

THE JEWS  
IN  
RHODE ISLAND

*A Brief History*

By

GERALDINE S. FOSTER



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Cover photo: Tablets of the Law at Temple Emanuel, Providence.  
*Courtesy of David Levitt.*

## EDITOR'S FOREWORD

In 1975 and 1976, on the eve of the bicentennial observance, in my capacity as chairman of Rhode Island's celebration (ri76), I established eighteen ethnic heritage committees, consisting of recognized leaders of this state's major ethnocultural groups. One purpose of this move was to involve in bicentennial activities those ethnic communities whose contact with this country did not extend as far back as the Revolutionary era. I urged such groups to observe and commemorate the contributions they had made to the American and Rhode Island experience from the time of their arrival down to the bicentennial year. A much more important reason for establishing the ethnic heritage program, however, was to allow each group to present its unique contributions, customs, and folkways to its neighbors from other cultural backgrounds. Formulated under the premise that knowledge promotes understanding and understanding begets brotherhood, the program was designed to break down the ethnocentric barriers and antagonisms that hindered us from achieving that lofty motto and goal—*E pluribus unum*, one out of many.

The one task assigned to each group upon its formation was to write a brief interpretive account of its Rhode Island experience—its motives for migration, areas of settlement, cultural survivals, and economic, political, and social activities—together with an assessment of its contribution to the development of our state. Though some efforts are more sociological, subjective, anecdotal, or selective than the neat, precise historical narrative that I envisioned, each of these pamphlets in its own way makes a valuable statement to all Rhode Islanders and provides a useful self-evaluation for the group that is the subject of analysis.

After the bicentennial's expiration, the concept of an ethnic heritage pamphlet series was kept alive by the Rhode Island Heritage Commission and its tireless chairman, Robert J. McKenna. Albert T. Klyberg of the Rhode Island Historical Society, Dr. Hilliard Beller of the Rhode Island Publications Society, and, especially, the authors of the various essays have also labored to bring this project to fruition as their contribution to the 350th anniversary of the founding of the state. No historical enterprise could be more appropriate for this 1986 celebration than a recounting of the toil and the triumph of our diverse peoples: From American Indians to Southeast Asians, we are Rhode Islanders all!

Patrick T. Conley

## PREFACE

In 1954 the American Jewish community marked the tercentenary of the coming of the first Jews to America. The celebration commemorated the arrival in September 1654 of twenty-three Portuguese Jews to the port of New Amsterdam. Their welcome to America was not very cordial, but they were finally permitted to stay and settle there—with certain restrictions. Thus began the history of the Jews in America.

Four years later, two Portuguese Jews arrived in Newport, and with their arrival begins the history of the Jews in Rhode Island.

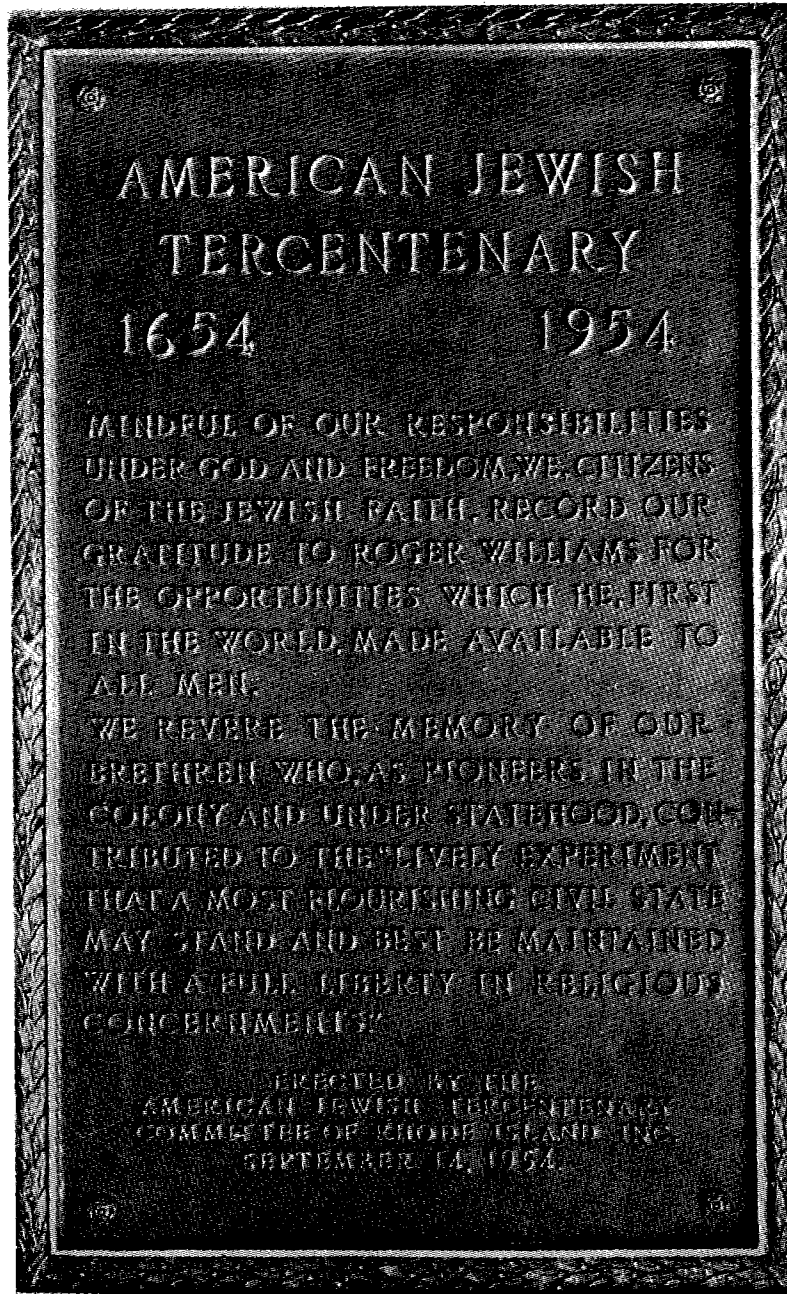
Rhode Island's Jewish population can trace its origins to many lands, where its forebears had lived for generations and where they had developed their own cultural characteristics and customs. Yet, whatever the differences, they all held in common the Torah, a holy language (Hebrew), the Covenant, a sense of community, and a tradition reaching back more than five thousand years.

How they came, how they lived, how "they" have become the "we" who are an integral part of Rhode Island—it is to these questions that this brief history is addressed.

I would like to thank those who shared the fruits of their research and writing with me: Alice Goldstein, population studies; Marilyn Kaplan, colonial Newport; Eleanor Horvitz, the North End and South Providence; Bernard Kusnitz, Newport; Rebecca Twersky, West Warwick; Ella Soloveitzik, Westerly; Arline Suzman, Bristol; and Bartholomew Schiavo, Jewish immigrant employment. To everyone who took the time to talk to me, I extend my gratitude. I also wish to express my appreciation to Dr. Seebert Goldowsky for his help and trust.

Mention must also be made of the contribution of David Adelman and of my father, Beryl Segal, both of blessed memory. For them, the preservation of the history of the Jews of Rhode Island was truly a labor of love, reflected in their writings and accomplishments in this field. It was my father's memory that provided a constant source of inspiration.

Geraldine S. Foster



*Bronze plaque at the Rhode Island State House*

## NEWPORT: THE EARLY YEARS

The colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations was home for many people whose religious beliefs were unacceptable in other colonies. Its 1663 charter gave Rhode Island the freedom "to hold forth a lively experiment, that a flourishing and civil state may stand . . . with a full liberty in religious commitments." No person was to be "molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question, for any difference in opinion in matters of religion." It is not surprising that the site of the "lively experiment" was also the site of the second Jewish community to be established in the American colonies.

The first documentary evidence of this settlement is a deed dated February 1678, which records that Nathaniel Dickins of Newport "sold . . . unto Mordecai Campanall and Moses Pacheckos, Jews, and to their nation, society, or friends a peice [*sic*] of land for a burial place." By 1684 a small group of Jews from the island of Barbados was conducting business in colonial Newport. Very little is known about this community. We do know that in 1684 the Jewish businessmen requested, and received, formal recognition of their right to do business as aliens. In 1685 these same Jewish aliens were tried for violation of the Navigation Act of 1660. Although they were acquitted, this experience must have frightened them. Within a year the small community began to disband, with most of the tradesmen probably returning to their homes in Barbados.

There is some scattered evidence that another small group of Jews came to Newport in the 1690s. Perhaps it was their presence that motivated the residents of Newport to name a thoroughfare Jews Street.

In the seventeenth century there were only limited opportunities for enterprising merchants in Rhode Island.

However, this situation changed dramatically in the eighteenth century as the West Indian trade began to expand and flourish. During King George's War with France (1744-1748), Newport became a center for privateering activity. The economy continued to thrive after the war and received another stimulus with the outbreak of the French and Indian War in 1754.

These new opportunities attracted the interest of a group of Jewish businessmen in New York. At least nine Jewish merchants moved to Newport in the 1740s. Initially they all retained their legal residences in New York and their memberships in the New York Sephardic congregation, Shearith Israel, because they were reluctant to commit themselves completely to this exploratory business venture. Within ten years, however, they were sufficiently established to drop their New York residences and synagogue memberships. By the 1750s the success of the initial Jewish businessmen seemed assured, and soon they were joined by a few more traders from the Shearith Israel congregation.

The prosperous Newport economy began to decline in the 1760s as the British acted to enforce trade restrictions. Rhode Island merchants were unable to obtain the hard cash needed to purchase essential manufactured goods from England. Among the merchants petitioning for insolvency in 1764 was Myer Benjamin, the only Jew to declare bankruptcy during that difficult period. All of the other Jewish merchants managed to survive financially, and some became quite successful. After Benjamin failed in business, members of the Jewish community rallied to his support and, in accordance with the traditional concern of Jews for the needy in their own community, found him employment as a *shammos* (Hebrew; a sexton) and *shochet* (a ritual slaughterer) of the new synagogue.\*

The Jewish population of Newport reached its peak and remained stable during the first half of the 1770s. At this time about 25 percent of the Jews in the colonies were living in New England, with virtually all of New England's Jews settled in Newport. The twenty-five to thirty Jewish families there constituted about 2 percent of Newport's total population, but about 10 percent of Newport's substantial merchants.

