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PROPOSED TOURO SYNAGOGUE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

IMPORTANT

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By: Dr. Charles W. Porter
October 28, 1944

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

54

ADDRESS ONLY
THE DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

October 28, 1944.

PROPOSED TOURO SYNAGOGUE NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE
NEWPORT, RHODE ISLAND

The following data are submitted to assist the Advisory Board in determining the eligibility of the Touro Synagogue, Newport, Rhode Island, for designation as a national historic site:

The earliest Jewish settlement of historical importance in America was in New York City in 1654, Jews having been attracted to that place by the religious freedom which prevailed in Holland and the Dutch colonies overseas. Governor Stuyvesant of New York was personally hostile to the Jewish immigrants but, at length, had to treat them fairly because Jews had invested large sums in the Dutch West Indies Company.⁽¹⁾ The oldest of the Jewish congregations in the United States today is generally recognized to be the Congregation Shearith Israel of New York, which in 1682 was meeting in a house rented from John Harpording on Mill, now South William, Street, New York City, and which between 1728 and 1730 built a synagogue 100 feet to the west of Harpording's house on land purchased from Cornelius Clopper, December 19, 1728.⁽²⁾ This Mill Street synagogue, after being several times enlarged, was demolished in 1818 and a new synagogue erected on the same site.⁽³⁾ In 1833, the Congregation sold its

(1) Edward Channing, A History of the United States (6 Vols., New York, 1937) II, 452; The Jewish Encyclopedia (12 Vols., New York and London, 1905) IX, 259, 264.

(2) N. T. Phillips, LL.B., "The Congregation Shearith Israel: An Historical Review", in American Jewish Historical Society, Publications, VI, (1897), pp. 126-130; The Jewish Encyclopedia IX, 259-264.

(3) Phillips, op. cit., p. 133.



property on Mill Street and built a new synagogue on Crosby Street. A great fire swept over the old Mill Street area in 1835, after which Mill Street ceased to exist as such. South William Street, widened and extended, took its place. The site of the early synagogue of the Congregation Shearith Israel might therefore be marked, but there would hardly be any physical remains of it.⁽⁴⁾

Shortly after the Jewish settlement in New York, Jews appear at Newport, Rhode Island, the earliest mention of them at that place being in 1658.⁽⁵⁾ It is noteworthy that the religious freedom which obtained in Rhode Island also caused that State to become the site of early churches of several denominations of Christians. Many well-known examples of early Christian churches still stand, namely, the meeting house of the Quakers (1699); the Seventh Day Baptist Church (1729), and the noted Trinity Anglican Church (1725-26). The First Baptist John Clark Memorial Church claims to be the oldest Baptist Church Congregation in America, though the building in which they worship was erected in 1846.⁽⁶⁾

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.⁽⁷⁾

(4) Phillips, p. 135. The evidence for the exact location of this early synagogue is summarized in M. J. Kohler's "Civil Status of the Jews in Colonial New York," American Jewish Historical Society, Publications, VI (1897), pp. 94-95, which gives the certain date as 1695 ... "house and ground of John Harpending, now commonly known by the name of the Jews' Synagogue."

(5) Jewish Encyclopedia, IX, 294-296.

(6) Report of Superintendent Francis S. Ronalds of Morristown National Historical Park, March 25, 1944, p. 2.

(7) Ronalds, loc. cit., p. 2.

The Jews were perhaps attracted to Newport partly by a desire for religious freedom and partly by the commercial advantages which the city offered in colonial times.

In 1762, there being between sixty and seventy members of the Jewish Congregation of "Jeshuat Israel" in Newport, the erection of a synagogue was commenced on land purchased from Ebenezer Allen on June 13, 1759. The architect was the distinguished Peter Harrison, one of the premier architects of colonial America.⁽⁸⁾ Although Harrison's best-known works are King's Chapel, Boston (1749-1754) and Christ Church, Cambridge (1761), the interior of the synagogue is a worthy example of his style which was "exceptional in the America of that time" for its purity of detail and monumental qualities.⁽⁹⁾ Photographic illustrations of the fine interior woodwork of this synagogue will be found attached to the original copy of the present report, which will be the copy marked for the Chairman of the Advisory Board. It is regretted that additional copies of the photographs are not available and that it will not be possible to illustrate the carbon copies of this report.

"The woodwork is hand carved throughout. The plan of the structure (Masonic) follows that of the Temple in Jerusalem, the twelve columns representing the twelve tribes of Israel; each column being a solid tree trunk. No metal was used in construction, all joining of units being done with dove-tail and wood pin. The great center candelabrum and other figures are of exquisitely wrought silver. The Eternal Light burns in a silver vessel before the ark,

(8) Fiske Kimball, "Peter Harrison," in Dictionary of American Biography (20 Vols., New York, 1943), VIII, 347.

