

History of CBI

Centennial Kickoff Celebration - January 17, 2004

by Phyllis Leffler

In 1996, the journal American Jewish History published an article written by Mark Gordon. Called “Rediscovering Jewish Infrastructure,” the article analyzed nineteenth-century synagogue buildings still in existence. Some like Newport’s Touro Synagogue (dated to the mid 18th century), Beth Elohim in Charleston (from the mid-19th), and the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation (also mid-19th) are extremely famous for the beauty of their buildings and their role in American Jewish history. Gordon lists 96 such buildings throughout the United States. Some have been converted through adaptive reuse and have become churches or museums. Other creative uses include an art studio, community center, hardware store, Masonic temple, office building, rooming house, interior design office, radio station, or state agency. Some are simply empty. Fewer than 40 are still in use as synagogues. Including the states of Maryland and Kentucky, only 12 in the South continue to be used for Jewish worship. Casting our view nationally, we are listed as the 15th oldest synagogue in the country still being used as it was originally intended. This study was done in 1996, however, and we don’t know how many of the buildings may have been adapted for other uses since then.

Clearly, over the years, much energy has gone into preserving what we have, honoring our roots, remembering our origins. But how many of us know about those origins – about who went before, and who emerged to be the sustainers of Jewish culture and Judaism in Charlottesville? On our hundredth anniversary at this site, it is important to remember.

Let’s try for a moment to put into perspective the building itself. The Benevolent Society, formed for the purposes of establishing a Hebrew cemetery for burial of the dead, was created in 1870. By 1882, the Hebrew Benevolent Society became Beth Israel Congregation. And on October 5 that year, the cornerstone was laid to create the first synagogue in the region west of Richmond. This was a public event, carried out with great fanfare. The Third Regiment Band marched through the neighborhood, joined by the Masons Monticello Lodge. In all, there were about 80 people who joined the march for the original building located at the corner of Second and Market Streets. The irony was that many fewer numbered among the original members of CBI. But the synagogue was to be in that location for only 20 years. By 1904, the building was reconstructed, in largely the same form, on our current lot.

To celebrate, a formal banquet was held. On each table lies a copy of the menu for this grand event, held in Armory Hall on February 9, 1904. Clearly no available space such as we have created to hold formal dinners! Look carefully at it. It tells you a lot about the values of the people who organized it. It made me think, in fact, about some of my experiences at High Table in Oxford last year! The edibles, like oyster cocktail and fried oysters were as important as the drink – sherry, claret, Delaware(?) that accompanied each course. It is clear, too, that those in charge of planning this dinner represented the Jews who had assimilated thoroughly into the mainstream culture!

Nationally, these were significant years in the history of American Jewry. Between 1880 and 1925, 2.5 million Jews came to America, escaping persecution and limited opportunities elsewhere. In Virginia, the Jewish population multiplied sixfold between 1880 and 1900, from 2,500 to over 15,000. Most of those Jews were located in Richmond and Norfolk, but small towns like Charlottesville saw in those years an increasing number of families finding business opportunities here. Like all American places, they represented both the original German Jewish families, like the Oberdorfers, Letermans, and Kaufmans, and the later Eastern European and Russian families like the Shaperos, Rubins, and Mopsiks.

These might also appear as years in which Jews were gaining great credibility in American life. The year after the original cornerstone was laid in 1882, Emma Lazarus wrote her famous sonnet, "The New Colossus," as an ode to the Statue of Liberty, symbolizing America's openness to those tired, homeless, tempest-tossed and huddled masses yearning to breathe free. In the first years of the twentieth century, just as CBI was moving to another location, those words were appended to the statue's pedestal. At the same time, in honor of the 250th anniversary of permanent Jewish settlement in America, President Theodore Roosevelt - hardly known to be sympathetic to principles of ethnic diversity - wrote to Jacob Schiff, who chaired that celebration:

I am glad to be able to say...that...the Jews of the United States...have become indissolubly incorporated in the great army of American citizenship, prepared to make all sacrifice for the country, either in war or peace, and striving for the perpetuation of good government and for the maintenance of the principles embodied in our Constitution. They are honorably distinguished by their industry, their obedience to law, and their devotion to the national welfare....This is true not only of the descendants of the early settlers and those of American birth, but of a great and constantly increasing proportion of those who have come to our shores within the last twenty-five years as refugees reduced to the direst straits of penury and misery.

It appeared that Jews had made it in America, and had been fully accepted.

But we know that was not the end of the story, and there would be challenges ahead in which many Jews would choose to bury their identities in an interest to avoid restrictions. Nativism in America was just beginning to rear its head. In the South, the lynching of Leo Frank and the virulence of the Ku Klux Klan lay ahead. Restrictive entry to country clubs, hotels and neighborhoods, quotas, and the closing of doors to high status positions would intensify.

In Charlottesville, one can't help but wonder about those early years from 1882 to 1904 – between the building of CBI I and CBI II, moving a few short blocks from the site of the current McIntyre Library to 3rd and Jefferson. Why, for example, did the Federal Government identify the specific site where CBI I was located to build a post office? Were there no other lots available? Was the location of CBI and the role of its prominent merchant families less comfortable for the city in 1904 than it had been in 1882? One can only speculate about this, since no records seem to exist to explain it. What is most

fascinating, however, is that the very dedicated original families took the \$10,000 offered, and re-established a Jewish religious presence in the heart of town. They were not folding their tents and retreating.