By 1775 war with England was imminent, and Newport was threatened commercially. Few Jewish merchants continued

\*Unless otherwise noted, italicized non-English words are Hebrew.

to prosper at that time, and several of them had either petitioned for insolvency or had spent time in debtors' prison. Only four of the twenty-seven Jewish merchants on the combined tax list paid rates over £5. Of these four only one, Aaron Lopez, was taxed at a rate that indicated true prosperity. Lopez paid £329.18, the highest tax rate in Newport.

Aaron Lopez was undoubtedly the most successful of all the Jewish merchants in Newport. Within a few years of his arrival from Portugal in 1752, he built a small local business into a large retail and wholesale trade that reached throughout the colonies and abroad. His courage and ingenuity, combined with the patience and fortitude of his creditors, helped him to become the outstanding merchant-shipper in Newport. His industrial interests included fishing, whaling, candlemaking, and shipbuilding, as well as the manufacture of rum. He and his father-in-law, Jacob Rodrigues Rivera, were also engaged in the slave trade, an activity that was highly developed before any of the eighteenth-century Jewish settlers arrived in Rhode Island. Most Americans were indifferent to the moral implications of slavery and the slave trade. Jewish merchants, like their non-Jewish counterparts, saw the slave as merchandise and a commodity to be traded. Thus, undisturbed by any moral issues, Lopez and Rodrigues continued to underwrite about two African voyages each year until 1776.

The secret of Aaron Lopez's enormous success was the diversity of his activities. Though becoming more involved in the West Indies and transatlantic trade, he continued to pursue the coastal trade. His specialty was not whaling or candles or Caribbean traffic or transoceanic commerce, but business in general. As an industrialist as well as a shipper, his interests were sufficiently diversified so that a setback in one quarter did not mean complete failure.

However, by 1775 it had become difficult for even Lopez to continue to do business in Newport. The British fleet was moored in Newport harbor. Trade was devastated and evacuation of the city had already begun. The following year, as the British occupation became imminent, Lopez moved his business a number of times: first to nearby Portsmouth, then to Providence, to Boston, and finally inland to the safe haven of Leicester, Massachusetts. The Lopez family was joined in Leicester by the families of Jacob Rodrigues Rivera and

Abraham Mendes. Lopez set up a shop in Leicester and did some shipping from Salem and Boston. Although his losses were large, he persevered in business throughout the war. Had he not accidentally drowned in 1782, he undoubtedly would have returned to Newport and attempted to rebuild his trading empire.

When Aaron Lopez died, his obituary in the Leicester newspaper praised his hospitality and benevolence and characterized him as "an ornament and a valuable pillar in the Jewish society of which he was a member." Indeed, even in the relative isolation of Leicester, which had no synagogue, Lopez and Rivera continued their adherence to Jewish practice and worship. They closed their shops on Saturday in observance of the Sabbath, and on Sundays out of deference to their Christian neighbors.

Community records of colonial Newport Jews are few, and the only evidence available of their institutional life deals with the synagogue and the cemetery. We know that as the original Jewish residents broke their ties with the Shearith Israel congregation in New York, they organized their own congregation, originally named Nephuse Israel (Scattered Ones of Israel), which by 1754 had begun to meet in private quarters. Within five years the members had raised enough money to lay the cornerstone for a new synagogue.

A visiting English clergyman, totally misunderstanding the importance of a religious education to the Jewish community, observed the new structure and commented: "This building was designed . . . by a Mr. Peter Harrison, an ingenious English gentleman who lives here. It will be extremely elegant within when completed; but the outside is totally spoilt by a school, which the Jews insisted on having annexed to it for the education of their children. . . ."

With the assistance of gifts from congregations in New York, London, Jamaica, Curaçao, and Surinam, the synagogue was completed in 1763 at a cost of two thousand pounds sterling. Congregation Yeshuat Israel (Salvation of Israel) proudly dedicated its new building but soon found itself forced to make a new appeal for help to its supporters in other congregations. The appeals were answered and debts paid. In turn, the Jewish community of Newport responded to similar requests from around the world and also provided charity to transient Jews, who were entertained and sent on to the next

Jewish community. Particularly in the 1770s, there is evidence of several Polish rabbis who stayed in Newport as guests for four to eight weeks before moving on to the West Indies.

There were no rabbis in colonial America. The actual officiants were *bazzanim* (cantors, or readers), who had some training but were neither ordained nor certified. They usually had the additional responsibility of supervising the community observance of *kasbrut*, the laws of ritual purity pertaining to food. From 1759 until the Revolution, the full-time *bazzan* in Newport was Isaac Touro, a native-born Hollander.

In Newport, as elsewhere in the colonies, the Jews established their own small community within the larger community. The synagogue was the heart of Jewish life and governed all communal concerns, including circumcision, marriage, religious education, religious services, social-welfare services, and burial. The Jews of Newport also established their own social club, the Newport Jewish Club, which met every Wednesday during the winter months. Benjamin Meyers, who was also *shammos* of the synagogue, served as the club's steward. During their slack business season the Jewish businessmen gathered there for a weekly card game and supper. According to the organization's bylaws, members were not permitted to discuss synagogue business at these meetings.

The cohesive Jewish community disintegrated with the coming of the Revolution. The few Jewish merchants who returned to Newport after the war were faced with the complete destruction of Long Wharf, most of their warehouses and stores, and the major portion of Newport's merchant fleet. The seaport's postwar recovery problems were aggravated by increasing competition from Providence merchants. While Newport was suffering from the British occupation, Providence merchants were able to solidify their control of Rhode Island commerce, and Newport was relegated to a secondary economic position. Gradually the remaining Jews drifted off to New York, Boston, and Charleston, South Carolina, in search of new opportunities. On October 5, 1822, Stephen Gould, a prominent resident of Newport, made this entry in his diary: "Moses Lopez, the last Jew, left Newport for New York."

The key to the synagogue was entrusted to the Gould family, who were Christians, and Congregation Shearith Israel in New York received title to the building and its religious objects. Only the empty structure and neglected cemetery

remained as a testament to the small but vital community that once flourished there. Contributions and bequests from Isaac Touro's sons, Abraham and Judah, saved the two landmarks from ruin. Judah Touro also left in the care of the Newport Town Council a sum of money to pay the salary of "a Reader or Minister to officiate in the Jewish Synagogue of Newport, Rhode Island, and to endow the Ministry of the same." The synagogue and cemetery and the Touro Funds awaited the rebirth of a Jewish community in Newport.

## THE PROVIDENCE COMMUNITIES

Shortly after the last Jews had left Newport, a new settlement began in Providence. Although there is some evidence to suggest earlier Jewish residents, the distinction of being the first Jewish settler in Providence has been accorded to Solomon Pareira, a native of Holland, who moved here with his wife in 1838. Pareira, a clothing merchant, conducted his business from a succession of locations as he attempted to find a place for himself within the business community. A few others, for the most part single men, began arriving one by one. By 1850 eight Jewish families had joined the Pareiras. They had come as part of a stream of immigrants fleeing the revolutions wracking western Europe.

In Providence they found a thriving seaport. The Providence River, the commercial heart of this growing city, was filled with sailing vessels of every description. Steamboats plied between Providence, Fall River, Stonington, New London, and New York, while eight railroads provided overland connections with the rest of the country. It was an ideal place for shopkeepers to establish themselves. The riverfront ran along Dyer Street and Washington Row and around Exchange Place, forming Weybosset Neck. It was here that the first Jewish settlers lived and conducted their businesses. Like Pareira, all but one of the new arrivals were engaged in the clothing trade, either as merchants of "ready-made" and second-hand clothes or as tailors. Advertisements in the *Providence Journal* attest to the vigor with which they entered into the commercial life of the city.

Although few in number, the early settlers laid the foundation of the Jewish community in Providence. With Solomon Pareira as prime mover, land on New London

Turnpike was acquired in 1849 for use as a cemetery. A *minyan* (a quorum of ten men required for a daily prayer service) met regularly at his home, perhaps as early as 1844. This *minyan* gave rise to the first congregation in Providence, Congregation Sons of Israel, which received its charter from the Rhode Island General Assembly in May 1855. Pareira served as the first president.

In the next two decades the Jewish population of Providence began to increase. At the close of the Civil War there were eighteen households; by 1870 there were fifty-six. Most of these settlers came from Germany. They had left their homeland to escape the restrictive, discriminatory policies of the militaristic government recently returned to power. New laws drastically curtailed the number and kinds of occupations available to Jews and also deprived them of many of their civil liberties. The government had gone so far as to establish a quota for the number of marriages permitted between Jews. And so the young people, their futures bleak and limited, turned their backs on their homeland and crossed the Atlantic to find freedom and opportunity in America.

Almost all of these new arrivals, like the original settlers, became merchants of various kinds, resuming the occupations they had pursued in the old country. Their businesses, primarily associated with clothing or dry goods, were small, often marginal, and therefore easily affected by the frequent financial panics of the times. Also, these immigrant merchants



One of the first Jews to be naturalized in Providence was Louis Lewissan. This advertisement for Lewissan's clothing business appeared in the Providence City Tax Book in 1852. Photo courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society, RHi X3 5270.

had to compete with the older, established firms as well as with one another, so they changed their business addresses frequently, advertised vigorously, and generally struggled to earn a living. In time, some became very successful retailers. In addition to merchants, the newcomers included a hairdresser, a cigar manufacturer, a bookkeeper, a cap manufacturer, and two grocers.

By 1877 the Jewish population of the Providence-Pawtucket area had almost tripled. Of this number, most still came from western Europe, particularly Germany, but there were now a significant number of Jews migrating from eastern Europe. The majority were merchants of various kinds—from peddlers to owners of major businesses—but one could also find a physician, an optometrist, a butcher, an advertising agent, and a librarian.

The newcomers were keenly aware of their status as foreigners; indeed, they regarded themselves as "on trial." Since they wanted very much to become Americanized, they studied English with a will and sought to acquire those manners and customs that would make them appear more like their American neighbors. In addition to an appreciation of social amenities, the German Jews had a genius for communal systems; by tradition they were organizers and joiners. In the decade of the 1870s they added another dimension to the fledgling Jewish community, as the newcomers zealously occupied themselves in fraternal endeavors and in charitable deeds.

Two new congregations received charters from the State of Rhode Island: Sons of David (1871), which merged in 1874 with Sons of Israel to form the Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David; and Sons of Zion (1875), which served the growing Jewish community in the North End of Providence. Three new fraternal lodges were organized: Haggai Lodge, Independent Order of B'nai Brith (1869); Redwood Lodge, Ancient Free and Accepted Masons (1877); and Montefiore Lodge Ladies' Hebrew Benevolent Association (1877). All three were centered within the Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David, with which most of the German and western European Jews were affiliated.

