

PETER HARRISON AND THE NEW HAVEN
CONNECTION

BY RABBI ARTHUR A. CHIEL*

Peter Harrison is the unsung architect of the historic Newport Synagogue and other houses of worship of the Colonial period. Through this column we offer our tribute to him. He died in New Haven in 1775.

“In the afternoon was the dedication of the new Synagogue in this town,” reported the *Newport Mercury* on Monday, December 5, 1763, three days after the impressive, religious exercises had taken place. “The Order and Decorum,” continued the report, “the Harmony and Solemnity of the Musick, together with a Handsome Assembly of People, in an Edifice the most perfect of the Temple kind perhaps in America, and splendidly illuminated, could not but raise in the Mind a Faint idea of the Majesty and Grandeur of the Ancient Jewish Worship mentioned in the Scripture.”

The Rev. Ezra Stiles, minister of Newport’s Second Congregationalist Church, carefully copied the *Mercury* notice in his diary. Taken with the charm of structure, Stiles proceeded to describe the synagogue’s interior in fine detail. He drew, too, a sketch of the Holy Ark, showing the tablets of the Decalogue enframed above it.

Oddly, neither the *Newport Mercury* in its report, nor Stiles in his diary entry, made mention of the architect of the new house of worship. For that matter, nowhere in the remaining contemporary records does Peter Harrison’s name appear. And were it not for the Travels volume published in London in 1775 by a British clergyman, the synagogue’s identity might have passed into oblivion.

In 1759-60 the Rev. Andrew Burnaby, a minister from Greenwich, England, during his travels in North America, visited bustling Newport. Burnaby observed the synagogue under construction at that time. Burnaby reported on the architectural character of Newport’s public buildings,

*Rabbi Chiel, until his untimely death (see footnote, page 69), was spiritual leader of Congregation B’nai Jacob in Woodbridge, Connecticut, a suburb of New Haven. Through his scholarly endeavors, he had become an expert on Ezra Stiles, whose extensive diaries are preserved in the Yale University Library. Stiles, before becoming president of Yale University, had been a minister in Newport, Rhode Island. His diaries have been an invaluable source of knowledge concerning the Jews of Colonial Newport and Touro Synagogue. That both Ezra Stiles and Peter Harrison started their careers in Newport and spent their last days in New Haven appears to have been a source of fascination to Rabbi Chiel. He sent us a copy of this essay a few weeks before his death, together with the manuscript of the preceding paper. The above essay first appeared in *The New Haven Jewish Ledger* of March 17 and 24, 1983. We reprint it here in tribute to Rabbi Chiel with the kind permission of the publishers.

indicating that few of these were “worth notice.” Only the “Jews’ synagogue,” when completed, promised to be “worth looking at.”

Here, Reverend Burnaby proceeds to reveal the identity of the synagogue’s architect. “This building,” writes Burnaby, “was designed, as indeed were several of the others, by a Mr. Harrison, an ingenious English gentleman who lives here. It will be extremely elegant within when completed. . . .” To this clergyman traveler from abroad are we indebted for revealing the identity of Newport Synagogue’s architect.

For nearly a century and a half, Peter Harrison’s name went unmentioned. At last, in 1916, on the occasion of his 200th birthday, Harrison was remembered in articles in two New England historical society journals. Then, in 1949, there appeared Carl Bridenbaugh’s definitive “Peter Harrison, First American Architect.”

HIS EARLY YEARS IN NEWPORT

Born June 14, 1716, Peter Harrison was the son of a Quaker couple of York, England. From childhood and through the rest of his life, Peter Harrison had close affection and association with his brother, Joseph, seven years Peter’s senior. Joseph became involved in trade with the American colonies, and Peter followed suit.

By 1738, Joseph Harrison was in charge of a ship fitted out by London merchants for trade with Newport across the Atlantic. The younger brother, Peter, was a member of the 10-man crew. Sailing from England in March 1738, with the cargo-laden *Sheffield*, they reached Newport harbor after eight weeks on the rough North Atlantic. Having successfully discharged their first overseas mission, the Harrison brothers returned to England in early Fall, 1738.

By 1740, at age 24, Peter had returned to Newport, where he was engaged to supervise the construction and outfitting of a new ship, the *Leathley*. In December 1740, the now Captain Peter Harrison took the *Leathley* in his charge, and in February 1741, the ship arrived safely in London.

After several years on the high seas, Peter Harrison decided to settle in Newport. Peter Harrison’s talents were quickly recognized, and in 1745 a committee of the General Assembly of Rhode Island appointed him to draw up plans for the development of Newport’s harbor.

That same year, Peter Harrison married the wealthy Elizabeth Pelham, a genteel beautiful woman of 22. Peter Harrison moved from Quakerism to the Episcopalian church of his wife and her family.

In 1746, the brothers, Joseph and Peter Harrison, formed a partnership in

Newport as sea-merchants. Peter Harrison, the younger of the two, took on the nautical responsibilities of the firm. As captain of a merchant vessel, he would be on the high seas for the better part of 1747 through 1749, a long separation from his wife, Elizabeth, and their daughter, Hermione.

It would appear that Peter Harrison's avocational interest in architecture was sparked during this period, while on business in England. It was the era in which English architectural taste was shifting from the baroque to Palladianism.

The Palladian style of building took its cue from the classical tradition of Rome, as interpreted by Andrea Palladio of Vicenza, Italy, during the 16th century. In England, Palladio's designs were taken up by Inigo Jones in the 17th century. English architects, who were largely gentlemen dilettantes, were inspired by "The Designs of Inigo Jones," published in 1727. Other works in Palladian architecture followed.

Peter Harrison acquired these various treatises in building design and studied them, on his own, with enthusiasm and pleasure. In London, he acquired what was to become the best architectural collection in the American colonies.

GENTLEMAN ARCHITECT

Upon his return to Newport from England, the first opportunity to apply his architectural skill presented itself to Harrison. Abraham Redwood had presented a handsome gift of 500 pounds sterling for the purchase of books for a library in Newport. A committee undertook the construction of a library structure. Peter Harrison was invited to execute its design.

Amidst his commercial and family responsibilities, after his nearly two years' absence, Peter Harrison took on the assignment to plan and oversee the construction of the Redwood Library. In its style, it would be a 'first' in that all other civil structures of colonial America until then had been planned in the tradition which came to be known as the Georgian or Colonial style.

Redwood Library was of Palladian character. This attractive, diminutive structure was the first building in America to have a classic temple-like design; it presaged the classical revival in this country.

Upon its completion in 1750, the Redwood Library became one of Newport's showplaces. Visitors, taken with its beauty and proportions, mentioned it in their travel journals.

Peter Harrison's next opportunity for creative architecture came from a Boston Anglican congregation. It requested of him "a Draught of a

handsome Church.” He graciously accepted this invitation to design Boston’s Kings Chapel. No remuneration was offered, nor, apparently, did Harrison expect such. He was a gentlemen-architect. It was his creative avocation and purely a labor of love.

In September 1749, Harrison completed his plans for King’s Chapel. Five years followed before the actual construction work was accomplished. It was opened for religious services in August 1754.

Reports of Peter Harrison’s success with Redwood Library and King’s Chapel spread beyond New England. Charles Town in South Carolina now turned to him for the design of a church for the parish of St. Michael. Again, Harrison responded to this 1751 request. St. Michael’s was opened for worship in 1761.

In the meanwhile, Peter Harrison carried on in the mercantile field as an importer-exporter. His success as an entrepreneur had its ups and downs. The sea trade was a high risk enterprise. But, though his fortunes varied in the overseas trade, Harrison lived the life of a gentleman with his wife and children in cosmopolitan Newport.

Harrison had a burst of architectural creativity in 1759-60, during which period he completed plans for the Synagogue, the Freemason’s Hall, and Brick Market, all in Newport, and for Christ Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

COMMISSION TO DESIGN THE JEWS’ SYNAGOGUE

The small Newport Jewish community of some 15 families purchased a “suitable Lot of Land, whereon we design to Build a Synagogue.” Two members of the building committee were Jacob Rodriquez Rivera and Moses Levy.

Both these men had contributed toward the building of Redwood Library nearly a decade earlier. Rivera and Levy turned to Peter Harrison for their prospective synagogue’s design, and he responded favorably to their invitation.

This project, on which Harrison worked beginning in early 1759, the construction of which was to get under way in August of that year, was a most unusual challenge. Committed to the Palladian style, he set to designing a structure along classical lines, at the same time suited to the spirit of Judaism in its faith and ritual.

Meeting with the Rev. Isaac Touro, the young Hazzan (Cantor) recently arrived from Holland, Harrison consulted with him regarding the interior layout of Amsterdam’s Sephardic Synagogue. Harrison, whose personal

library of architectural works was considerable, may have been guided, too, by reproductions of the interior of that house of worship.

A strong likelihood, too, is that he had seen the London and New York synagogues, which were all of similar layout in their interiors. Thus informed, Harrison proceeded with his creative assignment.

Harrison asserted his classical taste and originality in the final plans for Newport's synagogue. Particularly was this manifest in his design of the Ark, which, in the earlier Sephardic synagogues, were baroque.

