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Rediscovering Jewish Infrastructure: The Legacy of U.S. 19th Century Synagogues

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## **Rediscovering Jewish Infrastructure: The Legacy of U.S. 19th Century Synagogues**

**Mark W. Gordon**

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There is no guidebook to follow. Some are located in the most dangerous neighborhoods in the country. But the thrill of a new discovery makes the mission worthwhile.

The mission refers to location and identification of buildings originally constructed as synagogues before 1900. The majority of these structures are no longer used for Jewish purposes, yet they often tower proudly over their congregants' former communities.

This author's hobby began nine years ago during the pursuit of Jewish roots in the Lower East Side of New York City. While tracing the first American residences of various great-grandparents, the discovery of several old synagogues inspired a search for surviving synagogue structures throughout the United States.

The location of these buildings is often quite difficult to determine, since their former congregations may have moved several times in response to changing neighborhood demographic patterns. In addition, many references on early U.S. synagogues do not distinguish between the large number of demolished buildings and the few which still stand. The best sources of information are the three English language Jewish encyclopedias published over the last 80 years. These frequently provide either the addresses of specific synagogues or the location of former Jewish neighborhoods. Searching these neighborhoods, especially when they border their city's downtown district, often leads to the sudden and exciting discovery of another old synagogue structure. Sometimes significant ornamentation (Stars of David, tablets, Hebrew cornerstone, etc.) is still present, but often there is only a minor trace of previous Jewish affiliation.

The attached list provides a compilation of all known pre-1900 buildings which were originally erected as synagogues and which still stand. It includes the addresses of the buildings, their architectural styles and the names of the original congregations. The list also indicates if the original congregation still uses its building, or if not, what the current use is today. Some of the congregations listed - such as those in Newport, Charleston, Savannah and Shearith Israel in New York - are among the oldest Jewish congregations in the country. Most of the congregations on the list were the oldest in their respective cities; they started out as Orthodox and, in some instances, evolved into Conservative or Reform in the middle to late nineteenth century.

## 19th Century American Synagogues

The three oldest congregations on the attached list remain under Jewish ownership. Newport's Touro Synagogue, designed by noted Colonial architect Peter Harrison, is the current home to the successor of the original Sephardic (Orthodox) congregation which built it. Beth Elohim in Charleston is the oldest U.S. synagogue in continual use and is one of the birthplaces of Reform Judaism in America. It is constructed in the Greek Revival style, the rage in the 1840's, as is the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation building which is now used as a museum.

After the Colonial and Greek Revival periods, the synagogues generally continued to follow the trends in American secular architecture, which helps in determining the age of each structure. Romanesque buildings with round arched windows prevailed in the 1850's, with Gothic and Victorian styles more common in the 1870's and 1880's. One style used heavily for synagogues but not in secular architecture was the Moorish style from the 1860's to the 1890's. It is often associated with onion-shaped domes or minarets, horseshoe arches and polychromatic decoration. A common theory for the popularity of Moorish synagogues was the nineteenth century revival of Jewish scholarly interest in the history of the Sephardic Diaspora. At the turn of the century, synagogue architecture returned to the American architectural mainstream with a heavy emphasis on Classical Revival styles. This change was attributable in part to the interest in classical forms at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago and also to archeological discoveries of Galilean synagogues built during Roman times.

While many of the buildings originally constructed as synagogues are now used for other purposes, some remain as synagogues and provide special places for Jewish worship. Nineteenth century buildings in more than ten states are now utilized for Jewish services as shown on the attached list. This list of approximately 50 former and some continuing synagogues is a unique compilation of surviving religious buildings and should serve as a reference document for preserving the architectural legacy of American Jewish life.

