of including Jews and comparing that to a group with a lower probability of including Jews.

(d) Geographic distribution of American Jews

Emphasizing the wide geographic distribution of the Jewish population of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, Sarna (2004: 69–70) wrote that the Jews spread out across the country, as did other immigrants. The mid-nineteenth century Jews did not confine themselves to port cities as they did in colonial times or to concentrate in enclaves in industrial and commercial centers in the Northeast (especially New York City) and the Midwest as did late nineteenth century and early twentieth-century Jewish immigrants. Perhaps the greatest geographic dispersion of American Jews was during the middle of the nineteenth century.

In an article entitled “Jewish Confederates,” Rosen (2012: 6) writes that in 1860 about one-fifth of American Jews lived in the South. New Orleans had the seventh-largest Jewish population in the US. After identifying Jewish communities in ten additional Southern cities, he concluded that Jews lived in “many small towns throughout the South.”

The wide regional distribution of Jews is also shown in the 1850 Census data on religious institutions. A total of 37 Jewish “churches” were reported across 11 out of the 31 states in the country: Connecticut (2), Kentucky (1), Louisiana (1), Massachusetts (1), Missouri (2), New York (14), Ohio (3), Pennsylvania (8), Rhode Island (1), South Carolina (3), and Virginia (1) (De Bow 1854, Table 137: 134).

The occupational distribution of free men in 1850

(a) 1850 Census of Population

Enumeration started for the 1850 Census of Populations in June, and while about 88 percent of the census was enumerated from July to October, it continued fully through the following June. Remarkably, given the technology of the time, statistical portraits of the population were published by De Bow in 1853 and 1854, including tables on the occupational distribution of free men. De Bow (1854, Chapter IV, Tables 129–132: 125–129) reports from the 1850 Census data “the particular employments of each White and free colored male over fifteen years of age . . . , where the person follows several occupations, the principal one” (De Bow 1854: 125). For the free males in the US as a whole, De Bow’s Table 129 reports the numbers for detailed occupations (e.g., dentists 2,923, peddlers 10,669, etc.) and in Tables 130–132 counts by state and territory for broader occupation groups, ranging in the share of the total from agriculture (44.1 percent) to army (0.1 percent).

(b) Jewish and non-Jewish differences

The occupational distribution of Jewish and all free men in the full count Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) from the 1850 Census of Population is reported in Table 3 for the ten major occupational categories. The Jewish immigrants to the US in this period were not originally from high socioeconomic status groups. As Diner (2004: 81–82) writes: “From the 1820s through the 1840s tens of thousands of young Jewish men in particular left Bavaria for America . . . [These] immigrants appear to

Table 3. Occupational distribution of free men, age 16 to 60, 1850 census (Percent)

Occupation	All	All Jews	DJN Jews	AJS Jews
PTK	2.8	3.1	2.7	3.2
Farmers	43.4	39.0	34.6	40.0
Managers	4.8	7.0	8.9	6.3
Clerical	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2
Sales	2.2	3.8	4.8	3.5
Craft	16.5	18.1	20.1	17.9
Operatives	10.6	10.5	11.3	10.1
Service	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.0
Farm laborers	4.9	4.4	4.5	4.5
Non-farm laborers	13.6	12.9	11.8	13.2
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Sample size	5,365,332	18,588	7,013	14,529

Source: Minnesota Population Center (2020).

Note: Includes only free men who reported an occupation. PTK is Professional, Technical and Kindred occupations; Farmers includes farm owners, farm tenants, and farm managers; Managers is limited to non-farm managers. Detail may not add to total due to rounding.

have been among the least Germanized of their group, the poorest, the most traditional, and the least able to take advantage of the fruits of emancipation at home.” Sarna (2004: 64) makes the same point, that “the great majority of Jews who immigrated to the United States [in the decades prior to the 1850 Census were mostly] lower middle-class Jews stymied on the road to economic advancement” (Sarna 2004: 64). In spite of that, it will be shown that American Jews in 1850 had a higher occupational status or attainment than other free men in America.

Based on occupations classified into ten broad categories, there is relatively little difference in the distribution between men with identified Jewish surnames and all free men (Table 3). Among all of the free men, nearly half (48 percent) worked in farming (owners, tenants, managers, and laborers) and another 14 percent were non-farm laborers; while among men identified as having Jewish surnames, 43 percent were in farming occupations and 13 percent were non-farm laborers (Table 3). On the other hand, although professionals (PTK) were relatively rare, Jews were about as likely to be in professional occupations (3.1 percent compared to 2.8 percent). The most common occupations of the 572 professionals in the Jewish sample were teachers (19 percent), physicians and surgeons (26 percent), and lawyers and judges (15 percent).²¹

²¹There were also 0.3 percent (12 men) reported as daguerreotypers (photographers). Diner (2015: 180) wrote: “Peddlers with wagons sometimes brought photographic equipment into their customers’ homes, offering to take family portraits . . .” The negatives would be brought back to town for development and framing, and sold to the family on their next round. Some peddlers then set up photographic studios in town.