The Ark was his largest challenge, for it had no parallel in the Christian church or pagan temple. The Ark designed by Harrison proved to be an original creation of elegant simplicity.

Upon its completion in 1763, the Newport Synagogue's interior and exterior were combined with an excellent sense of harmony and proportion. And all of this was done by Harrison without fee.

REMOVAL TO NEW HAVEN

In 1766, Peter Harrison was appointed to succeed his brother Joseph as the Collector of Customs at the port of New Haven. Joseph Harrison had held that assignment since 1769 and was now promoted to the much larger port of Boston. These appointments came the Harrison brothers' way as reward for their Tory loyalties.

New Haven was, by that time, a prosperous and growing town with a population of about 7,000. Its growth had been due to the increasing importance of its harbor. And, while it had neither the cultural milieu nor the cosmopolitanism of Newport, Peter Harrison found it a pleasant place for his family and himself to live.

The Harrisons might have lived out their lives in their genteel circumstances had not personal tragedy and political turbulence engulfed them. Six years after arrival in New Haven, in 1772, their only son, 23-year-old Thomas, who inclined to art and architecture, died suddenly. Death struck again in the family, in 1774, with the sudden passing of their daughter, Isabelle, at the age of 22.

Peter Harrison, at 58, had become an ill and depressed man. His health impaired, he was utterly shattered by the Connecticut political situation. Being a Tory in his loyalties, a royal official, and an aristocrat, the popular uprising against British rule was terrifying to him and his family.

During 1774 and 1775, there were mob attacks at New Haven's waterfront. Peter Harrison was abused by the rebels. News of the battles at

Lexington and Concord hastened Harrison's demise. He died of a stroke on April 30, 1775, and was buried at Trinity Church on New Haven Green.

Soon thereafter, further uprisings took place in New Haven, and Harrison's house was vandalized by an unruly mob. Harrison's personal papers and his elegant library of several hundred books and architectural drawings were destroyed.

His two surviving daughters married at Newport and New York. Widow Harrison stayed on in New Haven, an impoverished woman, in the home where once she was the aristocratic lady, mistress of a lively household. She died in 1784.

Peter Harrison's name and reputation as the pioneer-architect was deliberately overlooked by American chroniclers and historians for nearly one and a half centuries because of his Tory inclination.

Only in 1916 was his architectural reputation "rehabilitated," when on the occasion of his 200th birthday the articles about the long-neglected Harrison were published in the two New England historical journals.

In assaying Harrison's contribution to American architecture, his biographer, Carl Bridenaugh, writes: "The tragedy of Peter Harrison is that he achieved success in the colonies 20 years too late. As he arrived at the top of the colonial ladder, the Revolution began to shake down the structure he had climbed with such effort. Temperament and environment combined to make him a Loyalist; he could not have been otherwise. Although he had chosen the wrong course, there were moderate men, even in the Patriot ranks, who thought only of his integrity and his contribution in introducing Palladian architecture in America."

The Newport Synagogue stands as testimony to Peter Harrison's creativity. In it, and in the other structures that remain standing today, are to be seen the pioneering contribution which he made to the "fine art of architecture."

HOW TOURO SYNAGOGUE GOT ITS NAME

BY BERNARD KUSINITZ, M.A.

Through the years almost all of us have had occasion either to read accounts of or hear speakers on the subject of Touro Synagogue. When the question of how the Synagogue acquired its name is raised, one of two explanations is usually offered.

Despite the obscure origin of the name, the view most commonly expressed in recent decades is that the Synagogue was named in deference to the first Rabbi of the Congregation Jeshuat Israel, Isaac Touro. The name of the house of worship is Touro Synagogue; the name of its first Rabbi was Isaac Touro. Therefore, there was a connection between the two, and the one was named after the other. This belief is almost invariably stated without equivocation, always with the utmost nonchalance, and always without any explanation whatsoever, as if there were no doubt about it at all.

Yet, notwithstanding this cavalier attitude and the popularity of the story in recent times, a careful examination of the history of the Synagogue and its times reveals that there is absolutely no historical justification whatsoever for assuming that the Synagogue was named for Isaac Touro simply because he was its first rabbi, or for any other reason for that matter. The facts demonstrate it to be an assumption *sans* merit, *sans* factual verification, *sans* reasonable hypothesis.

How many of us can name the first rabbi of any other synagogue, or know how many synagogues have been named for that elusive first rabbi? It would seem, therefore, that being a first rabbi of a synagogue, *ipso facto*, has never been sufficient cause for such a singular honor. And as capable a rabbi and teacher as he may have been, Isaac Touro, a Tory to the end, kept no diary, wrote no monographs, printed no sermons, and wrote no enlightening letters that we know about. In short, he made no contribution whatsoever to our knowledge of the Newport Colonial Jews, the Congregation, or the Synagogue. We believe, therefore, that his name would have been lost to posterity had it not been for the charity of his sons, Abraham and Judah, and the pen of Ezra Stiles, the noted Newport Colonial diarist and clergyman.

Permit us to offer just one case in point, even if it be almost parenthetical in nature, to demonstrate the validity of our claim, shocking as it may seem to those who have assumed the Synagogue was indeed named for the elder Touro and have often repeated it as if it were proven fact.

Delivered May 22, 1983 on the occasion of the 100th Anniversary of the Reconsecration of the Synagogue, May 25, 1983, and adapted for publication.

It seems that when the Jews of Congregation Ohabel Shalom of Boston, Massachusetts wished to honor the son Judah in 1852 because of the sum of money he had bequeathed them in his celebrated will, they chose to do so by inscribing his name in Hebrew on a plaque to be placed in their synagogue.

Whereas in English a person's name consists of his first and last names, in Hebrew it consists of his and his father's first names only.¹ In the case of Judah, his name in English was "Judah Touro"; in Hebrew, it was "Judah, son of Issac."

Unfortunately, however, because no one in Boston knew his father's name, they were forced to write to an historian in Newport for that information. That letter has only recently been acquired and placed in the archives of the Newport Historical Society. This action taken by the Boston Jews must be considered very significant, because Boston was the city to which Issac Touro's sister and his brother-in-law, Moses Michael Hayes, had moved and was the city in which they raised Issac's sons, Abraham and Judah, after he had died.

If the good citizens of Boston had no reason to remember the name of the father, as seems to have been the case also in Newport, then who should we assume should remember it? Sentimentality is satisfying, as is wishful thinking, but neither is a substitute for facts. Lest we be misunderstood, however, we are not advocating that we honor the father less; but rather that we honor the sons more!

The second, and older explanation for the derivation of the name "Touro Synagogue" has it that the name gradually evolved from the possibility that the Touro Funds² had something to do with it. What that "something" is, once again, is never explained. This is unfortunate, because, as it turns out, this explanation is partially true and has much validity. However, it does not begin to explain what really happened.

Our purpose then is to tell the story of what actually happened, a story that is begging to be told. It closes yet another gap in the saga of the Jews of America. It is the story of a decision that we greatly appreciate, yet take for granted. We shall attempt to explain the historical process that saw the Synagogue's "name" change in response to conditions prevailing at various times, culminating in a fateful decision made by the right man, in the right place, at the right time.

To begin with, the synagogue never really had a name in the accepted sense of the word until the late nineteenth century. It was merely referred to as the "Jews' Synagogue" in the eighteenth century. As abrasive as that sounds to twentieth century ears, no antisemitic or uncouth connotation should be

ascribed to those who spoke the words. This was the manner of speech of the day, and nothing more should be read into it. We must not judge one generation by the mores and speech of another.

The congregants themselves had no special name for it. They generally referred to it as "The Synagogue", there being no need for any further designation when speaking among themselves. Depending upon other circumstances, references were made to "our public place of worship" or even to the "Newport Synagogue" in some documents. Actually, there was no need for further identification, because for many decades the Synagogue at Newport was the only one in New England and hence there was no cause for confusion.³

In the nineteenth century down to the 1880s, it was mostly referred to as the "Jewish Synagogue." Indeed, for many years a sign affixed to the exterior of the building by unknown hands in 1903 bore the legend "Jewish Synagogue". Because habit dies hard, the sign remained there, largely ignored until the restoration of the 1950s, when it was removed. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, of course, and down to this very day it has borne the proud name of "Touro Synagogue".

An intriguing idea immediately comes to mind. If there were virtually no Jews living in Newport during the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century (excepting summer residents and an occasional year-round one), as indeed seems to have been the case, who was it then who referred to the building as the "Jewish Synagogue"?⁴

There is a two-fold answer. In the first place, those who used that phrase comprised just about everybody who had anything at all to do with the Synagogue. This would include the City Fathers of Newport as well as the legislators at the State House in Providence, both of which collectively have administered the "Touro Jewish Synagogue Fund." In addition, there were the reporters of the local press, who described events that took place occasionally in the Synagogue, travel guide writers who described the building as a tourist attraction, professional photographers who took commercial pictures of the building, and even the caretakers, especially the Gould family, who took care of the building over a long period of time and knew more of its history than anyone else.