(9) Ibid., VIII, 347.

wherein repose the Holy Scrolls. The balcony, in orthodox custom, is reserved for the use of women at worship."^(9a)

It is said that the building is today essentially the same as when it was first consecrated in 1763. "The seating was revised about thirty years ago, electric current installed and the carpet has been replaced intermittently."⁽¹⁰⁾

The building is today known as the Touro Synagogue because Isaac Touro was its first minister and because the endowment of the place of worship was principally supplied by him and by his sons Abraham and Judah Touro.

During the British occupation of Newport in the Revolutionary War (December 8, 1776 - October 25, 1779), the synagogue was closed, but in 1780, after the British evacuation of the City, the General Assembly of Rhode Island met in the building. The commercial prosperity of Newport declined after the Revolution and the Newport Jews drifted to New York and to other centers. The synagogue was at length reopened and the Congregation formally addressed George Washington, in 1790, who wrote a letter of appreciation. (See copy attached to this report.) The synagogue was again closed in 1791 for a period of about sixty years. It was reopened in 1850 on a single occasion and then remained closed until 1883. In that year, the Reverend A. P. Mendes became minister on the appointment of the Congregation Shearith Israel of New York. He conducted services until his death in 1891. In 1893, a Congregation was organized in Newport and took the old name of Jeshuat Israel, and was so incorporated by the State of Rhode Island, 1894, with the trustees of Shearith Israel in New York acting as its trustees.⁽¹¹⁾

(9a) Information supplied by Arthur Hays Sulzberger of the New York Times in a letter to Secretary Ickes.

(10) Statement of Mr. Sulzberger.

(11) Jewish Encyclopedia, IX, 294-296.

Closely associated with the history of the synagogue is the Old Jewish Cemetery in Newport which dates from about 1677. Here lie buried the early members of the Congregation and Abraham and Isaac Touro, whose bequests insure the perpetual maintenance of the place. The massive cemetery wall and imposing granite gateway were built in 1843 with funds supplied by Judah Touro of New Orleans.

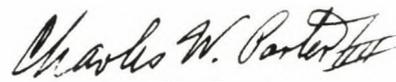
Both the cemetery and the Touro Synagogue are now the property of the Congregation of Shearith Israel of New York, the fact of this ownership having been settled by litigation in court.⁽¹²⁾ The Judah Touro Fund is administered by the State of Rhode Island and amounts to about \$90,000. The Isaac Touro Fund, amounting to about \$40,000, is administered by the City of Newport. From the illustrations attached to the original copy of this report, it will be seen that the interior of the synagogue is in excellent condition, but that the window shutters are in bad repair and give the exterior a neglected appearance. The present Rabbi is Jules Lipschutz, 11 Lincoln Street, Newport, Rhode Island. The present Rabbi of the Shearith Israel Synagogue, New York City, is Dr. David de Sola Pool. The ritual in use at the Touro Synagogue is Spanish-Portuguese. There are only two other synagogues in the United States where this is still true (New York and Philadelphia).^(12a) In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the majority of the Jewish immigrants to this country were of Spanish and Portuguese origin. They remained few in number, and as late as 1865 there were only 200,000 Jews in the United States. Between 1820 and 1890, the Jewish immigrants were nearly all of German birth. Between 1880

(12) Jewish Encyclopedia, IX, 294-296.

(12a) Ronalds' report, p. 6.

and 1920, 2,000,000 came to the United States from Russia, Austria-Hungary, and Roumania. There were 4,200,000 Jews in the United States in 1930, of whom 3,500,000 were of eastern European and 500,000 of German descent.

Besides New York and Newport, the chief early places of settlement of Jewish immigrants to this country were Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and Charleston, South Carolina. The Charleston congregation's place of worship changed several times between 1750 and 1792, and the synagogue built in 1792 was burned in 1838 and rebuilt in 1840.⁽¹³⁾ Although Charming says that a synagogue was built in Philadelphia in 1760,⁽¹⁴⁾ he may be referring to services which were being held in a small house in Sterling Alley. The first synagogue of the Mikveh Israel Congregation in Philadelphia appears to date from 1782.⁽¹⁵⁾ Among the distinguished members of its congregation (formed 1747) was Haym Salomon, banker, broker, and paymaster-general for the French forces in America, who handled most of the war subsidies of France and Holland for the American Revolution and who, as sole broker for the American Office of Finance in the sale of bills of exchange, rendered great service to the American cause.⁽¹⁶⁾ There is an imposing statue of him, together with statues of Robert Morris and Washington, at Wabash Avenue and Wacker Drive, Chicago, Illinois, erected in 1941 as a symbol of American tolerance and unity and as a tribute to the co-operation of people of all races in the building of the United States.



Charles W. Porter,
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Enclosure.

(13) B. A. Elzas, The Jews of South Carolina (Philadelphia, 1905), pp. 120-121 and 209.

(14) Charming, II, 453.

(15) Pennsylvania Historical Commission, Philadelphia: A Guide to the Nation's Birthplace, (Philadelphia, 1937), p. 167.