At 3.8 percent, Jews were more likely to be in sales occupations (which includes peddlers and hucksters), in contrast to 2.2 percent among all free men. Although among non-Jews peddlers were more numerous, the detailed occupational string data indicate a higher proportion of the Jewish men, 1.1 percent, were reported as peddlers, hucksters, or related occupational descriptions, than was the situation among non-Jewish free men (0.2 percent). Jews were also more likely to be working as managers – a category that included merchants – (7.0 percent compared to 4.8 percent) but were as likely to be in the less-skilled operative jobs (about 10.6 percent for both groups).²² Jewish men were also slightly more likely to be employed in craft occupations (18.1 percent compared to 16.5 percent), although among that group they were less likely to be carpenters (23.2 percent Jewish versus 25.9 percent) and much more likely to be tailors (10.5 percent Jewish versus 6.4 percent), a more sedentary occupation. Note that these patterns in the broad occupational distribution between Jews and all free men are similar to those found in the Colonial period which ended three-quarters of a century earlier (see “The Colonial period,” above).

In her study of Jewish peddlers in the nineteenth century United States, Diner (2015) emphasizes the wide regional coverage of the Jewish peddlers and that after only a few years, and accumulating some Americanized skills (including the English language and knowledge of American customer preferences) and financial assets, they settled down and opened small retail establishments in rural areas, small towns, and cities across the country. Peddlers were likely to be undercounted if they were on the road when the enumerators called at their more permanent residence, assuming that they even had one and assuming they were not enumerated at wherever they were staying while on the road. Moreover, some merchants with stores would leave them in the care of their wives while they went on the road peddling (Diner 2015: 73–78).

To the extent possible, census enumerators made efforts to include on-the-road peddlers in their counts. They were instructed to include individuals who were temporarily absent (either for a short time or on a more protracted journey) from the household. Further, enumerators were directed to make inquiries at all stores, shops, eating houses, and other similar places to take note of individuals who might otherwise not be enumerated (US Bureau of the Census 2002: 10). The diligence with which they implemented these directions is, of course, unknown. Yet, peddling was one of the more enumerated occupations, being in the top 16 percent of occupations with 10,669 free men reporting peddling as their occupation in 1850 across 35 of the 36 states and territories (De Bow 1853, Appendix, Table L: lxxiv; De Bow 1854, Table 129: 126–28). It is not known how many were on-the-road peddlers in contrast to more stationary peddlers. Note that in the full count microdata, there are 12,372 free men reported as hucksters and peddlers (1.4 percent of whom are identified as likely Jewish, far greater than the proportion of Jews in the population).

Unfortunately, there are no questions in the 1850 Census on self-employment status. However, among the men who were not in agricultural occupations, Jews

²²With an increase in industrialization, there was a rapid increase in operative employment in this period. See US Civil War (1963) and De Bow (1854, Table 132: 129).

were more heavily represented in occupations where they would be more likely to be self-employed or own-account workers – i.e., professional, manager, sales, and craft occupations (32 percent of employment among Jews versus 27 percent for all men), in contrast to clerical, operative, and laborer jobs.

The occupational data on Jews can be separated into the sources for identifying those with a higher probability of being Jewish. The DJN Jews were more likely than the AJS Jews to be managers, sales, and craft workers and less likely to be farmers or non-farm laborers, but, except for farmers, these differences are relatively small (Table 3).

Quantitative measures of occupational status

The ten occupational categories in Table 3 are useful for an overview analysis, but much important information is lost by ignoring detailed occupational variations within each of these broad categories. The 1850 Census microdata file used in this study identifies 225 detailed occupations based on the 1950 Census Bureau occupational classification system. An analysis conducted for hundreds of detailed occupations is not feasible unless the categorical variable is converted into a quantitative measure. It will be shown below that, when this is done, those identified as Jews have a statistically significant higher occupational status, both overall and when holding constant other measured variables that determine occupational status. This holds for each of the subgroups for identifying Jews (AJS and DJN). Moreover, there are no statistically significant differences in occupational status among the Jewish identifiers.

