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TOURO SYNAGOGUE

Memorandum Report on Historical Significance
of Touro Synagogue
(With Photographs)

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By: Francis S. Ronalds
March 25, 1944



There is one thing that I am sure you will not fail to take into consideration. Inasmuch as Rhode Island's extraordinarily liberal charter granted by King Charles II in 1663 allowed ample religious toleration, Newport quite naturally became the site of the "first" churches of several denominations. Even more remarkable is it that many of these original buildings are still standing; namely, the first meeting house of the Quakers (the oldest part of this structure dates from 1699); the Seventh Day Baptist Church, 1729, standing next to the Synagogue and well protected by the Newport Historical Society; and the beautiful Anglican Church, Trinity, built in 1725 and dedicated in 1726. The First Baptist John Clark Memorial Church claims to be the oldest Baptist Church in America. However, the present structure was erected in 1846, over two hundred years after its founding. By 1739 there were seven churches in Newport, three Baptist, two Congregational, one Anglican, and one Quaker. At that time the Jews worshipped in private houses.

It seems obvious that should the Synagogue be designated a national historic site there would be similar requests from other denominations. Perhaps this might be a good thing. If you approve, I would very much like to discuss this question with Mr. Arthur Hays Sulzberger and Rabbi D. de Sola Pool. I met Mr. Sulzberger at St. Paul's, Eastchester, and Father Weigle, the rector, has promised to bring him to Morristown so that he can see for himself how the Park Service contributes to the teaching of American History, something as you know, which is the studied policy of the New York Times to further. Rabbi D. de Sola Pool I once met at Federal Hall. He is a scholar of real ability, and I believe I now know enough about the Spanish-Portugese Jews in America to make such a conference worthwhile.

The following resume of the history of the Synagogue has been compiled from a goodly number of printed books and pamphlets which are listed in the bibliography.

The Jews in Newport

The history of the Jews of Newport is a fascinating story, going back as it does to the fires of the Inquisition in Spain, to a haven in the Dutch Republic, to Brazil seized by the Dutch and reconquered by the Portugese, to Jamaica and Barbadoes to the first Jewish settlement in Newport, traditionally said to have taken place in 1658. All secondary accounts give this date and that they came from Brazil. Most probably they came from Barbadoes. In any event, they were certainly in Newport before 1677, as the deed for land for "a burial place for Jews" dated February 28, 1677, is in the City Clerk's Office. (A printed copy of this deed may be found in Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society, Vol. XIX, p. 14).

The first time the Jews are mentioned in the official records of Rhode Island is 1684 when the General Assembly voted them "good protection." (Colonial Records: Bartlet Vol. III, p. 160). In 1693 about ninety Jews arrived in Newport from Curacao.

The Jewish families living scattered in various parts of New England looked up to Newport as the mother Jewish community. Samuel Sewall records in his diary

under date of February, 1704, "Joseph Frazon, the Jew, dyes at Mr. Mayors. Feb. 5, satterday, is carried in Simon's coach to Bristow, from thence by water to Newport where there is a Jew burying place." (Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, Section 5, Vol. XI).

John Mumford's map of Newport in 1712 at the Historical Society shows that the present Bellevue Avenue was then "Jews Street."

In the eighteenth century the Jews prospered. Some of the richest merchants were Jews. The Historical Society has the account books and papers of one of the most prominent of them; namely, Aaron Lopez. He owned nearly thirty square rigged vessels and engaged in European and West Indian trade and in the whaling business. By 1762 there were about sixty Jewish families in Newport. As many of these merchants dealt in the famous three-cornered trade with Africa and the West Indies (rum, slaves and molasses), they naturally objected to the British restrictions on trade and became Whig. When the British fleet arrived in Newport, they fled the place and their Synagogue was closed from the Revolution until 1882.

The Jewish Cemetery

The Cemetery on Bellevue Avenue, directly opposite the Viking Hotel, is one of the oldest burying grounds, dating from 1677. It inspired Longfellow's The Spot on the Hill.

"How strange it seems!
These Hebrews in their graves
Close by the street of this fair seaport town."

Here lie buried the early members of the congregation, as well as the two sons of the first rabbi of the Synagogue, Abraham and Judah Touro, whose bequests still insure its well-kept appearance. The Cemetery is surrounded by a high, spiked iron fence, having a granite gate.

It is curious that of the many nineteenth century "guides" to Newport all picture the Cemetery, but not one illustrates the Synagogue.

The Touro Synagogue

The land for the Synagogue was conveyed by Ebenezer Allen of Sandwich, Province of Massachusetts, to Jacob Rodriguez Rivera, Moses Levy and Isaac Hart of Newport, June 13, 1759, for £15 in the Colony's bills of credit. The deed recites, "containing by estimate 92 feet in front or breadth and 106 feet in length or depth."

The Newport Jews appealed for funds to their coreligionists in the Colonies, in South America, and in England. New York responded with £149 6d.

The Synagogue was dedicated December 2, 1763 or in the Jewish calendar in the year 5523. The Newport Mercury for December 5, 1763, gives a description of the dedication ceremony. The Rev. Dr. Ezra Stiles, then minister of the Second Congregational Church and later President of Yale, describes the exercises in his diary for December 2, 1763. He speaks of the building as being 40 feet long and 30 feet wide and finished except for the Porch and Capitals of the Pillars.

