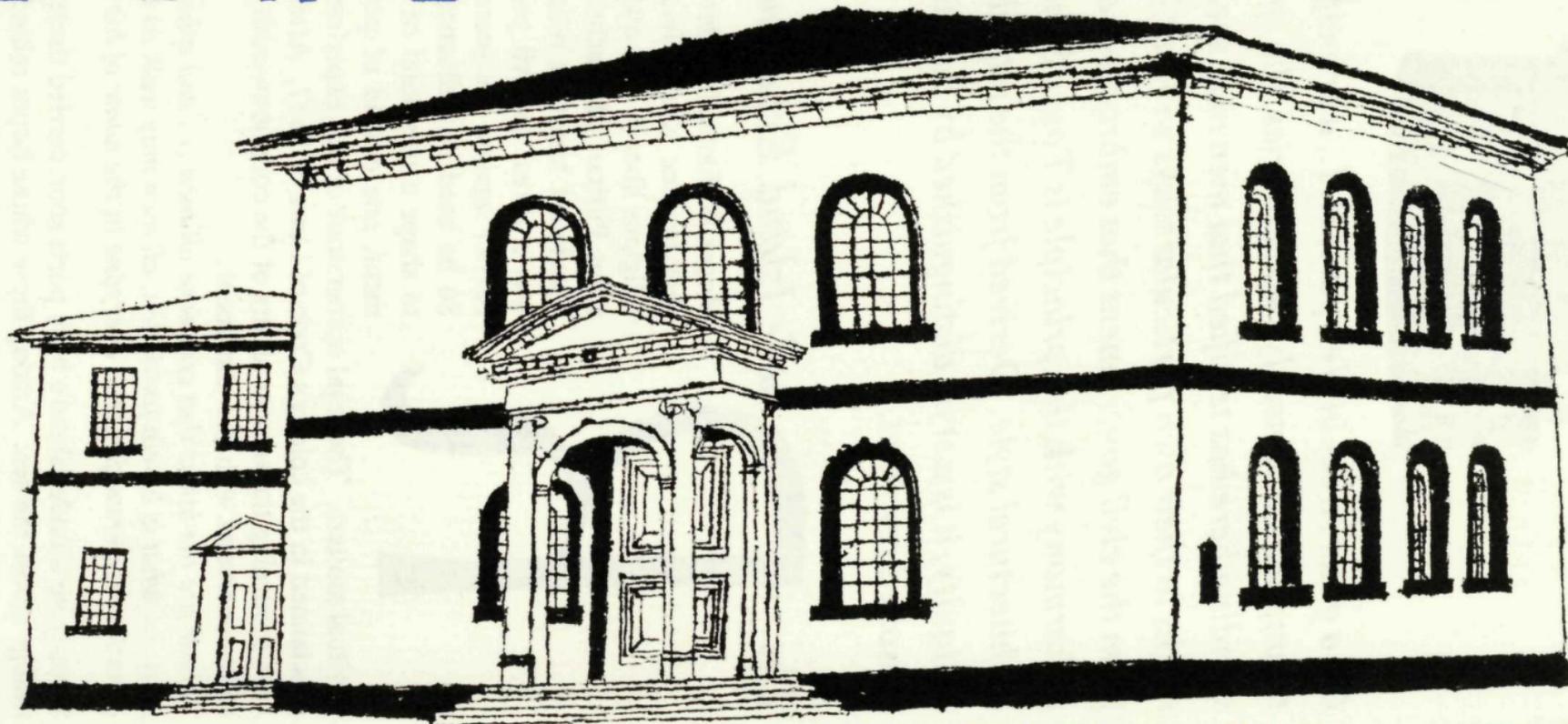


# TOURO SYNAGOGUE



*Ben Shaker*

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE • NEWPORT, R. I.