**American Jewish History**

**Pre-1900 Buildings Erected as Synagogues & Still Standing**

Date	City & Address	Original Congregation	Current Use	Architecture
1759-63	NEWPORT, RI 85 Touro St.	Jeshuat Israel (O)	SAME	Georgian
1840-41	CHARLESTON, SC 86-90 Hasell St.	K.K. Beth Elohim (R)	SAME	Greek Revival
1845	BALTIMORE 11 Lloyd St.	Baltimore Hebrew Cong. (R)	museum	Greek Revival
1849-50	NEW YORK CITY 172 Norfolk St.	Anshe Chesed (R)	empty	Gothic
1852	CINCINNATI 538 Broadway	K.K. Bene Israel (R)	church	Spanish
1853	NEW YORK CITY 8 Clinton St.	Rodeph Sholom (R)	Chasam Sopher (O)	Romanesque
1856	HONESDALE, PA 7th & Court Sts.	Beth Israel (R)	SAME	Greek Revival
1863	MADISON, WI Gorham & Butler Sts.*	Shaarai Shomayim (R)	community center	Romanesque
1865-66	CINCINNATI 8th & Plum Sts.	K.K. B'nai Yeshurun (R) (Isaac M. Wise)	SAME	Moorish Gothic
1865-67	CUMBERLAND, MD 107 Union St.	B'er Chayim (R)	SAME	Greek Revival
1869-70	QUINCY, IL 427 N. 9th St.	B'nai Sholom (R)	SAME	Moorish
1870	GALVESTON, TX 816 22nd St.	B'nai Israel (R)	Masonic Temple	Moorish Gothic
1870-72	NEW YORK CITY 123 E. 55th St.	Ahavath Chesed (R) (Central Synagogue)	SAME	Moorish

## 19th Century American Synagogues

1874-78	SAVANNAH 20 Gordon St.	Mikveh Israel (R)	SAME	Gothic
1875	BALTIMORE 27-35 Lloyd St.	Chizuk Amuno (C)	B'nai Israel (O); museum	Victorian Gothic
1876	NEW YORK CITY 274 Keap St.	Beth Elohim (R)	unknown	Victorian Gothic
1876	WASHINGTON, DC 3rd & G Sts., N.W.*	Adas Israel (C)	museum	Late Federal
1876	HARTFORD 457 Main St.	Temple Beth Israel (R)	museum	eclectic
1877	OWENSBORO, KY 429 Davies St.	Temple Adath Israel (R)	SAME	Moorish Gothic
1882	DENVER 24th & Curtis Sts.	Temple Emanuel (R)	empty	Victorian
1883	JEFFERSON CITY, MO 318 Monroe St.	Temple Beth El (R)	SAME	Gothic
1884-85	BOSTON Columbus Ave. & Northampton St.	Temple Israel (R)	church	Victorian Romanesque
1885	TRAVERSE CITY, MI 312 S. Park St.	Beth El (R)	SAME	vernacular
1886-87	NEW YORK CITY 14 Eldridge St.	Khal Adas Jeshurun (O) (merged w/Anshe Lubz)	SAME	Moorish
1889	BLOOMINGTON, IL 315 N. Prairie St.	Moses Montefiore Temple (R)	church	Moorish

Asterisks (\*) indicate synagogues which have been physically moved to their current location. (O), (C) and (R) stand for Orthodox, Conservative and Reform. They indicate the present day affiliation of the original congregation or its successor through merger. SAME indicates that the original congregation still uses the building for worship services. (Buildings which have been totally rebuilt and are no longer recognizable as former places of worship are not included on the list.)

