



A DOCUMENTARY FILM

Fleeing from the religious persecution of a tyrannical Russian czar to the desolate fields of a new world, forty-three immigrant families traveled across the ocean in 1882 and founded the first successful Jewish farming community in America.

Over the next few decades, more than 300 other immigrant families would join them.

This is... ALLIANCE.

Under the thumb of an autocratic czar, roughly five million Jews lived with heavy restrictions in Russia of the late 1800s. Despite the vast lands, Jews were restricted to a single area called the Pale of Settlement, which today encompasses Belarus, Lithuania, eastern Poland and Ukraine. In the Pale, Jews suffered greatly from anti-Semitism, economic restrictions, and faced deadly mobs, called *pogroms*. Jewish homes, synagogues, businesses and lives were ruined. For many, their only hope of survival was escape.

Thus began the great emigration of 1881, spurring millions of Russian Jews to leave their homeland.



Some of these Jews were part of a movement called *Am Olam*, which believed in a “return to the soil.” The *Am Olam* sought out a first-time social experiment, bringing persecuted Jews to the United States to form agricultural-based communities. They felt that by becoming farmers in their new home they could prove to the world that Jews were productive, which in turn would help eliminate antisemitism.

In 1882, one *Am Olam* group set off to the U.S. from Russia with the aid of one of the largest and wealthiest Jewish organizations in the world, a Parisian group named Alliance Israélite Universelle. Demonstrating their motto, “All Jews bear responsibility for one another,” the AIU funded the travel of these immigrants. This pioneering group, which also included non-*Am Olam* families, traveled to rural New Jersey and formed a farming colony, which, in honor of their benefactors, they named Alliance.

The Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society (HEAS), comprised of wealthy New York Jews, took over financing the settlers once in the United States. The colony was created to counter the mass migrations of Jews and other immigrants to cities, such as New York and Philadelphia, where they would sometimes

become dependent on charities. The first 43 families didn't go to a big city, but instead found themselves in the desolate pine barrens of New Jersey. They were bound together in this new endeavor.

Alliance was an improbable place. Its new citizens were everything but farmers. In the old country, Jews were forbidden to own land, so other professions thrived. The Alliance settlers arrived to America as carpenters, grocers, tailors, and salesmen—not well equipped with knowledge of how to tackle the sandy soil of southern New Jersey. Now they were farmers establishing one of the first Jewish agricultural colonies in America.

My great-great grandfather was one of these original settlers.

When Solomon Salunsky arrived to the shores of America in 1882 at the age of 49, he had no idea what life awaited him. He found his way to a dusty piece of land in a state he had never heard of before and was faced with becoming a farmer. Despite the struggles that lay ahead, this was the opportunity of a lifetime. Less than a year later he brought his young wife and their nine-year-old son, my great-grandfather, to join him in this new life in the Alliance Colony.

Inspired by the bravery of my ancestors, I have embarked on a journey of my own: to learn more about and share this amazing experiment with others through the creation of a documentary. The film, ALLIANCE, will cast a light on the brave souls that made the colony thrive. This will be the only documentary bearing witness to the stories of Alliance descendants and their ancestors, as well as, providing a currently relevant exploration of immigration, Jewish farming, and the changing definition of American Jewry over the last century.

As immigrants, the Alliance founders fought to make their way in this new country. Living by the Jewish principle of *mishpat* (justice) and the virtue of *chesed* (loving-kindness), the settlers' deep roots in Judaism impacted their immigrant experience. They also had a strong commitment to education and culture. These attributes combined with their business savvy, allowed this settlement to flourish. The ever-expanding group of refugees was able to claim the land, harness its bounty, and create a life and future for their families. With grit and strength, the early settlers were able to expand from one colony to a region of six villages, giving rise to a new generation of American Jews.

Descendants today, numbering in the thousands, have continued to remain in touch with other Alliance families. Together they are able to trace their families' histories and retell the stories of their ancestors—inspiring stories that deserve to be remembered.

Today, walking through the cemetery that is the final resting place to generations of Alliance families, one can almost hear the stories of the families that settled this area, and how those families have intersected and diverged throughout the last century. Although no colony exists today, Alliance celebrated its 100th year in 1982 at the Foundation's Alliance Centennial Jubilee. Two thousand people attended, including 600 descendants of the founders and pioneers. Most recently, the 136th anniversary was celebrated with a vibrant reunion on the grounds of the original colony.



And now a film will capture this inspiring history and the legacy that is ALLIANCE will live on.

Story and Concept Development Strategy:

ALLIANCE bears witness to a unique and inspiring true story—a story of bravery, immigration, resilience, and family. This film will examine the foundational history of the Alliance colony and interpret a vital part of Jewish history and immigration for local and national audiences.

The story will be told through the words of Alliance descendants, interviews with scholars, a genealogist, the curator of an Alliance museum, and local farmers to the area, as well as archival footage and historical documents. Many newspaper articles and books have been written about Alliance since its inception, all of which have grounded the film in solid research.

