

New Jersey Jewish News
Central Feature

Elizabeth surgeon writes history of city's first (and only) Jewish mayor



by [Elaine Durbach](#)
NJN Bureau Chief/Central

It's been a long time since Elizabeth's first and — so far — only Jewish mayor, David Naar, left office. One hundred sixty-one years to be precise.

But next week — on Wednesday, July 5 — the current mayor, Chris Bollwage, will tip his hat to him. Bollwage will preside at an official presentation at City Hall of a new book about Naar and his family by Elizabeth surgeon and genealogist Neil Rosenstein.



In *The Grandees of New Jersey*, Rosenstein pieces together Naar's history and that of his brothers Abraham and Benjamin, their descendants, and their relatives, the Peixotto, Pretto, and Seixas families. Apparently of Portuguese and Dutch descent, the family had originally come from Spain, and they shared ancestry with the Spanish Jews who settled on this continent in the 17th-century, aristocrats who were known as the "grandees."

While most of the descendants of these early immigrants are no longer Jewish, their story is one of Jewish success in the New World. Their names crop up in connection with all kinds of achievements, including helping to establish New Jersey's system of governance, promoting the idea of maternity leave, solving the Lindbergh kidnapping, and planning the Panama Canal.

Naar, believed to be the fourth Jewish mayor in the United States, served Elizabeth in that capacity from 1842 to 1845. His father, Joshua, came to America in 1793, and then settled in St. Thomas. David was born there in 1800 and at the age 15 was sent to New York to attend school. He returned to New York as an adult in 1834 and four years later bought a farm in New Jersey, near the growing city of Elizabeth.

He and his wife, Sarah, had 16 children. He became a prominent member of the Democratic Party, and in addition to becoming mayor of Elizabeth, served as a lay judge. In 1844, he was chosen as the Essex County delegate to the State Constitutional Convention. He died in 1880 at the age of 79, affluent and honored.



The book is Rosenstein's 12th, and the first in which he has gone beyond his special focus on rabbinic families of Ashkenazi background. In previous works, he has traced the lineage of, among others, the illustrious Lurie family, the Vilna Gaon, and the Rothschilds.

Naar and his clan were Sephardi Jews, and while there is no evidence of religious distinction, their achievements in politics and commerce earned them high standing. It also meant they were mentioned in all kinds of public documents, a fact that kept Rosenstein busy year after year.

His eye was first caught by a brief mention of Naar in a book about the history of Union County written in the 1950s. Then, during a visit to the B'nai Jeshurun section of the Evergreen Cemetery in Hillside, he noticed a gravestone with Naar's name and those of his relatives inscribed on it. "This Naar was in my backyard, and it seemed a shame not to find out more about him," said Rosenstein.

Grabbing free moments between doing surgery and consultations, spending time with his wife Mavis and their sons, and participating in the activities of the Jewish Educational Center in Elizabeth, Rosenstein plugged into the Internet and the Elizabeth Public Library. When he tracked them down, Naar's descendants willingly shared their own material with him, including an extensive family tree and some extraordinary pictures.

Among his collaborators were fellow researchers he encountered on a Web site called RAOGK.com, short for Random Acts of Genealogical Kindness. Just as he has gone out of his way to track down material for others, he asked for and received help from people in places around the world. What couldn't be found on the Internet, they sought out in archives and libraries and sent him photocopies.

"I could have gone on and on," he said. "It's such fascinating stuff. But I wanted to share all this information with other people, so I had to decide this was enough; it's time to put it into a book."

He published and is distributing the large, lavishly illustrated book himself through the organization he established a few years back, the Computer Center for Jewish Genealogy. He said he expects to sell the book to schools and public libraries and to people interested in Jewish history in America and New Jersey history in general. And meanwhile, his next book — about Saul Wahl, who, legend has it, was appointed temporary king of Poland in the 16th century — is lined up and set to be published.

In a forward to the book on Naar, Mayor Bollwage writes: "With this book, Dr. Rosenstein paints an in-depth portrait of one of the great men who has served our city as mayor. *The Grandees of New Jersey* brings to life a very important and fascinating part of our past and shows us how the history of our great city is closely linked with one of the most important events, and some of the most important people, in early Jewish-American history."

[Comment](#) | [Print](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Webmaster](#)

©2006 New Jersey Jewish News
All rights reserved