(16) Ibide, p. 100; Dictionary of American Biography, XVI, 314.

To the Hebrew Congregation in Newport,
Rhode Island

(Written in 1790)

C
O
P
Y

Gentlemen.

While I receive, with much satisfaction, your address replete with expressions of affection and esteem; I rejoice in the opportunity of assuring you that I shall always retain a grateful remembrance of the cordial welcome I experienced in my visit to Newport, from all classes of Citizens.

The reflection on the days of difficulty and danger which are past is rendered the more sweet, from a consciousness that they are succeeded by days of uncommon prosperity and security. If we have wisdom to make the best use of the advantages with which we are now favored, we cannot fail, under the just administration of a good Government, to become a great and a happy people.

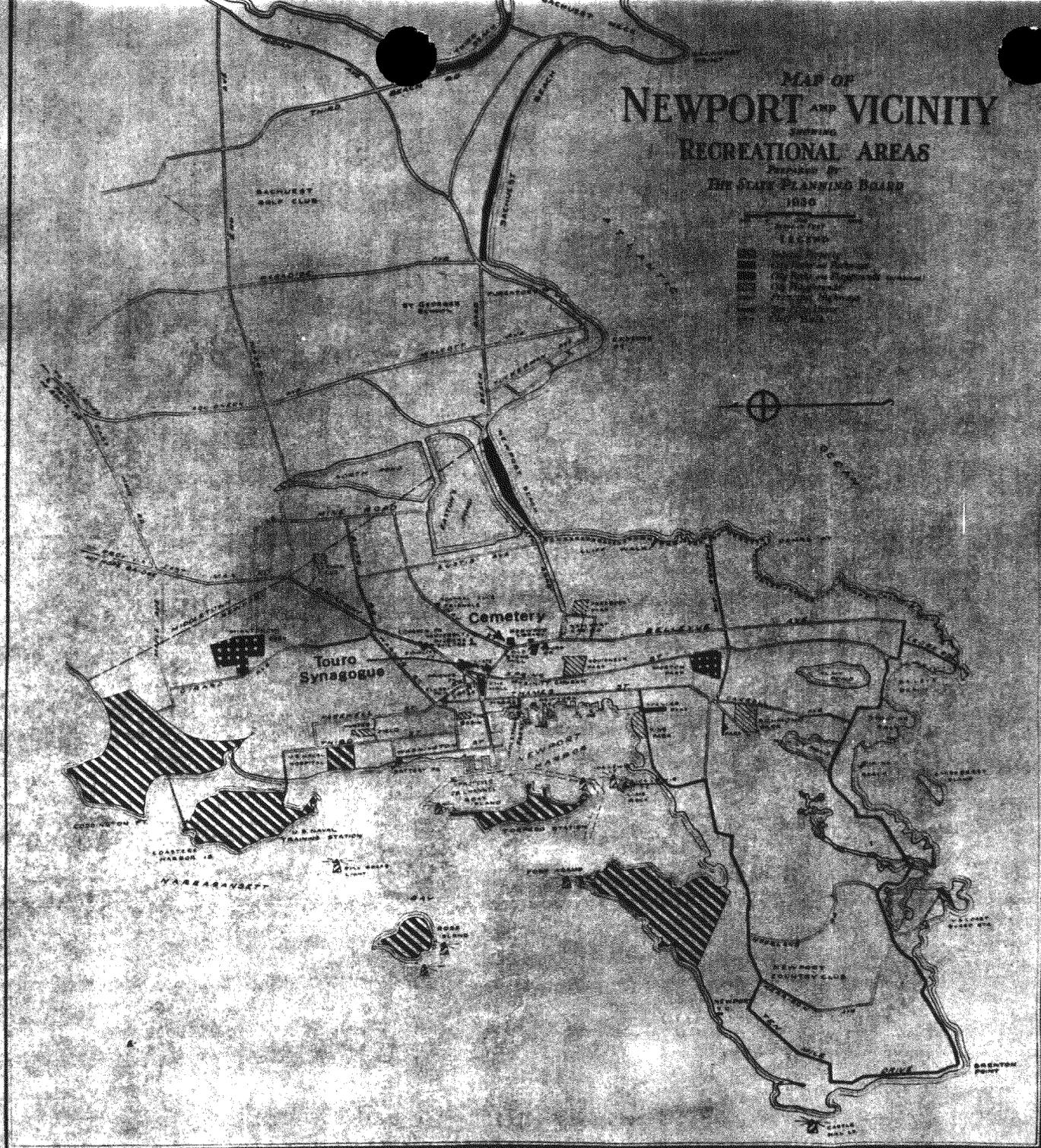
The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy; a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, 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.

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 fig-tree, 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 vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

(Sgd.) G. Washington

MAP OF
NEWPORT AND VICINITY
 RECREATIONAL AREAS

Prepared by
FBI STATE PLANNING BOARD
 1939



**PROPOSED TOURO SYNAGOGUE
 NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE**

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