In July of 1877 a call was issued for a "Convention of Israelites." Every Jewish man in Providence and Pawtucket received a circular inviting him to attend this first mass



meeting of its kind. As its primary purpose, the convention sought to revitalize the Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David, whose fortunes had reached a low ebb, and to change its orientation from Orthodox to Moderate Reform Judaism. It succeeded. This meeting may be considered a turning point in the life of the community because it brought together the Jews of the city in common purpose and laid the basis for community action.

The desire "to unite the Israelites of Providence more closely," as expressed in the announcement of the meeting, also led to the formation of the Redwood Lodge by the men of the congregation. The women, through the efforts of the newly engaged rabbi, organized the Montefiore Lodge Ladies' Benevolent Association. Named for the noted Jewish philanthropist Sir Moses Montefiore, the lodge was the first Jewish charitable association in Providence, as well as the first Jewish women's society. Affiliation with the congregation was not a prerequisite to membership in the lodge; good moral character and good health were.

The Montefiore Ladies took their responsibilities very seriously. Members who refused to hold office or were derelict in their attendance received fines. Committees oversaw the dispensing of relief to those in distress; they aided needy transients, distributed a Matzah Fund (money for the poor to purchase *matzah*—the unleavened bread—and other special food for the eight days of Passover), secured medical help for the needy, rehabilitated families of immigrants, and worked with parole officers. The women also volunteered to serve as homemakers for ailing mothers. The lodge regularly sent contributions to the district nurse association, to orphanages, and to other charities in Rhode Island, and its officers often acted as a liaison between Jewish and non-Jewish organizations in similar or allied fields of social welfare.

The association became the focus not only of the charitable activities of its members but of their social activities as well. There were meetings and holiday celebrations, and there were balls and dinners and cake sales to raise money for the association's projects. One social yielded the princely sum of eighty-one cents; the next event proved more successful financially.

The members also came together to sew aprons for an apron sale or to mend usable clothing they had collected for

distribution to the poor. Their daughters over the age of fifteen were encouraged to "assist in this noble work," "to appoint an afternoon to meet socially," and from time to time to prepare and present "entertainments," presumably for the meetings and fund-raising activities. In its operations, the Montefiore Lodge Ladies' Benevolent Association set a pattern for later organizations dedicated to mutual aid and community service.

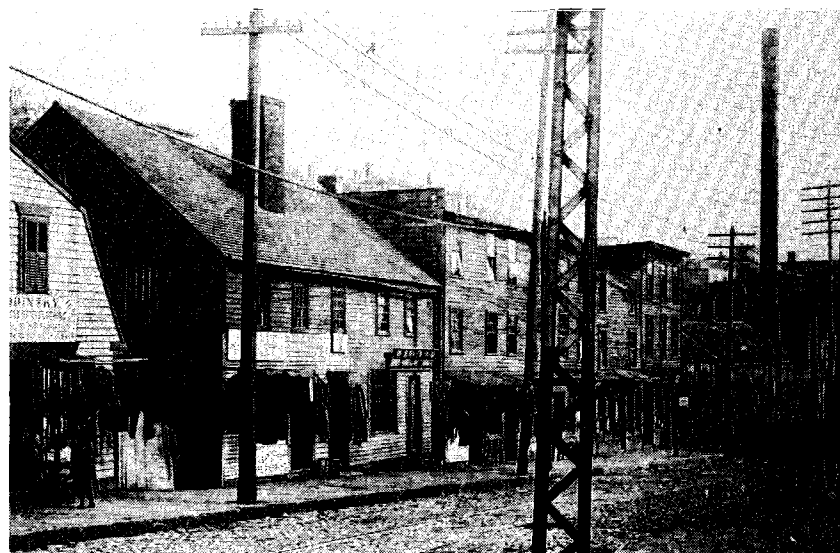
Significant growth of the Jewish community began after 1880 as more immigrants began to arrive in the city. Between 1885 and 1895 the number of Jewish families increased from 250 to 992. By 1900 it had reached 1,607. Unlike the previous immigrants, these newcomers came mainly from eastern Europe: Russia, Russian Poland, Roumania, and Austria, countries where Jews had lived for centuries.

In Russia, after a flirtation with liberalism, Czar Alexander II had become increasingly influenced by Pan-Slavism, a chauvinistic system of philosophy and belief that tolerated only those characteristics it considered "authentically Russian." His assassination in 1881 played into the hands of those espousing this ultranationalism. The new czar, fearful of revolutionaries, agreed to a far-reaching campaign of Russification intended to stamp out "western decadence." For the Jews of Russia and the Pale of Settlement (an area stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea controlled by the czarist government), this spirit of Pan-Slavism brought pogroms and harshly restrictive laws. Educational opportunities, the professions, and so-called "respectable trades" were all but denied to Jews by a system of strict quotas.

In Roumania the old and sizable Jewish community lived under constant threat, as here, too, unbridled nationalism swept the country. It was a nationalism mixed with xenophobia, a bitter distrust of anyone not considered Latin, i.e., not descended from the early Roman settlers of Dacia.

Beginning in 1880, the year when conditions worsened considerably, the Jews of eastern Europe left the townlets and cities in increasing numbers, bringing with them their vibrant culture, their Yiddish language, and their hopes for the future. Frequently one member of a family came to this country to establish himself/herself and to begin to earn a living. From each pay envelope money would be diligently saved and sent to the old country to support destitute relatives and eventually to bring them here.

With greater numbers came greater occupational diversity among the early Jewish immigrants. By the end of the century there were still a large number of merchants and tailors, but peddlers had become increasingly numerous. Unlike setting up a shop, peddling required little or no capital at the outset, and it called upon no special occupational skills. However, many of the immigrants from eastern Europe did possess skills and experience that allowed them to function in a modern industrial economy like that of the Providence-Pawtucket area. Included among the new immigrants were laborers, factory workers, jewelers, and metalworkers, as well as two lawyers, five physicians, four musicians, seven rabbis, fourteen teachers, and a bartender. Jews could now be found throughout the occupational structure. As they became acclimated to their new home and their new surroundings, they began to look for ways in which, with little capital, some skills, and a willingness to take risks, they could find opportunities to advance themselves.



*Jewish shops on lower Charles Street, Providence, circa 1895; P. Weinberg, tailor (no. 87); Philip Goldstein, shoemaker (no. 89); Morris Effros, variety store (no. 91); Samuel Hayman, painter (no. 93); Louis Rodinsky, clothing (nos. 99 and 105); and Reuben Volpe, clothing (no. 103). Photo courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society, RHi X3 4006.*

When the first wave of immigrants from eastern Europe arrived in Providence in the 1880s, they gravitated to the part of the city known as the North End. The already-established

German Jews had moved away from the downtown area to the neighborhoods of the South Side. In the North End the newcomers first congregated in a section of tenements and small shops in the vicinity of Charles Street. With new influxes of immigrants, the area of settlement expanded along Orms Street, Chalkstone Avenue, and Shawmut Street, as well as over to North Main Street. The North End seemed particularly attractive because it had already developed the nucleus of a Yiddish-speaking community. There was an established Orthodox synagogue to fulfill the immigrants' spiritual needs, and a number of Jews from eastern Europe, the pioneers of the previous decade, were already living and doing business in that section of the city.

By the turn of the century, Chalkstone Avenue and Shawmut Street had become the hub of this bustling business and residential area. Homes and shops coexisted in the same block, in the same tenement house. It was a busy and congested place. Particularly on Thursday nights, when the women began their preparations for the Sabbath, throngs of shoppers streamed in and out of the shops and gathered around the pushcarts and horse-drawn wagons, while the peddlers hawked their wares. As one woman recalled the scene:

So much activity going on on Chalkstone Avenue and Shawmut Street, starting on a Thursday or before a Jewish holiday—pushcarts, people buying chickens right off the wagon, and taking them in to the Shochet. For three cents he would slaughter the chicken and for another nickel would “flick” the chicken. And, of course, there were the baker shops. There was Kessler’s Bakery Shop and the people would knead their own *challah* [Sabbath bread] and Kessler and the Lorbers who also had a bakery shop would allow the Jewish women to come in with their *challah* and bake it so they would have it for the *Shabbos* [Sabbath]. At the corner of Shawmut Street and Chalkstone Avenue there was . . . a sort of delicatessen store. They also had a side window, and I remember as a youngster, my mother would send me with a pitcher, and you would either buy for two cents plain or he would put some syrup in for a nickel and fill up the pitcher—so-called soda. People would sell all sorts of things, and even fish, out of pushcarts. . . . On a Thursday all day until night the pushcarts would be lined up, one behind the other. The women would shop. They would buy their vegetables that way. (*Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*, November 1979.)

As they became more acclimated to America, the North End Jews moved, either out along Goddard Street and beyond into the northern area of Providence or into the section known

as the Lower East Side. By 1904 a group that included former North End residents had established Congregation Ahavath Shalom, better known as the Howell Street *Shul* (Yiddish; a synagogue), to serve those who had moved across North Main Street to Pratt and Benefit streets and over to Doyle Avenue. Constitution Hill, with its jumble of some sixty stores, served as their shopping area.

In one section of her 1910 study "Jewish Life in Providence" (reprinted in *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*, November 1970), Dr. Bessie Bloom Wessel discussed the residents of Pratt Street and their outward, upward mobility.

Pratt Street was taken to be a characteristic district for investigation, because of its immediate proximity to North Main Street, and because it presents such direct proof of the rise of the Jew and betterment of Jewish conditions. The homes here are all of the most modern pattern, well built and offering all conveniences. The tenements consist usually of five, six or seven rooms, and the rent ranges from \$16.00 to \$24.00 a month, frequently higher. Investigating conditions in one block, we found nine storekeepers (the stores are usually large and not in the immediate vicinity), three peddlers, and three jewelers. Most likely the storekeepers were peddlers in the early days of their lives here. The people living here have been in this country anywhere from thirteen to twenty-five years. One or two of the families in this district are living on less than \$25.00 a week, many on more than this and some on twice this amount. Pratt Street is by no means a small district of the aristocracy or the elite of the Jewry here. There are many families living on a similar scale along Benefit Street and the adjoining streets, and up toward Doyle Avenue.

But Jews were not a totally welcome addition to the Lower East Side neighborhood, according to an essay by a professor at Brown University published in 1909.

A large part of the population along North Main Street and in the cross streets between North Main and Camp is Jewish, and they have lately acquired a firm foothold among the fine old residences at the north end of Benefit Street. There is undoubtedly a strong social prejudice against them: their advent in a neighborhood almost invariably depreciates the value of the real estate, and is followed by the withdrawal of the non-Jewish population.

