

## An Overview of Rhode Island Jewish History

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Rhode Island's Jewish community is both exceptional and somewhat similar to its sisters. Despite its small size, our Jewish community has always sought to honor the past, grow stronger and more inclusive, and welcome the future with hope and gratitude. Yes, we gladly see ourselves within a never-ending cycle of dreams, blessings, responsibilities, and struggles, which sanctify our lives.

Rhode Island's founder, Roger Williams, probably never met a Jew. But one donated a park to Providence, marking the colony's first settlement. J. Jerome Hahn, the first Jewish justice of Rhode Island's Supreme Court, did so in 1931, five years before the state's tercentenary.

Rhode Island's Jewish history, begun during British rule, is extraordinary in at least two physical and symbolic respects. Newport has North America's oldest surviving Jewish cemetery, consecrated in 1677. Newport's synagogue, completed in 1763 and later known as "Touro," is also the oldest that survives in North America. New York City's Congregation Shearith Israel's building was 33 years older, but it was demolished in 1818 in order to erect a new synagogue on the same site, and since then the congregation built three more.

Following the American Revolution, Touro Synagogue remained far more than a beautiful or quaint building. In 1781, President George Washington paid his first visit. In 1790, in preparation for his second and in his written response to a letter by a Touro

elder, Washington declared that the new federal government “gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.” Thus, Newport’s synagogue came to epitomize religious liberty and tolerance. Many Americans consider it a shrine. In 1946, when honored by the Department of the Interior, Touro became one of the country’s first National Historic Sites. In 1982 it was again honored with a postage stamp, which celebrated Washington’s 250<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Most members of Newport’s small Jewish community, patriots and loyalists alike, dispersed during the Revolution. Its last member departed in 1822. As Emma Lazarus proclaimed in a 1867 poem, however, the hope of establishing a new Jewish community in Newport never vanished. Meanwhile, New York City’s Shearith Israel, which had become (and remains) the trustee of Touro’s land, building, and liturgical objects, sponsored summer services while awaiting the community’s rebirth.

When a new wave of immigration brought Jewish settlers to Newport at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, two groups vied for Touro’s use. By 1903, one group received Shearith Israel’s permission, and Congregation Jeshuat Israel, following Orthodox rituals and customs, was born. It still proudly prospers as a house of worship, study, and assembly for local residents and visitors from around the world.

Jewish immigrants, mostly from central Europe, did not begin settling in Providence, eventually the state’s permanent capital, until the 1830s. Once again, their first need was for a cemetery, which was consecrated on the city’s outskirts in 1849. Rhode Island’s second Jewish congregation, Sons of Israel, founded in 1854, assumed responsibility for the cemetery’s use and care. Providence’s next congregation, Sons of David, founded 16 years later, soon merged with its predecessor to become Sons of Israel

and David. This Orthodox congregation was one of the first in New England to join the Reform movement. Thirteen years later, it built Providence's first synagogue, appropriately on Friendship Street. In 1910, it replaced it with a second, built in South Providence, which became known as Temple Beth-El. The congregation's third home, built on the city's East Side in 1954, became one of the region's first important examples of modern synagogue architecture.

By 1900, Providence's population had soared to about 176,000, making it America's 20<sup>th</sup> largest city. Five years later, Rhode Island also became the first state with a Catholic majority. Providence's Jewish population at that time was about 8,000 or four percent.

Many new congregations- mostly Orthodox- were established in two Providence neighborhoods, the North End (including North Main Street and Smith Hill) and then South Providence, both of which had been settled by poor Irish immigrants. Soon every Jewish neighborhood in Providence and in such nearby towns as Pawtucket, Woonsocket, and Bristol created dozens of self-help organizations to assist needy Rhode Islanders and their brothers and sisters in Europe and in Palestine.

Beyond idealism, much of the Jewish community's strength was derived from its entrepreneurial spirit. Mom-and-pop businesses flourished, as did department stores, discount and pharmacy chains, and large manufacturing enterprises (primarily in textiles and costume jewelry but also in luggage, cable, and plastics). Relatively few Jews ever worked in factories; if so, only briefly.