Today much of Alliance history can be learned from a descendent named Jay Greenblatt. We find this attorney, former President of the New Jersey State Bar Association, and grandson of Alliance pioneer Jacob Greenblatt, down the road from the original colony, in the city of Vineland, New Jersey. In 1982, Jay established the Alliance Colony Museum, housed in the original burial preparation building on the grounds of the Alliance Cemetery; he is the local expert on all things Alliance. Recently, Greenblatt has worked with Stockton University to help establish the Alliance Heritage Center.

We will speak with one of America’s foremost experts on the topic of Jewish agricultural settlements, professor and author, Dr. Ellen Eisenberg. Her book, *Jewish Agricultural Colonies in New Jersey 1882-1920*, is the seminal work on Alliance history. Sitting down with professor Eisenberg, we will learn about the impetus for the establishment of Alliance and how the settlers managed to create such a successful community.

Sitting in one of the few surviving 19th-century synagogues in the United States and the only remaining Alliance synagogue, we meet Jarrett Ross, an Alliance descendent and professional genealogist. Jarrett sheds light on the unique interconnectedness of Alliance families, what made Alliance a truly unique place, and how it continues to impact so many today.

One descendent, William Levin, is not only telling the stories of his great-great grandfather, Moses Bayuk, a founder and community leader in Alliance, but he has literally returned to the land of his family’s roots. Moses Bayuk was one of the original recipients of land from the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society—a 15-acre parcel that was distributed to each of the families that would come to found the Alliance Colony. Today, Bayuk’s great-great grandson, William, and his wife Malya, are dedicated to honoring this legacy. They have formed a non-profit called Alliance Community Reboot, ACRé, dedicated to rebuilding a Jewish farm-based community in the original area of Alliance inspired by the spirit of the original settlers. They hope to begin a resurgence of Jewish farming on the 50 acres they now own. As Malya Levin says, “We are trying to reimagine its original spirit and give modern people the opportunity to connect through farming.”

Through a partnership with the Alliance Heritage Center (AHC) at Stockton University, the film will be grounded in solid research and depict a wide variety of archival materials. We align with the AHC’s goals of, “turning a spotlight on the Alliance colony and its historical significance and contributions to American ideals, [we hope] to preserve, promote, and disseminate this important history for future generations.”

Theoretical Concerns & Audience:

By telling untold stories, we believe film can be used to ignite meaningful discourse on social justice issues. Sharing the cultural history of Alliance and the hopes and dreams of its pioneering settlers will provide audiences with insight into the motivations of today's immigrants and the challenges they face, just as the Alliance colonists struggled with building a new life while holding onto elements of their birth cultures. Guided by the Jewish concepts of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world), and *hachnasat orchim* (welcoming the stranger), ALLIANCE will help to shift limited perspectives and spread the idea of shared responsibility for the people of the world.

ALLIANCE will have a broad audience, but will have particular appeal to those interested in history and culture. Stories of immigration and the history of ethnic groups in our nation, continue to be popular and extraordinarily relevant in the film and television industry. For this reason, ALLIANCE's audience will be a cross-section of the diversity we have in the United States.

The film will be especially appreciated by the American Jewish community and people who are interested in the changing definition of American Jewry over the last century. This includes the vast number of descendants of the Alliance colony—an active network that spans the entire nation and many of whom are involved in the creation of the project. They are passionate about their shared history and eager to have a film that illuminates the story of this legendary place. As the descendant population continues to age, it is important to put this film on screen sooner rather than later, as it will be the only documentary about this slice of history.

Another audience for ALLIANCE is students who can use this film as a history education tool, and who are often underserved and unlikely to know this untold history. The film can be shown in classrooms to educate about immigration and history. The director will work with her contacts in the education field to help disseminate the film and companion educational materials.

Artist Statement by Susan Donnelly, Director:

When my great-great grandfather, Solomon Salunsky, arrived to the shores of America in 1882 at the age of 49, he had no idea what life awaited him. He found his way to a dusty piece of land in a state he had never heard of before and was faced with becoming a farmer. Despite the struggles that lay ahead, this was the opportunity of a lifetime. Less than a year later he brought his young wife and their nine-year-old son, my great-grandfather, to join him in this new life in America. I am proud to say, my family was among the original 43 families to settle the Alliance Colony. Inspired by my ancestors, I am now on a journey of my own: to share this amazing experiment with others by casting a light on the brave souls that made this unique experiment thrive.

The Documentary:

The film is anticipated to be 55 minutes in length. Our goal is to release the film in Summer 2021. Upon completion, ALLIANCE will be packaged with a facilitator's guide for panel discussions, as well as, teacher guides for use in classrooms and learning environments.

Fundraising Strategy:

Funding through foundations, non-profits, and grant-making organizations, as well as from individuals, is being sought throughout the entire filmmaking process. In addition, a GoFundMe crowdfunding campaign is helping to support the film. Video Action Inc., a 501(c)(3) production company established in 1990 in Washington, DC, is the fiscal sponsor for ALLIANCE.