Whatever the accuracy of this statement, Dr. Wessel's study and comments and recollections contained in oral histories leave no doubt that this movement outward did evoke a certain amount of hostility.

Fox Point was another area of Jewish settlement.

Consisting mainly of families whose businesses were located among South Main Street, this Jewish enclave remained a small community. There were also a number of Jews in the Olneyville area, and they formed their own association, Anshe Olneyville (1910), to serve those who worked and lived there.

Rivaling the North End as a major center of Jewish life in the city was South Providence. Although it never attained the population size of the older section, it developed a vitality and sense of community that left a lasting impact.

Willard Avenue and the dirt lanes extending from it formed the heart of this early settlement. Wooden houses, with four to six flats and a store or business often occupying the first floor, lined the streets. Few had electricity; gaslight illumined the streets and the houses. Since most of the homes lacked bathtubs, the public bathhouse on Gay Street in South Providence, like the one on Quaid Street in the North End, provided the needed facilities.

Even though the streets in that area of South Providence were unpaved and the housing congested, residents never considered their section a slum. In a real sense, it was a world in itself. An amazing number of stores and services were crammed into the Willard Avenue-Gay Street vicinity. Nearby industries, large and small, provided employment for neighborhood residents. At Bazar's Hall one could attend a meeting or a lecture, a ball or a wedding. Boys and girls gathered there for club activities, and once a week silent movies with live piano accompaniment were featured.

As their numbers and their self-confidence grew, the Jews of South Providence began to move to streets perpendicular and parallel to Willard Avenue, toward Broad Street as far as Reynolds and Potters avenues. However, Willard Avenue remained the shopping center for the entire area. It retained the allegiance of those with roots in South Providence for almost fifty years.

Although the earlier German Jewish settlers had established a basic Jewish community structure with their synagogue as its center, it remained rather limited in its scope. One reason can be found in the population figures already cited. The German Jews were not numerous enough to permit much diversity in the way of religious or secular organizations. More important as a cause, however, was attitude. They saw no need for such diversity. In their former homeland the German Jews

had been as oriented to German culture as they had been to Jewish tradition. In their new home they wanted no part of what they considered ethnic separation.

The eastern European Jewish immigrants did not readily fit into this pattern of community, either emotionally or experientially. For most of them, community meant a tightly knit structure that included a variety of religious institutions and interests, mutual-aid societies, and voluntary associations for such needs as burial of the dead, care of the homeless, and Jewish education, all carried out in accordance with traditional beliefs. There were also a large number of eastern European Jews whose definition of community was completely secular and based on organizations that had as their goal economic and political advancement. For them, Yiddish language and culture were preeminent. This group included Zionists, anarchists, socialists, and trade unionists.

Both definitions of community ultimately came together in America and in Providence. In a new American context, these associations—both religious and secular—produced an amazingly rich and complex Jewish community life.

The new arrivals found that in case of need they could receive help from the established settlers, the German Jews. However, very soon they began their own mutual-aid network. It started with family, whose members helped one another to deal economically and socially with their new circumstances, and who shared shelter, skills, and resources. This network soon was extended to include friends from the old country and *landsleit* (Yiddish; those who come from the same townlet, town, or city). As one woman remembered, "There were at least four to a bedroom, ten in our house. In addition, there were always one to two strangers in the house who had just come to the country, and you had to take them in."

The same ties were expressed in more formal associations. Of the twenty congregations organized by eastern European Jews in Providence and chartered before 1920, most catered to specific groups. In both South Providence and the North End, one could find a Russian, Hungarian, or Roumanian *shul*. Often these *shuln* were better known in this way than by their official name. Those who came there to pray could hear the accents and the chants they had known in their old home. In their favored synagogue they stood among those who shared

their memories of a country, a city, a townlet, that few would ever see again.

The settlers also combined the idea of mutual aid with social purposes to form *landsmanschaften* (Yiddish; associations of *landsleit*). These organizations provided sick benefits, aided philanthropic endeavors, offered companionship, and helped newer immigrants as well as those members who had fallen on hard times. In a very real sense, the *landsmanschaften* were like an extended family for the immigrant generation.

Not all the mutual-aid associations, however, were *landsmanschaften*. Amid the profusion of lodges and associations that blossomed after the turn of the century, there were some societies that restricted membership to particular occupations or trades. Others were more general in nature and open to all. The women took an active role in organizing societies with a strong charitable component, whose members tended the sick, cared for orphans and the aged, and sheltered the homeless; there was also a women's free loan society established. Associations of men volunteers took care of other traditional needs of the community. There were socialist and Zionist groups as well as literary and dramatic societies. One club, the Wendell Phillips Educational Club, proposed to "educate its members in the English language." Other organizations expressed such purposes as "inculcating principles of patriotism" and teaching "men of the Hebrew faith . . . the highest duties of citizenship." For those who wished to become involved in politics, the North End Political Club provided a forum and a base for action.

However serious their purpose, this amazing variety of organizations also contributed to a very lively social and cultural scene. In addition to regular and frequent meetings, they sponsored balls and parties. Each holiday provided an occasion for special celebration, with local talent offering "entertainments." Yiddish theater, cantorial concerts, and speakers enriched the cultural fare as Providence played host to artists and orators from major Jewish centers in this country and abroad.

Yiddish remained the primary language of the immigrant generation. Although it was not uncommon for eastern European Jews to speak several languages, English was not usually one of them. Night school offered a way to master the

complexities of this new language, and many took advantage of English classes. For others, however, formal classes were not possible. Earning a living (generally meager), raising a family (usually large), trying to cope with a new set of experiences (most often bewildering), left little time for such activities. Nonetheless, news and newspapers still were an integral part of their lives. Yiddish-language papers were available at many locations, which became gathering spots for discussions of current events, politics, and news of the old country. In 1910 one dealer alone distributed nine hundred copies of the various Yiddish-language newspapers daily. In addition, a large assortment of magazines and weeklies was available.

The education of their children deeply concerned the Jewish settlers. It was extremely important to them that their children be both good Americans and good Jews. The public schools received their wholehearted support; parents took great pride in their children's progress. At after-school weekday classes, at Sabbath gatherings and Sunday school, many of the boys—and some of the girls—studied Jewish tradition, history, and prayers. Because boys prepared for *bar mitzvah* (literally, man of duty; here, a ceremony marking a boy's reaching religious maturity) at age thirteen, they received the more rigorous instruction. However, almost half the students did not attend such schools; they received instruction at home from tutors. Many of the youngsters had to work after school to supplement the family income, and so it was difficult for them to participate in formal classes. Selling papers was a popular way of earning money. Dr. Wessel commented in 1910 that "Jewish boys practically controlled the newspaper business, working at their trade for several hours every day."

On warm summer Sundays the Jewish areas of the city were emptied, for Sunday was the day for family and picnics. The few Jewish families who owned or could rent a horse and buggy rode out into the country for the day. Hunt's Mills (East Providence), Twin Rivers (North Providence), Roger Williams Park, and Rocky Point were favorite destinations. Since most people could not afford such luxury, they spent their family day either at a neighborhood park or at outings sponsored by the various lodges and associations. Palace Gardens (Warwick) and Vanity Fair (East Providence), with their pine woods and ball fields, were ideal for these get-togethers, and privately owned farms were used for this

purpose as well. Enterprising owners of large vans converted them to public transportation for the day and, for twenty-five cents per family, brought the picnickers to the picnics. There were speeches and singing, games and food—something for every member of the family.

While Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe were building new lives and new communities in the United States, their brothers and sisters in the Pale of Settlement faced a progressively deteriorating situation. The year 1905 was particularly tragic. Bloody pogroms swept seven hundred Russian communities, leaving a trail of death, misery, and destruction. As word filtered through to the rest of the world, a united Jewish relief committee was formed in New York to rush funds and supplies to the victims. Telegrams went out to Jewish communities nationwide to ask for their financial and moral support.

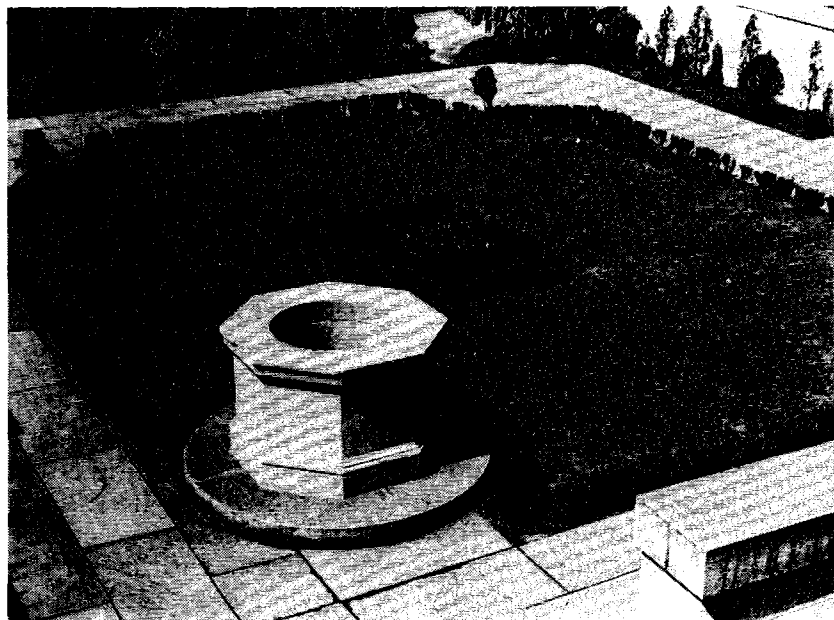
Just as 1877 was a turning point for the Providence community, so was 1905 a milestone for Rhode Island Jews. In Providence, forty-six organizations sent delegates to a special conference called in response to this plea for aid. Similar gatherings took place in other parts of the state as well, most notably in Woonsocket and Pawtucket.

The Providence representatives, in behalf of their organizations, agreed to participate in a house-by-house canvass of every Jewish home in a special fund-raising effort. They also set themselves a goal of five thousand dollars. It was a major test for the thirty-five hundred families of Providence. Most were newcomers whose meager earnings barely sufficed for their own needs, and many were sending money to relatives left behind in Europe. The already-established German and Sephardic families would help, but they were few in number.

