

AARON B. FRIEDMAN – 1915-1997



Some “projects” just seem to take on a life of their own. That certainly can be said about the “hobby” that occupied a significant portion of the last 20 years of Aaron Friedman’s life.

What began as a simple suggestion from his daughter-in-law, to “build a dollhouse for Rachel” (Aaron’s oldest granddaughter), evolved into the eight magnificent miniature houses now located at the History Museum of Mobile. Through this process, Aaron Friedman learned to say “I love you” to his family. By leaving this legacy with the Museum, he continues to touch the lives of people who knew him, as well as the thousands of others from around the world who now are able to marvel at these individually designed and masterfully crafted miniature houses.

Aaron Friedman – A Brief Biography

Aaron Bernard Friedman was born in 1915 to immigrant parents who came to the U.S. from Lithuania and Latvia. Aaron and his four sisters grew up in a traditional Jewish home in the multi-ethnic neighborhood of south Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His father, Samuel, owned a small printing shop where Aaron worked after school as a boy making deliveries and, eventually, learning to set type and proofread. Aaron’s mother, Anna, managed the family household and also supplemented the family income by operating a large boarding house with her mother.



In 1931, in order to help support the family during the depths of the Great Depression, Aaron took on full time work in the stock room of a department store in Philadelphia. Never completing high school, Aaron’s formal education ended in the 10th grade. He was 16 years old.



At age 23 (1938), Aaron was working in a department store in Baltimore, Maryland, when fire heavily damaged the store. The owners were in the process of opening another store that Aaron would manage, but that store would not be ready for months. So the owners suggested that Aaron work for their sister and brother-in-law (Annie and Abe Stein) in Mobile. Aaron packed a single suitcase and boarded a train in Baltimore, arriving in Mobile in June 1938.

Aaron began managing stores for the Steins in Mobile as well as Pascagoula, Mississippi, and Pensacola, Florida.



The Steins had a daughter, Sarah, and a son, Melvin. Within a few months, Aaron and Sarah were engaged, ending any thoughts of Aaron returning to work in Baltimore. Aaron and Sarah were married in 1939. They had four sons: Murray (1940-2018), Leonard (b. 1943), S. William (b.1947), and Jere (b. 1954).

During World War II, Aaron served in the U.S. Army Air Corps. He was trained as an aircraft mechanic and was stationed at various bases throughout the United States. Aaron was part of the crew that had the distinction of setting the timed record for replacing the engine in a B-29 bomber. The war ended without Aaron being stationed overseas.



After the war, Aaron and his brother-in-law, Melvin Stein, took over the operation of “The Fair Store” in Prichard, Alabama, from Aaron’s father-in-law.

Yearning to create and build as a woodworker, in his spare time Aaron set up a small shop attached to the garage behind their house on Williams Court in Mobile. Completely self-taught and using only a small table saw, lathe, jigsaw, and hand tools, Aaron built a few small projects. Most notable among those was a card table with intricate veneer inlay in the tabletop representing the four suits in a deck of cards. Another unique creation was a miniature mahogany grandfather clock that had a working pocket watch imbedded as the timepiece.



Little did Aaron know that these projects would plant the seeds and cultivate the skills needed for the miniature houses that he would produce later in life. The demands of operating a growing business and raising a family, however, did not leave much time for a woodworking hobby. Thirty years would pass before Aaron returned to a table saw and fine veneers.

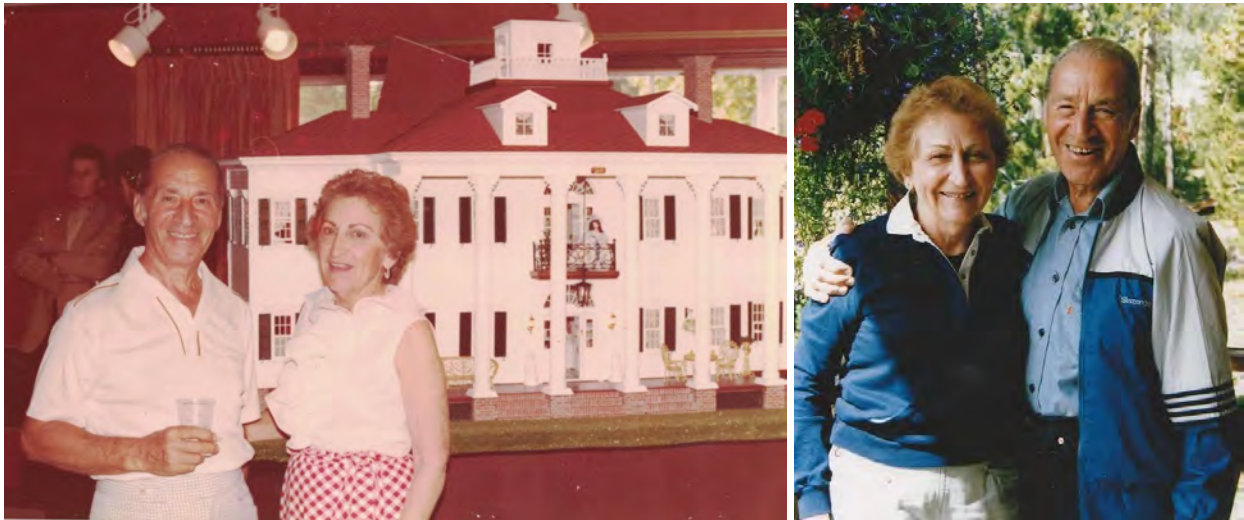
During the 1950s and 1960s, Aaron and Mel grew The Fair Store into a thriving and successful business. They also invested in various commercial real estate ventures in and around Mobile that proved to be very successful. By the mid-1970s, however, small independent department stores such as The Fair Store began facing increasing economic challenges including changing retail business pressures (shopping malls, large discount stores), plus national, regional and local economic and demographic changes. Aaron and Mel ultimately sold The Fair Store in 1977. Although they still had their real estate investments to



manage, this was by no means a full-time endeavor. Aaron began to face the question of how he would keep his mind and body active and stimulated while semi-retired.

At which point his daughter-in-law, Lynn Friedman, asked a simple question: “Why don’t you build a dollhouse for Rachel?” The answer to that one question became the eight miniature houses now on display as the Aaron and Sarah Friedman Miniature Gallery at the History Museum of Mobile (seven houses built for Aaron and Sarah’s granddaughters and one built for Sarah), as well as numerous smaller “storefronts,” jewelry boxes, and other items.

Aaron and Sarah made arrangements to donate the collection of miniature houses to the Museum following his death. Aaron was 82 years old when he died in 1997.



Murray, Leonard, S. William, and Jere Friedman lovingly composed this biography. All photos courtesy of the Friedman family.

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