There are many potential indices that can be used to convert the categorical data on detailed occupation into a continuous quantitative measure (see, for example, Hauser and Warren 1997; Inwood et al. 2019; Saavedra and Twinam 2020; Warren et al. 1998). To avoid an arbitrary selection of an index and to increase comparability with other studies, we employ two widely recognized long-standing measures that the Minnesota Population Center attached to the data file. These are the Occupational Income Score (OccInc) and the Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI).²³

For discussions of the pros and cons of using the occupational income scores, see, especially Inwood et al. (2019) and Saavedra and Twinam (2020). The latter indicates that occupational income scores based on median incomes in 1950 have been widely used in top social science journals studying labor market outcomes as far back as 1850 and discusses that the biases in doing so can be reduced by adjusting occupational income scores for demographic and geographic variables. This is done in the regression analysis in this article through statistical controls for demographic characteristics, and urban/rural and South/non-South residence.²⁴

The OccInc is an occupational standing variable based on each man's recorded occupation, as classified by the IPUMS team into the 1950 occupational

²³Chiswick (2020) used the Duncan SEI in studies of Jewish labor market attainment in the early twentieth century before the Census began reporting data on earnings or income.

²⁴This tends to be standard practice in the literature, although Saavedra and Twinam (2020) show that the bias is reduced when the dependent variable index is reconstructed to take into account these characteristics.

classification scheme. The Occupational Income Score indicates “the median total income – in hundreds of dollars – for persons in each occupation in 1950 with positive income . . . calculated using data from a published 1950 census report” (IPUMS-USA [n.d.](#), b). The IPUMS User Guide describes occupations with high scores as “well-rewarded and probably high-status” occupations, but notes that it is an *economic* measure, not a *socioeconomic* measure.

The SEI variable is also constructed using the individual responses for occupation data. The Minnesota Population Center assigned a Duncan SEI score to each occupation using the 1950 occupational classification scheme (Duncan and Reiss [1961](#); IPUMS-USA, [n.d.](#), b). It is a measure of occupational standing based on the relation between the occupational prestige ratings of the 1947 National Opinion Research Study Center survey and the income level and educational attainment (years of schooling) associated with each occupation in 1950. SEI is, therefore, a socioeconomic indicator, unlike OccInc.

Both measures are described in the Appendix (Supplementary material), which includes a comparison of the OccInc and SEI scores for various detailed occupations in each broad occupational category, in addition to a panel that emphasizes occupations that score high on one measure but low on the other (Table [A-2](#)). Overall, there is a high degree of correlation between the two measures of occupational status.

There are, however, limitations to both measures. They are based on relative income levels (and, for SEI, also educational levels) for 1950, 100 years after the 1850 Census. To the extent that relative occupational positions have changed over the century, the two measures would be biased. However, Saavedra and Twinam ([2020](#)) report that median earnings within an occupation are highly correlated over time, although the correlation decreases the longer the gap in time.

Moreover, the two measures cannot account for income differences among individuals within the narrowly defined occupations.²⁵ It cannot be determined whether those identified as Jews have a higher or lower mean level of income in 1850 within the detailed occupations. Furthermore, it cannot be determined whether in 1850 there was a systematic pattern in the relative intra-occupational mean income of Jews compared to others.

It is not clear what biases, if any, these limitations introduce into the analyses of Jewish/non-Jewish occupational status. We use these two measures because of an interest in occupational status and in the absence of direct information on the income or earnings data for individuals in 1850.

Multiple regression analyses

Table [4](#) reports the means (and standard deviations in parentheses) of the dependent variables, the OccInc and SEI scores, for all free men and Jewish men age 16–60 with a reported occupation. The men with Jewish surnames have higher occupational scores than other men. The OccInc score for the DJN Jews and AJS Jews was 21.8 and 21.0, respectively, compared to 20.3 for all free men. An OccInc score of 22 is equivalent to occupations such as bookkeepers and coachmen, while a

²⁵Both Inwood et al. ([2019](#)) and Saavedra and Twinam ([2020](#)) emphasize this point.

score of 20 is equivalent to laborers (n.e.c.), shoe repairmen, and landlord or building superintendents (see Appendix A, Table A-2, Supplementary material). Similarly, the mean SEI scores for DJN and AJS Jews are 22.6 and 21.2, respectively, compared to 19.7 for all men. The ranking by occupational scores appears to be DJN Jews, AJS Jews, and then all free men, although the differences are small.²⁶

The standard deviations of the occupational measures are greater for the Jews than for all free men (Table 4). This may be due, in part, to the inclusion of unidentified non-Jews among those in what we label as the Jewish group or the greater share of immigrants in the Jewish population.

Due to the positive skewness in the occupational standing scores, the natural logarithms of these scores are used as the dependent variables in the regression analysis.²⁷ The means and standard deviations of the logs of the outcome variables are reported in Table 4.

In general, the means of most of the explanatory variables differ little between Jews and all free men (Table 4). They are very similar in mean age (31.8 years for all men), proportion illiterate (cannot read or write in any language, 7 percent), proportion living in the South (30 percent), inferred family structure (married spouse present, 53 percent, and number of children, 1.6 (IPUMS-USA n.d., a)), and proportion non-White (2 percent). The Jews were less likely to live in rural areas (78 percent compared to 82 percent), but were more likely to be foreign-born (25 percent compared to 19 percent).²⁸ There is no direct information on when the foreign-born came to the US, but the data in Table 1 on immigration to the US in the three decades prior to 1850 suggests that immigrants in general were fairly recent arrivals.

