

PROPOSAL TO NAME THE SQUARE FORMERLY CALLED CALHOUN TO
LEO CENTER SQUARE

Savannah, GA is an historically diverse city. In our over 250 year history our city has commemorated and named streets, squares, and buildings after Caucasian, African-American, Christian, Greek, and Italian civic leaders. But there has never been a street, building, nor square named after a Savannah leader from our Jewish community. Now is a perfect time to recognize the contributions made by Savannah's Jewish community and one of its more popular leaders by naming the square located at Abercorn and Gordon Streets to the **LEO CENTER** Square.

Some of the very first inhabitants of Savannah were Jewish. They were on the boat of the original settlers brought on shore by General James Oglethorpe. The story has been told that the original Jewish settlers were not allowed to leave the ship harbored in what is now called the Savannah River. All other immigrants were allowed ashore. But not the Jewish settlers. Then there was an outbreak of yellow fever. Lo and behold there was only one medical doctor in the community. He happened to be Jewish and aboard that ship. Gen. Oglethorpe applied to the King's Lawyers in Charleston for permission to allow that doctor ashore. Permission was granted. But the doctor refused to disembark unless all Jewish immigrants were allowed ashore. Gen. Oglethorpe applied again the King's Lawyers in Charleston and permission was granted for all Jewish immigrants to come ashore. Thus began the Jewish community in Savannah, GA.

Savannah's Jewish community prospered and multiplied, producing prominent business, professional, and civic leaders. As early as 1799 Levi Sheftall was elected an Alderman. He served three terms. Levi's descendants Mordecai and Moses Sheftall also were subsequently elected aldermen -- Mordecai to one term and Moses to three. In the mid 1800s Solomon Cohen served three terms. Julius Jay Shoob served from 1957 through 1966. Benjamin Garfunkel served, also as mayor pro-tem, from 1966 through 1970. Then came **Leo Center**, who was elected by the citizenry to five consecutive terms from 1970 until he resigned in 1990. During his tenure Leo served as Vice-Chair of Council and Mayor Pro-Tem. Medical professionals (Dr. Irving Victor), legal professionals (Aaron Kravitch), and business leaders (David Rosenzweig, Julius Fine), along with Leo Center pushed and fought for political and civil rights for all Savannahians, particularly African-Americans. Leo also founded the local chapter of AIPAC and took local leaders, including Pastor Matthew Southall Brown and Cong. Lindsay Thomas, to Israel.

It was during Leo Center's tenure that the first African-American (Bowles Ford 1970) and the first female (Elizabeth Sheehan 1986) served as Aldermen. Leo was prominent in pushing for both those changes. In his last three terms Leo served on councils with three (eventual) mayors - John Rousakis, Floyd Adams, and Otis Johnson.

Leo Center was a native Savannahian, born here in 1918 to Henry and Hannah Center. Leo's dad Henry served as a Savannah police officer. There is an archived story in

the Savannah Morning News that Henry ran down a runaway horse carriage and saved the lady passenger.



Leo's dad Henry Center in his SPD uniform.

Leo grew up in downtown Savannah and as a child played in this (formerly named Calhoun) square. It was part of his neighborhood. Both of Leo's sons and two of his grandchildren now live only a block away from this square.

Leo attended Savannah public schools. He was an exceptional athlete. As an amateur prize fighter Leo won several Golden Gloves titles, a city championship, and advanced to the National Golden Glove finals in New York where he performed so well at New York's Madison Square Garden that he was asked to join the New York team and travel to Chicago. During this trip Leo became friends with the real Sugar Ray, Sugar Ray Robinson, and in later years officiated a match that Sugar Ray Robinson fought in Savannah.



Leo and Sugar Ray Robinson at the National Guard Armory on Eisenhower.

As a professional, Leo was named Fighter of the Month by Ring Magazine in 1941. He was ranked in the top 10 light heavyweights in the world, but then the United States entered WWII, so Leo enlisted in the Navy. He also won a fleet championship while in the Navy. Except for those four years serving America during WWII, Leo lived his entire life in this city he loved. He was later named to the Greater Savannah Athletic Hall of Fame.



Leo in the US Navy, WWII

SEASON HERE FR

ALL RULES NOT CHANGE

Leo Center Gets National Recognition As a Fighter

CADE AC

Committee Goes Into Session Today

Points Are Up

Sections Asking Alterations

Local Boxer Named by Ring Magazine As Best Light-Heavy of Month-Number One for 1941

Prize from the critics... Ring Magazine... Best Light-Heavy of Month-Number One for 1941

BABE RUTH TAKEN TO THE HOSPITAL

Sultan of Swat Gets Rest and Check-up

IS IN NERVOUS STATE

MEN'S QUALITY

Ring Magazine FIGHTER OF THE MONTH, 1941

Returning to Savannah after WWII, Leo married another native Savannahian Miriam Kantsiper, started a business, and a family. Beginning as the Linoleum and Shade Shop (the original lettering is still on the side of the building now housing Sorry Charley's), then changing the name to Center Brothers, Inc., Leo built a local commercial sub-contracting company into a regional force with offices in Atlanta, Jacksonville, Tampa, Miami, and Hilton Head. He employed hundreds and pushed for African-American participation. Leo served on the National Board for Interior Contractors (CISCA). I still remember a tape recording from a convention held in Canada when one speaker spoke down about African American workers and Leo took the floor to provide an animated and aggressive rebuttal. Leo was active in the local Chamber and civic affairs. He also refereed local prize fights.

