

David Teller
President: 1879-1896

David Teller was born in Kirchheim, Germany, in February 1824. In 1842, he came to America, settling in Wilmington, North Carolina, and partnered with his brother Solomon, in the dry goods business. In 1856, he sold his business interest and moved to Philadelphia. Here, he and his brothers became financially successful tobacco dealers and tobacco product manufacturers. Teller also cofounded and was the second president of The Mutual Benefit Company, a Pennsylvania insurance company.



David Teller was elected to Rodeph Shalom's Board, later became Vice-President before serving as President for 17 years. Under his leadership, the Congregation saw prosperity and advancement.

With Rabbi Jastrow's retirement in 1892, Rodeph Shalom hired Rabbi Henry Berkowitz when he came to Philadelphia for the dedication of Keneseth Israel's building. Berkowitz was a man of great intellect and influence. After coming to Rodeph Shalom, Berkowitz promoted interfaith dialogue by starting the Jewish Chautauqua Society, an organization that providing education programs on Jewish topics to non-Jews.

Philadelphia Jewish Community

In addition to his work on behalf of Rodeph Shalom, Teller devoted his efforts to serving as:

- A Hebrew Education Society Board Member – an organization establishing general education schools, combined with Hebrew language and literature instruction
- A charter member and Vice-President of the Mercantile Club, a predominantly German-Jewish business and professional club
- A founder of the Society of the United Hebrew Charities
- President of the Mount Sinai Cemetery Association
- Vice-President of the Philadelphia Branch of the Jewish Theological Seminary Association
- A member of the Merchants' Fund, Jewish Hospital Association, Jewish Foster Home and Orphan Asylum

At the 1888 convention to form the Jewish Publication Society, because there were intense feelings between leaders of the two schools of Jewish thought and observance, it was announced that no rabbis were put on the bylaws committee in the interest of harmony. A number of rabbis were offended and started to leave. Standing in the aisle, David Teller stated that anyone who for personal reasons helped to break up the convention would be held responsible by the Jews of America for their actions. The rabbis returned to their seats and the convention resumed peacefully.

David Teller died on October 10, 1905 at the age of 81.

The Teller Family

- In 1853, David Teller married Rebecca Hackenburg. She was the daughter of Judah Hackenburg, a respected merchant and a trustee of the Congregation Mikveh Israel and sister of William B. Hackenburg who would become one of Philadelphia's philanthropic and community leaders.
- When two of David Teller's daughters married Fleisher brothers and another married Alfred Mayer, the Teller family became related by marriage to the Wolf, Mastbaum, Adler, Loeb and Gimbel families. These families provided much of the leadership of both Rodeph Shalom and Keneseth Israel as well as Philadelphia's Jewish community organizations.
- Prior to David Teller's presidency, his brother Solomon (Benjamin's uncle) was Rodeph Shalom building committee chair when the original Frank Furness Broad & Mount Vernon building was built in 1869-70. At a cost of \$250,000 including land, it sat 1600 and had a 125-foot tower.
- David and Rebecca's son Oscar B. Teller served on the Rodeph Shalom Board. He chaired the building committee when Rodeph Shalom built The Benjamin F Teller Memorial School House at Broad and Jefferson Streets that was named for his late uncle.

Written by Chip Ellis