*On a quiet street in Newport, R. I., a principle has triumphed. For nearly two centuries, the small synagogue standing here has testified that men may seek eternal truths in their own particular ways without hindrance from the civil government that embraces them all. In harmony with this principle is Touro Synagogue's architectural style. Derived from the models of classical antiquity, it is a style distinguished by balance and reasoned restraint.*

## The Rhode Island Experiment

Roger Williams, founder of the colony that became Rhode Island, believed in religious liberty. His own banishment from Puritan Massachusetts had convinced him that religious intolerance was a threat to civil peace and a barrier against the search for truth. So he used his influence in Rhode Island to shape a new kind of civil government, one devoid of power over spiritual matters. The legal cornerstone of this experiment was proclaimed in the colony's Code of Laws of 1647. After listing the laws governing the secular affairs of the commonwealth, the code concluded with this statement: *"These are the laws that concerne all men . . . and otherwise than . . . what is herein forbidden, all men may walk as their consciences persuade them, everyone in the name of his God."* Ships from Rhode Island's busy ports soon carried these glad tidings across the sea. Among those whose hopes rekindled at this news were the Sephardim—Jews of Spain and Portugal. Some, called Marranos, had become Christian converts to escape persecution. Others had been driven from Iberia and now resided elsewhere in Europe, or in South America and the West Indies.

## The Jewish Community at Newport

Rhode Island's first Jewish community was founded by a group of these Sephardim. They came to Newport, perhaps as early as 1658, and were accepted. Soon they formed a congregation according to their religious tradition.

At first, unable to build a synagogue, they held religious services in private homes or in rented buildings. In like manner they provided space to school their children in the ways of Judaism.

The Jew who passes away is buried in sanctified ground. So in 1677, the Newport Jews bought a cemetery plot, their first community project.

As they had done in their religious affairs, so too in civic and commercial affairs these people carved a place for themselves in this strange new land. By the early 1700's, Newport was a bustling port city; and until Revolutionary times, its influence would continue to grow. Ships from Newport traversed the far reaches of the Atlantic in search of trade. The Jews of Newport contributed to this successful era. As merchants and shippers, as craftsmen and producers, they grew as a community with the city.

## A Place to Worship

By now a century had passed since the first Jews came to Newport. Throughout these years, more Sephardim had come to Rhode Island. And along with them had come Ashkenazim, Jews from Central and Eastern Europe. These two groups have differing traditions, and in Europe usually maintain separate congregations. But in 18th-century

Newport they became one community and as a congregation followed the Sephardic tradition.

This enlarged congregation needed a permanent place in which to worship. They needed a synagogue of their own. First they located a plot of ground. Then, as was the custom among these scattered groups of Jews, they turned to their coreligionists elsewhere for help in financing the building of a synagogue.

A generous response came from New York City's Congregation Shearith Israel—Remnant of Israel—the only one to precede the Newport congregation in what is now the United States. More help came from congregations in Jamaica, Curacao, Surinam, and London.

Now the Newport congregation turned to the dean of America's colonial architects, Peter Harrison, who volunteered to design their synagogue.

Ground was broken in 1759. Slowly the work progressed, beset like most church construction by delay and lack of funds. New appeals went out. More money was received. And the work continued.

Finally, 4 years after the laying of the cornerstone, the synagogue was ready of dedication. The date was December 2, 1763. Conducting the service was the spiritual leader of the Newport Congregation, Rev. Isaac Touro.

This historic event was attended by many non-Jewish notables of Newport and surrounding localities. The beauty of the dedication service inspired the *Newport Mercury* to report: *The Order and Decorum, the Harmony and Solemnity of the Musick, together with a handsome Assembly of People, in a Edifice the most perfect of the Temple kind perhaps in America, & splendidly illuminated, could not but raise in the Mind a faint Idea of the Majesty & Grandeur of the Ancient Jewish Worship mentioned in Scripture.*

## Congregation Yeshuat Israel

Now came the peak period of colonial Newport's Jewish community. With their new synagogue and their previously acquired cemetery, they could properly perform three essential functions of Jewish communal life: Worship, religious instruction of the children, and burial in sanctified ground. Perhaps it was optimism born of this good fortune that now prompted the congregation to choose the name, Yeshuat Israel—Salvation of Israel.

Following the strict rites of their faith, these devout folk centered their religious lives on the synagogue. Holy days observed with ancient ceremony and ritual were but the highpoints of their rich religious culture.