In the second place, in retrospect perhaps, they all appear to have been non-Jews, there being no one else in Newport. And all used the phrase "Jewish Synagogue." Even as late as 1881, when an infrequent Saturday morning service was held in the Synagogue, and was considered newsworthy enough to appear in the *Newport Mercury*, it was designated as the "Jewish Synagogue".

Proving that God and history both move in strange ways, an apparent detour in our search for the right combination of events that produced the noble name "Touro Synagogue" is now in order.

This most illustrious building, almost always referred to as an outstanding example of Colonial architecture and a dramatic symbol of religious freedom in America, is located, as is well known, on Touro Street. Like the building itself, the street, too, had undergone a name change. Now, in order to understand how the Synagogue was given its name, we must understand, first, how the street received its name. This, in contrast to the naming of the Synagogue, invokes no controversy. Plainly and simply, the street was named by resolution of the Newport Town Council. It was an action taken in recognition of the will of Abraham Touro, which, in addition to giving money for the preservation and maintenance of the Synagogue, also allocated funds for the repair and preservation of the street on which it stood. The resolution was adopted at the Town Meeting held in the State House in Newport on Tuesday, August 31, 1834, with William Ennis, Esquire, acting as Moderator. Written legibly in the "Minute Book Amended April 10, 1821-June, 1834," it read as follows:

Whereas Abraham Touro a Native of this Town and late of Boston in the State of Massachusetts deceased in his last Will and Testament devised to the Municipal Authority of this Town a very ample fund for the purpose of repairing and preserving the street leading from the Jews burying ground to the Main Street, we therefore voted and resolved in testimony of gratitude and esteem for the memory of the said Abraham Touro that the street from Spring Street easterly heretofore called Griffin Street be hereafter known and called by the name of Touro Street.

A question immediately comes to mind. If the street acquired its name by resolution, could not the Synagogue have received its name the same way? The answer could be "yes", but it has to be "no". There is no record of any resolution by any group anywhere at any time, or a record of a dedication or ceremony sponsored by anyone naming the building "Touro Synagogue" except that referred to below. And, even then, the naming of the Synagogue appears to have been incidental to the main purpose of the ceremony described.

While there is no connection between the names of Isaac Touro and Touro Synagogue, there *is* a direct connection between the names of Touro Street and Touro Synagogue. Two factors are important to a more complete understanding of what happened. The story is more complicated than would first appear to be the case.

The first of the two factors involves an analysis of the phrase “Jewish Synagogue”. The phrase “Jewish Synagogue” is in fact redundant as the word “Jewish” before “Synagogue” is superfluous. There is no such thing as a synagogue that is not Jewish. Other terms such as church, temple, and minister, for example, do require an adjective for proper identification. No Jew is likely to use the expression “Jewish Synagogue”. One says “synagogue”, and no more!

Who in Newport used the expression “Jewish Synagogue”? They were, of necessity, non-Jews. There were no permanent Jewish residents during this entire period. The non-Jews were seemingly unaware of the redundancy of the expression.

The second factor in the historical analysis had its beginning in the 1870s, when Jews returned to Newport to sink roots there for the first time since colonial days. Whether it was to escape persecution once again, or to search for “The *Goldena Medina*”, the golden land of opportunity, or for a combination of the two, or whether there were unknown undocumented personal reasons for which Newport in particular was sought out, are all beside the point.⁵ The fact is that Newport once again became the permanent home of people seeking freedom and a better way of life. More directly related to our story is the fact that within a few years after coming to Newport they decided they had sufficient numbers and motivation to organize. This may have been a premature decision, but organize they did. They received permission from the owners to use the Synagogue,⁶ to use the two Touro Funds, and to hire a rabbi. Thus the stage was set for the historic naming of Touro Synagogue.

Up to this point, we have been dealing with incontrovertible facts. Let us now engage in a little flight of fancy.

First imagine that you, the reader, are the new rabbi in town, just hired. After being here for a couple of weeks, you decide on an “affair” to be held in the Synagogue, complete with a printed program which you indeed do prepare. As part of the program, you have to indicate where the affair is being held. Keeping in mind that every synagogue has a name and that there is no reason why this beautiful old edifice shouldn’t have one also, you determine to finish the job and designate a name for the venerable house of worship. Being a rabbi, you are Jewish and you are educated. Further, you were born on an English-speaking island; you were brought up in English-speaking schools; and as an adult you have enjoyed a career in education and the ministry both in your home country and in England. With this sort of background could you possibly invite people to a place called the “Jewish Synagogue”? Hardly!

Reflect, furthermore, that in England and in other parts of Europe, as well as in the United States, many synagogues are named after the streets upon which they are located. While we could offer examples *ad infinitum*, let us offer just one, and let us offer it in honor of the incumbent Rabbi of Touro Synagogue, Rabbi Theodore Lewis. The synagogue near his home in Ireland bears the intriguing, delightfully Irish, if dubiously Jewish name of "The St. Kevin Parade Synagogue". Resisting the temptation to stray further, let us revert to Newport. On what street is the synagogue in question located? On Touro Street, of course. And after what Touro was it named — not Isaac, the father, but, as we have seen, Abraham the son.

Consider, also, that this synagogue in which you are officiating has been restored and maintained by the *Touro* Jewish Synagogue Fund for the last fifty years or so and that you are being paid by the *Touro* Ministerial Fund. Now what could be more natural, almost inevitable, than that you call this building — what? Why Touro Synagogue, of course!

The evidence indicates that we are *not* dealing with a coincidence. If there is any logic to our fantasy, this must be the way it happened — a pragmatic decision with no abstract deference to a shadowy religious figure of the past, to whom there was absolutely no reference once he left Newport. Besides — "Touro Synagogue" — it has a nice ring to it!

If we were to wax poetical or deal in abstraction, we would say that the atmosphere of the synagogue was heavy with essence of Touro — several parts Abraham and one part Judah! In this atmosphere and considering the flow of events, a rational and pragmatic choice by an educated English Jew could not have been otherwise.

We must now interject a very serious fact, which deserves much repetition. If it had not been for Abraham Touro and his bequest, almost certainly there would be no Touro Synagogue as we see it today, and almost assuredly none at all.⁷ As for the name itself, once the terms of the will were put into effect, not only was the building saved from physical destruction, but its fate was inextricably bound up with the name "Touro". The "Touro Mystique" began, was nurtured through the years, and still lives on today. All that was needed was the right combination of circumstances — the right man at the right time in the right place.

But because even a mystique such as the "Touro Mystique" must have a basis in reality, a return to the facts is in order. Our flight of fancy has, we hope, served its purpose. Our suppositions regarding the new rabbi in town, as some may have surmised, were not hypothetical at all.

The new rabbi in town was actually the Rev. Abraham Pereira Mendes. He was born in Kingston, Jamaica, an English-speaking colony in the

Caribbean. He was the first and one of the best of a long series of rabbis to serve the reborn Jewish community of Newport.

Between Jamaica and England he held a variety of positions; he organized more than one school or college; he published many kinds of books, translations, and articles both in England and in Newport. He was called from England to the reorganized community in Newport in 1883. Of the many works he authored, we shall single out but one work because of its relevance to Newport Jewish history. This was in the form of a translation of the inscriptions on the tombstones in the congregation's colonial cemetery. (This is one of three translations now extant.) He read this as a paper before the Newport Historical Society, which also printed it in Volume VI of its publication.

With that kind of background, could he refer to the synagogue as the "Jewish Synagogue"? Not likely!

The address from which this paper is adapted was delivered on May 22, 1983, the centennial of "The Reopening of the Touro Synagogue." This occurred on May 25, 1883, 100 years ago almost to the day. The ceremony of the reopening was reenacted on that occasion. The program prepared by Rabbi Mendes did indeed use the phrase "Touro Synagogue" and is the first document that weds that historic designation to our internationally recognized symbol of religious freedom. In fact if this were a court of law, we would submit the program as one of several "exhibits," designated A through G.⁸

Nonetheless, if there is truth to the thesis that we have submitted, let us ask one final question. Do these several exhibits comprise contemporary evidence that confirms the validity of our claim beyond what has already been discussed? The answer is yes:

1. When the synagogue was reopened for services after a suspension of about sixty years for the summer season of 1850, and because the rabbi who officiated at the first service, the Rev. Morris J. Raphall, felt that he had a large enough audience, he offered a series of six lectures. They were given over a two week period on the "Poetry of the Hebrews as Contained in the Sacred Scriptures." Like A. P. Mendes, who followed him years later, he too was English; he too was highly educated; and he too prepared a written "Syllabus". Moreover, he too had to designate the location of the lectures. Anticipating the Mendes dilemma, he too could not designate the building as the "Jewish Synagogue", nor could he call it the "Touro Synagogue", the name ingeniously

applied some thirty-odd years later. He simply states the location as “Synagogue, Newport”. Incidentally, he is described in the visitors’ book of 1850, our source concerning the reopening service of that year, as “lecturer and preacher to the Congregation B’nai Jeshurun New York”. In his written “Sillabus”, however, he identifies himself rather as “*Rabbi Preacher at the Elm Street Synagogue New York*” (underscoring by the author) — a cogent second example of the street-synagogue name connection.*

2. If A.P. Mendes did indeed create the celebrated “Touro Synagogue”, was it an off-hand forgettable impulse or did he sense it to be what it actually turned out to be — an unforgettable phrase? Did he therefore continue to use it thereafter? The answer appears to be “yes”, since several months after the reconsecration service, in a letter inviting military personnel to the high holiday services to be held in the synagogue, he signed the letter:

Yours faithfully
A.P. Mendes
Minister Touro Syn

3. In the visitors’ book, which covers the period 1850 to 1907, we find that there were far more non-Jews than Jews visiting the Synagogue. Even then, the Synagogue, which existed for many years without an organized congregation, had already captured the imagination of people all over the world and certainly before its designation as a national historic site. It was the Jews who appear to have been more emotionally affected. While most visitors merely signed their names, there are several instances scattered throughout the book where emotional persons wrote in more than their names. In the pre-A.P. Mendes period the writers did not refer to the synagogue as the “Jewish Synagogue”, nor as “Touro Synagogue”, since the phrase hadn’t yet been introduced. Rather they used such expressions as “ancient house of God”, “Sacred Edifice”, “Sacred House”, “Ancient Shrine”, “Holy Tempel” (sic), and “Holy Ground.” Further, from time to time there are references in various publications and documents to the “synagogue in Newport”, or the “Newport Synagogue”. Perhaps surprisingly the latter never caught on as a popular designation.