The decision was not reached easily. Some believed they should not accept the government's offer, and should fight to stay. Moses Leterman represented the congregation's members and sued the trustees who had decided to accept the offer. The trustees included his uncle Isaac Leterman, and his father-in-law, B. Oberdorfer. One can only imagine the dissention within the community. Feuding within the family? Acrimony? I'll say – but ultimately a willingness to move forward and put their squabbles behind them, as Moses Leterman became head of the new building committee. Incidentally, according to synagogue records, both Isaac Leterman and B. Oberdorfer died on the same day – July 5, 1905 – only one year and a few months after this building relocated. Two founders were gone, but their legacy lived on. When I saw this piece of information in the Archives, I could only think of two other Americans so closely tied to one another – Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, who died on July 4, exactly 50 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

But back to *our* story. Those original families, who had such stature within the community, put down their roots here and resolved to make it a good place for themselves and their families. They became members of the City Council, joined the Ladies Aid Society, the White Ribbon Temperance Society, the School Board. Hannah Leterman became known as “Mother Leterman” for her involvement with the poor. Moses Leterman served a term as President of the City Council and helped create the first Chamber of Commerce in 1888. Moses Kaufman served on the first School Board of the City of Charlottesville, and on the day of his funeral, school was suspended. They were the pillars of the community. Along with them, Uriah P. Levy, the owner of Monticello, and his nephew Jefferson Monroe Levy, developed cultural and entertainment opportunities within the city. They contributed with their time, their energy, their money to both Charlottesville and beyond.

Charity was an important part of the purposes of the community. The records show regular, sometimes daily disbursements for charity, sometimes in the amount of \$1.00 or \$1.50. And this charity was not just local in nature. Ledger books for CBI reveal an early response to an appeal on behalf of Russian refugees in Richmond in 1882. When the synagogue checkbook showed a balance of \$49.64, \$30.00 was disbursed for this appeal. These were careful businessmen, though, and one can only assume that there were funds in other places for additional needs. Incidentally, dues appear to be set at \$12 per year. Some paid monthly! (Take a look at the Receipts and Disbursements pages from 1905 to get a sense of the complex financial management issues! Think, too, about what 100 years means in the life of an organization!)

Part of making Charlottesville a good place meant creating a comfortable space for themselves as Jews. The synagogue – its building and its programs – helped create permanence. As new arrivals came, there were tensions, some of which related to the style of worship. East European Jews, more traditional, had to negotiate to find acceptance. Ultimately, it always seemed worthwhile to accommodate differences and to work together for one community. There was no rabbi after the initial years, but there

was plenty of volunteerism. Moses Kaufman was lay reader until he died in 1898; his oldest son, Mortimer, led services on Friday nights for much of the next forty years. Together, they sustained Jewish life in a small town.

There were some really lean years, too. With the Depression and the loss of business opportunities, many of the sons of the original sustaining families left for bigger cities. Smaller merchants, like the Kobres, Millers, and O'Manskys found their way here. As Jews became larger in number in the United States, they also became more of a threat to many, and their different religious practices became a source for the growth of anti-semitism. Being accepted became more of a problem. Eli Evans, speaking in 1976 at the founding of the Southern Jewish Historical Society, said that the problem of southern Jews has been "...to be a part but not to be apart." Ellen Frankel, CEO and Editor-in-Chief of the Jewish Publication Society, speaking at the meetings of that same society this year, commented that southern Jews have been both "of them" and "apart." The issue has always been one of place and belonging. And there have always been those who believed that sustaining a Jewish physical place for worship, education, and community is a worthwhile endeavor as a means to Jewish identity.

There were years when the continuity of this historic structure was in jeopardy. When there was insufficient money to maintain the synagogue, Harry O'Mansky regularly dipped into his pockets to come up with the necessary funds through the 1940s, 50s, and beyond. It was Harry and June, in fact, who provided the funds for the building of the first extension to create a better facility for religious education, and it was Harry and June who gave their blessing for tearing down that first addition to build our current extension in the very space that tied us to our larger history. Never was it a question of giving up the physical space that represented Charlottesville Jewry. Rather, there was always some means of enriching it.

And so, today, we continue to have those in our midst who value a Jewish space as a Beit Midrash – a house of study and prayer – a space which should represent us with dignity and beauty. I see a continuous line...with many in between who have not been mentioned tonight...from Oberdorfers and Letermans to Kaufmans and O'Manskys to Keuchens and Lewises. These are among the people who fortify the community through acts of charity and giving of themselves. Their work will live on to sustain this historic and beautiful space – hopefully until we celebrate another milestone in a building that stands for continuing dedication to both aesthetic beauty and to Jewish values.

Our community is as rich as it is because of a tradition of ongoing commitment of volunteers. Our space is as meaningful as it is because of its historicity that ties us to the generations of those who came before. On this 100th anniversary in an extraordinary place, we have much to make us feel grateful.