Prepared before the days of Passover was matzah, unleavened bread symbolizing the deliverance of the Jewish people from ancient Egypt. The sound of the shofar or ram's horn recalled Abraham's testing and announced the religious New Year, Rosh Hashana, and the end of the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur. To these Jews of Newport, Hanukkah must have held special meaning, for the essence of this celebration of the ancient Maccabean victory is religious freedom, and here in Newport the Jews were free.

During these few years before the Revolution, the Jewish community pursued commercial ventures with new vigor. One man, Aaron Lopez, was called the Merchant Prince of New England.

His ships and agents were known throughout the trading area of the Atlantic.

New homes were built, some of grand proportion. And the social, cultural, and civic activities of the Jewish community became an indispensable part of Newport's progress. It seemed that nothing could cloud this golden prospect.

## The Throes of Independence

But the Revolution came, and it sapped Newport's vitality. Her trade was destroyed. British troops occupied the city and it became a garrison town. Most of the townspeople left, Christian and Jew alike.

Deprived of all but a remnant of its congregation, the Newport Synagogue declined. Part of the time it was closed.

After the war, the city partially revived, and, to a limited degree, the Jewish community with it. Because many public buildings had been damaged, the synagogue now served public purposes as well as religious ones. In 1781 town meetings were held in the building. From 1781 to 1784 the Rhode Island General Assembly met here. And also during this period the Supreme Court of Rhode Island used the Synagogue for its sessions.

But the impact of war was not to be overcome, and Newport's vital processes could not be reawakened. Again people drifted away, most of the Jewish community among them. Again the synagogue served a dwindling congregation.

Ironically, it was at this low point in its fortunes that the Newport Synagogue inspired a classic declaration of religious liberty by George Washington.

## To Bigotry No Sanction

During a visit to Newport in August 1790, President Washington was presented with an address from the Newport Congregation prepared by Moses Seixas, warden of the synagogue. The heart of the letter was in the words: *. . . Deprived as we heretofore have been of the invaluable rights of free Citizens, we now (with a deep sense of gratitude to the Almighty dispenser of all events) behold a Government erected by the Majesty of the People—a Government, which to bigotry gives no sanction, persecution no assistance—but genirously affords to All liberty of conscience, and immunities of Citizenship. . . .*

Washington's reply a few days later contained a moving affirmation that almost exactly repeated the key phrases in the Seixas letter: *. . . It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.*

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It would be inconsistent with the frankness of my character not to avow that I am pleased with your favorable opinion of my administration, and fervent wishes for my felicity. May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocation useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

G. Washington

*From Washington's letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, August 17, 1790.*

Highly significant were these words from the President of the new Nation—a Nation feeling its way. Adoption of the Bill of Rights was more than a year in the future when Washington penned these perceptive phrases. And though the First Amendment would guarantee religious liberty in the strictly legal sense (but at that time only insofar as the Federal Government was concerned), Washington went further. His was a doctrine of brotherly love, of mutual respect.

Washington's recognition in 1790 came at the end of the eventful history of Newport's earlier Jewish community. A few years afterward regular services ceased; the doors of the synagogue closed.

Time passed and the buildings decayed. One observer regretfully noted that bats and moles now made their abode there.

## This Noble Edifice

When the last survivors of Congregation Yeshuat Israel moved to New York, title to the Newport Synagogue passed into the hands of New York's Congregation Shearith Israel, solely as trustees.

It seemed that the Newport Synagogue, once the central feature of a thriving communal enterprise, would soon disappear. But, as one historian of this period has stated: "Still, there were those who loved this noble edifice. . . ." Among the more important

members of this group were Abraham and Judah Touro, sons of Rev. Isaac Touro who had officiated at the synagogue's dedication.

