

VISITING THE SYNAGOGUE IN ST. THOMAS

Robert W. Case

On a recent trip to St. Thomas, where we have been numerous times, we never had time to visit this delightful piece of history.

The Synagogue, named “*Congregation of Blessing, Peace, and Loving Deeds*” was declared a National Historic Landmark in 1997, and is the oldest Synagogue *in continuous use* under the American Flag. Actually, Touro Synagogue in Rhode Island (1763) and the Synagogue in Curacao (1674) pre-date this synagogue, but were closed for periods of time due to fires.

The first Jewish immigrants were Dutch merchants, descendants of Spanish Sephardim, who arrived from the island of St. Eustatius. Expelled from the island during the American Revolutionary war for their sympathy and material support of the American colonists, they brought their extensive business networks, and were soon followed by traders from Europe and The Caribbean islands.

Nine Jewish families founded the synagogue in 1796. In 1804, the synagogue was destroyed by fire and replaced in 1812. The congregation continued to grow and in 1823 a larger synagogue was erected and the membership grew to 64 families. A citywide fire destroyed the synagogue in 1831, and it was rebuilt in 1833 on the same location- on “Synagogue Hill”

The synagogue was built in Sephardic style, since the original congregants migrated as a result of the Spanish Inquisition. Many of these were Marranos, who were Jews that converted to Catholicism, but secretly practiced Judaism. Since practicing Judaism was punishable by death, they met in cellars with sand floors in order to muffle the prayers. The synagogue in St. Thomas has a marble floor and lime plaster walls to protect them from the very corrosive salt air. The floor, however, is covered with a layer of sand to dampen the sound. Whether or not the sand floors have anything to do with the Marranos may be an urban legend!

Of interest to note is that the Baccarat chandelier, the brass candelabra, Sconces, and torches lighting the bema and the ark are all original, as well As the mahogany pews and all the mahogany fixtures! Mahogany is termite Proof, and resist the rigorous climate.



Figure 1 -Sand floor in Synagogue



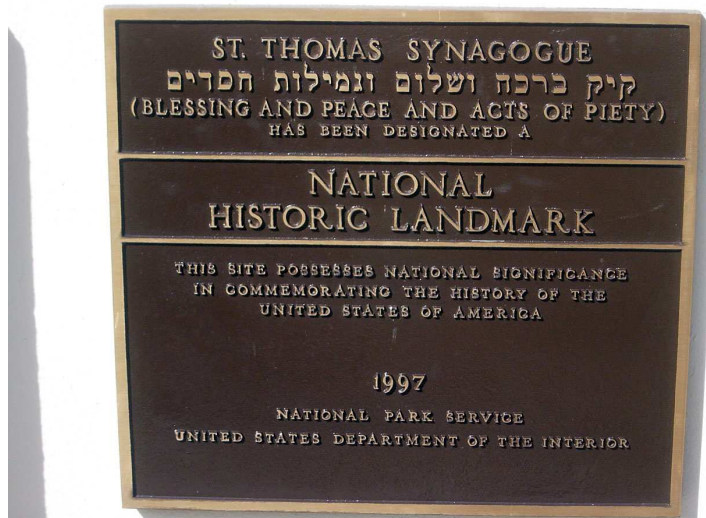
Figure 2- Rabbi addressing our group



Figure 3 Entrance to Synagogue



Rabbi Starr with original Torahs



Plaque dedicating synagogue as historic landmark

Today the synagogue is a reform congregation. When the synagogue was first established, it was orthodox, and the low wooden walls served as a *m'chitzah* separating the women from the men. The present Jewish community is very small, consisting of about 115 members. The synagogue holds Friday night and Saturday morning services as well as all the Jewish holidays. Tourists during the winter season add to the attendance, and the Temple has a unique way of enlisting support by offering "double chai" annual memberships (\$36.00). For this fee, you receive the quarterly newsletter as well remembering *Yahrzeit* for Chai members, and publishing it in the newsletter. (*I am proud to say that we are now Chai members!*)

There are presently over 1500 Chai members. They also hold an annual antique auction, a gift shop, and rely on dues and philanthropic contributions for support.

The Rabbi, Arthur Starr, is the spiritual leader of the congregation. He retired after serving 31 years as the Rabbi of *Temple Adath Yeshurun* in Manchester, NH, and then was named Rabbi Emeritus of the Temple. Rabbi Starr is extremely personal and "down to earth". He graciously arranged to open the synagogue on Sunday morning for our visit, and then proceeded to tell us the history of the synagogue, and answer all of our numerous questions!

If you wish any further information, you may e-mail the synagogue at: hebrewcong.@islands.vi

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