

Glimpses Into American Jewish History

The Building and Dedication of the Newport Touro Synagogue

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Introduction

The article **The Early Jewish Settlement of Newport, RI** (The **Jewish Press** -----) discussed the early history of the Jewish community in Newport, RI. Over the years the Newport Jewish community developed, although its numbers were always small when compared to Jewish communities today. Indeed, despite growth during the middle part of the 18th century, there were probably never more than 100 Jews residing in Newport.

For its first hundred years the Jewish community worshipped in private homes. By the year 1754 Newport Jewry had organized itself into a congregation which was called Nefutse Yisroel (the Scattered of Israel). However, this name was later changed to Yeshuat Yisroel (the Salvation of Israel).

By 1759 the Congregation had sufficiently increased to undertake the building of a Synagogue, which would also incorporate provision for the religious instruction of the young. As this was an ambitious undertaking, beyond the means of the community, an appeal was addressed to other congregations for funds.

It is interesting to note that in the letter of appeal to Congregation Shearith Israel, in New York, reference is made to the urgency of procuring proper facilities for educational purposes. In this letter dated March 21, 1759, the Newport Congregation wrote:

“When we reflect on how much it is our duty to instruct children in the path of virtuous religion and how unhappy the portions must be of the children and their parents who are through necessity, educated in a place where they must remain almost totally uninstructed in our most holy and Divine Law, our rites and ceremonies - we can entertain no doubt of your zeal to promote this good work.”¹

The response to this appeal was positive, because the land upon which the synagogue was eventually erected was purchased on June 30, 1759. As construction proceeded appeals for funds were made to other Jewish communities throughout the world.

The architect selected for the work was the renowned Peter Harrison. There is no record of his ever having asked for or receiving payment for his work. It must have been a labor of love to him. With consummate skill he applied his great

talents to his assignment and succeeded in erecting a Synagogue of outstanding beauty, dignity and impressiveness.²

Construction began in 1759 and proceeded in stages as funds became available. In addition to the actual synagogue, the building includes a school wing. There was also a slaughterhouse located on part of the property which was eventually removed.

The synagogue was dedicated on Friday, December 2, 1763, which was the second day of Chanukah. Isaac (de Abraham) Touro was the Chazzan of the congregation at this time.

Reverend Touro (1738 – 1783) was a native of Holland. He had studied in the yeshiva of the Grand Synagogue of Amsterdam but never received rabbinical ordination. In 1760 he came to America and settled in New York. He then went to Boston where he met and married Reyna Hays, daughter of Judah Hays. Subsequently, the Touros moved to Newport and not long thereafter he was elected Minister of the Congregation.

The Rev. Ezra Stiles³ attended and then recorded the dedication ceremonies. Below is his description of the event, as well as of the synagogue structure (with his original punctuation and spelling preserved).

December 2, 1763, Friday. In the Afternoon was the dedication of the new Synagogue in this Town. It began by a handsome procession in which were carried the Books of the Law, to be deposited in the Ark. Several Portions of Scripture, & of their Service with a Prayer for the Royal Family, were read and finely sung by the priest [Chazzan Touro] & People. There were present many Gentlemen & Ladies. The Order and Decorum, the Harmony & Solemnity of the Musick, together with a handsome Assembly of People, in a Edifice the most perfect of the Temple kind perhaps in America, & splendidly illuminated, could not but raise in the Mind a faint Idea of the Majesty & Grandeur of the Ancient Jewish Worship mentioned in Scripture.

Dr. Isaac de Abraham Touro performed the Service. The Synagogue is about perhaps forty foot long & 30 wide, of Brick on a Foundation of free Stone: it was begun about two years ago, & is now finished except the Porch & the Capitals of the Pillars. The Front representation of the holy of holies or its Partition Veil, consists only of wainscoted Breast Work on the East End, in the lower part of which four long Doors cover an upright Square Closet the depth of which is about a foot or the thickness of the Wall, & in this Apartment (vulgarly called the Ark) were deposited three Copies & Rolls of the Pentateuch, written on Vellum or rather tanned Calf Skin; one of these Rolls I was told by Dr. Touro was presented from Amsterdam & is Two Hundred years old; the Letters have the Rabbinical Flourishes.

A Gallery for the Women runs round the whole Inside, except the East End supported by Columns of Ionic order, over which are placed correspondent Columns of the Corinthian order supporting the Cieling of the Roof. The Depth of

the Corinthian Pedestal is the height of the Balustrade which runs round the Gallery. The Pulpit for Reading the Law, is a raised Pew with an extended front table; this placed about the center of the Synagogue or nearer the West End, being a Square embalustraded Comporting with the Length of the indented Chancel before & at the Foot of the Ark.

On the middle of the North Side & affixed to the Wall is a raised Seat for the Parnas or Ruler, & for the Elders; the Breast and Back interlaid with Chinese Mosaic Work. A Wainscotted Seat runs round the Sides of the Synagogue below, & another in the Gallery. There are no other Seats or pews. There may be Eighty Souls of Jews or 15 families now in Town. The Synagogue has already cost Fifteen Hundred Pounds Sterling. There are to be five Lamps pendant from a lofty Ceiling.⁴

The lamps were subsequently imported and installed.

In 1946, in recognition of its architectural and historical significance, an act of Congress made the Touro Synagogue a National Historic Site, and it became part of the National Park System. "The synagogue is the fourth church edifice to be designated as a national historic site, not federally owned." In 2001 The National Trust for Historic Preservation selected Touro Synagogue to become part of its collection of historic sites.

The Synagogue was closed in 2005 to services and regularly scheduled tours for a major restoration of the building. On May 28, 2006 the Touro Synagogue was formally rededicated and visitors were once again able to experience the beauty of the synagogue in much the way members of the congregation had over 200 years earlier.⁵

¹ **History of Touro Synagogue** by Rabbi Dr. Theodore Lewis, Bulletin of the Newport Historical Society, number 159, Summer 1975, 48, part 3, page 282.

² Ibid., page 283.

³ For information regarding Stiles interest in the Jewish community of Newport, RI, see **Ezra Stiles and the Jews of Newport, The Jewish Press** -----

⁴ **Ezra Stiles and the Jews, Selected Passages from his Literary Diary Concerning Jews and Judaism with Critical and Explanatory Notes**, by George Alexander Kohut, Philip Cowen Publisher, New York 1902, pages 58 - 59. This book may be downloaded from <http://books.google.com/> at no cost.

⁵ See <http://www.tourosynagogue.org/default.asp>