**American Jewish History**

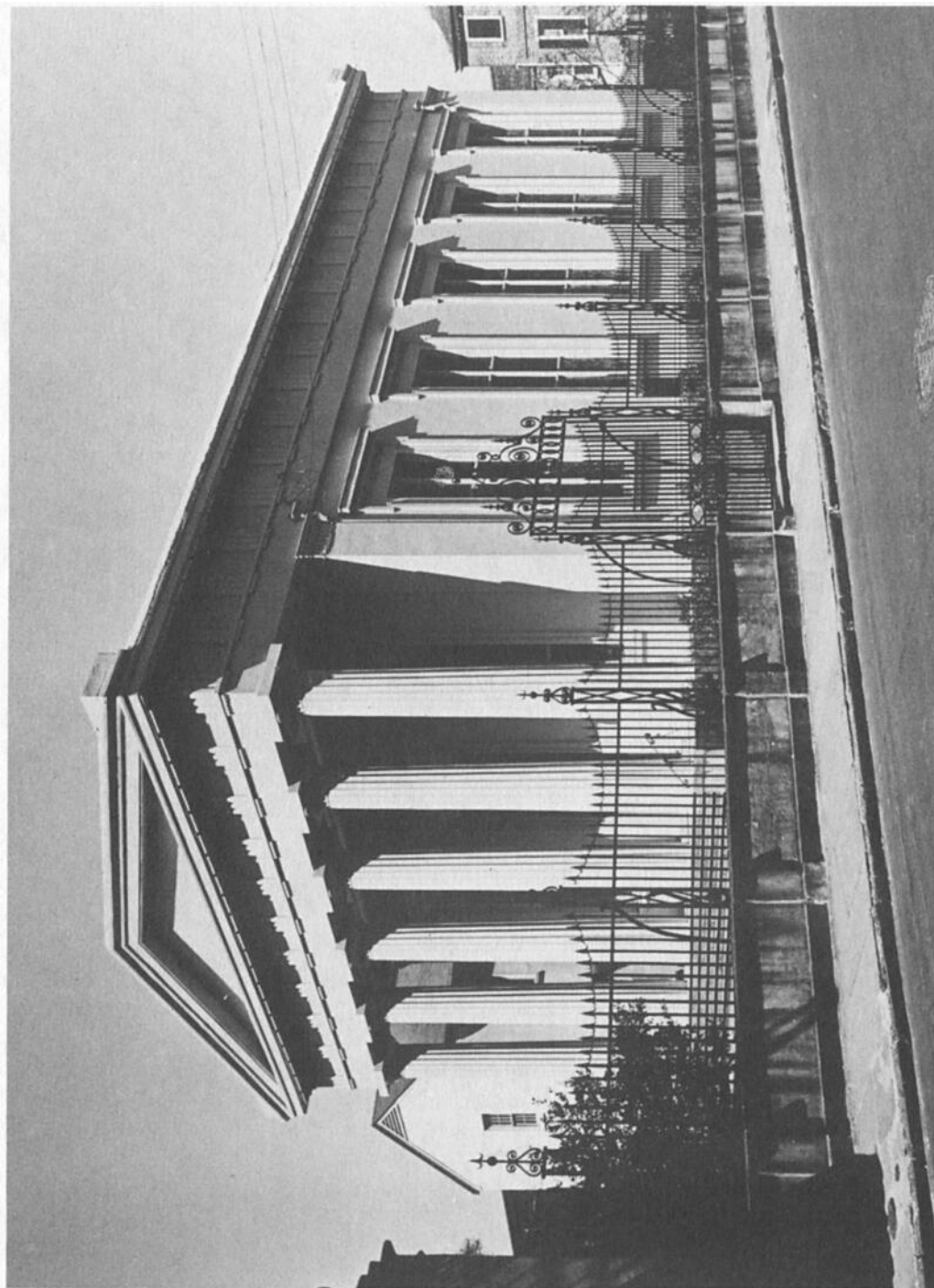
**Pre-1900 Buildings Erected as Synagogues & Still Standing**