Table 5 reports the multiple regression analysis with the natural logarithm of the occupational income score (LnOccInc) as the dependent variable for all free men with Jewish identifiers as dichotomous variables (Columns 1 and 2) and for only the Jewish sample (Column 3).²⁹

²⁶The differences between Jews and non-Jews in the OccInc and SEI scores are statistically significant:

		Jews	Non-Jews	t-test
OccInc	Mean	21.2	20.3	12.0
	S.D.	10.3	9.8	
SEI	Mean	21.5	19.7	13.9
	S.D.	18.6	17.0	
Sample Size		18,588	5,346,744	

Minnesota Population Center (2020).

²⁷Using the log form of the dependent variables results in regression residuals that are closer to being normally distributed and homoscedastic, desired properties for a regression analysis. Saavedra and Twinam (2020) report that the majority of studies using the occupational income score as the dependent variable use the log of the variable.

²⁸Among the men identified as Jewish immigrants, nearly half were born in Germany, in contrast to only one-quarter among the non-Jewish immigrants.

²⁹The regression equations for the Socioeconomic Index (SEI) are reported in Appendix A, Table A-3, Supplementary material.

Table 4. Means and standard deviations of the variables in the regression analysis, 1850 Census

Variable	All	Jews		
		All	DJN	AJS
Occupational income score	20.30 (9.878)	21.17 (10.32)	21.79 (10.25)	21.00 (10.29)
Ln OccInc	2.92 (0.395)	2.96 (0.410)	2.99 (0.416)	2.95 (0.407)
Socio-economic index	19.74 (17.04)	21.47 (18.62)	22.58 (19.24)	21.16 (18.36)
Ln SEI	2.76 (0.609)	2.82 (0.652)	2.86 (0.673)	2.81 (0.644)
Age	31.77 (11.57)	31.65 (11.36)	31.68 (11.26)	31.64 (11.40)
Age squared	1143.13 (828.0)	1130.65 (810.7)	1130.41 (807.3)	1130.91 (812.5)
Illiterate	0.07 (0.255)	0.06 (0.242)	0.07 (0.252)	0.06 (0.235)
Non-White	0.02 (0.140)	0.03 (0.157)	0.04 (0.199)	0.02 (0.156)
Married	0.53 (0.499)	0.53 (0.499)	0.53 (0.499)	0.53 (0.499)
Number of children	1.64 (2.276)	1.64 (2.279)	1.58 (2.226)	1.64 (2.285)
Foreign born	0.19 (0.390)	0.25 (0.434)	0.29 (0.455)	0.23 (0.420)
Rural farm	0.50 (0.500)	0.46 (0.498)	0.41 (0.492)	0.47 (0.499)
Rural non-farm	0.32 (0.468)	0.32 (0.465)	0.31 (0.462)	0.32 (0.466)
South	0.30 (0.459)	0.30 (0.460)	0.32 (0.467)	0.30 (0.457)
Jews	0.003 (0.0588)	1.00 (0)	1.00 (0)	1.00 (0)
Sample size	5,365,332	18,588	7,013	14,529

Source: Minnesota Population Center (2020).

Note: Includes only free men with an occupation reported, ages 16-60. Standard deviations in parentheses. A t-test of equality of means shows that Jews had significantly higher OccInc scores than non-Jews, $t=12.0$, as well as significantly higher SEI scores ($t=13.9$).

Among all men and Jewish men, the OccInc increases with age (but at a decreasing rate as age increases, with a peak at about age 43), is significantly higher for those currently married, and is significantly lower for the illiterate, the foreign-born, the non-Whites, among those with more children, and those living in rural areas. The regression coefficients are very similar in the all men and the Jewish men equations, although there is a larger partial effect of being married and being native-born among the Jewish sample.

Except for those living in the south, the signs of the effects for all men and for Jewish men are the same as what is found in twentieth century analyses (Chiswick 2020). Living in the South had a positive effect on a man's OccInc for all free men in 1850, and an even larger positive effect for Jews. The likely explanation for the higher scores in the South among free men is that the lowest-skilled jobs in the South in 1850 were performed by enslaved people.³⁰ Partly for this reason, new immigrants tended to avoid the Southern states. While 11.5 percent of the total

³⁰For an analysis of the substitution between free and enslaved persons in household work in the antebellum South, see Chiswick and Robinson (2023).