4. Not until the post-A.P. Mendes period in the late 1890s

*Bevis Marks synagogue in London, named for Bevis Marks’ Lane on which it stands, is perhaps the most significant example of this practice. Home of the Spanish and Portuguese Jews Congregations, it influenced architect Peter Harrison’s designs for Touro Synagogue. Ed.

does "Touro Synagogue" appear in the visitors' book. It is likely that it would take time before the name became common usage, which further supports our thesis.

In summary, we believe that through contemporary evidence we have adequately supported the thesis that no one other than the Rev. A.P. Mendes in this tiny Jewish Community had the educational background or the historical perspective to have introduced the name Touro Synagogue, and that in fact he did so.

NOTES

¹In most if not all, Ashkenazic (west European) congregations only the first names are used. However, the last name is used as well as the first, as in English, in some Sephardic (Spanish-Portuguese) congregations.

²The Touro Funds: When Abraham Touro died in 1822, he gave in his will "\$10,000 to the legislature of Rhode Island in special trust" for the purpose of supporting the Jewish Synagogue in Newport together with the municipal authority of Newport." He also willed \$5,000 for the repairing and preservation of the street upon which the synagogue was located. However, this street fund has long since been mingled with the General Funds of the City of Newport.

When Judah Touro died in 1854, he willed \$10,000 to the City of Newport" for "the purpose of paying the salary of a reader or minister to officiate in the Jewish Synagogue at Newport" and also to help repair and embellish the Jewish cemetery in Newport. His will was implemented by an act of the General Assembly in 1879.

Overall, beginning in 1823 and up to 1979, the terms of the original wills were put into effect, their scope enlarged, and major purchases permitted by the enactment of various laws and amendments. So now the funds engendered by the original trusts support not only the synagogue and the colonial cemetery, but also the community building owned by the Congregation Jeshuat Israel. The capital of the funds has increased tremendously, especially the Abraham Touro Fund, into the six figure category and now accounts for as much as one third of the annual budget of Congregation Jeshuat Israel.

The principal source for the above information is the 1969 Reenactment of the General Laws of Rhode Island 1956, Volume 6, and the 1980 Cumulative Pocket Supplement General Laws of Rhode Island 2956, Reenactment of 1969, Volume 6.

³The fourteen oldest congregations in the United States are as follows (with the exception of Congregation Jeshuat Israel in Newport, none are in New England):

<i>Congregation</i>	<i>City</i>	<i>Founding Year</i>
Shearith Israel	New York, NY	1654
Jeshuat Israel	Newport, RI	1658
Mikveh Israel	Savannah, GA	1733
Mikveh Israel	Philadelphia, PA	1740
Beth Elohim	Charleston, SC	1750
Beth Ahabah	Richmond, VA	1789
Rodeph Shalom	Philadelphia, PA	1800
Baltimore Hebrew Congregation	Baltimore, MD	1823
K.K. Bene Israel	Cincinnati, Ohio	1824
B'nai Jeshurun	New York, NY	1828
Touro Synagogue	New Orleans, LA	1828
Adath Israel	Louisville, KY	1836
Sharre Zedek	New York, NY	1837
Beth Emeth	Albany, NY	1838

⁴Unique in the annals of the Jewish Diaspora was the experience of the Newport Colonial Jews. Unlike the Jews of "civilized" Europe, exposed to periodic persecutions and expulsions based upon the religious and political whims of those in power, the Jews left Newport, not for those familiar reasons, but for economic reasons only. What a startling and new privilege! The economic basis of Newport had been destroyed by the British during the War for Independence, leaving the Jewish merchants, who made up virtually the entire Jewish community, no cause to remain. The last of the Colonial Jews left Newport in 1822. However, Jews returned in the latter part of the nineteenth century. This was in sharp contrast to the Jewish experience after, for example, the expulsion from Spain in 1492. Before Jews would come back to Spain in any numbers, approximately three hundred and fifty years would pass. Will Jews ever return to Auschwitz, Belsen, Treblinka, and other sites of the Holocaust horror all over Europe? Time alone will tell. The free atmosphere and reputation of Newport, Rhode Island, on the other hand, was never questioned, and another generation of freedom-loving Jews never hesitated to begin the Newport experience all over again and after an absence of only some fifty-odd years!

⁵There are three categories of reasons why Jews came back to Newport. The first, applying to all those who settled anywhere in America, are not pertinent exclusively to Newport and require no discussion. The second derives from the historical background of the Newport exodus contrasting with the bitter European experience. The fact that the now world-famous Touro Synagogue had survived and was available to Jews from small European *shtetls* (villages) who were used to having a small synagogue nearby to pray in was a plus factor. The good name that the Colonial Jews had willed to posterity was a psychological factor not to be ignored. And for those looking for a religious sanctuary, it could be said that the "Holy *Schechinah*," or Holy Spirit of God, operating through all the above factors and more was still present in Newport.

Ironically, the third category of reasons as to why the first of these later immigrants came to Newport, is the most difficult to determine. Unfortunately, they left no written documentation or oral tradition to be handed down from generation to generation. Their children and grandchildren seem to be completely unaware of the reasons why the first generation came to Newport. Not a single interview has proved fruitful. However, once the process got underway, family attracted family, and friend attracted friend. Even job opportunities in certain lines, such as tailoring, served to attract varying numbers; but, alas, documentation does not exist.

⁶In Colonial Rhode Island there was no such thing as a non-profit charitable corporation, a legal device not created until many decades later. A religious group, therefore, could not legally incorporate *per se*. Instead, individuals would be appointed to act for the group. So it was that three members of Congregation Jeshuat Israel bought land and constructed a synagogue in their own names; but for all practical purposes they acted not for themselves, but for the group. However, no one anticipated the destruction of the City of Newport as a major seaport. More pertinent to our story is the fact that, together with the city, its Jewish community consisting primarily of merchants was also destroyed. Likewise, no one anticipated the legal consequences arising out of the differences between legal ownership and "everyday ownership" or possession of the Synagogue. Thus, when the Seixas family, who had become the last legal heirs to the Synagogue, moved to New York and became members of Congregation Shearith Israel, the latter assumed *de facto* ownership of the synagogue in Newport. Later on, the heirs turned over their legal rights to the trustees of Shearith Israel, who then became the *de jure* owners. In the interim, the new Jewish residents of the City of Newport asked for and received permission to use both the Synagogue and the funds.

⁷It would stretch the imagination to believe that a group of absentee landlords, no matter how conscientious and devoted they might be by virtue of inheritance, would maintain possession of a building in a distant city, invest thousands and thousands of dollars to restore and maintain that building, which was in a state of ruinous disrepair when they first took possession of it, for the possible use of co-religionists who might or might not one day in the distant indefinite future come back to that city and ask for the use of the facility. Indeed, in a letter to Newport, Moses Lopez, the last Jew to leave Newport in 1822, who then became a resident of New York and member of Congregation Shearith Israel, reveals the conservative attitude of that congregation, which had just assumed de facto ownership of the synagogue in Newport, in the following words: "I think they (the work to be done) are inclined to be at more expense than we dare to attempt ourselves if we did the work. . ." Who could fault succeeding generations of heirs from having less and less desire to keep ownership any longer than necessary with the passage of decade after decade, if this is the way they would come to feel? Certainly, what survived would have been less than what we see, had it not been for the Touro Funds, which in the last analysis made New York ownership of the synagogue both possible and desirable.

⁸The exhibits A through G are as follows:

- A. The 1824 resolution of the Newport Town Council renaming Griffin Street Touro Street
- B. A xeroxed copy of Rabbi Raphall's "Sillabus" of 1850
- C. A xeroxed copy of the letter from Congregation Ohabel Shalom requesting the name of Judah Touro's father
- D. Complete text of the letter written by Rabbi A.P. Mendes which he signed as "Minister Touro Syn."
- E. A brief biography of Rabbi A.P. Mendes summarizing his educational and ministerial background
- F. A picture of Touro Synagogue taken between 1868 and 1878 bearing the legend "Jewish Synagogue in Newport"
- G. A copy of the 1883 "Order of Service" for the Reopening of Touro Synagogue reproduced in "The Story of the Jews of Newport" by Rabbi Morris A. Gutstein.