Date	City & Address	Original Congregation	Current Use	Architecture
1889	SAN DIEGO Juan & Harvey Sts.*	Temple Beth Israel (R)	community center; museum	Romanesque/ eclectic
1889	TRINIDAD, CO 304 Maple St.	Congregation Aaron (R)	SAME	Victorian Gothic
1889	LIGONIER, IN Main St.	Ahavas Sholem (disbanded)	church	Victorian Gothic
1889-90	STATESVILLE, NC Kelly & West End Aves.	Emanuel (C)	SAME	Romanesque
1889-90	NEW YORK CITY 163 E. 67th St.	Zichron Ephraim (O)	SAME	Moorish
1890	NEW YORK CITY 128-30 Forsyth St.	Anshe Uleya (Forsyth St. Shul)	church	eclectic
1890-91	CHICAGO Indiana Av. & 33rd St.	K. A. M. (R)	church	Chicago School
1890-91	BALTIMORE Madison Av. & Robert St.	Baltimore Hebrew Cong. (R)	church	Moorish/eclectic
1891	NEW YORK CITY 199 Victory Blvd.	B'nai Jeshurun (C)	New Brighton Jewish Cong. empty	Victorian
1891	PORT GIBSON, MS Church St.	Temple Gemiluth Chasardim (R)		Moorish/Russian
1891	HENDERSON, KY Center & N. Alves Sts.	Adas Israel (disbanded)	church	Victorian
1892-93	BALTIMORE Eutam Pl. & W. Lanvale St.	Oheb Shalom (R)	church	Byzantine
1893	CHICAGO 1363 Sedgewick St.	Anshe Emet (C)	church	Moorish
1893-94	CLEVELAND E. 55th & Central Sts.	Tifereth Israel (R)	church	Richardsonian Romanesque

## 19th Century American Synagogues

1894	NEW YORK CITY 160 W. 82nd St.	Shaaray Tefila (R)	church	Classical/ Moorish
1895	SAN FRANCISCO 1881 Bush St.	Obabei Shalome (disbanded)	church	Moorish/eclectic
1895	BALTIMORE McCulloch & Mosher Sts.	Chizuk Amuno (C)	church	Classical/ Renaissance
1895-96	LANCASTER, PA 508 N. Duke St.	Shaarai Shomayim (R)	SAME	Classical/eclectic
1896-97	NEW YORK CITY 8 W. 70th St.	Shearith Israel (O)	SAME	Neoclassical
1897-98	WASHINGTON, DC 8th & I Sts., N.W.	(Spanish & Portuguese) Washington Hebrew Cong. (R)	church	Moorish/ Byzantine
1898	CHICAGO 44th St. & St. Lawrence Ave.	Temple Israel (R)	church	Classical
1898	PEORIA, IL 521 N.E. Monroe St.	Anshai Emeth (R)	church	Gothic Revival
c. 1898	SAG HARBOR, NY Elizabeth St. & Atlantic Ave.	Temple Mishkan Israel (C) (merged w/Adas Israel)	SAME	vernacular
1898-99	CHICAGO 45th St. & Vincennes Ave.	Temple Isaiiah (R)	church	Classical
1899	DENVER 16th & Pearl Sts.	Temple Emanuel (R)	church	Moorish
1900	NEW YORK CITY 23 W. 118th St.	Shaarei Zedek (C)	church	Moorish
1900	CORSICANA, TX 208 S. 15th St.	Temple Beth-El (C)	community center	Moorish

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**The 1840-41 Beth Elohim Synagogue in Charleston, South Carolina is the second oldest surviving structure originally built as a synagogue in the United States. Its Greek Revival building is one of the birthplaces of Reform Judaism in the Western Hemisphere. The fence originally surrounded an earlier 1794 synagogue on the same site.**