Reverend Touro had gone to Jamaica after the war, and there he had died in 1784. His two sons—nurtured in commercial life by their uncle, Moses Hays of Boston—had made fortunes. Both were outstanding philanthropists. One object of their charity was the Newport Synagogue and Jewish Cemetery. Abraham, upon his death in 1822, left a \$10,000 fund for the care and preservation of the Synagogue. This money was described as the "Touro Jewish Synagogue Fund." Perhaps this was the origin of the now commonly used name for the building, Touro Synagogue. Abraham's bequest was certainly among the earliest in America for the purpose of preserving an unoccupied historic building. Within a few years restoration began, and Touro Synagogue was saved for the future. Judah Touro, who died in 1854, left another \$10,000 for the salary of a reader or minister to officiate in the synagogue, and also for care of the cemetery.

## The New Congregation Jeshuat Israel

Though Touro Synagogue was occasionally used for worship or special services beginning in the 1820's, it was not permanently reopened until 1883. By that time new immigration from Central and Eastern Europe had again brought Jews to Newport. In time this community united as the Congregation Jeshuat Israel—a different spelling, but still meaning the Salvation of Israel. Maintaining continuity

with its predecessor, this congregation also follows the Sephardic tradition.



Peter Harrison

## Peter Harrison's Masterpiece

The 18th century bred men of affairs who—in the fashion of the Renaissance gentleman—channeled their talents in many directions. Peter Harrison was one of these. Born in England, he came to Newport in 1740 and became a successful merchant. Proficient in

carving, Harrison is best known for his architectural achievements.

Adopting the Georgian style of England, Harrison became the most notable architect in mid-18th-century America. Examples of his work include King's Chapel, Boston; Christ Church, Cambridge; and the Redwood Library, the Brick Market, and Touro Synagogue in Newport.

Georgian architecture—so called because of its popularity in England during the reigns of the first three Georges—uses classical motifs as formalized by the ancient Romans. Symmetry, balance, ordered rhythm—these are terms descriptive of the style. In designing Touro Synagogue—often called his masterpiece—Harrison used the Georgian style, but modified it to accommodate the Sephardic ritual.

As was the custom of Sephardic Jews, the synagogue was inconspicuously located on a quiet street. It stands diagonally on its small plot so that worshippers standing in prayer before the Holy Ark face eastward toward Jerusalem. This symbolic placement gives an air of individuality to the synagogue and subtly insulates it from its surroundings. To the side, and somewhat affecting the symmetry of the synagogue, is the ell. It was designed primarily as a religious school for the children.

The rigorously plain brick exterior gives no hint of the richness to be found within the building. Though abundantly furnished, the synagogue chamber is so well proportioned that an airy, even lofty, impression is given. Twelve Ionic columns, representing the tribes of ancient Israel, support a gallery. Above these rise 12 Corinthian columns supporting the domed ceiling.

In the Orthodox tradition, women sit in the gallery and men sit below. The wainscoted seat running along the sides of the hall provided the only seating for men at the time of the synagogue's dedication. A raised section of this seat at the center of the north wall is used by the president and vice president of the congregation.

Five massive brass candelabra hang from the ceiling. Two were the gift of Jacob Rodrigues Rivera in the name of his son Abraham; they bear the date 1765. Another, dated 1760, was presented by Naphali Hart Myers; and the fourth, the gift of Aaron Lopez, is dated 1770. The inscription on the large center candelabrum identifies it as a gift of Jacob Pollock in 1769. In front of the Holy Ark hangs the Eternal Light, a symbol of the Divine Presence. It was presented to the congregation in 1765 by Samuel Judah of New York.

The Holy Ark at the east end of the room contains the Scrolls of the Law, or Torah. Hand-lettered with special ink by scribes of great skill, these scrolls are the most sacred of Jewish objects. On them are recorded the Five Books of Moses, the source of Jewish faith. The scrolls are mounted on wood rollers, two of which are decorated with exquisite silver belltops—the work of the colonial silversmith Myer Myers.

Above the Ark is a representation of the Ten Commandments in Hebrew, painted by the Newport artist, Benjamin Howland. In the center of the room is the Bimah, an elevated platform where the cantor intones the liturgy and reads the Torah.

These holy objects, all rich in symbolism, give to the synagogue a profoundly religious atmosphere. The total effect does indeed provide "a faint Idea of the Majesty & Grandeur of the Ancient Jewish Worship mentioned in Scripture."