HISTORY AND MYSTERY ON FAREWELL STREET AND WYATT
ROAD — THE JEWISH CEMETERIES OF NEWPORT COUNTY,
RHODE ISLAND

1894-1982

BY BERNARD KUSINITZ, M.A.

The uniqueness of the Newport Jewish community and its world-famous synagogue have been written about, and discussed on radio and television and wherever religious freedom and its symbols have been the topic of conversation. This essay, however, is the story of another facet of religious freedom and the Newport Jewish community — the establishment of consecrated cemeteries. The establishment of a cemetery has much greater significance than one would ordinarily suspect. History, mystery, religious freedom, drama, tragedy, the whole gamut of human experience are there for the readers, but historical perspective is required for full appreciation.

The Newport Jewish community has had a unique history. Most communities, with the passage of time, differ greatly from what they were in their early years. These differences are usually the result of a natural and steady evolution. Not so with the Newport Jewish community.

Few communities have had to make *two* beginnings. The histories of the two Newport Jewish communities are alike in some respects, but differ in others.

The American Revolution and the War for Independence, which ruined Newport as a major commercial seaport, also in the process ruined its Jewish community, which had been an integral part of its commercial life. The War of 1812 finished off the small remnant of the Jewish community, the last Jews leaving shortly thereafter. During the next sixty-odd years there were very few, or no Jews at all in Newport, except for summer visitors and transients. There were some burials of former residents.

For the Colonial Jews the challenge for survival was a philosophic one, because the promise of true religious freedom had not been truly tested. For nineteenth and twentieth century Jews the challenge was primarily an economic one, for the religious issue was already legally if not socially settled.

The Colonial Jews found that in America the right to live as one chose also included the right to die as one chose (an apparent truism not necessarily a fact in all societies at all times). When the second community sought to establish itself, the Touro Synagogue was already in existence, and they obtained the right from the Synagogue's New York trustees to make use of its facilities. Their first move after organizing, therefore, was, *not* to

build a synagogue, but to establish a cemetery. This was essential, for it had apparently already been perceived that the original cemetery at the head of Touro Street was an historic site and in any case not large enough for the new community.

For the Colonial Jews, then, the establishment of a cemetery had a great religious significance, while for the newcomers the religious aspect was no longer an issue. It was primarily a decision based on economic and practical geographic needs.

How did the new community resolve the matter of a new cemetery? There is both history and mystery involved! That generation of Jews generally knew what to do, but their methods at times defied logic. Their propensity to leave few records, or none at all, has greatly complicated our efforts to record their history and to build on their early efforts. What follows represents an attempt to describe their activities in the period from 1895 to the present to establish cemeteries and honor their dead. The climax of the story is the three contemporary cemeteries and burial groups, the origins of which are summarized below. Of necessity, some details will be omitted for the sake of continuity.

The Jewish community in the 1890s consisted of some two dozen permanent families and many more individuals who stayed a year or two or even less. Not all joined the newly formed Congregation Jeshuat Israel in 1894. Nevertheless, the Congregation obtained a charter, received permission to use Touro Synagogue, established a Hebrew School, and then took another step toward settling its roots in Newport on a permanent basis. In 1895 it established a cemetery fund, but did not actually buy a burial ground. So, between 1895 and 1899 two distinct and separate movements to that end were made by the community.

Because not all of the community were members of the Congregation and because the Congregation had not actually made a purchase, a new society, the Goel Zedeick* Society, was incorporated by several members of the community. The group included ex-members, members, and non-members of Congregation Jeshuat Israel and was chartered for "charitable and benevolent purposes". By the end of 1896 they had purchased from the City of Newport six small lots, enough for thirty to thirty-six grave sites, in the city's burying ground on Farewell Street just below Van Zandt Avenue. Some of the lots were then resold to individuals. However, there were only three interments there. Because the Society itself was dissolved in 1923 and because the third and last interment was in 1944, the Newport Jewish community in time had completely erased from memory recollections of the

*Merciful Redeemer

Goel Zedeick Society. Its key members had again become involved in congregation affairs and its cemeteries as well.

The Society and its brief history came to light as a part of the study of Jeshuat Israel and also in relation to research into the cemetery merger movement. An error in one of the deeds complicated the story.

In 1898 the Congregation called a solemn meeting upon the occasion of the death of the wife of an ex-vice president. As recorded in the minutes, it was "necessitated to purchase a burial ground, which it was the sentiment of the entire congregation not to take our dead in a neighboring city for burial." Roots were indeed sunk deep! The Congregation contracted that very day to buy ten lots from the Braman Cemetery Company on Farewell Street, just south of the City burying ground. Two others, were purchased between 1899 and 1905. Together, the lots, each some 197 square feet in area, comprise the original Congregation Jeshuat Israel cemetery, now referred to as Section III, and are located in Section A of the Braman Cemetery. They, along with all the other lots in all sections were of uniform size. Four more lots were purchased later. This area was called Section 2 and is contained in Section II. None of this information is recorded in the Land Evidence Records in City Hall, but can be found wherever the records of the Braman Cemetery Company are stored at any given time.

One of the mysteries concerning the story of Congregation Jeshuat Israel Cemeteries involved the location of the records. A further mystery had to do with the fact that interments were dated *before* the purchase of the involved lots. One of these deserves mention. The son of an ex-member who had been an incorporator of the Goel Zedeick died suddenly in 1896. He was interred, not in the area bought by the latter group later that year, but in the area bought by his former congregation three years later. One wonders how this was arranged. No documents which would indicate any relevant transaction or transactions which would have made this possible have been discovered.

The story of the Congregation Jeshuat Israel Cemetery was revealed through research relating to the later movement, which will be described below.

The community now consisted of many more elements than Congregation Jeshuat Israel alone. Since its cemeteries were reserved for its members, and since the Goel Zedeick area was strictly limited in size and quite possibly restricted to its members, other groups in town felt a need for their own burying ground. This led to the creation of another Jewish cemetery area, located south of that of Congregation Jeshuat Israel, thus becoming another part of the Jewish cemetery system on Farewell Street. It was placed in Section F of the Braman Cemetery system and is now Section II of the Jewish Cemetery system. This complex consists of twenty lots purchased

and resold between 1906 and 1935. The deplorable condition of parts of this area led this writer on behalf of the Congregation Jeshuat Israel and the Jewish Planning Council of Newport to investigate the whole matter of the cemeteries on Farewell Street.

They discovered, for example, that in a few cases perpetual care had been Contracted for at the time of death, but not necessarily performed; in some cases money had been left in wills for that purpose. In other cases fees were collected on an annual basis for services performed. Some families brought in lawnmowers and did the work themselves. But alas, in most cases nothing at all was being done! Consequently, those areas or graves which were being serviced were at a disadvantage because they were surrounded by a majority of plots which were neglected. All in all, it was a deplorable chaotic situation that Jews, proud of their heritage, could not countenance once they were aware of the facts.

These investigations, upon recommendation of the Planning Council, culminated in the creation of the Jewish Cemetery Unification Association, Inc. It acted to create a group that would provide the necessary missing ingredient — a system of uniform perpetual care under the direction of one association for the entire area.

The Planning Council discovered after much confusion and investigation that there were no less than five separate groups involved in Section II, two of which had been defunct or inactive for years. Their areas were vitually abandoned, which was one reason for the deplorable conditions. Thus, Section II, consisted of separate areas owned by the Cheva Kadisha*, since conveyed to the Jewish Cemetery Unification Association, Inc., and one each by Congregation Jeshuat Israel, the Israel J. Josephson Lodge No. 294 of B'rith Abraham, and the City of Newport Lodge No. 255 of B'rith Shalom, the latter two being the ones that were abandoned. It was especially confusing that non-Jewish areas were found, not only on both sides (north and south) of the Jewish areas, but also interspersed among the Jewish areas on the western interior side of the cemetery.

Further inquiries, which were begun by Congregation Jeshuat Israel and continued by the Jewish Planning Council, led to the merger. The problem was compounded by the lack of cooperation of some groups, the fact that the two defunct groups were remembered by only a handful of people, and those who knew about one group did not know about the other. Records were either incomplete, sketchy, or non-existent. Perseverance resulted in the consolidation of the five groups into Section II with complete documentation for the record.

*Sometimes rendered with a hyphen between Chevra and Kadisha. The words are from the Hebrew, meaning "Holy brotherhood."



Views of Farewell Street cemetery showing tombstones with Hebrew inscriptions -- 1977.
Photos by ED CONNELLY

The last Jewish section on Farewell Street to have been created by the Jews of Newport was that one referred to as Section I. Located in Section L of the Braman Cemetery Company, it was purchased mostly, but not exclusively by the members of Congregation Ahavas Achim. However, they acted not in its name, but as individuals. This occurred between 1925 and 1927 with some of the plots being resold as late as 1935. This area consists of eight lots, four of which were bought by individual families and four by sixteen men acting in concert. The latter four were then subdivided into sixteen quarter plots of three gravesites each.