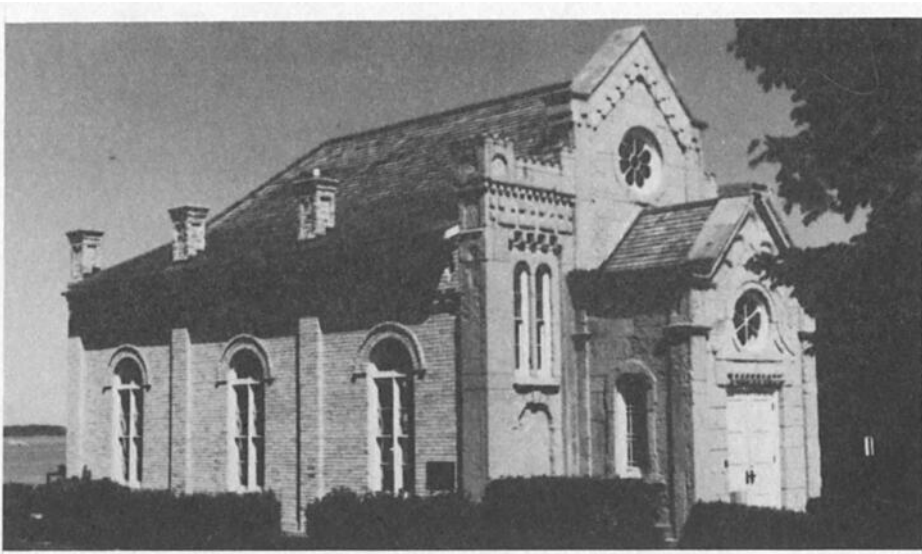


## 19th Century American Synagogues

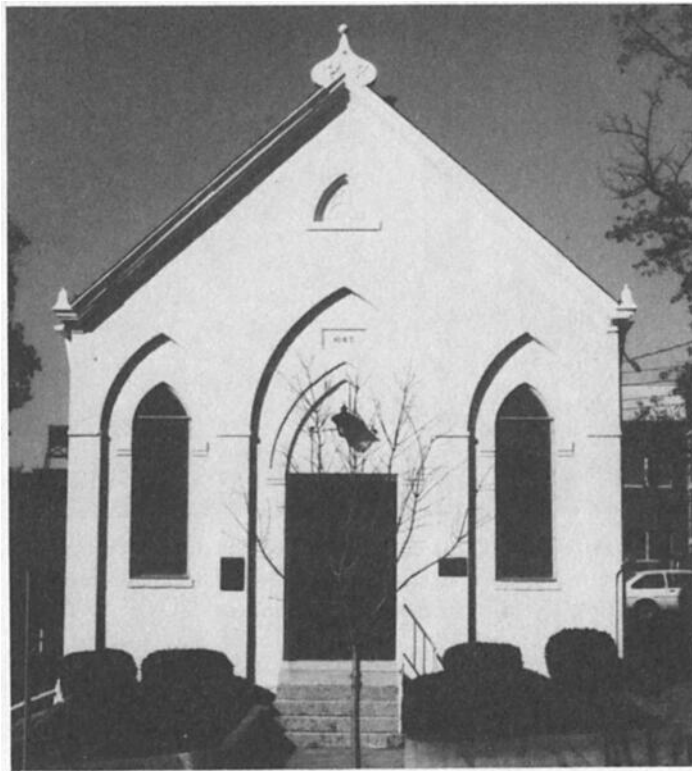


**Baltimore's Lloyd Street Synagogue, built in 1845 in the Greek Revival style, is now a Jewish museum. It was the first U.S. synagogue to use the Star of David as exterior decoration (on a rear, non-visible window).**

## American Jewish History



**This 1863 Romanesque sandstone building was originally built as a synagogue in Madison, Wisconsin. Its congregation sold it after 16 years as many members left the area. The building has been relocated to a lakefront park and now serves as a community center.**



**This small 1883 synagogue houses Temple Beth El of Jefferson City, Missouri. Its Gothic windows form the major design element of one of the oldest, continually functioning synagogues west of the Mississippi River.**