Table 5. Regression Analysis of the Logarithm of the Occupational Income Score (LnOccInc) for Free Men Age 16–60, 1850 Census

Variable	All-1	All-2	Jews
Age	0.0143952*** (200.17)	0.0143953*** (200.17)	0.0146580*** (11.28)
Age squared	−0.000170151*** (−177.36)	−0.000170152*** (−177.36)	−0.000168572*** (−9.70)
Illiterate	−0.0966217*** (−198.82)	−0.0966220*** (−198.82)	−0.0923293*** (−10.14)
Non-white	−0.185325*** (−210.88)	−0.185336*** (−210.89)	−0.187638*** (−13.34)
Married	0.00934984*** (27.69)	0.00934918*** (27.69)	0.0146841* (2.46)
Number of children	−0.00502617*** (−67.63)	−0.00502603*** (−67.63)	−0.00691811*** (−5.25)
Foreign born	−0.0889742*** (−264.52)	−0.0889776*** (−264.52)	−0.0597045*** (−10.59)
Rural farm	−0.610787*** (−1667.23)	−0.610783*** (−1667.20)	−0.626624*** (−100.19)
Rural non-farm	−0.0742051*** (−200.18)	−0.0742012*** (−200.17)	−0.0769485*** (−12.38)
South	0.0186024*** (68.74)	0.0186007*** (68.73)	0.0347634*** (7.32)
Jews	0.0129615*** (6.32)	#	#
DJN-Only Jews	#	0.0205325*** (4.68)	#
AJS-Only Jews	#	0.00868942*** (3.34)	−0.00666802 (−1.25)
Both DJN & AJS Jews	#	0.0193013*** (3.76)	0.00233471 (0.33)
Constant	3.018393*** (2501.96)	3.018391*** (2501.96)	3.020915*** (138.00)
Sample size	5,365,332	5,365,332	18,588
Adjusted R^2	0.500	0.500	0.497

Source: Minnesota Population Center (2020).

Note: Includes only free men with a non-zero occupational income score. t-ratios in parentheses. # indicates the variable was not entered. Significance levels: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

White population of the US in 1850 were foreign-born,³¹ only two Southern states had a foreign-born share above the national average – Missouri (12.9 percent) and Louisiana (26.3 percent) (De Bow 1854, Table XL: 61). Among White men age

³¹This statistic – from the official Census Report released in 1854 – includes White women and children, a smaller proportion of whom were foreign-born than among White men (De Bow 1854, Table XL: 61). In the full count microdata, 18.8 percent of White men age 16–60 were foreign-born.

16–60 in the 1850 Census full count data, the proportion foreign-born was 10 percent in the South and 22 percent in the rest of the country, while the proportions were 17 percent and 28 percent, respectively, among the Jews.

The significant negative effect of the number of children in the household on the father's OccInc should not be interpreted as children causing a decline in their father's occupational income score. Rather, it is likely the consequence of the children of lower occupational-income fathers being more likely to begin working – and contributing financially to the household – at a younger age, thereby inducing the parents to have more children (Becker and Lewis 1973).³² Although the 1850 Census did not inquire into the work activities of those under age 15, child labor was common at that time among farming and lower-income non-farm families (see Craig 1993; Schuman 2017; and, Whaples 2005).

Other measured variables are the same, the coefficient on the Jewish identifier is positive and statistically significant (coefficient 0.013, $t = 6.3$) (Table 5, Column 1). The observed difference of 0.037 log points is reduced to 0.013 log points when the other variables are held constant. Thus, the control variables explain about two-thirds of the observed difference, but a statistically significant positive difference persists.³³ The magnitude of the effect of being in the Jewish group on the occupational income score, with other variables held constant, is larger than the positive effect of being married and about two-thirds the size of the positive effect of living in the South.

This arises in spite of the methodology for identifying Jews, which is expected to underestimate the Jewish/non-Jewish differences in occupational status. Moreover, the greater-than-average economic attainment of American Jewish men in 1850 is consistent with findings from the eighteenth and twentieth centuries analyses of Jewish labor market attainment compared to other White men (Marcus 1970, Chapter 27; Chiswick 2020).

When the Jewish variable is split into three groups – the surname is only on the DJN list, only on the AJS list, and the name appears on both lists – all three Jewish identifiers have a significantly higher occupational status than other free men (Table 5, Column 2). In the analysis limited to Jews (Table 5, Column 3), with DJN-only Jews as the benchmark, the coefficients on the other two Jewish identifiers are very small and are not statistically significant. Thus, each of the Jewish groups has a higher occupational status than free non-Jewish men, with other variables held constant, but there are no significant differences among the three Jewish categories.

The other measure of occupational status, the Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI) can also be used as the dependent variable in the regression analysis, also in logarithm form (Appendix Table A-3, Supplementary material). When this is done,

³²Another interpretation is that men who start fatherhood at a younger age are more likely to have had more children and less likely to have invested in occupational trainings, and therefore have lower-skilled jobs. For an analysis of the negative effect of owning enslaved children who would provide labor services on the fertility of their White slaveholding families, see Wanamaker (2014).