Section I proved to be a researcher's nightmare. To begin with, the Bramans did not use a uniform system in numbering the lots under their jurisdiction. Some went from right to left, others ran from left to right, while still others began in the middle! The sections differed in the number of lots they contained. For example, Section L consisted of sixteen lots of which numbers 5 to 12 comprised the Jewish area. To complicate matters further, the Bramans numbered the sixteen subdivisions of 5 to 12 as 1a through 16a with at least two subdivisions being marked with the small letter "b". Next, they introduced a third system identifying the subdivisions by the name of the buyer or occupant. They then entered the subdivision number plus names on the company's map, using a system that placed the names in the wrong place. A final obstacle was the map itself. It was brownish in color, torn to shreds, and almost illegible. This information is all verifiable and is now available in the records of the new association.

The fences on Farewell Street are a silent reminder of the "greenhorns" of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as those on Kay Street and Bellevue Avenue recall the pioneers of the eighteenth century. Both shelter the mortal remains of generations of Jews, who lived and died as Jews, each in his own fashion. Now a new generation takes up the burden of responsibility.

When the members of Congregations Jeshuat Israel and Ahavas Achim realized that time was taking its toll and that space on Farewell Street was getting ever scarcer, they had the foresight to purchase another burial ground, even though there were (and still are) some plots available at that site. On this occasion, however, they acted together, buying one large area in one transaction, rather than piecemeal as had their forebears. But, alas, this wise transaction has also been veiled in mystery and confusion. What they intended to do and what everyone concerned thought they had done was in fact different from what they actually did. Fortunately, everything appears to have worked out for the best.

On May 19, 1945 eight men, four from Congregation Jeshuat Israel and four from Congregation Ahavis Achim each put up \$1,200 and jointly purchased, for \$9,500 an eight acre estate on Wyatt Road in Middletown,

Rhode Island from Judge and Mrs. Robert Franklin. This land had once been the Agriculture Fair Grounds. Confusion arose many years later as to who actually did what, but the following is the true sequence of events.

When no action had been taken for three years, the eight men urgently requested that the congregations repay their \$9,600 and keep the land for a cemetery. If not, they would sell the land to recover their money. This galvanized the congregations to action. It was decided to form a corporation to operate the proposed cemetery. In short order eight men, seven of whom were from the original group, incorporated as the Jewish Community Cemetery Association of Newport, Inc., on May 26, 1949. The popular name for the organization is the Beth Olam,* the name given to the cemetery itself. One month later the original eight men conveyed the land to the new corporation. In July the new corporation obtained from the Savings Bank of Newport a loan of \$8,000, the amount necessary to finish payment to the original eight. At about the same time Congregation Jeshuat Israel had passed a resolution to do the very same thing. In 1953 the corporation amended its charter to allow it to buy land for a funeral chapel. In the same year it sold slightly less than half of its holdings on Wyatt Road to the Town of Middletown for \$10,000 (a sum higher than the original purchase price for the entire estate), leaving room in the remainder for well over three thousand graves, which the members felt would be sufficient for generations to come.

In 1972 an action was taken by the Beth Olam group which precipitated a debate on the exact nature of the relationship between it and the two congregations. All of the legal transactions described above were carried out directly between eight individuals and the new corporation, not between the eight and the congregations.

The act which precipitated the debate came in the form of an amendment to the corporation's bylaws which stated that anyone becoming a member of either of the two congregations after January 1, 1972 would no longer be entitled to a free grave in Beth Olam, a privilege enjoyed up to that time. The affairs of the cemetery association had been conducted by its cemetery commission, which now reported that the amendment was simply a matter of economic necessity. Because of the high cost of cemetery maintenance, it was economically impossible to allocate graves without charge.

In December of 1972 a joint meeting was held at which all of the parties involved were present. The crucial point at issue was who was the "ultimate authority" in cemetery affairs, the congregations or the Cemetery Association. After reviewing the whole situation from the beginning, it was

*Hebrew for "Everlasting House", euphemism or cemetery.

decided that the Association was indeed an independent corporation, having been structured that way, and could therefore act independently as it saw fit. Congregation Ahavas Achim had already accepted the situation, leaving Jeshuat Israel very little choice.

At the outset there seemed to be no doubt that the "ultimate authority" in cemetery affairs belonged to the congregations which had formed the corporation to take over the land and run the cemetery. Indeed the Association asked for and received financial aid from Congregation Jeshuat Israel to help meet its obligations. In the ensuing years there were regular reports from the Association to the Congregation. However, once its affairs had become stabilized and its plans implemented, committee reports became less and less frequent.

This assumption of ultimate authority was perpetuated in Congregation Jeshuat Israel's financial reports by listing under stocks and bonds a \$5,000 50 per cent interest in the Jewish Cemetery Association of Newport, the other 50 per cent presumably belonging to Congregation Ahavis Achim. There appears to be no legal documentation to support this claim.

Finally, regardless of intent, there is no language in its charter that states that the Association is acting for any group or groups other than itself. In other words, while not realizing it, the congregations legally and actually had set up an independent group which in the course of time began to act without direct control of the congregations. In their complacency they did not realize what they had done. The only legal connection between them and the Association was the fact that the eight men who were to comprise the new commission were to be appointed for life, four from each congregation. When once appointed, the commission members were to act for the benefit of the community as a whole, rather than as parochial representatives with a narrow interest.

Once the confusion was dispelled and the amendment described above was accepted, a harmonious relationship was resumed. The cemetery commission, acting for the Association, continues to act in turn for the community as a whole, carrying out its stated mission efficiently and in cooperation with the city's Jewish burial society, the Chevra Kadisha Society of Newport, Inc.

Burial of the dead has since ancient times been considered by Jews to be an important religious duty. The existence of burial societies dates back according to European sources to approximately the seventeenth century. Whether or not the Jews of Colonial Newport brought such societies with them, they succeeded somehow in handling matters of life and death. The present-day Chevra Kadisha appears to date back to 1913, when its name first appeared in contemporary documents.

Not much is known of the Society in the first decades of its existence. Like other organizations, it had a membership, officers, dues, meetings, and annual dinners. It performed its mission of taking care of the dead in the proper ritual and religious manner, as it has continued to do to the present time.

When in 1921, as described above, the Society decided to go into the "cemetery business", it purchased two lots from the Braman Cemetery Company and in 1935 four more from Brith Abraham. In 1937 it reorganized as the Chevra Kadisha Society of Newport, Rhode Island, Inc. to perform its traditional duties "in accordance with the rites of the Jewish faith". The charter was forfeited in 1944, but the "forfeiture was vacated" in 1951. The biennial report required of non-business corporations was filed in 1978 by the present officers, who have kept up with all legal requirements to the present time.

The current story is yet another example of how in cities like Newport, when new leaders were desperately needed, their older members having been decimated by age, sickness, and death, a new group emerged to assume responsibility for this ancient merciful, but thankless religious obligation. Unlike its earlier brethren who dealt with a homogeneous religious community, the present leadership is faced with a community of multiple beliefs. It continues nevertheless to perform its duties for all in the same spirit of compassion and dignity under Jewish law with the cooperation of the resident clergy.

Through the years, the feeling had gradually developed that a funeral chapel was an absolute necessity. Such a building was needed because there were no facilities other than the homes of the deceased in which to prepare the required rituals. Something more practical, dignified, and humane was needed. To this end the Chevra Kadisha Society in 1947 purchased land on Fowler Avenue in Newport.

It then appointed a committee known as the Jewish Chapel Committee of the City of Newport to raise money and build the chapel. Teams of solicitors canvassed the Jewish community family by family. In 1951 Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Hoffman made a major donation to the Chapel Fund, enabling it to reach its goal. An agreement, therefore, was made to name the chapel "The Hoffman Jewish Memorial Chapel of Newport" in memory of Hoffman's parents. The cornerstone was laid in 1953. The building was completed in 1955, and the dedication took place in 1956.

The Beth Olam had worked very closely with the Chevra Kadisha on the chapel project and, in fact, managed the financial aspects of the construction of the chapel for the Society. As we have seen, in 1953 it amended the

Articles of Association to enable it to assume control of the Chapel. One month later the Chevra Kadisha Society did indeed convey its title to the chapel to the Beth Olam.

For a variety of reasons the composition of the Chevra Kadisha Society changed from a membership organization (reportedly a membership of seventy-five at the time of the construction of the Chapel) to a committee type organization, consisting only of its four officers, its present composition.

Although it has always been the wish of Congregation Jeshuat Israel that all Jewish cemeteries of Newport County be united under one organization, its plans were never implemented. Too many people felt that the situation on Farewell Street was insoluble, and nothing was ever done. The *status quo* remained until the Jewish Planning Council of Newport County undertook a feasibility study. After an exhaustive inquiry, it reported that the situation was not insoluble, even though some individuals had tried to do something on their own, but had failed. As a result, approximately twenty persons from the community at large were called to a special meeting. A unanimous decision to proceed was reached, and thus the Jewish Cemetery Unification Association, Inc. was formed in 1976. Within a few months a viable organization was created, a charter was obtained, and bylaws were written. A carefully worded letter was sent to the entire Jewish community. A goal of \$50,000 was set. Maps were drawn, records were kept, and a filing system was instituted. It was the purpose of the group to provide a uniform system of perpetual care and maintenance within Jewish religious law requirements for all of the Jewish cemeteries on Farewell Street and to consolidate the administration of all cemeteries under one cemetery organization.