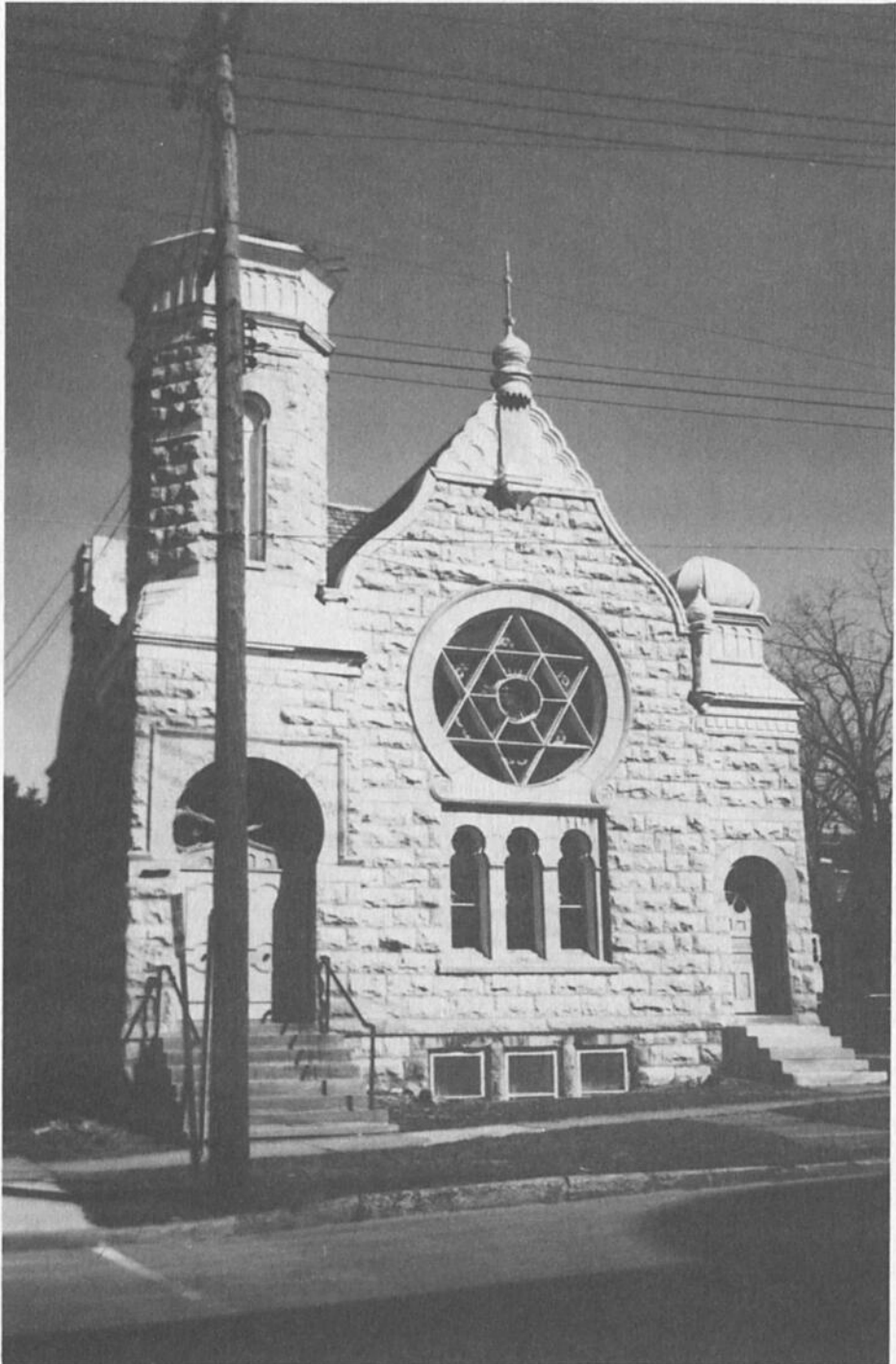
## 19th Century American Synagogues



Chicago's K. A. M. ("Congregation of the People of the West") built this synagogue in 1890-91. Designed by Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan, it is one of the few American religious structures built in the Chicago School style of architecture. The building is now a designated city landmark and a Baptist church.



The synagogue built by Congregation Aaron of Trinidad, Colorado is Victorian Gothic with a Moorish turret to complete the design. It was dedicated in 1889.



**The synagogue of the Moses Montefiore Congregation in Bloomington, Illinois was abandoned in the early 1970's. This Moorish 1889 structure, built of Joliet limestone, is now being restored by an enthusiastic Baptist congregation.**