³³In a preliminary test of the methodology used in this article, Chiswick (2020, Chapter 2) analyzes the occupational status (using the socioeconomic index) of Jewish men compared to non-Jewish men in the one-in-a-hundred sample of the 1860 Census. Although the sample size of men with a higher probability of being Jewish is much smaller in a 1/100 sample, overall and other variables the same, the Jews have a higher socioeconomic index. The patterns found for 1850 mirror those found for 1860.

the signs and statistical significance of the explanatory variables are the same as in the Occupational Income Score analysis (compare Table A-3 and Table 5). The Jewish variable shows a highly statistically significant ($t = 11.6$) positive effect on occupational status, and when split into three components, each has a highly significant positive effect compared to the benchmark, free men who do not have a Jewish surname (Table A-3, Columns 1 and 2).

When the SEI analysis is limited to Jews, however, the surnames for the AJS-only Jews have an SEI significantly lower than the DJN-only Jews (Table A-3, Column 3). This suggests that the DJN Jews in 1850 appear to be more likely to be in occupations that (a century later, when the Index was constructed) were associated with a higher level of educational attainment or prestige than those on the AJS list, and hence a higher SEI score. The AJS-Only list is largely derived from the list of names of Jewish Union Army veterans. This finding is, therefore, consistent with Mendelsohn's (2022: 45–69) finding that among the Northern Jewish men the Civil War soldiers were disproportionately drawn from wage workers and those in marginal occupations, while proprietors and entrepreneurs were underrepresented in the Union Army. Even among Jewish merchants, Mendelsohn finds that the less successful were more likely to volunteer for the army, attracted in part by the signing bonuses. Otherwise, the analyses show identical results for the two measures of occupational attainment.

In summary, the regression analysis indicates that, for both measures of occupational attainment, both overall and even after controlling for other variables that determine a free man's occupational status, mid-nineteenth century men with a Jewish surname have a higher occupational status than other free men. There was little difference among Jews by the surname list used to identify them.

Summary and conclusions

This article extends back in time to 1850 the findings from twentieth-century microdata analyses that American Jewish men had a higher labor market status than other White men, both overall and when other measured variables used to explain occupational status are held constant.

The 1850 Census was the first to record the occupations of free males, and this article is the first systematic nationwide analysis of microdata from the full count of the 1850 Census of Population to study the occupational status of free American men. It is also the first to use microdata to study the occupations in 1850 of American Jews compared to other free men. In the absence of other data, Jewish men are identified using independent lists of Jewish surnames: one modern and the other based on the surnames of rabbis in the 1850 Census and Jewish Civil War veterans of the Union Army.

American Jews in 1850 comprised about two in every thousand (0.2 percent) of the US population, with a geographic distribution in the US that was wider than either the Colonial-era Jews or the later twentieth-century Eastern European and Russian Jews.

By major occupational category in 1850, men identified as having a higher probability of being Jewish were more likely than other free men to be working as managers, salesmen (including as peddlers), and craftsmen, and less likely to be laborers and farmers, the primary occupation in the economy. The Occupational

Income Score (OccInc) is applied to the census's detailed occupation data (225 occupations) to yield a quantitative measure of occupational status. These scores are found to be higher for free American men who are older, literate, married, White, native-born, Southern, urban, and have fewer children. These determinants, however, explain only part of the observed higher occupational attainment scores of men with Jewish surnames compared to other free men; overall, with other variables held constant, Jews have a statistically significant higher occupational status. The magnitude of this effect, when other variables are held constant, is larger than the positive effect of being married. Yet, there are no significant differences in the occupational income scores depending on which techniques are used to identify those men with a higher probability of being Jewish. Similar patterns are found when the Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI) is used as the measure of labor market attainment. The data do not permit an analysis of intra-occupational income differences, so it cannot be determined whether within the detailed occupational categories, Jews had higher or lower average incomes than other free men in 1850.

Much attention is given in the literature on Jewish occupations in the mid-nineteenth century to on-the-road peddlers. Jewish men were more likely to report being in peddler, huckster, and related occupations than other free men in the 1850 Census. This was an important but temporary activity for young, low-skilled, immigrant Jewish men from Central Europe to acquire some financial assets, English-language proficiency, and knowledge of the needs and preferences of their American customers. Being an on-the-road peddler was not a permanent or long-term occupation; it was a start-up or transitional activity. They are not as numerous in the data because they fairly quickly moved up to being store owners, non-peddler salesmen, repairmen, and manufacturers of the items that they had previously sold. The proportion of adult Jewish men who ever worked as peddlers at some point in their life history would be far greater than the proportion of those working as peddlers at any given point in time.