With the canvass, two benefit concerts (one in Pawtucket), and performances by a Yiddish theater company, the specified goal was surpassed by four hundred dollars. Moreover, there was another dimension to this effort. The united Jewish relief committee designated Monday, December 4, as a national time of "prayer and consolation, and as an expression of their heartfelt sympathy with their sorely afflicted brethren." Jewish businesses in Providence closed at 4:00 P.M., and the Jews of the city came together at two major houses of worship. This was the first instance of a nationwide Jewish communal effort for any purpose or any cause, and

Providence—indeed, Rhode Island—did its part on both a financial and a moral level.

Special note must be taken of the assistance of the *Providence Journal*. Because of the role it played in arousing public support, the campaign was not limited to the small Jewish community but assumed the proportions of an areawide humanitarian effort that engaged the hearts and the support of non-Jews as well. The community was beginning to come of age.



*Roger Williams Spring on North Main Street, Providence. This historic site was presented to the city in 1928 by J. Jerome Hahn in memory of his father, Isaac Hahn, who in 1885 became the first Jew to be elected to public office in Rhode Island. Photo courtesy of the Rhode Island Historical Society, RHi X3 1918.*

## BEYOND PROVIDENCE

While the Providence community was growing in population and developing its institutions, a scattering of Jews, primarily of German origin, came to the smaller cities and towns of Rhode Island. They arrived individually—most often from out of state—in search of opportunities for earning a living and putting down roots. The burgeoning textile industry and the growth of other kinds of manufacturing offered many possibilities for small retail business, but these opportunities required a willingness to live some distance from an urban area or a Jewish community. Records of the latter half of the nineteenth century indicate that there were a number of would-be settlers who came to these areas, remained for a year or two, then moved on. Their names on a document or in a directory attest to their presence but offer no further information.

In Pawtucket and Westerly, however, German Jews found the opportunities they sought, and many of them settled there. They established no congregations or Jewish communal organizations of their own; that had to await the arrival of eastern European Jews. They maintained their ties with their fellow Jews in other ways, though, often through affiliations in neighboring communities. As an example, half of the Pawtucket Jewish population of 1877 subscribed to the Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David in Providence. Another form of contact was provided by Jewish periodicals in English, such as the *Occident*, originating in Philadelphia, and the *Sabbath Visitor*, a later publication originating in Cincinnati. On their pages readers found education and inspiration, news and commentary. For many Jews in remote or isolated parts of America, these journals were their only link

with their brethren and their heritage. Both periodicals had subscribers in Rhode Island.

In the 1890s eastern European Jews began to arrive in the smaller cities and towns. Although newcomers to this country, they had passed the difficult transition period of those "just off the boat" and had acquired some experience of America. Now they were ready to explore its possibilities. If they perceived opportunities for earning a livelihood, they sent for family and invited *landsleit* already in this country to join them.

For the majority of these settlers, earning a livelihood meant peddling. The man with the pushcart trudging from house to house, street by city street, offering a variety of wares for sale, is a familiar figure from this era. However, there were also peddlers who brought their wares to less populated areas. Some traveled from Providence, spending all week on the road and returning home for the Sabbath and holidays. Others preferred to live closer to the places where they hoped to sell their merchandise and settled in the towns that seemed to hold promise for the future.

There was both a need and room for the peddler who traveled the back road to villages and farms a distance from commercial centers. There, goods were generally difficult to obtain; a trip to a store in town took too much time away from one's tasks. Along with his stock of wares and samples of the merchandise that he could obtain on order (most often purchased with borrowed capital and sold on credit), the peddler brought the latest news of the neighborhood or a bit of the outside world. Thus he became a familiar and welcome figure. By dint of long hours and ingenuity, he could earn enough to support his family and perhaps to open a small shop.

A number of peddlers dealt not in foodstuffs or clothing or notions, but in junk. These peddlers made their rounds where there were mills and factories and built-up areas of housing. For the man who wanted to become a junk peddler, it took only a few hours to put together a pushcart to trundle; or he might borrow money from the *gemillut chesed* (literally, deeds of loving-kindness; here, a free loan society) and look for a serviceable horse and wagon which would take him to neighborhoods or villages where there was less competition, and where he could establish a regular route. The junk peddler bought rags, bottles, newspapers, metal, and old furniture, sometimes bartering in livestock—in short, he bought

anything he could resell to eke out a living, or perhaps even to prosper.

The list of early Jewish occupations must also include farming. Most European countries had for centuries made it difficult, if not impossible, for Jews to own arable land or to engage in agriculture, and consequently there had been few Jewish farmers in Europe. In America, on the other hand, no such prohibitions existed; those who wished to farm could do so, as long as they had some capital and some experience, or a desire to learn. A number of immigrant Jews took advantage of this opportunity and turned to farming. It was at their farms that Jewish outings and picnics were frequently held during the summer. A few of these farmers took in boarders during July and August to supplement their income by providing city dwellers with a taste of country life during their vacations.

As other Jews arrived, many of the settlements grew sufficiently in size, interest, and concern to develop a lively Jewish community life, one based on a congregation, a school for their children, requisite religious officials, and voluntary associations that ministered to the needs of the group. The Jews of Newport, Woonsocket, and Pawtucket were able to develop such communities. In Bristol, West Warwick, and Westerly, the settlers founded congregations that became the center for their Jewish activities and affiliations, but the small Jewish populations in these towns limited the growth of fuller community life. There were also towns and villages in the state where one or possibly two families settled. Although these families were remote from Jewish community activities, they too retained their identity and educated their children in their heritage and faith.

### The Newport Community Resettled

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow visited the Jewish cemetery in Newport, and in 1852 he wrote these lines:

Closed are the portals of their Synagogue,  
No Psalms of David now the silence break,  
No Rabbi reads the ancient Decalogue  
In the grand dialect the Prophets spake.

Gone are the living, but the dead remain. . . .

Longfellow's words were moving and expressive, but they were not quite accurate. Actually, there was at that time a

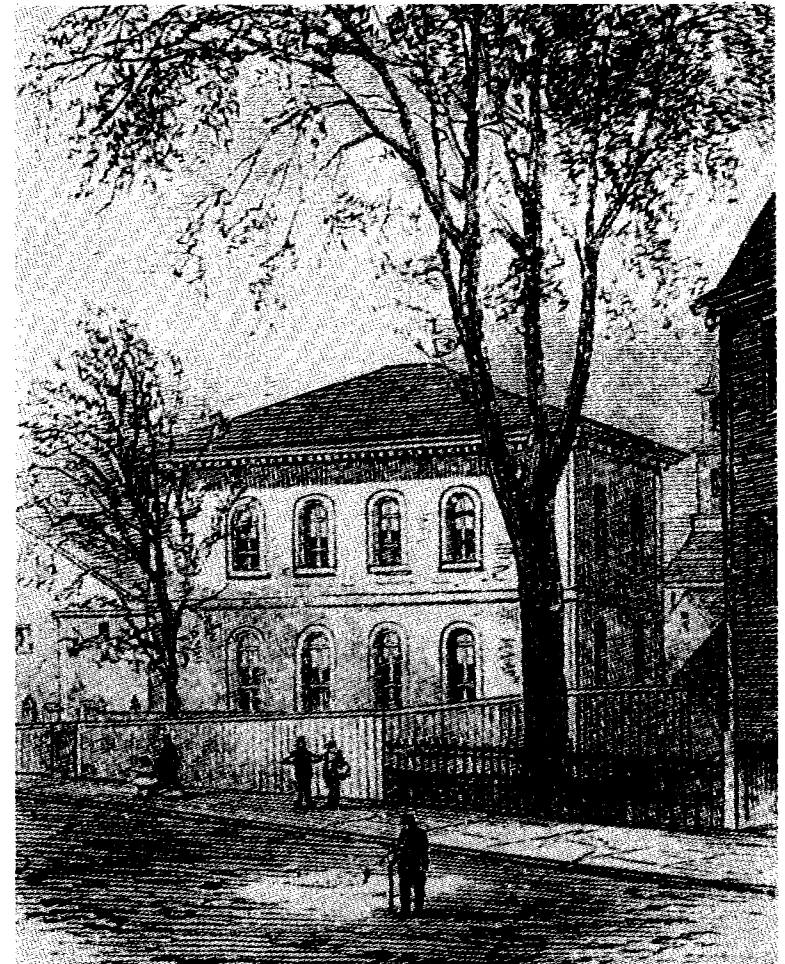
summer colony of Jewish families from New York who lived in the vicinity of Catherine Street, and occasionally other notables also came to enjoy the healthful sea air. In 1850 the synagogue was reopened for public worship for one season, and in the following years vacationers sometimes received permission to hold private services there. Furthermore, former residents of the earlier Newport community were, at their expressed wish, buried in the old cemetery.

Records available for the years 1856-1857 list ten Jewish names among the residents of the town. However, true permanent settlement did not begin until fifty-five years after Moses Lopez's departure in 1822. Prior to the 1870s small numbers of Jews came to Newport, but only a few remained for more than a year. Newport had not yet recovered from her decline as a maritime and commercial center and did not offer many economic opportunities or the prospect for Jewish communal life.

It was in the 1870s that Newport received a significant influx of Jewish settlers, most of whom originally came from eastern Europe. These new settlers made their homes within walking distance of the synagogue and established their businesses in the vicinity of Thames Street. A few turned to peddling for a livelihood, but most opened small shops related in some way to clothing or dry goods. Newport also attracted a disproportionately large number of Jewish tailors who opened shops for a season, or for a year or two, and then moved away. Perhaps the commissioning of the Newport Naval Station in 1883 served as a magnet. Perhaps the palatial summer "cottages" of Bellevue Avenue held forth a promise of prosperity. Records of the time offer only meager information.

After petitions to the Newport City Council and to Congregation Shearith Israel, the synagogue was reopened in 1883, reconsecrated, and named to honor the Reverend Isaac Touro, a founder of Congregation Yeshuat Israel. The generosity of his sons had preserved both the synagogue and the cemetery. The New York congregation, having determined that there were now enough residents to support daily services as well as Sabbath services, appointed a rabbi whose salary was paid from the Touro Ministerial Funds. In addition to leading services, the rabbi taught the children of the congregants. However, he apparently found that the congregation's need for his presence had been overestimated, and he petitioned the city

council for permission to leave Newport from November to April because of the lack of a *minyan*.



*Touro Synagogue, Newport, as it appeared in a print in Harper's Monthly in 1874. The wooden fence, constructed in 1822, has since been replaced by a fence of granite and iron.*

The decades before and after the turn of the century saw the small permanent population increase to fifty families, with twice that number of transients. As their numbers increased, so did the kinds of occupations that these Jewish residents pursued. Although most were still associated with businesses dealing with clothing or dry goods, there were also a grocer, a



bookbinder, a woodcarver, a shoemaker, a restaurateur, and a pool-parlor operator.