The first rabbi was Isaac Touro. He left Newport in 1775 for Jamaica, where he died in 1783. His two sons became very wealthy men and through their legacies assured the upkeep both of the Synagogue and the Cemetery. Their names are perpetuated in Touro Park, in which stands the "Old Mill" or Norse Tower, which through Mean's book has recently come into renewed prominence.

Through the generous contributions of Abraham Touro of Boston and Judah Touro of New Orleans, not only the Synagogue and the Cemetery were preserved, but books were purchased for the Redwood Library and land for the Park. Judah Touro, who was wounded at the Battle of New Orleans, January 1, 1815, also contributed to the building of the Bunker Hill Monument in Boston. His portrait is in the Redwood Library. Both of the brothers are buried in the Jewish Cemetery at Newport.

After the British evacuated Newport in October of 1779, the Synagogue was occupied by the General Assembly of Rhode Island until the Colony House (still standing) was restored for its use. In 1790 President Washington visited the building and was the recipient of an address by Moses Seixas, the warden. The Synagogue has a copy of the Rhode Island Gazette containing Washington's reply. It is rather odd that this famous plea for toleration is quoted in Fitzpatrick, Writings of George Washington, Vol. 31, p. 93, only in a footnote, and there only in part.

There was no officiating minister at the Synagogue from the time Rev. Isaac Touro left for Jamaica in 1775 until the appointment of Rev. Dr. Abraham Mendes in 1883. From 1883 to the present the building has remained open for worship.

In 1867 Emma Lazarus, whose words are remembered at the Statue of Liberty National Monument, wrote a poem entitled, "In the Jewish Synagogue in Newport."

"Nathless the sacred shrine is holy yet,
With its lone floors where reverent feet once trod
Take off your shoes, as by the burning bush,
Before the mystery of death and God."

Present Time

In the yard of the Synagogue is a stone monument on which is a bronze tablet which reads:

"Dedicated to the principle that all and everye
person and persons may from tyme to tyme and at
all tymes hereafter freelye and fullye have and
enjoye his and their owne judgments and consciences
in matters of Religious Concernments."

(From the Rhode Island charter of 1663). Erected August 20, 1939, by the Jewish community of Newport to commemorate the tercentenary of the City, 1639-1939.

By the gate (always kept locked) is a sign reading:

"Synagogue of the Congregation of Jeshuat Israel.
Organized in 1658
Dedicated 1763
Oldest Synagogue in America.
Sabbath Services
Friday 6:30 P.M.
Saturday 9:00 A.M.
Visitors Welcome"

On the front wall of the Synagogue is a bronze plate reading - "Jewish Synagogue. Dedicated 5523 - 1763."

The Synagogue was not built at a right angle with the street, but is on an acute angle, in order that the Ark should face directly east. The fence was erected in 1843. The building is of brick, two stories, each floor having a range of arched windows. The interior of the Synagogue is very lovely. The hand-carved woodwork and walls are painted white, the domed ceiling is blue.

The accompanying photographs give a much better description of the interior than I can do with words. The twelve Corinthian columns represent the twelve tribes of Israel. In the photograph showing the sacred Ark opened are the Holy Scrolls of the law. The lamp hanging over the pulpit contains the eternal light burning in a silver vessel. The Holy Scrolls are on parchment, encased in silver cylinders, surmounted by bells. One of the scrolls is said to be of very great age. I read and heard this scroll variously described as from 400 to 700 years of age. It is supposed to have been brought from Spain during the Inquisition. The gallery for the women, who enter from the side of the building, runs around three walls and is supported by columns of the Ionic Order. The five massive bronze candelabra all bear eighteenth century dates.

On one side of the entrance way, on the west wall, is a marble tablet, bearing the following inscription:

"In Memoriam
Rev. Isaac Touro. (1738-1783)
Rabbi of this Synagogue from its dedication
5523 - 1763 until the American Revolution.
Abraham Touro
Born Newport 1774
Died Oct. 18, 1822
Judah Touro
1775-1854
Their sacred gifts endowed this Holy Sanctuary.
Rev. Abraham Perreira Mendez
Rabbi of this Synagogue
5651 - 1881 5653 - 1893
(1825-1893)

The fruits of the righteous is a tree of life;
And he that winneth Souls is wise.
Proverbs XI, 30."

On the other side of the entrance is a blown-up facsimile of Washington's letter of August 17, 1790, to the Hebrew congregation in Newport.

The present rabbi of Touro Synagogue, congregation of Jeshuat Israel is Jules Lipschutz, 11 Lincoln Street, Newport, Rhode Island. The President of the Synagogue is Dr. Samuel Adelson, 135 Touro Street, Newport.

The property is owned by Sheareth Israel Synagogue, New York City. Dr. David de Sola Pool is Rabbi of this Synagogue.

There are only three Synagogues in America in which the ritual is still Spanish-Portugese -- Newport, Philadelphia (Rabbi Cardoza), and New York (Rabbi de Sola Pool).

Francis S. Ronalds

Francis S. Ronalds,
Coordinating Superintendent.

CC: Regional Director, Region One
Mr. Demaray

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