Note that American Jewish men in 1850, as was the case in the Colonial period and in the twentieth century, were disproportionately engaged in occupations in which decision-making skills, or "allocative efficiency," are particularly important for economic success. This suggests that it was not a characteristic of a particular cohort of Jewish immigrants and their descendants, or their particular countries of origin, that was responsible for their three centuries-long economic success in the American economy, but something general among Jews. Their choice of occupations and their success in them was presumably not random, but rather a consequence of their culture and historical experiences.³⁴

Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2025.19>

³⁴Botticini and Eckstein (2012) document that the rabbinic requirements that fathers teach their sons an occupation and how to study religious texts (Talmud and Torah in particular) resulted in a higher level of literacy among Jews. Once one is literate in one language, acquiring literacy in another language is that much easier. Chiswick (2020, Chapter 17) analyzes several alternative hypotheses as to how cultural and historical experiences contributed to male Jewish occupational and income success in the United States.

Acknowledgements. The authors would like to thank the IPUMS team at the Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota, for their assistance in understanding the 1850 Census data file. Financial support for this project was provided by George Washington University. We also appreciate the assistance of Christopher Roudiez, then of the Center for Population Studies, University of Chicago, for providing the list of surnames of Jews from the Union Army Veterans data files. We appreciate the comments received on this project from Carmel U. Chiswick, Jonathan Sarna, and Ira Sheskin, as well as from the *SSH* editor and the two referees.

References

- Anbinder, T., C. Ó. Gráda, and S. A. Wegge (2019) "Networks and Opportunities: A Digital History of Ireland's Great Famine Refugees in New York." *American Historical Review* 124 (5): 1590–1629.
- Anbinder, T., C. Ó. Gráda, and A. A. Wegge (2022) "The best country in the world: The surprising social mobility of New York's Irish Famine immigrants." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 53 (3): 407–38. https://doi.org/10.1162/jinh_a_01869
- Becker, G. S., and H. G. Lewis (1973) "On the interactions between quantity and quality of children." *Journal of Political Economy* 81 (2 Part 2): S279–88. <https://doi.org/10.1086/260166>
- Botticini, M., and Z. Eckstein (2012) *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History*, 70–1492. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Carter, S. B., et al. (2006) *Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Chiswick, B. R. (1988) "Differences in education and earnings across racial and ethnic groups: Tastes, discrimination and investments in child quality." *Quarterly Journal of Economics*: 571–91. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1885546>
- (2020) *Jews at Work: Their Economic Progress in the American Labor Market*. New York: Springer.
- Chiswick, B. R., and R. H. Robinson (2023) "An analysis of the occupations of free women in the antebellum USA." *Cliometrica* 18: 363–403. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11698-023-00268-x>
- Cohen, M. R. (2017) *Cotton Capitalists: American Jewish Entrepreneurs in the Reconstruction Era*. New York: New York University Press.
- Craig, L. A. (1993) *To Sow One Acre More: Childbearing and Farm Productivity in the Antebellum North*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- De Bow, J. D. B. (1853) *The Seventh Census of the United States, 1850: An Appendix*. Washington: Robert Armstrong, Public Printer.
- (1854) *Statistical View of the United States: Compendium of the Seventh Census*. Washington, DC: Beverly Tucker, Senate Printer.
- Diner, H. R. (2004) *The Jews of the United States, 1654 to 2000*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- (2015) *Roads Taken: The Great Jewish Migrations to the New World and the Peddlers Who Forged the Way*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Duncan, O. D. (1961) "A socioeconomic index for all occupations," in A. Reiss, et al. (eds.) *Occupations and Social Status*. Free Press.
- Fermaglich, K. (2018) *A Rosenberg By Any Other Name: A History of Jewish Name Changing in America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Ferrie, J. P. (1999) *Yankeys Now: Immigration in the Antebellum United States, 1840–1860*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Fogel, R. W. et al. (2000) *Aging of veterans of the Union Army, Version M-5*. Chicago: Center for Population Economics, University of Chicago Graduate School of Business.
- Friedman, L. M. (1954) "The problems of nineteenth century American Jewish peddlers." *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 44 (1): 1–7.
- Godley, A. (2001) *Jewish Immigrant Entrepreneurship in New York and London 1880–1914: Enterprise Culture*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave.
- Goodman, A. V. (1951) "A Jewish peddler's diary." *American Jewish Archives* 3 (3): 81–111.
- Hartman, H., and I. M. Sheskin (2013) "Estimating the Jewish student population of a college campus." *Journal of Jewish Communal Services* 88 (1/2): 95–109.