If Jews were risk-takers, they were also adventurers. For example, in 1912, Col. Harry Cutler became chief of the Rhode Island Boy Scouts, even before the

organization's merger within the national movement. During the 1920s, Herman Galkin led five Jewish troops. Later, Jewish Scout leaders happily built outdoor and indoor chapels within the gorgeous wilderness of Camp Yawgoog.

Yet, Jewish communal solidarity was also derived in some sense from discrimination. For example, the Miriam Hospital was established in 1925 largely because Jewish physicians were unwelcome elsewhere. But Jewish care there also included kosher meals and some Yiddish-speaking staff. During the same era, both discrimination and solidarity led privileged Jews to found Ledgemont, the state's first Jewish country club.

In 1910, Rhode Island's Jewish orphanage had been established, and in 1937 it gave birth to a Jewish summer camp, JORI, which thrives today on Worden Pond. In 1912, the Jewish community opened its first quite modest home for the elderly. It grew and flourished until 1993, when services to Jewish elderly were provided in a combination of other settings, including the Phyllis Saperstein Tamarisk Assisted Living Residence and the nearby Shalom Apartments.

Of course Jewish communal strength also grew as a result of educational opportunities- provided primarily through public schooling. Jewish men and women did not graduate from Brown University, a Baptist institution, until the 1890s, but Jews would eventually play prominent roles as professors, deans, provosts, trustees, and benefactors. In 1947, Brown's Hillel chapter was established. In 1971, its rabbinic director was recognized as a university chaplain. During the 1950s, Brown also began to develop a distinguished undergraduate and graduate program in Judaic studies.

Talented and ambitious Jews have also studied at the University of Rhode Island, Rhode Island College, and Rhode Island School of Design. Indeed, Jewish men were also welcomed at a new Catholic institution, Providence College. Having proudly served in the military during World War II, large numbers of Jews gained access to higher education and then the professions through the GI Bill. Jewish philanthropists have donated buildings to and funded programs at many campuses.

By the 1970s, Jews taught at virtually all of Rhode Island's colleges and universities- many for 40 years. Michael Fink, known as "Mr. RISD," has been teaching literature and film studies at the renowned design school for nearly 65 years.

In 1925, Providence's population had peaked at about 268,000 residents. Around this time, during the height of industrial expansion, the state's Jewish community reached about 25,000. It probably peaked a decade later with about 30,000 members.

Following World War II, Jews continued to disperse- some to larger, warmer or hipper states- but others to growing suburbs, such as Cranston, Warwick, and Barrington, where young families built their own homes as well as new congregations and synagogues. Rhode Island Jews of various denominations have also studied and worked in Israel, and some have made *aliyah*.

Jewish education has always remained a high priority. While many congregational schools grew and flourished, Providence Hebrew Day opened in 1947 to bolster Orthodox learning. Nearly three decades later, the Alperin Schechter Day School was established under the auspices of Temple Emanu-El, the state's second Conservative congregation but the first built on Providence's East Side- in 1927.

If learning can be viewed within a much larger context, Rhode Island's Jews have played influential roles. For example, several Jews became prominent and trusted reporters, columnists, and editors at *The Providence Journal*, one of America's oldest newspapers. Such Rhode Island-born journalists and broadcasters as Fred Friendly and Irving R. Levine became nationally prominent. In 1926, the *Jewish Herald* began publication.

Jews have become curators, directors, and benefactors of RISD's Museum of Art. Several Jews helped found and lead Trinity Repertory Company, the state's major theatre, which performs at the Lederer Theatre. For decades, Barbara Orson acted, sang, and danced on Trinity's stages. Jews have helped lead, support, and perform with the Rhode Island Philharmonic. Beginning in the 1950s, George Wein, from Boston, built and expanded both the Newport Jazz and Folk Festivals, which attracted countless Jewish fans from near and far.

Needless to say, Jews have always enjoyed relaxing within the Ocean State. Strolling, swimming, sailing, fishing, and outdoor dining seem like perfect pastimes, especially when enjoyed with family or small groups of friends and neighbors.

Thus for various reasons, when compared to much larger Jewish communities, especially Boston's, Providence's may seem both insular and slow to establish a central fundraising and governing agency. The first effort occurred in 1896. "Not for nothing," as the saying goes, the symbolic figure standing atop the Statehouse dome since 1899 is called "The Independent Man."