With the blessing of the Congregation Shearith Israel, the settlers reestablished and incorporated Congregation Jeshuat Israel (note the change of spelling). In 1894 the congregation founded a religious school that had a total of eleven pupils, representing three families. It also purchased land for a cemetery and hired a *shochet*. Slowly it laid the basis for a community.

In 1901 the Jews of Newport played host to the Convention of Jewish Societies for Promoting Physical Culture among Jewish Masses, called by the Touro Cadets of Providence and arranged by the Montefiore-Touro Association. The Cadets were one of a number of Jewish voluntary military organizations founded during the decade before the turn of the century to counter the calumnies that Jews would not serve in the army, that they lacked patriotism, and that they could not compete in physically demanding activities. The Touro Cadets had lived up to their promise. They had won national distinction for their military precision at a major competition, and at the outbreak of the Spanish-American War they had enlisted en masse.

During this same period two Jewish societies were chartered: Society Goel Zedick, organized for "charitable and benevolent purposes," and the Hebrew Independent Organization, established to encourage interest in politics and the duties of citizenship. However, before the community could continue its development, Newport's Jews had to heal a deepening rift that threatened its future.

This rift had occurred when a dissident group among the synagogue's congregants founded Touro Congregation and demanded the use of the synagogue building. Among the issues involved in the dispute were questions of ritual. The New York congregation sanctioned only the Sephardi *minhag* (custom or rite; the *minhag* of Jews of Spanish and Portuguese background differed from eastern European custom), while the eastern European Jews wished to follow the Ashkenazi *minhag* with which they were more familiar. Other problems included sharp, often emotional differences in attitudes that had a great deal to do with background and European origins, and with the nature of the relationship between Congregation Shearith Israel in New York and the Newport congregation. At stake

were the Touro Ministerial Funds and the physical possession of the synagogue building. Interesting to note, the legal ownership of the building was not in question at that time.

When the Newport City Council, which controlled the Touro Funds, and the State of Rhode Island took the side of the Touro Congregation, the Shearith Israel trustees, who recognized only Congregation Jeshuat Israel, closed the synagogue in 1899. The controversy led to a break-in for prayer, a hunger strike, and a sit-in. After lengthy court hearings in which the scope of the controversy was extended to questions of the legal ownership of the synagogue, the parties to the dispute finally reached an amicable resolution of the conflict. Congregation Shearith Israel emerged as the legal owner of Touro Synagogue. Both Newport groups merged and retained the name Congregation Jeshuat Israel, and this congregation received permission to use the synagogue. However, one of the provisions of the agreement signed on February 1, 1903, stipulated that the services follow the customs and rites of Orthodox Judaism as practiced in the synagogue of Congregation Shearith Israel—the Sephardi *minhag*.

By 1915 Newport's Jewish population had doubled in size, and with the increase had come the means to support the associations that could provide the services of a Jewish community and fulfill the needs of its people. More than twenty groups (some of short duration) were organized during this decade. Included in this number was Congregation Ahavis Achim, known as "the workingmen's congregation," which served the settlers in the West Broadway area. Newport's Jews also joined in the national efforts to relieve the plight of overseas Jews during this period, and members of the Jewish community increased their participation in the civic and political affairs of their home city. The Jewish community of Newport was once again flourishing.

### The Woonsocket Community

Northern Rhode Island near the falls of the Blackstone River had been a quiet agricultural area until 1810. In that year the first cotton mill was established adjacent to the Mill River. Its success initiated a new era of industrial growth for the region. By 1867 the mill town of Woonsocket had been chartered and was the center of a major textile industry that attracted foreign investment to Rhode Island.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Woonsocket also earned a deserved reputation as a flourishing cultural center. It had a theater that attracted repertory companies from all over the country. Immigrants received free instruction in English, while all residents had access to the Harris Institute, one of the first public libraries in the state. It was the sort of community that had much to offer newcomers to this country.

The first Jewish settler was Solomon Treitel, who came to Woonsocket from Germany by way of Boston. According to his advertisements, he established a clothing business on Main Street in 1873. Treitel was the only permanent Jewish resident for over a decade; though others came during this period, few remained longer than a year. This phase continued until eastern European Jews reached Woonsocket and began settling there. With Treitel as the prime mover, the new immigrants soon took steps toward founding a community. According to available statistics, the decade of the 1890s was a period of rapid increase in the number of Jewish settlers. Contemporary records list six Jewish names in 1890, ten in 1892, forty-one in 1895, and sixty-two in 1900. While there may be some question regarding the accuracy of the numbers cited, the trend they represent is clear.

The Jewish population of Woonsocket had grown sufficiently by 1889 to support a congregation, and one was chartered by the state four years later as the Congregation of the Lovers of Peace. Treitel served as president. Initially the members held services in a loft on South Main Street near Market Square, and they were able to procure a Torah scroll from the Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David in Providence. Although it had no permanent home, the congregation flourished, and three years later it had a Sunday school and land for a cemetery. Another congregation, Sons of Israel, was granted a state charter in 1895, and it, too, received valuable assistance from the Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David.

There was little diversity in the occupations followed by Woonsocket's Jews. The available records for 1900, for example, indicate a predominance of peddlers (twenty-one) and persons connected with the clothing business (nineteen). However, these lists did include an oculist (optometrist), a bookkeeper, a laborer, an overseer (labor foreman), a hairdresser (barber), a restaurateur, two cobblers, a grocer, and

two dealers in fruit, one of whom had previously given his occupation as butcher.

The large number of peddlers in Woonsocket is not surprising. Surrounded as it was by farms and villages, the city offered opportunity for earning a living (often meager) by peddling, if one wished to invest long hours and hard work in the venture. Often on foot, sometimes with horse and wagon, peddlers from Woonsocket traveled through Harrisville, Chepachet, Pascoag, Slatersville, and Forestdale, offering their goods or taking orders for merchants in the city.

Life was not totally absorbed by hard work. The affairs of the congregations and the needs of the growing Jewish community provided diversions, and in an early effort at fund-raising in 1899, the Congregation of the Lovers of Peace successfully staged the comic opera *Esther*.

In January of 1902 the Congregation of the Lovers of Peace officially changed its name to B'nai Israel, and in September of that year it voted to integrate the "Polo Street Congregation," not further identified. A chronicler of Woonsocket's history has suggested that this was probably the more familiar name for the original Sons of Israel Congregation. Polo Street, barely a block long, was one of the first areas of Jewish settlement.

Early Woonsocket Jews employed a *shochet* who saw to the problem of providing kosher meat for the city's kosher butchers (this *shochet* also had to double as a teacher in his free time). One butcher, wishing to counter any possible competition from Providence, posted a fifty-dollar bond guaranteeing "good fresh meat at not above Providence prices."

As the population increased, the area of settlement grew to include the Fairmount district, Bernon Street, and eventually part of the North End. Along with this population growth came the development of voluntary organizations to care for the traditional needs of a Jewish community. A lodge provided social ties as well as mutual aid and benefits; the YMHA and the YWHA sponsored social events, always with a particular charitable purpose, while youth groups vied with the immensely popular sport of baseball for the interest of the community's younger members. The merged congregation sponsored lectures and concerts, dinner dances and holiday

celebrations, as the synagogue became the center of the social and cultural life of this growing Jewish community.

### The Pawtucket Community

When the Congregation of the Sons of Israel and David of Providence issued a call in 1877 for a "Convention of Israelites" of that city, the invitation also included the Jews of Pawtucket, because they were considered (and considered themselves) part of the Providence community. Jews from both cities had a great deal in common at that time. Most had originally emigrated from Germany; all were associated with the clothing trades; many had ties of kinship or friendship. The Pawtucket residents had little interest in founding their own community institutions.

The *Pawtucket Directory* of 1878 listed fourteen Jewish names among those who lived and worked in that city, and five more among those who only worked there. With two exceptions, their business addresses or places of employment were concentrated within a small area on Main Street. Half of the residents lived in the Fairlawn section, the rest near downtown.

Twelve years later, in 1890, the number of Jews listed in the directory had almost doubled, as eastern European Jews began to find their way to Pawtucket. Although most of the settlers were still engaged in some form of the clothing trade, either as employee or employer, the list of occupations also included four cobblers, three peddlers, a watchmaker, a jeweler, and a brushmaker. No longer were their shops confined to one compact area. The well-established firms had moved further along Main Street; a few had relocated to North Main Street (now Roosevelt Avenue), and newer businesses had opened nearby. However, eleven Pawtucket residents gave business addresses in Central Falls, where eight families resided, for the area of settlement had shifted to include neighborhoods in Central Falls close to the Pawtucket city line. The greatest influx to these neighborhoods occurred after 1900. In the words of a former resident, Central Falls was the "first stop" for many of the newcomers. They found housing there, established themselves, and in time moved across the city line into Pawtucket. However, for many years Central Street in Central Falls remained the principal Jewish business district in the area.

While the earliest settlers had looked to Providence for their religious and social affiliations, for the eastern European Jews this did not suffice, and they began to build their own community. In 1905 a charter was granted to Congregation Ohave Shalom, which had grown from an Orthodox *minyan* that had met regularly in a variety of rented quarters. Home for the congregation was the second floor of a two-family house on North Main Street; the adults held their services in the front rooms, while a back room served as a *cheder* (a room; in this case, a school) where the children studied. When the small synagogue could not hold all the worshipers who came for High Holy Days and other holiday observances, the nearby Grand Army Hall on Exchange Street was rented for that purpose until a new synagogue was built in 1920. Since the hall was the only suitable place in the neighborhood available for rental and easily accessible to the Jewish residents of both Pawtucket and Central Falls, it became a popular place for meetings, concerts, and special events.

As the Jewish population grew, so did the number of voluntary associations, mutual-aid associations, and benevolent societies. These included at least one *landsmanshaft*, an association restricted to junk peddlers, and a B'nai B'rith lodge. Women's organizations undertook social welfare responsibilities and worked on behalf of the synagogue.

Not all the organizations founded by members of the Jewish community concerned themselves with mutual aid or religious needs. In 1912 the Hebrew American Political Education Club stated its purpose as political education and sociability among its members. Within the next three years two organizations were founded to promote Jewish education for adults and children and "to disseminate knowledge." Pawtucket also had an active branch of the Workmen's Circle, a socialist beneficial association known for the high intellectual caliber of its programs and meetings. Many of the Jewish children of Pawtucket learned Yiddish language and culture at its school.