- Hauser, R., and J. R. Warren** (1997) "Socioeconomic indexes of occupational status: A review, update, and critique." *Sociological Methodology* 27 (1): 177–298.
- Himmelfarb, H. S., R. M. Loar, & S. H. Mott** (1983) "Sampling by ethnic surnames: The case of American Jews." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47: 247–60. <https://doi.org/10.1086/268783>
- Inwood, K., C. Minns, and F. Summerfield** (2019) "Occupational income scores and immigrant assimilation: Evidence from the Canadian census." *Explorations in Economic History* 72: 114–22. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eeh.2019.02.001>
- IPUMS-USA** (n.d.)a. "Family interrelationships," IPUMS User Guide, Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota. <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/chapter5/chapter5.shtml> (accessed July 11, 2022).
- (n.d.)b. "Occupation codes and income scores," IPUMS User Guide, Minnesota Population Center, University of Minnesota. <https://usa.ipums.org/usa/chapter4/chapter4.shtml> (accessed August 16, 2023).
- Jewish Virtual Library** (n.d.). "Total Jewish population in the United States," <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-population-in-the-united-states-nationally> (accessed July 7, 2022).
- Kobrin, R.** ed. (2012) *Chosen Capital: The Jewish Encounter with American Capitalism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Koffman, D. S.** (2012) "Jews, American Indian curios, and the westward expansion of capitalism," in Rebecca Kobrin (ed.) *Chosen Capital: The Jewish Encounter with American Capitalism*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press: 168–86.
- Kohs, S. C., and W. Blumenthal** (1942) *Survey of Recreational and Cultural Needs of the Jewish Community*. National Jewish Welfare Board. Unpublished report
- Marcus, J. R.** (1967) *The American Colonial Jew: A Study in Acculturation*. The B.C. Randolph Lectures in Judaic Studies. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University.
- (1970) *The Colonial American Jew: 1492-1776*. 3 vols. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Mendelsohn, A. D.** (2015) *The Rag Race: How Jews Sewed Their Way to Success in America and the British Empire*. New York: New York University Press.
- (2022) *Jewish Soldiers in the Civil War: The Union Army*. New York: New York University Press.
- Minnesota Population Center** (2020) 1850 Census of Population, Full Count Data. IPUMS International: Version 7.3. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS. <https://doi.org/10.18128/D020.V7.3> (accessed August 2, 2023).
- Reese, J. H.** (1968) *Sure Shot Shapiro*. New York: Doubleday
- Rosen, R. N.** (2012) "Jewish Confederates." *Heritage: The Magazine of the American Jewish Historical Society*. Winter: 6–8.
- Saavedra, M., and T. Twinam** (2020) "A machine learning approach to improving occupational income scores." *Explorations in Economic History* 75: 101321. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eeh.2019.101304>
- Sarna, J. D.** (2004) *American Judaism: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Schuman, M.** (2017) "History of child labor in the United States – Part 1: Little children working." *Monthly Labor Review*. January.
- Sheskin, I. M.** (1998) "A methodology for examining the changing size and spatial distribution of a Jewish population: A Miami case study." *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 17 (1): 97–116. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.1998.0041>
- U.S. Bureau of the Census** (1979) *Twenty Censuses: Population and Housing Questions, 1790-1980*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- (2002) *Measuring America: The Decennial Censuses from 1790 to 2000*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Civil War Centennial Commission** (1963) *The United States on the Eve of the Civil War: As Described in the 1860 Census*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics** (2014) *2013 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics*. Washington, D.C.
- Uselding, P. J.** (1975) "Peddling in the Antebellum economy." *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 34 (1): 55–66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1536-7150.1975.tb01159.x>
- Vecchio, D. C.** (2024) *Peddlers, Merchants, and Manufacturers: How Jewish Entrepreneurs Built Economy and Community in Upcountry South Carolina*. University of South Carolina Press.
- Wanamaker, M.** (2014) "Fertility and the price of children: Evidence from slavery and slave emancipation." *Journal of Economic History* 74 (4): 1045–71. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022050714000850>

- Warren, J. R., J. Sheridan and R. Hauser** (1998) "Choosing a measure of occupational standing: How useful are composite measures in analyses of gender inequality in occupational attainment?" *Sociological Methods and Research* 27 (1): 3–76. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0049124198027001001>
- Whaples, R.** (2005) "Child labor in the United States," EH.Net Encyclopedia. (accessed July 16, 22).

Barry R. Chiswick, Ph.D., (brchis@gwu.edu) is a professor of economics and international affairs, and a member of the Judaic Studies faculty, at George Washington University. His research has focused on contemporary and historical labor market and human capital differences across demographic groups.

RaeAnn H. Robinson, Ph.D., (rhalenda@gwu.edu) is a researcher in the Department of Economics at George Washington University. Her research has focused on the determinants and consequences of gender and ethnic group differences in occupational choice, with a specific interest in historical developments.