Providence's General Jewish Committee was not established until 1945. Yet, three years later, its annual campaign exceeded \$1,000,000 in order to bolster Israeli

statehood. Special campaigns were organized to help Israel during subsequent wars and crises, but also during the 1970s and '80s to gain freedom for Soviet Jews and help welcome them to our shores.

By 1970, Providence's General Jewish Committee had expanded to become the Jewish Federation of Rhode Island. Its annual campaign, led by dedicated men and women, supported a multitude of local, national, and international needs and dreams. Both the Federation and the Bureau of Jewish Education were eventually housed within the East Side's new Jewish Community Center, which has recently been remodeled primarily through the generosity of the Dwares family. The JCC, which originated in 1925, is also home to two study centers, the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association and the Sandra Bornstein Holocaust Education Center. A new Holocaust memorial is located among other monuments between South Main Street and the Providence River.

Since 1953, three Rhode Islanders have served as national chairs of United Jewish Appeal's Women's Division. Men and women from Rhode Island have been proud leaders of other national Jewish organizations, including: the Jewish War Veterans, the Jewish Welfare Board, the Joint Distribution Committee, and the National Council of Jewish Women. Currently, a Rhode Islander chairs the American branch of the Jerusalem Foundation.

Beginning in the 1960s, many Jews (primarily Democrats) have been elected to state office. Three Jews became attorneys general, and Frank Licht and Bruce Sundlun served as governors. (The state judicial complex and the passenger terminal at the state airport were named in their honor.) David Cicilline, elected Providence's first Jewish mayor in 2003, became the state's first Jewish member of Congress in 2011. Another

Jew, Leonard Holland, served longer as adjutant general of Rhode Island's National Guard than any of his counterparts elsewhere. Fearing government intrusions, including prayer in public schools, Jews also helped found and lead Rhode Island's affiliate of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Another Jewish advocate for justice, Irving Fain, championed fair housing legislation during the 1960s. In 1965, three Rhode Island rabbis marched shoulder-to-shoulder with the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama.

Two Rhode Island-born Jews, Dorothy and Irving Stowe, even before the organization's incorporation in 1971, helped found Greenpeace in Vancouver, British Columbia. Other Jewish environmentalists participate in Save the Bay.

After barriers were lowered, Jews helped lead many of the state's philanthropic organizations. These include, for example, the United Way and the Rhode Island Foundation. In 1994, the Hassenfeld family, which built one of the world's leading toy companies, established Hasbro Children's Hospital within the Rhode Island Hospital complex.

Leadership of the Ocean State's Jewish institutions has also remained strong. Fifteen rabbis have served their congregations or organizations for at least 20 years. The longest serving, Leslie Gutterman, led Temple Beth-El for 45 years. Beginning in the 1980s, women rabbis, cantors, educators, and executives have also held key positions. Joseph Galkin was Federation's longest-serving executive, but another official, Gail Putnam, has surpassed his 35 years.

Today's Jewish community is small, about 18,500 members, less than two percent of the Ocean State's population. But Jewish compassion rings true, and its determination remains mighty.

In 2011, in order to consolidate its strength, the Jewish Federation merged with its largest beneficiary agencies to form the Jewish Alliance of Greater Rhode Island, which includes communities in nearby Massachusetts. Although the Alliance's annual campaign remains the largest umbrella for Jewish giving, important income is also generated through its endowment and numerous family funds.

As has been true for nearly 350 years, every Jew in Little Rhody matters. We proudly help care for each other- at home, in Israel, and elsewhere around the world. Caring, an everlasting gift and commandment, makes us a stronger and humbler people.

Goodwin is a past president of the Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association, which was founded in 1951. He has edited its annual journal, *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes*, since 2004. Goodwin also coedited *The Jews of Rhode Island*, an anthology of articles from *The Notes* published by the Association, Brandeis University Press, and the University Press of New England in 2004. A transplant to the Ocean State, Goodwin wrote the articles on Rhode Island and Newport for the second edition of *The Encyclopedia Judaica* (2007). He and his wife, Betsey, live in Providence and belong to Temple Beth-El.