Thus the Pawtucket-Central Falls community developed its own institutions, and although its proximity to and traditional ties with Providence militated against total separation, it nonetheless established a distinct identity among the Jewish communities of the state.

## Other Jewish Communities

Significant settlement (i.e., sufficient to found and sustain a congregation) occurred also in Bristol, West Warwick, and Westerly.

In 1891 the Louis Molasky family became the first Jewish residents in Bristol, where Molasky opened a grocery. His wife Annie, a midwife, delivered most of the Jewish babies born in the town during her lifetime. When the National India Rubber Company (later part of the merger which created the United States Rubber Company) moved its operations to Bristol a few years after, the company brought along much of its work force, including a number of Jews.

The first Jewish organization in the town was the Young Men's Hebrew Association of Bristol, chartered in 1896 for "social and benevolent purposes." A congregation, Chevra Agudas Achim (United Brothers Synagogue), received its charter in 1905.

The Jewish population of Bristol remained comparatively small. The town's directory of 1905 recorded thirty-six Jewish names among the residents. Of those listed, twelve gave their occupation as rubber workers and two as laborers; the others were shopkeepers or peddlers. The town of Warren recorded three Jewish residents—a doctor, a grocer, and a tailor—all of whom maintained close ties to the Bristol community and its congregation.

Most of the settlers in Bristol lived in the vicinity of Catherine Street and Richmond Street near their congregation's rented quarters. The congregants led the daily and Sabbath services themselves, but they arranged for a seminarian to officiate on the High Holy Days. From the outset they sought to secure a building of their own for use as a permanent house of worship. This search was assisted by Dr. George Lyman Locke, pastor of St. Michael's Episcopal Church, who also offered to teach Hebrew. With further help from St. Mary's Roman Catholic Church, which donated pews, the new synagogue was dedicated in 1916.

West Warwick's Jewish settlers began to arrive after the turn of the century, later than those of Bristol or Westerly. They came from the Lower East Side of New York to Arctic and Phenix, where most became junk peddlers who traded in their own communities as well as in Anthony, Riverpoint,

Crompton, and Natick. A few opened dry goods shops or shoe stores.

By 1913 a *minyan* was meeting regularly. Two years later a *Talmud Torah* (a school for children where Judaic subjects are taught) was opened, with children from West Warwick, East Greenwich, and Warwick in attendance. The *minyan* formally organized as a congregation, purchased a building in the center of town in 1919, and received a charter as Congregation Ahavath Shalom. The building, a two-story structure, had originally housed a saloon on the first floor. The former barroom was converted to a house of worship, and the second story became the home of the Hebrew teacher who taught in the afternoon and conducted a Sunday school.

For both Bristol and West Warwick Jewish residents, shopping for kosher meat and similar necessities meant a trip to Providence. A former resident of Bristol recalled the long ride by horse and wagon or by train. From West Warwick the trip was made by interurban trolley and local streetcar, if not by horse and wagon. However, no one shopped only for his own family. One took orders for the neighbors, which was the neighborly thing to do, and of course the deed would be reciprocated.

Neither community grew very large in population, but those who settled there supported their local religious and social organizations while maintaining ties to the larger community in Providence. At the same time, they were able to integrate themselves into the life of their town and participate in its activities.

Because of Westerly's location, the Jews who settled there had a closer relationship with the Jewish communities of nearby Connecticut than with those in Rhode Island. Providence was too distant to provide either shopping, social services, or cultural attractions. Like the Jewish residents of Bristol and West Warwick, those of Westerly soon became an integral part of the everyday life of their town and involved themselves in its affairs.

An excerpt from a letter to the *Sabbath Visitor* in 1887 gives us a glimpse of life in Westerly during that era. It was written by Rose Stern, the daughter of a prominent merchant, to "Cousin Sadie," who edited a feature page very popular with young people:

As stated in my previous letter, we live within five miles of the Ocean, and Watch Hill, a noted seashore resort, can be reached by water in an hour and a half. There are at present four boats plying back and forth hourly to the Hill, including Sunday. As you remember I mentioned in my last letter that Westerly has two weekly Sabbaths, and strictly speaking none. By-the-by, I find in the list of the Watch Hill News many Western, and particularly Cincinnati people, and among them quite a number of Hebrews. . . .

Perhaps six or seven Jewish families, mainly immigrants from Germany, lived in Westerly at that time, and Jewish visitors to Watch Hill, just five miles away, attracted their attention.

The letter also alludes to an interesting facet of Westerly's Sabbath observance. Many of the principal industries and stores closed on Saturday because they were owned by Sabbatarians (Seventh-Day Baptists), who strictly observed the seventh day as their Sabbath. They conducted business as usual on Sunday, when other Christians closed their businesses. Rhode Island law made Sunday closing mandatory except "in the compact towns of Westerly and Hopkinton." In these two towns Sabbatarians and Jews were specifically exempt from all the enumerated restrictions applicable to all other parts of the state. Whether this attracted Jews to settle there is not really known.

After 1890, Jews from eastern Europe began to settle in Westerly. In his memoirs, *The Unfailing Light* (1943), Rabbi Bernard Drachman described Westerly at the turn of the century as an idyllic place to live. He had spent three days there as a guest of the Soloveitzik family, whom he found most congenial. However, he also noted sharp differences between the established Jewish settlers and the newcomers. The latter, all peddlers, were more observant of tradition and concerned with religious custom. By 1908 they had organized and received a charter for a congregation, Shareh Zedeck. The community grew to twenty families, among whom the town directory listed a "clergyman." Since the size of the population made it difficult to maintain a *minyan*, the leaders of the congregation recruited other Jews to settle among them, even though it meant more competition for their businesses.

\* \* \* \* \*

Earlier in this essay the term *significant settlement* was used in a very specific sense. However, every settlement, no matter how small, had its own special significance. The villages

or towns of Pascoag, Exeter, Block Island, East Greenwich, and Hope Valley attracted individual Jewish settlers before the turn of the century, while Warwick and Cranston gained Jewish arrivals somewhat later. Like their fellow Jewish immigrants to the larger areas of settlement, these people came to find their home in Rhode Island and to contribute to its growth; and as they found their place also in the Jewish community of Rhode Island, they added to that community's development as well.

## THE JEWISH COMMUNITY TO MIDCENTURY

The war clouds gathering over Europe in 1913-1914 cast long shadows that reached Rhode Island. Many Jewish families had relatives who lived in the Pale of Settlement, certain to become the battlefield for opposing armies. For Jews of German background, World War I posed a very poignant problem, since they had ties with kin in the old country, perhaps a brother or nephew serving in the kaiser's armies. Still, there was never a doubt where their allegiance lay. America's entry into the war produced an outpouring of patriotism and activity in behalf of the war effort from all segments of Rhode Island's Jewish population, as their young men went off to become members of the armed forces of their adopted country.

The advent of the twenties coincided with a period of prosperity in America. A carefree mood, a buoyant spirit, dispelled for the most part the somber memories of World War I. Many eastern European Jewish immigrants found opportunities in Rhode Island during these years and eventually attained more economic security, as had generations of German Jews in earlier years. Having entered the business world at its lower rungs, some worked their way up to ownership of establishments involved in buying and selling of various kinds of merchandise. Others became manufacturers of textiles, wire and cable, or jewelry. Often they began their enterprises with a small shop and with used equipment, in areas of manufacturing scorned by well-established firms or considered too risky. If they succeeded, they did so by dint of long hours and hard work. These were their key to success.

But the eastern European Jewish immigrant generation realized that another key was available—education. Traditional study and learning, always prized by Jews, became secularized into the desire for a college education and entry into one of the professions. Even before World War I, Jewish youth had increasingly found acceptance into colleges and universities, despite restrictions and quotas. Consequently, parents encouraged hard work at school in order to gain college admission (and perhaps a scholarship). Rhode Island State (now the University of Rhode Island) offered excellent opportunities for an education for the cost of room, board, and books. The tuition at Brown University posed problems, but should a son be accepted, there were generally scholarships available, or a few dollars laboriously saved, or funds borrowed from the Hebrew Free Loan Association. Even Providence College, a newly founded Catholic institution, provided some local Jewish boys with low-cost private education.

The postwar years brought great change in other ways. World War I had interrupted the flow of immigration, and except for a short period after the peace, it was not fully resumed, for discriminatory quotas were now imposed for Jews and other recent arrivals. By 1924 the United States no longer offered welcome. The period of intense growth for the Rhode Island Jewish communities had come to a close, and thus the proliferation of new organizations ceased. However, the creative social activity of those earlier years had left its mark on the character and the structure of the local Jewish community, a mark that persists today even with the great changes that time has wrought. Each generation since has built upon that foundation, never completing the structure but recasting it to meet contemporary needs.

During the decade of the 1920s a new generation reached maturity in Rhode Island. The men and women who composed this generation had been born in this country or brought here at an early age; they had grown to adulthood in America. This fact influenced their attitudes and perceptions. Their experience differed from that of their immigrant parents, who had come as strangers to a strange land. The second generation knew of Jewish life in Europe only through the reminiscences of family members, the pages of history books, or letters of distant relatives. English, not Yiddish, was their mother tongue. It was the language in which they studied at public

school alongside the sons and daughters of immigrants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Socially and economically they faced fewer restrictions in the wider community than did their parents, and they found many of its organizations open to them. Consequently, *landsmanschaften* had little meaning for them, and most mutual-assistance societies held small attraction. They redefined Jewish community life in ways more compatible with their experience of America.

The second generation expressed its sense of community through religious affiliation and by support of Jewish social-service agencies and service-oriented organizations whose constituency was not limited to a particular group or neighborhood within the local Jewish community but rather cut across such lines. The chief beneficiaries were the Jewish Orphanage, the Jewish Home for the Aged, Miriam Hospital, and the Jewish Family and Children's Service—all outgrowths of earlier women's organizations which combined social service with fund-raising—and the Jewish Community Center, which had developed from educational organizations and the YM-YWHA. This kind of Jewish identification and philanthropy,



*The Machzekas Hadas Home for Jewish Orphans, located at the rear of the Machzekas Hadas Synagogue on Willard Avenue, Providence, was the first Jewish orphanage in Rhode Island. This photo was taken there about 1908, the year the orphanage was chartered. By 1910 it had united with another newly established Jewish orphanage in the North End and acquired a home for the children at 1213 North Main Street.*

while in keeping with the tradition of assuming responsibility for one's neighbor, was deemed more appropriate to American society than the old ways were. Appeals in behalf of overseas Jewry also received support, and there was a concerted (though short-lived) effort to oversee and consolidate the multiple campaigns.