The new association's appeal for funds was met with very positive response by the families of the deceased, as well as by both Congregation Jeshuat Israel and the Chevra Kadisha Society. It formulated an agreement with the Congregation to provide the same system of perpetual care as it was providing the individual families, thus relieving the Congregation of this obligation. It received from the Society title to its cemeteries in Section II. It was able to keep all of its promises without delay. It immediately began a program of general restoration and perpetual care. By the end of the first season it had fenced in all of the unfenced sections of the Jewish cemeteries, in keeping with Jewish law. In succeeding years the perpetual care committee instituted special projects in addition to the routine perpetual care. These included such needed projects as setting up of old capsized stones, filling in sunken sites, leveling off of irregular terrain, reseeding where needed, replacing old dilapidated fence sections, and pointing stone fence posts. All of this was accomplished as monies became available.

Although the \$50,000 goal had not been reached at the time of the actual merger, the capital fund was sufficient that the interest earned by it had been adequate to perform all of the required tasks. The result has been that the cemeteries on Farewell Street have been in better condition than ever before and are now acceptable to the Jewish community of Newport County.

A partial list of the names of the dedicated individuals involved from the beginning in 1895 to the present appears in the Appendix. The fund-raising committee for perpetual care for the Jewish Cemetery Unification Association in its successful campaign was headed by Joseph Schmelzer, aided by Dr. Irving Nemtzow, Mrs. Jack Werner, and Bernard Kusnitz.

The final chapter of the story of the Jewish Cemeteries of Newport County climaxed with the merger of the three existing organizations — the Chevra Kadisha Society of Newport, Inc., the Jewish Community Association of Newport, Inc., and the Jewish Cemetery Unification Association, Inc.

The chief obstacle to Congregation Jeshuat Israel's dream of unifying the Jewish cemeteries in Newport County under one organization had been removed. The creation of the Jewish Cemetery Unification Association, Inc., and its goal of removing on a permanent basis the blight and deplorable conditions on Farewell Street had been accomplished through proper organization and dedicated leadership. It was further discovered that, although it had not been planned that way, the same individuals were involved in all three groups. Although the source of each group's membership differed, all of the members of the Chevra Kadisha belonged to the Beth Olam, and in turn all members of Beth Olam had joined the Unification Association. Another fifteen persons, including several women, initially constituted the total membership of the Unification group. The merger created one strong financial structure which could meet the needs of all involved in an efficient manner.

The fear of the older Newport families that in future years there would be no one left sufficiently interested to care for the older cemeteries had been removed.

Once the basic decision to merge had been made informally, the following steps were taken formally in rapid succession beginning in late 1980:

1. Each group officially agreed in principle to a merger.
2. Each group officially agreed that the name of the new association would be the Chevra Kadisha Association of Newport County, Inc., as recommended by a joint meeting of the officers of the three groups.
3. Zalman Newman, Esq. agreed to serve as attorney for the merger, as recommended by a special committee.

4. Bernard Kusinitz was appointed as liaison officer between the groups and the attorney as coordinator of the merger.

5. Title searching and research was conducted by the coordinator, resulting in a dossier of over fifty deeds and documents. These papers collectively document the entire story, including discovery of the Goel Zedeick and its cemetery ground.

6. A list of descendants of those interred on Farewell Street and Wyatt Road has been completed and filed. All but a very few persons have been located and notified of the merger.

7. A dedicated Bylaws Committee has written and unanimously approved a set of bylaws with three objectives in mind:

(a) To provide a framework within which the new association can function with dignity and efficiency.

(b) To create an association that will protect the sanctity of all its cemeteries.

(c) To create an association that can service the entire Jewish population of Newport County within the framework of Jewish law under rabbinic supervision.

In solving some of the problems, both philosophic and organizational inherent in establishing the new organization and in writing the bylaws, the committee received full cooperation of the three resident Rabbis, Theodore Lewis, Ely Katz, and Marc S. Jagolinzer.

8. On Sunday afternoon, January 10, 1982 the three groups met individually to adopt the proposed bylaws, which they did unanimously. These meetings were followed by a widely publicized public meeting in order to allow interested members of the Jewish community to air their views and ask questions.

The final steps in the creation of the new association were its incorporation, the merger of all assets, assuming custody of all abandoned areas, and carrying out of all legal steps necessary to complete the merger. The target date was mid-1982.*

Thus, what the Jews of Newport County began almost ninety years ago has now evolved into a viable unified cemetery and burial association, dedicated to the honoring of its dead in accordance with Judaic principles.

It is hoped that for future generations of Newport Jews there will be less

*The actual filing date of the charter with the Secretary of State of Rhode Island was September 10, 1982.

mystery and more history. The Chevra Kadisha Association of Newport County, Inc. will have made that possible.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OR SOURCES

1. *Primary*

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 Minutes of Congregation Jeshuat Israel, 1949-1962
 Minutes of Joint Meeting of Cemetery Commission of Jewish Community Cemetery Association, Inc. and Congregation Jeshuat Israel, December 28, 1972
 Records of Braman Cemetery Company — Deeds of Farewell Street Cemeteries, 1899-1935
 City Cemetery Book Volume I — re Goel Zedaick, 1896
 The charters of the three involved corporations
Newport Daily News, issue of June 27, 1957
 Land Evidence Office — City of Newport, Such pertinent deeds as were filed
 Newport City Directories, 1878-1900
 Minutes of the Israel J. Josephson Lodge No. 294 of Brith Abraham, 1927-1935
 Records of the Chevra Kadisha Society of Newport, Rhode Island, 1949-1981
 Minutes and records of the Jewish Cemetery Unification Association of Newport Inc., 1976-1981
 Report of the Cemetery Unification Study Committee of the Jewish Planning Council of Newport County, February, 1979

2. *Secondary*

Unpublished manuscripts and notes of work in progress by Bernard Kusinitz on the history of Touro Synagogue and Congregation Jeshua Israel.

APPENDIX

KEY COMMITTEES

1937-1981

1. Membership of the three groups at the time of the merger.

BETH OLAM-Wyatt Road

Benjamin Helfner (Pres)
Ralph Jaffee (Vice-Pres)
Charles Waterman (Secty)
Joseph Schmelzer (Treas)
Abraham Hoffman
Leon Silechnik
Irving Tobak

CHEVRA KADISHA SOCIETY

Leon Silechnik (Pres)
Abraham Hoffman (Vice-Pres)
Benjamin Helfner (Secty)
Joseph Schmelzer (Treas)

UNIFICATION ASS. — Farewell Street

Bernard Kusnitz (Pres)
Dr. Irving Nemtzow (Vice-Pres)
Mrs. Elizabeth Cohen (Secty)
Joseph Schmelzer (Treas)
Mrs. Jack Werner
Mrs. Samuel Gillson
Mrs. Max Meierowitz
Benjamin Helfner
Charles Waterman
Leon Silechnik
Irving Tobak
Oscar Kanarek
Samuel Friedman
Ralph Jaffe

2. Original purchasers of Beth Olam.

Max Adelson
Dr. Samuel Adelson
Samuel Gold
Morris Friedman

Harry Hochman
Hyman Katzman
Abe G. Smith
Charles Tobak

3. First membership and officers of Beth Olam

Nathan Ball (Pres)
John J. Dannin (Vice-Pres)
Max Adelson
Dr. Gerald Feinberg

Samuel Rubin (Secty)
Abe G. Smith (Treas)
Harry Hochman
Charles Tobak

4. Chevra Kadisha Incorporated 1937

Harry Novick
Samuel Nevelson
Everett I. Hess

Morris A. Gutstein
Nathan Ball
Hyman Desotnek

5. Officers of Chevra Kadisha at time of chapel construction

Herman Levin (Pres) - Had just succeeded Harry Hochman
Abraham Hoffman (Vice-Pres)
Samuel Levin (Fin. Secty)

Hyman Katzman (Secty)
Samuel Kravetz (Rec. Secty)

6. Cemetery Unification Study Committee of Jewish Planning Council of Newport County, 1975-1976

Charles Waterman (Chairman)
Samuel Friedman

Dr. Irving Nemtsov
Joseph Schmelzer

Bernard Kusinitz, ex-officio

7. Key committees of the Farewell Street Association which indirectly laid the ground work for the merger:

Fund Raising

Joseph Schmelzer
Dr. Irving Nemtsov
Mrs. Jack Werner
Bernard Kusinitz

Perpetual Care

Joseph Schmelzer
Benjamin Helfner
Abraham Hoffman

Records and Descendants

Mrs. Jack Werner
Mrs. Max Meierowitz
Samuel Friedman
Bernard Kusinitz

Maps and Grave Registration

Benjamin Helfner
Mrs. Jack Werner
Bernard Kusinitz

8. Merger Committee

Zalman Newman, Esq., Attorney
Bernard Kusinitz, Coordinator

Descendants

Mrs. Jack Werner
Ralph Jaffe
Bernard Kusinitz

By-Laws

Dr. Irving Nemtsov
Benjamin Helfner
Leo Silechnik
Ralph Jaffe
Mrs. Elizabeth Cohen
Bernard Kusinitz, ex-officio

Records and Title Searching

Charles Waterman
Bernard Kusinitz

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

BY SEEBERT J. GOLDOWSKY, M.D.