The delicate and ornate interior contrasts sharply with the outward simplicity of the building. Inside the Holy Ark on the far wall are the Scrolls of the Law; above is the painting of the Ten Commandments.

## About Your Visit

Touro Synagogue is on Touro Street in downtown Newport, R. I., about 1½ blocks east of the Old Colony House on Washington Square.

From late June until Labor Day, Touro Synagogue is open to visitors from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Friday, and from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Sunday. Guides provided by the Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue are available to lead tours during visiting hours. At other times of the year, the synagogue is open on Sunday from 2 to 4 p.m. and on other days—except Saturday and other Jewish holy days—by prior appointment.

From the synagogue, it is only a short walk up Touro Street to the old burial ground. In this small plot—inspiration for Longfellow's poem, "The Jewish Cemetery at Newport"—are buried many who were important in the history of the synagogue, among them Aaron Lopez, Moses Seixas, and Judah Touro.

For further information write to Touro Synagogue, 85 Touro Street, Newport, R. I. 02840.

## Administration

By terms of a cooperative agreement between the Secretary of the Interior, the Shearith Israel trustees of New York City, and Congregation Jeshuat Israel of Newport, Touro Synagogue was designated a National Historic Site on March 5, 1946. The agreement—authorized by the National Historic Sites Act of 1935—enables the National Park Service to lend technical assistance in preserving the synagogue.

The Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue National Historic Shrine, Inc., assists in perpetuating Touro Synagogue as a symbol of religious liberty. Through its Restoration Committee, the society has gone far toward restoring the site to its 18th-century appearance.

The Synagogue continues as the place of worship for Congregation Jeshuat Israel.

U.S. Department of the Interior



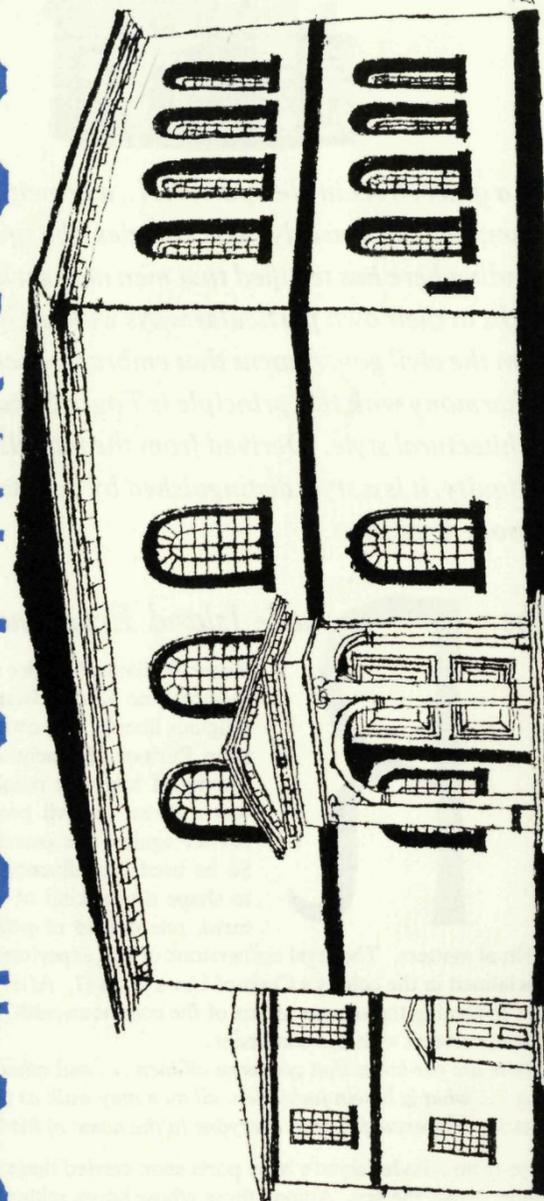
National Park Service

In cooperation with the Society of Friends of Touro Synagogue National Historic Shrine, Inc.

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1965 O-782-678

For sale by the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office  
Washington, D.C., 20402 - Price 15 cents

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Ben Howland

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