*The first Jewish Home for the Aged, originally organized as a subsidiary of the Ladies' Union Aid Association, was located on Orms Street, Providence, from 1912 to 1932.*



*Inscribed "Help the poor sick" in Yiddish, this collection box, circa 1914, was used to raise money to provide free beds for the needy at Rhode Island, St. Joseph, and Lying-In hospitals, as well as kosher food for patients there. The Miriam Hospital Association also supplied the poor with other medical needs and transportation to clinics, but the main objective of this women's organization was the construction of a hospital.*



*This building on Benefit Street, Providence, became the home of the Hebrew Educational Institute, the YMHA, the YWHA, and Talmud Torah in 1916. In 1925 these organizations merged into the Jewish Community Center, which continued to occupy the building until moving to new quarters in 1951. Photo courtesy of the Providence Journal.*

It was during this decade that Providence gained two Conservative congregations: Temple Beth-Israel (1921), which was incorporated as the Providence Conservative Synagogue and later integrated with the Cranston Jewish Center (Temple Beth Torah) to form Congregation Torat Israel (1981), and Temple Emanuel (1924).

All these changes had the greatest impact on the variegated communities of Providence, but they also affected those outside the city. As previously seen, the smaller Jewish communities were developing institutions and organizations—both religious and secular—suitable to their situation but limited by the size of their population. For special needs they relied on the Jewish resources available in Providence, to which they gave support. The agencies thus served the whole state and made Providence the central location for Jewish social service in Rhode Island.

The Roaring Twenties, which began with such high hopes, ended in the trauma of the Great Depression, with its dark days of hardship and want. It was a bitter time for all Americans. Yet, despite problems of unemployment and stringent quotas, this country did not forsake her role as haven for the persecuted. So it was that the Rhode Island Jewish community received in its midst a group of refugees who managed to escape from Hitler's Germany. They were able to bring only their professional talents or their business acumen, and with these—after a difficult period of adjustment—they established themselves in their new home. Like their predecessors, they organized their own self-help group to ease their transition and later worked with all agencies of the community to help the survivors of the Holocaust who came to Rhode Island following World War II.

For the United States, World War II was a time of mobilization, of anxiety, of unity, and often of sorrow. For the nation's Jews it was also a time of particular anguish, as reports told of terrible suffering inflicted on European Jews by the Nazis. Not until the end of the war, however, did the magnitude of the tragedy begin to be revealed. The great need for funds to save and restore the surviving remnant of eastern European Jewry stirred the Rhode Island Jewish community to an action many deemed long overdue. On May 28, 1945, five hundred delegates from fifty-one Jewish organizations came together and approved the formation of a central agency



designed to help meet the needs of Jews both abroad and locally. This agency was authorized to (a) conduct one annual campaign of giving in behalf of local institutions and overseas relief; (b) allocate these funds equitably among the constituent groups; (c) establish a committee for community planning; and (d) invite all organizations to join, thus bringing the whole community together in common purpose. The General Jewish Committee of Providence, Inc. (it actually served Greater Providence, which included suburban areas) came into being that night, and those assembled took a major step in recasting the definition of Jewish community life in Providence and in Rhode Island.

Twenty-five years later the General Jewish Committee officially became the Jewish Federation of Rhode Island. The new name more accurately described the scope of the agency's activities and the nature of its role.

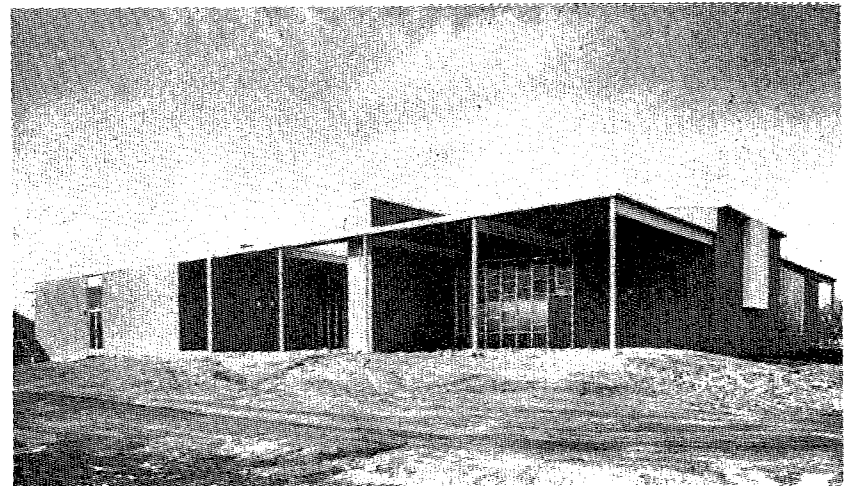
The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 was a deeply felt, profoundly emotional experience that united Jews from all walks of life. Its meaning transcended differences in belief and divergences in viewpoint to touch the hearts of all. Israel became and continues to be central to Jewish life.



*The Cranston Jewish Community Club, organized in 1942, conducted its first High Holy Days services in 1947 at Legion Hall, Cranston (shown here). After reorganization in 1950, the group became known as the Cranston Jewish Center. It is now Congregation Torat Yisrael.*



*Greenwood Hall, Warwick. Temple Sinai held its first services here on March 7, 1958. Religious school classes were housed at Garden City Elementary School.*



*Temple Beth Am, Warwick, 1960. The temple's congregation, chartered in 1955, merged with Congregation Beth David-Anshe Kovno in 1980 to become Beth Am/Beth David. The congregation is now named Am David.*



*This June 1980 photo shows the beginning of the procession that carried the Torah scrolls from the first permanent home of Temple Habonim, Barrington, to its new building. Temple Habonim evolved from the Eastward Jewish Center, which was founded in 1959 and reorganized as the Barrington Jewish Center in 1963. Eight years later the name was officially changed to Temple Habonim-Barrington Jewish Center.*

## EPILOGUE: WHO ARE WE?

We are approximately twenty-four thousand men, women, and children who live, work, and study in Rhode Island; it is our home. Some of us recently arrived from the Soviet Union, but most of us are second- to sixth-generation Americans. However diverse our backgrounds, we all share a common heritage and tradition which link us to each other and to generations past as well.

Our numbers have remained fairly constant over the past thirty years, but where we live has changed considerably. Gone are the old neighborhoods of the North End and South Providence, but the East Side has flourished, as have those plats in Pawtucket adjacent to Providence. Cranston now has the second largest Jewish population in the state, while Barrington and Warwick, once summering places, also have sizable numbers of Jewish residents. Now many of us are moving to East Greenwich, to Narragansett, and to various towns in South County. We still live in Bristol, Newport, Westerly, and Woonsocket, and we find these places quite congenial.

There are seventeen temples and synagogues in Rhode Island, to which three-fourths of us belong. Religious affiliation is an important part of our identity. Our children study Judaic subjects at eight congregational and three community afternoon and weekend schools, as well as at two day schools. Our traditional emphasis on education continues. Almost all of our children complete high school, and we encourage them to go on to study in colleges and universities. Many adults enroll in programs of continuing education or further their Judaic studies at special classes.

Few of us speak Yiddish now, but more of us have some

knowledge of Hebrew. We have entered many occupational fields and follow many callings; the list is long and varied.

As a community, we maintain a large number of organizations and agencies in Rhode Island, both religious and secular, that cater to our needs and interests, and to the welfare of our brothers and sisters overseas. Community and responsibility are basic to our ethic and have been part of Jewish life since Biblical times. However, we do not limit our activities to the Jewish community; we are very much a part of the total community of Rhode Island, and we share in all of its concerns.

Since colonial days, Rhode Island has offered haven and refuge to those fleeing persecution. It has provided an environment of freedom and opportunity in which talent may develop. The generations of Jewish immigrants, their children, and their grandchildren have recognized the greatness of this gift. In turn, they and we have tried to contribute in our own individual ways to the growth and well-being of our state in industry, commerce, education, medicine, law, politics, the arts, and public service.

Some of Rhode Island's Jews have gained renown for distinguished achievements. Many have added to the state's quality of life in clear and tangible ways. But equally significant are the contributions of those other Jewish Rhode Islanders, the unsung men and women whose aims have been more modest: to build a good life for themselves and their loved ones, to fulfill their responsibilities to the Jewish community and to the larger community as well. In their quiet way, through their varied involvement and the example they set for others, they too have worked to make Rhode Island a better place for all of its citizens, for Jews and non-Jews alike.

## Agencies and Organizations of the Rhode Island Jewish Community

### Congregations

- \*Temple Am David, Warwick  
Congregation Beth David,  
Narragansett
- \*Temple Beth El, Providence
- \*Congregation Beth Shalom-Sons of  
Zion, Providence
- \*Congregation B'nai Israel,  
Woonsocket
- \*Temple Emanuel, Providence
- \*Temple Habonim, Barrington  
Congregation Mishkon Tfiloh,  
Providence
- Congregation Ohave Shalom,  
Pawtucket
- Congregation Shaare Zedek, Westerly  
Congregation Shaare Zedek-Sons of  
Abraham, Providence
- Temple Shalom, Middletown
- \*Temple Sinai, Cranston  
Congregation Sons of Jacob,  
Providence
- \*Temple Torat Yisrael, Cranston  
Touro Synagogue, Newport  
United Brothers Synagogue, Bristol

*\*Congregations with weekday/  
weekend schools*

### Day Schools

- Providence Hebrew Day School-
- New England Academy of Torah
- Solomon Schechter Day School

### Community Schools

- Harry Elkin Midrasha
- South County Hebrew School
- United Hebrew School, Newport

### Agencies and Community Associations

- Bureau of Jewish Education
- Jewish Community Center
- Jewish Family Service
- Jewish Federation of Rhode Island
- Jewish Home for the Aged
- Miriam Hospital
- Chesed Shel Emet
- Chevra Kadisha of Rhode Island
- Vaad Hakashruth
- Rhode Island Board of Rabbis
- Hebrew Free Loan associations
- West Bay Jewish Center
- Rhode Island Mikvah Committee
- Providence Fraternal Association
- Touro Fraternal Association
- Rhode Island Jewish Historical  
Association
- Hillel organizations
- Jewish War Veterans
- Jewish Community Relations Council
- JORI Foundation
- B'nai B'rith
- Association of Parents of Americans  
in Israel
- Brandeis University National  
Women's Committee
- Hadassah
- Jewish National Fund
- Chabad House
- National Council of Jewish Women
- Pioneer Women
- Rhode Island Jewish Bowling  
Congress
- Rhode Island Self-Help
- Women's American ORT
- Israel Bonds Organization

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