In one particular fight during a match between a white and a black, some drunk local, sitting high up in the back of the National Guard Armory on Eisenhower kept calling out over and over, "Kill the N... Hit the N... Destroy that N...". His voice kept floating over the hubbub of the crowd. It was obnoxious. It was frightening. Everyone cringed. Everyone froze. Nobody knew what to do. But Leo did. He stopped the fight mid-round, pointed to the rafters, and bellowed out, "That's enough"! The taunts stopped. Then, to thunderous applause, the fight went on.

The ground rules for renaming the square state that

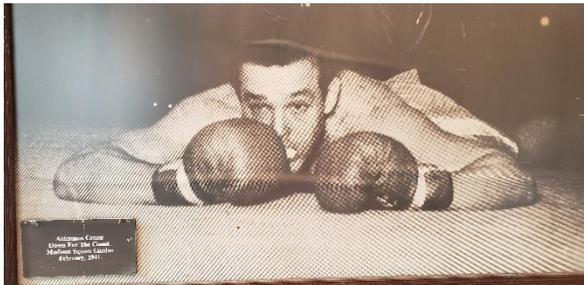
- The proposed honoree shall be **deceased**, absent extraordinary circumstances;
- Whether the **proposed namesake made a sustained contribution over an appreciable time period**, exerted efforts of benefit or significance to **local, state or national affairs** and/or demonstrated leadership in governmental, cultural or historical affairs, humanitarian efforts, or community development;
- Contributions that beneficially changed the nature and characteristics of the community; and

- **Achievement by a native Savannahian of national or international acclaim** in a specific field of endeavor that has reflected positively on Savannah.

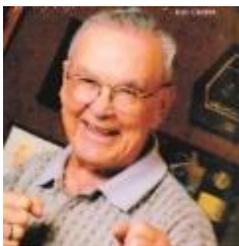
All of these check points apply to Leo.

After living 94 years and 19 days in his beloved home city, Leo died in September 2012. Leo participated in and demonstrated leadership in governmental, cultural and historical affairs, humanitarian efforts, and community development and made significant commercial, civic, and political contributions over quite an appreciable time, including nearly 23 years in public office. Leo exerted efforts of benefit and significance on the local level, the state level (both as an amateur and professional prize fighter, as a businessman, and as an elected official), and on the national level through League of City convention connections and on the board of his commercial industry. Through the League of Cities Leo became friends with San Jose Mayor Norman Mineta who later became the first Asian-American to serve in the national cabinet (as Secretary of Transportation under Pres. Bill Clinton and later George W. Bush). As an Alderman Leo was instrumental in developing Rousakis Plaza along our riverfront, changing a broken yet historical area into our most recognized and visited development. Promoting minority inclusion in commerce and politics and helping develop Rousakis Plaza, Leo definitely beneficially changed the nature and characteristics of our community

Every aspect of Leo’s commercial and public life has reflected positively on Savannah. Leo was honored with a signed menu on the wall of Johnny Harris restaurant and almost all Savannahians have seen and commented on his photo on the wall of the Crystal Beer Parlor at the corner of Jefferson and Jones Streets.



Leo Center at Crystal Beer Parlor



It is time for Savannah to officially honor its Jewish community and one of its most beloved native citizens. Naming the square at Abercorn and Gordon as the **LEO CENTER** square will do just that. Plus it is a very generic name “the Center square” which will offend no one.

TONY CENTER
912-238-5766
TonyCenter@comcast.net



City of Savannah - City Council

Detric Leggett
Alderman, District 2

Fellow Council Members,

Pursuant to the Article E of our Naming Ordinance, particularly Sections 4-1101 and 4-1102, and the additional naming requirement of a support letter from a designated Alderman, I support the application of Tony Center that the name of our square located at Abercorn between E. Gordon and E. Taylor Streets be named the LEO CENTER square.

Leo Center served our city, our state, our country, his family, his industry, and our Jewish community with honor, prestige, and notoriety. Naming the square after Leo Center accomplishes all of the criteria we requested in renaming this square:

- It honors and commemorates a noteworthy person associated with the City of Savannah, Chatham County, the State of Georgia, and the United States of America;
- It commemorates local history, events and culture; and
- It strengthens neighborhood identity

It takes into consideration

- Community diversity;
- The historical significance of the location;
- The appropriateness and compatibility of the request in relation to the existing area; and
- Continuity and stability.

And Leo Center, now deceased,

- Made a sustained contribution over an appreciable time period, exerted efforts of benefit or significance to local, state or national affairs and/or demonstrated leadership in governmental, cultural or historical affairs, humanitarian efforts, or community development;
- Contributed to and beneficially changed the nature and characteristics of our community; and
- Achieved recognition nationally and internationally as an athlete, businessman, and elected official in ways that have reflected positively on Savannah, particularly for both the Jewish and African-American citizens of our city.

Sincerely,
DETRIC LEGGETT