Recent acquisitions in the Library of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association containing items of Rhode Island interest and a listing of these items:

1. *Know Rhode Island*, Facts concerning the Land of Roger Williams. Compiled and distributed by the Office of the Secretary of State, Sixth Edition, State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1936. 64 pages, paperback.
 - Page 31. Photo of Old Stone Mill in Touro Park, Newport.
 - Page 32. Excerpt from Longfellow's poem on the Jewish Cemetery.
 - Page 34. Lists the Jewish Synagogue, the Jewish Cemetery, and Touro Park, in Newport.
2. *Around and About Rhode Island With Children*. A guide to Children's Activities in Rhode Island, written and compiled by Sheila Alexander, Judith Braden, Barbara Feldstein, Ellen Mactas, and Elizabeth Samuels for the benefit of the Jewish Community Center Nursery School, Providence, Rhode Island. Ed. by Elizabeth Kaplan, cover design and illustrations by Jill Thaler, 1979, 114 pages, paperback.
 - Page 12. Entry on Jewish Community Center of Rhode Island.
 - Page 39. Entry on Hasbro Industries toy manufacturers of Pawtucket, R.I.
 - Page 65. Entry on Touro Synagogue, Newport.
 - Page 74. Notes swimming available at Jewish Community Center of R.I.
3. *Highroads and Byroads of Providence*, By John Hutchins Cady. Drawings by Helen Mason Gross. Providence, Rhode Island, The Akerman Standard Press, 1958. 69 pages, paperback.
 - Page 25. Notes Temple Beth-El at Broad and Glenham Streets in Providence.
4. *History of the Jews in America*, by Deborah Pessin. Illustrations by Ruth Gikow. Pub. by the United Synagogue Commission on Jewish Education, New York, 1957.
 - Pages 54-65. Story of the Jews in Colonial Newport.
 - Pages 57, 58, 59, 63, 92, 106. Aaron Lopez mentioned.
 - Pages 56, 100, 105, 106. Roger Williams mentioned.
 - Pages 98, 99. Religious freedom in Rhode Island. Washington's letter to the congregation in Newport.
 - Pages 106, 107. Religious tolerance at Brown University.
 - Page 107. Peter Harrison, architect of Touro Synagogue in Newport.
 - Page 240. Ezra Stiles and the Jews of Newport, and his friendship with Rabbi Isaac Hayyim Karigal, a visiting preacher at the Synagogue.
5. *Half a Century with the Providence Journal*, being a record of the events and associates connected with the past fifty years of the life of Henry R. Davis, secretary of the company. Compiled and issued by The Journal Company, Providence, 1904. 235 pages, hard covers.
 - Opp. Page 88. Photo of John J. Rosenfeld, listed as a former writer and city editor.
6. *The Eternal Light*, by Morton Wishengrad, with a foreword by Louis Finkelstein, President, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America. Crown Publishers New York 1947. Twenty-six radio plays from *The Eternal Light* program. 412 pages, hard covers.
 - Pages 110-121. Dramatic sketch about the Jews of Colonial Newport.

7. *Rhode Island History*, Volume 42, Number 43, August 1983. Publication of the Rhode Island Historical Society.
 Page 88. An article titled "Impoverished Politics. The New Deal's Impact on City Government in Providence, Rhode Island", by David L. Davies (starting on page 87) discusses efforts by the city and state to cope with the destitution produced by the Great Depression. The following item appears involving a prominent Jewish politician: "City politicians also joined in other voluntary schemes to provide for unfortunates. The City Council (Providence) formed a Special Milk Fund Football Committee to oversee a benefit game between Providence College and Rhode Island State College (now U.R.I.) at Brown Stadium. Reporting that tickets were selling well, Sol Bromson, a Republican Alderman from affluent Ward 2, encouraged fans to 'attend the game --- Root for your favorite and thus make sure that the needy and unemployed of Providence will have food and fuel during the dark days of winter.' "
8. *Rhode Island — An Historical Guide*, by Sheila Steinberg and Cathleen McGuigan. Drawings by Barry Moser. Published by Rhode Island Bicentennial Foundation, Providence, R.I. 1976. 284 pages, paperback.
 Pages 183, 216-218. Historical background and description of Touro Synagogue, Newport.
 Page 219. Jewish Cemetery in Newport. Brief description.
 Pages 68, 186, 189, 216, 217, 219. Mention of Jews in several communities in Rhode Island.
9. *Rhode Island Folklore Resources*. American Folklore Center, prepared by Peter T. Bartis, with the assistance of the Rhode Island Folklife Project in cooperation with the Rhode Island Heritage Commission, The Rhode Island Council for the Arts, and the Rhode Island Historical Society. The American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 1983. 63 pages, paperback.
 Page 40. Listing of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association describes the Association and lists its activities and holdings.
10. *Guide To Jewish Archives*, Ed. by Aryeh Segall, World Council on Jewish Archives, Jerusalem, New York, 1981.
 Pages 60-61. Listing of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association. Describes the Association and lists its activities and holdings.
11. *American Jewish History*. Published quarterly by the American Jewish Historical Society. Vol. 72, No. 2, December 1982.
 Page 261. Lists "Population and Redistribution Among American Jews", by Sidney Goldstein of Brown University, in *The Jewish Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 24, No. 1, June 1982. Study indicates greater residential dispersion among Jews, perhaps a greater challenge to the organized Jewish community than intermarriage or low fertility.
12. *Idem*. Vol. 72, No. 3, March 1983.
 Pages 293-305. "The Coordinated use of Data Sources in Research on the Demographic Characteristics and Behavior of Jewish Immigrants to the United States," by Alice Goldstein of Brown University, mentions Providence, R.I. on pp. 305-306.
 Pages 369-394. "Beyond New York: The Occupation of Russian Jewish Immigrants in Providence, R.I. and in Other Small Jewish Communities, 1900-1915, by Joel Perlmann. He states: "The Providence occupational pattern is especially important because it refines, or places in a wider context, the common generalization concerning the economic adjustment of grants to the United States."

13. *American Jewish Year Book* 1982. Volume 82. Editors Milton Himmelfarb and David Singer. Published by the American Jewish Committee, New York, and The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia. 453 pages, hardcovers.
pages 3-98. "A Century of Jewish History, 1881-1981: The View from America", by Lucy S. Dawidowic. page 13: mentions the George Washington letter read in Newport, R.I. in 1790.
Page 60. A listing of the *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*.
14. *Idem* 1983. Volume 83. Same editors and publishers.
page 131. Gives the estimated Jewish population of Rhode Island as 22,000, or 2.3 per cent of 953,000.
Page 350. A listing of *The Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*.

RHODE ISLAND JEWISH HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION
TWENTY-NINTH ANNUAL MEETING

May 1, 1983

The Twenty-ninth Annual Meeting of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association was convened at 2:45 P.M. on Sunday, May 1, 1983 by the president, Dr. Seebert J. Goldowsky. It was moved, seconded and passed that the reading of the minutes of the twenty-eighth annual meeting of April 25, 1982 and the intermin meeting of February 13, 1983 be waived. The treasurer, Bertha Kasper, presented a report for the year 1982 as follows: income \$10,851.87; expenditures \$9,659.58. Balance on hand as of December 21, 1982: Fleet National Bank NOW account \$5,553.81; Fidelity Cash Reserves account \$4,000.00; total \$9,553.81.

Louis I. Sweet, budget chairman, then presented his report. He projected a balanced budget for the year at \$9,000. As a result of a successful membership campaign, the Association exceeded its goal of 500 members, reaching 515. It is hoped that a new goal of 600 will be attained. Membership chairman, Melvin L. Zurier, read his report, listing new members, including life members.

Eleanor Horvitz, librarian, explained the historical exhibit set up for the meeting. She also enumerated the kinds of material acquired during the past year.

Professor Albert C. Salzberg, editor of the *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*, reported a delay in the publication of the current issue. He noted that the issue will include an index for the completed volume 8. It will contain papers on the Jewish Community Center, the Providence Hebrew Day School, and the concluding installment of Rabbi William G. Braude's memoir.

Dr. Goldowsky advised of a change in the bylaws passed at the midwinter meeting of the Association, whereby all past presidents would be life-time active members of the Executive Committee, while the number of members-at-large would remain at twelve to serve rotating two-year terms. He called upon Jerome B. Spunt, chairman of both the bylaws and nominating committees, who reviewed the change in the process of electing the Executive Committee, whereby a nominating committee would present a complete slate, including at-large members of the Executive Committee, which would be elected at the annual meeting. The slate for election for the ensuing year was then read. Five present members of the Executive Committee would be re-elected for one year. Three present members and two new members were then nominated to the Executive Committee to serve